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WARRIOR WOMAN



LYN MANGOLD

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Lyn Mangold

Dedication

To my parents who continually encourage me to be creative, always believe in my dreams, and help me achieve them.

To my loving and patient husband who tolerates my messy desk and lets me ramble and bounce ideas off him.

Introduction

We never knew when they would come. For nearly a year they had been attacking our city's walls sporadically. Sometimes a month would pass before the next assault. Sometimes it would be as little as a week. The only thing we could be sure of was that when it happened, the attack would be at night. Even the time of night was never consistent. Sometimes they would appear just after dusk before the last wisps of sunlight had completely faded from the sky, and other times it would only be a few hours before dawn when they would finally come charging out of the blackness of the shadows. They would spring out of the darkest places in the northern forest and fight fiercely until the first rays of the sun kissed the tree tops, and then disappear into the fading shadows of the sunrise like smoke. The battlefield that separated the northern woods from the city was now saturated with blood, but no matter how many battles we won or how many of their men we killed, they always came back strong.

The first battle seemed like it had happened ages ago. Victorious, we had believed we'd crushed our strange new foe and celebrated our success with a lavish ball and nights of dancing. Surely they wouldn't dare attack again after such a sound defeat, but they did. They returned again and again. Though we were winning every battle, I feared we were ultimately losing the war. True, we lost very few warriors in a single battle, but battle after battle those few warriors began to add up, and our forces were beginning to suffer. People were afraid to travel beyond the protective walls of the city for fear they would meet the enemy in the deep shadows of the woods.

With no one willing to risk travel, we could not contact our allies and request assistance. It had been too long since a friend had come out of the northern woods. For all we knew all our allies had fallen to the same strange enemy. We were tired and were wearing thin, which may have been the Dark Army's plot all along. We had foolishly fallen for it, believing that each victory would surely be the last, but month after month our hope was failing. How were we going to win this war? After all this time, we still knew nothing about our enemy, except they attacked at night with seemingly limitless strength and numbers. Even their leader was elusive. He rode through the battlefield covered in black armor. A faceless shadow who cut our fiercest men down as though they were simply novices.

These thoughts troubled me as I stood in the tower scanning the edge of the forest for the faintest flicker of movement. I could feel Dark Leader's magic out there somewhere. What was his source of power? I shifted my weight from leg to leg nervously, fingering the hilt of my sword. I glanced over at Arden. His brows were furrowed in a slight scowl and the corners of his mouth were just barely turned down into a frown as he stared out at the woods. He looked as though he was made of stone, trying to give an appearance of cold hard confidence, but he couldn't fool me. One hand rested on the castle wall and the other held a white knuckled grip on his sword. I knew he was as worried as I. He didn't have to be here. It wasn't his night to be on watch. Why was he here?

I should have been watching the woods, but my eyes were drawn to him. I found my gaze lingering over his long black hair and strong jaw before finally resting on his broad shoulders. I could see his muscles straining against his shirt. He must have sensed my eyes on him because he turned to look at me. Embarrassed, I quickly turned away. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach, and I was sure my face was flushed. I was thankful no one could see me blush in the darkness. What was wrong with me? I should have been concentrating on the watch. Why was I so distracted by Arden? Certainly he was an attractive man, but that was all. I didn't have any other feelings for him. I couldn't, could I?

My hand went to feel the cool smoothness of the charm I always wore around my neck. I looked down at the bright green stone. It had been my mother's once. My sister, Katrina, had given it to me and said that the charm had magical properties that protected the bearer from harm. My father laughed at the idea, but as I held the charm in my hand, I could feel something inside it. I couldn't be sure, but sometimes I thought I saw it glow. Of course I'd never told anyone. They wouldn't believe me anyway. Maybe it was magic, maybe it wasn't, but with the city in the middle of a war, I could use all the protection I could find.

I strained my eyes looking toward the eastern horizon. The stars were still twinkling brightly in the sky, but I could feel the approach of dawn deep down in my bones. The night was nearly over, and sunrise could not come quickly enough. Just a few more hours and the city would be safe for another day. It had been over a week since the last attack. When would the next attack come? Would it be tonight? Tomorrow? I could never be sure.

Chapter One

One Year Ago

I trudged down the hallway realizing too late that my boots were caked in mud, and I was smearing it on the blue and gold ornamental rug that ran down the center of the long stone hallway. I sighed. I would just have to take care of it later. It had been a long day of training with the new recruits, and all I wanted was to go up to my room. I desperately needed a bath before I had to strap myself into the ridiculously fancy ball gown my sister had selected for the banquet tonight. Actually, I didn't really want to go to the banquet at all. I wanted to curl up in a comfy chair with a mug of tea and a good book, but being a princess and second-in-command of the army meant there were certain expectations placed on me, and I needed to, at the very least, make an appearance.

I was nearly to my room when I saw my grandmother coming down the hallway towards me. Just what I need, I thought as I winced. My grandmother was sure to lecture me when she saw how disheveled I was. Quickly, I searched for a room I might be able to duck into before she noticed me, but it was too late. She'd spotted me and was already walking toward me with her brows knitted together in a scowl and a frown on her face. I took a deep breath and twisted my mouth into the brightest grin I could manage as she approached. "Good afternoon Grandmother. Have you had a pleasant day?"

"It's been just charming, not that it really matters to you. Just look at you. You're a disaster! Your hair is sweaty and matted to your head and I see you've managed to scrape all your knuckles raw again, and just look what you're doing to this exquisite rug! It will take you ages to clean up for the banquet. You are planning on going to the banquet this evening,

aren't you? Your father is going to name an heir, you know. If he's smart, he'll name Katrina as the heir to the throne. She is a real lady, unlike you, and would make a beautiful queen, just like your mother was."

"Yes, my mother was a beautiful queen," I said through gritted teeth. My father only had two children, my sister and me. My mother, Grandmother's only daughter, had died giving birth to me, which was where, I suspected, her deep resentment for me stemmed from, that and the fact that I wasn't a "real" lady.

It was true that my father was going to name an official heir to the throne, but I, like most people, thought my father would surely name my weasel of a cousin, Trent, as the heir. Personally, I didn't like Trent. He only cared about himself. Being named heir to the throne was something he wanted because of the land, title and gold that came with the crown. He didn't care about the people or our kingdom, Twentaria, but he was probably the most logical choice for the throne. My older sister was also a distinct possibility, but she was beautiful and delicate, more interested in parties and gossip than anything else, not really suited to rule a kingdom. As for me, I was content to be second-in-command of the army. An unusual position for a woman, I know, but I was more adept at riding a horse and handling a sword than most of the men.

"Yes, I was just going to my room to bathe and get dressed," I said as I snapped my wandering thoughts back to attention.

"It's going to take more than a bath to clean you up. I swear I don't know why your father lets you carry on with those men. It isn't right for a lady to fight with the men let alone command them."

"Yes, well, I'm only second-in-command," I said as I continued to smile sweetly, which only annoyed Grandmother more, but I wasn't about to get into a long drawn out argument with her. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing she'd upset me. Truthfully, I didn't have the strength to cross her at that moment. I just wanted to go to my room. Thankfully Grandmother didn't get a chance to reply because my sister, Katrina, came floating around the corner on a cloud of perfume and ruffled silk skirts.

“Good afternoon, Grandmother,” she said as she smiled and gently planted a kiss on Grandmother’s cheek. My grandmother’s bitter exterior melted in a single moment and in its place a sweet affectionate woman, who returned my sister’s kiss. It was amazing how quickly she had transformed, and equally amazing how differently she treated my sister and me. “I’d love to stay and chat, Grandmother, but I must help Lillian prepare for the dinner tonight.”

Ordinarily I would have been annoyed, but I was thankful for any chance to escape one of my grandmother’s infamous lectures.

“Thank you,” I mumbled as Katrina pushed me into my room and immediately began fussing over me.

“You’re welcome. Now, are you going to wear the dress I suggested?”

“Yes, I suppose. You know more about this girly stuff than I do.”

“That’s only because you refuse to pay attention to my advice, and you spend all your time training with the recruits. You could be really stunning if you would only work at it a little.”

“Yes, well, you’ll thank me someday when I’m defending Twentaria and your life. Besides, I don’t need or want to be stunning.” That was only half true. There was a very tiny part of me that wondered what it would be like to be beautiful and graceful like my sister, to be admired by everyone as I glided across the dance floor. I shook my head. That kind of life just wasn’t a possibility for me.

After much scrubbing, brushing and praying, my sister had managed to pull my unruly mass of curly red hair into a simple twist with several small curls framing my face. She said it would show off the emerald earrings that she knew would be “just perfect” with the gown that she was practically forcing me to wear, a rich green dress made of some expensive fabric—its name escaped me—and trimmed in gold. After I worked my way into the impossibly complicated dress, Katrina stood back looking at me with a critical eye.

“Not bad at all. I could do more if you would let me, but this will do quite nicely.”

“Wait. There’s something missing.” I said looking for my little green charm. “Where did you put my necklace?”

“What necklace?”

“You know, my green charm necklace, the one that you gave me.”

“Oh that old thing? Do you still wear that?”

“Yes, now where is it?”

“Here it is on your dressing table.” Katrina retrieved the charm and fastened it around my neck. “It isn’t really appropriate for a ball, you know. I have nicer pieces that you could wear. I don’t mind sharing.”

“But this one used to be Mother’s. I can’t explain it, but it makes me feel safe.”

“Well, I guess it is the same color as your dress, and I can see that it is no use trying to talk you out of it. Whenever you’re ready, we can head down to the banquet room.”

I turned to the mirror and adjusted the charm that was now firmly in its usual place around my neck and stared at my reflection in the mirror for a moment. The image looking back was foreign to me, although I did have to admit the green dress was nearly the same shade as my eyes, but the dress would have looked better on my sister. She had golden hair, sapphire eyes, and a perfect porcelain complexion. Everything looked exquisite on her. My hair was always a tangled mess and my skin was tanned from spending too much time outside in the sun and it was usually covered in scrapes, bruises, and these days, an occasional scar.

Looking at my sister, I realized just how beautiful she really was. Everyone would want to dance with her tonight while I stood around and talked to Philip, the commander of the army, before he was whisked away by some gorgeous and flirtatious girl. He was very attractive with shiny black hair that was just a little too long so he was constantly brushing it away from his amazing chocolate brown eyes that always twinkled with the light of some mischievous thought. Though he always wore a smile, his jaw was strong and proud. Just thinking about him made me blush a little. I glanced at my sister, who was fussing around in my closet, and was grateful that she hadn’t noticed.

Philip and I had known each other since we were children, and I couldn't remember when exactly I had developed feelings for him. Sadly, we were and probably always would be just friends. Sometimes my heart ached having to work so closely with him everyday and watch other girls flirt with him. It was nearly unbearable, but I was good at what I did. I protected Twentaria and that was more important than anything else I may have selfishly wanted for myself. I just didn't have time for all that silly romance. I was a fighter, not a "real" woman. There would never be time to be both.

That night at dinner, I sat dutifully next to Katrina, unsuccessfully trying to stifle my yawns of boredom. The conversation was trivial gossip about who was courting whom and whose dress looked the nicest, whose jewelry was the most expensive, and other nonsense. I couldn't understand why these other people seemed to care so much about all that superficial stuff. None of it really mattered, at least not to me. All I wanted to do was go up to my room and rip the uncomfortable excuse for clothing off and curl up with a good book and relax. After all, I had work to do in the morning, and I desperately needed to rest.

I was hoping I could leave the party early unnoticed after Father made his big announcement. I was sure everyone would want to congratulate Trent when he was named the future king. With everyone distracted, I might be able to sneak out the side door and no one would be the wiser. No one would even wonder where I had gone. I wouldn't have to dance, and most importantly, I could avoid having to stand awkwardly at the side of the room while Philip danced late into the night with a host of other women.

Long after the last course had been served, my father still hadn't made his announcement. The guests were becoming extremely anxious and were doing a very poor job of hiding it. I glanced over at him. He turned and gave me a mischievous smile and a quick knowing wink. He was waiting to make his announcement on purpose! He sipped at his drink and feigned intense interest in the idle conversation until the suspense was almost unbearable. I stifled a laugh as I fidgeted in my seat. The sooner he made the announcement, the sooner I could leave.

After a few more minutes, my father finally stood. The hall fell silent immediately, all eyes fixed on him. The tension in the air was nearly tangible.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, “as you know, I have gathered you all here so that I may make a very important declaration.” He took a deep breath. “As you all know, my wife died many years ago without bearing a son, who would have traditionally ascended the throne after me. However, this does not mean that I am left without options. Sitting at this very table is a person who has proven their dedication to the kingdom over and over. They are strong in body and mind.”

I looked over at my cousin Trent. He was just grinning from ear to ear, and even looked as though he were preparing to stand as he stole a glance at a small scrap of paper cupped in his sweaty palm. No doubt it was an acceptance speech, which I thought was very premature, after all Katrina was still a distinct possibility.

“My decision is very nontraditional, but there is no law in all of Twentaria against what I’m about to do. I have thought long and hard about his decision and it has already been finalized. So, it is with great pleasure and confidence that I name my youngest daughter, Lillian, as heir to the throne.”

I sat in my seat paralyzed. I couldn’t have heard right. Surely he hadn’t said my name? He did not mean me to be the next ruler of Twentaria, did he? I glanced over at Trent and the look on his face was all I needed to confirm that I had heard correctly. His face was turning crimson and the stupid grin had fallen. The piece of paper was now crumpled in a balled fist, and his mouth had settled into a deep frown. He was scowling intensely at me from across the table, as was my grandmother. I turned to my father who was absolutely beaming, oblivious to the displeasure of my cousin and grandmother. Well, I guess I wasn’t going to be leaving the party early after all.

Chapter Two

Shaking like a frail autumn leaf, I stood and made my way to the head of the table careful not to make a fool out of myself by tripping on the frilly skirt of my gown. What was I supposed to do now? Make some kind of fancy acceptance speech? If my father had asked me to charge into battle outnumbered against an entire army, I don't think I would have been as nervous as I was about the prospect of having to give an acceptance speech in front of all his honored guests.

Well, that was going to have to change if I were to be the queen. What was my father thinking? Truthfully, I was relieved he hadn't named Trent, and I couldn't deny that part of me got just a little satisfaction out of seeing my cousin so angry. As for the rest of the people at the banquet, they weren't doing very well at hiding the fact they were shocked. Glad to know I had their absolute confidence.

When I finally reached the head of the table, I gave my father a quick hug and whispered in his ear. "You know, you could have given me a bit of a warning."

"I know, but that wouldn't be nearly as much fun," he whispered back.

I turned to the guests and had no idea what to say. My heart was beating in my throat and my insides felt all jumbled. I reached up and placed my hand on my charm and a warm, comforting sensation instantly washed over me. I took a deep breath, cleared my throat and began.

"I know that you are all shocked. Believe me, no one is more shocked about my father's unusual decision than I am. Consequently, I'm not really prepared to give a speech, so I won't waste your time by fumbling

around and trying to make one up on such short notice. I'll just say that I'm honored and will do my best to live up to my responsibilities to the kingdom when the time comes."

I stood awkwardly for a moment or two while the audience, unsure of how to respond to the situation, sat confused until Philip, thank goodness, stood and started a round of applause and was the first to make the move to congratulate me personally. He ran over to me and gave me the biggest bear hug and lifted me clear off the ground as he did a quick twirl.

"Philip, put me down!" I said as I blushed with embarrassment and pushed him away playfully. I smoothed my dress and moved to stand next to my father in order to greet the quickly forming line of guests anxious to be the next in line to offer their congratulations and support.

For the next hour, I dutifully stood between my father and Philip while all the people in attendance filed past me in a seemingly never ending line. Many people expressed their happiness and confidence in my leadership capabilities, which pleased me much more than the initial looks of shock I had received. When my grandmother approached me, I plastered the fake smile I had worn in the hallway earlier on my face. She did not even try to pretend that she was happy. Instead she decided now was the time to finish the little lecture she had begun earlier.

"Well, I suppose you think you're pretty special now, don't you? You think you've made a fool out of me, don't you? You knew you were going to be named as the heir when I saw you in the hallway earlier today, didn't you?"

"Grandmother, I don't know what you mean," I said as I continued to smile so sweetly I thought my face would crack.

"I didn't tell her. It was a surprise to her as well. That was my decision," my father interjected. "It was just my way of having a little fun." He was trying to smooth things over, but it was not working well.

"You know that you will never be the queen your mother was, the kind of queen that your sister would have been. So, don't even try," Grandmother continued. "The only hope for the kingdom is that you are

able to marry well, but of course that will be difficult with your boyish looks and temperament.” The shriveled old woman sneered.

“Now, Grandmother,” cautioned Father. An edge of anger had crept into his normally calm voice.

“No, it’s okay, Father. I’m going to have to learn to deal with difficult and extremely rude people like her if I’m ever going to be a good queen,” I said as I turned back to Grandmother. “You don’t like me. I’ve known that practically since I was an infant, so it’s really not necessary for you to remind me on a daily basis, but let’s get to the real issue. You miss your daughter, and you blame me for her loss. Don’t you think that the rest of your family misses her, too? I never even knew her! At least you have memories. All I have are paintings and the stories my father tells me, and no amount of insults you hurl at me will ever bring her back.”

My face had become flushed as the words tumbled out of my mouth. I knew I was way out of line. Speaking in such a way to your elders was just not done no matter how rude they were, but I just couldn’t seem to stop myself. It was as if a dam had broken within me and all the pent up anger that I’d swallowed year after year spilled out in a single moment. I stared into my grandmother’s eyes blinking back hot tears of frustration. Even with my tear-blurred vision, I should have been prepared for what followed, but I never saw it coming. Grandmother raised her hand so quickly it was only a blur and struck me across the face so hard that I stumbled back a step. As she stormed out of the banquet hall, everyone else in the room was so silent the only sound to be heard was the angry click of her heels striking the cold stone floor.

I had the overwhelming urge to tell my father he could give the crown to someone else and run out of the room, but that would mean he would give the crown to Trent. I couldn’t let that happen. I cared about the future of Twentaria too much to throw it away. Instead, I straightened myself, ignoring the stinging handprint on my face, and briefly let my hand flick up to my green charm. Again the feeling of peace washed over me. I smiled as I continued to converse with the rest of the people waiting in line, acting as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. I would

not let myself cry. I needed to appear strong to the people of the kingdom if I was going to be their leader someday.

Trent did not come over to congratulate me, which though rude, didn't really surprise me much. As soon as people began getting up from their seats to form the line, he abruptly pushed back from the table, threw his napkin down in plain disgust, and stalked out of the banquet hall. He hadn't even seen grandmother's little scene. Watching him, I honestly believe that he would only be angry for awhile and then come to the realization that Father had made the best decision for the kingdom. I should have known then that what I took to be a little display of anger and disappointment was certainly not the last or the least of the problems that I would face as a result of his resentment.

Chapter Three

After everyone in the banquet hall had respectfully shuffled through the line, the musicians Father had hired for the evening began to play, and just as I expected, there was soon a line of women practically begging to dance with Philip. He gave me an apologetic shrug as he took the first adoring young lady by the arm and escorted her to the dance floor. I believe over the course of the evening he danced with nearly every eligible lady in the room. I simply stood off to the side next to my father, silently wishing that just for one moment I was one of those lucky girls twirling around the room in Philip's arms.

I turned to my father, who had been understandably silent after my inappropriate exchange with Grandmother. "I'm very sorry if I embarrassed you earlier. No matter how upsetting or hurtful her words were, I know I shouldn't have said those things. I will practice better self control in the future, and I will make a formal apology to Grandmother first thing tomorrow morning if you'd like."

"Yes, I believe that you do owe your grandmother an apology, but I also believe that she owes you one as well. I know that your grandmother can be difficult to live with at times, but she loved your mother very much, as I did and still do. I'm sorry that I've been so sullen on what should be one of the happiest moments of your life. I've just been thinking of your mother. I wish you could have known her."

"I do too."

"Don't ever feel as though you aren't capable of leading this kingdom. I've seen you work with Philip and the army. You are a strong woman and will make a wonderful queen someday, no matter what your grandmother says"

“Well, I don’t know what kind of a woman I am, but I’ll do my best to lead this kingdom when the time comes.”

“I know you will. Well, would you like to dance with your poor old father?”

“Of course.”

As we danced around the room, he made an effort to look as though he was enjoying himself, but I could see the sadness in his eyes. He was thinking about my mother. He never loved another after she had died. I felt terrible having said those awful things to Grandmother, even if she deserved them. It had hurt my father as well, and I just couldn’t bear the thought of that. After the song ended, we walked back over to our spot on the side and chatted for awhile about nothing in particular until Father noticed what necklace I was wearing.

“Lillian, I noticed that you’re wearing your mother’s old charm. Where did you find it?”

“Katrina gave it to me. She said she never wore it and that I should have it since it matched my eyes.”

“You know your mother believed that charm was magic. She said it had the power to protect the wearer.”

“I know. Katrina told me.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“I don’t know. Why do you ask?”

“I noticed you touched it every time you became upset this evening.”

“Just a nervous habit, I guess.” I blushed a little as I spoke. I didn’t want my father thinking I was being silly, but the charm did have some sort of power. The calm feeling was real and it didn’t come from me. It came from the charm.

“You don’t need a little trinket to protect you.”

“I know that. I guess its special to me because it belonged to Mother.” That was only partially true, but I couldn’t explain the truth to my father, at least not in any way he would understand. “Did she wear it often?”

“Yes, she did.” His eyes misted over a bit as he thought of my mother. I looked away. I couldn’t bear to see such a pained expression on his face. “Well, Lillian, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to circulate through the room once more before I retire for the evening. I can’t stay out all night anymore like you young people. Enjoy the rest of your evening. I love you.” He kissed me on the forehead and went to mingle, leaving me standing alone next to the wall.

I didn’t have to stand alone for very long though before Philip scurried out from the mass of women clumped in the middle of the dance floor. “Dance with me, Lillian.”

“What?” I said, startled. He couldn’t really be asking me to dance with him, could he?

“This is your night to celebrate, and I won’t have you standing over here by yourself like a wallflower all night, no matter how pretty a wallflower you are. Besides, I really need a break from all those other women. I swear if I have to listen to one more second of those women’s mindless chatter, I believe that I’ll lose my mind.”

“Well, if you put it that way, I suppose I can rescue you,” I said as he led me to the dance floor. I couldn’t believe I was really dancing with Philip. The moment I had wished for earlier was really coming true. Even if it was just a pity dance, it was more than I’d ever imagined would happen. “You know all those women adore you,” I teased. “They’re hoping that you will choose one of them to be your bride, you know?”

“I know. My parents have been urging me to choose a wife as well. They used to just mention it casually every now and then, but recently they have been extremely insistent that I take a wife. If I don’t choose someone soon, I get the feeling that they will make the decision for me. Since I’m an only child, they want grandchildren to carry on the family name, but I just don’t know if I’m ready to take that step yet. I can’t picture myself spending the rest of my life with any of them.”

“You can’t tell me that you don’t find any of them at least a little bit attractive!”

“It’s not that. They are all beautiful, but I’m just not ready for that kind of responsibility.”

“Well, there’s no rush. You’re only a few years older than me, and I’m not interested in that sort of thing either.” I was lying through my teeth of course. I wanted desperately to tell Philip how I felt, but that would have made things awkward between us, and that couldn’t happen if we were to command the army together. I’d rather become an old maid if that was what it took to keep the army running smoothly. The protection of Twentaria was all that really mattered. Love just wasn’t a realistic possibility for me now. Most likely it never would be.

“I know you aren’t. That’s what makes you and me so perfect together, for commanding the army, I mean. I trust you with my life, and if anything were to happen to me, I trust you with the safety of our men as well. No matter what your grandmother says, you are a great leader for the army and will be a wise ruler someday. Don’t tell anyone I said this, but I think it took a lot of courage for you to stand up to her even though I know you’re going to have to apologize to her later. It takes a strong person to apologize and an even stronger person to forgive, stronger than the person who strikes out in anger. I know that you’ll apologize to her for your father’s sake, but I know that someday you’ll find the strength to forgive her as well.” He paused for a moment. “Anyway, I guess what I’m trying to say is you’re not like all those other silly girls.”

Honestly, I didn’t know how to respond to his praise. I was happy that he held such a high opinion of me, but it also seemed to confirm that he didn’t really think of me as a woman, just a friend, his best friend, but a friend nonetheless. We finished the dance in silence while other girls on the dance floor, who wanted their turn with Philip, shot sharp glares in my direction as they swirled by us.

I began to think of the future and how bleak my chances with Philip really were. He would eventually give in to his parents’ demands and choose a bride. She would be radiant in her snow white wedding gown, the entire kingdom would attend, and I would stand at their wedding, probably as his best “man”, watching them take their vows with a broken

heart. Just the thought of Philip marrying another woman made my heart feel so heavy that I just couldn't bear to watch another girl throw herself at him on the dance floor. I feigned exhaustion, which actually wasn't far from the truth. If I was going to be their strong and fearless queen someday, I couldn't let them, especially Philip, see me cry. I wouldn't allow it.

I walked out of the banquet hall slowly, smiling and saying goodbye to Philip, my sister, and all the honored guests. As soon as the door to the hall clicked shut behind me, I picked up the hem of my skirt and ran as quickly as I could manage in the cumbersome dress and heels to my bedroom at the other end of the palace. It was only when I locked my door behind me that I allowed the tears that had been threatening to spill down my cheeks all night to flow. I sank to the floor and cried. I cried for the mother I had never known. I cried for my father who had lost the love of his life, but most of all, I cried because I wanted so badly to be with Philip and knew it wasn't possible. My role in life was to be strong and protect the kingdom, not fall in love.

After I'd recovered, I looked down at my dress. It was completely wrinkled and the sleeves were streaked with tears from me wiping my face. I'm sure my grandmother would have just loved to see me in such a state of distress, but at that moment, I didn't really care. I took the dress off and threw it over a chair. I knew Katrina would lecture me about it tomorrow, but right now all I wanted to do was sleep. I tried to undo the clasp for the charm, but couldn't manage to get it undone, so I gave up. I could have Katrina help me with it later. I slipped my nightgown on and crawled under the soft blankets and fell into a deep sleep.

That night I had a vivid dream of Philip and me walking hand in hand in a field of flowers. The dream was so real I could smell the fragrant flowers in the field, hear the birds singing in the trees, and feel the warmth of his hand in mine. Philip leaned forward and seemed about to kiss me, but then the dream abruptly changed as I saw the shadowy figure of a man run out of the forest. I could never get a good look at the face, but he wore a golden ring with the insignia of the kingdom on it. The man ran over to Philip and pulled him out of my grasp and dragged

him away into the shadows. Philip's brown eyes were wide with fear. The green charm around my neck was glowing fiercely as I reached for my sword, but it was nowhere to be found. All I had was a silly bouquet of flowers. There was nothing for me to do but watch helplessly as they disappeared into the darkness.

I woke startled wondering what it meant. I was a firm believer in the idea that dreams always came for a reason, that they were some kind of message, and this dream seemed to be an urgent warning. I looked down at the charm, half expecting it to be glowing, but it wasn't. I closed my hand over it and tried to concentrate on the figure that had run out of the woods, but it remained unclear. Whatever the dream meant, my mother's old necklace seemed to be connected to it somehow. I was never going to take it off again. I didn't care what my father thought; it had some sort of protective property. I laid back down, but slept fitfully for the rest of the night.

Chapter Four

In the morning, Katrina bustled into my room and immediately began to nag at me for treating the dress so poorly, but one look at the dark circles under my eyes and the sour expression on my face, and she decided to let the subject drop. I was deliberately sluggish as I dressed and pushed my breakfast around on my plate until it was cold and most definitely inedible. I was trying to mentally prepare myself to make the formal apology to Grandmother as I had promised my father. I thought about simply writing her a letter and slipping it under her bedroom door, which would certainly have been much easier than talking to her in person again, but that would not be what my father expected me to do. He expected me to be the more honorable person and face my grandmother in person. It wasn't that I was unsure of what to say. I had gone over it in my mind a million times. It was the fact that I didn't think I could tolerate another tongue lashing from her and keep quiet as I had in the past. I walked around the halls of the palace for nearly an hour preparing myself for the worse, but I could only stall for so long. I had other more important things to do that morning.

I found Grandmother sitting alone in her formal sitting room eating breakfast. She didn't even so much as glance up from her steaming cup of coffee as I entered the room. "Good morning, Grandmother. How are you this morning?"

"You didn't come here to ask how I'm doing this morning. As you can see, I'm very busy, so say what you have to say and then leave," she snapped, still not looking up at me.

"You're right. I didn't come here to ask you how you are. I came here this morning because I know last night I said some things that were

inexcusable and very inappropriate. I know that you were hurt by my rash words. I fully acknowledge this and offer you a most sincere apology if you will have it.” Even as I said the words, I didn’t feel my apology was sincere, but I hadn’t promised my father I would mean everything I said. I only promised that I go and say the things that needed to be said in order to appease my grandmother, but would she accept it? I wondered as I waited for her response.

“Accepted,” she snapped, still not bothering to look up from her coffee. I hesitated for a moment, thinking she would say more or at the very least apologize for her actions as well, especially since she had slapped me, rather hard in fact, in front of all the guests at the banquet, but she remained silent.

I watched her sip her coffee and stare out the window absently for several moments, but she still hadn’t said anything else to me or even acknowledged that I was still standing there waiting. I wanted to say so much to this woman who believed I had ruined her life simply by being born. I had never done anything to deliberately provoke her anger before last night. Nothing I ever did seemed to please her, so I quit trying a long time ago, but some small part of me still sought after and needed her approval. I wanted to ask if she thought that maybe she owed me an apology as well. Instead I simply turned and walked out of the room, quietly closing the door behind me, not wanting to start another argument. Though I was truly shocked that she hadn’t apologized. I don’t know why I was so surprised because as far as I knew she’d never apologized for anything in her life. Why would she start with the person she seemed to despise most of all?

Once outside, I leaned against the wall next to her door with my heart racing. Why did she always have such a terrible effect on me? I was an adult now, and I should be able to handle myself. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, brought my hand up to the green charm and waited as the pounding of my heart slowed and my gasping breath steadied. I tried to put thoughts of my grandmother behind me and tried to think of more pleasant things, and as usual my thoughts turned to Philip. I smiled as I remembered him running out from that crowd of

girls, desperately seeking my protection. What would the night have been like if those other girls would have left him alone? Would he still have come running to me for a dance? Would I have found the strength to tell him how I felt? If I ever did tell him, how would he react? Would he take me in his arms or push me away? I sighed and realized I couldn't spend the rest of my day wondering what might have been. There was work to be done. I pushed away from the wall and headed outside to meet Philip.

As usual, we spent the morning drilling and training the new recruits. I found it difficult to concentrate on my duties and was mindlessly going through the motions for most of the morning. Though I told myself I wouldn't dwell on "what ifs", I couldn't help thinking about the dance we'd shared the night before. His strong arms had felt so warm and safe, but I knew that it had meant nothing to Philip. He had even said that he just didn't want me standing alone like a wallflower. I wondered how many other women he had danced with after I'd left. How many other women had felt the warmth of his arms? Probably more than I cared to know about.

I was so preoccupied with my own thoughts that I didn't realize Philip was talking to me. I looked up and must have seemed quite startled because he and the rest of the men laughed. I silenced their chuckles with a withering glare. "I'm sorry, I was thinking of something else. What did you say?"

"I was just asking if you wanted to demonstrate some different fighting techniques with me for the men."

"Oh, yes, of course."

Philip and I had made up a fighting routine and had done it so many times it was like a well rehearsed dance. We each had our steps and marks to hit. If either one of us was off just a little, one of us could be seriously hurt, but Philip and I had done the dance so many times neither one of us ever worried, at least not very much any way. I always felt as though we were showing off, and that our time would be better spent having the men work in pairs under our direction, but Philip thought it was necessary for the men to view "flawless" form. I suspected

that he liked the attention, but he always was very insistent. So, every time we had new recruits, we performed our dance for them.

After we had finished training the recruits for the day, I just wanted to go back to my room and relax. All I ever wanted to do was go back to my room and relax, but it just never seemed to happen that way and today was certainly no exception. As I was about to leave, Philip called me over. "How did your conversation with your grandmother go this morning? You apologized, right?"

"Yes, I did, and it did not go very well at all."

"I figured that was what was bothering you. You've seemed unusually distracted all day."

"Sorry, I know I should have been more on task today. You're right, I was thinking about last night. I promise I'll be better tomorrow." It was true that I'd been thinking about my grandmother, but that was only half of what was on my mind, but if he wanted to believe that was all that was bothering me, so be it.

"You don't have to apologize to me, Lillian. I know that your grandmother was more than rude to you last night. What did she say to you this morning?" He looked deep into my eyes as he spoke. I felt as though his gaze would cut right through me. That he would see the truth behind my carefully masked face.

"She didn't really say much of anything," I said as I looked away from the heat in his eyes. "I apologized and she accepted. That was it. She didn't say anything about what she'd said or slapping me in front of everyone. I waited for her to say something, but she ignored me. She never even looked up from her breakfast. I guess I shouldn't be so shocked. She's never said sorry for anything in her life. Wouldn't it be nice if we were all so perfect?"

Philip laughed at my poor attempt at humor and then did something quite unexpected. He walked over and gathered me up in his arms in a tender hug. Startled, I tensed for a moment, but his arms felt so good that I couldn't help but relax in them. I hugged him back and rested my

head on his shoulder. His hair smelled like fresh grass and spring breezes. I could even hear the steady beat of his heart as he held me.

"I don't like seeing you so sad." He leaned down and whispered in my ear.

His breath felt warm on my neck and tickled my skin as he spoke. When he had pulled me into the hug, it had pressed our bodies together in a way that dancing had never done. I began to blush at the thought of the closeness of our bodies, and the blush spread from my cheeks. It was as if a fire had been lit deep within me, and it spread throughout my body from my face, to my heart, and settled in my thighs. It was so intense that I trembled ever so slightly in his embrace.

"It will be okay. You've done your part. Now it's up to her to take the next step in repairing your relationship," he said as he kissed me gently on the forehead and released me from the hug.

"I don't know if our relationship, if that's what you want to call it, is worth salvaging anymore. I'm not sure I care if she ever speaks to me again." I was trying desperately to put out the fire Philip's embrace had started, but it was proving to be difficult. Would he notice the effect his touch had had on me?

"You don't really mean that. Well, I've got to be getting home. See you tomorrow," Philip patted me on the back, walked over to his horse, and rode away.

I stood in the field alone for a long time after he left, thinking about what had just happened. I was so confused. I had always believed Philip only thought of me as a best friend, a guy friend at that, but guys, even best friends, don't hug each other the way Philip had just hugged me. His arms had felt so strong, and he had been so warm and tender that for the tiniest of moments I believed that maybe, just maybe he had feelings for me, and that I had a chance with him. However, when he had said goodbye, he clapped me on the back like I was just another one of the guys. It had just been a hug of pity, like that dance the night before.

Tears began to well up in my eyes, but I forced them back. What was wrong with me? I had never been a very emotionally expressive person,

but I'd cried more in the past couple days than I had in my entire life. I still felt his hot breath on my neck, and the fire he'd started had slowed to a glow, but it was still there, and it still burned. I touched my green charm and waited for the familiar rush of relief, but there seemed to be no remedy for what ailed me. When I felt satisfied that I wouldn't start crying again, I headed back inside the palace, the setting sun at my back.

Chapter Five

The next few weeks were fairly uneventful and went by rather quickly. Philip and I worked hard every day training the new recruits, and I tried to forget about that tender hug and my strong feelings for him, which was proving to be nearly impossible. Ever since that hug, I'd found it difficult to conceal my emotions. Every time his hand brushed against mine, I felt the fire flare up, and always afterward I ached with the emptiness.

To make matters worse, I celebrated my twenty-fifth birthday and as usual, Father insisted that there be a party. I wore another fancy gown and Philip was as handsome as ever. Of course he wanted to have one dance with the "wallflower birthday girl" before he was again whisked away to dance with dozens of other women who, as usual, had glared at me while I danced with Philip. One would think that they would be a little less obvious about their disdain for my closeness with Philip. They didn't know it was really I who envied them. They actually stood a chance of one day becoming his wife, while I would remain only a friend.

Thankfully, there were no more incidents with Grandmother. She hadn't really spoken to me at all since the morning that I apologized to her. When we happened to pass each other in the hall or at some other official palace function, we simply nodded to one another. It was hard not to be a little upset that she wasn't talking to me, after all she was my grandmother, but that also meant that she wasn't lecturing me either. I decided to count her silence as a blessing. The silent treatment went on for months, and I began to think that we would live and die without saying another word to each other, and honestly, after a while, that didn't bother me much at all.

My cousin Trent avoided me completely from the moment I was named heir to the throne. He declined his invitation to my birthday party, which surprised me quite a bit. He even missed a few days of training. Trent and I had never been very close, but before the announcement we had always had a fairly good working relationship. I'd even made him commander of one of the divisions in the army. I knew he was angry he wouldn't be the king someday, but I thought he was taking things a bit far. After all he still lived a life of privilege in the palace, and I certainly wasn't going to throw him out when I became queen. Philip thought we should formally discipline him, or at least give him a stern lecture, but I didn't think that would be necessary. This was not an issue to be resolved by formal reprimand. It was personal, and I didn't want the rest of the men or Philip involved in it.

I tried to make time to talk with him and smooth things over a bit. He was one of my best men and I couldn't have the performance of his duties affected by his anger with me. He had responsibilities to the men and the kingdom to think about, but it was difficult to try and find a time and place to talk to him privately. When he wasn't blatantly avoiding me, he spent a lot of his spare time locked away in Grandmother's sitting room talking with her for hours. I suppose they griped to each other about their disappointment with me being named heir to the throne. Even though Trent hadn't been my grandmother's first choice as heir to the throne, neither one of them had wanted me to have the position, and that seemed to form the basis of their new bond. Soon, I gave up trying to talk to Trent as I had given up on my grandmother. If they wanted to waste their lives being angry and miserable, that was fine with me as long as they didn't bother anyone else.

Katrina seemed to be the least affected by Father's decision to name me as the future queen. As I've said, she was always more interested in socializing than leading a nation. She didn't even seem to be too concerned with my encounter with Grandmother. Surprisingly, she seemed to have taken my side on the issue. I knew that Grandmother loved Katrina, and I had always assumed that Katrina had felt the same way about Grandmother, but Katrina explained that knowing how to

handle someone was quite different than actually liking them. I couldn't have agreed with her more. In those months after the incident, we became quite close. She managed to drag herself away from all her pressing social engagements and come out and watch Philip and I work with the recruits in the late afternoon. She even stayed to talk with us for awhile before she and I walked back up to the palace for dinner.

"You and Philip spend an awful lot of time together. You are really good friends, aren't you?" Katrina asked one day as we were walking together.

"Yes, well, we are in charge of the army, and we've been best friends for years, but you know that, so what are you insinuating?"

"Do you ever think of him as anything more than a friend?"

I was shocked at the boldness of her question for a moment. Maybe I hadn't been as good at hiding my feelings for Philip as I had thought.

"No, of course not. We're just very good friends who work together well. We're a team. He's more like a brother than anything else. Why do you ask?" My voice sounded calm, but I was panicking. What did she know? Had she seen us hug?

"Oh, I don't know. You two just seem to be spending a lot of time together after you've finished training, and I just thought that something might be going on."

"Is new gossip really that scarce? Are you that desperate for news? Really, Katrina, things must be dull if you're looking for news in my life, especially my nonexistent love life. Nothing is going on between Philip and me." I was trying very hard to be convincing, maybe too hard. I wasn't sure if she would believe me.

"All right, all right. I believe you. It's just that you've seemed a little distracted lately and I thought that maybe that was the reason."

"Well, you couldn't be more wrong. If you really want to know, I'm still a little upset with the way things went between Grandmother, Trent and I," I said, grateful for an opportunity to be able to change the subject.

“Oh, Lillian, don’t let them bother you,” she said as she gave me a hug.

“I wish it were that simple.” I breathed a sigh of relief inwardly. It was true that the situation with Grandmother and Trent was upsetting, but she had come too close to discovering that I had feelings for Philip, the real source of my distraction. I was going to have to be more careful in the future. I couldn’t let anyone find out how I felt. What would people say if they found out I was in love with the man I was supposed to be working with to protect the kingdom? They would lose faith in my ability to be a warrior and they might even question my ability to lead them when I finally became queen. I couldn’t stand the thought of people losing confidence in my abilities.

“So, you’re just upset about the situation with Trent and Grandmother. There is absolutely nothing going on between you and Philip, right?”

“Right,” I repeated firmly.

“I was just curious. Let’s go have dinner.” She smiled and gave me another hug.

The waves of panic began to subside as we walked toward the palace. She was rambling on about the latest gossip, but I was only half listening. I was going to have to be more careful. I had been too emotional lately. I needed get myself under control.

“Lillian, are you all right?” She had asked me a question and I hadn’t responded.

“I’m sorry, Katrina. I’m still preoccupied with this whole mess.”

“It will be okay, and besides, if you ever need to talk, you can always come to me.” With everything else in my life falling apart, it was nice to know I had a sister who cared about me, even if she was just a bit too nosy.

Chapter Six

With my personal life in such a mess, I was grateful the kingdom had continued to enjoy a state of peace. We had many allies throughout the land and very few enemies. We had even established regular trade relations with several of our neighbors, and people of all kingdoms traveled freely from one nation to another without fear of attack. The roads were most generally free of rogue warriors and common thieves, and if such people caused trouble, the different kingdoms often worked together to bring the outlaws to justice. It had been a prosperous time for everyone, but I began to fear that this time of peace was coming to an end.

Not quite six months earlier, Philip and I had dispatched some messengers to Thench, our closest ally kingdom in the north. It had been nearly a year since we'd had any type of communication from this neighboring kingdom, which was unusual especially for a time of peace. So, we decided it would be best to send messengers to take some gifts and make sure that the peaceful relationship was still intact. At first we weren't terribly concerned when we didn't hear from Thench or the messengers for a couple months. They had traveled on foot and the weather had been stormy, making the paths more difficult to pass than usual, but six months had passed and we still hadn't heard from our ally, and even more disturbing we hadn't heard from our messengers. In fact, it had been a long time since anyone had come to our kingdom through the northern woods.

Philip and I reported this news to my father who was equally disturbed. Philip suggested sending an armed guard out on a mission with a dual purpose. First, they were to reestablish communication with

Thench. Second, they were to search for any sign of the messengers sent out previously. Father and I agreed at the time that this was a good idea and the guard was dispatched immediately. We never saw or heard from those men again either.

Father, Philip, and I were all extremely disturbed by this. There were only three plausible explanations for the disappearance of our men. Possibility one, they could have all been attacked on the road by bandits. It wouldn't have been difficult to capture the first group of messengers, but it would have been more difficult for a simple group of bandits to take down the entire armed guard, and that would not totally explain the lack of communication from our ally. Certainly the bandits couldn't prevent everyone from coming through the forest. Possibility two, our ally had turned against us and had either killed our men or was holding them hostage until they were prepared to launch a full assault against us, but we had a very good relationship with the people of Thench, so it was difficult to believe that they would simply turn on us without any provocation.

The third and most likely possibility was that our ally was in trouble and was possibly under attack at this very moment. If this were indeed the case, then our men were probably killed by this unknown enemy in order to prevent them from sending a warning or for reinforcements. This meant my father, Philip, and I had a tough decision to make. We could either send the army into the north in order to help our ally and recover our men, or we could remain at home and wait. If our ally in the north had been taken, certainly Twentaria would be next.

My vote was to send part of the army north. If our ally was in serious trouble, they depended on us to come to their aid, let alone our men who depended on us to rescue them. They could still be alive in a prison somewhere. Philip thought it would be better to stay and protect the kingdom in preparation for an attack. Father was undecided at the time and struggled with the decision for nearly a week, but ultimately decided he didn't want to send any more of our men out to face an unknown enemy. If indeed there was such an enemy, he rationalized that we would need all our men at home protecting the kingdom and its people. I tried

to convince him to at least send one more armed guard out in order to at least try and gather some scrap of information about this potential enemy so that we would be better prepared. I even volunteered to lead the guard, but Father had made up his mind. I let the issue drop and Philip and I began to prepare the army for battle.

I was thankful there had been a surge in new recruits in the past year and that most of them were already fully trained, though few of them had actually been in a real battle. I had only been in a few minor battles myself. As I said, we had been enjoying a time of peace and prosperity. Father didn't seem as concerned about the inexperience of our men as I was. He felt that this enemy, if they came, would surely be taken care of in a single battle. Our forces had quite a reputation and were by far the strongest in number and skill in the entire world.

I wasn't so confident that this potential enemy could be taken care of so easily simply because it had been so long since we'd heard from any of the neighboring kingdoms. Only a very powerful force could close off communication between nations like that. None of the kingdoms I knew about had the power to do that. I felt certain there was a full scale war waiting on the horizon, and I just didn't think some of the new recruits were ready for it. However, there were many veterans who were able to take on leadership positions among the smaller divisions. I had full confidence in these leaders.

One of those men that I heavily depended on was Trent. Philip was skeptical about Trent's loyalty because he had been somewhat lax in his duties after I'd been named heir to the throne, but I reassured Philip that Trent would do his duty when the time came. Trent may have been a selfish weasel, but he was also a warrior as I was, and warriors don't let their personal feelings interfere with their dedication to the protection of the kingdom.

Another month passed and there was still no word from our ally in the north or the messengers and armed guard we had sent out earlier in the year. The families of those men began to lose hope of ever seeing them again. I became increasingly impatient and wanted to send more

men out to investigate. One day Philip and I walked the perimeter of the wall around the city while I vented my frustration.

"I don't understand why we haven't heard anything from anyone. If Thench was under attack, wouldn't they be able to sneak at least one person out to send a request for help or at the very least a warning?"

"I'm as confused about this as you, Lillian, but your father and I feel it is best not to divide our forces. He and I want our men to be at their strongest if and when this enemy makes an appearance."

"That doesn't explain why we haven't heard anything from anyone. Wouldn't we have heard something about an enemy that powerful before they took over the kingdom closest to us? News like that usually travels very quickly. Certainly a force that powerful would be well known throughout the land."

"I know it doesn't make any sense, but I still support your father's decision."

"Assuming this enemy force is powerful and has somehow managed to escape wide spread notice. How are we going to fight an enemy that we know absolutely nothing about?"

"I understand your frustration. Someday when you're queen, you can handle things differently. Until then your father is still the king and we must respect and support his decision."

"I know. I just wish there were something else we could do besides sit around and wait." I didn't know it at the time, but I wouldn't have to wait very much longer. The unknown enemy was already swiftly approaching the border of Twentaria.

Chapter Seven

It had been months since I'd had the dream about the Philip and the shadowy figure. I had nearly managed to forget all about it with the mess with my grandmother and Trent, not to mention all the extensive preparations for battle, but the same night I walked the perimeter with Philip I found myself in the same dream. Philip and I were walking hand in hand in the field of flowers by the northern woods again. I was wearing a long flowing dress, very uncharacteristic of me, and I was confessing my true feelings for him in the sunshine of that fragrant field. As I was looking into those chocolate brown eyes, he again leaned down about to kiss me.

Then, I looked away from his eyes distracted by some movement behind him. Over his shoulder, I saw the shadow man running out of the northern woods again. I screamed a warning to Philip, but it was too late. The obscure figure was already upon us and pulled Philip out of my embrace. As in the first dream, I could see the golden ring with the insignia of the kingdom on the man's hand. The green charm around my neck was again glowing fiercely as I started to run towards the man. Automatically, I reached for my sword as I had in the first dream and again there was nothing in my hand except a stupid bouquet of flowers. I tripped over the heavy layers of fabric that comprised my dress. I sat helplessly in the field as I watched Philip fight a losing battle with the shadow man as his chocolate eyes became clouded with fear. I struggled to see the attacker's face through the tears that blurred my vision and was shocked because this time I could make out the features of his face. They seemed strangely familiar, though I couldn't quite place them.

I woke from the dream screaming and sweating, my hair plastered to my face. I must have been tossing and turning because I was hopelessly tangled in my bed sheets. I clutched the charm at my neck and tried to calm down. This dream was definitely some sort of warning, but what did it mean, and why did my charm always glow? What was the connection? As I began the process of untangling myself, I replayed the dream in my mind. I had seen the face of the attacker this time, but now that I was awake, the face was blurred. I struggled to clear the image in my mind. Just before Philip and the shadow man had been swallowed by the blackness of the forest, the shadow man had looked up, and I had found myself staring into his eyes, a very familiar pair of eyes.

I truly believed this dream was some sort of warning, but I also found it very confusing. The correlation between the shadow man coming out of the northern woods and the enemy that we felt was surely approaching was clear, but why did the man wear the ring of the kingdom? Why did the face in my dream seem so familiar? What I found even more disturbing was the fact the dream seemed to suggest that I would lose Philip in the struggles to come. The moment the thought entered my mind, I shook my head and tried to push it away. I just couldn't bear the thought of losing Philip.

I smoothed out the blankets on my bed and was about to lay back down and try and go back to sleep when I heard an urgent knock at my door. I nearly fell out of bed as I ran to my closet. Quickly, I pulled my robe on and answered the door to find one of the palace maids standing there looking visibly shaken.

"Forgive me for waking you, Princess."

"It's all right, calm down. I was already awake anyway," I said in a gentle voice. My words failed to calm her and I could see that she was still very upset. "What's the matter?"

"The men in the watchtower have detected some activity at the edge of the northern woods. They believe it could be a team of spies sent by an approaching army. Philip and your father are already awake, dressed, and are on their way to the north wall. They sent me to tell you that you are to dress for battle and join them immediately."

“Thank you,” I said, forgetting about her agitated state as I practically slammed the door in the girl’s face. I threw my closet doors open and dressed in my battle gear as quickly as I could manage. There was no time to braid my unruly hair, so I simply tied a ribbon around it to keep it out of my face and ran out the door. I forced the dream about the shadow man out of my mind as I ran up the steps to the watchtower to meet Philip and my father. I couldn’t waste time thinking about the familiar face in the dream now. No matter how much I wanted to figure out whose face was in the dream, it would just have to wait. I had work to do.

Chapter Eight

When I finally reached the tower, I found Philip alone peering out into the darkness at the edge of the northern woods. “What’s going on? Where is my father?”

“I’ve sent him back inside. He can’t be of any help to us out here, and I don’t want to risk him being hurt. So far we’ve just seen some movement in the trees. It looks like a smaller group is hovering at the forest edge. They’ve probably been sent to spy on us before the larger force arrives.”

“Well, what are we going to do about it? Shouldn’t we send some men out there to try and capture the spies? They could give us valuable information about their leader.” I moved toward the steps.

“Yes, if we wanted to try and get our men killed!” Philip said as he caught me by the arm. “We don’t know what kind of weapons they have, how many men are in the group of spies, or how far away their army is. I won’t send the men into a trap. We are going to wait until our enemies reveal themselves.”

“I’m so tired of waiting! I want this done and over with!” I pulled out of his grasp.

“Do you really think you’re the only one who has grown impatient? I want this to be over as much as you do, but I’m not about to go charging off into the night and risk losing men. It’s a little thing I’ve learned called patience.”

“Sorry, I’m just frustrated with the way this whole situation has been handled. I didn’t mean to upset you.” I blinked in surprise and looked away. I’d had my fair share of arguments with Philip over the years, but

he'd never snapped at me like that. I glanced up at his face. Philip's expression was strained, not a hint of his usual boyish charm evident in his eyes. He was scared. I bit my lip and settled my gaze firmly on my boots.

"I know. I'm sorry for yelling, but the anticipation is killing me too."

"Let's move into formation. When they come out of the woods, we'll want to be ready to charge them."

"I agree," he said as he began walking down the winding steps of the watchtower with me following closely. About halfway down, he stopped and turned to look at me. "Lillian, don't go charging off on your own tonight. I know you're eager for this to be over, but we don't know what is going to come out of those woods. Make sure you don't do anything rash in your impatience." He climbed up a couple stairs so that he was standing on the step where I had stopped and was looking down into my eyes. "Just be careful out there, okay?" he whispered just inches from my face.

"I will," I said, a little shocked. I was glad it was dark in the stairwell. Otherwise he would have seen me blushing furiously.

"Promise me," he whispered in my ear.

"Philip, I'm an experienced warrior. I know how to handle myself in battle. Why are you so worried?" I tried to sound hurt, but I had to look down because I was unable to stare up into his intense eyes for another moment. This moment was too much like the embrace we'd shared before. If he hugged me again, I didn't know what I would do. The fire he had started that day had never really died. It was just lying in wait until it could be let out and fed.

"Lillian, just promise me, please," he whispered as he gently took my face in his hands and turned my chin upward forcing me to look him in the eyes again.

"All right, I promise." The tension of the moment was nearly unbearable. Didn't he know what he was doing to me? I wanted so badly to lean forward and kiss him. If he had forced me to hold his gaze for one more moment, I would have done it and all of my feelings for him would

have tumbled out in a torrent of words, but he let his hands drop from my face as he closed his eyes. He opened his mouth as if he had something more that he wanted to say, but he simply turned and continued walking down the stairs of the watchtower.

I was so confused. What had just happened between us? As I followed him down the stairs, I tried to rationalize that he was concerned about my well being since we were best friends, but then what had he been about to say after he made me promise to be careful? The tiny spark of hope that I'd harbored suddenly burst into a flame that threatened to consume me from the inside out. Philip did have feelings for me! Why else would he have touched my face so tenderly? It was all I could do to keep a smile from spreading across my face. Now was not the time to smile. I had to be serious, and I didn't have time to dwell on the possibility that Philip loved me because the time for battle had come. I took a deep breath to calm myself. I needed to focus. There would be time to talk to him after the battle. I followed Philip to the front of the men gathered near the front gate and gave the order to move into formation. The archers were already in place along the top of the city walls. We were as ready as we were going to be for whatever came out of those woods.

The night had suddenly grown very still and quiet. The only sound was a calm breeze and the gentle rustle of the grass stirred by the wind. I glanced down at my charm and it was glowing brightly as it had in my dreams. It was then that I finally made the connection. The charm glowed green when danger was approaching. How many other uses did this charm have? I didn't have time to wonder because all at once a shrill cry like the screaming of a thousand hawks cut the night air. The sound seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once. It was a sound that literally made my skin crawl, and it took all my will power not to crouch down and cover my ears. It had to be the battle cry of the enemy lurking in the forest. Then, all at once, the battle cry stopped just as abruptly as it had begun, leaving the night silent again.

The silence was quickly filled with a low rumble, the sound of the approaching army. Philip and I watched as hundreds of warriors dressed

in black armor marched out of the forest straight for our city gates. Philip gave the signal to our archers, and arrows immediately began raining down upon the enemy. The Dark Warriors didn't even make an attempt to shield themselves against the shower of arrows. They kept marching over the bodies of their comrades with out even breaking formation or raising their shields. I knew in that moment that we were facing an enemy without compassion even for their own kind. I began to worry about our ally in the north. If they had been battling this foe for the past few months, then they were surely all dead for I doubted that this enemy would keep prisoners.

The Dark Army was nearly at our gates, but they had no battering ram. What were they intending to do to the gate? Pull it off its hinges with their bare hands? No army was that strong. I wanted to run to the gate because the army was now so close that it was difficult for the archers to hit them now. The enemy warriors were now standing just a few feet from the gate. They were close enough to fight, and we could take out the men while they attempted to destroy the gate. Philip disagreed, determined to wait and see just what this army planned to do. Exasperated, I stood next to him and obeyed his order, sure that we should run to defend the gate, but in the end Philip again proved to be the wiser of us. They pulled out large vials of liquid and threw them at the metal bars and hinges of the gate. The vials exploded and a thick sour smelling liquid covered the gate. The metal quickly began to melt as the liquid fizzed and ate away at the metal bars. If our men had been standing there, they would have been burnt by the strange corrosive liquid as well.

With the gate melting into a puddle right before our very eyes, we prepared to rush the enemy. When the gate quit fizzing, I screamed the order to charge. The archers were excellent marksmen and since the invaders had made no attempt to shield themselves, the archers had taken down just under half of the enemy's men as they had marched across the field. I was fully confident as I ran to meet the enemy that our men could finish the job.

The night was soon filled with the sound of clashing swords and grunts of exertion as we fought against the intruders. Our army managed to push the Dark Warriors back into the open field very quickly, and not a single enemy warrior set foot within our walls, but our archers could not shoot at the enemy anymore for fear that they would hit our own men. I engaged as many Dark Warriors as possible. As soon as I defeated one, I moved on to another, slicing through them one at a time with Philip at my side. At one point, I saw a new recruit plunging his sword deep into the heart of the man he had been battling.

Alarmed, I went over to correct him. "Don't stab them, slice! You're going to get your sword stuck in them. While you're struggling to remove your sword, you'll be killed!"

"Sorry, Your Highness."

There wasn't time to say anymore. The battle raged on for another half hour. The invaders were less in number than we were, but they were very strong and they fought well. At times during the battle, I searched for the enemy leader. If I could defeat the Dark Army's leader, the battle would be over more quickly. I only caught a few small glimpses of the man I assumed was the leader. He rode a horse and stayed on the outskirts of the battle for the most part, engaging very few men in battle. He seemed almost reluctant to fight. What kind of leader sent his men into a battle that he was unwilling to fight in? Only a man with a weak heart would behave in such a cowardly way. I fought through the throng of men to get closer to this strange commander, but he always seemed beyond my reach. He seemed to fly on his great black stallion from place to place with amazingly unnatural speed.

The battle ended soon after. Before I knew it we were chasing the last handful of warriors, including their leader, through the field. As the sun rose, they fled for safety towards the woods they had crawled out of. The field was littered with the fallen bodies of our enemies. They would have to be gathered in a pile and burnt or else the stench would be unbearable, but before I could give the order, the bodies simply disappeared. My men quit shouting their victory chants and simply stood on the field with their mouths hanging open. Only a few enemy shields

and helmets remained scattered on the field. Puzzled, Philip looked over at me, but I had no answers. I picked up one of the empty helmets and examined it briefly before throwing it down in frustration. It was certainly some sort of magic, but there wasn't time to think about it now.

The army regrouped briefly at the entrance to the city in order to find out who was missing. Fortunately, very few men had been killed in the battle, but Trent was missing. I ordered the organization of a search party, and they were dispatched immediately. We combed the field, but couldn't find any sign of him. Where had he gone? Had he been taken prisoner? If so, why him? I talked to several of the men who had been fighting closely with him at the onset of the battle in order to determine if they had seen anything unusual, but no one had seen anything. Trent seemed to have disappeared.

Chapter Nine

Now that the battle was over and the sun was coming up, the moment with Philip on the stairs of the watchtower immediately jumped to the forefront of my mind. I asked several of the men if they had seen where Philip went, and was told that he was with the doctor. At first I feared that he had been seriously injured, but when I arrived at the infirmary it turned out that he was just busy making sure that the men who were wounded were properly tended to. I watched him for a moment or two, but decided that now was not the time to approach him and walked out the door without saying anything to him.

While I was leaving the doctor's, I happened to glance at my reflection in the spotless window and was shocked by what I saw. I had been so busy trying to find out what happened to Trent and Philip that I didn't even realize how awful I looked. My face was smudged with dirt and streaked with sweat, and my hair wasn't looking much better either. It had freed its self from the flimsy ribbon shortly after the battle began, and consequently my hair was now a tangled, matted mess. Most frightening of all was that I was covered in blood. Most of it wasn't mine, but the blood of the men I'd killed in battle. I could only imagine what people thought when they saw me, and I was glad that I had decided not to talk to Philip, especially looking like this.

While I was standing there staring at my disheveled reflection, one of the doctor's nurses came out and insisted that I come in to be examined. I had a small cut on my arm, but I wasn't very concerned about it. I hadn't even really noticed it, but the nurse was insistent and very persuasive. Before I knew it, she had coaxed me inside, and I was sitting with clenched teeth as she cleaned and bandaged the wound. I looked

across the room and saw that Philip had also been forced to take a seat. Another nurse was bandaging a cut on his arm as well. I had to laugh because he too was clenching his teeth while the nurse scrubbed the dirt from his wound.

"Hey, what are you laughing about?" Philip said through gritted teeth.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing," I said as I tried to stifle my laugh.

"Well, you're not enjoying this any more than I am. I can see from here that every muscle in your body is tense."

"I'm managing just fine, thank you." We didn't say anything more while the nurses worked, but as I headed back out the door, Philip called out to me.

"Lillian, wait." He jumped up from his chair and followed me out into the street. "Come here for a moment. I need to talk to you." He took me by the arm and pulled me over to the side of the doctor's building so that we were nearly hidden from the road.

"Is something wrong?"

He was standing close to me again, as close as he had in the watchtower the night before. My heart was beating in my throat. What was he going to say? Was I really ready for this?

"I wanted to talk to you about last night," he said, taking another step closer.

"Oh?" Our bodies were so close that it was unbearable. That inner fire was beginning to flicker to life again. I struggled to restrain it, but if he touched me, I just didn't know what would happen.

"Last night," he began.

"Lillian! Philip!" Katrina shouted as she approached. I jumped back at the sound of her voice, and my face immediately flushed crimson. "Imagine meeting you here!"

"Katrina, what are you doing here?" I asked, startled. What had she seen?

"I came to help the nurses for awhile. Why are you two here? Are you hurt?"

"We both have some minor cuts, but we'll live." I cast a quick glance at Philip to see if he were as flustered by Katrina's interruption as I was. If he was, he was doing a very good job of hiding it.

"Well, I'm glad you aren't hurt. I'd stay and talk, but I have work to do." With that, she headed into the infirmary.

"I should be going," I mumbled without even looking up at Philip and started to walk away.

"Wait, I still need to talk to you."

"We can talk later. I have to be going now." I rushed away before he could say anything more. What was I so afraid of? I wanted to be with Philip, so why didn't I stay and talk with him? What was wrong with me? Turn around, I thought, but I just couldn't force myself to turn around and go back.

After I left Philip standing alone at the doctor's, I went directly to my father to report on the results of the battle and to inform him that Trent was missing. I didn't bother to clean up first even though I was covered in drying blood. I knew Father would not want to wait too long for the report. I found him waiting in his sitting room. "We defeated the Dark Army soundly."

"I told you we would take care of them in one night, and you were so worried."

"A great deal of credit belongs to the archers who were able to take down many of the Dark Warriors before they reached the front gate."

"Speaking of our front gate, I hear that it was quite severely damaged during the fight. Is it salvageable?"

"They melted the gate, Father. The enemy marched right up to the gate and poured some sort of corrosive liquid on the gate and it melted into a puddle."

"What?" He frowned, his brow furrowed in thought, seemingly unable to comprehend what I'd just told him.

"I don't understand it either. I've never seen anything like it, but I'm having some chemists look into it. In the meantime, extra men will be posted at the gate. Only a handful of the enemy's men got away, including the leader, but I feel that it is best to make sure the entrance to the city is well guarded."

"I agree. How many men did we lose?"

"From the latest count, it seems that only ten men have died, several more were injured and are currently being treated, but all are expected to live."

"I see you managed to hurt yourself as well," he said, pointing at my bandaged arm.

"It's only a small cut. I'll be fine. Father, I have some strange news."

"Oh?"

"Before I could give the order to gather the enemy bodies, they disappeared."

"They disappeared?"

"Yes, they simply vanished." I hesitated for a moment. I knew my father would be skeptical about what I was going to say next. "I believe magic is involved."

"Magic? There hasn't been a wizard in these parts for years."

"I know that, Father, but all the same it's the only possible explanation."

"Well, I suppose it doesn't really matter much since we defeated them, but I'll have some men look into it, but more importantly, how is Philip? Was he hurt?"

"He had a small cut as well, and has already been treated. Father, listen. I have some very bad news. Trent is missing."

"Missing?"

"Yes, when he didn't report in after the battle ended, we searched the field, thinking we would find his body, but he wasn't among the dead. We can only assume that he must have been taken prisoner. I asked several of the men in his division if they had seen anything unusual, but no one

saw him being taken. I have already sent out a search party, but they haven't returned yet."

"This is most disturbing. Someone will have to tell your grandmother. I know that you and Philip usually feel that it is your duty to personally inform family members of missing men, but I don't think that is such a good idea in this case, given the tense relationship between you and your grandmother. I will tell her this news personally. I don't think she'll take kindly to hearing it from you."

"I understand. I don't really want to be the one to tell her either, especially since she seems to have grown quite close to Trent in the past few months. A bond of bitterness, I believe."

"Now, Lillian. You shouldn't talk that way."

"I know. I apologize."

"Let me know as soon as you hear any news, good or bad, from the search party."

"Yes, Father," I said as I turned to leave.

"Lillian."

"Yes."

"I'm glad that you're okay." He stood and gave me a quick hug. "I worry about you going out into battle like that. I love you. You know that, right?"

"I love you too, Father."

"Well, I won't keep you any longer. I appreciate you coming so quickly to give me the report, but you obviously need a good scrubbing and some time to rest. We all do. I don't think anyone got any sleep last night."

"I'll just clean up and take a quick nap, and then I'll go out to see that repairs for the gate are started immediately."

"Just be sure you don't wear yourself out. You can't do everything by yourself you know."

"I can try," I said with a smile. "I'll keep you informed, and I promise not to over do it."

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Father said before I reached the door. “I’m already planning on having another ball in a couple weeks to celebrate our victory over the Dark Army.”

“I’ll never understand why you give so many parties.”

“You may think those parties are silly, but they are a symbol of strength to the people of this kingdom. It’s important to them.”

“I don’t need to give the appearance of being strong. I know I’m strong, but I’ll be there anyway for your sake.” I gave Father another quick hug and left the room.

Cleaning up took much longer than I had anticipated. My curly red hair was so tangled that I had to ask one of the maids to help me comb it out. I gripped the bottom of my dressing table chair fighting back tears as she tore through the tangled mess. By the time I had scrubbed all of the filth off my body and had the bandage on my arm changed, I was completely exhausted. With my scalp still stinging, I changed into my nightgown and lay down on my soft warm bed, intending to only sleep for a couple of hours. When I finally woke, it was already afternoon. Angry with myself for sleeping so long, I leaped out of bed and dressed quickly. I ran out of my room and ran right into Grandmother, nearly knocking her to the floor.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Grandmother. I wasn’t looking where I was going.” I prayed that she was in a mild mood and would continue her silent treatment and simply accept my apology and keep on walking, but luck had never been on my side, especially when it came to dealing with my grandmother.

“Well, I should hope you’re sorry. In your clumsy haste, you could have killed me, a poor old woman with fragile bones!”

“Really, I’m very sorry. It’s just that I slept longer than I intended, and I ran out into the hall without watching where I was going. It’s completely my fault. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have something very important to do.”

“If you mean finding my grandson, then yes I would say that’s very pressing business. What were you doing wasting time sleeping? As

second-in-command, I thought you were supposed to be watching out for your men. How is it that you have no idea where Trent is? To make matters worse, I had to hear about Trent's disappearance from your father, since you were too scared to come and tell me yourself. Some courageous leader you are."

"I'm sorry, Grandmother. It's just that I had a very long night, and I didn't give you the news because Father volunteered to tell you personally. It was his decision, not mine. I'm sure we'll find Trent very soon. I sent out a search party as soon as we realized he was missing. I expect to hear from them very soon," I said as calmly as I could manage through gritted teeth, forcing my voice to stay even. I wanted to scream at her, but I would not let her goad me into losing my temper again.

"Oh, so you're delegating your responsibilities to other people now?"

"I sent men out who were fresh and hadn't been defending the lives of the people of this kingdom all night."

"Well, I can see you are prepared with a long list of excuses to explain away your cowardly behavior, so I won't waste anymore of my time talking with you." She pushed past me with such force that I stumbled back a few steps.

I stood there for a moment with my jaw hanging open, feeling as though I had been punched in the stomach. Her words had stung more than any slap to the face ever would. I could handle her criticism of my manners, dress, and even her skepticism of my ability to be a good queen someday. I could even handle her slapping me across the face in front of the entire nation, but I could not handle her boldly accusing me of cowardice. I had been fighting for her life while she slept soundly in her safe bed. A bed made safe only by me and the dedication of my men. I whipped around, intending to deliver a scathing remark of my own, but she had already disappeared around a corner.

I slid to the floor and clutched the green charm in my hand. It was clear that my ongoing struggle with my grandmother was not over. I would not let her continue to treat me this way. I was through tiptoeing around her, making sure I never did anything to displease her when she

wasn't willing to at least be civil with me in return. If I had ever held on to even the smallest fragment of hope that my grandmother and I would ever attain a semi-normal relationship, it was crushed now. This battle was far from being over.

Feeling much calmer, I stood and smoothed my shirt with new determination. Never again would I let her have the last word, I thought as I stormed out of the palace. I could have gone looking for her, but it was already getting to be late in the day, and I had more important things to do than satisfy my own personal need for revenge. Right now I needed to see to the needs of my men, and the needs of the city. I headed toward the city gate, where I was sure to find Philip.

Chapter Ten

Just as I had hoped, I found Philip by the ruined gate of the city, already giving orders to the blacksmiths for the immediate construction of a new and stronger front gate. I smiled as I stood and watched him for a moment. I wondered how long he had slept. He didn't look tired at all.

"Look at you taking charge! Maybe my father should have made you heir to the throne," I said as I approached him.

"Sleepyhead Lillian! The day is nearly over! Good to see you haven't missed it entirely, though I have most of the work already done."

"Don't even start with me. I hadn't been sleeping well before the attack and then I spent the rest of the night fighting. I didn't mean to sleep so long, and I've already taken all the criticism I can handle for one day," I snapped. I knew he wasn't really serious, but I was just so irritated from my run in with my grandmother that I lashed out without even really thinking.

"Whoa! Calm down. I was just teasing you. You're obviously upset, so let's go for a walk, and you can tell me what happened," he said and we began walking the perimeter of the city wall.

"I'm sorry, Philip. I didn't mean to yell at you." I sighed. "I literally ran into Grandmother this afternoon just after I woke up. I was rushing down the hallway and nearly knocked her over." I paused, taking a deep breath and wondering how much of this I should tell Philip, but I could see it was no use trying to hide anything. He was determined to weasel all of it out of me.

"And?"

"She basically called me an irresponsible leader because Trent is missing, and because I had no idea what had happened to him."

"The wellbeing of the men, our men, is as much my responsibility as it is yours. We are a team. Besides, you can't watch every single man every single minute. Battles can be chaotic. It's enough just to keep track of where you are, let alone anyone else."

"If that had been all she had said to me I wouldn't have minded quite so much, but she didn't stop there."

"Oh? What else could she have possibly said?"

"She called me a coward."

"No! You can't be serious."

"Believe me, Philip. I couldn't be any more serious than I am right now."

Philip had stopped walking and was just staring at me. I didn't want to talk about it anymore. Just thinking about my grandmother made me uneasy, let alone discussing the most recent injury I'd received at her hand.

"She called me a coward because I didn't come and tell her personally that Trent was missing. She also thinks I should be out there looking for him."

"What did you say to her?"

"Nothing, I was so shocked that by the time I was finally able to respond, she had already left."

"It sounds like she's the one who is the coward. You know she's just saying those things to get under your skin."

"Yeah, too bad it's working. Philip, I wanted to talk to you about what happened last night."

"Hey, this might cheer you up," he said, accidentally cutting me off. "Sorry, what were you going to say?"

"Nothing, you go ahead. What will cheer me up?"

"Your father is throwing a ball in a couple of weeks to celebrate our victory."

“Since when has a ball ever cheered me up? If anything, it depresses me. How did you know about it anyway?”

“Your sister stopped by earlier and told me.”

“My sister?”

“Yeah, she came out to gawk at the melted gate with some of her friends, and we ended up talking for a while earlier today. She was really excited about the ball, you know how she likes to get all dressed up and dance. Anyway, I promised I’d save her a dance. Now, what was it you were going to say?”

“Oh, right. Um, I was just going to ask how you thought our new recruits did last night because I thought that some of them could still use a little more instruction in proper technique.”

“Well, obviously they didn’t do too badly. We won a solid victory last night!”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. Still I don’t think it would hurt to continue training in order to fine tune their skills. You can never be too prepared.” I paused for a moment. I desperately wanted to say something about our moment before the battle, but I could feel my resolve melting away like the ruined gate.

“Are you sure that’s all you wanted to tell me?” Philip said, sounding more than a little skeptical.

“Yes, that’s all I wanted to say,” I lied. We stood there staring at each other. Why did it always feel so awkward between us? Why should it be so difficult for me to tell him how I really felt? I opened my mouth to tell him, but the words stuck in my throat.

“Well, I need to be getting back to the blacksmiths. I’ll talk to you later.” He turned and walked back toward the gate, and I was left with the image of Philip and Katrina dancing together flitting through my mind. Maybe Grandmother was right. I really was a coward.

The next couple weeks flew by. Father never got around to having someone look into the strange phenomena of the disappearing enemy bodies and it was nearly forgotten, though it tugged at the back of my mind from time to time. With all the blacksmiths working together, the

new gate was completed and set in place in record time. The people Philip had commissioned to build the new gate were excellent craftsmen, and the new gate sparkled brilliantly at the entrance to the city. With a new gate set firmly in place and the Dark Army soundly defeated, Father felt confident that it was again safe to send another armed guard to try and reestablish contact with our ally in the north and offer them any assistance necessary to rebuild.

The mysterious army had only attacked the city, and had left the nearby villages alone, which meant that the kingdom as a whole had suffered minimal damage, and everything seemed to be rapidly returning to normal, everything except that Trent was still missing. Philip had tried to convince me that his disappearance wasn't my fault, but I couldn't help thinking that I could have done something to prevent it. Philip began to lose hope, assuming that Trent had been killed as the other messengers and armed guard that had disappeared earlier in the year, but I refused give up hope. I had to believe that Trent was alive. Life in the palace with my grandmother would be unbearable if we couldn't find Trent.

The day of the ball arrived and there was still no sign of Trent. I knew Grandmother was most likely going to be at the ball that night, and I dreaded the thought of having to face her. I made up my mind to simply avoid her, if such a thing was possible. I could see her making another scene in front of all the guests. How was I supposed to respond to her accusations? On one hand, I didn't want to insult her. She was my elder and unfortunately she was also family. I didn't want to embarrass my father. On the other hand, I didn't want to appear weak in front of the entire kingdom. If I was going to be a good queen, I needed to inspire confidence. Would the people see me as weak if I failed to respond to Grandmother's accusations, or would they respect my self control? These thoughts tormented me as I slowly made my way to my room to prepare for the ball.

When I finally reached my room, a dress was already laid out for me and an elderly maid was waiting to help me get dressed. "Good afternoon,

Your Highness. I'm here at your sister's request in order to help you prepare for this evening's ball."

"I figured that was the case, but where is my sister? She usually comes and helps me herself."

"Yes, I know, but she is very busy getting herself ready."

"Okay, well, let's get started." As usual, my hair was very difficult to comb through. "I'm so sorry that my hair is such a tangled mess. You shouldn't have to work this hard just to comb hair."

"It's okay, miss."

"You don't have to lie to me. I know you'd much rather be helping my sister. I don't blame you. She's much prettier and easier to take care of."

"Really, miss, it's no trouble. If I may, I think your hair looks very beautiful when it's untangled. It just takes a little work to get it that way." She paused for a moment. "It may interest you to know that I've heard some people talking about you in the past couple weeks."

"Nothing too horrible, I hope."

"Oh no, quite the opposite actually. Many people from the city who were watching the battle said that when your hair shook free of the ribbon, it flowed around your shoulders and shone like fire while you were fighting off the invading forces. I'm told the sight was quite breathtaking."

"I don't believe you. You're just making that up so that I won't feel so bad."

"I would never make up such a thing. I think you are very beautiful, and very unique."

"Well, I'll agree with the unique part."

After my hair was finally tamed, I put on the dress and looked at myself in the mirror. The maid had pulled my hair up and left a few tendrils to frame my face. The dress Katrina had selected this time was similar to the one I'd worn earlier in the year. This dress was gold with emerald green trimming around the ends of the sleeves and the hem of the skirt, which again accented the color of my eyes and really made my

hair seem to shine in the candlelight. It was uncomfortable and much too fancy for me, of course, but I had to admit Katrina knew how to pick out dresses that highlighted a woman's best features, even mine. Her taste in jewelry was also impeccable. Tonight she had instructed that I wear dangling pearl earrings. As usual, I secured my green charm around my neck. I knew Katrina would not approve, but I didn't care. Even though we had beaten the Dark Army, something told me that I shouldn't take the charm off. It was just a feeling or maybe an instinct, and I'd never been one to ignore my instincts, most of the time anyway.

I thought about the evening ahead and wondered if Philip would ask me to dance. He had promised Katrina a dance, so it made sense that he would dance with me, his best friend. When he asked me to dance, I would talk to him about that night on the stairs. It was my only window of opportunity and I could feel that window closing quickly. Every day Philip complained to me that his father pressuring him to marry. I had to tell him how I felt before his family forced him to commit to another woman. I didn't care what other people would say. But what if he didn't feel the same way? That would make working together awkward, but I could handle that. I was a warrior, and I wouldn't let any mess in my personal life interfere with my duty to the kingdom. With that in mind, I left my room feeling confident that I could tell Philip how I felt no matter what his reaction might be.

Chapter Eleven

It had taken so long for me to get ready that, by the time I entered the ballroom, most of the guests had already arrived and Philip had already been swept away by one of the many women in his throng of admirers. As I watched him spin the latest girl across the floor, I was jealous, of course, but I knew he would come over to see me at my usual place along the wall eventually. I scanned the room looking for any sign of my grandmother, but I didn't see her. Maybe she had chosen not to attend the ball. I prayed she wouldn't show up later as I continued to scan the room. I saw my sister and she was gorgeous as usual wearing a blue dress that matched the color of her sapphire eyes perfectly. Her golden hair gleamed in the candlelight. For the millionth time in my life, I wondered what it would be like to be as beautiful as her. She was dancing with some man I didn't recognize, probably just another one of her admirers. She had so many it was hard to remember them all.

I didn't have to stand alone at the side of the room very long before Father made his way over to me. "Are you enjoying the ball, Lillian?"

"Oh yes, my dancing shoes are nearly worn out!" I said as he laughed.

"Well, you look very nice tonight."

"You're just saying that because you're my father. Now Katrina, on the other hand, looks stunning. She must have spent a long time getting ready. She usually helps me get ready, but she sent a maid this time."

"Yes, she told me about that. I get the impression that she is hoping to impress a certain young gentleman tonight."

"She never mentioned anything like that to me! Did she happen to mention his name?"

"No, she didn't, but I suppose we'll find out soon enough."

"Is it the man she's dancing with now? I don't recognize him."

"I don't know. As I said, she did not tell me the young man's name."

"Strange," I muttered under my breath.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I see that some more guests have arrived, and I must greet them."

As Father walked away, I began to wonder who it was that was so special to my sister. We'd become quite close in the past few months and she hadn't said anything about a man. She had plenty of admirers, but I'd always gotten the impression that she wasn't ready to settle down just yet, and Father, unlike Philip's parents, wasn't about to pressure either one of us into making that sort of decision before we were ready. I would just have to ask her about it later.

My eyes wandered to the dance floor to where Philip was, and I was surprised to see him dancing with Katrina. I felt a quick stab of jealousy, but then I remembered that they were just friends, and he had promised her a dance. I laughed at myself for my irrational momentary reaction. Yes, they were just friends, but as I continued to watch them dance it became clear that there was some kind of connection between the two of them. She was flirting shamelessly. Even I could see that standing all the way on the other side of the room. As for Philip, he seemed to be enjoying himself thoroughly, laughing and joking with her as well.

My vision narrowed and they were the only people in the room I was seeing clearly. With my defenses down and all my attention focused on Philip and Katrina, I didn't even notice that my grandmother had come to stand next to me. It must have been blatantly obvious what was going through my mind because she launched an attack immediately. My defenses were down, and I wasn't ready to fight.

"They make a beautiful couple, don't they?"

"What?" I struggled to quickly regain composure. "Oh, you mean Katrina and Philip. They are just friends, he promised to squeeze in a

dance with her between all his other admirers. He's always the most popular man at these dances." I laughed a little as I spoke, but it sounded strained and fake, even to me.

"That's not the impression I'm getting. I think romance is in the air," she said as she smiled slyly.

"He promised her a dance because they're friends," I repeated firmly.

"Since when has he ever promised dances to girls? He promised her a dance because he cares about her more than those other girls. Besides, Katrina tells me that there is something going on between them. She spent extra time getting ready today just for him."

"I don't believe you. She's my sister, and she would have told me if something were going on." Even as I said it, I remembered that I had denied my true feelings for Philip while talking with Katrina not so long ago.

"Why would she tell you? You and Philip are just friends. She doesn't owe you any explanation." She eyed me critically. Then her face lit up in a moment of realization. "Why, you don't have feelings for him, do you?"

"No, but that's not the point. I'm her sister. She would have told me." My mind was racing. I was overwhelmed, unable to watch Philip and Katrina while facing an attack from my grandmother. I could feel my face flushing and hot tears began welling up in my eyes.

"You do have feelings for him, don't you? I knew it!" She laughed. "I don't blame you though if you do. He is quite a catch, but do you really think that you stand a chance with someone like him? How completely absurd! A man like Philip would never be interested in someone like you. He needs a real woman, a lady. Katrina is that lady. I shouldn't think it will be too long before they begin officially courting."

"You don't know what you're talking about." I was practically gasping for breath at this point.

"Oh, but I do. Katrina told me all about it earlier today. They really are a perfect match, and I imagine your father will approve. Philip's parents have been after him to choose a bride, you know. They will be thrilled when they learn that he has chosen Katrina. The courtship will

be short because they've know each other for years, and he'll propose right away. I can see their wedding now. The whole kingdom will attend. I can see her now standing at the altar in her beautiful white wedding gown. Philip will be handsome as well. I'm sure you'll be there in some way as well, but I can't imagine what your role would be. They will live in the palace, of course. Your father will give them their own wing and personal servants. Perhaps they will be expecting their first child before the end of the year."

"You're lying!" I shouted, attracting the attention of some people standing near us. I couldn't believe how I was behaving. I had vowed not to let Grandmother get under my skin and here I was shouting at her like a child of the verge of losing control.

"Well, you're being quite rude. I would think that you would be happy for your sister. She has a chance to make a good match like your mother did before her, unlike you. You'll never be able to produce an heir to the throne, for who would want to marry you? You'll be lucky if you're father can bribe someone into marrying you."

That last remark was like a knife cutting into my very soul. It was more than I could bear. I had never in my life let my grandmother see me cry, but I couldn't hold the tears back any longer. They began to stream down my face, ruining the makeup that the maid had taken such care to apply. I had to get out of there before Philip saw me like this. Quickly, I spun around, blinking the tears out of my eyes as I searched for the quickest escape route. I spotted a door not too far to my right and began running. There was a man standing near the door, and I tripped over something on the floor and nearly knocked him over, but he reached out and caught me in his arms before I could bring us both to the floor. I found myself staring up into his almond shaped eyes for a moment. He was one of my warriors, but I didn't apologize. I pushed away from him and kept running. The loud rapid click of my heels certainly attracted the stares of many guests, who I should have spoken to before leaving, but I didn't care. I didn't even turn around when I heard Philip calling after me. I couldn't face him looking like this.

Picking up speed, I ran down the hallway toward my room, but the dainty high heels that my sister had chosen for me that night were not easy to walk in let alone run in. I lost my footing on the smooth stone floor, and before I knew it, I was tumbling through the air. A sharp pain shot through my left knee as I came crashing to the ground. Stunned, I sat on the floor for a moment, trying to regain my bearings. I tried to stand, but my left leg buckled from the pain in my knee. I slipped the hazardous heels off my feet and resisted the urge to throw them down the hall. Gritting my teeth, I made another effort to stand. The pain in my leg was now pulsing with each heartbeat, but I couldn't very well lie in the hallway all night. Managing to work myself into a standing position, I began to hobble slowly the rest of the way to my room.

Once there, I closed the door and locked it firmly behind me. Slowly sinking to the floor, I continued to cry. I hated the fact that I was crying. I had always thought of myself as a strong person. I was a leader, someone that people looked up to and depended on. Crying was a weakness, and I despised myself for crying so much, even more for letting Grandmother see me cry. There was a knock on my door. It was the elderly maid asking if I needed any help undressing. Without opening the door, I told her I was fine and could handle myself. I didn't want to see or talk to anyone for the rest of the night, maybe for the rest of my life. How many people had seen me run out of the ballroom?

The eyes of the man who I'd nearly knocked over flicked through my mind. When he had looked down at me, I had seen something in his eyes. What was it? Compassion? No, it was probably pity. I can't imagine how terrible I had looked as I had run from the ballroom. I shook my head. How was I going to explain myself to my father, Katrina and Philip? I knew they would be asking what was wrong. I couldn't confide in any of them. I couldn't confide in anyone.

I replayed all the terrible things Grandmother had said over and over in my mind. At first I was unable to accept that anything was going on between Katrina and Philip, believing that my grandmother simply wanted to hurt me, but the longer I thought about it, the clearer it all became. Katrina hadn't been coming down to talk to me all those

afternoons. She had been coming to talk to Philip. When she had asked me if I had feelings for Philip, she hadn't been being nosy for the sake of gossip as I had originally thought. She had been asking because she was interested in him and had wanted to make sure there was nothing between Philip and I before pursuing a relationship with him. Why couldn't I have been honest with her? If I had simply confessed that I did have feelings for Philip, I wouldn't be in this mess right now.

When I believed Philip was going to be forced to marry one of those silly girls who fought over him at the dances, I had been depressed, but I could have lived with it. He would still come to work with me every day, but his home life would be separate. I wouldn't have to see him with his new bride hardly at all. Grandmother was right. If he married Katrina, they would live in the palace. Their world would collide with mine every moment of every day, and I would have to watch their smiling faces, knowing each night while I laid in bed alone that they were making love just a few rooms away. At least if he married another woman, I wouldn't have to live with them.

I sighed. What had ever made me believe that Philip and I had something? Oh sure, we'd had a few dances and had a few tender moments, but what had really happened? Philip and I were best friends and that night in the watchtower he had just been worried that something might happen to me in battle because I was rash and impatient. I wanted to be with Philip so badly that I had managed to convince myself that love was the motivation for his concern, when it was simply friendship. I had made much more of those "tender" moments. I had imagined it all. He wasn't in love with me. He was just a friend. I wouldn't be the "best man" at the wedding. I would be Katrina's maid of honor. The image brought fresh tears to my eyes. I didn't even try to hold them back.

Chapter Twelve

When the tears finally dried up, I stood carefully trying not to put too much pressure on my knee. It had been foolish to go running through the halls in those dangerous shoes. How was I going to work with the recruits with an injured knee? I peeled off the dress and threw it over a chair as usual, and sat down in one of my overstuffed chairs and bent down to examine my knee. It was already turning a sickening shade of purple. I prayed that it wasn't anything serious and was only a bad bruise. Maybe it would be feeling better in the morning. As I gingerly crawled into bed, there was a knock at the door.

"Lillian, it's me, Katrina. Are you all right? You left the party so early and in such a rush that you didn't hear Philip and I call after you. You nearly knocked poor Arden over when you ran out. I thought I would come and check on you."

"I'm fine. I just felt a little sick and needed to rest," I said in a strained voice.

"Can I come in and talk for a while?"

"No, I'm very tired and am going to sleep."

"I thought you looked like you were crying when you left. You were standing by Grandmother. I know how she can be with you sometimes. Did she say anything to upset you?"

"No, she didn't talk to me," I lied. "Really, I'm fine. My stomach is just a little upset, probably just something I ate."

"Are you sure you aren't upset about anything? I'm your sister. You can tell me these things."

"Seriously, I am fine. I am just tired, and I need to rest."

“Okay, but I still don’t believe you. Goodnight, Lillian.”

“Goodnight, Katrina,” I said as I blew out the candle next to my bed, but my mind was still humming with the events of the night. Arden. That must have been the man with the almond shaped eyes. I hoped I hadn’t hurt him in my hurry to escape. He was one of my best warriors. I would definitely have to apologize to him. I rubbed the green charm as I finally drifted off to sleep.

The night passed slowly, and my dreams were troubled. Sometimes I would dream of Grandmother lecturing and laughing at me, and other times I would see Philip and Katrina married and having children while I grew old and gray alone. Other times I would see Arden’s eyes as he held me in his arms and kept me from falling. I tossed and turned all night and woke several times to find myself tangled in my sheets. I would untangle myself and lay back down to go to sleep only to have the dreams return to taunt me.

The next morning, I looked in the mirror to find that my eyes were red and puffy from all the crying the night before. I could explain that away by saying that I was up most of the night because I didn’t feel well. I then turned to examine my knee. It was badly bruised, but thankfully didn’t appear to be very swollen. If I was careful, I was pretty sure I could hide my limp, and if anyone did happen to notice I was favoring my left leg, I could simply say I bruised my knee when I tripped in my hurry to get to my room. There was no need to tell the entire truth.

The rest of that week passed very quickly. I decided not to approach Arden about the incident. It would have been too awkward for the both of us. I also successfully avoided Grandmother at all costs. When someone asked about my knee, they bought my simple excuses and didn’t press me for anymore information. Katrina didn’t even ask why my eyes were red and puffy the morning after the ball. Philip didn’t ask why I had left the ball so early, and he and I continued to work well together. When Katrina came out to talk to Philip in the afternoon, I excused myself as soon as an opportunity presented itself so they could have some time alone, and I wouldn’t have to watch them flirt. It was probably what they

had wanted all along, though they were too nice to ask me to leave, and I had been too thickheaded to notice.

One afternoon at the end of the week, Philip stopped me before I could rush away to hide in my room. "Hey, Lillian, wait a minute. I need to talk to you."

"Sure, is there a problem?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Well, you've just seemed a little distant this week."

"I haven't been distant."

"You haven't been staying to talk with Katrina and me in the afternoons like you used to, and I was wondering if I'd done or said anything to upset you."

"No, I've just been tired and my knee still hurts a little."

"About that knee, how did you say you hurt it again?"

"I didn't feel well during the ball and I was in a hurry to get to my room and I tripped."

"I'll say you were in a hurry. You practically sprinted out of the ballroom, in high heels for that matter. You know you nearly knocked over one of our men. I think his name is Arden. You really should apologize to him." He shook his head. "Your sister said you were standing next to your grandmother before you left. Did something happen between you two again?"

"No, I just didn't feel well."

"You know that if something happened you can tell me about it. I'm your best friend. I won't tell anyone."

"Well, I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine, really."

"You've been saying that a lot this week."

"Well, it's true. I'm fine. Nothing's wrong."

"How come I don't believe you?"

“Because you’re being silly.” I could see Katrina coming across the field to where we were standing. That was my cue to exit. “Well, if you’ll excuse me, I have to be going. See you tomorrow.”

“Lillian, wait,” he said, but I didn’t look back and continued walking. I waved as I passed my sister and made my way up to the palace.

Chapter Thirteen

It had been three weeks since the battle with the Dark Army, and there was still no sign of Trent. The search parties had found nothing and there was no word from the messengers we had sent to reestablish contact with Thench. I began to feel uneasy again. What if there was no one left in the north? What if Trent was really dead? How was I going to break the news to Grandmother? I was nearly to my father's room with the intention of discussing these disturbing thoughts with him, when one of the palace maids came rushing up to me. "Your Highness, I've been looking all over for you!" She gasped.

"Calm down. Take a deep breath. Now, what did you want to tell me?"

"It's about your cousin Trent."

"Trent!" For a moment, my heart leaped into my throat. Had they found Trent? Was he alive, or had they found his body? "What about Trent?"

"He's alive! He came wandering out of the forest. He is currently in his room with the doctor."

"Is he hurt badly?"

"He doesn't appear to be. He has a few minor injuries, and he looks very tired, but other than that he looks fine."

"Go and tell Philip and my father immediately." I didn't even wait for her to respond as I ran down the hallway towards Trent's room. My knee was feeling much better and I wasn't wearing any killer heels today, so there was no fear of falling now. Without bothering to knock, I burst into his room to find him propped up against some pillows in his bed looking

a little thinner than he had the last time I'd seen him. His normally bright blue eyes looked just a little dull.

"Trent, thank goodness you're alive!"

"Thanks for noticing." For someone who had just crawled out of the woods after being taken prisoner, he sure hadn't lost any of his sarcastic bite.

"Well, what I mean is, you had been missing for so long we were all beginning to fear that you were dead. The search parties I sent out couldn't find a trace of you anywhere. What happened?"

"I don't know if he should be wasting so much energy by talking too much. He shouldn't have too many visitors either. He's exhausted and needs to rest," lectured the doctor. I had been so focused on Trent that I hadn't even seen him standing in the corner of the room.

"It's okay. I feel well enough to see my family and talk. Besides, they need to hear my story while everything is still fresh in my mind," responded Trent.

"No one saw what happened to you during the battle. We've all been so worried that you were dead, but if you need to rest, I can wait to talk to you until later. I understand." I'd been so eager to find out what happened that I hadn't even considered the fact that he might need some rest.

"No, it's okay, Lillian. I don't mind talking." He took a deep breath. "That night when we were fighting off the enemy—"

At that moment Philip burst into the room along with Father and Grandmother. There was a joyous reunion between Grandmother and Trent. They hugged and kissed each other as tears trickled down their cheeks. I sat quietly and patiently waited for Trent to resume his story.

"I didn't know if I was going to see any of you ever again." He paused as he wiped away a few stray tears. "After we had the remnants of the Dark Army on the run, I was caught up in the moment. I was so energized from the excitement of the battle that I ran into the forest chasing after one of the warriors. When I had run a couple hundred feet, I lost sight of the man. I suddenly realized I was standing alone in the

forest and that I had been foolish to run so far from the protection of our army, and by the way, I fully expect a formal reprimand for my irrational actions.” Trent directed this comment toward my father, who simply dismissed the notion with a quick shake of his head. “Anyway, as I was turning to go back, someone leaped out from behind a tree and hit me over the head with some sort of large, blunt object. The next thing I remember, I was waking up in a small prison cell.”

“What did you see? What did you hear? Did you learn anything about why the bodies disappear after the battle?” I inquired.

“I’m getting to that.”

“Sorry for interrupting. Please go on.” I knew I shouldn’t have interrupted, but I was so impatient to hear what had happened to him. Maybe he had learned something about the enemy or what had happened to our ally, Thench.

“As I was saying, I woke up in a cell. Actually it was more of a crude shack. My hands and feet were bound with thick rope, and I was alone at first, but then another man entered the room. I can only assume he was the Dark Leader, but I never got a good look at his face. I expected him to torture me into answering all sorts of questions concerning Twentaria and our army. I wouldn’t have told him anything, of course, but he just stood and stared at me for a while and left. He didn’t even lay so much as a hand on me. I could hear men talking as they walked by the room that I was kept in. From what I gather, we decimated their army, and they are planning to continue their retreat to the north. They don’t dare attack again with so few men. At least I’m pretty sure that’s what I heard. I was drifting in and out of consciousness for days. I think it was days anyway. I didn’t learn anything about the disappearing bodies.”

“How did you manage to escape? Weren’t you well guarded?”

“Well, it wasn’t easy. They were giving me food, but not very much. When one of the guards came in to feed me, I attacked him. After I knocked him out, I used his sword to cut the ropes, and I escaped. When I ran out of the shack they were keeping me in, I saw that there were only a few crude buildings that made up their camp. Only a handful of

the Dark Warriors escaped our army. They won't be a threat anymore. Anyway, I escaped, and I've been running through the woods for days not sure of where I was going, but somehow I managed to find my way back here."

"If it took you at least a week to escape, then it only took you at the most a couple weeks to find your way back here. That means that the remnants of the army can't be far from Twentaria," Philip reasoned. He had been standing in the far corner of the room quietly listening to Trent tell his story, scowling the whole time.

"I guess. I mean I don't really know. I didn't see where they took me and when I escaped I just ran. I didn't really care where I was going, just as long as I got away from their camp."

"You mean you don't remember anything about where they had you? What time of day did you escape?"

"It was night time. Like I said I didn't see anything. I just ran."

"I see." Philip continued to frown, but said nothing more and remained in his corner.

"Well, if you all don't mind, I'd like to spend some time with my grandson in private," Grandmother announced, looking straight at me.

"Of course, you two deserve some time alone," I agreed. It didn't take a genius to figure out that I wasn't wanted in here anymore. "I just have one more question. When you heard the guards talking, did you hear them say anything about the messengers I'd sent out? After we won the battle, more messengers were sent out to reestablish contact with Thench. Did you hear any talk about them? Were they killed or taken prisoner?"

"I never heard any mention of additional messengers."

I looked down at his face. He looked almost serene as he sat against his overstuffed pillows. The ordeal he had just been through must have been terrible, but it didn't seem to be affecting him much. He must be more resilient than I had thought.

"I was just curious because we haven't heard anything from them yet, but I can see you need some rest and you need some time with

Grandmother. Again, I'm so glad you came back." I stood and followed Philip and Father, closing the door firmly behind me. The doctor had left sometime during Trent's story. I had been listening too intently that I hadn't even seen him leave. Father left to attend to some personal business, which left me and Philip walking through the hallway alone. Philip was the first to break the awkward silence.

"What do you think about Trent's story?"

"It's quite an ordeal he's been through."

"Well, it certainly sounds that way, but do you believe all of it?"

"What do you mean?" I was confused. What was Philip trying to tell me?

"I just think some of it sounds a little far-fetched. How did he manage to escape so quickly?"

"Like he said, he attacked the guard that came to feed him."

"Do you really think that only one guard was there to keep an eye on him? And how did he manage to attack the guard with his hands and feet tied up? And wouldn't some of the other guards have heard the commotion when he escaped?"

"Well, he said there weren't very many men left after the battle. Maybe they only had one guard available to watch him."

"That doesn't explain how he was able to attack the guard if he was restrained the way he described."

"Maybe they didn't tie him up very tight." Even as I said it, I began to wonder. It did sound a little far-fetched, but I shook my head. Trent wouldn't lie to us. He was a warrior and family.

"There is one more thing that bothers me. Trent's sword was sitting on a table in his room. How did he get his sword back if he just ran out of the shack they were holding him in? They certainly wouldn't have kept it with him."

"Maybe the guard he attacked had the sword on him."

"Come on, Lillian! That doesn't even make any sense. You're a smart woman. He's lying about something. I can feel it."

“Why would he lie about being taken prisoner?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t figured that out yet. All I know is that he’s hiding something.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?” As I spoke, I knew exactly what he was suggesting. I just didn’t want to hear it.

“Nothing. Forget I said anything.”

“Look, Philip, I know that Trent can be a little weasel and that he’s been acting strange since I was named heir to the throne, but he’d never do anything to hurt the kingdom no matter what his feelings, or lack of feelings, for me are. He’s a warrior, and warriors don’t betray their kingdom.”

“I wished I shared your strong convictions about Trent’s character.” He stopped walking and stood staring down at me hard.

For a moment, I saw the expression he’d worn that night on the watchtower stairs flicker across his face. I could feel my heart melting as he opened his mouth to say something. Just then, I saw Katrina bustling down the hall behind him.

“Well, Philip, I have some things to do. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Lillian, wait a minute. I really need to talk to you about something.”

“We will talk more later. I have to be going now.” I just knew he was going to tell me he was in love with Katrina. He was probably going to ask if it was all right for him to court her. I just wasn’t ready to hear those words from his mouth, so I turned and walked briskly down the hallway. Behind me, I could hear Katrina inviting Philip to take a walk with her through the palace gardens. Probably so they could have some romantic alone time. They would be holding hands and sharing kisses under a secluded tree. I didn’t hear his response because as soon as I turned the corner, I broke out into a run. I didn’t know where I was going, just far away from the two of them.

Chapter Fourteen

It seemed that I was doomed to never attain a good night's sleep because that night I slept fitfully, tortured by another troubling dream. It was the same dream that had haunted me before the Dark Army attacked, the dream about the field by the northern woods, but it was slightly different this time. At first the dream was beautiful as it had been before. I was in the field of flowers with Philip, again wearing an uncharacteristically fancy dress. He was putting flowers in my hair, touching my face, and telling me how beautiful I was. Even in the dream I was confused, telling him I thought that he was in love with Katrina. He laughed and told me that he was in love with me, not my sister. I was overjoyed at the news. We laughed and danced in the bright sunshine through the field, hugging each other tightly.

When we finally came to a stop, he looked into my eyes with that expression that never failed to melt my heart. He gathered me up in his strong arms and leaned in to kiss me. My eyes flicked to the woods afraid that the shadow man would come to drag Philip away from me again, but this time there was nothing there, just the trees swaying in the gentle breeze. When our lips met, the whole world disappeared around me. I was floating on a cloud. The one thing that I had wished for myself all my life was finally coming true.

A cloud passed in front of the sun casting a shadow over Philip and me, and his lips suddenly grew cold as ice. I pulled away from him and saw a pained expression come over his ashen face. He turned to look at the woods behind him. With his back facing me, I could see blood pouring from a wound made by an arrow embedded firmly in the middle of his back. I screamed as he sank to the ground growing paler by the

second. At the edge of the woods, the figure of a man stood holding a bow. Sunlight glinted off the familiar ring. Again I reached for my sword and again came up empty-handed. The shadow man dropped his bow, but before he disappeared into the woods, I could again see the features of his face, and again they were familiar.

I sat up in my bed screaming for what seemed like the millionth time. How many times was I going to be tormented by this dream? My hand automatically went up to the charm at my neck, and when I looked down at it, it was glowing. Not with a brilliant light, but just a very subtle glow. When had that started? I hadn't really noticed it when I'd gone to bed. My thoughts again turned to the troubling dream. In the beginning, I had believed that the dream was some kind of warning against the advancing Dark Army, but we had defeated them soundly, and Philip had lived through the struggle, his only injury a superficial scratch. So, why was I still having this recurring dream? And why was my charm glowing? It only glowed when danger was near.

I sighed. It was useless to try and go back to sleep at the moment, so I climbed out of bed and pulled my robe over my shoulders. I opened the door to my balcony and stepped out into the night. The smooth, solid stones were comforting beneath my feet. The summer weather was soothing. I could hear the gentle hum of the insects in the woods, and the sky was so clear that the world below was bathed in the silver glow of the moonlight.

As I stood breathing in the cool night air, the dream replayed in my mind. There was something about the face of the shadow man. I knew I recognized him from somewhere, but always when I woke, I struggled to recall exactly what he looked like. There was something about his eyes. I thought they were blue, or maybe they were gray. No, they were most definitely blue. I walked back into my room, closing the balcony door behind me. I crawled back into bed and managed to finally fall asleep near dawn, but the vision of the man's face remained obscure, surrounded by a fog that refused to clear.

The next few weeks were rather uneventful, but my charm continued to glow with a steady even light no matter what time of day it was, or who

I was with. I kept it tucked in my shirt so that it wouldn't attract any attention. I didn't want people asking questions. I wouldn't know what to say if they did. Philip and I continued to work together, but I avoided spending any time alone with him, though he asked several times that I stay and talk with him in the afternoon. I just knew he was going to tell me he was in love with Katrina. Somehow I managed to convince myself that if I didn't hear it from his lips, it wouldn't be true. I made up excuse after excuse to avoid him, my very best friend in the whole world.

Trent recovered quickly from his ordeal with the Dark Army. The only injuries he suffered were some very minor bruises. Within a week, he was already working with his division in the army as if nothing had happened. He and Grandmother spent an enormous amount of time together locked away in her sitting room. I often wondered what they spent so much time talking about. I couldn't believe they had very much in common, but I was thankful that Trent distracted my grandmother from torturing me. She hadn't said one word to me personally since that awful night of the victory ball. I can't say that bothered me much at all.

It seemed that everything was going smoothly, except for one thing. The messengers we had sent to make contact with Thench after the victory had not returned. Philip and I went to my father to discuss our options.

"Don't you think it's strange that the messengers have not returned, Father?"

"Yes, I do. I don't know what to think," Father said, visibly puzzled. His brow furrowed in a tight scowl as he paced the room.

"The messengers should have reached Thench by now and should have sent word about their condition. Even if they got there and found nothing left to save, they would have come back by now."

"What about rogue soldiers or bandits?" Father said, but I knew he was grasping at straws.

"Then how did Trent manage to come through the forest unharmed?"

"I'll tell you how Trent managed to come through the forest," Philip, who had been silent up to that point, interjected. "I don't think he told us

the whole story about his abduction. When our archers began shooting at the Dark Warriors, they walked over the bodies of their own men without breaking formation or even looking down! Do you really believe that men that devoid of emotion for their comrades would capture Trent, hold him captive for a few days, and then carelessly let him escape without so much as a scratch on his body?”

“What are you suggesting?” Father said as his eyes narrowed and focused on Philip.

I held my breath because I knew exactly what Philip was about to suggest, and I wasn’t sure how Father was going to react to the news. I braced myself in preparation for the worst.

“Your Highness, I know it is going to be hard for you to even consider this possibility, but I beg you to hear me out before you react.”

“Go on,” Father said. He had quit pacing and was now standing with his arms crossed over his chest.

“I think that Trent is lying. He says they didn’t torture him or even probe him for information. That doesn’t make any sense. Any good leader who takes a prisoner interrogates them in the hopes of learning more about the enemy. I think the reason we haven’t heard from our messengers is because they are dead. I believe the Dark Army, or what’s left of it, killed them and is still out there. I don’t think they were as defeated as they led us to believe. I have nothing to prove this, but I think that Trent is involved in something. He might even be plotting against you and all of Twentaria.”

“Are you accusing my nephew of treason?”

“I guess I am, Your Highness.” Philip straightened himself to stand at his full height looking my father squarely in the eye. I had to hand it to him, he had guts.

“That’s a pretty bold statement considering you have no proof. I could have you thrown in prison even for suggesting such a thing. Some kings would have executed you on the spot.” Father frowned.

“I understand that, sir. All the same I stick to my assertion that Trent is hiding something.”

“What motivation does Trent have to betray his kingdom?”

“I don’t know, sire. Maybe he’s upset that you didn’t name him as heir to the throne. He was pretty emotional that night you named Lillian as the future queen.”

“You think that is enough to drive him to betray us all?”

“I believe it is a distinct possibility that deserves some consideration.”

“I refuse to believe that. However, since you’ve always been a loyal warrior and excellent leader, I’m not going to discipline you, but I don’t want you to ever mention this to me, or anyone else for that matter, ever again. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, now I need some time to think about this situation. Until then, absolutely no one, I repeat, no one is to go into the northern woods.”

“But, Father, don’t you think it would be wise to send a few spies out to see if any of the Dark Army are still there? They could finish off the remnants for good.” I knew I had made a mistake the moment the words escaped my mouth.

“No, I don’t because I don’t believe that they are out there! I don’t know what is happening to our men, but we nearly eradicated our enemy in a single night. For all we know our messengers could have been attacked by a pack of rabid wolves! Now, both of you get out of my sight this instant!” My father face turned red with anger as he screamed.

“Yes, Father.”

Philip and I bowed in unison and practically ran out the door into the hall.

“Philip, I wish you would let this ridiculous theory about Trent go. I’ve never seen my father so angry.”

“It’s not a ridiculous theory. I know Trent is lying about something.”

“You’re lucky that my father is very fond of you. Like he said, any other king would have thrown you in prison for making accusations like that without a shred of proof. Who knows, if you keep pushing your luck,

he just might throw you in prison or strip you of your commanding rank.”

“I know, and I’m prepared to face that possibility.” He sighed. “Lillian, we’ve known each other for years, and you know me better than anyone else. You’re my best friend, though you haven’t acted like it lately. I would have thought you of all people would have believed me.”

“I know you believe what you’re saying, but you don’t have any proof, just your silly suspicions.”

“I know I don’t have any proof, but I have a feeling in my gut. There is something fishy about Trent’s whole story. He is hiding something. I have nothing to gain and everything to lose by making these accusations. Why would I risk everything by making something like this up?”

“I don’t think you’re making it up.”

“Well, either you think I’m making it up or you believe me. Which is it, Lillian?”

“Philip, you know it’s just not that simple.”

“Yes, it is.” He turned and walked away from me.

“Philip, please come back.”

If he heard me, he didn’t acknowledge it. He stormed down the hallway and around a corner leaving me standing alone in the hall outside my father’s door.

“Lillian, are you still standing out there?” Father called in a much calmer voice from inside his room.

I hoped that he hadn’t heard Philip and me arguing, but we’d been yelling loud enough. He’d probably heard everything, and was probably calling me back into his room so he could lecture me some more.

“Come in here please.”

“Is there something I can do for you, Father?” I said hesitantly as I entered the room. I wasn’t sure if he had settled down since his outburst just moments ago, and I didn’t want to make things worse by setting him off again.

"I heard you and Philip arguing out there in the hallway." He sighed. "He seems very sure of his theory. Philip is a good man. He's never lied to me. What do you think? Do you think that there is some credibility to Philip's theory?"

"I don't know what to think anymore."

"What do you think about Trent? Do you believe that he is up to something, that he is capable of betraying Twentaria and his family?"

"Honestly, I think he's a weasel. As Philip said, he was very upset when you named me heir to the throne, and he was lax in his duties to the army for a time after that, but since he escaped from the enemy's prison, he's been a model warrior. He still isn't very friendly with me, but that doesn't mean he's involved in some grand scheme against the kingdom. We've never been very close."

"Why do you think Philip is so certain that he is plotting against us?"

"I don't know. I just don't know."

"How do you explain the continued disappearance of our men?"

"I don't know that either, Father. Maybe if we sent some spies..." I trailed off when I saw Father start to scowl at my suggestion.

"Lillian, someday you will be queen, and you'll find yourself in a situation much like this again. You always seem to want to charge off into the night with your flaming hair flying behind you, beating down every problem you encounter with your sword. Trent went charging off by himself and look what happened to him. He's lucky to be alive." Father took a deep breath. "You know that you are one of the best warriors in the kingdom"

"I'm not so sure about that."

"Yes, you are, and I'm not saying that just because I'm your father. I'm saying that because I'm a king who cares very much for the safety of the people of my kingdom. Do you think I'd put someone in second command who didn't truly deserve it?"

"No, I suppose not."

“I know that you have it in you to become a wise ruler as well, but you must learn to be patient. Not every solution to your problems is found at the end of your sword.”

“But many are.” I knew that wasn’t the response that he had hoped for, but it was the way I felt, and the way I lived my life.

“Well, I have some thinking to do.” He sighed again, looking more tired than I’d ever seen him before. “Something is going on out there in those woods. I just don’t know what it is. Tell Philip I’m sorry for snapping at him. I’m just very tired and very confused.”

“I’ll give him the message.”

“Goodnight, Lillian.”

“Goodnight, Father.” I walked to my room doubting that I’d be able to sleep much that night. I had begun to dread closing my eyes for fear that the dream of the shadow man would return. I knew that although Father was very tired, he wouldn’t get much sleep either. He would be up pacing the floor, wondering what had happened to our missing men and our estranged ally. However, he wouldn’t have to wonder very long.

Chapter Fifteen

By some miracle, I had managed to slip into a restful and thankfully dream free sleep that night. Unfortunately, it was short-lived. In the middle of the night, I woke to the sound of someone pounding on my door. Startled, I tumbled out of my bed on to the floor. I stood quickly and rushed over to the door without remembering to slip on my robe and flung it wide open only to find Philip standing there. Immediately, my face flushed to a brilliant shade of crimson as I made a futile effort to be modest, but Philip seemed so flustered that he didn't even seem to notice my clothing, or lack thereof. He must have run to my room because he stood there a moment leaning on the wall for support while he caught his breath.

"Lillian, get dressed right now." He gasped. "It's the Dark Army! They came out of the northern woods just moments ago. We are under attack!"

"What?" I had heard the words, but my mind was unable to make any sense of them. How could the Dark Army be back?

"Just get dressed! I'll explain on the way out to the battle front." I stood there for a moment, my bare feet frozen to the stone floor. "Well don't just stand there like an idiot! Get dressed!"

I slammed the door shut, my previous embarrassment forgotten. I threw on my battle gear and boots in record time, not bothering to tie my hair back. I grabbed my sword, slipped it into the sheath on my belt, and opened the door to find Philip still impatiently waiting.

"Took you long enough!"

"What's going on?" I said, ignoring his criticism as we sprinted down the hall making our way out the palace doors toward the front gate.

"The enemy is back. We didn't spot them as quickly as before because your father ordered the decrease of men on watch. They didn't even give their shrill battle cry this time. Consequently, we didn't even see them until they ran out of the woods into the field."

"When you say they are back, you mean the few that ran away last time?"

"No, the army is back in full force with as many, if not more, men than before."

"How is that possible?"

"I don't know, but it means I was right. Trent was lying about how many men they had at their camp."

"They could have tricked him into believing they only had a small camp left. They could have used him to lull us into a false sense of security." Even as I said it, I knew that it sounded far-fetched.

"Why would they go to all that trouble? Wouldn't it have made more sense to just kill Trent and attack us later?"

"I don't know. I'm just throwing possibilities out there."

"Why are you making excuses for him? You don't like him any more than I do."

"True, I don't like him, but he's family, and he's a warrior. I just can't accept that he had anything to do with this." Philip was scowling, so I changed the subject. "Are the men ready?"

"Yes. Most of our men are already at the front gate, but the archers didn't have very much notice. From what I've heard, they were still able to take down a good amount of the Dark Warriors."

"Where is my father? Does he know?"

"He is safe in the palace. I notified him the moment the attack began and then I came to get you."

"Why didn't you come and tell me first? I could have already been on the battlefield by now!"

"I wanted to go to the battlefield with you so I could tell you what the situation was. If I'd sent a messenger, I would have had to explain all this

to you when you got to the front gate, and that would be a waste of time, like me having to explain my reasoning to you is now!" he shouted in frustration. I just wasn't having a positive effect on him these days. I didn't have time to apologize because we had come in view of the battle.

"Oh no!" The sight before my eyes stopped me in my tracks. Philip and I had reached the front gate and the sight was horrifying. The newly constructed gate was melted as the first had been. This time the invading warriors had stood back a few more paces than before and were launching vials of the corrosive liquid at the gate with sling shots. The vials exploded into balls of fire the moment they came in contact with anything. I could see that some of the men had been burned on their hands and faces, but they continued to fight as the enemy pushed to enter the city.

I turned to see Philip's face. He looked as horrified as I felt. I looked up at him and realized there were things that needed to be said. I felt a lump forming in my throat as I took a deep breath and drew my sword. "Philip, I'm sorry that I've been avoiding you. If I die in this battle, I want you to know that it's been an honor and a privilege to fight by your side. You're my best friend, never forget that. Take care of Katrina, and know that I wish you two the best."

Philip gave me a puzzled look and opened his mouth to say something in return, but I didn't wait to hear what he had to say. Just saying those words out loud had been hard enough. Screaming, I ran to the front of the battle.

Philip had been right to suspect that the Dark Army was still lurking in the shadows of the forest. They were back in full force. There were more warriors than before, and they even seemed to be stronger. We managed to push them away from the gaping hole that had once been the beautiful front gate and fought in the bright moonlight of the open field between the city walls and the northern woods. I was glad I had insisted on extra training for the new recruits as I sliced through one warrior and another. At times during the battle, I glanced to my left to see Philip fighting fiercely, Trent was not too far behind him, loyally defending the kingdom with the rest of my men. I set my sights on the

leader and pushed to engage him in battle, but again he always managed to elude me. I could never seem to get in striking distance before he rode on his black horse to another area of the battle.

After what seemed like hours, the tide of the battle had finally turned in our favor. We had slaughtered most of the Dark Army, and the sun was beginning to peak over the horizon. Again, the warriors who had escaped our blades began to run for the shelter of the woods, tripping over the bodies of their fallen comrades, which began to disappear as they had after the first battle. I wiped the sweat out of my eyes and watched the sunrise for a moment trying to catch my breath.

As I watched the remnants of the invading army run, something very strange happened, something that will remain permanently etched in my memory until the day I die. The elusive leader suddenly materialized a few feet in front of me, along with Trent. At first I feared Trent was going to attempt to fight the Dark Leader alone. I raised my sword and screamed for him to get out of the way. But Trent wasn't trying to fight. He stepped to the side and yelled and pointed in my direction. I was confused and couldn't hear what he was saying. Then, time seemed to slow as Trent turned to face me, a sinister smile spreading slowing across his blood and sweat streaked face.

In the next moment, I became aware that the Dark Leader was raising a bow and taking aim directly at my chest while Trent continued to smile and point. Two voices were screaming in my mind. One voice was screaming to attack, or at least move and defend myself. The other voice was screaming that Philip had been right about Trent all along. I was being betrayed by one of my own men, a member of my family. The shock of that realization rendered me immobile. I just stood there and stared, waiting for the arrow to hit its mark as time crept by.

Just as the arrow was released from the bow, Philip appeared out of nowhere and leaped in front of me. Trent's face twisted from the sinister smile into a scowl filled with rage as Philip stumbled back a step from the force of the blow. The arrow had hit him squarely in the center of his chest. I could faintly hear Trent screaming in rage as the Dark Leader quickly reloaded his bow and embedded another arrow in Philip's

stomach before riding off into the forest with the rest of his retreating men.

As Philip collapsed on the ground, it was only then that my mind began working again, and I found the power to move. I looked at Trent, and the numbness of shock was quickly being replaced by rage. We made eye contact for one brief moment before he bolted toward the woods.

“Coward!” I screamed. Some of my fellow warriors were running toward Philip and me. They had seen what Trent had done. “Arrest him now!”

The men ran past me and were quickly gaining on Trent’s fleeing figure. Sinking to the ground beside Philip, I saw the men tackle Trent to the ground and drag him in the direction of the palace prison.

“Oh my God! Philip!” I said as I knelt next to him. The arrows were deeply embedded in his body, and the wounds were bleeding profusely. I didn’t dare try and remove them on my own. I needed to get him to the doctor quickly.

“I need help over here!” I yelled and several men came running. Together we gingerly lifted Philip off the ground and carried him as quickly as we could manage to the doctor.

Once we reached the doctor, we carefully laid Philip on the table. The other men left, but I stayed and held Philip’s hand while the doctor examined him briefly before motioning that I should join him just outside the door in the hallway for a moment. I didn’t want to leave Philip, but I reassured Philip that I would be back in a moment before I joined the doctor in the hall as he had requested.

“Can you take the arrows out? Is he going to be okay?”

“He’s lost too much blood and the arrows are too deep. If I pulled them out now, he would bleed to death in a matter of minutes”

“Isn’t there anything you can do?” I pleaded. “Anything at all? He’s the commander in the army. We can’t lose him, not now.”

“I’m sorry, Your Highness. He’s dying. I will send someone for his parents. I know he is a dear friend of yours, so I suggest you go in and

say goodbye. He doesn't have much time left." The last words he spoke were barely a whisper.

"Thank you," I said as I quietly reentered the room. I looked at Philip lying on the examination table before me. His eyes were closed, and his breath came in shallow and irregular pants. His brow was covered in beads of sweat and shirt was soaked with blood. I walked over to him, smoothed the hair out of his eyes, and took his hand in mine again. His hand felt cool to the touch. "Philip, can you hear me?"

"Lillian?" His eyes fluttered open. "Where am I?"

"You're at the doctor's."

"The leader had a bow. He had an arrow, and he was going to shoot at you, and Trent was." He struggled to sit up.

"I know. You jumped in the arrow's path. You saved my life, Philip," I said as I gently helped him lay back down.

"But Trent..." He tried to sit up again.

"Don't try to move. Trent is in prison." I wiped his forehead with a cool cloth.

"Why haven't they taken the arrows out yet? Is it that bad?"

"No, you're going to be fine. The doctor and his nurses will be back in a little while to fix you up. You'll be back on the field with me and the men before you know it."

"Don't lie to me, Lillian."

"I'm not lying. You're going to be fine." It was the only thing I could manage to choke out as a lump formed in my throat.

"Before you ran off to the battle, why did you tell me to take care of Katrina?"

As he spoke, a stab of pain shot through my heart. I didn't want to deal with this now. I wanted to say goodbye to my friend. I didn't want to talk about his love for my sister.

"Because..." I cleared my throat. "Because I know you two are in love," I whispered as I looked away. "Do you want to talk with her? I can

send for her if you like.” My voice caught in my throat as I choked back the tears.

“Lillian, look at me.” I turned to face him again. “I’m not in love with Katrina.” He coughed and struggled to clear his throat. “I’m in love with you.” My heart stopped. I didn’t know what to say or how to respond. “I tried to tell you that night on the stairs, but I was afraid. I’ve tried to tell you so many times, but you wouldn’t talk to me. You kept avoiding me.”

“I’m so sorry, Philip! I didn’t know.” Tiny tears began trickling down my face.

“Well, now you know.” Even in so much pain he was still teasing me. I couldn’t help but smile a little.

“I love you too.” I leaned down and our lips met in a tender kiss for the first and last time.

When I sat back up, his eyes were closed. His parents had appeared in the doorway, and had seen the kiss. Slightly embarrassed, I cleared my throat. “Philip, your parents are here to see you. Philip?” I patted his hand as his parents came to stand on the other side of him, but he didn’t respond. The terrible realization hit us all at the same time. He was gone.

Philip’s mother sank to the floor and began to wail while her husband tried to hide the tears forming in his eyes, trying to be strong for his wife. I let go of Philip’s hands, my own hands trembling as I backed into a corner of the room as far away from his lifeless body as I could get. I listened to the sobs of his mother as I sank to the ground. He was gone. He was gone, and he had loved me. I hugged my knees up to my chest and began to sob uncontrollably.

I don’t know how long I sat there crying, but after what I can assume was a respectful amount of time, the doctor and his nurses came into the room and asked Philip’s parents for permission to clean the body in preparation for the funeral. They consented and slowly walked out, clinging to each other for support. With no one of my own to cling to, I stood and wiped the tears out of my eyes and left the doctors and nurses to do their job.

I stepped out of the dimly lit room into the bright morning sunshine, which blinded me for a moment. As I stepped out of the doorway, I nearly ran into one of my warriors. I turned to see Arden, the man I'd nearly knocked over that night of the victory ball, standing there. He looked tired and worried as he looked down at me with his black eyes and studied my tear-streaked face.

"He didn't make it, did he?"

"No, he didn't," I said, almost choking on the words.

"I'm so sorry. I know you two were close." He shifted nervously from one leg to the other. It was only then that I noticed he was holding a sword.

"Is that my sword?"

"Yes," he said, quickly holding it out to me. "You left it on the field after Philip..." His voice trailed off for a moment. He cleared his throat and began again. "When you helped the other men carry Philip here. I wanted to make sure that it was returned to you. I have already cleaned it off for you."

"Thank you." I held out my hand to take the sword from him. He stood there looking down at me for a moment or two. As I looked up at his face, I saw something there. The same expression I'd seen briefly the night I'd run into him at the ball. What was it? I was too tired to figure it out. I needed to be somewhere else right now. "If you'll excuse me, I have some business to attend to," I said as I began walking toward the palace prison with my sword at my side clutched in my hand.

Chapter Sixteen

My father was standing outside the entrance of the prison waiting for me. "I figured that you would come here before long. How is Philip? I heard that he jumped in front of you and took some arrows to the chest. How bad are his injuries?"

"He died a little while ago. The doctor was unable to pull the arrows out. Even if he had tried, Philip would have bled to death before the wounds could be mended."

"Do his parents know?"

"Yes, the doctor sent for them the moment he determined that Philip wasn't going to make it. He had already died by the time they got there." The words sounded hollow even to me. What was wrong with me? I was talking about the death of my best friend!

"That is a shame, not being able to say goodbye to their only son."

"Yes, it is."

"He was quite a man." I could see my father's eyes misting over as he spoke. "He was like a son to me. I'm going to miss him," he said as he cleared his throat and tried to blink back the tears, but a few escaped to trickle down his face.

"I'm going to miss him too." Seeing my father cry was too much. I began to cry again, but I didn't try to stop the tears.

"Lillian, I know how Philip was shot on the battlefield. I know that Trent betrayed you. He betrayed us all." He paused for a moment. "I should have believed Philip. I should have at least looked into his theory a bit more rather than just dismissing it. I just didn't want to believe that

Trent was capable of doing such a thing. If I had listened to him, maybe he would still be alive.” The tears began to flow more freely down his face.

“Philip said he loved me, Father.” I hadn’t meant to blurt that out, especially not to my father, not at that moment.

“Oh, Lillian.” He came and hugged me while I still clenched my sword in my hand. He pulled away. “You look tired, and you clearly need a relaxing bath.” I looked down at myself as he spoke. I hadn’t realized until that moment that I was covered in blood. Some of it was the blood of the warriors I’d killed, some of it was mine, but most of it had come from Philip as I’d leaned over to kiss him. I looked at my father and noticed that the blood from my shirt had also stained the front of my father’s robe, but he didn’t seem to notice, or if he did he didn’t care.

“I want to see Trent right now. Which cell is he being kept in?”

“I don’t think that is a very good idea. You go and get cleaned up. Don’t worry about Trent right now. He will surely be severely punished for his actions. I will see to it personally.” He took a deep breath. “You’ve just suffered a terrible loss, and you’re mentally and physically exhausted. You need to rest.”

“What I need is to talk to Trent.” I stood firm as I faced my father. He looked at me and then my sword closely for a moment.

“All right, I’ll allow you to go and see him, but not alone. There are two men assigned to guard him. They must be present in the cell at all times. You can find them in the cell at the very back of the prison.”

“Fine” With that, I sheathed my sword and strode into the prison to the cell in the back where Trent was being held, and directed the guards to open the gates. As I entered the cell, Trent stood, and the guards positioned themselves in front of the door in case Trent tried to escape, but I didn’t think he’d be that foolish. We both stood facing each other silently for a moment. He hadn’t been permitted to wash up just yet, probably because I had insisted on barging in here. I didn’t care if he never got another bath again. It would have served him right for what he’d done to Twentaria, what he’d done to me.

“What do you want?” he grunted, finally breaking the oppressive silence.

“What do I want? What do you think I want? I want an explanation! You owe it to my father and the people of Twentaria. You owe it to me!” I screamed. “You betrayed me and all of Twentaria for what? What did they offer you that was so irresistible? Gold? Land? What?”

“You really want to know why I betrayed the kingdom? Because I should be king! Me! It should be my crown. I’ve earned it, and I deserve it.” He shook with anger as he spoke. “I’ve spent all these years patiently waiting for my reward. I did everything your father ever asked of me. I didn’t say anything when he promoted you over me to second-in-command because I thought he had bigger things in store for me, but when you took my crown, that was the final straw.”

“How did you do it?” I said, unable to keep my hands from shaking with anger.

“When I ran into the woods chasing after the enemy, it wasn’t to kill them. I wanted to strike a bargain with them. When we first learned that an enemy was moving in on the city, I knew I had to form an alliance with them if I was ever to overthrow your father’s rule. Several of the Dark Warriors found me when I ran into the woods, just as I had planned. At first, they were going to kill me, but it turns out that I’m very persuasive. In the end, I gave them some very valuable information and they agreed to kill you and make me a ruler in their nation after they finished Twentaria off, but at the last minute, that idiot Philip stepped in front of you and ruined everything.” He punched the damp stone wall in his frustration, which was not a smart thing to do. His hand would probably bruise at the very least. I hoped he had broken it. “He cost me everything. The Dark Leader will never trust me now!” He punched the wall again. This time I heard a distinct crack. He had broken a bone that time, but he was so enraged that he didn’t seem to notice. “Did he die by the way?” Trent sneered.

“Yes, about an hour ago.” The image of Philip’s pale body flashed through my mind, bringing fresh tears to my eyes, but I fought them back. I wouldn’t let them fall, not in front of Trent.

“Oh, that’s too bad. Now you know how it feels to have something taken from you.”

My mouth dropped open in shock. I couldn’t believe the amount of hate and filth that poured out of this vile man. My whole body began to tremble with rage. I paced around the prison cell for a moment trying to gather my thoughts.

When I returned to stand in front of him, I looked up into his dull blue eyes and suddenly had a vision of the shadowy figure in my dreams. The familiar features, the blue eyes, were Trent’s! The dream had been a warning. I just hadn’t been able to piece it all together in time. If only I’d listened to Philip! I looked down at my charm, which had slipped out of my shirt at some point in the day. It had been glowing steadily for some time, and was glowing more brightly now as I stood in front of Trent. The charm had been trying to warn me all this time of his treachery, but I hadn’t been smart enough to understand it.

“It doesn’t matter what you or your father think anyway. I’ll stand trial, but Grandmother won’t let your father execute me. I have some valuable information about the enemy that I can trade in order to avoid a death sentence. Before you know it, I’ll be living the rest of my life comfortably in a quiet tower. It’s not quite the life I had planned, but it will do.” Each word he spat out only added fuel to the flame burning in my soul.

The stress of the day was beginning to be too much to bear, and the filth that poured out of Trent’s mouth was shocking. I was unable to hold back the tears anymore and they began to stream down my face. It was useless to wipe them away.

“Oh, are you going to cry now?” he sneered. “How weak!”

In that moment something inside me snapped. Before I was fully conscious of what I was doing, I drew my sword. Screaming, I ran at Trent, his eyes suddenly wide with fear, and plunged my sword up to the hilt through his rotten black heart. I held it there, staring up into his blue eyes until all the light drained out of them. I could feel his warm blood oozing down my hand. Shaking, I pulled my sword out of his body

and let him sink to the ground. I dropped my sword and looked down at my hands. They were warm and slick with bright red blood. Funny, I had expected his blood to be black.

The guards stood frozen at the prison cell door with their jaws hanging open, not believing what their eyes had just seen. Finally, one of them cleared his throat and said, "Clearly, he provoked you. He was a traitor with no sense of honor or loyalty. He got what he deserved." The guard walked over to my sword, pulled out a handkerchief, and carefully wiped the blood off of it before handing it back to me. "You executed a traitor. You're a hero."

"I'm not so sure about that." I sheathed my sword and walked out into the bright sunshine for the second time that day and headed for my Father's sitting room, still not bothering to clean up. I had to explain to him what I'd just done. The news of Trent's death wouldn't stay contained to the walls of the prison for long. I had to get to my father before the news reached him. It would be better for him to hear it from me.

After I explained what had happened in the prison to my father, he was very quiet and very still for a long time. Finally, he took a deep breath and said, "I had a feeling that something like that was going to happen. I shouldn't have let you go into to see him so soon after losing Philip. You weren't ready for it. I should have insisted that you go up to your room. Part of the blame falls on me."

"I understand that my actions warrant punishment, and I'll take whatever you feel I deserve." My response was hollow and automatic. I felt numb as I stood before my father.

"Lillian, I'm not going to punish you. He was a traitor, and the penalty is death. I would have ordered his execution."

"Trent seemed to think that he could avoid a death sentence because Grandmother would intervene, and by trading information about the enemy."

"What kind of information?"

"I don't know."

"I suppose that's because you killed him before he could tell you."

"Yes," I said, lowering my eyes to avoid his piercing gaze.

"Lillian, do you ever listen to anything I tell you?" He paced around the room. "You have got to learn to control your anger. Now, I understand that Trent deliberately provoked you, but you must learn to be the stronger person and restrain yourself! You must learn to be patient. As I said, I would have had Trent executed, but not now, not until he had stood trial, not until he'd given us his information, and certainly not by you."

"I'm sorry that I've disappointed you." I hung my head in shame. My father was right. I shouldn't have taken matters into my own hands. I should have waited until I'd calmed down before going to confront Trent.

"I know you're sorry," he said as he came to hug me. "I know you've been through a lot today, and you weren't thinking clearly. I will speak to your grandmother about Trent's betrayal and his death. It wouldn't be right to keep the truth from her, though I can't guarantee that she won't come looking for you afterward. If I were you, I would hide in my room for a while and wait out the storm."

"All right"

"It would be good for you to use that time to think of who you would like to be the new second-in-command. I know it is hard, but we don't know what is going to happen with the Dark Army. They could come back and we need to have a second-in-command."

"But I'm second-in-command."

"Not anymore. With Philip gone, you must fill the first commanding position."

"Thank you." I should have been grateful and even happy for the promotion. It was certainly an honor, but all I could think about was Philip and the tender kiss we'd shared in his final moments.

"Now, for goodness sake go and get cleaned up and get some rest. You're a mess! Remember, I love you very much."

“I love you too, Father.” I turned and left the room feeling empty inside. I’d lost my best friend in the world, my only friend for that matter. What was I going to do now?

Chapter Seventeen

Word of the deaths of Philip and Trent had spread rather quickly. As I walked through the palace halls to my room, many of the servants whispered and clung to the side of the hallway as they scurried past me. They must have thought I was a monster for killing my own cousin, even though he had been a traitor. I only prayed that I wouldn't run into anyone else as I continued on my way to my room, especially Grandmother. I could only imagine what would happen if our paths collided now.

I managed to reach the safety of my room without encountering anyone, not even Katrina, though she had certainly heard the news by now. I couldn't help but wonder how she felt about all this. What would she say about Trent's betrayal? What did she think of me for killing him the way I did? Had she been in love with Philip even though he hadn't felt the same way about her? All these questions spun around in my mind until I developed a throbbing headache. By the time I finished cleaning up, it was very late in the afternoon, a bit early to be going to bed, but I hadn't slept much the night before, and I was thoroughly exhausted and was positive I could sleep clear through the night to the next morning. I slipped into my nightgown and crawled into bed and shivered underneath the covers. I got up and pulled a few more blankets out of my closet and spread them over the bed, but no amount of blankets could warm the cold I felt deep in my soul. I slipped into an empty and dreamless sleep.

When I woke the next day, I took breakfast in my room. I wasn't ready to face the world yet, though I couldn't stay locked away in my room forever. The funeral ceremony for Philip would be that afternoon.

Father had wasted no time in making the arrangements. The entire city would be there, and maybe a few of the people from the smaller villages in the kingdom. Certainly all the men in the army would be there. Philip had been a great leader, and he was loved by everyone he had known. I was certain there would be a large crowd. We would gather in the great northern field where his body would be burnt, his soul floating to heaven with the curling smoke from the flames. Trent's body would be burnt as well, but there wouldn't be a special ceremony for him, even though he was a member of the royal family. He was a traitor, and a disgrace. His body would be burnt and his ashes would be scattered to the wind.

I looked through my closet trying to decide what to wear for the ceremony. As a princess and woman, most people would expect me to wear a long black gown and veil to hide my tears. As commander of the army, I would be expected to wear my formal armor. As I stared at my reflection on the highly polished armor, I wondered, which one was I today, the woman or the commander? I couldn't be both, not now or ever. My duty was to the people of Twentaria and my men, and in the end, I decided to dress in my formal armor.

My limbs felt very heavy as I dressed slowly. I kept thinking about Philip and what I could have done to prevent his death. I should have listened to his concerns about Trent. I should have been able to make more sense out of the strange dream. When my green charm had started glowing, I should have listened to its subtle warning. I should have moved when the Dark Leader raised his bow level with my chest. If I had been able to move, Philip wouldn't have had to leap in front of me. If only I had just moved.

Before I left the room, I checked my appearance in the mirror. The armor was perfectly polished so it sparkled in the bright morning sunlight. It was never to be worn on the battlefield and was just for show on special occasions. My hair was pulled away from my face in a simple black ribbon. It was hard to believe that not so long ago I had been standing in front of this very mirror dressed in a fine gown eagerly waiting to tell Philip how I felt about him. So much had changed since then. The longer I stared at my reflection, the more foreign it seemed to

me, until I barely recognized the face staring back at me. I used to feel strong and full of energy when I dressed in battle gear, but not today. The reflection in the mirror was tired and worn. My eyes were rimmed in red and dark circles hung beneath them. There was a knock on the door. When I opened the door, a palace maid informed me it was nearly time for the ceremony to begin. She didn't even look me in the eye as she spoke, which made me all the more apprehensive about going to face the other people of Twentaria.

The sun beat down upon my head as I listened to my father speak. I'm sure the speech he gave was very eloquent, but I never heard a word he said. He had asked me beforehand if I wanted to say anything, but I declined. I couldn't trust myself not to cry if I spoke. I scanned the crowd that had gathered. Philip's parents stood near my father clutching each other as they gazed upon the pale face of their only son. To my left I could see Katrina. She was wearing a beautiful long black gown with a matching veil. Even in a state of grief, her beauty was undeniable. She was breathtaking.

I brought my attention back to Philip's pale frame. It was very disturbing that his lifeless body seemed so frail on the enormous pile of wood when he had been so robust in life. My heart ached when I thought of all the happy times we had shared together and the battles we had fought side by side. The last memory of Philip was the one that hurt most of all. That first and last tender kiss when his last breath mingled with mine. I sighed and realized that my father had finished speaking. It was time to light the fire. The commanding warriors, including me, were all given torches lighted by my father. We spaced ourselves evenly around the funeral pyre, and then the men awaited my signal.

I was standing near Philip's head. Before I gave the signal, I wanted to say one last goodbye. I leaned forward and kissed Philip's cool forehead tenderly. The surprise from some of the people in the crowd showed clearly on their faces, but I didn't care. I took a step back and gave the nod, and the fire was lit. As the fire began to consume his body, Philip's mother, who until then had stood as still as a statue, cried out and buried her face in her husband's chest.

As the crowd began to disperse, many people stopped to offer their condolences to Philip's parents. A few people even stopped to commend me for the swift execution of Trent. They called me a hero, which I thought was inappropriate for the time, but I thanked them politely just the same. Even after the last person had gone, I remained standing in front of the fire till the flames burned down to the gentle glow of embers. Though the sun had sunk low and slipped beneath the horizon, I still stood there. I turned my attention from the dying fire to stare at the northern woods past the funeral pyre, and very slowly the emptiness I had felt began to be filled by another emotion, rage, and the thoughts of sadness and self pity were replaced by other thoughts, thoughts of revenge.

Chapter Eighteen

When I finally trudged back to the palace, I was surprised to see Katrina waiting for me on a bench near the palace entrance with a puzzled expression on her face. She stood as I approached.

“Why did you kiss Philip on the forehead during the funeral?” Her very direct question deserved a very direct response.

“Because I loved him, and he loved me.” I didn’t know how else to say it. I didn’t want to hurt her, but it was the truth, plain and simple.

“I thought you two were just friends. You told me that you didn’t think of him as anything but a friend.”

“I know. I was lying.”

“Well, that explains a lot.”

“What do you mean?” I knew exactly what she meant. She had loved him.

“I hinted to Philip at the victory ball that we should be more than friends. At the time I thought I was being too subtle, but it appears he was in love with you the whole time.” She paused for a moment. “Why did you lie to me?”

“I was afraid.”

“You were afraid of me?”

“No, I was afraid of my feelings for him, afraid that he didn’t feel the same way about me. I was afraid of what other people might think. I didn’t know how he felt until it was too late.”

She didn’t say anything for a long time.

"I made a fool out of myself. I wouldn't have approached him if I knew how you two felt about each other."

"I don't know what to say except that I'm sorry." My voice was barely a whisper.

"Oh, Lillian!" she said as she began to cry. "You don't have to apologize. We've both just lost someone we care deeply about and here I am making you feel awful for loving someone," She walked over to hug me, which was difficult considering I was still wearing my clunky armor. "It's not like you took him away from me. He never loved me to begin with." She pulled away from the hug.

"All the same, I'm sorry that I wasn't honest with you. We're sisters. We shouldn't hide things from each other."

"Speaking of hiding, I noticed that Grandmother was not at the ceremony."

"I'm afraid that is my fault, but I can't say that I'm upset that she didn't come. I don't think she wants to see me right now either, considering I killed her favorite grandchild."

"Father told me what happened."

"I suppose you think I'm a monster. All the servants do. I hear them whispering when I walk past."

"No, I don't. What Trent did was very wrong, though I think that you should have waited to go and see him. He should have stood trial and Father should have determined his punishment."

"I know. I was just so angry and the things he was saying were so awful. I wasn't thinking clearly. I drew my sword and plunged it deep into his heart. It was over before I realized what I was doing."

"Well, there's nothing you can do to change what happened, but you must learn from the experience."

"When did you become so wise?"

"I do more than go to parties you know," she said as she pretended to be insulted.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry.” I sighed. “Thank you for being so understanding about this whole mess.”

“I already told you to stop apologizing. Besides, it’s not me that you have to worry about. You can’t avoid Grandmother forever.”

“I know. Believe me I know.” With that we walked into the palace. It had been a long day and we both needed a rest.

That night, I couldn’t sleep. I was troubled by the fact that the bodies of the slain Dark Warriors kept disappearing after the battles. Why hadn’t that been investigated further? Father dismissed it as a simple magic trick, but I was beginning to think it was much more complicated. It was true that wizards and those who practiced the art of magic had grown scarce, but they weren’t extinct. What if the Dark Army had a powerful wizard working for them? That would explain how the bodies disappeared, but why? What was the advantage? I pondered the matter until my head hurt, but still hadn’t figured it out. I finally managed to go to sleep a few hours before dawn, but I was determined to solve this mystery. I was certain the future of Twentaria depended on it.

The next few days were filled with repairing the city gates and walls and I didn’t have time to research my suspicions of magic. One morning, I received word that my father wanted to speak with me as soon as I had finished breakfast. I was so anxious at the prospect that he might want to talk about Trent that I could hardly choke down my food. Maybe the matter wasn’t going to be settled as easily as I had thought.

Shaking, I entered his sitting room. “You wanted to speak with me, Father?”

“Yes, come in and sit down.”

“If this is going to be about Trent, I’d rather stand.”

“This is not about Trent, now sit down and relax.”

Inwardly, I breathed a sigh of relief and slid into one of the many comfy chairs in the room. I looked across to one of the other chairs in the room and was startled to see that someone else was sitting in the room. It was Arden, the man who had kept me from falling that awful night at the ball, and had taken care of my sword while I had been with Philip. He

was one of the many men in the army, but I recognized him at once because his features were unmistakable. He had come to us from lands in the south and the color of his skin was that of a rich, bronze tan that never faded. His long, black hair nearly reached his waist. Usually he kept it pulled back from his face, but today it hung loosely around his broad shoulders. His eyes were also black and had a slight almond shape to them. He had joined our army and had been a very loyal warrior for several years. What could my father possibly want with him?

“Lillian, did you hear what I said?”

I jumped. I had been staring at Arden and hadn’t heard a word my father had said.

“I’m sorry, I was thinking about something else. What did you say?”

“I said that I’ve decided that Arden here would be a good choice for your second-in-command.”

“I thought you were going to let me decide who would fill the position?”

“Well, I was, but then I thought that Arden would be the perfect choice. Philip often spoke of him as being one of the best warriors, but if you disagree we can chose someone else.”

Arden simply sat patiently in his chair, not seeming to mind that we were talking about him as though he weren’t even in the room.

“No, I mean of course Arden is perfect for the position.” I stood and walked over to Arden and extended my hand to him. He stood and we shook hands. “I would be honored to have you as my second-in-command if you are willing to accept the responsibility.”

“I am honored and eagerly accept.” He held my hand a bit longer than was customary and stared into my eyes. It was very unsettling.

“Is there something else you wanted to say?” I said as I pulled my hand out of his.

“I know that you and Philip were very close and I’m very sorry for your loss. I hope that I can be half the man he was.”

"Thank you." I looked down. "Arden, you might think this is silly, but some nights ago I ran into you at a ball. You probably don't remember."

"I remember very well. You stumbled and I caught you." He stared down at me with those black eyes.

"Yes, well, it was very rude of me, and I don't believe I ever apologized to you. I'm very sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for." His voice was soft as he spoke. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I must be going. Again thank you for bestowing this honor on me. No one will work harder and be more loyal than I." He bowed to my father and then me and left the room. I stood silent for a moment, my hand still warm from the handshake.

"I'm glad you approve of him. He's a good man and I think you two will work very well together," Father said as he came to stand next to me.

"Yes, he's a good choice. I probably would have thought about him if I had given the matter much thought, but I've been distracted lately."

"Yes, the damage caused by the enemy was more extensive in the second battle. I understand the repairs have been keeping you quite busy."

"That's part of the reason, but I've been thinking about the Dark Army." I paused, searching for the right words to begin this difficult conversation. "I think that it's possible that magic plays a key factor in this somehow. The bodies disappeared after the second battle as they did in the first."

"Yes, I was informed, but I still don't think it has anything to do with the strength of their army. I believe it is a trick meant to intimidate the armies they mean to conquer, but obviously they are no match for our forces."

"We thought that last time and they came back stronger."

"Yes, well, you don't really think they will come back again, do you?"

"I think that we need to consider that possibility. We weren't as prepared as we should have been for this last attack. Even you said that I needed to choose a new second-in-command in case they attack again."

"That is true. What do you propose we do?"

"I think we should double the watch and rebuild the city gate as soon as possible. Have any of the chemists figured out what that caustic liquid used to melt the gate was?"

"No, there is barely any of the substance left on the fragments of the gate to test, and not enough to determine what it is. They are at a loss."

"So, we have an army whose dead disappear and an unidentifiable caustic substance that melts metal like candy set in the sun, and you don't think that we might be dealing with a powerful wizard?"

"No, I don't. I'm sure there is a logical explanation for everything. All that magic stuff is nonsense."

"I disagree. I think we should continue to look into this matter further."

"Not at this time. There are many other things that need to be done, and you need to teach Arden the duties of commanding the army."

"Yes, Father," I said as I turned and left. I really felt Father was making a mistake, and that troubled me deeply.

Deep in thought, I wandered down the hall. I wasn't really paying attention to where I was going. I was just walking and thinking when I realized I had wandered into the wing of the castle where Grandmother's room was. I had managed to avoid her since Trent's death, and I was desperately hoping that I wouldn't run into her now. I scanned the hall quickly and sure enough she was walking down the hall in front of me. To make matters worse, she had already spotted me and was scurrying down the hall toward me. I had never wanted to disappear so badly in my life. I tried to turn and run, but my legs felt like iron. I felt like a small mouse about to be caught by the cat.

"What are you doing on my end of the castle?" she shouted as she came to stand inches from my face.

"I was just wandering around the castle and I didn't realize where I was." I considered making a comment about her claiming part of the castle, but that would have only made her angrier and decided against it.

"You are not welcome here. Leave at once!"

"Believe me, I wouldn't have come here on purpose, but you have no right to tell me where I can and can not walk! The palace is my home as much as it is yours." My words sounded much stronger than I felt. Even as I spoke them I took a step back.

"Don't talk to me like that!"

"Why? Why should I respect you when you've never even shown me an ounce of respect or civility for that matter?"

"Why should I respect you? You're just a monster who kills her own family," she hissed inches from my face.

"I didn't mean to kill Trent that day. I was angry and the things he had done were terrible. He betrayed us all, even you, and because of him Philip, our greatest warrior and my best friend, is dead. Trent was a traitor and a liar. He would have been executed anyway," I said, taking another step back.

"Trent would never betray me. He would have been a great ruler someday."

"No, he wouldn't have. I am the one who will rule this kingdom."

As the last word fell from my mouth, something seemed to snap within my grandmother. She screamed and lunged at me, scratching and clawing at my face as we fell to the floor. I tried to cover my face as best I could, but her long nails managed to reach my skin anyway. A few palace maids heard the commotion and dragged Grandmother off me and down the hall to her room while she screamed.

"You ruined everything! You and that stupid boy! Everything!"

I sat on the floor of the hallway as my grandmother's screams grew fainter and fainter until I couldn't hear them at all. I clutched my green charm until my heart stopped pounding in my throat. It was only then that I noticed that my face was stinging, and when I touched it, my hand came back spotted with blood. She was a tough old woman. I stood and began walking away from that wing of the palace as fast as I could. I was puzzled by what my grandmother had screamed. What had I ruined? What boy? Surely she wasn't referring to father, and he was the one who had named me heir to the throne. No, she was talking about something

else, but what? I paced my room that night, but couldn't figure it out. I sighed. I was probably wasting my time. Her screams had been those of a bitter old woman who hadn't been able to get her way. Her sanity was probably in question. Her rants probably didn't mean anything special at all.

Chapter Nineteen

The next few weeks I was kept busy with the remaining repairs to the city and the construction of the new gate. In addition, I was responsible for training Arden to be second-in-command. I had thought that it would be a difficult and time-consuming process, but Arden proved to be a quick learner, and soon he and I were a great team, almost as good as Philip and I had been.

One day after training, he rushed over to talk with me before I left. “Lillian, wait. Can I talk to you for a moment?”

“Sure, is there something wrong?”

“No. It’s been a month since we lost Philip, and I know you two were very close, but you never talk about him.” He paused for a moment. “I was just wondering how you were holding up. If you need to talk, I’m always willing to listen.”

“I’m fine, but thanks for asking.” I forced a smile as I turned to walk away.

“Wait a minute. There is something else I wanted to ask you.”

“I’m sorry. I thought you were finished.” What more could he have to say?

“You’re forgiven. Anyway, I was wondering if you wanted to practice that routine that you and Philip used to perform for the new recruits to demonstrate proper fighting technique. There are some new recruits joining us in the coming weeks and I thought that we could perform for them.”

“Oh right, I guess we could, but you don’t know the routine. I mean it was just something that Philip and I made up. I’ve never taught it to anyone else.”

“I know, but I watched you and Philip perform it many times.”

“Watching is very different from actually doing.”

“I know. Trust me. I know the routine,” he said as he gave me a look that sent shivers down my spine.

“Okay, but I’m not going to make it easy for you. I’ll fight as if it were Philip. You have your warning. If I hurt you, you will have no one to blame but yourself.” With that, we took our positions and the dance began.

I went through my usual movements, expecting Arden to falter at some point, but to my surprise he didn’t. His sword was always there ready to meet mine, just as Philip’s had been. I went faster, trying to get him to stumble, but he kept up every step of the way. Faster and faster we danced. It was getting dangerous. I could have really hurt him if his sword missed the mark, and I knew that I should have stopped or slowed down, but I just couldn’t stop myself.

Breathless, we finally came to the end of the routine. We stood panting with only an inch of space between us, and I found myself staring up into his black almond eyes. I blinked and quickly pushed away a few steps. “How did you learn how to do that?”

“I told you I watched you very closely many times,” he said in a low voice as he took a step to close the distance I had put between us.

“Right, well I think you’re more than ready to show the new recruits,” I said as I looked away from the heat of his stare. “Now if you’ll excuse me I have to go.”

I turned and walked quickly toward the palace. I ran to my room with my stomach in knots. I couldn’t stop thinking about Arden’s black eyes and his intense stare. What was wrong with me? Why was I thinking about Arden so much? I couldn’t have feelings for him, could I? Philip had been gone only a month and here I was thinking about another man. Pacing around the room, I forcefully pushed Arden’s image out of my

mind. I didn't have feelings for Arden. I was just confused because he reminded me of Philip in so many ways. Yes, that was all it was. I saw pieces of Philip in Arden. As I prepared to go down to dinner, I almost managed to convince myself it was true, almost.

The next day, Arden and I performed for the recruits, at a much safer speed, of course, but I avoided spending any extra time with him. I needed to get myself together. Admitting my feelings for Philip had made me weak, and losing him had been a terrible blow. I needed to push useless thoughts of romance and love out of my mind and focus on my responsibilities to the kingdom, especially if the Dark Army was waiting to attack again. The night guards were always on full alert, and the number of men posted on the north wall was doubled.

Father felt we were safe and could fight off anything that came through the forest, but I was still troubled by the element of magic. Even though he had told me not to look into the matter further, I spent all my free time inquiring if anyone knew anything about magic. I started with the palace servants and worked my way out into the city. I went from house to house asking the same questions. Surely some old grandmother would remember a little something about magic, or at least who I could go to in order to find the information I needed. Some old women knew a bit about love charms and small tricks to amuse children, but no one within the city walls seemed to have any substantial knowledge of magic, let alone anything powerful enough to make an entire army disappear. I was about to give up my search and head back to the palace when I stumbled upon a very strange old woman. She couldn't tell me anything about the Dark Army, but she had another kind of information for me, information about my mother.

On the outskirts of the city, I stumbled upon the tiny home of this strange old woman. Her home was humble, but obviously well taken care of. Cautiously, I approached the door. "Is there anyone here?" I said as I stuck my head into the open front door. "I am Princess Lillian. I just want to ask you a few questions."

"What does a royal princess want with a simple old woman?"

I jumped as a frail and bent figure of a woman hobbled out from behind the house.

"I just want to ask you some questions. Do you know anything about magic, or do you know anyone that does?"

"You have your mother's eyes," the old lady said as she peered up at me with critical eyes.

"You knew my mother?" I couldn't hide the surprise on my face. I'd never really spoken to anyone about my mother. It was too painful for my father, and my sister had still been very young when she had died, but maybe this stranger had been a friend.

"Yes, I knew your mother very well. She and I were very close friends long ago. That charm you wear around your neck was hers."

"I know. My sister, Katrina, gave it to me," I said as I clutched the charm at my neck. I hadn't realized that it had slipped out of my shirt. "What do you know about it?"

"Plenty!" The old woman cackled. "I gave it to her." Her eyes sparkled with a sly smile. "But where are my manners? My name is Elsa. Would you like to come in and talk with a lonely old woman for a while?"

"Of course, if it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"No trouble at all." She turned and disappeared into the doorway of the dimly lit house. I hesitated a moment at the door, unsure if I should follow this strange woman into her tiny house, but I looked down at my charm and it was not glowing. I took a deep breath and walked through the door.

At first, I had a hard time seeing, but after my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I could see that the inside of the small house was as neatly tended as the outside. The old woman was heating a pot of tea over a small fire in the center of the room.

"Have a seat, dear. The tea will be ready in a moment," Elsa said as she motioned to a small wooden table and chairs.

I sat and took the opportunity to study the rest of the room. Off to the left was a door opening to the only other room in the house, which I assumed was Elsa's bedroom. I surveyed the rest of the room and my

eyes came to rest on the only decoration in the whole house. It was a painting of a beautiful young woman. I stared at the portrait for a moment before I realized that I recognized the painted face. It was a picture of my mother as a young woman.

"Where did you get that picture?" I said as I stood and walked toward the painting. I squinted in the dim light trying to take in every detail. She was beautiful. Her long golden hair fell in soft curls down her back and her skin was as fair as the finest porcelain. Katrina certainly looked more like my mother than I ever would, but the old woman had been right about the eyes. My mother's eyes were a brilliant shade of green, just like mine, and around her neck was the same green charm I now wore around mine.

"Your mother gave that painting to me when she was quite young. Younger than you are today." Elsa smiled as she poured tea in two large brown mugs and sat at the table.

"How did you know my mother?" I said as I joined Elsa at the table.

"Your mother always had an interest in all things magical, and I happen to know a thing or two about such things. When she was just a mere eighteen years old, she came wandering through the city, much as you did today, though her need was not as urgent as yours. She was simply curious."

"So, you can tell me about the Dark Army's magic?" My heart leaped at the thought that I might be able to discover their secret. Something that could help me defeat them if they attacked again.

"I didn't say that. I only said I know a little about magic," she scolded gently and my heart sunk. "Your mother would come to me everyday, and I would teach her small spells, mostly for amusement than anything else. We became quite close, though she could never tell her mother or her husband, your father, where she spent all her afternoons.

"Why?"

"They did not believe that she should be wasting time on magical nonsense." I smiled as I recognized my father's words. "As I said earlier, I gave her the guardian charm that you now wear around your neck. It is

my greatest accomplishment.” She paused to take a sip of her tea. “I cared about your mother very much. She was like a younger sister to me, and I wanted to use my magic to make her something very special. I chose that stone because it matched her eyes, and then infused it with a spell that brings comfort in times of trouble and warns the bearer of coming danger. Tell me, does the guardian charm still work? Does it bring you comfort? Have you seen it glow?” The questions tumbled out of her mouth in her need to know if her magic still held true.

“Yes, when I’m upset, I touch the charm and it calms me.”

“Does it glow when you are in battle?”

“Yes, it does.” I looked down as I remembered the steady glow of the charm and how I’d ignored it. If I had paid more attention to it rather than keeping it tucked away in my shirt, maybe I would have discovered Trent’s treachery sooner. I would never ignore the warning of the guardian charm again, especially now that I knew its origin.

“I’m glad.” Elsa took another sip of her tea. I hadn’t touched mine yet. I knew it must have seemed rude, but I was so anxious to learn everything that this woman could tell me about my mother that I couldn’t have forced myself to take a drink. “I have never been able to make another charm as powerful as that one. I have tried many times, but have not been successful. It comforts me to know that my greatest success has found its way to you.”

“Why haven’t you ever come to the palace?”

“I could never go to the palace. As I said, your grandmother and father didn’t approve of your mother’s interest in magic, and they would never let me come and corrupt her daughters.”

“Well, I would welcome a visit from you. A friend of my mother’s is a friend of mine.”

“No, there is nothing for me at the palace, not anymore.” I thought I saw tears forming in her eyes as she spoke.

“You know that my mother died giving birth to me.”

“Yes, but you are hardly to blame for that. It was simply your mother’s time. Even a magic guardian charm can not stop death.” Elsa

wiped a couple tears from her face. "Now, what questions did you have for me?"

"I wanted to ask you about the Dark Army. The bodies of the fallen enemy warriors disappear when the sun rises."

"Yes, I have heard about that, and I agree that it is certainly some sort of powerful magic, but it is much too powerful for my understanding. My knowledge is very limited. I cannot help you. All I can tell you is to be sure that you never take the guardian charm from your neck. I have a feeling that it will help you in the days to come."

"Thank you," I said as I stood. "It has been good talking with you, but I must leave."

"I understand." Elsa walked me to the door as she spoke. "If you ever want to talk about your mother again, please don't hesitate to come by for tea. I would welcome the company."

"Thank you," Elsa squeezed my hand and then disappeared back into her tiny house.

It was good to finally find someone who would talk freely about my mother, though the visit had been bittersweet. I still knew nothing about the magic of the Dark Army, and I found that frustrating. I decided I was going to have to expand my search to the surrounding villages. The only problem with that plan was it would require asking my father's permission to travel. I knew that he would never approve and would tell me it was a waste of time and resources. How was I ever going to convince him to take this magic seriously? Should I tell him about Elsa? Should I tell him that I knew my mother believed in magic? I decided to sleep on it and approach him in the morning. Who knew what could happen if I caught him in a good mood?

I didn't get the chance to talk with my father as soon as I would have liked. That night, the Dark Army struck again.

I was awakened from my slumber by the sound of someone pounding at my door, which I had come to realize was never a good way to be woken up. I fumbled around in the dark for my robe, the green charm

around my neck glowed brightly as I opened the door to find Arden standing there.

“Get dressed! The enemy is at our gate!”

I didn’t even question him. I slammed the door and began dressing in my battle gear. As I dressed, I was annoyed that Arden had been notified about the attack before me. I was first-in-command now, so why did it seem that I was always the last person to be awakened?

Irritated, I flung the door open. As we ran down the hall, I vented my frustration. “Why were you notified before me? I am first-in-command, and I outrank you.”

“I couldn’t sleep so I decided to take a walk.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“I figured I could check on the night guards since I was awake anyway, but before I made it to the gate the Dark Army sprang out of the woods and charged the gate.”

“Did the archers have time to shoot?”

“Yes, they were able to take down some of the invaders, but not nearly enough.”

“Does my father know? Where is he?”

“Yes, he is safe in the palace.”

“Good.”

By that time we’d come in view of the gate, and again their army was launching vials of the corrosive liquid at our gate, which hadn’t even been finished yet. I didn’t understand this enemy. If they had such powerful weapons, why couldn’t they manage to defeat us? Something just didn’t seem right. This strange new enemy had to be more than they appeared to be.

“Lillian, be careful out there. The leader knows who you are now and he may have his men target you. He may even come to fight you himself, and we don’t know how powerful he is yet.”

“I know. I will be looking for him as well.”

“Don’t do anything stupid and get yourself killed.”

“You sound like Philip.”

“He was a smart man in more ways than one.”

“Yes, he was.” I looked over at Arden and the look on his face made me squirm. I shook my head. I couldn’t let myself be distracted by irrelevant feelings. I turned and faced the front gate not knowing what else to say. The gate had been destroyed and the men were trying to hold back the enemy again. My place was on the battlefield. I charged and Arden followed.

The Dark Army seemed to be even stronger than before. The battle raged for hours, but we managed to push them away from the front gate, though their explosive vials had damaged many of the buildings within the city walls. Several people were desperately trying to quench the flames before they spread farther into the city, but the damage was already more extensive than it had been after the previous battles.

The night wore on and my arms ached from exertion, but still our mysterious enemy remained strong. From time to time, I caught glimpses of Arden. He was skillfully defeating each warrior that challenged him. As for the Dark Leader, I watched him closely, or as closely as I could manage while fighting for my life. He didn’t fly around the battle field as he had in the past. He simply stayed near the back of the battle and watched. I couldn’t be sure because I could never see his face, but I was positive that he was staring at me. Certainly Trent had told him that I was the future queen, and that meant I was in danger. Leaders, especially heirs to the throne, were always targeted first.

Finally, a couple hours before dawn the Dark Army began to falter. We had killed many of their men and soon only a handful of them were left. Just moments before dawn, they began their retreat to the woods. The leader fled first and his men followed as if some silent signal had been given. I looked at the bodies strewn all over the battlefield, and I knew that in moments they would begin to disappear as they had before. In a moment of desperation, I grabbed the enemy body nearest to me and began dragging it toward the city wall, thinking that if I could just hold onto one body I might be able to learn something, but the moment the sun peaked over the horizon the body disappeared. I had been tugging so

hard that when the body disappeared, I was off balance and I tumbled to the ground. When I stood, the only bodies left on the field were men from my army.

Chapter Twenty

The next morning I was tired and very sore. The third battle with the Dark Army had been the longest and most difficult. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep them out of the city. They had already managed to do a considerable amount of damage with their explosives. What would they do if they managed to breach the city walls? Still troubled by the disappearing bodies, I was more convinced than ever that I needed to learn more about this magic. I went to Father determined to get permission to ride to the villages.

“Absolutely not! I won’t have my best warrior riding out on a wild goose chase when the Dark Army could attack at any moment. Your place is here.”

“But, Father, we will never defeat this army unless we know what their source of power is!”

“We can and we will defeat them, but by the sword, not by this magic nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense. Clearly, the Dark Army has a secret source of power. If we can take that away or counteract it, we might be able to defeat them.”

“No.”

“It’s getting more and more difficult to defeat the army and they are attacking with more aggression now. We didn’t even have time to finish the new gate before they attacked this last time. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the list of casualties on our side is also steadily increasing. These men are my responsibility and I don’t want anymore to die, not if I can do something about it.”

"I still think there is another way." My father crossed his arms determined not to give in, so I said the only thing that stood a chance of changing his mind.

"I know that my mother believed in magic. I found Elsa." At the mention of her name, my father's jaw dropped.

"What did she tell you?" His eyes narrowed in a scowl, but I was not going to be intimidated.

"That she made this guardian charm, and that she and my mother were friends."

"I thought that I'd never hear that woman's name again. Your mother knew I didn't approve of their friendship. I was hoping that you girls wouldn't be corrupted with all her nonsense."

"It's not nonsense. This charm really has power. It glows when I'm in danger, and it comforts me when I'm upset."

"Oh really? Then why didn't it warn you of Trent's treachery?"

"It had been glowing, but I didn't understand its power then. I ignored it, but I won't ever make that mistake again. I'm never going to take it off."

"Your mother always wore it too. She knew I didn't approve, but she always had a mind of her own, just like you." Father sighed. I could see that I was wearing him down.

"Mother believed in magic, and I do too. I need to learn more about it if we're ever going to learn the secret of the enemy's power. You know that I am right about this."

"Yes, unfortunately, I believe you are. Does Elsa know anything about their power?"

"No, she doesn't have any knowledge of any magic that powerful. No one in the city does."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I need to expand my search for more powerful knowledge beyond the boundaries of the city to the villages and the countryside." I took a deep breath and began to think that Father might actually consent. "Some of

the villages are only a day's ride from here. If I set out early in the morning, I could be back before night."

"What about the villages farther away? You will be away for a few days. What will the army do in your absence?"

"Arden will be here. He will be in charge of the men while I am gone."

"What if the Dark Army attacks while you're away? Do you think he's ready?"

"Father, you've seen him fight. You hand-picked him to be my second-in-command. He's more than ready, and you know it. You're just trying to make up excuses to keep me here."

"I suppose you're right." He sighed. "All right, I'll let you do this, but I want you to start with the villages that are the closest to the city. If you find whatever it is that you're after in one of those small villages, then you won't have to be away from the city at night." He paused and sighed heavily. "I still think you are wasting your time."

"Thank you, Father. I promise I won't let you down."

"You never do," he said as I turned and rushed out of the room before he could change his mind.

As Father suggested, I started with the small villages that were less than a day's ride from the city. The people in the first village were very friendly and often invited me into their homes for tea. They lived near enough to the city that they had been to some of the celebrations at the palace. They had often seen Philip and me training the men and were pleased to hear that I would someday be queen. They had heard of Philip's fate and expressed their sympathies. I had many bittersweet conversations there, but sadly no one was able to tell me anything about magic or even where I should search next. Leaving instructions with the villagers that they should send word to me immediately if they learned anything new, I rode home frustrated after only one day. I had truly expected to learn something useful. It seemed that this search was going to take longer than I had anticipated.

My visits to the other small villages were very much the same as the first, but the farther away from the city I traveled, the less friendly the

people were. They barely knew my Father by sight, and they had never seen me. The women I spoke to were timid and the small children clung to their mothers' skirts. If they knew anything at all it, it was a simple luck charm or something to help their crops grow, nothing that could match the enormous power of the Dark Army. Soon there was only one more village that I would be able to reach in a day. Every other village in the kingdom that I knew of was at least a two day trip from the city.

The morning I prepared to travel to that village, my heart was heavy. I began to think that Father was right and that I was wasting my time and would never find the key to unlock the mystery of the Dark Army. Just as I mounted my horse, Arden rode up next to me.

"What are you doing here? Is something wrong?" I said confused to see him there.

"No, nothing's wrong," he answered quickly. "I just thought that you might want some company on your trip. You're going to the last village that can be reached in one day right?"

"Yes, I am, but I don't need any company." He frowned so I quickly added, "But thank you for offering."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like someone to talk to? It's a long ride, besides I need a bit of fresh air." The corners of his mouth turned upward just slightly in a quiet smile. He was determined to wear me down until I agreed to let him come with me. "I brought some food that we could eat later."

"Oh all right. If you want to come that badly, I suppose I won't be able to stop you anyway." I spurred my horse into a gallop and called behind me, "Try to keep up if you can!"

Within moments, Arden was right beside me. I hadn't expected him to catch up so quickly. I spurred my horse on faster and faster, but Arden kept up as he had during our sword dance.

After we had ridden for quite a while, Arden showed no sign of slowing down, and the horses began to sweat from exertion.

"We should slow down. The horses are getting tired," I shouted.

"You first!" He laughed.

"This isn't a competition, now slow down."

"You started this, not me. If it's not a competition, then you slow down first," he shouted over the thundering of the horses' hooves. I thought for a moment, and for some reason, I just couldn't bring myself to break the pace first. It sounded silly, I know, but I just couldn't do it.

"I could order you to slow down."

"You don't really want to do that."

"Okay, we'll slow down together." He didn't respond. "I promise I'll slow down with you. I'll count to three."

"All right"

"One, two, three!" In the same instant, we both urged our horses to slow until we both reached a walk.

"Now that wasn't so hard to do, was it?"

"What?"

"You didn't want to be the one to slow down first. Why?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know perfectly well what I'm talking about. You see me as some sort of threat, don't you? Is that why you have been avoiding me so much?"

"Why would I avoid you?"

"I just told you. You see me as a threat."

"That's ridiculous. I don't think you're after my position, and I don't avoid you, not purposely anyway. I've just been very busy." That was a flat-out lie and he knew it. I knew he wasn't after my commanding position. I feared he was after something else. Something I'd already given to someone else.

We passed the rest of the trip in silence. When we reached the village, we decided it would be best to split up. We could cover the entire village in half the time it would have taken me on my own, and a part of me was glad Arden had insisted on coming. The men in the village were much more receptive to his questions, which upset me at first, but if it helped us discover something to defeat our enemy with, I could swallow my

pride for one afternoon. The sooner this mess was resolved, the sooner life in Twentaria could return to normal.

As I talked with the women in the village, I was surprised to learn they knew very little about the Dark Army. They knew the city had been attacked several times, but they had assumed it was merely a band of rogue soldiers. They thought the army had handled it, and they knew nothing of the disappearing bodies or any magic strong enough to match it. If this village had barely even heard of the Dark Army, surely the other villages that were farther away knew even less.

That afternoon as Arden and I began the trip back to the palace, I frowned deep in thought.

"I can tell by your face that you didn't learn anything useful either." He sighed.

"Just the same old tricks and charms, no real magic."

"Don't give up hope. There are still some villages farther out that we haven't been to yet."

"I'm beginning to doubt we'll ever figure this out. My father was right. I am wasting my time."

"Don't talk like that." He paused for a moment. "Let's stop at that grove of trees over there and eat this food I brought."

"I don't know," I said, glancing at the sun. "We still have quite a way to go before we get back to the city."

"Trust me. You'll feel better after you eat. Besides, you don't want my food to go to waste, do you?" He gave me that quiet smile again, and I knew I was defeated.

"All right, but we can't stay for too long. We have to be back within the city walls before night fall."

"We'll make it back in time. I promise."

I didn't say much during our little picnic, but Arden talked a little about the land in the south where he had come from. He said nothing about any family, which I thought odd, but decided it was none of my business. After a while he grew silent, and we simply sat in the shade of

the trees, quietly eating while the horses rested nearby. There was a gentle summer breeze blowing. The breeze cooled my face as I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, letting the summer scents fill my body completely. I thought of my childhood and happy summers playing in the fields with Katrina.

I thought of many moments shared with Philip. Then, Arden's quiet smile and the look in his eyes the night he'd caught me in his arms and kept me from falling suddenly flitted through my mind, but I didn't try to block the thought. I let it flow in and out of me freely. In those small moments, I felt my muscles relax, and I hadn't even realized how tense they had been.

"That's the first genuine smile I've seen on your face." I jumped at the sound of Arden's voice.

"You've seen me smile before," I said, embarrassed. Though Arden hadn't seen my private thoughts, I felt as though he had somehow sensed what I had been thinking.

"I know you smile, but it's never looked like that. Usually when you smile, it seems," he paused as he struggled to find the right word, "forced."

"Has it always appeared that way?" I fidgeted with the bright green blades of grass unable to look him in the eyes.

"No, not always. When I joined the army a few years ago there were moments when you and Philip smiled and laughed together." He stopped for a moment and took a deep breath. "What was the nature of your relationship with Philip exactly?"

"Excuse me?" I said, startled by the sheer boldness of his question.

"I know you two were very close friends, but were you ever more than that?"

"What could we have been other than friends?" I knew what he was alluding to, but I pretended to be ignorant.

"Were you two lovers?" His voice was low and quiet. As he spoke, he looked me directly in the eyes, and again I saw something in those black

almond-shaped eyes. Was it pity? Love? No, he couldn't be in love with me, could he?

"Not that it is any of your concern, but no, we were not lovers. There was a hope for something more, but then..." My voice trailed off. I couldn't bring myself to talk about what had happened between Philip and me. It was true that I had loved Philip, but nothing really serious had ever happened between us until it was too late. "Anyway, I don't really think that is any of your business. How would you like it if I pried into your personal business?"

"I will tell you anything that you want to know." He paused. "I know your relationship with Philip isn't any of my business, but all the same I want to know."

"Why?" I asked, but he didn't respond.

He simply stared at me those black eyes and that quiet smile, and then abruptly changed the subject. "Why do you wear that green stone all the time?"

"It was my mother's before she died. It's a guardian charm." I was grateful for the change of subject.

"What does it do?"

"It glows when the person wearing it is in danger. It also comforts me when I'm upset."

"Are you upset often?" Arden was again looking at me with those intense eyes. I didn't answer. I simply looked away.

We finished the rest of our small meal in silence. I was afraid of the way I felt when I was around Arden. I wasn't supposed to be feeling things for him, but one look at him and I was lost. I shook my head and stood quickly looking at the sun.

"We had better get going. The sun will be setting soon and we need get back to the city. We'll barely make it as it is."

We gathered up the remains of our small picnic, mounted our horses and rode as quickly as possible. We passed through the city gate just as the last rays of the sun disappeared beneath the horizon.

As soon as I put away my horse, I was informed by one of the palace maids that my father wanted to speak with me right away. I cringed, knowing he was going to lecture me about staying out so late. I just wanted to go to my room, but I couldn't disregard my father's request.

"You wanted to see me?" I said as I entered his sitting room. He had obviously been pacing the floor waiting for my return. I braced myself for the worst.

"You just barely made it inside the gate before sunset."

"I know, Father, but the important thing is that I did make it."

"How many more villages do you have to visit yet?"

"There are a few more, but they will take several days to visit."

"Have you learned anything useful yet?"

"No, I haven't, but I know that there is someone out there who can help us. I can feel it."

"I cannot have you away from the city at night. The Dark Army could attack at any moment, and I need my best warrior here."

"But, Father, I thought we discussed that Arden could handle matters here when I am gone."

"Maybe you could send Arden to those outer villages in your place."

"I disagree. He doesn't know the land around here as well as I do, and he could get lost."

"I suppose you are right." He sighed. "It's just that I worry about you taking risks all the time."

"I know you do, but I really think that I'll find something useful out there."

"I still think you are wasting your time, but I can see it is useless to try to dissuade you. However, I want you to stay in the city for a little while and rest. All this traveling is wearing you out and you need to be strong in case we are attacked again."

"But, Father!"

"Do not argue with me. I've made up my mind. You are staying in the city for a while. That is the end of the discussion." He wasn't yelling, but

his voice was stern, and I knew he meant what he said. There was no use in trying to argue any more.

“All right,” I agreed reluctantly.

“Good.”

I could see the relief in his face. I hadn’t known that my little trips had caused him to worry so much.

“So, I saw that you took Arden with you to the village today.” he said, changing the subject.

“I didn’t take him. He invited himself, and he brought a picnic lunch to bribe me.”

“So, that is the reason you were so late. You were having a picnic with Arden.”

“It’s not what it sounds like. We were just tired and needed a brief rest. Everyone has to eat.”

“If you say so.” My father smiled as he spoke. “Arden is a fine man, don’t you think?”

“Yes, he is.” I excused myself and went back to my room to relax.

Chapter Twenty-One

As my father had instructed, I didn't resume my search right away, which I knew deep down in my heart was a mistake. I tried to change his mind many times, but he shrugged and said that I was simply being impatient as usual. He felt I had been working too hard recently and that I needed rest, but how could true rest be possible when I was too anxious to relax even for a moment? The Dark Army was still out there and I still didn't know how to defeat them

A few days after my trip with Arden, I was unable to sleep. I walked out onto my balcony, hugging my robe tightly around me. The night was very quiet. The moon was hidden behind some clouds, and not even the sound of wind rustling through the leaves disturbed the stillness. I began to feel uneasy. It was a summer night and should have been filled with the sounds of nocturnal animals and insects. Something was wrong. I felt it. My heart began to pound. I stood waiting for something to happen. Beads of perspiration formed on my forehead while I waited. The guardian charm around my neck was glowing as I clutched it, waiting for comfort to flood over me, but relief didn't come. It glowed steadily in the night while I waited for something to happen.

I don't know how long I stood there, but after awhile I willed myself to relax. I needed to go back into my room and try to sleep. The charm was glowing, which meant danger was near, but how close? Would we be attacked tonight? Tomorrow? An hour from now? Two? The charm couldn't tell me that. It only knew that danger was lurking out there in the shadows of the night. I sighed and headed back into my room, and was about to shut the doors to my balcony when all at once I heard one of the watchmen sound the alarm bell. We were under attack! Certainly

the Dark Army had returned. I rushed back into my room and began dressing for battle. No one was going to have to summon me this time. I was already awake and alert.

I finished dressing, flung my door open, and collided with Arden in the hallway. We both tumbled to the ground. I jumped up immediately. "What are you doing here?"

"I was coming to tell you we're under attack, but I can see someone beat me to it."

"No, I couldn't sleep and was out on my balcony when I heard the bell. How did you get here so soon after the alarm?"

"I couldn't sleep either."

"What's the situation?"

"The Dark Army is back again in full force."

"I thought that was it." I sighed as we approached the front gate. It was going to be a very long night.

The battle was much the same as those before it. The enemy pressed forward trying to enter the city gates while my men and I relentlessly pushed them back. They were strong and persistent, and the battle raged for hours. Finally, just a few moments before sunrise, the Dark Army along with their elusive leader began their retreat into the northern woods. I could see the sun peeking over the horizon and I knew the bodies of the fallen enemy warriors would again disappear. I threw my body over top of one of the bodies in a futile effort to hold onto it, but it disappeared from my grasp as the first one had. I stood and surveyed the field. Even without an official count, I knew that more of my men had died in this battle than in all the previous battles combined. Now more than ever I was convinced I needed to make those trips to the outer villages. The fate of the kingdom depended on it.

After the fourth battle, there was work to be done within the city. No sooner had we finished the repairs, the Dark Army was again at our door, and so my journey was postponed. Months went by and I still hadn't been able to make the journey. We never knew when the next attack would be. Would it be a week? A few days? No one could be sure.

No one would risk travel, and I could not afford to leave my men. We kept winning every battle, but autumn had ended months ago, and we were in the middle of a cold, hard winter. The men were tired and beginning to lose heart. We needed help or the city would certainly fall, leaving the rest of Twentaria vulnerable. These thoughts troubled me as I stood in the tallest watchtower scanning the edge of the northern forest.

“Quiet night, isn’t it?”

“Oh! Arden, you scared me.” I replied embarrassed that I hadn’t heard him approach.

“Sorry.”

“What are you doing up here anyway? It isn’t your night to be on watch.”

“I know, but since this whole mess with the Dark Army started, I haven’t been able to sleep at night. So, instead of lying around in my bed, I figured I’d come out here and make myself useful. I saw you standing up here and thought you looked like you needed some company.” He moved to stand close to me.

“That’s very noble of you, but you need to try to get some sleep. If the enemy attacks, you need to be well rested and ready to fight.” Part of me had the urge to move away from him, but there was also a part of me that enjoyed his closeness, that needed him to move even closer.

“I don’t think there is a single well-rested man left in the city.”

“I know, but we should try.”

“Lillian, there is another reason I wanted to come up here to talk with you,” he said as he took my hand in his.

“Oh? About what?” My heart jumped to my throat a bit as I pulled my hand away. I knew what he was going to say. He had feelings for me. Over the past few months, I noticed that he had been dropping several hints. I had done my best to ignore him, trying to convince myself that it just couldn’t happen, but then he always had that quiet smile. How was I supposed to react to his confession? Did I have feelings for him? I just didn’t know. It was so confusing.

“I think you know.”

"No, I don't." I was trying desperately to keep the nervousness out of my voice, but was having a difficult time doing it. My hands were shaking so badly I had to clasp them behind my back so Arden wouldn't see them.

"I know that you wanted to be the one to ride out to the outer villages, but it's obvious that you'll never get the opportunity. The Dark Army is attacking fiercely and more often. I think I should be the one to make the trip."

"You want to visit the outer villages?" I said, a bit stunned. I had gotten myself worked up for nothing. Part of me was relieved he hadn't made some sort of confession of love, but a small part of me, a very small part, was just a little disappointed.

"Yes, you need to stay here with the army, and someone who is strong and reliable should go in your place."

"And you think you're the best choice for the mission."

"Yes, I do." He straightened himself to stand at his towering full height. His long, shiny black hair hung loose around his shoulders.

"I don't know. If the enemy attacks, we might need you."

"You know as well as I that we can't defeat the Dark Army whether I'm here or not, not unless we figure out their secret." He paused a moment and took a deep breath. "If I don't make this move soon, we are going to lose this war."

"I know, but you don't know your way around the country."

"I'll take a guide with me."

"I suppose you're right. I just wish there were some other way."

"I know. You want to be the one to go charging off looking for the answer to our problems, but you can't do everything yourself. Sometimes you need to let other people help you." He looked down into my eyes. "You need to trust me."

"You sound like my father," I said as I looked away.

"Well, someone has to talk some sense into you," he teased.

"All right, I'll talk to my father about sending you to the outer villages, but I can't guarantee that he'll agree." That wasn't true. I was sure that my father would agree. He had suggested a few months ago that Arden be the one to make the trip, but I didn't need to tell Arden that.

"I'm sure that you will be very convincing," he said as he smiled. He turned and left, leaving me alone in the watchtower again.

The Dark Army did not attack that night, but my stomach was in knots anyway. What if something happened to Arden? It was winter and any number of things could go wrong. He could run out of food or be caught in a blizzard and freeze to death. And why was I so worried about Arden? Was it simply that I valued him as a warrior, or was it something more? I had been terrified that he would tell me that he had feelings for me, but when he hadn't, I'd been disappointed. What was wrong with me? All this mess with the Dark Army was confusing my mind. Arden would have to make the trip. I didn't want to lose my second-in-command, but I couldn't afford to keep him here either.

When the sun finally rose and we were safe for another day, I went to talk to my father about the possibility of Arden making the journey to the outer villages. I was tired and desperately needed to rest, but sleep would have to wait. I found my father in his sitting room looking as though he was exhausted.

"Good morning Father. Did you sleep well?"

"No, I'm afraid it has been a long time since I slept well." He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. "A very long time, but that's not important. You obviously haven't had any sleep since your watch ended, so you must have something important that you want to talk to me about."

"I can see you're tired so I'll get right to the point. Arden has offered to make the trip to the outer villages."

"I had hoped you two had given up on that nonsense."

"We are losing the war! If there is even the smallest possibility that Arden could find something that could help us, then I think we should

let him go,” I shouted. I hadn’t meant to be so short, but I was so tired, and Father was being unreasonable.

“I suppose that you are right, but why does it have to be Arden? Surely there is someone besides our second-in-command who could go.”

“Who would you have me send?” I shouted again out of my exhaustion and frustration. I knew I needed to calm down so I took a deep breath. “You yourself suggested that he be the one to make the trip when I came to you with the idea months ago. He is the only one I trust to carry out such an important mission.”

“That is a high compliment, especially coming from you.” He sighed. “All right, tell him that he can leave tomorrow morning at sunrise.”

“Thank you. You won’t regret this.”

“I certainly hope not,” he said as I hurried out of the room to tell Arden the news.

The next day I went down to the gate at sunrise to see Arden off. He didn’t have any family here, and I felt that it would be wrong if he left without anyone coming to say goodbye. I found him packing the last of his supplies on his horse. His guide was ready to go and was standing a few feet away.

“Good morning, Lillian,” he said with a smile as I approached.

“Good morning. I see you’re almost finished packing. Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

“As ready as I’m going to be. I don’t even know exactly what I’m looking for, but I promise I won’t come back until I’ve searched every single village.” He paused for a moment and stared out at the sunrise. He turned back to face me. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to say goodbye and wish you luck.”

“I didn’t know you cared,” he said, grinning. I knew he was teasing, but for some reason that morning I found it extremely irritating.

“Of course I care! You’re my second-in-command as well as my friend. You don’t have any family here, so I thought I’d come and see you off,” I snapped.

He was quiet for a long time. I'd hurt his feelings with the comment about his family. I'm not sure why he chose to leave his home in the south, but I could tell that it was still something that caused him pain.

"Arden, I'm sorry I shouldn't have said that. I'm a little on edge, and I can't remember the last time I had a nice, long, uninterrupted sleep."

"It's okay. You didn't say anything that wasn't true." He took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. "So, you're my friend."

"Yes, of course."

"Lillian, do you think there is the possibility that we could ever be more than friends?"

"Arden, I just don't know." I was shocked even though I had suspected he wanted us to be something more. I had been pretty certain that he had feelings for me, but to hear him say it out loud was still a little frightening. Did I have true feelings for him, or was what I felt still tangled up in what I had felt for Philip? I just didn't know.

"You know that I have feelings for you. All I'm asking is if you feel the same way about me." When I didn't respond, he continued, "Is this about Philip? I know that you two were close, but he's not here. I am."

"I can't believe you just said that." Tears began to form in my eyes, but I did my best to fight them back.

"I guess it's my turn to apologize. I'm sorry I hurt you, Lillian, but I need to know how you feel. I've loved you for so long, practically since I came to live in the city. You are so strong and so beautiful. I would have told you how I felt a long time ago, but I knew that you'd given your heart to Philip even if he didn't. I stood at the side of the room and watched you dance with him. It was obvious that you were in love with him, so I stayed away."

He was standing right in front of me now. There was barely an inch of space between us. He reached out and brushed a few stray curls out of my face. His hand was so warm and gentle. I could feel myself melting under his caress.

"We've become close over the past several months, and I think you have feelings for me too. Why can't you admit it?"

“Arden, it’s not that simple,” I said, taking a step back. I couldn’t let myself be drawn into something like this. I wasn’t ready. I had to get space between us or I wouldn’t be able to stand my ground.

“Yes, it is. I am standing right here right now asking if you love me. Forget about everything else, and tell me the truth. Do you love me?” His voice was strong and sure. This was a man who deserved an honest answer, but he wasn’t going to like what I had to say.

“I don’t know. I know that’s not what you want to hear, but it’s as close to the truth as I can get right now.”

He sighed and mounted his horse and rode out the city gate on his quest. He didn’t even say goodbye. I could still feel the warmth of his body where his fingers had brushed the skin on my face. I knew that I’d hurt him, but I was so confused. I had spent most of my life pining for Philip. I had never even imagined that I could ever love anyone else. Arden had taken me completely by surprise, and I’d never been very good with surprises. Was it really love, or me missing Philip? I couldn’t lie to Arden when I wasn’t absolutely sure. It wouldn’t have been fair to either of us. I turned and walked back to the palace where my breakfast, like my heart, was certainly cold.

Chapter Twenty-Two

After Arden left, time passed in an endless march of meaningless hours, and the hours drifted into days. The Dark Army continued to attack, the bodies of the fallen enemy warriors continued to disappear at sunrise, and I continued to lose more and more men in each battle. I was forced to recruit men from some of the other nearby villages and some younger men who were practically boys. I tried to train them properly, but there was never enough time between attacks. They would never be ready for a battle with a force as strong as the Dark Army. It would have been a little easier if Arden had been there.

I was worried about my father. He seemed to age so fast in those long winter months. There were deep frown lines forming around his mouth where there had once been laugh lines and his forehead was deeply creased as well. Dark circles had also become a permanent feature under his dull blue eyes that had once glittered like the brightest blue sea. His once robust frame seemed frail as he paced around his room. He wasn't eating as he should have been, but he would never admit he wasn't well. I visited with him often and tried to cheer him as much as I could. I reminded him we were still winning every battle, and Arden would be back with an answer to the enemy's magic very soon, but my words sounded hollow even to me. He pretended to be comforted, but I knew he wasn't.

When I wasn't worrying about my father, I spent a lot of time thinking about Arden, and was surprised at how much I missed him. The more I began to think about Arden, the more I began to realize that while he and Philip were similar in some ways, they were very different in many others. Of course they were both very physically attractive, but

Philip's personality had been like a bright star. He had been so popular and charismatic that people flocked to him when he entered a room. Arden was quiet and thoughtful, more like a candle than a star, but his light shone just as steadily. The thought of his knowing gaze, his quiet smile, and the gentle touch of his hand on my face was enough to make me blush, which forced me to face the fact that I did have true feelings for him. Why did it always take me so long to admit these things? What was I so afraid of?

Suddenly, a terrible thought occurred to me. What if something had happened to Arden? What if he was injured, or worse, dead? I shook my head fiercely, forcing the thought from my mind. It had only been two months since I had watched him ride off at sunrise. Travel was more difficult in the winter, so it was not unusual for a journey to take more time to make. He had been upset with me when he'd left. When he came back, would he be able to forgive me? Would he understand why I couldn't give him the answer he had wanted? Would he still want to be with me? I just hoped I hadn't damaged our relationship beyond all repair. I sighed. I could command an entire army, battle the Dark Army until dawn, but could never seem to get my personal life in order.

Another month passed and winter finally began to give way to spring. It should have been a time of celebration and rebirth, but the farmers could not begin to plant crops as they ordinarily would have. The Dark Army would have burnt them as they had burned the area around the city walls. There was still no sign of Arden. The only time I was able to push my worries for my father and Arden aside was on the battlefield, but even the most intense battles could not quiet my restless mind. When I looked around during the battles, I expected to see Arden fighting by my side. I promised myself that if he made it back to me alive, I would tell him how I truly felt, even if he didn't feel the same way about me anymore. He had asked for honesty, and I was ready to answer him.

One bright spring morning after a long night of standing in the watchtower, I was dragging my weary body back to the palace. My eyes were heavy from a lack of sleep, and I just wanted to curl up in my soft bed. I was nearly inside the palace when I became aware of the sound of

horses galloping at full speed. I drew my sword and whipped around afraid for a moment that it was some stray warriors from the Dark Army. I was shocked by what I saw. Arden and his guide were riding through the gate!

Looking more closely, I could see that Arden was riding with someone else. A small child appeared to be clinging to him as he rode in at top speed. I sheathed my sword and ran to meet them. In all the excitement, I forgot how tired I'd been only moments ago.

When we met, Arden shouted, "Help the girl down!"

He was obviously exhausted and a bit thinner in the face than he had been several months ago. How difficult had his journey been? Had he run out of provisions? Had he been caught in a blizzard? There were so many questions I wanted to ask him, but at the moment I wanted to know who the strange girl clinging to him was. She looked very young. Why had he brought her to the city?

"Who is she? Is she sick?" I said as I took the girl's hand and helped her to the ground. She had a shawl wrapped tightly around her so that I couldn't see her face.

"She's fine, just tired," he said as he hopped down from his horse. "I'll explain everything later. Right now she needs some food and some rest, and so do I. Then, I need to take her to the king." Our eyes locked in a heated gaze for a moment. There was so much I wanted to say to him, but now was not the time.

"All right, but we need to talk." I was puzzled. Who was this strange girl, and why did Arden think it was so important that my father meet her? Surely she wasn't the answer to our problems with the Dark Army. She was just a girl. Judging by her height, she couldn't have been more than nine or ten.

"Right, I'll meet you in your father's sitting room after dinner this evening." With that, he turned and escorted the small girl into the palace leaving me standing alone.

I had been so happy to see him ride through the gate, but now I felt disappointed. Perhaps he was angry with me and didn't want to be with

me anymore. Why else would he have been so short with me? I shook my head pushing the thought from my mind. I guess I would just have to wait until the meeting in Father's sitting room to find out how his journey had been, though I had hoped for some time alone with him. I sighed. There just never seemed to be enough time.

Later that evening, I went to my Father's sitting room as Arden had suggested. When I arrived, my father, Arden, and the young girl were already seated and waiting for me.

"Sorry to keep everyone waiting," I said as I moved to sit in a chair across from Arden. As I took my seat, our eyes met for a moment, and I was nearly overwhelmed by a wash of emotions. I quickly turned my head away to hide the blush that bloomed on my cheeks. I had to control myself. Obviously, the small girl was important or Arden wouldn't have brought her to my father. I needed to focus on my first priority, the safety of Twentaria. "What's this meeting about? Have I missed anything?"

"Arden hasn't told me anything. He insisted on waiting until you got here." My father sounded irritated as he spoke, which was unusual. He must just have been tired. We all were.

"Well, I'm here now. What's this all about?"

"Let me start at the beginning." Arden said as he stood and began pacing about the room. "As you all know I left here several months ago."

"I remember," I said looking down. Arden cleared his throat and continued.

"I left here in search of something that would help us defeat the Dark Army, whether it was magic or some other means. I traveled to every village, every farm, and every hovel that I could find and hadn't learned anything. The winter had been hard and we had run out of food and were relying on the kindness of the villages that we passed through. It was nearly spring, and I had no news of the state of the city. I felt that I would be of more use here and was about to give up and return to the palace when I happened to see a tiny cottage on the horizon. Something told me I needed to visit this cottage."

“What did you find there?” I interrupted impatiently. All these details were interesting, but when was he going to get to the point? “Sorry, please go on,” I said, seeing Arden’s frown.

“I went to the cottage where I met this young lady sitting before you today.”

I looked over at the girl who was sitting perfectly quiet and still. I had nearly forgotten about her completely. She was very well behaved for how young she looked.

“She has the answer to our problems.”

“But she’s just a little girl,” I began.

“I am not so young as you might think,” she said in a quiet, clear voice. She stared up at me with the most startling eyes I had ever seen. They were an intense shade of lavender.

“How old are you?” I said, still startled by her appearance.

“I believe that I am at least two thousand years old, but I can’t be sure of the exact number. It has been such a long time since I gave my age any thought.”

“How is that possible? You are a little girl. You don’t look a day over nine or ten.”

“I will explain everything to you if you will quit interrupting me.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“I know. Now, where was I? Oh yes, my name is Mandia. I am at least two thousand years old, and I can help you win your fight against the Dark Army.”

“How?” The small girl glared at me again. I felt her age in that glare and knew she wasn’t lying. “Sorry, please continue.” I was going to have to learn to bite my tongue.

“I was born in a tiny village. I had a brother, who was much older than I. Both our parents had died when I was very young, and my brother took care of me. I was happy with my simple life, being young I didn’t know any better, but my brother always desired more. He wanted to be like the kings who commanded huge armies and ruled the land

around our small village. He was always practicing with his sword in the field near our house dreaming that he would someday be a knight commanding an army of his own.

“One day, when I was much younger than I appear to be now, I was playing among some flowers while my brother gathered wood for our fire. I happened upon a fairy, which was about the size of a child’s doll. Have you ever seen a fairy?”

“No, I haven’t. I didn’t know such things still existed.” I was puzzled. I had thought that fairies were simply something that only existed in the stories of children, but then I did have a guardian charm around my neck. I shouldn’t discount what Mandia was saying. Something told me she was telling the truth.

“No, of course not. They are very scarce now as no one believes in them anymore. On this day, I happened to catch this fairy, and if you know anything about fairies, they have the power to grant wishes. I brought the fairy to my brother and she said she would grant us each a single wish. Being a simple child, I made a simple wish. I wished for eyes the color of the flowers in the fields, but my brother thought for a very long time before making his wish. He leaned down very close to the fairy and whispered something in her ear. I could not hear what he said, but I could tell whatever he had said made the fairy very sad. She refused to grant the wish. This made my brother very angry and he caught the fairy up in his arms and threatened her terribly. I won’t repeat what he said now. It was too awful.” Mandia stopped for a moment and I could see tears forming in her eyes.

“Even after all this time it is still painful to remember, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I’m afraid some wounds never heal, even with time.”

“Would you like something to drink, or perhaps you need a break?”

“No, thank you. I need to finish telling my story.” She paused for a moment and then began again. “He wished for terrible power and the fiercest army in the land. He gained the ability to call his army back to him, even from the grave. After every battle, he weaved his spell and his army was reformed.”

“That explains the disappearing bodies, but are these Dark Warriors real men? Do they know that they die with every battle?” The thought was so horrible that it made me feel sick to my stomach. Who would put such a curse on the men who fought for them?

“I don’t know. I was too young to understand everything that happened.”

“If these men are being held under a spell, then we must find a way to set them free.”

“I do not know if that is even possible, but please, you must listen to the rest of my story.”

“I apologize for being rude again. It’s just that your story is so interesting.”

“I understand. Now, where was I? Oh yes, I remember. He and his magic army conquered all the land he could see, but it was never enough. He was always looking to the horizon toward new lands. I was forced to follow him where ever he went. I was practically a slave.”

“To your own brother?”

“He was not my brother anymore. He became a monster.” She took a deep breath. “He is the Dark Leader who assaults your great city.”

“How is that possible? How are you two still alive?”

“He is immortal, but I don’t understand everything completely. It is all part of the wish he whispered to the fairy. The devastation he brought was like nothing the world had ever seen. No one could stop him. I couldn’t bear to watch him destroy any more lives, so I made the decision to run away. I only made it just beyond the army’s camp, when I stumbled. When I stood up, I was surprised to see the little fairy who had granted our wishes several years ago. Of course she knew what my brother had done with his power. She knew when she granted his wish that he would bring sorrow to the world. I begged her to help me stop him, but fairies very rarely grant more than one wish to the same person, and this particular fairy was very bitter because my brother had treated her so poorly and misused the great power she had given to him. Instead

of a wish, she offered me a trade. She gave me a magic knife that would kill my brother.”

“I know what you gave away,” I whispered, interrupting again. “You gave away your mortality. That’s why you are still a child.”

“Yes, she was tired of immortality and the endless years and wanted to experience life as a human. She wanted to fall in love, and raise a family. I was so desperate to stop my brother that I agreed, and so I remain a child for eternity.”

“What did you do then?” It was only then that I noticed the small girl was clutching a knife in her hands. It looked rather ordinary, but I knew that this must be the knife that she spoke of.

“I went back to the camp and into my brother’s tent where I knew he would be sleeping. He always fought by night, and slept by day. The fairy had told me that I must plunge the knife deep into his heart. As I stood over his sleeping body, my hands trembled. How was I to kill my own brother? The man who had taken care of me after our parents died. No matter how terrible he had become, he was still family. The only family I had left.” She stopped and brushed away a few tears that trickled down her porcelain cheek. The image of Trent’s lifeless eyes flickered through my mind momentarily, but I pushed the thought away. “I closed my eyes and tried to convince myself that he wasn’t really my brother anymore, and I plunged the knife into his body, but I missed the mark. I hit his arm near the shoulder rather than his heart. His scream was like that of a hawk, not even human.”

“I’ve heard that sound.” I shivered at the memory of the terrible battle cry of the enemy the first time that they attacked Twentaria.

“I pulled the knife out of his body and scurried into a corner of the tent. I expected him to kill me, but instead he just disappeared. The entire army disappeared along with all the tents and all their weapons as if they had never existed. I was left sitting alone in an empty field. With the Dark Army destroyed, the world began to rebuild and soon the Dark Army and my terrible brother were completely forgotten. I was nervous in the first few years, thinking that he would return, but when he didn’t, I

began to feel confident that even though I had missed the heart, the blow had been fatal. I know now that he did not die as I believed. He was simply wounded, but his wounds must have healed now, and he has returned. I have felt his presence for some time now.”

“Why didn’t you come to us before? Together, we could have stopped him.” I wondered how long she had known of the terrible Dark Army’s return. I began to feel a little angry. How many lives could have been saved if she had come forward sooner?

“I could not make the long journey by myself, an unfortunate side effect of remaining a child for all eternity, but I knew that Arden would come and bring me to you eventually.”

“How do we know you’re telling the truth?” My father, who had been silent until that moment, interjected. His arms were crossed and his steady glare was fixed on Mandia’s tiny frame.

“What reason would I have to lie? I have nothing to gain. I could have stayed in my cottage and let my brother’s army take over world all over again, but I came with Arden instead.”

“But do you have any proof that what you say is true?”

“No proof that you would believe.” As she spoke, Mandia’s voice remained calm.

“I’m not comfortable with all this nonsense about magic.”

“I understand. I can feel your skepticism, but you do not have a choice. If you refuse my help, your city will fall and my brother will be one step closer to conquering the world.”

“Well, I believe you,” I interrupted. “How do we defeat him? Is that knife in your hand the one that the fairy gave you? How are you going to get close enough to kill him?” The questions tumbled out of me in my impatience.

“Defeating my brother will not be easy, and it will not be me who will defeat him. I could not kill him all those years ago, and I fear that I cannot do it now either. I wouldn’t be able to get close to him even if I could.”

“It has to be me then.”

"Wait a minute. You can't attempt something so risky. You are going to be queen someday. You can't be a good ruler if you are dead. As second-in-command, I am more than qualified for the job," Arden interrupted.

"I'm afraid that you can not be the one to kill my brother, Arden," Mandia said calmly.

"What do you mean it can't be me? Why does it matter who kills him as long as he ends up on the wrong side of the magic knife?"

"I cannot explain it, but when I gained immortality from the fairy, I gained other abilities as well." She paused for a moment, struggling to find the right words. "I sense things. I can't see the future exactly, but I hear whispers. I know that Lillian is somehow destined to kill him. Anyone else who attempts to kill my brother will fail."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I have already explained that to you. We are wasting time. There is more to it than simply plunging the knife into his heart."

"All right, so it has to be me who kills the Dark Leader. How do I do it? Do you know when he will attack next?"

"First, tell me, has my brother approached you in battle?"

"Yes," I said very quietly. The horrible memory of Trent's betrayal and Philip's death filled my mind. "My cousin betrayed me, and your brother tried to kill me, but as you can see he was not successful."

"Then he knows who you are. This is unfortunate, but cannot be changed. Two weeks from today the Dark Army will attack exactly one hour after sunset. Now, you already know that he only attacks at night."

"Yes, we'd begun to suspect that the night is somehow the source of his power. He and his army seem to run away from the light of the sun."

"It is an easy assumption to make, but the night is not the source of his power. It is the sun. The sunbeams are an intricate part of the spell that he must weave in order to call his fallen warriors back to life, back to him. Without the power from the rays of the sun, he would not be able to attack at night."

“So what do you propose we do, stop the sun from rising?” I was beginning to think that defeating this magical enemy was going to be impossible.

“That is exactly what I am proposing.”

“How is that possible?” Everything that came out of Mandia’s mouth was so strange and hard to understand, yet she spoke with such conviction that it was impossible to doubt her words.

“I know many things that have been forgotten. There is a spell, which must be performed at sunset that will extend the night’s length three extra hours. You will need that extra time to kill all the Dark Warriors. My brother will sense that it is you, with my help of course, who has stopped the sun from rising and will come looking for you. He will engage you in battle. He is very fierce, but you must find a way to plunge the knife into his heart before the spell is broken. If you fail, he will kill you, your great city will fall, and the Dark Army will destroy everything in its path. There is nothing else in all the world that could stop him.”

“Sounds simple enough,” I said, but there was no confidence in my voice. The fate of Twentaria and the whole world rested on my ability to win this one impossible battle. In that moment, it seemed more than I could bear.

Chapter Twenty-Three

After several hours of going over the plans for the coming battle, we were all exhausted. My father, who still had serious doubts about all this “magic nonsense”, withdrew into his private rooms. Mandia was escorted to one of our finest guest rooms by one of the palace maids. She took the precious knife with her. I had hoped to have time to examine it more closely, but she seemed determined to hold on to it until the last possible moment. I was left standing in the dimly lit hallway with Arden.

“Well, goodnight, Lillian. I will see you in the morning when we go explain the plan to the men, though I don’t know how we are going to explain that an immortal child with a magic knife gave us a battle plan. They’ll think we’ve all gone mad.” He shook his head, turned and began to walk away.

“Arden, wait a minute.” He stopped. “There are some things we need to talk about. We could go to my sitting room for a while. It never gets any use because I hardly ever go in there. I usually don’t have anyone to talk to, but that’s not the point. It would be a good place where we could talk in private.” I was nervous and was talking too fast. I just wanted to have a moment alone with him.

“What more do we have to talk about? We went over all the plans for the battle with your father.”

“Stop pretending that you don’t know what I’m talking about.” So he was still angry with me. Still, he was being very rude, and that was making me angry. It had been a long night, and I was not in the mood for this.

“But I don’t know what you’re talking,” he said as he turned on the heel of his boot and started to walk away again. I reached out and grabbed his arm.

“I want to talk about what’s happening between the two of us,” I whispered as a servant walked by. Arden pulled out of my grasp and took a step back.

“Us? There is no such thing as us. You made that very clear the morning I left on my journey.”

“I know that I hurt you, but my feelings were so intense and confusing. I’ve never felt anything quite like that, and I was scared.”

“Scared of me?”

“No, of course not. I could never be scared of you. I was scared because my feelings were and are so strong. I just wasn’t prepared to answer your question.”

“How could you not be prepared? I have never been subtle about my feelings. I dropped hint after hint. You’ve known how I felt all along. I came you to and was honest, really honest about how I felt. You made it very clear you didn’t feel the same.”

“I knew how you felt, but I was confused about how I felt. I never expected this to happen. After Philip”

“This isn’t about Philip,” he interrupted. “It is about you and me. I asked you if you loved me and you said no.”

“I never said I didn’t love you. I said I didn’t know! You asked me for an honest answer and I gave you one. You just didn’t want to hear what I had to say.” I was shouting by this point, but I didn’t care. He was being totally irrational. “I was struggling with my emotions and needed time to think, time to sort my feelings out, and I have.”

“Why does everything have to be a fight with you? Haven’t you ever once just let something happen? Haven’t you ever fallen in love because it was right and you wanted it?”

“I’ve never had the time! I’m too busy making sure that everyone else is safe. I protect the kingdom. Love always seemed like a luxury, one I could never afford. The only man I ever had feelings for was my best

friend and died as I held his hand. I thought that was it, my one chance to be in love. I never expected this to happen with you.” I took a deep breath. “When you asked me if I loved you, I was confused. I thought that maybe I was confusing my feelings for you with the feelings I’d had for Philip, but I’ve had some time to sort it out now. I really missed you while you were gone. You, not Philip. Now if you are willing, I would like to go to my sitting room where we can continue to talk about this in private without servants gawking at us,” I hissed the last words at him. He was still scowling at me. Was he even listening to what I was saying?

“What if I’m not willing?”

“That is your decision, but I’m asking you to come with me so we can talk.”

“I’m tired of talking,” he said as he turned away. “Goodnight, Lillian.” With that, he began walking down the hall.

I watched him stride down the hallway and around the corner. Hot tears burned my eyes and were soon streaming down my cheeks. I stood there, hoping that he would turn around and apologize, but he didn’t. Soon, I couldn’t even hear the steady beat of his footsteps against the stone floor.

I walked back to my bedroom in a daze. Once there I firmly closed the door and sank down into a chair and cried. My heart ached. I had really believed he would come back from his journey and we would be able to work it all out. I don’t know why I’d held on to such high hopes. Nothing had ever worked out for me before, so why should this be any different? I had ruined what was probably my last chance for love. Arden had confessed his love to me and I had stomped all over it, but then he hadn’t been very nice to me today either. Had his feelings for me changed so quickly? If they had, then how strong had they ever really been?

The more I thought about it, the angrier I became. I wasn’t the only one who had made a mess of this situation. He asked for an honest answer and I had given it to him. If he really wanted to be with me, then surely he could have waited for me to figure things out. I had half a mind to track him down and tell him off again, but then it was late at night

and I needed to make an attempt to sleep. Just then a knock came at my door.

"Miss, do you need any help getting ready for bed?" An elderly palace maid opened the door and stepped gingerly into the room. She must have felt sorry for me when she saw my tear-streaked face, but I didn't need her pity, and I certainly didn't want to talk to anyone.

"No, I can manage myself," I said, trying not to sound as irritated as I felt, but I was unsuccessful and the maid looked hurt. After all, she was only doing her duty. "Thank you for asking though," I said in a much gentler tone.

"You're welcome." She paused for a moment. "Are you sure you are all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine," I said and the edge of irritation spilled into my voice again.

"Goodnight," she said and she scurried out of the room, closing the door behind her. I sighed and walked over to my closet. I pulled off my boots, slipped out of my coarse shirt and pants, and tossed them into the closet where they landed in a rumpled heap on the floor. As I pulled on my nightgown, I smiled for a moment thinking of how Katrina would lecture me about my treatment of my clothes. That was why she never let me keep any of the fancy clothes in my room. I didn't mind though. I was much more comfortable in my training clothes than any of the frilly things Katrina wore.

I was just about ready to climb into bed when I heard a soft knock at the door. Irritated, I assumed it was the maid again. If it had been something important, the knock would have been more urgent. I didn't feel like going to the door, so I simply shouted, "Yes?"

No one answered, instead they knocked again.

"If you're a maid, I already told one of the other ladies that I don't need any help getting ready for bed, so you don't have to worry about me."

Whoever it was knocked again. By this point I was really irritated. It had been a long and stressful day and my nerves were frayed. I stormed over to the door, all thoughts of being polite gone, and flung it wide open.

“Do you always greet guests so courteously?”

My jaw dropped because it was not a palace maid standing at my door. It was Arden.

“What are you doing here?” I managed to squeak out when I had recovered enough to speak. “Is something wrong?”

“Yes and no.”

“Are we under attack?” It was a stupid question. If we had been under attack, he would have said so already.

“No, nothing like that. I just came to apologize for earlier. May I come in?” he said as he moved farther into the room without waiting for my response. I took several steps back. “I couldn’t go to sleep knowing that you were still angry with me. I am truly sorry for the way I reacted. After all, you were just being honest, which is what I asked for.”

“I suppose that I can accept your apology.” I was suddenly very aware that I was only wearing a thin nightgown.

“You said that you had sorted your feelings out. Does that mean you love me?” He stepped closer to me.

“Well, that’s one of the things that we need to talk about, but it’s late and you need some rest after your long journey.” I motioned to the door, but my hand was trembling. He stood staring at me intensely. I stared back unable to force myself to look away. I wanted so badly to touch him and kiss his lips. I wanted to have his strong muscular arms wrapped around me, but I again motioned toward the door with an unsteady hand. I didn’t want him to know how badly I wanted him to stay. I was still trying to be angry with him, but if he didn’t leave now, I knew my resolve would fail.

Arden walked very slowly and very deliberately toward the door, and slowly closed it. In a few quick strides, he was standing right in front of me again. I was glued to the floor, unsure of how to react never having been in this situation before. He leaned forward so there was barely an

inch of space between us. I could feel his hot breath on my lips as he spoke.

“I didn’t come here to talk,” he whispered.

I was about to protest, but he pressed his lips gently against mine. I made one weak final effort to push him away, but he wrapped his arms around my waist, pressed our bodies close together and kissed me again, more passionately this time.

He pulled away from the kiss but kept his arms around my waist and looked down at me, searching my face for a reaction. Quickly, I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him. I ran my fingers through his silky black hair. A wave of emotions flooded my soul, my body bursting to discover. Breathless, I pulled away from the kiss, stumbling back a few steps, struggling to regain control. My whole body was tingling from the sensation of having his body pressed against mine. I ached to have him hold me again, to feel his bare skin against mine, but I had to stop this before it went too far.

Arden looked confused. “What? Is something wrong?”

“Yes and no.”

“I don’t understand.” he said, taking a few more steps toward me.

“I liked it too much.” I sighed as I took another step back, afraid that if he got too close to me I would lose what little self-control I had left. I took a few more steps back and found myself leaning against my bedroom wall. I found strength in the solid stones. “Arden, I can’t do this.”

“Do what?” he said with that knowing smile as he again closed the distance between us.

“Oh, don’t tease me like that. It isn’t fair.” I closed my eyes.

“I know. I’m sorry.” He leaned forward and pressed his hands against the wall on either side of my body. “I love you, Lillian.”

“Arden, I love you, and believe me, I want this more than you know.”

“Then why are you fighting it?” He kissed my forehead and caressed my face. It was nearly more than I could bear. “I want to make love to you.” he whispered in my ear. “Tonight”

“It’s just not right, not here, not now.”

“How can you say that?” he said, frowning slightly. “Why does everything have to be a battle with you? I felt the passion in that kiss. I know that you want to be with me too.”

“I do, really I do, but I’m not ready to take such a big step. I’ve only just sorted my feelings out,” I said, speaking too quickly. I took a deep breath. “I’ve never felt this way before. All this is new to me. Let’s just take things slowly.”

“You talk too much,” he said and he kissed me slowly. “Don’t be afraid.” I let myself melt into his arms for a moment, but pulled away again.

“Please, you have to leave, Arden.”

“All right,” he sighed, dropping his arms at his waist. “But not before I get one more goodnight kiss.”

“That I can do.” We kissed again, and then I showed him out of my room. I watched him walk slowly down the hallway. He paused before he went around the corner and turned to look back at me, his eyes pleading for me to invite him to come back, but I gently shook my head. He turned the corner, and I went back into my room and firmly locked the door behind me. I flopped onto my bed and savored the memories of those kisses, and there were many memories to be savored. I was finally beginning to gain an understanding of things that had always eluded me in the past.

My sweet thoughts were soon interrupted, and I began to worry about tomorrow. What would other people think when they knew about Arden and me? After all I couldn’t keep this a secret. Would they think less of me as a leader? What would the men think? Would they think I was weak? I shook my head and pushed those questions from my thoughts. I was a strong person, and I would find a way to balance everything. I

snuggled deep into my blankets and breathed a contented sigh. Yes, I could make this thing with Arden work. I was sure of it.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The next morning I felt refreshed. I'd had the first truly fulfilling night of sleep in a very long time. I woke to sunshine streaming through my window instead of someone pounding at my door reporting an emergency. I snuggled down into the covers and savored the moment. Though I knew my army and I were approaching the most important battle of our lives, I felt oddly at peace. With the information Mandia had provided, I felt we finally had the upper hand in the struggle against the Dark Army. For the first time, I began to think that we might actually win.

I let my thoughts drift to Arden and those intense kisses the night before. He was so passionate and open about his feelings for me that I found it disarming. For a moment, I felt a small rush of panic. What did he want of me and this relationship? More importantly, what did I want? I shook my head and emptied my mind of those troubling thoughts. Arden was right. I could never let anything just happen. It always had to be a fight, but I could change, couldn't I? Yes, I was sure I could change.

Later that morning while I ate breakfast in my room, one of the maids delivered a message from Mandia. The note was brief, stating only that she wished to see me after I finished eating. I folded the note and wondered what more the strange girl with the lavender eyes had to tell me. I choked down the remainder of my breakfast as quickly as possible. If I had to talk with Mandia, it had to be now. Later in the morning I needed to speak with the army and go over the plans for what I hoped would be the last battle with the Dark Army. The strategy would be different than our previous encounters with the enemy, and I was expecting some of the men to resist the plan, but I was hoping to

convince them. That would take time, and that was something there just never seemed to be enough of.

Mandia was staying in one of the finest guest rooms of the palace. I found her sitting at a window nibbling at her breakfast and staring out at the bright morning.

"I'm sorry. I assumed when I read the note that you were finished eating. I can come back later this morning if you'd like."

"No, please stay. I sent the note to you because there are some things that need to be said that I didn't want to say in front of your father and your gentleman friend, Arden."

"My gentleman friend?"

"Yes, you are a couple, aren't you?"

"Well, I guess, I mean, yes, but how did you know?" I panicked again. Had she seen Arden come back into the palace last night? Had anyone else seen him?

"As I have said before, I know many things. I could see the way you two looked at each other. It is very clear that you have feelings for each other."

"Well, it can't be that obvious because no one else seems to know." Then, she hadn't seen him come back last night. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"You would be surprised at how many are able to sense your attraction to each other."

For a moment, I panicked again. How many people knew, and what did they think? Had I lost their respect?

Mandia spoke as though she had read my mind. "Lillian, no one thinks less of you for falling in love. Love is not a weakness. It is a blessing."

"There is more to this than you know. I can't explain. It's complicated."

"You are speaking of Philip."

"How did you know? Wait, I know. You know many things."

“Yes, I know of Philip. I know about your whole life. Time whispers to me, and I must confess that I have the ability to,” she paused for a moment, “hear peoples’ thoughts as well.”

“You mean you’ve known what I’ve been thinking this entire time?”

“You are angry. I understand.”

“Yes, I’m angry!” I shouted. I felt violated. How could she pry into my mind like that without my permission?

“I did not ask for these abilities, and I find it very hard to block them, especially when I am with a mind as strong as yours. It practically shouts to me.” She took a sip of her tea. “When I made the trade with the fairy, I did it to stop my brother and his terrible army. I did not know what all the consequences of such a trade would be. I did not ask for this life. It is simply the path that I was destined to take.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I was just shocked.” I looked at Mandia. She looked so small and frail, but it was only an illusion. Inside she was a woman with more knowledge and ability that anyone could possibly imagine. “What did you mean about my mind shouting at you? Is this something that I could stop?”

“No, I’m afraid not. You have a very powerful mind, and are very strong-willed, but you know that. Minds like yours are just very loud. I don’t know any other way of explaining it.”

“I see.” I was still confused, but I could see that I would never understand what she meant completely, so I decided to let it go.

“Now, where were we? I always seem to get sidetracked when I am talking with you.”

“That is my fault I’m afraid. I have a tendency to interrupt people.” I blushed. “I believe you were going to tell me something about Philip.” I felt a knot form in my stomach. I hadn’t talked about Philip much since he had died. I didn’t really know Mandia and was unsure of how I felt talking about him with her now.

“Oh yes, Philip. I know that you had very strong feelings for him for a very long time.”

“Yes, I did.”

“And he had feelings for you.”

“Yes.” The sight of him stretched out on the table with the horrible arrows protruding from his bleeding body flashed through my mind, but I pushed it away. If Mandia could really read my thoughts, then that was something that I did not want her to see. It was still so horrible, and so very private, those final moments, the kiss. I just didn’t want to think about it ever again.

“I know how Philip died, and what you meant to each other.”

“You’ve been reading my thoughts again.” I couldn’t help being irritated.

“Yes, as I said before, it is not something I do intentionally.” She took another sip of her tea. “I usually don’t talk with people about what I see in their lives. Most people cannot handle the knowledge, but I feel that I need to tell you a little of what I know so that you can truly move on with your life. Philip was not the man that you are destined to spend your life with. The man that you are to be with is still very much alive. I can’t explain it, but I know that these things are true.”

“Then, can you tell me who am I going to spend my life with?”

“I could answer many questions about your future, but I will not answer any of them. You cannot live a full life that way. If you always knew what to expect and exactly how to handle it, you would never make any mistakes.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Yes, but you would never learn anything. I made a promise to myself long ago that I would never let anyone use my gifts for their own selfish purposes as my brother used the fairy. I won’t make any exceptions, even for you.” She reached out and patted my hand. It was a gesture that a grandmother might have made. I just couldn’t get over how strange it felt to be receiving comfort from someone who looked so very young.

“Then why are you helping us defeat the Dark Army? You have already given us some information about what the future holds for the coming battle. How is that different?”

“Because I have always felt that what happened was my fault. If I had simply let the fairy go and hadn’t brought her to my brother, the Dark Army would not even exist. If I had been strong enough to kill him with the knife all those years ago, he would not be here assaulting your great city now. If I had not failed to do the right thing so many times, the Dark Army would not be on the verge of conquering the world yet again.” She sighed. “This whole mess began with me, and I must help end it.”

“But you already told me how to defeat your brother. You didn’t need me to come here this morning.”

“Yes, I did. There were many things that you needed to hear, and I have said them, but there was another reason that I wanted to speak with you this morning.” She paused for moment and took a very deep breath. “When you kill my brother, the rest of the army will surely die as well. They are connected to him and his power and cannot survive without him. Though they fight fiercely every night, they are not truly alive. The bodies may or may not disappear. I don’t know.” Her voice cracked a bit as she spoke, and she paused again and collected her thoughts. “I do not know if my brother’s body will disappear. Before you pierce his heart with the knife, I need you to tell him something for me.”

“Anything.”

“Tell him that I’m sorry for everything, and that I love him.” I must have looked puzzled because she explained. “You must think it strange that I can still feel love for something so terrible, but you must remember that he was my brother once, and I will always cherish those memories.” She wiped a single tear from her cheek. “I don’t know if he even remembers me, but I would like you to tell him just the same.”

“I promise.”

“Thank you. Now, in order to defeat my brother, you will need the knife. I have held on to it long enough. It is yours now. Take it.”

“I promise to take good care of it.” I paused for a moment. “Would you like me to return it after the battle?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Thank you,” I said again as I stood to leave.

“Wait, there is more that needs to be said before you go.”

“Oh?” I sat back in the chair as I studied her face. What more could she have to tell me?

“That is a very unusual piece of jewelry that you wear around your neck.”

“It is a guardian charm. It was my mother’s once.” I looked down at the smooth green stone. “A dear friend of my mother’s made it for her a long time ago. It comforts me when I am upset, and it glows when danger is near.”

“I know what a guardian charm is for. May I hold it for a moment?”

“I never take it off.”

“I only want to look at it for a moment. You can trust me. Besides, if I meant you any harm, wouldn’t it be glowing now?”

“I suppose that is true.” I undid the silver clasp and reluctantly handed it to Mandia. It was the first time I’d taken it off in a long time. My neck felt naked without the familiar weight of the charm. She studied it for awhile before speaking.

“It is just as I thought. This is no ordinary guardian charm,” she said handing it back to me.

“What do you mean?” I fastened the charm safely around my neck again.

“You said a dear friend of your mother’s made it.”

“Yes, her name is Elsa. She and my mother both shared an interest in magic, though my father disapproved. My sister gave me the charm. I only learned about Elsa and the true nature of the charm recently.”

“And Elsa has never been able to produce anything else so powerful.”

“How did—” I stopped. Surely Mandia had read that in my thoughts. If I was going to be spending time with her, I was going to have to get used to this, and it was not going to be easy.

“Do you know why she was never able to make another one?”

“No, I don’t know much about magic. I only became interested in it when the bodies of the slain enemy warriors started disappearing. As I said, my father has never encouraged an interest in magic.”

“Elsa has never been able to create another guardian charm like this because she created this one out of a powerful friendship with your mother. Even she doesn’t know how special this charm is. The comfort that you feel, can you describe it?”

“When I’m upset, I touch the charm and it helps me to calm down. I feel safe somehow.” I was confused. What was Mandia trying to tell me?

“This comfort does not only come from a charm. Ordinary guardian charms simply warn of approaching danger and offer only a small amount of comfort that would allow a person to escape a dangerous situation quickly. They do not typically bring the deep sense of calm that you described. The bond between your mother and Elsa was so strong that it spilled over into the charm. Your mother is a part of the charm.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You feel safe because the love your mother had for you still lives in the charm. That is the reason you feel safe when you touch the charm.”

“But my mother never knew me.” I could feel tears welling up in my eyes.

“She loved you before you were born. She still does.”

A few tears trickled down my face, but I quickly wiped them away and collected myself. I needed to stop all this crying and pull myself together.

She stood. “Well, I have told you all the things that needed to be said. Thank you for speaking with me this morning. I wish you luck for the coming battle. My thoughts will be with you.” Her voice was soft and reassuring.

“Thank you for coming forward. I know that it’s been hard.” I looked down at her and felt the urge to give her a hug, but I didn’t know how she would react to such a personal gesture. It would have been too awkward, so I simply nodded. There was nothing else to say or do for the moment, and I left to brief the army on our new battle plan.

Chapter Twenty-Five

After my visit with Mandia, I went out to meet Arden and the rest of the men. I worried that I might be late, but I made it in plenty of time, which meant there was time to talk to Arden. My stomach fluttered nervously. Would things be awkward between us now? Would it be obvious to the other men that something was going on? Mandia had noticed, certainly other people would as well. Did it matter if they knew? I knew it shouldn't have mattered, but some part of me was still worried. I didn't want to lose anyone's respect, especially the respect of my men.

"Good morning," I said, trying to be casual as I approached. "Did you sleep well last night?"

"Yes, I did. The first good sleep I've had in a while. And you?"

"Very good." I was finding it hard to relax around him, and my words sounded so rehearsed. I had to stop fighting this. I had to relax.

"Lillian, about last night, I know I apologized for the awful things I said in the hall yesterday. I really do have very strong feelings for you. I hope you know that."

"I think you made that pretty clear last night," I teased.

"Are you upset with me? I know that I was pretty forward, and I apologize. I don't want things to be awkward between us. It's just that—"

"Arden, stop. You don't need to apologize anymore. I said I loved you and that I wanted to be with you, and I meant it. I still do," I said as I looked up into his eyes.

"You don't know how happy I am to hear you say that."

"I think I have a pretty good idea." I smiled. "But now, we need to focus on telling the men the plan for the battle ahead."

“Right. Do you want to tell them, or do you want me to?”

“I will.”

With that, I turned to face the men. As I looked out across the sea of faces, I could tell that they were tired and were beginning to lose hope. Now, I was about to tell them that a two-thousand-year-old immortal girl with lavender eyes had predicted the time and date of the next battle. Not only that, but also the only way to defeat the Dark Army was to stab him with a magic fairy knife. I was sure they would be very confident.

“Listen up! As you all know, Arden rode out in search of a method to defeat the Dark Army and their leader. His journey took him to the farthest corners of the land. There he found a small girl named Mandia with an amazing story. I cannot tell you her entire story. Some other time perhaps, but as you all know time is of great importance. Mandia has given me the secret of the enemy’s strength. The Dark Leader is an immortal with an amazing power.”

“An immortal? How are we going to defeat an immortal?” a man shouted from the crowd.

“What’s all this stuff about magic that I’ve been hearing?” another man shouted.

Soon several men were shouting, arguing, and fighting among themselves. No swords had been drawn, but at the rate the tension was escalating, it wouldn’t have been long. Ordinarily the men wouldn’t have behaved so poorly, but they were tired and irritated. They had been fighting battle after battle in a losing war for so long. I sympathized, but I knew I had to put a stop to this before it got out of hand.

“Silence!” I screamed as I drew my sword. “All of you! As your commander, I demand silence!”

The moment I had drawn my sword the crowd had grown still. “Listen to me, and listen to me carefully. I know you are all tired and you want this to be over. Believe me I want to end this war as badly as any of you, but that is no excuse for this type of behavior. You are warriors of Twentaria! Act like it!”

As I stared out at the men, I could see shame in some of their faces. At least now I had their full attention. "Mandia has given us the chance to end it in just two weeks' time." I stared out at their faces again. They still looked agitated, but they were listening, but I hadn't told them the most unbelievable part of it yet. "The Dark Leader brings his army back to life after every battle using the rays of the sun. Mandia has given me a spell that will stall the rise of the sun for three hours. That will give us the extra time we need to kill all the Dark Warriors. Now, this is the complicated part. I have to kill the Dark Leader using a special knife given to Mandia by a fairy a very long time ago."

"A fairy? Fairies don't exist," a man in the front shouted. I gave him a withering stare that silenced him immediately.

"I will kill the Dark Leader using this knife. Most of you have noticed that he is reluctant to engage in battle, but he will sense the spell and will come looking for me. Do not engage him. He is mine. Are we all clear?" The men nodded. "Now, the Dark Army may try to escape into the northern woods once they figure out that the sun isn't rising. We can't afford to chase them into the woods. Therefore, we will need to prevent their flight. One third of you will leave the city the afternoon before the battle and will split up heading to the east and west edge of the northern woods. After the enemy assaults the city, you will move in to block off the woods, but you will not join the battle until the signal horn is blown. When they begin their retreat, you must stop them. Not a single Dark Warrior can be allowed past the wall that you will form."

"Who's going to lead the separate group?" a man in the back shouted.

"That's a very good question. Do I have any volunteers?"

"I will go." I was startled because the man who volunteered was standing next to me. Arden was the unchallenged volunteer.

"No, I need you with me and the larger group of men," I hissed, not wanting to get into a conflict with my second-in-command in front of the men.

"No, you want to keep me where you can see me, and you need to keep your focus on the Dark Leader," he whispered. "You need someone

who is strong and decisive to lead the smaller group of men. I am the best choice for the job, and you know it.”

“Very well,” I said, raising my voice so the other men could hear. “Arden will lead the smaller group.” I spoke to the entire group of men, but I stared into Arden’s eyes as I spoke. I had to admit that what he said had been right. I wanted to keep him close to me, but I couldn’t watch Arden and focus on defeating the Dark Leader.

After it was decided who would go with the small group, I sent the men home to be with their families. We knew we would not be attacked for another two weeks, which was an enormous relief because the men would finally have some time to rest before the big battle. The watch would still be posted at night, but I knew no alarm would be sounded in the middle of the night. I walked away from the field with that same sense of peace I had woken with in the morning. I didn’t know how the battle would end, but I knew that my men would fight as hard and as long as they could. It was all anyone could ask of them.

I didn’t get to walk very far before I heard Arden shouting behind me. “Lillian, wait!” I turned as he ran over to me. “Do you have anything planned for this afternoon?”

“Well, no, not really. Why?”

“I was wondering if you would like to join me on a picnic. The first one was so rushed, so I figured we could get it right this time.”

“The first one?”

“You remember, that day when we rode to the village and had to be in by sunset.”

“Oh, yes. I remember that. We barely made it in time. That seems like such a long time ago.” I looked down at my feet for a moment. Did I want to go on a picnic? I wanted to spend time with Arden, but I was still uneasy about people knowing that we were together. It just wasn’t something I had ever thought would happen to me. “I don’t know, maybe.”

“What? Are you afraid to be seen with me in public?”

“No, of course not. It’s just—”

“Well, then there’s no reason for you not to come on this picnic with me,” he said, interrupting me. I sighed. He was giving me that smile again. I didn’t have any logical reason not to go, and he knew it. He had already won.

“All right, all right, I’ll go on the picnic.”

“Great! Follow me. I have the best place picked out.”

It turned out that Arden had begun planning for the picnic as soon as he had gotten up that morning, which irritated me a little because it meant that he had not only anticipated me having a free schedule this afternoon, but he had also anticipated me saying yes. How could he presume that I could be so easily coaxed? I turned and was about to say some smart remark, but when I looked over at his face, he had the most peaceful expression. He was smiling and looking at the trees and flowers, which were now in full bloom. He looked as though he was deep in thought, and I wondered what he was thinking that brought such a serene look to his face. Was he thinking about the home he had left, or was it something else? I continued walking and began to enjoy the scenery myself. It really was a lovely spring day. The air was filled with the fragrance of flowers, and the grass was soft and green beneath my feet. It was a perfect day for a picnic.

At some point during our walk, Arden reached out suddenly and took my hand in his. Of course my first instinct was to pull it back, but then I remembered what Arden had said about everything being a fight. I relaxed and let him hold my hand as we walked. We passed a few people on our way to wherever Arden was leading us to, and many of them smiled when they saw us holding hands. They didn’t point and laugh or scowl in disapproval. They smiled, and as I walked hand-in-hand with Arden, I smiled as well.

Arden finally stopped at a small grove of trees where he had a blanket spread under a particularly large and shady tree with a basket of bread and cheese waiting. “I apologize that I don’t have more to eat,” Arden said we settled under the tree. “Fancy food has been hard to come by since the Dark Army began attacking.”

"It's fine," I said, looking down at my hands.

"What are you thinking?" he asked as he peered at me through narrowed eyes.

"Nothing, why do you ask?"

"You just looked like you were thinking about something."

"I was just admiring the scenery," I lied. I was really wondering how long this was going to last. How long would it be before I said something wrong and upset Arden? How long would it be before he realized that I wasn't the kind of woman that he wanted to be with? For what seemed like the millionth time that day, I forced myself to relax and enjoy Arden's company. Why couldn't I just enjoy the day without constantly worrying about all the things that could possibly go wrong. I looked over at Arden and he was still frowning in my direction. If I didn't stop doing this, I was going to end up ruining the picnic. My mind was racing. I had to find a way to change the subject, and then it came to me. "Arden, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"You never talk about your past or where you came from." I stopped for a moment. Was I really willing to pry into his personal life like this? Was he going to be upset with me? Still, I had to know more about this man that I cared so much about.

"And?"

"I want to know more about your life."

"What do you want to know?"

"I don't know. Maybe you could tell me why you left your homeland." He frowned as I spoke. "You can tell me anything. Everything. Whatever you want to tell me. You know so much more about me than I know about you." He was quiet for a long time. So, I continued. "You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to. I shouldn't have asked."

"No, it's all right. You should know about my past." He took a deep breath. "I was born to a simple family. I had an older brother named Adrian. My parents made it no secret that he was their favorite son. He could have been cruel to me, but he wasn't. He and I were the best of

friends, and were practically inseparable.” Arden paused for moment. “There was a large forest near my family’s land with a strong river running through it. Adrian and I used to swim there on especially hot summer days.” His voice caught in his throat as he spoke.

“Arden, you don’t have to do this.” Guilt stabbed at my heart. I had not meant to bring up such painful memories. He was hurting, and it was my fault.

“No, I want to do this.” He took another deep breath. “One day while we were out hunting, the heat was just unbearable and all I wanted was to cool off in the water for a bit before we went home. It was very late in the day, and our parents were expecting us home, so Adrian thought it would be better just to head home, but I didn’t listen. I climbed a tall tree on the river bank and leaped as far as I could into the rushing water. I splashed around, taunting Adrian to do the same. Not wanting to be outdone by his younger brother, he finally climbed the tree and jumped, but he was tired and didn’t jump out far enough. He hit his head on some rocks.” Arden was looking at me as he spoke, but I could tell he didn’t really see me. It was as if he were living the moment all over again. “I saw his head hit the rocks, and then his body sank below the surface. I swam over to where I’d seen his body go under, but I couldn’t find him. Frantically, I scrambled up the bank and searched the edge of the river. I went further and further downstream all afternoon. I finally found his body downstream caught in the roots of a large tree that had grown on the bank of the river.” A few tears trickled down his face. “His skin was cold and pale as I pulled him out of the water. He was already dead.”

“I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

“I sat there just holding his limp body for the longest time. I couldn’t believe that he was really gone. At sunset, I carried him home. I told my parents what had happened, and they were devastated. My mother clutched at Adrian’s body and wailed, while my father screamed at me. He disowned me and ordered me to leave at once. I gathered the few things that I had and began wandering from land to land for years until your father gave me a home and a place in his army here in Twentaria. I

didn't even get to see my brother's funeral fire." He sighed. "I've never told another living soul until now."

His face resumed its usual calm expression while I just stared at him, too shocked to say anything, but there was nothing to say in a moment like this, nothing that would have mattered. I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride that he had chosen to confide in me. He had trusted me with something so personal. I reached out and pulled him close to me. He closed his eyes and rested his head in my lap as I stroked his hair under the shade of the tree while the gentle, fragrant breeze washed over us like cleansing water.

We stayed snuggled under the tree long after the food had run out, and the sun was beginning to set. The sky was an explosion of dusky pinks and purples. It was beautiful, but as the sun began to dip under the horizon, I felt a quick jab of fear in my heart. For so long the night brought the possibility of another attack, but now we knew when they were coming. Tonight we were safe. The time for the final battle would come soon enough.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The morning after the picnic I again woke with the sun. It had been another night of uninterrupted sleep. If this kept up, I was going to be spoiled. When I had finished dressing and had eaten my breakfast, I opened my door to walk out into the hallway only to find Katrina about to knock on my door.

“Oh, you startled me!” she said, taking a step back.

“Well, I didn’t know you were standing on the other side of my door! I’ll be more careful next time,” I teased. “Did you want to talk to me about something? I don’t have much time. I’m going to meet Arden and go over the finer points of our battle plan this morning.”

“Arden is just the person I wanted to talk to you about. Do you mind if I come in?” For a moment, my heart leaped into my throat as we settled into a couple chairs in my bedroom. Why did she want to talk about Arden? Did she like Arden? What would I do if she had feelings for him too?

“What about Arden?” I said, trying to sound calm.

“Is there something going on between you two?”

“Yes,” I said after a moment of hesitation. There was no sense in lying about it. That’s what had gotten me in trouble before, and I’d promised that I wouldn’t lie to my sister about something like that again. “Why do you ask?”

“So, it’s true then!” she exclaimed. “Several people said they spied the two of you walking and holding hands yesterday. I was skeptical so I had to come and hear it from you myself.”

"So people are talking about us then." I sighed. This was exactly what I was afraid of. I stood and walked to the window and stared out at the rising sun. "What exactly are they saying?"

"Nothing bad," she said as she came to join me by the window. "I won't lie. People are surprised, but truthfully, most seem to be genuinely happy for you."

"Really?"

"Yes, they are glad to finally see you with someone."

"Why would my being with someone make so many people happy?"

"Lillian, I'm going to tell you this as gently as possible. I know you don't mean to, but you give people the impression that you are a very," she paused for a moment searching for the right word, "cold person."

"Cold?"

"I know that's not who you are, but most people don't get to see you the way I do, but that's beginning to change. In the past, you have always been so guarded. People saw how torn you were by Philip's death, the anger you felt at Trent's betrayal, and the way you and Arden walked hand-in-hand. Seeing you experience those raw emotions makes you seem more real, more human."

"I didn't know people felt that way about me."

"Well, it's nothing to worry about. You're one of the most respected people in this city. They trust you with their lives." She gave me a quick hug. "So, when did this thing between you and Arden start?" she said, changing the subject.

"I'm not really sure. It's only been recently that things have become more serious."

"Well, I'm happy for you." she said as she turned to leave. Halfway to the door, she stopped and turned. "There's just one more thing I wanted to ask you about."

"Oh?"

"Some of the maids have been talking, and they say that they saw Arden come out of your room the other night. Is there anything else going on that I should know about?" she said with a sly smile.

"Nothing happened."

"So you admit that he was here."

"Yes, we'd had a fight earlier in the day and he came to apologize. We kissed, but that's as far as it went."

"I'm not sure I believe you," she said, peering at me intensely.

"Well, it's the truth." She still didn't look convinced. "I swear."

"I won't be upset if something did happen. I'm your sister. You can tell me, and I swear I won't tell anyone else."

"Oh for goodness sake! Nothing happened!" I shouted, exasperated.

"All right, all right, I believe you." She laughed. "Just a thought, you should probably tell Father what's going on between you and Arden. I'm sure he will be happy to hear the news, but he'd probably rather hear it from you than the gossiping maids."

"I hadn't really thought about that, but I guess you're right." It surprised me that I hadn't thought about talking to Father. He was the one person in the world who I respected more than anyone else. Katrina was right. He would certainly want to hear this bit of news from me personally.

"Well, I won't keep you any longer. I'm sure you have more important things to do than satisfy my appetite for news. See you at dinner." With that, she scurried out of the room.

After Katrina left, I decided that I would go and see Father right away. There was no sense in putting this conversation off. As I walked toward his sitting room, the things that Katrina had told me swirled around in my head. I wasn't sure how I felt about all that information. I guess it shouldn't have been a surprise that people thought of me as a cold statue. I had never done anything to convey anything else, but all the same I felt a bit hurt. I guess you can't be everything to everyone.

When I got to my father's door, it was open a crack, so I pushed it open a bit further and stuck my head in the room. He was sitting in a chair staring out the window absently. He didn't even appear to have heard me. I cleared my throat and said, "Good morning, Father."

"Oh! Good morning, Lillian," he said as he jumped a bit and then laughed at himself for being startled.

"I didn't mean to scare you," I said as I stifled a laugh myself.

"What brings you here on this lovely spring morning? I hope this is a social call, nothing about the war or any of that magic nonsense."

"No, but there is something I need to talk to you about," I said, choosing to ignore the fact that he still had no faith in what Mandia and I were going to attempt at the next battle.

"Well, in that case. Sit down. Have some tea with me." He poured me a cup.

I sipped the tea for a few moments unsure of how to begin this conversation. It sounded silly, but I was a little nervous. I was a grown woman. Why should it be so hard for me to tell my father that I was in love? I knew it didn't make any sense, but I was still nervous.

"Is this about Arden?" he said with a knowing smile.

"How did you know?" I said, nearly choking on my tea. I coughed trying to clear my throat. "Did Katrina say something to you, or was it one of those nosy maids?" I couldn't help but be a little irritated. Who had been spreading my personal business around? This was exactly the sort of thing that I hated.

"Calm down. I'm your father. I figured it out on my own, but it wouldn't have taken a genius to see that there was some sort of connection between the two of you. Besides, I saw you two walking together yesterday, and you were holding hands."

"Yes, of course." I felt a little foolish for being so upset, and for immediately thinking that Katrina had gone behind my back. She would never have done such a thing, and I shouldn't have jumped to such an unjustified conclusion. I was behaving like a child. "You're right. I did come here to talk to you about Arden."

“What is there to say? It’s obvious that you two like each other, and are spending time together.” He paused. “There is just one thing I want you to answer for me.”

“What?”

“Do you love him? Do you really love him?”

“Yes, of course. Why else would I be spending so much time with him?”

“There are many reasons. You could just be lonely and missing someone else.” He looked at me for what seemed like an eternity. “So my question still stands. Do you love him?”

“Yes, I do,” I said, looking my father directly in the eyes.

“Good. I only ask because I don’t want to see either of you get hurt. Now, is there anything else that you wanted to talk with me about?”

“No, that was it.”

“Well, if you’ll excuse me, I have quite a bit to do this morning, as I’m sure you do as well.”

“Yes, there are some things I need to discuss with Arden regarding the coming battle, and I need to see Mandia later as well.”

“I guess that I will see you tonight at dinner.” He kissed me on the forehead. “See you this evening.” Then, he turned and went into his private rooms.

I left my father’s room feeling very concerned. He was too thin and much paler than he used to be. This war was really beginning to wear on him. Before, he had always seemed tired from lack of sleep, but today I realized that he looked older. This war was aging him too quickly, and I was the only one who could stop it. I only hoped that when this battle was over he was able to become his more youthful self again. Now, more than ever I knew I had to win this battle. There was no other option.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The days passed quickly with all the battle preparations, and before I knew it, it was the last night of peace before the battle. Everything was ready. The army was briefed on the plan, and Mandia had taught me the spell that would stall the rising of the sun. We were as ready as we were going to be. I just hoped it was enough. Father decided to have a nice dinner in the banquet hall. Not a grand ball, but a small gathering with a few guests. I would have preferred to eat in my room alone, but Father didn't see the point of me moping in my room and insisted I join the group.

I hadn't planned on wearing anything special. After all it wasn't a formal ball, but when I went to my room to get ready, I found my sister waiting there with a fancy dress already picked out.

"What are you doing here?" I said a bit stunned.

"I'm here to help you get ready for dinner."

"Yes, I can see that, but why? It isn't a ball, just dinner with some of father's close friends."

"Well, Father thinks it would be nice to see us dressed up again."

"Do I have to?" Even to my own ears I sounded like a whining child.

"Yes, now stop complaining and let me help you get ready."

I frowned and stood there for a moment deciding if I really wanted to let Katrina dress me up in one of those frilly dresses. Tomorrow night was the biggest battle of my life, and now was not the time to be dressing up and going to fancy dinner parties. There would be time to celebrate later, if we won the battle.

"Lillian, it's just a dinner party."

“Fine, I’ll wear the dress,” I said, throwing my hands in the air. “But I still think that this is a colossal waste of time.”

After what seemed like an eternity, Katrina was finally satisfied with my appearance. She left me standing in front of my mirror alone. She’d left most of my hair down, and had only pulled back a small section to keep my curls out of my face. Katrina had chosen the same emerald green dress that I’d worn the night I was named heir to the throne. It seemed like that night was ages ago in another world. I sighed and put in the earrings Katrina had left for me. They were emeralds and they matched the dress perfectly. Katrina always knew how to put together an outfit. Since it was only a dinner party, I hoped that it would go quickly. I was always so awkward in social situations, and I knew that tonight would be no different.

I was a bit shocked when I entered the banquet hall. There were more people there than I had expected. Everyone was gathered in small clusters and so engrossed in their own conversations that no one had noticed me enter the room. I breathed a sigh of relief and scanned the room and saw my father with his back to me. He was talking to someone, but I couldn’t see their face. Quickly, I walked over to join my father before anyone noticed me standing at the door.

When I reached my father, he turned to greet me. It was only then that I saw who he had been talking to. Arden. My jaw dropped and my eyes widened in surprise.

“Arden, what are you doing here?” I said as my heart fluttered. I had never seen Arden in anything other than battle gear. Well, I suppose he hadn’t been wearing battle gear the night I’d run into him. However, I’d been too upset to notice, and at the time he’d been nothing more than a fellow warrior. Tonight his long black hair was braided and hung down the middle of his back, and he was wearing a strikingly elegant suit with an emerald green vest that matched my dress perfectly.

“Your father invited me,” he said with a grin.

“I’ll leave you alone for a moment,” Father winked. “But don’t be too long. Dinner will be served momentarily.”

"Where did you get these clothes?" I asked, trying to regain my composure.

"Your sister brought it to me and insisted that I wear it. Does it look all right?" he said, fussing with the collar. "It's very uncomfortable."

"I know just how you feel!" I laughed. "You look very nice."

"Thank you," he said, and I could swear that he was blushing. "You look beautiful." He gazed down into my eyes. Now it was my turn to blush. "May I escort you to the table?" He held out his arm.

"Yes, you may." I couldn't help but smile as we walked to our seats. As we sat down, I almost didn't notice the other guests staring, almost.

The dinner was absolutely wonderful. For the first time in my life, I had someone else I could really talk with. I didn't have to pretend to be interested in the idle gossip, or stifle yawns of boredom. Arden and I talked throughout the meal, and when my father tapped his glass to make an announcement, I was shocked by how much time had passed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize that this dinner has not been as fancy as others in the past, but I have managed to find some musicians to play if any of you are interested in a little dancing."

"Well," I said, turning to Arden. "Would you like to dance?"

"Of course." He smiled, and we walked hand-in-hand to the dance floor. I would not be a wallflower tonight. We swirled around the dance floor, and several girls seemed surprised to see me there, some even glared at me though I'm not sure exactly why. I shrugged the stares off, determined not to let it bother me. Yes, I was definitely not going to be a wallflower. Tonight was my night to blossom, and I was going to enjoy every moment.

We danced every dance together, and after one particularly fast paced song, we decided to sit the next dance out. Breathless, we stood at what had always been my usual spot by the wall. Ordinarily we would have been sipping a glass of fine wine, but such luxuries had been scarce since the war with the Dark Army began. It didn't matter. I was content to simply stand next to Arden. I watched my sister as she glided across the dance floor with a different man for each song. I didn't blame the

men. She was beautiful, and everyone wanted to dance with her. I looked across the room and saw my father chatting with one of his oldest friends. It was a bittersweet image. He was smiling and laughing, but the dark circles still clung to his face, and the wrinkles were permanently etched on his forehead. He would never be the same after this war ended. I had a feeling that none of us would ever be the same.

I don't know how long I stood there watching the crowd, but my thoughts were interrupted by a shrill laugh. I blinked and looked over to see that one of the many young girls at the dance was flirting with Arden.

"Wouldn't you like to dance with me Arden?" she said in that squeaky voice. "A nice man like you shouldn't be standing over here like a wallflower." She cast a quick glance in my direction.

I was stunned. Who was this girl? I looked up at Arden and he looked very uncomfortable. Why didn't he just tell the girl that he was with me? I glared up at him and he cleared his throat.

"No, thank you."

The girl glared at me and then smiled sweetly at him. "Well, if you change your mind, the offer still stands." She glared at me again and then flounced off into the crowd.

I stood there silently fuming. I didn't know who I was angrier at, the flirtatious girl asking Arden to dance when he was clearly with me, or Arden for hesitating a moment before saying no. He had almost seemed reluctant to tell the girl no. I clenched my teeth and stood silently beside Arden while he fidgeted with the buttons on his suit. Did it really make him so uncomfortable to have to stand with me?

When the dance ended, I was still angry. Arden and I hadn't spoken since the girl had asked him to dance. I said goodbye to my father and stomped toward the door. I heard Arden calling my name, but then I also heard the whiny voice of the girl yelling for Arden. I didn't turn around, instead I just kept walking.

I strode down the hall, walking as fast as I could manage. I didn't run because I'd more than learned my lesson the night I'd run down the hall in heels and slipped and hurt my knee. The battle with the Dark Army

was tomorrow night, and I could not afford to be injured. With each pronounced click of my heels, the anger within me grew until I felt like an overfilled glass about to spill over. I felt confused. What exactly was I so angry about? The girl had been the one to ask Arden to dance, not the other way around, but I wasn't really angry with the girl. I was angry that he hadn't said no fast enough. He hadn't immediately confessed his love for me and declined the invitation in one swift blow. Then a startling thought occurred to me. Would I have done that? Could I have declared that the only man for me was Arden right there in front of everyone? I just didn't know.

As I walked, I became aware that I heard someone else behind me. I turned to see Arden at the end of the hallway hurrying toward me. I turned away and quickened my pace. I didn't want to talk to him right now. I wasn't far from my room now. All I had to do was get there and lock my door before he caught up with me. I was again reminded of the inconvenience of wearing fancy clothing. Arden could run in his shoes and was swiftly gaining on me. How I hated high heels!

Just as my hand touched the doorknob to my room, Arden caught me by the arm. "Lillian, didn't you hear me?" A bit winded, he continued, "I tried to get your attention at the end of the dance, but you left in such a hurry."

"Yes, I did. I wanted to give you and the girl with the squeaky voice some privacy since I deprived you of your dance with her." I glared up at him, biting my lip. I felt as though I was going to cry, but I was angry with him, and I wouldn't allow him to see that.

"What are you talking about?"

"You obviously wanted to dance with her, and it clearly made you uncomfortable to have to stand next to me!" I shouted. "If you want to dance with other girls, that's fine with me, but don't stand there and look pitiful, making other people feel sorry that you have to spend the evening standing with me." I paused to take a breath, and Arden started to say something, but I cut him off. "Well, you don't have to worry about that anymore." I pulled away from Arden and tried to push open my bedroom door, but he stopped me again.

“Lillian, wait a minute! If you’ll just let me explain!”

“What could you possibly have to explain to me? That you were confused? That you didn’t know how to react? That you wanted to dance with the girl? What? What do you have to explain?” I was practically screaming now. It wouldn’t be long until some of the palace servants came snooping around to see what was going on. Arden realized this, of course, and glanced around to see if anyone else was around. He opened the door behind me, pushed me inside, and practically slammed the door behind us.

“You need to calm down before everyone in the palace comes to see what’s going on. Do you want that?” he said, staring directly into my eyes. I thought for a moment.

“No, I suppose not.” I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. “Say what you have to say and then leave.” I crossed my arms and waited.

“I didn’t want to dance with that girl.”

“But why—” I started to interrupt.

“Let me finish,” Arden said, cutting me off. “I didn’t want to dance with that girl. I wanted to stay with you. I hesitated because I wasn’t expecting anyone else to ask me to dance. So yes, I was a little confused but not about my feelings for you. I’ve never been to such a formal affair, and I didn’t know how to react. I was trying not to be rude.”

“But you were talking to her at the end of the dance. What was all that about? Were you confused then?” His explanation seemed reasonable, but I still wanted to be angry with him.

“She wanted me to walk her home. I declined, but you didn’t stay long enough to hear that part of the conversation.”

I stood there scowling. He was right. I hated to admit it, but he was right. I had overreacted and made a fool of myself, again.

Arden continued, “I’m sorry if I hurt you. It was not my intention.” I had been the one to behave inappropriately and he was the one apologizing.

"I'm sorry too. I don't know what's wrong with me. I guess I'm still getting used to this."

"Getting used to what?" he said, looking at me slyly.

"I'm still getting used to us being together," I said, blushing.

"I suppose I can forgive you."

He pulled close to him and kissed me gently and slowly. The moment our lips touched I felt my whole body begin to tingle. Arden had that effect on me. The kisses grew more intense and soon we were crushed against each other. He began to tug fervently at the laces in the back of my dress. It felt so good that I never wanted it to stop. I wanted him to stay with me, but I knew that couldn't happen. Soon the laces were loose and I could feel the dress beginning to slip from my shoulders. I pushed Arden away and took a few steps back.

"Arden, we have to stop." I took a moment to catch my breath. "You have to go."

"I don't have to go," he said, taking a step toward me.

"Yes, you do." Taking a step back, I said, "Tomorrow night is the most important battle of my life, and I need to be ready for it. You have to leave."

"I know." He groaned. "Promise me that someday I won't have to leave." He stared down at me with his black eyes.

"I can't make that kind of a promise."

"No, I suppose you can't." He sighed. I leaned forward and kissed him goodnight. He left and I watched him walk down the hallway again, and again he stopped at the end and looked back, but I remained firm in my decision.

I closed the door to my room and looked down at my dress. It was unbelievably wrinkled. Katrina would be angry with me, but that was the least of my problems. This thing between Arden and I was intense. How long would it last? Where would it lead? I shook my head. I was thinking too hard. Couldn't I just enjoy the moment? His kisses felt so good. Closing my eyes, I savored the memories, but I couldn't spend all night thinking about Arden. The enemy would attack tomorrow.

I went across the room and picked up the knife that Mandia had given me. It was cool and heavy in my hands. I shuddered and for the first time in my life, I was afraid of the coming battle. Fighting had always come naturally to me, and I was undefeated, but this battle was different. I was afraid of the mysterious Dark Leader. I had never fought anyone or anything like him. What if I failed? The thought was unbearable and I pushed it out of my mind.

I undressed and got into bed, and tried to quiet my restless mind. I had to get some sleep. When sleep finally came, I dreamed, but when I woke the next morning, I could not remember exactly what the dream had been about. I was left with a vague feeling of emptiness and apprehension. I was certain the dream had been about the Dark Leader and the coming battle. I sat in bed and tried to focus, but the dream remained hazy. I couldn't spend all day trying to recall the dream. The battle was to take place that night, and I needed to be ready. I forced myself out of my warm bed and began to get dressed.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

After I had finished dressing for the day, one of the maids brought me my breakfast. I tried to force myself to swallow a few mouthfuls, but the moment the food touched my lips I felt sick to my stomach. I pushed the food around on the plate for another half hour before finally giving up. There was no sense in trying to pretend that I was actually going to be able to eat anything. I pushed my chair away from the table and went to stand on my balcony.

I knew that I should be heading out to give the final instructions to the men, but I had a moment. I stood in the bright sunshine of the morning and closed my eyes. It was hard to believe that the Dark Army had attacked us for the first time a year and half ago. It seemed like such a long time ago. I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself. I needed to be at my best tonight. All of Twentaria and possibly the entire world depended on a single moment in a single battle.

I went to my dresser and picked up Mandia's knife, took my own knife out of its sheath, and replaced it with Mandia's. I took a final look in the mirror and headed for the door. As I left my room, I felt calm, or as calm as was humanly possible at a time like this. I closed my door and began walking down the hallway only to find my grandmother walking towards me. The calm feeling that I had managed to muster moments earlier evaporated in an instant. I hesitated for a moment. If I quickly ducked into my room, she would never see me.

I actually turned and had my hand on the door knob when I stopped. Was I going to spend the rest of my life hiding from her? I pulled my hand away from the doorknob and turned to face her. She had stopped in the middle of the hall and was waiting for me to approach her. I began

walking towards her, but I didn't plaster a fake smile on my face as I would have in the past. There was no use in pretending to like or even tolerate her anymore. We both knew how the other one felt. The least I could do was be honest.

"Good morning. Grandmother," I said as I stopped to stand in front of her.

"Good morning," she snipped.

We stood staring at each other for a moment, and I thought that she wasn't going to say anything more. I should have known better. As I tried to move past her, she stepped to the side and blocked my path.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to prepare my men for the battle."

"Oh, yes. The battle with the Dark Army is tonight, isn't it?" A wicked smile slowly spread across her face. "You haven't had much luck with them, have you?"

"No, we haven't, but we will win this battle tonight."

"How can you be so sure?" she said, still bearing the twisted smile. "The Dark Army has great power and many secrets."

"What do you mean?" I said as I narrowed my gaze. How much did she know about the Dark Army? To my knowledge, no one had told her about Mandia or her story. I suppose the story could have come to her through one of the palace maids, but somehow I doubted that. No one talked to her unless they had to.

"Oh nothing, just an old woman muttering." Her eyes widened in an effort to look innocent, but I knew better. She tried to move past me, but this time it was me who moved to block the path.

"What do you know about the Dark Army?"

"I told you I don't know anything." She actually batted her eyes at me and again tried to move past me, but I stepped in the path again.

"What are you hiding?" I searched her face. Her innocent expression was gone now and had been replaced by a more fitting scowl. "It was Trent, wasn't it? How long had you two been plotting against me." Her

wrinkled hands were balled into fists now, and her breathing had become uneven and was coming in jagged gasps. I knew that I should have stopped, but I couldn't. "You didn't have much luck with that plan did you?"

"You ruined everything!" She screamed as her hand flew out to slap me as she had done so many times in the past, but this time was different. I was no longer the small girl who wanted her love and approval. That little girl was gone, and in her place stood a woman. I caught her arm by the wrist before she could connect with my face and squeezed as hard as I could.

"You will never strike me again." I continued to squeeze her wrist as she struggled to free herself from my grasp. "You knew that the arrow that killed Philip was meant for me. You knew that Trent had plotted with the enemy, and you knew the secret of the Dark Army the day that he tumbled out of the woods. Because of you many men have lost their lives, and I lost a best friend. You are nothing but a traitor just like Trent."

"You can't prove any of that," she hissed.

"True, but I'm going to be watching you. The moment you make a mistake I'll be there, and you'll find yourself locked in the dungeon for the rest of your life."

"What? You won't kill me in cold blood like you did your cousin?" She gave short laugh. "You aren't fit to be a queen."

"Think what you like, but it doesn't change the fact that I will rule, not Trent, and certainly not you."

"At least he didn't involve himself with a foreigner." She struggled in my grasp again.

Of course she was referring to my relationship with Arden. "You leave him out of this. Arden is a good man, and a loyal warrior, which is more than I can say about Trent." I looked down at her sour face. Nothing would ever be right in her eyes. "I feel sorry for you."

"Sorry for me! Why?"

“Because you are so fixated on hating me that you’ve let it consume you. I pity you.” I released her wrist, and she stumbled back a step or two rubbing the place that I had gripped. It was red and might even bruise. I was sure she would run to my father and complain, but I didn’t have time to worry about that right now. I turned on my heel and began walking down the hall.

“Don’t you walk away from me!” she screamed. “I’m not finished with you!”

I turned back for a moment and said, “But I am finished with you.” I turned away from her shocked expression and continued walking. I could have continued to argue with her, but what would have been the point? My grandmother and I could fight all day for the rest of our lives, but I was done dealing with her.

I headed toward my father’s sitting room. I was sure he would be in there, and he probably hadn’t slept last night. When I reached his room, I paused for a moment and stood outside the door. I was about to knock when I heard a violent fit of coughing from inside. It lasted for a moment or two while I stood stunned outside the door. When had my father developed a cough? He had seemed fine the night before, though he hadn’t stayed for the entire dance.

Taking a deep breath, I knocked on the door. I heard him clear his throat and could imagine my father straightening himself and trying to regain his composure.

“Yes, who is it?” he called from inside.

“It’s Lillian. May I come in?”

“Of course,” he said as I opened the door. “Is something wrong? Sit down and have some tea.”

“Thank you, but I don’t think I would be able to hold it down.”

“Oh? Are you ill?”

“No, I’m just apprehensive about the battle tonight.” I looked at my father for a moment. “How are you feeling, Father?”

“I’m feeling fine. Why do you ask?”

"You just look a little tired, and I worry about you," I lied. I could have confronted him and told him that I'd heard him coughing, but I didn't think that now was the right time for that conversation. It was probably nothing, and he would surely get better once he started getting more rest.

"Are you prepared for the battle?"

"As prepared as I can be I suppose." I paused for a moment. "Father, this is the most important battle of my life. I want you to know that I am aware of how important this victory is to you and the kingdom. I will not disappoint you."

"Lillian, how could you ever disappoint me?" he said as he rushed forward and gave me a hug. Tears were streaming down both our faces. It was one of the few times that I'd ever seen my father cry. I'd seen small tears trickle down his face, but never like this. "You take care of yourself out there, and come back to me safe."

"I promise, but you have to promise me that you will get some rest."

"I promise." We pulled apart and wiped the tears from our faces. "I love you."

"I love you too, Father." I turned and left the room before either one of us started crying again.

As I went out to meet Arden and the men that he was taking to ambush the Dark Army, I felt heavy. The battle hadn't even started and it had already been a stressful day. I stopped for a moment and took a deep breath and tried to regain the calm feeling I'd found on my balcony earlier in the morning. I clutched the guardian charm in my fist as a small sense of peace washed over me. I looked to the sky and hoped that my mother was there somewhere looking down on me, and that she was proud.

Arden and his men were waiting near the front gate. I nodded to Arden, who gave me a soft smile. I turned to the men. "You men are to go with Arden away from the city. You will return to block off the woods after the battle begins. You are not to engage in the battle until you hear the signal horn blown." I scanned the faces of the men in the crowd. They

looked as tense and apprehensive as I felt. “No matter what you hear or see. You are not to engage in the battle. Part of the success of this battle depends on the Dark Army being surprised that their escape route has been blocked off. Do you understand?” The men shifted nervously and a few muttered an affirmative answer. “I said, do you understand?”

“Yes ma’am!” they shouted in unison.

“That’s better. We are going to win this battle. I can feel it. All I ask is that you fight like the men I know you are.”

“Yes ma’am!” they shouted in unison again.

“Prepare to ride out!” I turned to Arden. “Good luck tonight.”

“We don’t need luck, we need a miracle,” he whispered.

“Don’t you have faith that what Mandia said will work?”

“Yes, I do, but I must confess that I’m,” he paused for a moment, “nervous.”

“Me too,” I whispered. We stood for a moment in silence.

“Lillian, if something happens to me, I want you to know that I love you.” He leaned close to me and stared down into my eyes. I looked back into his eyes and saw so much in them. Love, respect, strength, fear, they were all there.

“I love you too,” I whispered. The men had mounted their horses and were ready to ride out. Most of them were now staring at Arden and me. “You should go. The men are ready.”

“Kiss me.”

“Right now? In front of everyone?”

“Yes, right now in front of everyone.” He was inches away from my face.

“Not in front of the men. It isn’t appropriate.”

“Lillian, this might be the last time we see each other. Despite all your brave words, one or both of us might not make it out of this battle alive.” I was sure that his eyes misted over a bit as he spoke, but I couldn’t be sure. “Kiss me goodbye.”

“All right,” I said as I leaned forward and kissed him gently at first, but he caught me up in his arms and kissed me passionately. We clung to each other for a moment or two longer. I didn’t want to let him go because what he said had been true. Depending on the outcome of the battle, we might never see each other again. There was so much more that I wanted to say, but the other men had really begun to stare at this point, though they said nothing.

“Be careful tonight,” I whispered, blinking back a tear or two. I would not cry in front of my men.

“I will.” Arden made a poor attempt to smile before he mounted his horse and rode through the front gate, and the other men followed. I silently hoped Arden would make it out of this battle alive. So many thoughts cluttered my mind, but there wasn’t time to dwell on them. I gave final instructions to the men left behind to defend the castle, and I went back into the palace to talk to Mandia one last time. The army was ready. The plan was in place, and the final battle was only a few short hours away. I was ready to meet the Dark Leader.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The final hour before sunset was a blur. I ran around making sure everything was in place. So much depended on the outcome of this battle that I could not relax. Now, I stood in the watch tower with Mandia, watching the sun slowly sink beneath the horizon. The sky was an explosion of fiery reds and oranges. My hands trembled. The enemy would be upon us in just one hour. I had never been so nervous about a battle in all my life. I had been fighting them for over a year and had never been this shaken. It felt strange to go against the Dark Army now that I knew their awful secret. I knew in my mind that the Dark Army had always been different. Why should a little extra knowledge make a difference? It should have calmed me, but it didn't. Now that I knew the truth about the Dark Leader, I was afraid. I gripped the hilt of my sword and willed myself to calm down. I was not successful. I could have reached for the charm, but decided against it. I was going to have to stand on my own.

"It is time," Mandia whispered as I jumped at the sound of her voice.

"All right, what do you want me to do?"

"Hold my hand, close your eyes, and we will begin the spell."

I reached out and clutched her hand. I'm sure that my strong grip hurt her, but she never muttered a word of complaint. Mandia began to sing the words of the spell and I followed. The moment I began to sing, I felt the power of the words flow from Mandia's hand to mine. We sang louder and the power flowed out of us into the night. The words were in a strange language that I did not understand and could not record now even if I wanted too. Mandia had refused to write the words down and had taught the spell to me verbally. She explained that the words of the

spell were too strong, and if the words were written on a page and then fell into the wrong hands, it would be disastrous for the world. This is the reason that such spells are passed from person to person in the oral tradition.

We finished weaving the spell just as the last shred of color disappeared from the sky. The blackness of night was all around us now. I stood breathless for a moment. The night was still. The animals were quiet, and not even a breath of air stirred.

"He is close now," Mandia whispered. "I can sense his presence."

"I know," I replied. "I can feel him too. Even the night seems to be afraid of his coming."

"You must go and lead your men. The Dark Army will be here very soon, and you must be ready."

"Thank you for all your help." I looked down at this small figure of a woman and didn't know what else to say. I started for the door, but at the last moment turned around. "Mandia, there's just one thing I need to know."

"Yes?"

"Can you see the outcome of the battle? Do you know what will happen?"

"I can see shadows of many things that may or may not come to pass. It is very hazy and I am weak from weaving the spell."

"Oh," I said, feeling a bit disappointed.

"Even if I could see it clearly, I would not tell you what I saw."

"Why not?"

"We have already had this conversation before. You are wasting time."

"I know." I sighed. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm just a little," I paused for a moment struggling to say the word out loud, "afraid."

"I think we are all a little afraid."

I waited for her to say something more, something comforting or at least encouraging, but she didn't. She turned and stared out into the

night. I left, closing the door to the watchtower behind me. She had already decided to watch the battle from the tower. She said she wanted to watch over me and my army, but I believe that she secretly wanted to see her brother, no matter how terrible he had become, one last time.

I walked slowly toward the front gate. The night was still silent. The only sound to be heard was my own shaky breathing. When I reached the front of my men, I could see that they were afraid. I could see it in their eyes. I wanted to say something that would give them courage, something that would comfort them, but there was nothing I could say to take away the fear. They knew as well as I that tonight was the battle of our lives.

I looked up to the city walls and signaled the head archer. He had a dual purpose tonight. As usual he and his fellow archers were to shoot down as many of the Dark Warriors as possible, but he was also to blow the signal horn the minute he saw the first enemy warrior begin to retreat toward the woods. When Arden heard the sound of the horn, he and his men would ambush the retreating army. If the plan worked, we would have them trapped.

The head archer signaled that he and his men were ready. I nodded in approval. Turning back to my men, I knew that as their leader, I had to say something. I shouted the only thing that came to my mind.

“For Twentaria!”

“For Twentaria!” the men shouted back. Soon it became a steady chant. I turned back to face the northern woods. The Dark Army was waiting there, I could feel it, and somewhere wrapped in the shadows, Arden and his men were hiding. This plan had to work. It just had to.

Suddenly, the screaming battle cry of the Dark Army pierced the night. It was the sound of the hawk screaming. The chant of the men was eclipsed and many men had to cover their ears and cower from the terrible sound. I stood staring out into the night. The Dark Leader was watching me. I could feel his terrible eyes upon me, and I would not cover my ears and duck down in fright. I touched Mandia’s knife that was safely secured in my sheath.

Had he felt the spell? Did he feel Mandia's presence as she felt his? Did he know I had the knife? Something told me that he was well aware of all these things. I only hoped he didn't know about Arden and our plot to block off the woods.

Suddenly, the enemy charged out of the woods. They didn't march in their perfect formation as they had in the past. They were running at full speed for the city gate. The archers quickly began to rain arrows down upon them, but since the invaders were running, it was more difficult to hit them. I watched as the Dark Army ran with unbelievable speed toward the city while the archers continued to shoot, frantically trying to bring as many of the Dark Warriors down as possible. I drew my sword, and the moment I felt its familiar weight in my hand, a sense of calm washed over me. I may not have known much about magic, but I knew how to use a sword, and I knew how to fight. I decided not to wait for the enemy forces to charge the city. We would meet them on the field. I screamed the order to charge and ran out to meet the Dark Army, my army following behind me.

The sound of clashing metal and cries of pain soon filled the once silent night air. Of course the archers had to stop firing arrows. With all the chaos on the battlefield, they couldn't be sure that they would only hit enemy warriors. It was a battle of swords now. I battled each warrior one at a time. Sweat poured down my face in salty streams, but my muscles didn't ache from exertion. As each Dark Warrior fell by my sword, I felt more energized, more alive.

It was strange to be fighting this battle without Arden by my side. At times I turned my head expecting to see him battling his way through the throng, but he was not there. By now he and his men should have moved into position and were at the entrance to the northern woods, waiting for the signal.

I turned my attention to the Dark Leader. He was simply sitting on his horse near the back of the battle. This time I was sure that he was staring at me. He had to know about the spell, but then why didn't he come after me? Mandia had said that he would come to challenge me, but maybe she had been wrong. I moved in his direction, but with each

step, another warrior blocked my path. They seemed to be concentrated in an effort to protect their leader, but I was determined.

Just as I was about to make another push towards the leader, I heard a voice speaking in my head. *"I told you that my brother will come to you!"*

"Mandia?" I thought. *"Is that you?"*

"Yes, it is me. Even from up here I can see very clearly what you are trying to do, and it is a mistake."

"How are you doing this? I can hear you as if you were right here speaking with me."

"I told you I have many gifts. This is one of them. Now, wait until he engages you in battle."

"But he's just standing there! By the time he gets around to fighting me, I'll be too tired from battling the rest of his men." I scowled and fended off another foe. *"Maybe that's what he wants. He wants me to be tired so that he can defeat me. I need to attack him now."*

"No Lillian, you must wait. Be patient, and trust me."

I waited for a moment, but she said nothing more, which was a relief. It had been difficult to concentrate on the battle with her messing around in my head. I would have to talk to her about that, but now was not the time. I returned my focus to the battle and did not make another push for the Dark Leader. I just hoped I wasn't worn out by the time he finally decided to enter the battle.

The night wore on and the enemy fought more fiercely than they had ever fought before. The energy that I had felt earlier was beginning to wear off, and my muscles were beginning to ache now. Sweat streamed down my body, soaking my shirt so that it clung to my skin. My limbs were beginning to feel heavy, and I had no clear sense of time. The men were tired, and I had the feeling we were quickly running out of time. The spell would be wearing off soon, and the sun would begin to rise. Everything would be lost if the Dark Leader didn't move to attack me soon. Then it happened. It was as if every member of the invading army realized all at once that something was very wrong. Several cast a glance

at their leader, but he sat on his black horse motionless and seemingly indifferent to the concerns of his men.

The Dark Warriors, having received no answer from their leader, took matters into their own hands. Some began running for the northern woods, but my men pursued them relentlessly. Their leader was enraged and screamed what must have been an order to keep fighting, but I could not understand the sounds that spilled out of his mouth. They weren't human. His warriors did not listen and continued their flight toward the woods. I heard the clear, loud sound of the signal horn and hoped Arden and his men were ready. It was out of my hands. I had to trust Arden's ability to command. I didn't have very much time to wonder though because the leader was riding towards me. Mandia had been right. He was finally coming to fight me.

I stood for a moment debating what action to take. I was at a disadvantage not only because I had already been fighting for most of the night and was more than a little tired, but also because he was riding a horse, and I was standing on the ground. I had to get him off the horse. As he came charging toward me, I stood my ground. He was nearly on top of me, when at the last minute I leaped out of the way and slashed at the side of his horse with my sword. I was off balance and crashed to the ground. I rolled on the grass and quickly leaped up, fully expecting him to be charging me again, but I had cut the strap that held his saddle on the horse. The Dark Leader had tumbled to the ground several feet away from where I was standing. His horse deserted him and rode off toward the woods with the rest of his fleeing men.

I watched as he quickly picked himself up off the ground and turned to face me. We stood looking at each other for a moment or two. My legs were twitching, and I desperately wanted to charge him, but Mandia's words echoed in my mind. I had to wait until he attacked me. I took a deep breath and stared into the blackness that was his face.

"You want a fight? Are you tired of standing by and letting your men die in your place? Then fight me! I'm ready. Are you?" I shouted. The Dark Leader remained motionless, but I was determined to make him charge me. "Or are you too much of a coward now that your men, and

even your horse have deserted you!” He uttered an ear piercing shriek that caused me to flinch, but only for a moment. “Coward!” I shouted again. The Dark Leader had had enough. In an instant, he was running full speed toward me.

Chapter Thirty

As the Dark Leader charged, I didn't have much time to react. I felt a bit foolish for having shouted at him and bringing this on myself, but there was no time for self pity. This was the battle that would decide who would be the victor of the war. I braced myself for the impact. It was all I could do. Our swords came together in a terrible crash. Our collision was so powerful I thought our swords would shatter, but they didn't. The fight had begun.

My arms ached and the Dark Leader was so strong. The night was filled with the sounds of swords clanging together and my increasingly labored breathing. Sweat streamed down my face and into my eyes burning them, but there was no time to wipe my eyes. I had to ignore the pain. I lost sense of everything except the fight. My only thought was to win.

As the struggle wore on, I searched desperately for an opportunity to gain the upper hand. I had to get some sort of advantage if I was going to be able to get close enough to plunge the magic knife into his heart, but he blocked all of my moves, every one of my advances seemed to be anticipated and was stopped before I really had time to execute my very best moves. It was as if he could read my mind. Then, a startling and frightening thought occurred to me. What if he could read my mind? His sister Mandia had gained that power from the fairy. Why not him as well?

The moment the dreadful thought had fully formed in my mind, I knew it to be true. In that moment, I faltered. The Dark Leader, seeing his opportunity, struck at once. Time slowed as he knocked the sword from my hand. I watched it fly end over end and finally come to rest

somewhere in the tall grass of the battlefield. I should have run after it, but I knew that I would never reach it in time. I stood frozen. I had failed. There was nothing to do now except await my death.

I expected him to charge at me and finish me off quickly, but he didn't. He just stood there staring at me. Finally he spoke in a thin, rasping voice. "Will you give up so quickly?" He took a step forward. "I thought you a more formidable enemy than that."

"I am not the one cheating."

"Cheating?"

"You were reading my mind and were able to anticipate all my moves." I cleared my throat. I knew I was being rather bold, but if I was about to die, it didn't really matter. "Don't try and deny it. I could feel it."

A strong breeze began to blow. My hair, which had been braided at the onset of the battle, was now its usual tangled mess and blew across my face. I looked to the horizon. The spell would be wearing off soon. I could feel the coming of the sunrise in my bones.

"Yes, I was reading your mind. How did you know such a power existed?"

"Your sister told me." I shifted nervously. Why wasn't he attacking me?

"You're lying," he said after a long pause.

"Look in my mind, and you will know I speak the truth." I knew it was dangerous to let him explore my mind. He would see all our carefully laid plans, but it didn't matter now.

"Mandia is alive then."

"Yes, she is." I stood staring at the blackness that would have been his face, and thought that I saw a flicker of what might have been his eyes, but it was gone in an instant. Surely he had seen Mandia's message of love and forgiveness. There was no need for me to say it out loud anymore.

"Retrieve your sword. We will finish this now," he said lowering his sword. "I will not intrude on your thoughts again."

I looked at him, trying to decide whether or not I could trust him, but I again found myself looking to the horizon. Time was running out. I ran as quickly as I could manage to the place where I had seen my sword fall, and found it nestled in the grass streaked with the blood of my enemies. I picked it up, and again felt its familiar weight in my hands. I turned and saw the Dark Leader had kept his promise and had not moved. He was merely waiting for my return.

I walked back to stand in the same place I had been standing before and raised my sword. In the same instant, we both moved to attack. Our swords clashed together with great force, but I was tired and was making careless mistakes. The Dark Leader had kept to his word and was giving me a fair fight, and I was losing it. The ache in my arm had changed and was now a nearly unbearable throbbing. I was merely warding off his blows, too tired to advance against him. Defeat seemed imminent.

All at once I felt a sharp pain in my arm, and then an equally sharp pain in my leg. As I fell to my knees, I realized I was bleeding. The Dark Leader had cut me, and it had brought me to the ground. He stood over me and raised his sword to deal the final blow. My mind was racing. Was it really going to end this way? I dropped my sword and bowed my head in shame, but with my lowered eyes, I saw the magic knife safely tucked away in my belt. I had forgotten it was even there. This was my last chance. I would not be executed on the battlefield. I would die fighting. I gripped the handle of the knife and prepared to make my move.

As the Dark Leader brought his sword down, I shifted to the side ignoring the pain in my leg and arm. His blade came within inches of my arm as I stood and plunged the magic knife deep into his heart. I released my grip on the knife as the Dark Leader, stunned, stumbled back a couple steps. His sword fell to the ground as he stood there breathing heavily. I grabbed my sword and prepared to strike again, unsure of what would happen next. Would he make a final attempt to fight?

As I watched, he fell to his knees and let out a final piercing scream as the first rays of the sun peaked over the horizon. A tiny wave of panic flowed through me. Had the death blow come in time? Would the bodies

disappear? My fears were soon laid to rest because as the sun continued to rise, the bodies remained in the field. The few Dark Warriors who hadn't been killed by my men fell to the ground and died the moment I killed their leader.

A shiver went through my body as my men's cheers began to fill the morning air. It was over. It was really over. The Dark Leader was dead, and his army would never return. I had done it. My thoughts quickly turned to Arden. I had to find him. I started running toward the northern woods. He would probably still be in that area. I scanned each face as I hobbled through the field. The deepest wounds on my arm and leg were bleeding and would need bandaging. Pain coursed through my body with each beat of my heart making it nearly impossible to think clearly. I should have reported to the infirmary, but I had to find Arden first.

When I reached the edge of the woods, there was still no sign of Arden. A wave of nausea passed over me. I took a deep breath and braced myself against a tree until the feeling passed. I tried to ignore the steady stream of blood that was trickling down my leg. I'd go to see the doctor later.

One of the younger recruits came to stand by me. "Are you all right, ma'am? You look a bit pale."

"I'm fine. Can you tell me where Arden is?" Even to me my voice sounded weak and shaky.

"Hasn't anyone told you the news?" He said looking at the ground. "Arden is missing. No one has seen him since the battle ended. They are searching through the dead as we speak."

"Missing?" My breath caught in my throat as the world around me began to spin. I closed my eyes to make it stop. How could Arden be missing? "I have to find him." I pushed away from the tree. "I have to organize a search party."

"With all due respect, ma'am, I think you ought to have your wounds tended first. They are bleeding quite heavily. Let me escort you to the infirmary." He reached out and tried to put his arm around me.

“They are just scratches, and I don’t need your help. I am fine. I have to find Arden.” I pushed him away, but I only managed to take a few steps before the world around me began to spin out of control and then suddenly grew dim. I reached for the tree trunk again, but couldn’t manage to steady myself in time. I tumbled to the ground, and the last thing I remember before I slipped into unconsciousness was the young recruit kneeling next to me as he yelled for help.

Chapter Thirty-One

I woke with the vague sense that I was laying in my bed. I cautiously opened my eyes and blinked back the blurriness that clouded my vision. A single candle flickered in the gentle breeze that blew in through the open balcony door. The sun was setting, and the clouds were a million shades of pinks and purples.

What had happened? How long had I been asleep? How had I ended up back in my room? I tried to sit up, but a sharp pain shot through my leg, forcing me to lie back down. Why did my leg hurt? I tried to focus, but my head began to ache. I closed my eyes as sleep overtook me again.

The next time I woke, it was night. The candle had been blown out, but the balcony door was still open. Moonlight streamed through bathing my room in a soft silvery glow. Slowly, I propped myself back up on my pillows and realized that my left arm and my right leg had been bandaged. Then, it all came rushing back to me. I had been fighting the Dark Leader, and he had cut me before I stabbed him with Mandia's magic knife. What had happened then? I closed my eyes and focused. I had gone to look for Arden. My heart leapt to my throat. Arden was missing.

As I moved to get out of bed, Katrina came rushing through the door. "Lillian you're awake!" She ran to my bedside and hugged me tightly. "I was so worried!"

"Why would you be worried? How long have I been asleep?"

"Not very long, but the cut on your leg was deep." She took my hand and squeezed it tightly. "You're lucky that recruit brought you to the doctor when he did. You had lost a lot of blood on top of being physically

exhausted. Why didn't you take care of your injury as soon as the battle was over?"

"I didn't realize how deep the wound was." That was only partially true. I had been so focused on finding Arden that I hadn't cared about anything else.

"Well, when you collapsed, the recruit carried you all the way to the doctor's."

"I can't believe I fainted in front of one of my men."

"You were hurt and you needed help. You were just too stubborn to get help on your own."

"Katrina, has anyone seen Arden?" I said, changing the subject.

"There is no sense in lying to you. He is still missing."

"Then he wasn't among the dead on the battlefield." I breathed a sigh of relief.

"No, but they are still combing through the woods. The trees are very thick and it is taking some time."

"Where could he have gone?" I muttered. "I should be out there looking for him," I said as I started to get out of bed.

"You are in no shape to go anywhere," Katrina said and gently pushed me back onto the mass of pillows. "The doctor left strict orders that you are to remain in bed."

"It's just a cut on my leg."

"Yes, but you still need to rest. The battle was the longest you've ever fought. You're mentally and physically exhausted."

"Where is Father?" I said abruptly. Shouldn't he have been here? Was his cough worse? Did Katrina even know about the cough? Should I say something?

"He's already retired for the night." Katrina looked down. She was lying. I could tell that there was more to the story.

"Katrina you didn't lie to me about Arden. Don't start lying to me about Father. Is he all right?" I grabbed her chin and pushed it up, forcing her to look me in the eyes.

"All right, All right," she said as she pushed my hand away. She took a deep breath. "He's been sick for awhile and has been hiding it from all of us." She paused for a moment.

"And?" My heart was beating fast. So Katrina did know about Father's cough. How long had she known?

"He was watching the battle with one of his personal servants, and he collapsed."

"Is he all right?" I said impatiently. Katrina never seemed to be able to get to the point fast enough. I could tell that I'd hurt her feelings so I added quickly, "I'm sorry for yelling. I'm just concerned."

"Yes, he's fine. The doctor gave him some herbs, and he's resting."

"Does he know we won the war?"

"Yes, but I didn't tell him about your injury, or about Arden being missing. I didn't see the point in worrying him when he was ill."

"He would want to know. He'll be angry that you didn't tell him." I sighed. It was so much to take in. Then, another thought occurred to me. "Where is Mandia?"

"I was wondering when you would ask about her," she said, taking a deep breath. "I was watching the battle from the tower with her."

"Why? You've hardly even spoken to her while she's been here."

"I know, but I had this feeling that she didn't want to be alone."

"A feeling?" I thought of Mandia speaking to me through my mind and wondered if she had called Katrina to her in the same way. I debated whether or not to tell Katrina about Mandia's strange ability, but decided to keep it to myself.

"Yes, I had a feeling she didn't want to be alone." she said, a bit annoyed at my interrupting her. "When you stabbed the Dark Leader with the knife, it was as though she herself had been stabbed as well. She could feel it. As she fell to the ground clutching her chest in pain, I ran over to help her, but the moment I reached her, the sun came up and she disappeared."

"She disappeared?"

"Yes, she vanished."

"What does that mean? Is she dead?"

"I don't know. I was hoping she had explained that to you."

"No, she didn't." Was Mandia dead? Her brother's body hadn't disappeared and neither had the bodies of the enemy warriors. Why had Mandia disappeared? "I have absolutely no idea. Did she say anything when it happened?"

"No, she just screamed and vanished."

"That's strange," I muttered. I hadn't expected something like that to happen. I hoped it didn't mean that something had gone wrong.

"Well, I should let you get some sleep."

"I've already slept all day." I could tell by the expression on her face that there was no use arguing with her. "All right, I'll try and sleep some more, but you have to promise to tell me the moment you hear anything about Arden. I don't care if I'm sleeping, you come and wake me immediately."

"I promise." She stood. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

After Katrina left, I made an honest effort to fall back to sleep, but no matter how tightly I closed my eyes or how still I forced myself to lie, I couldn't manage to sleep. I hadn't had a regular night of sleep in so long that I just couldn't force myself to stay in bed another minute. I slowly got out of bed and tested my leg. The wound still stung a little, and the stitches felt tight, but I could walk. My injury wasn't nearly as bad as Katrina had made it sound, but then she always had a way of exaggerating things. I pulled my robe on and stepped out onto the balcony. The night was cool, and the air was filled with the sounds of night birds and insects. I felt an automatic impulse to listen and watch the blackness of the night fearful that the Dark Warriors would attack, but they would not be coming back. We had defeated them, and I had killed the Dark Leader. I took a deep breath and relaxed as the realization set in. The Dark Army was never coming back.

My thoughts turned to Arden. Where was he? Was he lost in the woods somewhere? Was he dead? I shook my head and forced that thought from my mind. He couldn't be dead. Things had just started to happen between us. But what if he was dead? I had told him I loved him, but I had still kept him at arm's length. I hadn't really let him into my life, and now I might never have the chance. I felt helpless standing there staring out into the night knowing Arden was out there somewhere. What if he was hurt and couldn't make it back to the city? I couldn't just stand there and wait for someone else to find him. He was too important to me.

I slipped out of my robe and turned around to go to my closet and get dressed when I stopped in my tracks. I let my robe fall to the ground. Arden was standing like a ghost in a pool of moonlight in the middle of my room. He was still wearing the clothes he had worn during the battle. They were streaked with dirt and stained with blood. He had come straight to my room from wherever he had been. His hair still hung in a long braid down the center of his back.

"Arden?" I said cautiously. "Is that really you?"

"Yes," he whispered.

I stood there frozen to the ground just staring at him.

"You're hurt," he said pointing to the bandage on my arm.

"It's nothing. My leg is worse."

"How bad?"

"Not very." We were still just standing there. Neither one of us had moved. "How did you get in here? Does anyone know that you're here?"

"No." He paused. "What were you thinking just now?"

"I was thinking about you."

"Oh?"

"I was going to get dressed and go out to look for you."

"But you're hurt."

"I know, but I couldn't stand here and wait for someone else to find you."

"It seems that I have found you," he said with just the faintest of smiles.

"What happened to you? Where have you been? Where were you when the battle ended? Why didn't you come to me sooner?"

"So many questions," he said as he unfastened his breastplate and set it, along with his sword, on a table. He took a few steps towards me.

"I'm sorry. I just—" I didn't have a chance to finish. Arden closed the gap between us, put his arms around me, and pulled me close. We stood there, just holding each other for a moment. I leaned against his chest and listened to him breathe, but after a few moments had passed, I started to pull away.

"Don't push me away, Lillian. Please." His voice was quiet and pleading.

"But there are so many things that need to be said, things that need to be explained."

"They can wait until tomorrow. Please don't send me away." Slowly, he kissed my forehead, then my cheek, and finally our lips met. The connection sparked a tiny flame within my soul, and as the kisses became more and more passionate, the tiny spark grew until it was a blazing fire that threatened to consume me from the inside out. "Please."

Before I fully realized what we were doing, we had moved in a flurry of kisses and caresses through the room and had come to stand next to my bed. It looked so warm and inviting, though the covers were still disheveled from all my tossing and turning. This time it was Arden who pulled away from me.

"Are you sure that you want to do this?"

"Are you?" I said, gasping for breath, my whole body tingling with anticipation. I wanted this more than anything in the world.

"Yes. God, yes, but it's a big decision and you're injured." He took a deep breath. "I want this, but I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't hurt me," I whispered as I slipped my nightgown over my head and tossed it to land somewhere in the middle of the room. "I promise."

Arden gazed down at my bare skin, taking in every bit of me as he pushed a few stray curls away from my face. I shivered a bit as his warm skin brushed against mine. I took his hand in mine and gently pulled him down on the bed. I leaned over him, and my hands trembled as I undid each button of his shirt one at a time. I spread his shirt wide open and looked down at him. His shoulders were broad and muscular. I leaned down and kissed him slowly, deliberately drawing out each moment as I let my hands explore Arden's body.

Suddenly, it became too much for him to bear and before I could react, he had flipped me over and was leaning over top of me. His hair had come free of the braid and spilled around us like a silk curtain as he covered my neck with kisses. He caressed my breasts and covered them with kisses as well. The tingling sensation was replaced by a new ache, something I'd never experienced before, but Arden knew what I wanted. He looked down into my eyes as his hands moved lower and caressed my most intimate of places. The tension in my body built, and just when I thought I couldn't bear it any longer, sweet release washed over me like a wave. He leaned over me again with such tenderness in his eyes.

"I love you," he whispered in my ear. His breath felt hot on my skin.

"I love you too." Then he kissed me more passionately, and I was lost in his arms.

The next morning I woke to the sunlight streaming through my open window. As I blinked away the sleepy feeling in my eyes, I suddenly realized that I was lying naked in bed next to Arden, and the memory of last night jumped to the front of my mind. My first impulse was to leap out of bed and figure out what to do next.

What would people say if they knew Arden had spent the night? What would my father think? Should I sneak him out of the palace? How would I do that without anyone seeing him? I shifted in order to wake Arden up, but when I looked down at his face, my moment of panic passed. His long black hair was spread over the pillow and his breathing was slow and even. His face looked so serene. I wondered if I would ever experience that kind of calm. I nestled back into the blankets and rested my head on his bare chest. He stirred for a moment, smiled, and put his

arm around me. I lay there in bed just listening to the sound of his strong steady heartbeat. It didn't matter what people thought. All that mattered was Arden being here with me. I would figure out how to handle anyone's and everyone's reaction later.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The reaction to Arden being in my room overnight was not nearly the crisis situation I had imagined. When we finally decided to quit hiding in my room, we simply walked out as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I had worried that the other warriors would lose respect for me and Arden, but they seemed indifferent to the situation. Most people were just happy that he had come back safe and unharmed. Though my sister and even a few maids cast a few sly glances in my direction when they didn't think anyone else was looking.

As for Arden's disappearance after the battle, it wasn't really mysterious. Embarrassed, he'd explained that one of the Dark Warriors had managed to push through the line that blocked off the woods. Arden ran after him, going deep into the forest. He'd been so intent on catching the Dark Warrior that he hadn't been paying attention to the terrain. He'd tripped and fallen into a hole. On the way down, he'd hit his head and fallen unconscious. The hole wasn't very deep, so when he'd woken up he climbed out and came looking for me.

My father was feeling much better after resting and taking the herbs that had been given to him by the doctor, though his cough did not subside as I had hoped it would. I had a feeling that it never would. The war with the Dark Army had changed him. The dark circles and deep wrinkles did not smooth away, and he moved more slowly than he had in the past. His eyes regained some of their old sparkle, but it still wasn't quite the same. As I had told Katrina, he was angry she had not told him about my injuries or that Arden had been missing for a time, but his anger was brief and he was soon planning a grand ball to celebrate the victory over the Dark Army. I wanted to send small groups of warriors

out to discover just how much damage the enemy had done, but my father would hear nothing of it, insisting that it could wait a little longer. Now was the time to celebrate and rest. I bit my lip to keep from protesting, but realized he was probably right. The men were tired and needed to rest.

The ball was the most lavish and extravagant event my father could manage after just having fought a war. Everyone in the kingdom who wanted to come was invited. The response was so great that the ball had to be moved outside to accommodate all the guests. I danced with Arden under the stars that night while my father watched us and smiled, and when the girl with the squeaky voice approached Arden for a dance, he smiled and declined saying he was already taken.

My grandmother did not come to the ball celebrating the victory over the Dark Army or even come to congratulate me and my men. I hadn't really expected her too. A couple of years ago, I would have been hurt and offended, but not anymore. It didn't matter that she didn't think I was a real woman. For the first time in my life, I was feeling content with who I was, and I wasn't going to let her make me feel otherwise.

Grandmother also did not eat dinner with us in the evenings anymore, preferring to eat alone in her room. When she wasn't prowling around the palace, she stayed in her room. All of the servant girls were afraid of her, and I had taken to locking my bedroom door at night. In her present state of mind, there was no telling what she would do. She had been involved in Trent's betrayal. Of that, I was certain. Without any proof, all I can do was wait and watch. She would never be happy until she was rid of me. Now that I knew she was a threat, I would never turn my back on her.

After the ball, life in the kingdom went on. Repairs to the city were made and a new gate was constructed. Father let me send men out to discover what damage had been done and offered aid to anyone who had survived. The destruction we found was extensive, and there weren't many survivors to be found.

Thench had been completely destroyed. All its small villages had been turned to dust, and all that remained of the capital city was the burnt

shell of the once great palace. Those few that had survived came back to live in Twentaria. As my army explored farther, we found that a few other kingdoms had suffered the same fate.

Some time later, I was thinking about Mandia and wandered into the room where she had stayed. There I found a note addressed to me on her dressing table. I picked it up carefully, wondering why no one else had seen it before. The maids had cleaned this room several times, and yet no one knew anything about it. It seemed to have just appeared. The letter was brief.

Dear Lillian,

Congratulations on your victory against the Dark Army. I know that it was a difficult fight, and there is much to be done now that the battle is over, but there are more challenges that await you. The destruction of the Dark Army has left the world greatly changed. I will not explain this to you, but you will understand what I mean soon enough. I will always be watching over you with your mother somewhere among the stars. Remember to cherish your guardian charm, and trust in its warnings. I wish you luck in all your future endeavors.

Mandia

Chills ran up and down my spine as I read the letter that had mysteriously appeared. Mandia had known the outcome of the battle, and she had known that she would not be there afterward. Had she known what pain she would endure? The tone of her letter was so calm that I couldn't be sure. I wondered what Mandia meant in saying that the world was changed, but as always, she was right. I found out soon enough.

The changes were subtle at first. The colors of the flowers and trees seemed brighter, birds seemed to sing more sweetly, and even the air had a new freshness about it. It was as if a weight had literally been lifted off the entire world, but that wasn't the end of it. Soon, I was hearing reports of strange creatures in the woods and lakes, creatures that until then had been believed to be creatures only of legend and myth. Even I

swore that out of the corner of my eye I had seen tiny winged creatures flitting about in the fields of flowers.

It was as if the world was filled with magic, though I dared not tell these things to my father. I went to Elsa who confirmed my suspicions. The destruction of the Dark Army had released something into the world that had been dormant for a long time. I decided to take up my mother's old habit of visiting Elsa. I wasn't sure if all these new creatures and magic were going to be good. The world was changing, and Elsa could help me understand what sort of a kingdom I might be ruling someday.

Arden and I were still very much together and spent as much time together as possible. He had become a permanent fixture at the palace, where my father welcomed him with open arms, though he continually hinted that a wedding must soon take place. I had to admit that the thought of Arden asking me to marry him would be nice, or maybe I should ask him, but with all the repairs and new happenings in the kingdom and the other lands, it wasn't the main focus of my thoughts. I was simply too busy to think of such things.

The nights were no longer a source of fear, and if I woke in a cold sweat screaming from some unsettling dream, Arden was always there by my side, ready to comfort and hold me until I drifted back to sleep. Sometimes I still felt tiny waves of panic over what our future might hold, but then I would into his eyes and realize that he loved me, and for now that was more than I ever could have hoped for.

About the Author

Send an email to Lyn Mangold at lynmangold@yahoo.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Lyn Mangold! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/<lynmangoldgroup>

Smelling like an overcooked pig was only the start of a bad day...

Nimue's Price

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Nimue enters the shining city of Camelot with her order plain: seduce Merlin or lose her family.

She knows his magic, how he can slip under a woman's skin and work his charm. It's there in the shine of his dark eyes, eyes that see through to her soul. Merlin knows what she is.

In the searing light beneath the Round Room, Merlin discovers that the Lady Nimue is the same as him: a Seer. Now he must resist their attraction to save his own sanity. But a new enemy threatens Camelot with a weapon so destructive, he is forced to join with her and reach into the far future to save Camelot.

Merlin has always known that knowledge has a high price. But will Nimue be willing to pay hers?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Nimue's Price*:

Nimue lay on the stuffed hay mattress and stared up at the curve of the ceiling. The torch cast a weak golden glow over the smooth stones and left most of the room in thick darkness. Merlin had dumped her there and bolted the door, fixing one of his devices. One that clicked and twisted and secured her better than stone and mortar.

She turned and punched her pillow.

"Saved by an invading army." She let out a slow sigh. "Well, saved for now."

At least Merlin had let her eat, bathe and rest.

"Not exactly going to plan, is it." A bitter laugh escaped her. "Seems I'm not that irresistible after all."

"You are to him."

Nimue's heart stopped.

A Voice. A Voice in her head. Inside her head.

Her neck tightened, a dull throb of pain spreading over the base of her skull. Nimue breathed against it and willed herself to be calm. There was something familiar about the voice. She'd heard it in a dream... No. The memory of searing white light and endless pain rushed over her. Not a dream, a nightmare.

"You're...you're Them."

She felt the twist of a smile as if she wore it herself. "One of Them." The press of quick spikes into her skull, sharp, fleeting, forced a gasp. "A new mind. Fresh. Free from Merlin's fixed paths. Yes. You'll do very nicely."

"What do you want?"

A grin ran a saw across her brain. "We know what you're doing here."

"I..."

"Don't bother to lie, Nimue. We know all, We see all. Your little scheme with Morgan is open and obvious to Us."

Nimue bit into her lip and tasted her own blood. Fire surged down her spine and she curled her body tight, trying to deny the pain. "Please...I..."

"We have plans for Merlin. And you are a vital part of them."

Nimue groaned against the rapid pulses of sharp pain scraping through every nerve, every muscle. "What do you mean?"

"You will take everything that Merlin has. But not yet." A short pause and the pain washed over her and away. "He is coming. Remember. This is our secret. Or I will come to live in that sweet body of yours."

Nimue breathed in and out. Slowly. So slowly. She slid her knees down from her chest, stretched and found the agony gone. She rolled onto her back and let the tears slip down her face into her pillow. Damn it. And damn the Iselin Dal to whatever hell They—

She cut off that thought.

If They knew everything, They had to know that Morgan had her sisters. That part of the bargain she had struck was for their safety.

Nimue sat up and wiped her hand over her mouth, wiped away the evidence of the Iselin Dal's invasion of her mind. Her bare feet curled into the cold stone of the floor. Well, now she had two masters.

The clank and clink of the lock broke into her thoughts. A hiss and then bolts shot back. The door groaned.

The bright flare of a torch burst over the cell and Merlin glared at her. "They said I need you."

A bitter laugh escaped her. "Nice to be wanted."

Yes, two masters. And now Merlin made three.

A smart-talking witch and a ghostly deputy travel another dimension to fulfill a centuries-old legend, and find a love that transcends every world imaginable.

The Saints of Midland

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Amanda Sims is a woman with a problem. Her brother disappeared in the woods on Halloween night. When she enters the forest with enigmatic, sexy-as-hell deputy Josh Kent, the last thing this self-professed witch expects is a spiritual presence the size of the Grand Canyon.

Josh holds his own secrets. He recognizes the entity in the forest, and offers to trade his immortal soul for that of Amanda's brother. But the Keeper of the Way has other ideas.

When Amanda offers a part of herself in exchange for her brother's safe passage, the Keeper thrusts her and Josh into another land. A land where scarlet-tipped grain waves across an endless landscape, where parrots speak the Queen's English, where the dead walk and where she hears of the prophecy for the first time.

Legend speaks of a human witch and an Earth-walker who will free the lost souls of Midland. But from there the details are murky, doled out in bits and pieces as they travel the countryside, encountering spirits in every conceivable shape and form.

But Amanda and Josh find more than the prophecy in Midland—they find a love that transcends every world, every dimension, imaginable.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Saints of Midland*:

The Manticore's segmented tail quivered over its back, darting between us and Rick like a heat-seeking missile. Its blue, blue eyes were shockingly reminiscent of Gabriel and the Mage's, cutting right through me, down to what made me Amanda.

“Wrong, buddy, help is here,” I grated, heart thundering in my ears from terror and adrenaline and something that approached joy. Deep within me, I’d actually been relishing this confrontation, no matter how much I denied it.

“What in the hell are you trying to do?” I yelled at him, fury and anticipation bubbling through me. This was our trial to pass or fail, not Rick’s.

“Just trying to even up the odds, Lady Amanda,” he answered coolly, over his shoulder, never taking his eyes off the Manticore. “I know much more about this particular beast than you ever will.”

The Manticore unleashed a volley of stingers, embedding them in the ground at Rick’s feet. Its eyes flickered on each member of our party, vibrant and frighteningly intelligent. This was no mindless monster. Rick had been right, earlier in the morning. It would take our combined wills, and cooperation, to make it past him alive.

“It’s not your battle, Rick. It’s ours.” Josh’s voice rumbled from next to me, reinforcing my original thought as we closed in behind our suicidal friend.

I raised my hands skyward, ring finger numb with the energy flowing from my blue amber, flowing into me. I wasn’t positive of what I was doing, but knew that it felt right. The words tumbled from my lips easily, without forethought, the power rocketing through me with the strength and addictive force of heroin.

“Hera, queenly wife of Zeus, I call upon you now; Lend to me the strength of old, your lion’s mighty roar; I promise power used for good, open Fate’s beastly door.”

The air around us compressed, popping my ears and sending a screaming protest through my muscles. My thoughts flew in a hundred different directions, and then focused on the sensation of my body pressing into the ground with awesome force. Now I knew what pilots and racecar drivers felt when they experienced the pull of increased gravity. It felt as if my eyes were going to pop out of my head.

Even though a good hundred feet separated us from the beast, it seemed as if we were standing right in front of it, as if the ground had been eaten up in a fold of time and space.

A shimmering light metamorphosed between us and the Manticore, taking the form of an enormous lion the size of a horse. The beast turned his shaggy, tawny head toward me, almost in acknowledgement, then turned his massive body back to the Manticore. It advanced with a mighty roar that shook the air around us and pushed the trees into a frenzy. Rick tailed behind him, walking stick unsheathed to reveal a wicked-looking rapier.

The Manticore stood its ground, tail whipping back and forth, jaws clashing and foaming. It let loose a barrage of stingers which passed through the lion harmlessly, barely missing Rick, and spearing the ground at our feet.

Josh and I stared at the foot-long stilettos inches from our toes, oblivious of everything but those deadly needles.

For the first time, my mortality loomed before me. I may have *thought* I was in danger before, but it was nothing compared to this. True terror surged through me for the first time ever, immobilizing me as even my breath stuttered to a stop in my chest.

My heart thudded uncertainly against my breastbone, so loud and strong I thought it would pop out of my chest, as I stood there, frozen for the worst possible second in time.

The lion looped to the left, reaching out with an enormous paw, now substantial, and knocked the Manticore off balance.

Shocked into motion, Josh and I surged behind the two in the gap left by the beast's momentary lapse in firepower. I was still scared as shit, but there was no way in hell I was going to let my friends down, even if my arms and legs felt like Jell-O.

I wasn't sure what I was going to do, but there was no way Rick was doing this alone. It was Three Musketeers time...all for one and one for all. Gayla, Yvonne and Miguel were right behind us, Yvonne chanting something, I had no idea what, but the warm security of her spell settled

over us and bolstered my courage, giving me a strength I didn't know I had.

Using the fold in time and space to his advantage, Rick darted in to the beast's right, using the lion as a diversion, voice raised as he repeated Richard the Lionhearted's passage triumphantly.

The Manticore turned his attention to Rick, ignoring the lion and reached out, clawed hands grasping Rick by the arms and torso, rending his flesh in long, bloodless strips.

Gorge rose in my stomach at the sight of that pale, gory sight, at the ivory sheen of bone that should never have seen the light of day. I gagged reflexively, but forced myself on despite the somersaults my gut insisted on.

We *would* save Rick from his own foolishness.

Rick fell to the ground screaming, a series of long, banshee wails, and dropped his blade as the Manticore stripped flesh from bone.

With an inhuman burst of speed, Josh caught up Rick's walking stick, the blade dancing in the mid-morning sun, light shimmering off of it in impossible rainbows before he slid it home, slicing the creature's head off.

The unnatural skull rolled away to rest facing us, unholy blue eyes still blinking, still staring at me, freezing me in my tracks fifteen feet away. Its body continued to writhe, tail whipping as it sent off volley after volley of stingers, driving the rest of our party back as they strained and darted, trying to find a way through the barrage, but missing me in some fantastical quirk of fate.

Dropping the point of the blade, Josh thrust deep into the Manticore's chest, twisting and tearing flesh as he forced the sword upward with pure strength and surety of purpose.

With a shriek that whipped the trees into a maelstrom and echoed through my bones like a call from the netherworld, the Manticore collapsed on top of Rick, thick, viscous blood seeping from its vile body.

Josh struggled to pull the Manticore off Rick, but the beast was too massive for even his superhuman efforts.

Please let him be all right. Please let him be alive under that monster. The mantra rolled through my brain as I bolted forward on stumbling feet, then was stopped in my tracks by the gigantic lion.

I debated going around him for about half a second, but relented, knowing this had to be dealt with first, and fast. I stepped forward until I was nose-to-nose with the beast. It looked at me with intelligent, caramel-colored eyes. I extended a hand, palm out, the blood thrumming wildly through my veins, dread stealing at my heart, but my voice steady.

“Blessed be and merry meet, your purpose here is done; we journey on the Eight-Fold Path, an in harm none, my will be done.” I lowered my hand. *“Goddess greetings to your queen, another battle won, our prayers will go to her tonight, with the setting of the sun.”*

The lion stepped away from me, and disappeared in the same fold of light we’d witnessed earlier, this time manifested by a vacuum of sound.

Just like that I was back across the clearing, a hundred feet from the body of the Manticore, Josh and Rick.

I raced to Rick, but was beaten by Miguel, who helped Josh pull the body of the beast off our fallen comrade.

He gazed up at me with eyes wracked with pain, a smile on his lips. “Well done, Lady Amanda, Master Josh. I daresay this quest will be a success after all.” With that he went limp.

I dropped to my knees, reaching out to clasp his hand in my own. The same freezing cold I’d felt from Gayla and Yvonne was there, but dissipated almost instantly. As quickly as he’d begun to manifest his ghostly existence, it was gone. I felt him grow insubstantial in my grasp. He tightened his hand one last time, and then was gone, his corporeal body disappearing into a hazy mist.

I sat down hard on the ground, my legs folding beneath me bonelessly, dumbfounded and more empty than I’d ever felt in my life. This was not how it was supposed to be! We weren’t supposed to lose good people, people I cared for, to the Mage. Even with the Manticore defeated, it shouldn’t have ended like this.

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