

WHISPERS OF A LEGEND,

PART ONE

SHADOWS OF THE PAST

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Part One

SHADOWS OF THE PAST

By Carrie James Haynes

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the ones I love.
Bob- I would never have followed my dream without you.
Gary, Tracy and Becca Lee- you are the reason I write.

Whispers of a Legend

Part One

Shadows of the Past

The legend, they say, is whispered within the winds along the magnificent Preda Mountain Range, the words and deeds never to be forgotten of the Time of the Nuxvenom.

Little children sing to the glory of the Sordarins. Young lads praise their heroes of the past with dreams of following within their footsteps. Old men bask in the deeds of another time, a time when the Sordarins crushed the impending threat and once more Scarladin was safe.

The mighty Sordarins, rulers of the sky! The people look high up in the clouds and see their warriors soaring under the sun and know they are safe and secure in their world; they never to have to worry about the threat of the Arachnideans or the dreaded Asmeodai, the ones whose quest seeks only to destroy all the Sordarins have ever known!

The Sordarins have slept well over the years secure in their knowledge the Great One watches over them, knowing that the legends hold a mighty warrior will emerge if threatened again, born with a destiny only to defend their world.

But subtle changes have emerged. Little by little fear begins to resurface that their world; their very existence is once again threatened. They look to the skies anxiously awaiting their warrior; questioning perchance if the Great One has forgotten them.

I know this how? For I am the one born to defend their world. I, Kela Calledwdele, was born a Euchoun. I am their warrior.

CHAPTER ONE

Nottesdone

The bitter scene of my earliest memory has been etched forever in my mind. I have dreamed about it often. Oh, how I remembered the bitter chill in the air and my beautiful

mother, Princess Eufamia Calledwdele, gazing up into the darkness of the night. Unbeknownst to her, I was in the shadows, watching, not understanding within myself that I had been called to her side. Her head stretched heaven bound while she stood upon the balcony of her chambers; her eyes searched desperately for some sign or sound of life in the sky, but none would be found this night. In her gaze grave and thoughtful, I sensed she was afraid, terribly afraid. Her long dark hair flowed in the mighty wind while a storm brewed over the ocean's horizon. Longs clouds, fleeting on a chill wind, covered the heavens like a gray menacing shadow, encompassing all around her. Ominous and disquieting, the night stilled.

Waves crashed along the cliffs on which the indomitable castle sat as a barrier between her world and the world of my father. I had watched her awaken from a dream. I knew it had been a dream for she called out for Mithelk, my father. A disturbing feeling swept through me while I watched her. Rain began to descend from the heavens, but she made no attempt to seek cover. Moreover, it came with a realization that there would be no haven for her this night.

"My lady, pray come in and take shelter. We have just received word the winds are playing havoc with the gates. Malward says they need to be reinforced before damage is done." A tired, cracked voice called from behind me.

My mother turned quickly. I could tell the news had not taken her by surprise. She walked in swiftly.

"It is true."

She bemoaned the fact for only a moment, for she had not time for more. She brushed aside her maid's movements toward her. Drenched from the downpour, she wiped back the water dripping down her face. Her eyes caught sight of me, though not surprised by my appearance, that I knew. Extending her hands toward me, I rushed to her side. She hugged me tightly.

"We need to send the children through," she said.

The distinguished elderly statesman stared at her in disbelief. Lord Robart Dyer had served as my father's minister since he had come to Nottesdone. Long before, he served by the side of my grandfather, King Edulf of Scarladin, ruler of the Sordarins, the mightiest of all warriors, commanders of the sky. The lines in the old man's face tensed.

"My lady, what do you speak? It is the weather. Why would we do such?"

My mother met his eyes with an intense glare. "You dare question me, Lord Dyer! Do you know who I am? What I once was and now am again? It would not be so unless...."

His body openly shook. Trepidation overcame him. His worn wings drooped. His hand rubbed his forehead while he grasped at her words. "Your powers are back? No!"

Tears that had welled up in my mother's eyes flowed freely. Straightening herself up with all her dignity, she wiped back the tears. She had not time to mourn her loss.

"I could not see what I see now, if he lived. He has been betrayed. My Mithelk lays slain upon the hillside of Scarladin. I can't see by whom, for he stands in the shadows, but they are descending down upon us as we speak. They are searching for the portal. It has to be closed immediately."

"We can't do that," Lord Dyer declared. He walked briskly over to the balcony, closing the doors firmly behind him. "You have to be wrong. We have had no warning. We would have had a warning!"

"You are wasting precious time, old man," she said with firm determination. She nodded to her maid. "Send for Gunilda and my other children. Wake them without delay. Prepare them for a journey and bring them down to the red room."

Her chest heaved heavily. She released me, but took my hand. She began to walk out of the room. An arm reached out and grabbed her. In a frantic move, Lord Dyer pulled her back in.

"I'm afraid I can't allow you to do that, my Lady," Lord Dyer stated without emotion. "It is with much regret, I can assure you, but you have given me no other options. All our well laid plans...we didn't consider you getting your powers back. I'm afraid we have need of the portal, my lady."

My mother eyed him with contempt, but her lips edged upward to where a small smile formed.

"Then, Lord Dyer, you will be solely disappointed." She closed her eyes and uttered, "Sareta! Falco!"

No sooner had the words been uttered, my siblings appeared. Sareta was no more than an infant. Holding my tiny sister, our nurse, Gunilda, stepped toward my mother. My mother trusted no other. Gunilda had been her loyal companion since she herself was a child. Immediately, my mother's arms outstretched, encircling us. Then we faded from Lord Dyer's view.

Within moments, we materialized within a wide vaulted chamber, deep within the castle. Shadows illuminated against its shrouded walls from a fire from which the embers burned a crimson red. Within the far corner swirled a wind encircling the greater part of the stone wall. My mother stared at the portal for a time as if rapidly trying to decipher a course of action. The thought occurred to me that I should be afraid, but my thoughts lay only on my mother and the words she had uttered. To my small mind, the only ones echoing within held to the ones concerning my father. My father was gone? Gone where? I questioned. Why was my mother so upset?

Her hands shook. She looked down upon us, her beloved children. Her eldest, my brother, Falco, had only turned six. He stood without fear.

She bent down to us. I heard her utter under her breath that he looked so much like his father it broke her heart.

She turned to me. I wanted nothing more than to throw my arms about her and cling to her, but even at my young age of four, I realized an urgency of the situation. Her hand caressed my cheek.

"Kela, my protector, my darling," she whispered to me and kissed the top of my head. Falco, reading my thoughts, reached over and squeezed my hand.

She stood back up to my sister, who was less than a week old. She took her in her arms. I could see the tears flowing freely down her cheeks. She kissed her and handed her back to Gunilda. She breathed in deeply.

"Listen carefully to me, my children. There is no time. Gunilda is going to take you, care for you. If I do not follow, remember it is only because I cannot. Do not forget all I have told you. Hold true to yourselves."

"Mother, I will help," young Falco said. "I'll fight off all."

Her hand went to his cheek. "No, Falco, your day is not yet," she said gently. "You need to depart to have that day." She looked up at Gunilda. "Take them through, my dear friend. Take them to my father until all can be assessed."

“My lady, come with us,” Gunilda cried. She reached over to my mother’s hand, but I saw. Within my mother was a daughter of a king, dutiful and strong, understanding the need to protect her land, her people above all else. My mother spoke no words, but said all within her eyes.

Gunilda fought back the tears, holding tight to us. She nodded with reluctant acceptance.

Mother began to chant in her native language. “Oto avoiyouau ropia rapaoexoai eyw eioodoo!”

The wind within the portal swirled harder until a view became clearer. Once, the portal had opened to a peaceful, serene meadow of abundance of blooming flowers, a winding stream which flowed freely through the grasslands, soothing sounds of birds singing, and the sight of butterflies fluttering around. All was gone.

My mother’s shock could not be hidden. The sun had set and the land lay in gloomy, gray skies. Gone were the luscious green pastures, displaced with a barren land. Dust blew over the desolate terrain, but lying beside the open portal lay a form covered by ash and dirt.

“Mother, close the portal!” Falco cried. In the distance a cloud arose quickly, descending down toward where we stood.

“Asmeodai!” she spoke. She pressed us back away from the portal and uttered words, closing the portal. The floor shook, sending all sprawling against the floor. The walls trembled, echoing cries from within the portal and now from outside the chamber.

To our horror, the comprehension we were surrounded encompassed us. Deep-throated calls emerged from outside the door. A great horn blew in desperation to shatter the door. Within me, instincts emerged. I reacted, throwing my hand up. A light blasted from behind my mother toward the door, portal, and all around our small frightened group. My small hand held firm. I had no choice. Falco demanded it from me.

“Kela, do not let go,” Falco said emphatically. “You can do all. Mother?”

Falco turned toward Mother, who crawled to her feet. I could feel her eyes fixed upon me. Was she afraid I would drop my shield?

“I will not fail you, Mother,” I said.

I could see from the corner of my eye that she glanced over to Gunilda, who held tightly to my infant sister. She stood up.

“Watch! I need to bring back all who have survived the assault,” my mother commanded. Once more she uttered her native language. From a fog that emerged, a form appeared. Tall, broad of shoulders, lean of muscle, he swung hard his sword in hand.

“Take care!” Lady Eufamia cried. “You are back within Nottesdone! Where are the others?”

The warrior slowly lowered his sword, adjusting to his new surroundings. His broad wing was damaged and hung awkwardly. His side bled, his hands also. A wound above his eye gusted forth blood that flowed down his cheek. Silent, he looked around. “My Lady Calledwdele,” he bowed. “I’m sorry. I was the last to stand. There are no others.”

My mother gripped tight her stomach. “It is Turstan, is it not?”

“Yes, my lady,” he said. He stood tall and clutched his sword tightly. “What is your command? Do you want me to defend the door while you escape out....”

"No," she said. "I want you to give your oath that you will defend my children with your life."

"I will, my lady," Turstan uttered loudly and without hesitation.

"Then I'm ready to send you all along upon your journey." She turned to Gunilda. She reached upon the mantle above the fire and brought down a box. She withdrew a bag. "Take this. Find a place of peace to raise my children. Teach them the ways. In time, they will need all. Protect them until that time. They will search for them. They can't find them."

"You aren't coming?" Gunilda asked in a faltering voice of despair.

"We have not time to discuss all, Gunilda. We all have our purposes in this life. It is not to be questioned. Promise me you will care..."

"I don't understand, my lady," Turstan interrupted, hearing a commotion arise from outside. "Am I not to defend you....?"

"You are to go with my children. Protect them without question," she said. A wave of emotions flooded over me when I heard her words. We all could hear the echoes of all descending down upon us. "I need to send you now or it will be too late. Go with my love, my children. My hope."

My arm ached and began to waver. I cried out to my mother. With everything in me, I didn't want to leave her. "I'll stay with you, Mother."

Her eyes misted over. "You have to go, Kela. You have to live. Turstan..."

The large warrior bent over and picked me up in silence. Words again she uttered in her language. A moment later our small group began to disappear; I reached forth once more and illuminated another light from my hand to surround my beloved mother.

I saw no more except in my dream. And in my dream, I saw my brave mother watching us fade from sight, hoping against all hope she had sent us far enough away and that all was not lost, that the gifts we had been given would allow us to fulfill our destiny that we were born to follow.

I saw the door demolished. I heard their swords and weapons try to permeate the shield I had given her and with such, the time she needed to accomplish her objective. Her intention held firm upon the words she uttered.

"Kovia ropia repqouq ewo, iade xpovoc kabapa kapoia eriotpateuw ueto!"

The room began to shake. The walls crumbled as fear enveloped the invaders. They had no time to escape. The room erupted, collapsing around them. The shield could not protect even her from the eruption. My mother's last word: "Mithelk."

In this, I have dreamed and have known: I will not falter in my quest to fulfill my destiny. For this I was born to do.

CHAPTER TWO

The Encounter

The late morning sky, bright and peaceful, gave way to a fine day. At this moment, I gave no thought to the beauty of either the day or the pleasant landscape surrounding me.

Instead my focus lay upon my mission. I galloped through the grasslands while the wind whipped through my fallen hair, my hat long lost along the riverbank. From the corner of my eye I saw Falco edged closer to me.

Ignoring the white-tipped mountains in the far distance to the south, I raced on. On most clear days the majestic Preda Mountain Range reigned over the valley in which we now lived. Turstan said the powerful Kampar River, whose banks we raced, originated on the tallest peak and flowed boldly down into the valley, giving life to all around. The intimidating presence of the Preda Mountain Range could not be disregarded for long. In truth, it served as an entrance to the kingdom of Scarladin, our home, or would have been if not for that fateful night.

Stories we had been told, Falco and I. We listened and hung upon every word, clinging to the hope of one day returning triumphant. We have dreamed and watched the sky. Some days, if the fog cleared long enough from around the peaks of the mountains, the hawkmen could be seen dominating the skies. In Falco's eyes, I have seen the desire within him to fly the sky like our father before us, claiming his right as a Sordarin!

Turstan boasted at great length of the mighty citadel which encompassed the grand cliff of Yucca. Excitement lay within his voice. For years he has talked of nothing else and only now we had come close enough to glimpse a semblance of the grandeur.

"A great wall encircles the city of Yucca, home to King Edulf. The height and steepness of the cliffs below serves to discourage any from such a dangerous climb. Within those walls, the roofs of the homes of the Sordarins rise up. The castle encircled by three towers stands aloft, while in the center lays the Great Hall of the Sordarins."

We have long grown accustomed to Turstan's ramblings of finding our long lost grandfather, but on this day my mind gave little thought to the castle in the distance, intent only upon my goal. Regretting not taking the time to tighten my braids, I fought against the distraction of my unruly hair. In a vain attempt I pushed my hair back while I urged my mount on. From my vantage point, I realized I had once more lost ground after the turn.

I glanced over my shoulder. To my side - underbrush. Suddenly the thought of losing gnawed within me. Not again, not today. Without another thought, I took a sharp turn from the path and cut through the underbrush. Dodging branches, I kned my heels into my roan's side. He responded. The finish lay within my view beyond a long extended ditch. Without hesitation, I clicked my mouth. Knowing instinctually what I wanted, my pony lunged through the air.

For a brief moment, I felt I flew into the air. Landing abruptly, my pony's legs buckled, almost throwing me. Regaining control, I flung my hands up in the air. We lay well beyond the finish line. Reining in my pony, I turned in triumph to my brother, who brought his horse down to a trot. He frowned.

"Ha! I won!" I declared most boastfully.

"Kela, you could have killed yourself!" Falco cried, irritation clear within his tone.

I was not certain if it was for concern or the fact he lost. His sandy blond hair ruffled. His deep blue eyes simmered at me. His white shirt smeared with signs of leaning against his chestnut horse. "If I urged Mayer on, we would have collided!"

At that moment in time, I could have cared less. I wiped the sweat from my brow with the sleeve of his borrowed shirt, but my thick auburn hair clung to my forehead. Now I regretted losing my hat. Turstan wouldn't be happy. Lately, he harped upon the

fact I should conduct myself more like a lady. *Like he would know what a lady should behave like.* I laughed at the thought.

I could feel my eyes sparkle with victory. Rounding about my brother, I tethered my pony. "You're mad because you got beat! How many times have you beat me? Never mind that your horse has longer legs!"

He grimaced, arching his back one way and then another. With his hand, he tried in vain to scratch his back.

"Not going to do you any good, Falco," I bantered, taking advantage of the rare circumstance of having the upper hand against my older brother. "Turstan said it will take months for your wings to form. You have no choice but to endure."

A huge grin formed upon his face. He countered. "But when they do, I'll no longer be grounded. It will be the skies for me. Poor Kela, we will see who beats who then!"

He knew me well. Jealously swelled within me. Why could I not have been born a male? Life wasn't fair to have treated me in this manner. Refusing to allow him the upper hand once more, I countered, "But it's not this day! I'll race you home!"

Without waiting for a reply, I took off, intent upon taking the lowlands, but in my haste I had forgotten the heavy rain of yesterday. I had not gotten far when my pony slowed with the weight of the sodden mud on his hooves. With the greatest reluctance, I pulled up as the ground gave way beneath the weight of my horse and myself. Soggy and muddy, there was no way I would ever make it through. To make matters worse, the echoes of Falco laughing fell upon my ears while he galloped away.

Oh, why did I not think? I reprimanded myself soundly. How many times had Turstan told me I was too impulsive? Slowly, I backtracked through the mud, annoyed with myself. Oh! With the thought of the gloating Falco waiting on me when I returned back to the farm, I slowed my progress.

At least I would take the time to look for my brim hat. Turstan wouldn't be happy if I came back again without my hat. He had threatened withholding my riding if I lost another, but he was always threatening something. Sometimes I believed he liked to hear himself talk for he rarely, if at all, carried through with any of his threats.

I slowed the pace of my mount to look through the tall, thick grass. Finally dismounting, I walked. There was no hurry. I knew what awaited my return: either taunting by Falco or another lecture which surely would follow from Gunilda.

Engrossed in my undertaking, a loud and thunderous noise caught me off guard. I hesitated until I deciphered the sounds were voices carrying up river.

Startled, for few people ventured this far into the wilderness, I crept cautiously toward the edge of the trees. Down the river's edge, I could make out forms engaging in a circle. A commotion held the attention of this small band of men. I eased ever so quietly through the underbrush to the edge of the trees. Seeing through the line of guards surrounding the scene, I smiled when I made out the turmoil concerned an elaborately dressed rider laying soaked within the river's bend.

A rather large and heavy legged man lay drenched while his purple headdress clung over his eyes. Screaming unintelligible words, his hands gripped his confining head piece in a vain attempt to relieve it from his head.

"Your Majesty!"

From the banks of the river, a little man cried, running into the strong flowing current. He stepped and slipped. In a desperate effort to fight his fall, he tried to

compensate by lunging backwards only to find he, too, floundered in the cool river water. Frantic arms thrashed as he tried to stand, but with each attempt he would lose his footing and find himself once more face down in the water.

I laughed soundly, hoping not to call attention to myself, but found I could not leave the humorous sight, especially since the water rose no more than waist deep at that point in the river.

The band though seemed intent upon saving the regal man from himself, if nothing else. His Majesty, with a final heave, managed to free himself of his bondage, sending his emblematic head covering into the river's current.

Immediately another member of dubious band trotted his horse into the river, reaching down to retrieve the errant head dress. Extending his arm too far, he lost his balance, falling into the Kampar within inches of His Royal Highness. His hands extended out of the water, grabbing hold of the first solid object it could find, His Majesty's leg. No sooner had he grasped hold than His Majesty floundered once more in the water.

The enraged monarch stumbled out of the water. He treaded out onto the bank in his waterlogged clothing. Dressed in bright purple jacket with a leather belt tied at the waist, his clothes hugged tightly to his wet, soaked body. His hair dark was as his eyes, which glared at all around. Although while I quite enjoyed the scene, I instinctually realized he was not a man to engage. *Time to depart.* I edged away from the sight.

Except the moment I had begun to swing my leg over my pony, I halted, hearing a resounding voice shout.

"Take hold! Do not let him depart!"

Kela.

I heard him at that moment. My arrogant brother!? *Oh, all that is good! What had he done?* Holding the reins of my pony behind me, I ambled back to the scene. How I had missed him sitting in the river laughing hysterically, I don't know, but there he was, water-drenched with a broad grin on his young face!

His feet dragged his body through the current. He shook his shoulder length hair back off his face. His horse stood quietly along the bank, his reins free to the ground. Falco stood, rubbing his forehead as if he had hit something.

My mind raced, studying quickly all around with more thought than amusement. The small procession, which had the markings of a hunting party, consisted of around fifteen armed escorts. Most were dressed in bright gold and brown uniforms, their faces immaculate, without a trace of a beard. The guards made no effort to move except to encircle Falco on their horses. They gave him no room to make an escape, but Falco didn't seem affected. *Of course he didn't. He was Falco!*

"Your Majesty! Let me help you."

His Majesty shoved the attendant back harshly. He walked intent upon Falco.

"Who dares to disrupt my hunt? Knock me into the river!"

"I beg your forgiveness, Your...", Falco hesitated in a sarcastic fashion as he half bowed. "Highness. You have to forgive me once more, for I know not who I address. I can assure you, though, that my intentions were not to land within the river."

"Such insolence!"

“Young man. Get down upon your knees and beg forgiveness from His Majesty, King Gregorius de Folur, King of Brixtone. The land you inhabit.” The voice carried from the small man the river had tried to swallow.

“Again, my apologies, my lord,” Falco said, gesturing toward his horse. “It was not my intent. I will take my leave and will take more care upon my ride.”

“You are going nowhere!” King de Folur snarled. He pointed to one on a horse. In a loud voice he demanded, “Seize him! A good flogging will teach this impudent blusterer the price one pays for such calamity!”

One of the guards began to dismount. In a swift motion, Falco sprang towards him, easily having hold of the guard’s sword. He welded it with ease against de Folur’s chest.

“Now, my lord, let me once more express my sincere apology for the accident, but I have no desire to be flogged upon this day.”

Shaking my head in disbelief, I heard the mutterings of the warning Turstan had instilled within us. *Lay low and never, never call attention to yourselves.* We couldn’t afford to, but now I had no choice. I couldn’t allow my brother to be flogged by such an insolent man!

Oh, Falco! Without issue, my brother would have need of me within moments. Mounting up, I kicked my pony’s flanks and rode up to the group. For a brief moment, I wondered about my decision. The band’s horses were of great stature, strong and clean-limbed. There would be no out-running them, but my appearance didn’t give way to much attention, except for one who sat still upon his mount.

He was the most handsome man I had ever laid eyes upon. His long yellow hair tied back from the most telling eyes of the most unusual color, perchance a blue of sorts. He sat tall upon his mount with an amused look upon his face. The situation seemed to give him no cause for concern. His head tilted to one side. He looked curiously and closely at me. He glanced back at Falco.

“Father,” the young man said. “Does not this ring strange to find such here? Take note of his back. Is not the forming of wings emerging? He is a Sordarin.”

Panic surged within me. Falco’s wet shirt clung to his back, outlining the full skeletal formation. I held my breath as I caught my brother’s eye. His mark of his emblem blared out upon the back of his neck. The hope that no one noticed depleted when I glanced back at the young man sitting upon his mount. I quickly comprehended he did. *Oh, hang the devil! He knew. We were in danger! Turstan was going to kill us if these men did not.*

Falco! I screamed from within me. There was no more time for playing around. *Now!*

Falco dropped the sword upon the ground and in one motion he was upon Mayer’s back. Jerking back upon the rein of my horse, I inched backwards. Falco took off in a gallop. In a blink of an eye, one of the guards held his cross-bow in his hand, aiming at Falco’s back. Without hesitation my hand flicked toward the cross-bow and it flung out of the guard’s hand. A few of the guards tried to follow; light flashed while I called forth the full extent of my power, an instinctive surge.

Turstan’s warnings forgotten, the only thought lay with protecting my brother. The guards urged their mounts to gallop. Immediately upon my thought, they hit what I am certain they thought to be an invisible wall, sending them sprawling upon the ground, moaning and groaning. I kept backtracking, not daring to turn my back upon the group.

From the corner of my eye, I caught sight of the young prince. He hadn't moved, but a smile formed upon his face, watching the sight before him.

His father screamed for all to follow us. The prince shook his head as if he knew and understood. "It will do no good, Father."

King de Folur gave no heed. He directed his band in a chaotic manner. Falco called to me from the woods.

It is set!

With one more outstretch of my hand, the guards all were flung from their mounts as a force hit them. Abruptly I turned and galloped toward Falco while a mysterious fog appeared. Within the mist, Falco grabbed hold of my reins. In moments there would be no visibility and only Falco could navigate such.

"Oh, Falco," I began.

"Do not go there, sister. Was that not the most fun? Did you see the look upon the king's face?" Falco laughed. "They will think before confronting us again!"

"One seemed to know, Falco. Did you not see? He saw your mark."

"You are letting your imagination play with your thoughts," Falco dismissed my concerns. "Come, we need to get back before Gunilda sets supper."

I sighed heavily. It would do no good debating with Falco. He was probably right. Had we not been nomads for years: moving upon every suspicion Turstan had upon a stranger's remake or look; never settling down; never making friends; and always looking, yet always overly cautious? Yes, Falco was right. If I mentioned the incident, we would be on the move once more and I liked this place. No, I would keep silent.

Over eight years had passed since I lost my parents, a time forgotten - now lived only within my dreams. Since that time, we have lived a different life, protected only by two loyal servants whom served now as our guardians and protectors. Long ago, Turstan had determined that to survive we had to live within the shadows of the land around us. He trusted no one and over time he held to this oath.

His previous life had been spent in service of Scarladin: his home, his country. This we knew because he had long told us his stories, especially when he drank his ale. Gunilda admonished him greatly when his tongue loosened with his drink, but the stories were the best when he did. I feared that Falco and I encouraged his talk when he was in such a state.

In his youth he had been given charge within King Edulf Calledwdele's Royal Wings. His days of service to King Edulf had been one of despair. Not long after he led a mission upon the boundary of the Payelaga Desert, his wife, Frieda, whom he loved dearly, had taken to her bed early with child. She did not survive, nor had his son. He fell in rank after not caring where his fate lay.

Our father, Prince Mithelk, found him thus. He offered Turstan new standing and an escape to the throes of Nottesdone. In this, Turstan gave his loyalty to his prince. Turstan was a grim man of great strength. His hair at one time had been raven dark, but now speckled with gray. His once proud wings had been damaged beyond repair during the battle where my father had lost his life. He held to his oath and protected us children with his life.

Questions abounded upon what happened that night. Who had betrayed us? Why? And who could we now trust? To Turstan's way of thinking, Gunilda had been of little

help in trying to rectify our situation, constantly saying it would be made known to all when it was time. Time? How much longer would time have to elapse? In truth, I believe Gunilda had no trust for Sordarins.

The place called upon to serve as our home sat quietly a top of a hillside, a long, comfortable craft of a dwelling with a thatched roof of straw. The walls at places looked warped, bulging out, but if the truth be known of the times the house had been moved, one would wonder about the strength of such establishment. A stone hearth centered the kitchen with open shuttered windows on the bottom floor. The entrance door was wide and tall. No other entrance would be allowed where a Sordarin dwelled. Their wings would not allow for anything less. The ceilings were high and the rooms spacious and broad.

Turstan stood comfortably within this house and saw to our needs, but he held no knowledge of childrearing. A Sordarin warrior had little to do with such, but he held no pity for himself. He did only what he knew. He had taught Falco the ways of the Sordarins, in which I followed suit. In turn, Gunilda had tried to instill into the two of us the Witheleghe's ways, but at most ends, I'm afraid, she had been met with bitter disappointment. We were born to be Sordarins as our father, Turstan bolstered. Gunilda took comfort in Sareta, a true Witheleghean.

Over time, all of us came to comprehend that Sareta held tremendous powers. A wish would become reality if Sareta felt the need, as when Turstan felt threatened. Sareta could will the whole of the house elsewhere. The problem lay with where elsewhere lay. We held no knowledge of where would be safe for all of us to grow. Turstan held firm it would be in Scarladin, but Gunilda cautioned all with the fear of betrayal. Had we not been betrayed by both Sordarins and Withelegheans?

"When the time is right, all will fall into place, Turstan. We can't force the issue. The children need time to gain strength. Do not be fooled into believing Asmeodai has ceased looking for them, especially Sareta. He must feel her power. It is better to use caution."

But of late, Sareta had grown weaker. Barely eight years of age, Sareta was a delicate creature with unearthly beauty. Illuminating from her was a glow, a white sheen. Her dark hair flowed down her back; her skin clear, white; her eyes were like an opening for the heavens, sparkling as stars. It was if she didn't belong to this world. Gunilda constantly guarded over her.

Gunilda, unlike Turstan, gave not quickly her knowledge. She held within her the understanding of Witheleghe. And made no secret she held to Sareta greatly. Gunilda stood slender and tall, n'ever given away her age, which must have been great. She had served my mother and her mother before her. She longed for her home, yet was terrified upon the comprehension of the waste it lay within upon the ascension of Asmeodai. She was a true Witheleghean. She abhorred violence, yet when called upon, gave no issue if Turstan felt the need for such. She lived in fear for herself and her charge, Sareta.

My concerns forgotten, the two of us ran and giggled back from the barn toward the cottage on our return. We gave no notice of Gunilda who waited on the step, looking tired and worried. Immediately we both dug our heels in the ground, for we were met by her cold glare.

For a tense moment of indecision, I exchanged glances with Falco. The look upon Gunilda's face gave no question that we had been caught and lay upon trouble. Most

times, Turstan served between us and Gunilda, but Turstan was nowhere to be seen this day.

“Explain quickly,” she demanded. Her frail body bent over, worn from the years and the stress we lived under. Her dry wrinkled skin folded tensely around her eyes. “Your sister has taken to her bed. What have you asked of her? Falco?”

I lowered my head, noticing Falco biting his bottom lip while he thought.

He uttered, “It was for fun only, Gunilda. We needed only a small favor. It wasn’t too much for Sareta. She did it with ease.”

“Ease! She has taken to her bed. You take her too much for granted!”

“We didn’t mean to, Gunilda. Is she going to be okay?” I asked, worry echoing within my voice. I stepped toward my sister’s room. Gunilda halted my progress with her hand.

“I’ll take care of Sareta. I have warned you before and you do not listen. Have I told you not to ask of her? You know well she will give you both anything you want, but she hasn’t the strength. The years of need have put a strain upon her,” she sighed, studying the two of us. “Now, the question is what did you do?”

CHAPTER THREE

The Euchoun

In the stillness of the night we waited, my eyes glued to the clear sky with only the stars’ glitter littering the heavens. I wondered vaguely if all our concern was for naught. It had been six nights without any sign of danger. My eyes caught Falco’s while Turstan stood by the door, listening intently for any sound or noise to alert him of a potential threat. The once massive intimidating warrior held tight to his freshly sharpened sword’s grip.

Most nights the hearth burned brightly with an open fire. Not this night. The shutters were closed outside the windows and the curtains drawn until all inside became dark. And thus we sat within the shadows, waiting for an unknown threat. For six nights Turstan’s reprimand echoed within me.

“You said King Gregorius de Folur, King of Brixtone!” Turstan exploded at me. His pitted, scarred face covered by his long heavy beard, softened most times by his kind eyes, now remained grave and attentive. Falco warned me not to say words but to let the burly warrior unleash his fury. “I don’t know one that would be worse!”

“I don’t think it’s as bad as you make it out to be,” I said defensively, having already endured Gunilda’s wrath. “The band didn’t...”

Turstan cut me short. His temper, his worry abounded.

“What can we do but make a stand?” Turstan exclaimed upon looking down at Sareta, who lay listless within her bed. “You both know well the cost of being discovered. Have we not well instilled within you the need?”

“In truth, Turstan. But it was not our fault. Falco didn’t mean to run into the party. And the prince...how could he have known who we are? I had to be mistaken. No one knows we live.”

“Rumors exist. This we know, Kela. Prophecies foretold are not forgotten,” Turstan muttered.

“Kela! How naive you are! Once suspected, they will use the Hallow Minions to smell out the magic! Sareta! We have to protect her. She is our only hope,” Gunilda responded, wringing her dry wrinkled hands together. “Sordarins!”

“I won’t let anyone harm, my sister, Gunilda. I am a protector, Gunilda.”

“You are a child!” she squelched. Turning her back on me, she leaned back over Sareta. I quieted.

The love for my family encompassed me, more than my own life. *If I have done anything to do harm!* The thought gave me pause. But, I reasoned, it was merely a simple fog she had brought in to cover their escape. Had she not moved houses? Supplied all with the needs they had?

At most times, Turstan would have rushed to our defense when Gunilda ranted about the vices of Sordarins, but on this I saw only worry in his eyes. He stood now with his head looking toward the heavens.

To my horror, water welled in my eyes. Had I disappointed all? I loved my guardian as the father I had lost that fateful day. For well over eight years, he kept well to his oath he had given my mother. Unfamiliar with upbringing of three small children, he had lamented his fate often.

“This is no job for a warrior! By all in heavin! I have been saddled with a weight that would bring down a lesser man!”

Though, through the years Falco and I cared for Turstan at moments when he had given into his weakness.

“A real man has needs, by Gotty!” he contended while he drank his ale. His thirst lay evident with the empty beakers on the rickety old table. At times he would disappear for days, but had always returned to us.

Gunilda would preach upon the lack of morals of a Sordarin warrior. In truth, I understand naught of all of she ranted about, but I knew only the need we had for the broken warrior.

Falco had told me more than once that most warriors would have taken this task as an insult, but Turstan stood by us. I understood well that he had a morbid fear for our safety and even though he would never admit it, he cared deeply for us charges. Turstan became a man possessed when it came to defending us siblings.

Tonight while I stood and waited, my thoughts turned to the fate of our family. In all, there was much confusion. My father, Prince Mithelk Calledwdele of Sordarin, had been first in line to the throne. Scarladin, land of prosperity, of fertile lands and mighty rivers, was the land where hawkmen ruled.

Turstan’s words affirmed our legacy. “When you look up and see the regiment soar the skies, all is well. No one dare threaten a Sordarin!”

But they had, I thought. Someone had ambushed my father and killed him. My mother! Oh, how I still missed her. When I smelled the fragrance of the first spring flowers, my beautiful mother’s face emerged in my mind: the smile, her eyes, the love she held for all. She herself was the descendant from the great line of Flandigana within

the boundary of Witheleghe, a place most thought only a legend; in truth, a place where magical beings dwelled.

I, myself, was born strongly Sordarin. In that, I couldn't deny.

"Your destiny is easiest to define, Kela," Turstan talked during one night of his drinking spells. "Ah, the princess warrior born to protect. Protect the young prince. Protect your sister. Caught within the middle for the others to fulfill their destiny. Much as myself. Essential, yet thankless."

Previously when danger had to be faced, we woke in a new place, a new home. But Sareta had neither the strength nor the will. She shook her small head, lying quietly in her bed. Olaf, our mongrel of a dog, had curled up by Sareta and refused to leave her side.

"She says we need not run any more. It is time," Falco said to Turstan, who felt the need to take off once more. But it was not meant to be. Turstan had always said there were moments in life where one could not run from the past. So our running ceased.

Suddenly we heard what we had been dreading: a clamor in the distance. Sounds drew nearer. They were coming. Falco jumped up and looked out the window. I could feel my heart pounding, fearing it could be heard by all. My chest heaved with effort on each breath. Glancing around my home, I was torn by which side to stand, my sister's or the men. Gunilda stood by Sareta's door, pale and clammy. So I placed myself firmly between all. A loud fluttering sound rose from overhead.

Turstan's ears alert to the sound. "Sordarins!" he exclaimed. "I would know the sound anywhere."

What did Turstan mean Sordarins? Friend or foe? Were we not expecting Brixtone's warriors? But I had no time to contemplate. Nervously, I gazed down the hall. Gunilda had her arm around Sareta, who had risen from her bed and stood silently with Olaf by her side. Frightened, she met my eyes.

Within me, my instincts reacted. For the last few years Turstan had trained Falco in the ways of our people, the only way he knew; taught from a young age, the techniques were used for centuries to defend their country. In this, I recognized that Sordarins were an aggressive people when it came to protecting their territory. Turstan hadn't hesitated to teach me alongside Falco, for I was a Euchoun.

Euchouns, protectors for the warriors of Sordarins, were called upon only on the most pressing of times.

"Legend holds the Great One sends only when the need arises. In this, we must hold. You must train, for the time will come when you will have to fight. It is your destiny," he explained. "Although, Kela, I have never known one to be female. I don't know how you will do such upon the ground, but then again I have never heard of one with your strength at such a young age."

My mind raced. Sareta had said it was time. *Time for what?* Turstan hadn't known. Sordarins were our people or, at least, our father's people. Had they come in peace to bring us home or were they trying to do us harm? My parents had been betrayed by other Sordarins. That I realized, as did Turstan. Was that not the main reason he hadn't searched for a way within Scarladin? He had been betrayed, also.

Ominous, I heard thumps upon the roof. Clear voices rose and fell. They alit all around. I eyed Turstan when the locked door rattled. Outside, commands resounded. All of a sudden, the roof shook. From the sound, I held no doubt it was being ripped apart.

The door rammed once. Turstan pushed against it. Without another thought, I raised my arm, surrounding my young sister and Gunilda with my shield. I moved closer beside my brother, while he raised his sword. Olaf barked madly, circling around us.

Screeches emerged louder in the loft. My fear became my reality. They were in. The door again banged. I looked upward. With a wave of my arm, the Sordarins that had landed upon the roof were thrust back with such a force that they landed within the pasture. My other hand motioned toward the door, pushing the door back, taking with it all around.

Abruptly, I felt strong hands grasp my arms, bringing them down roughly to my side. Struggling violently to free myself, fear surged within me. In the distance voices spoke, but I understood none, for all I could see was a cloud of warriors descending upon my family. Falco swung his sword while he pushed Sareta back away from the assailants. His sword clanged against another. Turstan grabbed Sareta with one hand and held his sword with his other.

Trying vainly to wrench myself free, my eyes lay intent upon all. Panic swept through me. All I could think of was protecting my own. The dark shadows of the night cast an eerie glow to the forms. My panic grew. The Sordarin tightened his hold on me, pulling me back against his armored chest. Immediately, I felt a surge of power. In the next instant a wave of light shot forth from my eyes, fluctuating around the small group, exploding with such force that I was thrown backwards with the Sordarin who held me. A moment later, around me I saw debris floating downward toward the ground.

I was freed! Scrambling back up to my feet, I stood, but could not move. All around where the house once stood now seemed a battlefield. I took in the awe of the sight.

"The dewill be hang and draw!" the Sordarin cursed under his breath, regaining his footing. He reached toward me, catching my arm.

Stunned, I turned and stared at the Sordarin, a young dark warrior. Tall, broad wings flexed to ensure they still worked; his dark bold eyes met mine. His hair hung long upon his shoulders. His face was stern and keen. His chest was covered with a painted shield, with his long sword secured at his belt.

"Don't look at me as such! Look upon the damage you have done!" he cried.

Turstan rushed to my side, jerking me out of the warrior's arms. If I wasn't mistaken, I swore he had the look of pride upon his face. Falco stood, his arm surrounding Sareta, but his face plastered with a broad grin. Around them the remains of the house we once called home lay in pieces.

Slowly in the dim light of the night, movement began from the ground. Sordarins began to straighten up, flexing broadly their massive wings. Frightened, I glanced up at Turstan. He swung me back with Falco and Sareta. Falling to my knees, I grabbed hold of Sareta and buried my face into hers. I could feel Sareta gently pat my back. The fear within my sister had dissipated, but the whole of my body began trembling uncontrollably. I tried desperately to stand, but when I did, my head spun. Everything went black.

Movement woke me. I felt air beneath me and wind in my face. My eyes opened, but I needed time to focus. Strong arms held me. Someone whispered in my ear to remain calm, pleaded in reality for me to do so. Gripping tightly to the arms that held me, I

realized I was flying. Glancing upward, I gradually recognized the warrior who had held me before the explosion. Falco spoke within my mind, soothing me, allaying my fears.

Sister, all is well. We are beside you. Sleep. Sareta's with Turstan, flying in front of you and I'm flying on a fleogan ahead of all. We are going home. Home! Sareta was right. It was time.

My head hurt. Staring at the young warrior, he looked down upon me. A slight smile formed. "You aren't going to cause anymore devastation, I hope. We are flying high and the fall would be a long one."

Looking down, my hands dug into his arms. From the sky, I stared down upon the ground of shadows in the early morning light. Trees and fields could be made out clearly. We flew high above the Kampar River, using it as a guide. The air so crisp, I gasped. His arms tightened around me. I clasped my arms around his neck.

"Have no worries, little one," he whispered. "I won't let you fall."

Surprisingly, I took comfort in his words and closed my eyes once more. To my surprise, I fell back into slumber.

CHAPTER FOUR

Meeting of the King

I tossed and turned, for my dreams disturbed me. I stood in a fog, searching desperately for a way out, calling for Sareta, Falco, Turstan... No one answered. I was alone in the haze.

Slowly a scene emerged before me: a wondrous place where beauty abounded; luscious green pastures; paths, alit with multitudes of flowers, around a large blue lake. Across from where I stood, a grand waterfall sprayed water upward in a mist of air while the water poured off the edge of a huge cliff. My ears heard chatter and laughter of children. Turning, I smiled as colorfully dressed inhabitants of this astonishing place appeared. Happy. Cheerful. Warmly greeted, I recognized I was in a place that seemed vaguely familiar.

Outside the gates of a majestic castle, I stood. I looked around, feeling out of place in clothes I wore, nothing more than a gray tunic. An older woman walked by me and waved her hand in front of me. Instantly I wore an elegant sapphire gown adorned with diamonds glittering in the sun. I felt wonderful. Looking upward, the gates opened.

I smiled widely, but before I took a step within the opening I halted. A richly dressed man ran by me, knocking me down. Stopping, he bent down to help me back up.

"Run, Kela," he said. "He will devour you. Run quickly."

"Why would I?" I questioned. "I do not run. I protect."

"My niece, daughter of my beloved sister, Eufamia, I know well who you are and where your destiny lies, but it is not now. Trust the words of your Uncle Halmir. Do not tarry."

I recognized him when he spoke his words. "Where am I, uncle? And who is set to do me harm?"

He looked back over his shoulder. Then spoke in a whisper. "You have been called to see, to understand...there is no more time...he will soon know of your appearance... tell all that Thardalf betrayed us. He called forth Asmeodai from the darkening chamber...no one is safe, no one: not only Withelegheans, but also Sordarins, everyone...Cyaika has already crossed. Asmeodai is assembling an army for assimilation. Waiting for the sign..." His face grimaced as visions relived grisly, gruesome scenes.

"I don't understand...I don't understand," I cried, glancing over my shoulder. Looming in the distance, a cloud of dust began to spread far and wide. Turning back around, all had changed. My shock could not be hidden. The sun had set and the land lay in gloom, gray skies. Gone were the luscious green pastures, displaced with a barren land and dust over the desolate terrain; the laughter and chatter replaced with unending screams and cries.

The walls of the castle crumbled, exposing a burning fire. Flames erupted. Within the blaze of fire and smoke a loathsome creature emerged. He peered with red luminous eyes at me, beckoning to me. Instantly I was overwhelmed by a great evil. Closer and closer the figure came toward me. Sordarins, courageous and valiant, were not cowards, but I could not move, for a terror seized me.

Suddenly within the haze a voice called to me, a warm, safe voice. "Kela!"

"Mother!" I cried.

Light illuminated around me; a faint outline of a figure emerged. A warm smile on a beautiful face of one long gone, but never forgotten. Oh, never forgotten.

"My child."

I heard the words and wanted nothing more than to follow the voice. I moved toward the light. I wanted so desperately to run into the light. As if frozen in time, I was no longer afraid. I called out again, "Mother?"

"Halt, Kela. Do not come any closer. You can't come within. I have only moments. Listen, my precious. Do not forget the words I will utter. Do not let go of the past. It will lead to the present. Do not let go of your siblings. They will have need of you. Trust your instincts and let them guide you. Search out Seilda the Tvopac. She will guide you. You aren't prepared as you should have been, but all you need you have. Find your path, Kela. Do not falter, my darling daughter..."

"Mother!" I cried, watching the light dissipate from my view. "Mother, don't leave me!"

The light dissipated. I bolted straight up in a bed. Sunlight filtered in through an open window. Confused for a moment to where I could be, I looked down. Sareta lay beside me, asleep. Olaf lay curled up at the foot of the bed. *Where was I?*

Sareta stirred. "Kela, you are awake?"

Breathless, I nodded while memories of my dream, my vision flooded back to me. Calming myself, I reached up to my forehead.

"Yes, Sareta, but where are we? Where are Falco and Turstan?"

"I have been told nothing, but know all." Sareta smiled at me in a knowing manner. I relaxed, for she seemed content. "I'm glad you're awake. I had been scared you would not do so. You expelled so much energy that night. I didn't know if you were injured."

"It still hurts, but it is better. That night, you say. How long have I been asleep?"

“For three days,” Sareta said simply. “Turstan has checked upon you constantly. I believe he still feels the need to care for us, but they have sent him back within the Royal Wings. It was the Royal Wings they sent.”

“Sent? I don’t understand,” I said, lying back down for a moment.

“I’m not sure they know what to do with us,” Sareta squirmed, stretching her legs. “I’m not supposed to be here. They had placed me within the castle with Gunilda. I believe they are to place me with our aunt. We have an aunt, Kela!”

Glancing around, fear gripped me. The room was clean, but small. We both lay on a cot. There was nothing else in the bare room that had not even curtains on its window, except a wooden chair.

“Then where am I, my sister?”

“I’m not certain. They have been arguing about you for some reason, of which I’m not certain of. But it is my hope they place you with me. They have to. Do they not?” she said with her smile. Her face had more color within it, more energy. She tilted her head and swung her small feet off the bed. “I’m certain you impressed all with your display. It is all any one is talking of, but it is confusing. For some reason others talk as if it was Falco who did so. But Falco and Turstan couldn’t have been more pleased with you.”

“Where is Falco?”

“He is enjoying himself immensely down at the barracks. They wasted no time. He is training to become a true Sordarin. But, Kela, all is not as it seems,” Sareta said. She jumped down upon the floor. “They have certain expectations now of us.” She walked over to a wooden-backed chair. A simple wool gray dress sat upon it. Sareta winced upon the sight. She thought for a moment. She unfolded the dress and it became a beautiful blue dress with designs embroidered along the front. “You should look like a lady in this. Do you not think?” Sareta laughed.

“It’s not funny,” I responded. Without explanation, an emotion gripped me. “What is not as it seems, Sareta? Hurry, for I feel we don’t have much time alone.”

Rapid footsteps could be heard hammering down a hall. Sareta reached for my hand. “Do you want to leave? We, two. We could go upon our own. We can’t be separated. Not yet, Kela.”

“I know, Sareta. Mother...Mother told me as I slept,” I whispered. “I will never abandon you. Stay. I will deal with all.”

Suddenly, the door sprang open with Sareta and me staring at a quite disturbed Sordarin. An elderly gentleman - his wings had faltered, over time or injury, I wasn’t certain - but by his robes, he was a man of importance.

“Mother of all!” he exclaimed. “How did you? How could you?”

The aged Sordarin gripped tight the frame to the entrance of the room in an attempt to catch the breath he had lost in his haste. “I thought someone had captured you in some manner. You, young lady, are my charge. You can’t leave my suites in the castle.”

I walked protectively in front of Sareta. “Excuse me, my lord, but this is my sister. We have always been together and have no desire to be separated.”

“It is not a choice, young lady,” he responded indignantly for someone of such youth to talk to him such. “She has to return immediately.”

I eyed him with a reflective gaze. He ignored me and reached for Sareta. A mistake! I flicked my hand ever so lightly. Immediately, his hand propelled backwards.

“I don’t think so.”

Sareta smiled, inching back behind me. The man stared intently at her, but I didn't relent. From behind the man, a woman appeared, a dark skinned older lady dressed in a simple cream tunic down to her ankle with a leather belt tied at her waist and a head dress.

"Lord Pigoc, the children have gone through much and I'm certain they are confused. It's all understandable. Why do you not let me ready the young lady? You found the little one. She is fine and seems content with her sister. Does she not?" she said in a graceful manner. She walked to my side with an elegance I had rarely seen. "King Edulf asked for me to prepare the young lady when she awoke. What harm can come?"

"The little one can't walk the grounds as such. King Edulf stated..."

"I'm certain they can travel, as the young one obviously did to enter within a guarded bed chamber without being seen," the woman answered. She gently maneuvered Lord Pigoc out the door. "Give me a couple of hours and I'll have both prepared." She gave him no time to respond and closed the door behind him. Then she turned with a tender expression. I liked her almost instantly. "Let's see what we need to do here."

As promised, I prepared to meet the king. I stood outside a grand hall waiting to be summoned, adorned in the blue dress Sareta had given me. Sareta had only with the greatest reluctance returned to her suites. I was certain I would meet her again, to come before our grandfather as sisters. To my dismay, I found I was destined to meet my grandfather alone. Standing in the massive hall, I felt small, insignificant. I had a sudden need for Turstan and Falco. I sighed heavily. Why was I apart from the others?

Answers to my questions were elusive. Even the hospitable woman who seemed to be in charge of my well-being could tell me little, introduced as only as Lady Faileuba.

"For the moment you are a guest in my home," she said kindly. She turned to one behind her and called a bath for me. "King Edulf wants you within my house. I know my home is not the castle, but I'm certain the king has reasons for such. My husband serves in the Royal Guard, as does now my grandson, Cono. He was the one that brought you here. I don't know if you remember much."

I nodded, taking in my surroundings in the large house. Faileuba's husband must hold a position of power, I thought, to own such a home. The house was made of brick and had a high wall around it. The entrance of the house had a long walkway, which gave way to a wide wooden gate opening into a lane. The many rooms were well furnished and I found Faileuba had many servants who waited upon her.

But my concern laid not where I was to stay but keeping all together. Sareta had tried to contact Falco, but he seemed content. I could well imagine Falco was where he had always dreamed of: not being surrounded by his sisters, but in a group of warriors. He ignored us. *I will take care of him later*, I thought.

Lord Pigoc had returned to walk me over to the west wing of the castle, Yucca, a grand unyielding, imperishable fortress. From a distance, Yucca loomed as a massive gray stone fortification.

"The grounds are extensive, my lady," he explained on our walk, which was a greater distance than I first imagined. "The castle lies secure upon the cliffs. The only way to enter is from the sky. The back opens up to open ground. Along the squares, the homes are arranged to the west. To the east lie the barracks, storehouse, armory, and treasure house. All along the mountain cliffs are the homes of the Sordarins, opening

beyond the Preda Range to the Saquasha Range. The land of Scarladin is vast and widespread.”

I caught a glimpse of the bailey when we entered the massive stone castle. Flowers abounded within, along canals of water. I caught scent of gardenias in the lustrous garden. In the middle I could make out a huge statue of a Sordarin by a fountain. From my view it seemed peaceful, serene.

“There is much to remember when meeting His Highness,” Lord Pigoc explained while we walked. I wondered why he seemed nervous. Was I not the king’s granddaughter? “Keep your head bowed until he acknowledges your presence. Don’t speak until spoken to. Nod only. It will be brief, I hope.”

Lord Pigoc led me through the front sandstone pavilion. Two large wings encompassed the austere entrance with three towers reigning over the cliffs. The hall was lined with portraits of kinsman who had ruled in the past. I wondered briefly if my father was among the portraits. I wanted to ask, but Lord Pigoc gave me no opportunity, having walked fast by all. Tapestries hung down upon the stone walls. Fenestral windows with lattice frames that were covered in fabric allowed light in or drafts out.

The Great Hall seemed to have been annexed at a different time. It wasn’t made of stone, but the ceiling was made of stucco with gilt-leather hangings. At the entrance, a gilt bust was placed for all to admire. The floor was made of marble and hangings of blue damask covered the wall.

No sooner than I had entered, I caught sight of a small group of visitors leaving. They weren’t Sordarins, but walked with seemingly great importance. The tallest of the group looked back. My heart beat rapidly. I knew him. My eyes glared. He was of the band at the river. The prince, I remembered. He began to walk gingerly toward me, even more handsome to my young eyes than I remembered. Dressed in a regal manner, his eyes greeted mine with a sense of satisfaction within them. He bowed to me while the others followed, uncertain of his destination.

“I believe introductions are in order, my lady. Prince Pieter de Folur. It is good to see you well. I understand you have had quite the adventure, but it must be satisfying to know that you are back among your people,” he said. Without warning, he took my hand and kissed it. “I’m happy to have had a hand in your return.”

“How did you?” I uttered trying to hide my confusion. “How would you know...?” My voice faded. Warnings recalled gave me pause to talking to this stranger.

“Let us just say that I realize that the rumors of your existence held truth to them,” he said simply. “I have always held interest in such. This time it paid off, did it not?”

He smiled at me, but from behind him a guard appeared. “My lady, Your Majesty requests your presence.”

Prince Pieter let go of my hand with the greatest reluctance. “Your grandfather desires to see you. I’m certain we’ll be seeing each other again.” He bowed and waved his hand in a manner of departure.

Disturbed, for a feeling surfaced within me that the man knew more about me than I did myself, I stared after him.

“My lady.”

I turned back to the guard and followed him within.

"King Edulf, filia Mithelk of Scarladin, soror ejus Falco of Scarladin, Kela Monicalia Flandigana Calledwdele," the guard announced loudly.

Apprehension grew upon each step I took. In the far corner of the room he stood, proud and grave at the moment before him. Forgetting the instructions to lower my head, I met his eyes. Nervously, I pressed my hands against my dress. I felt uncomfortable dressed such, but Sareta assured me I looked beautiful. The blue accented my eyes, Sareta said. She had placed a butterfly hairpiece in the middle of my thick auburn hair. Sareta enjoyed such things, things I had not for the time.

I studied my grandfather as he approached, as I was certain he was me. I searched for something familiar, but for the life of me, I found nothing. Had I not been four upon my parents' deaths? Would I not have met my own grandfather?

He held himself tall and muscular, appearing younger than I had imagined, even with his long white hair and bushy eyebrows. For some reason, I had deemed him ancient and frail. That was not the man before me. He seemed a man ageless in time.

He had only a simple leather string tied around his forehead to hold his hair back. His eyes were grey as a clear evening sky. Lines were many upon his aged face. He had the look of a tried warrior, one not only in strength but valor revived. He had not dressed for a formal meeting, wearing only his tanned pants and the leather straps criss-crossed over his broad chest. His sword sat secure within its place around his waist.

King Edulf motioned for me to walk to his side, dismissing all except for one. The Sordarin must have importance, for he carried himself thus. Tall, dark, and muscular, his manner gave way to a semblance of intelligence surrounding him. I imagined he must hold council with my grandfather. He gave me a slight smile, but when I turned back to my grandfather, if I expected a semblance of emotion from him in seeing his once seemingly dead grandchild, I was to be disappointed.

"So you're Kela, a Euchoun?" He looked upon me. "I understand you almost wiped out my entire Royal Wings. I send them to retrieve you and you almost destroyed them."

Instinctually, I took a step back. Had I heard his words correctly? Reprimanded for my actions! I stared wide-eyed at my grandfather. Sudden emotions overwhelmed me. My eyes flamed. How dare he question me! We had no knowledge he was coming for us! I had only done what was within me - protect!

King Edulf rubbed his eyes and ran his hand through his hair. He seemed greatly agitated for having to deal with me. "Your upbringing has been sadly lacking! I know not if it can be saved at your age. What are you, child? Twelve? Thirteen? If you were male, I would know what to do. There are consequences to such actions."

"My lord?" the other asked. He looked strangely at his king. "Of what are you saying? I thought we had talked about a course of action."

"Lothar!" King Edulf declared suddenly and loudly. "I have not decided a course of action, but think not I will be questioned in front of a subject. I have to decide an acceptable solution."

I stood speechless. I might not have expected a warm reaction, although I had long thought it would have been. My eyes grew large. This man, king, couldn't abide being in the same room with me, his own grandchild, that much I was certain. I stood now as if I was an inanimate object.

"She needs to be taught quickly about the ways of the Sordarins. If she is indeed what has been proclaimed to be, she has much to learn. A Euchoun protects, not does

harm upon us. It should well have been within her instincts. It may be she hasn't the instincts within her. She will have to be developed. The East Tower will serve as her quarters. We'll start with a month of bread and water and a strenuous schedule of lessons."

"My lord," I spoke. At first in a low voice, but while my courage grew, so did my voice. "Who are you to question my actions? Why would I assume that your guards descending down upon my home were friendly? They tore through the roof. No one knocked upon the door, but instead tried to ram it. Turstan for years talked of nothing but the grandeur of Sordarins. My father was one, but do you not comprehend that he was betrayed by such? My father is dead because of trust of his own; my mother betrayed by your minister. So tell me once more about my actions."

Silence ensued within the room. King Edulf stared at me, intensely unhappy with my outburst. He stood straighter and seemed suddenly to have grown taller. With a flick of his hand, he called for a guard, who responded immediately. The guard reached for me.

Thoughts ran rapid within me. He was dismissing me, rebuking me. Was he sending me to the tower? Anger built inside of me. I would not be treated so. My hand raised and repelled the guard's touch. Tears welled in my eyes. Where was Turstan? I wasn't going to stay thus. I would leave with Sareta... Falco.

From behind me a voice emerged. "My lord. I beg your forgiveness,"

Relief flooded me, for it was Turstan. He spoke loudly. "I'm afraid proper etiquette I taught not, but the girl can fight. I can assure you, my lord."

A well-groomed Turstan walked toward me. He had cut his beard down, washed and dressed proudly with the Royal Guard uniform. Without thinking, I ran toward him and he took me in his arms.

"I want to go home, Turstan," I whispered. "I don't like it here. Sareta is better, stronger. We can leave."

"No, child," he said softly, his arms outstretched. His hand touched my cheek, wiping back escaping tears. "Your place is here. Sareta is better because we have not need of her magic continually. For years she has been drained. She is in no shape to do such. Don't ask her. We will have to deal with all. It's time to stop running."

"He doesn't like me, Turstan," I said in a whisper, glancing back over at Grandfather. "He's mad with me. He's placing me in the tower."

"The tower? Why, in all that's holy?" He looked doubtfully behind me.

"I will not be questioned about my actions!" King Edulf declared. He looked upon me, grave and stern. "She is supposed to be a Euchoun! A Euchoun would never behave such! Discipline! Honor! Duty! A tiny waif of child! A girl! Where does her strength lie if we had demand of such? Tell me why, Lothar, I would hold back from sending such to de Folur as was requested to Brixtone to honor our agreement, if she cannot perform as a Euchoun?"

Lothar walked between his king and me. He motioned for the guard to leave. I stood quite motionless. What was his meaning of his utterance of sending me to Brixtone? Panic swept through me. Was that what the prince meant?

"Tell me quickly, Lothar. My patience is wearing thin!" King Edulf demanded.

"My lord," Lothar answered. "I have tried to explain I wouldn't commit to such until we know more. I have urged caution from the beginning of de Folur offering such

information. We have seen only a glimpse of her power. Do you not believe he is after such?"

I stared blankly at the man in front of me, the man that by blood was my grandfather, leader and ruler of the most powerful land. Trying desperately to make sense of all, all I could feel was his hatred toward me. My eyes broke from him. He began to rant. His temper raged at me.

"I'm tired of all of this. Falco is back as heir. Sareta holds form as her mother. But to tell me that this one, this tiny girl, almost destroyed my Royal Wings...that I don't believe. Her brother must hold the bond. He will be able to develop." With a heavy heave, he sighed and then took a deep breath in. "But Lothar, you are correct, I must tread carefully or I will be tricked by Brixtone." He eyed me with an intent stare. "Yes, Lothar, de Folur"

I stood silently, but my eyes bore out my confusion. I felt my heart pierced with the keenness of the king's glance. My own blood held me in such contempt. For what? Why?

Turstan grabbed my shoulders and turned me to him. "Kela, what is going on? What have you done?"

"Turstan," I said in a voice no louder than a whisper. "He hates me, Turstan. He will accept Falco? Sareta? What have I done, Turstan, to incur such hate from my own grandfather? Turstan, we can't be separated."

Turstan glanced across at his ruler, the one he pledged to serve and protect, but he had done the same to his son and wife. His oath he had made to my mother bound him to the children, for he understood it wasn't undone.

"My lord," Turstan countered, in an attempt to alleviate the tension. "I thought I had explained all to you in vivid detail. You have ignored all I have said as if all we have endured was for naught! What do you believe happened to your son? The entire unit I was assigned? You would betray your grandchildren. And in the end, your country."

"Lothar, hold to Turstan. I do have questions about my son's death. It may well be it is you, Turstan, who have betrayed all." King Edulf turned his full attention upon my guardian. "How is it you were the only one to survive? Yes, I believe it is what I will do. Get to the bottom of my son's death."

"Then may I suggest, my lord, that we listen. I beg patience. All has come quickly. You now have the opportunity to ask. Kela and Falco were there that night. Did you not hear her utter it was the minister? For your own good, we need to take all slowly. There is much to adjust to. Find the meaning of all. We have long suspected a threat is looming upon the horizon. To dismiss all would be a fatal mistake," Lothar said in manner of stating a fact.

King Edulf glared at me, his granddaughter. His ego would never let him relent in front of me, this I realized.

"Get her out of here immediately. Do not begin to tell me that the fate of Sordarins lies within the hands of that weakling! Look upon her, Lothar. She is trembling! Her eyes water! Get her out of my sight! I will decide upon my course of action. Since Turstan seems reluctant to stop acting as a wet nurse, take him with you!"

Relief flooded me. I was dismissed. I may have not understood anything of his ramblings, but a weakling? Never! My only desire was to leave the company of this despicable man. I held my head high departing the room and didn't look back.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fight of Arachnidean

The morning dawned once more. I rose from my bed, taking care not to wake Sareta. I pulled the thin blanket and tucked it around my sister, who again within the night had found me. Although still within the home I had first been taken, I had been moved; now I was held as a servant in the household, banished from the castle I had never known. I had been given a small room across from the servant quarters similar to the one I had had before, but I believed it was only because of the fear that Sareta would turn up beside me that I had a room to myself.

Lady Faileuba had been most kind. Although her husband, Lord Lothar, and she had no desire to incur the wrath of King Edulf, I don't believe they thought the king, in truth, wanted his granddaughter to become a common servant.

But with all, I was confused and within my heart I understood not the method behind my treatment. Was I not a Euchoun? A warrior? At night when I lay my head down upon my bed, I would remind myself of the fact warriors did not cry, but survived. Turstan instilled within me as much.

I hadn't uttered a word of complaint, but wondering of why I was being treated in this manner weighed upon me. The unfairness of it all! But Turstan had urged me patience. The king, he said, felt I had disrespected him. I would have to pay the cost of such behavior. Falco, I hadn't seen since we arrived within Yucca three months hence. Three months since I had sustained the fury of the king. Falco hadn't even tried to contact me when I turned another year. Sareta told me, in all, King Edulf had commanded none use my name.

"Please, Kela, do not hold it against Falco. Grandfather will not let him see you. In that I have heard," Sareta confessed upon the day I passed into my thirteenth year.

"It has not stopped you," I countered.

Her eyes lowered, escaping my gaze. "I fend ignorance, sister. I need your strength. I can't be kept from you. I feel your need for me also. It calls to me and I can't ignore it."

At least I had my sister and, in time, I would reunite with my brother. Of that I was determined. My anger now seethed against the king. I had ceased calling him Grandfather, for he had shown me no feeling of such.

In truth, though, I had begun to wonder if I should relent and beg for forgiveness to the king. Not that it had been asked of me, but this time away from my family was taking a toll upon me. Surely the king would forgive me. Did not my family have need of me? A plan began to formulate within me. I could take no more, deciding upon swallowing my pride. I would humble myself before the king. The problem now lay with how to gain audience.

Washing myself before the day, I glanced over at Sareta once more. I would let her sleep a tad longer before waking her and sending her back. For some odd reason, her presence, even in sleep, gave comfort to me. Patting my simple gray tunic, I walked out the door, shutting the door quietly.

The house was large with many servants. In all, a pleasant, comfortable place to live. I found myself envying the family and wishing I lived with my family in a house such as this. Living as a servant, I learned much from the other servants in the house about the family. Lord Lothar had come from the Lanka tribe. I didn't know a lot about the tribes that made up Scarladin, but I had heard of the Lanka tribe from Turstan. Proud and true, they were a dark skinned race, renowned for their valiant warriors. I didn't ask the position Lord Lothar held. It mattered not to me, but, with all, I surmised he held a position of importance.

From these whispers, I learned Cono, the warrior whom had flown me to Yucca, came from this house, but his mark was Brixtone. Cono came at times to see his grandmother, causing a stir within the house upon each visit. The servant girls turned to silly, giggling idiots upon his appearance, not even talking coherently. Yet they waited upon his every want.

In my youth, I suppose I could not fault their actions. Cono was ruggedly handsome without question. He seemed much older than Falco, for he walked with the air of confidence that only time seems to give, but, in all, I learned he was only a year older. Already the winds carried the tales of his bravery and courage. Yes, he was a magnificent warrior with his bulging muscles, broad chest, and the most telling of eyes. I watched all from the shadows upon his visits, hiding from those telling eyes. With his actions, I realized he reveled in this treatment.

From the keeper of the house, Allersaka, an old woman whom had served the house since her early life, I learned much of the family of the house I served within.

"Lord Lothar and Lady Faileuba had only one child, a son, Pers. He was a valiant Sordarin warrior. He died in a battle along the border of Scarladin and Brixtone. An arrow to his unprotected chest. It was thought he was betrayed, for he wasn't wearing his armor. The house fell into deep mourning for his loss. The darkness only lightened upon the discovery that Pers had left a child. Unbeknownst to his parents, he had married, but had done so in secrecy. His bride, Crestiana, came from the Brixtone royal family where it was forbidden to marry without consent of the King of Brixtone. You cannot imagine the shock of discovery of his lordship when he learned his son had left behind a child.

"A lone maiden, Helena, Crestiana's cousin, arrived upon the steps of the house carrying an infant in her arms with the tale of his existence. The poor maiden carried only the babe and a letter: a letter that Master Pers himself had written before his death in case something happened to him. He worried about his wife and wanted her to be given entrance to the house if fate didn't allow him to bring her. Fate was cruel; Crestiana died within hours after giving birth. Her last actions sent young master Cono to his home here. She feared for his life.

"Helena journeyed the treacherous path to Yucca, climbing even the steep incline of the mountains with the young one. By the Great One, she survived with Cono. She stayed a year ensuring the health and safety of Cono and then returned to her people.

"Cono looks as his father. And has never questioned he's a Sordarin, although he has the mark of Brixtone upon him. He has been a source of great pride and joy to his grandparents. Lady Faileuba holds great ambition for him. She has been told of a prophecy of his greatness."

With my thoughts, I walked down the small hall to begin my work for the day. The sun had only thus risen upon my entrance into the kitchen. A fire needed to be tended; the

food prepared. Water needed to be heated for the morning baths of Master and Mistress. I was given simple tasks to perform. I wasn't allowed to wait on the Lady Faileuba. At all times, I was kept out of sight of all visitors. So I kept to the kitchen.

In all, I didn't mind. The room was warm and all within friendly. Although included within the talks of all around, I realized at one point that no one asked me where I had tarried from. For that matter, none asked me any questions. In turn, I offered no account of myself.

I worked diligently until after the morning breakfast had been served, being told that the Master and Lady would be leaving soon and would not be returning until the morrow. Scarladin was celebrating this day. I gave all no thought and continued my work. Then I snuck out of the kitchen, making back to my room. There would be no words to halt me.

I did so every morning. None seemed to notice. In turn, I offered nothing to call attention to my actions.

I quickly eased back within and woke my sleeping sister. As was her habit had become, she sleepily hugged me tightly, kissed my cheek, and disappeared immediately.

Smiling to myself, I once more closed my door and made my way down the hall. Before I had turned to make my way back into the kitchen, voices echoed out for my ears. At most times, I would not listen to the words but the voice I recognized. Cono! And with that recognition the utterance of my name! I paused.

"Kela? You think I come only to spy on the girl! Why do you question me, Grandmother? Is this not my home?"

"Do not play upon me, Cono! Your grandfather is no longer within the room. I know you have come to check upon the girl. I beg you, pray, don't interfere. I worry so about you. The king has ordered her to stay here until he has determined her course."

"Grandmother, in that I don't understand. Kela is..."

"Hush, my grandson, the wall has ears. If the king hears you have been checking upon her! Your grandfather says that she is to stay here during the ceremony and is not to be told that she isn't to be acknowledged as her siblings this day."

"Does that in itself not give you pause? I tell you, Grandmother, there is more going on here than meets the eye. If you had seen what she did, the destruction in which all laid. How can the king leave her here? She should well be within the castle with her sister. Or as Turstan proclaims, to train her as a Sordarin. It makes no sense to treat her thus."

"King Edulf has his reasons, child. Hold your tongue well, my grandson, or his wrath will turn upon you. He has looked favorably upon you until now. You dare not turn him from you."

"Have no worries, Grandmother; I come only to ease the young prince's conscience. You're correct in that the king has even forbid him in seeing her. He wants only to be assured she is cared for on this day."

"Then go quickly. She is set. You have heard..."

I paused no longer. I raced down the hall into the kitchen, giving no time for contemplating - only reacting. "Allersaka," I cried upon my entrance. "What day is today? What, pray, is being celebrated?"

"Child, in all, how could you not know? King Edulf's missing grandchildren have been found! Praise be! The ones thought long dead. They are to be anointed this day. Prince Falco is to be heir apparent. And I have heard of the loveliness of his young sister,

Princess Sareta. There is to be a Soaring...Oh, I see. You aren't allowed to leave the grounds. Kela?"

Her voice faded into distance, for I forgot all about begging for forgiveness. I ran, determined that none should stop me.

My mind raced with thoughts. Falco hadn't forgotten about me! Yet in the next thought, I was dismayed. My siblings were to be acknowledged this day. And I? I had to get to my siblings. We had to leave this place. We were being separated and above all that couldn't happen!

I ran out into the gardens, giving no thought to its beauty. I heard a commotion behind me, but only focused on what was before me. A tall encompassing wall: a barrier between me and freedom! A moment later, I raced toward the gate, having blasted my frustration. I climbed frantically over the rubble stones. Above me I could hear the flutter of wings. I turned. For an instant I set to blast, but I hesitated. And with hesitation came capture.

"I suppose I should be thankful you didn't blast me," Cono said harshly. "But what in all blue heavens are you doing? Trying to be imprisoned?"

At first I glared at him in awe. He was, in truth, a glorious warrior. I had been within his arms before but it had been in the midst of the skirmish. Here the sun gleamed behind him. He seemed to glow. His strong arms held tight to mine.

Finding my voice, I answered solemnly, "I have gone to retrieve my family."

His intense eyes questioned me. Tilting his head, he looked at me strangely. "I take such you heard my words. Do you not reason that you will not reach them in this manner?"

From behind him I saw others gather: the servants' faces shocked and in wonder of all before them. Nervous perchance, but it was the warriors that caught my attention. Their hands held to swords drawn toward me. I gritted my teeth at the scene. Immediately, Cono whispered low for my ears.

"Do not, Kela. It will gain you nothing."

I turned to face him, staring him with rage ignited within me. "Who are you to dare tell me what it will gain me? I have tried to comply, but to no avail." Heaving heavily, my chest burned with my fury. "Release me. At least then I go down as a warrior instead of sniveling coward. Let go of me."

I felt power surged within me. Again my eyes...but suddenly Cono shook me. "Prince Falco sent me. Kela, your brother..."

Just the mention of his name, his concern weakened me. *Devil beat all!* My eyes watered while I felt the anger dissipate, replaced with an overwhelming sense of longing for my siblings, Turstan, and even Gunilda. Then, without warning, a sensation swept through me and I was not where I had been. When my eyes focused, I stood staring at my brother.

"Falco," I whispered. My breathing became rapid. I couldn't manage more than the faint cry. My eyes glanced around the room. Not to my surprise, my sister walked through an open door. A wide smile emerged upon her beautiful face. She broke toward me. She must have called to me in my distress.

Falco dressed in ornamental clothing with a long red train attached to the strappings on his shoulder. His wings had emerged broad and wide. He was as he always wanted to

be: true Sordarin. I marveled at his image with pride bursting forth from me. Sareta eyed me with her tears, but she looked breathtaking in a sequin gown that glittered upon her every movement.

But my joy was short lived, for movement caught my eyes. I turned to face King Edulf.

* * * *

I watched the procession from the tower. I saw only through a tiny slit I was allowed. I could see little, but in all could hear the cheers of the crowd below. In the distance I could see bands of winged Sordarins, but, in all, they were too far to make out much. An array of armed Sordarin warriors guarded my cell. In reality, it was not needed. If I was again to use force, I would have done so the moment King Edulf ordered my arrest.

I huddled in the cold, damp quarters against the corner of the bare cell, given nothing for comfort. Without question, my siblings had no idea of my treatment during the ceremony. In all probability, they were told I would watch from a place of honor.

My final words to them had been reassuring that all was set with me. Pride oozed from my being for them both. In truth, I could have said little else, for King Edulf's eyes lay upon me, threatening me and my siblings. Even when Falco called to me, I assured him I was well. I had no choice. King Edulf's words to me upon my appearance, while brief, sank deep within my soul.

"I can quickly stop these proceedings, Kela. If you rebel against my wishes, your siblings will be denied their birthright. Is that your wish?"

No, I wanted to cry. My wish was to understand why I couldn't stand with them, beside them, to be acknowledged as was my right. It was my right! Yet I did nothing but smile at them both in their finery and glory, left to wonder about my fate. Quickly after their departure, King Edulf sent in the Winged Guards, to my surprise led by Cono. He must have known where I had disappeared to. He met my eyes in disappointment.

In all, his treatment was kind, as kind as one could be given my circumstance. He waited until King Edulf departed. Signaling to the others, he said in a tone not to questioned, "There is no need. I will fly her to the tower."

Away from the eyes of all, he took me into his arms as if I weighed nothing. Seemingly unconcerned that I would disrupt his flight, he flew to a balcony which led into a dark lit room, even in the middle of a bright day. He released me. All heads turned upon our appearance. Cono immediately began to bark orders, but I didn't listen to them. My soul deflated.

He led me into the cell. "I wish none of this had happened, Kela. Pray, be patient. I'm certain all will settle. Stop infuriating the king. I will do what I can after the ceremony. Please, for your own sake, do nothing until I come again."

He gave me no time for response before closing behind him the thick wooden door. In time, I closed my eyes. Sleep must have befallen me for the next I awoke, startled. Night had fallen, for the air outside the window had turned dark. A loud voice bellowed outside my door. The next instant it opened wide. Turstan!

"All that's in heavin! For one to be treated such! For what reason! She is one of them." Turstan's voice shook the walls, echoing his fury.

I scrambled to my feet and ran to him, shivering; I knew not from the cold or my experience. Breaking from his hold, others began to circle around me. He had not come alone. Lord Lothar stood beside Cono, but it was Falco whom my eyes beheld with water within them. He had come for me.

Lord Lothar gestured with his hand and the Winged Guard departed. Before he began talking, he motioned for Cono to make sure all had left. Then he turned his attention to Turstan.

“We have not long. We need only to decipher how to handle this before I present our plan to the king. I can’t answer King Edulf’s reaction, Turstan. Frustration with all, perhaps. That the Euchoun we had hoped for is a mere girl. That his agreement he gave he doesn’t want to hold to. Whatever the reason, his lordship is adamant about it. At the moment, we have kept her here. The other two he openly accepts. He has his reasons, Turstan. And he is king and he has declared that Kela stay out of sight from everyone. If she could have contained herself, she could have stayed within my home, but after the display this day it is not an option.”

“We have the house outside the city,” Cono offered, returning to his grandfather’s side.

My anger toward him subsided somewhat with his effort. My hand gripped Turstan’s tightly, frighteningly fighting back the tears welling in my eyes. For the first time in my life I was truly frightened, not for my safety, but being ripped from my family. My biggest fear.

“Then the king is a fool! He knows not the power which lies in that girl. I know. I have seen!” Turstan declared. “But, Lothar, even if the girl had not the power, for all that is holy, is she not his granddaughter?”

“In that, I don’t understand. I do know that the king has extensive knowledge of Euchouns. He seems to give credit to Falco for her display,” Lothar acknowledged. “From all accounts, most give Falco the credit for all that occurred that night.”

Falco laughed out loud. “You can rest assured, my lord, it wasn’t I. I may have the ability to do small things,” he paused. He looked at a wobbly chair at the end of beaten table. The chair fell back. “That, sir, is the extent of my ability. A far cry from the destruction Kela caused. I know of no other, but I will give you that I had never seen such even from her than what she did that night. I cannot turn from my sister. I will not.”

Lord Lothar sighed heavily in a manner that he wanted not to deal with Falco’s stance. He turned to Cono. “Cono, you agree? You had hold of the girl. If she did all the damage and without her hands, how?”

“It came from her eyes, my lord,” Cono said. He glanced over at me, waiting for me to offer an explanation. I had none. I clung tighter to Turstan.

Lord Lothar shrugged, pressing his lips together tightly. Then he shook his head. “I’m afraid I’m not going to be able to offer anything that will make you happy. King Edulf insists Kela stays here until he finds a solution.”

Lord Lothar’s hand went up immediately to Falco. “Oh, young prince, do not begin with me and I would advise you not to go against King Edulf. It has been a long day of celebrating for most. Morning is only a couple of hours away. I have instructed for a bed for your comfort, Kela. It is all I can do at the moment. Know, though, I will intervene on your behalf. You will not be in the tower long, of that rest assured...”

“No, you don’t understand. We all need to stay together: Falco, Sareta and I,” I interrupted, unable to remain silent any longer. I broke from Turstan’s side. “I understand none of this. I have done nothing to deserve such. But this I know: Sareta is a passive. The intensity of feelings between all has drained her. She could not survive with this conflict.”

“Then you need to convince her otherwise. You need to convince her you are well looked after,” Lothar said plainly. “If you care for your sister.”

“How can you ask such?”

“Life as a royal is never easy, Kela. It has to be accepted. Do you believe that Archibaldus is happy with your discovery? He has long been considered heir apparent once your father died. All has changed. Archibaldus will not take it without issue. King Edulf will have to tread softly.”

“Do you realize, Lothar, that Kela is also in line behind Falco for the throne?” Turstan bantered.

“Much has changed, Turstan,” Lothar stated. He ran his hand through his hair, frustrated, for the meeting wasn’t going as planned. “King Edulf cannot afford to trust many. Times are such. When we discovered Mithelk and his guards cut down to ribbons, we immediately flew to Nottesdone. There was nothing left. The portal closed. He placed blame solely upon the children’s mother. When Kela spoke of Dyer’s involvement, it was the first we had heard of even the possibility.”

“Why would he blame Lady Eufamia?” Turstan asked, confused.

“I’m not certain, but he was convinced of such,” Lothar answered. He shook his head. “In honesty, I don’t know what to make of all. To me, I believe as most Lankas - fate and destiny will prevail. Also, there is the realization that a great threat looms, for a Euchoun with that power would emerge only to deal with such.”

I listened intently while they argued, but suddenly my eyes became blurred. I rubbed them, trying to focus but all I could see was a fog where a form emerged. A dark figure slinked toward a sleeping object. I screamed. I could feel hands touch my shoulders and then with a sweeping force I was flung through a seemingly long tunnel, landing hard against a hard stone wall.

A body fell against me, quickly rolling to the side. To my surprise, Cono had followed me through. He stood upon his feet, sword drawn. The creature turned, staring at me with all eight of his eyes arranged in four pairs in a semicircle on its dark forehead. The creature seemed to revive with my appearance. Its mouth opened, revealing two huge fangs on the chelicerae, drooling with liquid and smacking its lips in a manner of it was about to satisfy a hunger.

Cono moved swiftly between the creature and me. Without warning, the creature flung Cono back with one of its many legs. It made its way slowly toward me. For a moment, I stood frozen with a fear that gripped me, but the creature buckled. Wings fluttered rapidly as Cono jumped upon the creature’s back. The creature fought back, bending over. Cono lost his footing. The creature maneuvered over the fallen Sordarin, fangs outstretched.

Panting, shaking, I quickly crawled back to my feet. Sweat beaded on my forehead. I didn’t have time to think, only react. Flinging my hand across my chest, I blasted the creature. A cry, a shrill eerie cry, emerged, but the blast only freed Cono for a moment. He jumped up to my side, pushing me back. Frightened, I grabbed his hand and in the

next moment, the creature extended its front leg, giving us no room to escape. All my instincts screamed inside of me. I looked up at Cono. His attention lay solidly upon the creature.

Once more I extended my free arm. A force more powerful than the first exploded and thrust the creature back against the stone wall. Cono had his opening and used it to full advantage. He plunged his blade straight into the unprotected underbelly. A gush of ooze ushered forth, covering Cono and splashing over me.

The room echoed with a moan of a dying soul. I felt as if it took all my effort to breathe, watching in shock while the creature began to transform from the horrendous creature back into its original form. Screams, cries wouldn't cease. Cono stepped back.

Joining us to watch, the once sleeping figure stood holding his sword in hand. King Edulf said nothing. The room filled quickly with guards. Chaos ensued. I turned my head. My lower lip trembled. My eyes welled. Turstan said that warriors didn't cry, but I felt the urge to do so.

"Lord Ambrose!" King Edulf uttered in disbelief at the body of a man appearing where once was a monster. Then he turned his attention upon me. It took nothing more. The tears began and I couldn't stop them.

Sobbing hysterically, I called desperately for Falco, but to no avail. Falco couldn't hear me. Something was wrong. Frightened beyond measure, I withdrew back against the far wall, my hand placed over my mouth.

King Edulf walked toward me, but I shimmied down the wall and tucked my head into my knees. Would he harm me? I braced myself as best I could. And waited. Nothing came. I refused to look up. I heard men talking in the background. Then I heard stomping, running into the room. There was only one. Turstan!

He grabbed me up. "Are you harmed?"

Shaking my head, he hugged me tightly. Glancing back up, Falco stood behind him with Lord Lothar. I tried to talk, but found I had no voice. I managed only a whisper, "I tried to call Falco."

Turstan nodded. "He tried himself. He was blocked by some means. Lord Lothar said it had to be black magic holding him back. You broke through for some reason."

"King Edulf? What is he going to do with me?" I asked, trembling, but no sooner had I spoken, I felt my head spinning once again. I could hear voices as if in the distance.

"Can you stop her insufferable trembling?"

But little else could I hear. I was swallowed once more into blackness.

CHAPTER SIX

The Forbidden Forest

Groggy and bleary, I woke with sunlight beaming in on my face. In a daze and uncertain where I lay, I sprang up on a bed within a room I did not know. The bed sat upon a post, rusted and worn. The windows opened, for there was no covering. Looking

down, the floor was dirt. Easing off the bed, I walk cautiously toward the door while the dust encircled me.

Confusion rang around me, for I knew not where I was. Slowly, I began to remember, terrifying, frightening remembrances...the creature reaching forth toward me. Cono had appeared...his sword in his hand. I blasted the creature. I had, hadn't I? Had I not seen Cono thrust his sword into the creature? The cry emerged. Yes, I was certain he had done so.

But where was I? Where was everyone? It seemed only a simple cottage. Glancing around my surroundings, it had only one room as far as I could tell. There stood a doorway open, but I saw no door to close. At the far end sat a simple stone hearth and a wobbly table. Was I still within a dream? No, this was no dream, I feared. I flinched. Was that a cry? I swore I heard a slight whimpering noise. I eased consciously toward it.

The sun blared harshly into my eyes when I exited. I squinted. The air was very bright and the sky clear. Within the distance, I could hear songs of the larks. The yard was long, bordered against a foreboding line of trees. Across from the small cottage sat a quaint shelter. I glanced around. I could still hear the sound. It became clearer. Someone was crying.

I turned the corner of the cottage. Sitting against the wall, Gunilda held her head within her knees. She wept.

Leaning down, I brought my nurse within my arms. "What is wrong, Gunilda? Where are we? Where is everyone?"

"Kela, what have you done? Why have we been banished here?" Gunilda wailed, but she didn't lift her head.

"Gunilda, I know not of what you speak. The last I remember is using my shield to help save the king. Surely he could not be angry with me about such?"

"Kela, I think not. All would have never reacted in their way if such. The Royal Wings dragged me from my bed. You lay motionless while they flew us within here. I didn't even get to say farewell to Sareta. The poor child knows not where I went. She must be frantic without me!"

"What of us?" I cried, suddenly overwrought. I stood and turned around, glancing one way and then another. "Where are we, Gunilda? Can we leave? Where is Falco? Turstan would never leave us such."

"This, I was told, is the Forbidden Forest." Gunilda looked up at me. "It is our prison."

The cottage sat in a clearing at the bottom of a hill on the northern side of the Preda Mountain Range in the midst of a thick forest. A narrow lane led to a tapered gate in a thick hedge, which gave way to the entrance of the house. Nothing of the house could be seen from within the forest until one came upon in for it stood back...alone. To the east a winding stream bordered the back of the house, surrounded by ancient oak trees. The only access lay from the sky, which I soon comprehended was the intention of King Edulf.

Gunilda's words echoed within me. "There were only two. The one that had hold of me - I thought for sure he was to drop me. I believe it was his intent. We flew for hours on end. I know not exactly how long. We landed in the dark, except with only the moon's reflection to guide. They said not a word. I begged them of what had happened. They

gave no answer. All they uttered that it was as a prison with no method of escape except from the sky. And we would not be able to do so.

"*Do not venture into the forest, for they are guarded by lost souls. No one has ever returned once they have entered.*" One laughed.

"I pleaded what had you done! Then the one that laid you upon the filth of the bed turned to me.

"*I know not, but I know of none other the king's wrath has been so punished. I know we have been ordered to forget we brought you forth. May the Great One look over you both. You will need such!*"

Gunilda uttered the words, hung her head, and wept.

* * * *

Dreams have come and gone since that day. For weeks I stood within the back of our cottage and searched the skies with a yearning to fly. I was alone and so totally lonely. I called to my brother repeatedly. Each morning I searched the skies for his arrival, but he did not come. I had long lost the sense of time since we were placed in this valley, bordered by the Forbidden Forest and the cliffs of the looming mountains surrounding our small cottage.

Poor Gunilda was worse than I. She fretted terribly for Sareta. Not much time passed before my nurse, who had longed served my mother's family, became frail. The care quickly reversed, for Gunilda had taken to bed - the only bed we had.

I slept upon dried grass and leaves I had collected in the far corner of the room. To the best of my ability, I had partitioned off an area for Gunilda to have a space to herself. In all, I had not time to contemplate our dire straits. Our means of survival depended quickly upon me.

Gone was a simple wish and all I needed appeared. I no longer had my sister beside me. I hunted the edge of the woods for any semblance of edible foliage. A desire to cry encompassed me, for I couldn't find much. The water from the stream running alongside the forest was the only source of fresh water we had. My body ached and my stomach growled, for I was hungry. I had most times given most to Gunilda, who seemed to think we had the ample food we once had. I had not the heart to constantly remind her of the change in our circumstances. And try as I might, I realized that I could never replace Sareta in Gunilda's heart.

I had begun to explore. I had no other choice. I gave little heed to the warning of the ones that brought us to this hellhole, but to my dismay, the forest seemed endless.

During this time I walked and explored, nervously at first. I learned I wasn't totally alone. I heard voices murmuring and at times singing mournful songs. Then, after a time, I gave it no thought, irritated as I was. I didn't care if there were spirits, lost souls, or whatever they were. If they couldn't help me get out of this place, I had no time for them.

Although once, I gave pause, hearing a woman sing. It seemed to be a haunting song, as if a lullaby for a babe. A beautiful voice she had and it was a song which I found strange that I took comfort in. I would sit and listen while the wind blew gently.

*Do not cry, my little one,
Sleep my child with peace,*

*As I attend to thee,
All through the night and the day,
I will not be away from you.
As guardian angels watch over all,
I'll be as such with my little one.
Watching over you as you sleep.*

*Sleep within the slumbers soundly,
Knowing love surrounds you.
Do not cry, my little one,
The Great One sends me hence,
But my heart will always watch ov'r thee
E'er around my little one,
Close your eyes and dream,
Dream always, my little one,
And I'll stay watching over thee,
Sleep, my little one!*

As I hummed the tune, Gunilda looked at me oddly.

“Why are you humming a lullaby, Kela?”

“Lullaby?”

“It is the one your father used to sing to you.”

I remembered little of the time before my parents' death. Oddly, the thought of the lullaby placated me. And after a while, I ceased to be afraid or irritated or whatever I felt about the lost souls. The shadows looming within the darkness of the woods no longer felt threatening to me. Although I had yet to yield to their callings, I felt drawn to do so. Randomly different forms would materialize in the forest, beckoning to me. I held back, for I had no knowledge of their intent, good or evil.

Then from the sky I heard a fluttering of wings. I looked up and hoped emerged when forms became clearer as they flew closer. Sordarins! My heart pounded madly. Of course they had returned. They couldn't leave me here without explanation, but the Sordarins flew by our small shelter as if we were insignificant. My eyes fixated upon them in disbelief. In the distance, I saw the small group land. I could have cried.

I lay in bed that night deciphering whether to attempt to make contact with the group. By the morning light my mind set upon the venture. In truth, I had no choice. We had little food and the shelter had much to be desired.

In the dim light of the early morning, I eased out of the cottage. Gunilda lay sound asleep. I laid out the little food we had for her, a round fruit of which I had no knowledge, except it seemed to be plentiful on the ground, and the last of the bread that we had been left. I glanced back over my shoulder. I left determined I would be back soon enough with food for my old nurse.

The sun lay high in the sky before I came close enough to the site. My legs weakened, for the hike had been grueling over tattered rocks and streams. I dare not take the easier route of going through the edge of the woods. It was too open. I would have

been easily seen upon that course. An ominous sanctuary sat in the midst of the towering cliff of the mountain before me.

A crumbling castle was embedded into the rocks, fortified with towering stone walls. I cringed the closer I walked. I heard rumblings of life behind the high walls. I searched at first for a gate to lower for me to enter, but I was dealing with Sordarins. They didn't need a gate to enter.

My mood, my frustration, gave way to a brief thought of blasting my way in, but after I climbed over the last of the rigid rocks my eyes caught sight of a small entrance way in the far corner of the encampment, an archway covered by wild undergrowth. It had not been used as of late. I began the arduous trail to the opening.

The briars caught my tunic, pricking my skin and material. I grimaced when I turned abruptly and a branch swung back in my face, but I trudged onward until I came to an archway. My back crouched over, for the undergrowth didn't allow me to stand erect. I fell back upon the ground when my eyes caught sight that the archway was blocked by a huge stone. I pressed against it; thinking what, I didn't know. All I could see behind me was a venture back into the briars and undergrowth and before me a stone barrier.

I stared at the wall for only a moment before I set my mind upon my course of action, the only thing I could do and should have done from the first. The whole of my situation, the emptiness within my stomach, the loneliness of having been ripped from my family and thrown into the middle of the Forbidden Forest, away from everything I had known, swept through me.

A moment later, I blasted. Crawling back unto my feet, I blasted again, having not noticed the first blast would have been sufficient. I eased over to the now well ventilated archway. The stone lay many yards away, broken into pieces.

My eyes blazed, for within me intensity built that needed to be extinguished. I walked soundly into a courtyard. I stared around. In front of me, a young Sordarin stood in silent amazement at my feet; behind him several more eyes began to emerge out of the clearing dust.

Faces hung open in startled fashion, although from the corner of my eye I saw a warrior descend onto the scene. My arms raised back...

"It is not necessary. Please, let me keep all intact, my dear."

My head tilted toward the calm voice. A man walked in an even manner, an elderly man with flowing gray hair pulled back from his face. I quickly realized he was not Sordarin: short in stature, for I was of the same height, his face showed worn lines of the years behind him. His wrinkled hand drew back in such a fashion to hold back an assault from me, but in my mood I cared not. I would take on them all. Staring upon me, a smile emerged on the older man's face.

"There is no need for more destruction. I can understand your frustration. We have only returned here last night to discover that the caretaker passed away since our last departure. It is a shame, for it was thought he would have greeted you..."

"Greeted me?" I corrected. "The only greeting I have had is a harsh one."

"The ones that brought you should have seen to your needs before departing."

My head shook, but my manner didn't relent. I knew not these people. Reading my thoughts, the man pressed his lips together.

“I’m Twiten.” His hands spanned wide across his chest. “These young Sordarins are my students, although I’m certain they have not seen the power that was just exhibited. I had been told, held hope it would surface again, but until one sees...”

“I don’t understand you, old man.”

“No? You don’t know why you are here?”

“I know only that I was ripped from my family and brought here in the dead of night with little food and only a semblance of a shelter. I hear not my brother and don’t feel my sister’s presence. No, I don’t know why I’m here.”

He nodded slightly, motioning to one behind him. “Go prepare a meal. See what we have for clothing also.”

“No, wait...My nurse is in bed,” I uttered, filled with confusion. “She needs food.”

His smile widened. “Spoken like a true Euchoun. Thinking of others...That is what you are is not, young lass? You wonder why you are here.” He paused and walked up beside me. His hands pushed mine down. “You don’t need to use your powers against us. We are as you. It is why you are here.”

“Why?”

He said simply, “To train, young lass. To train.”

In a huge dining hall, food was prepared for me. Filling my plate cautiously, I glanced up while I ate. Twiten sat across from me, studying me, I was certain. When we were alone, he talked. His words echoed in the large hall, but in this he offered to me the explanation that eluded me since the night I was swept into the Forbidden Forest.

“My name is Twiten and I tarry from a land long ago lost, Narteria. It is written that Narteria is the source of all that is known upon this world. The few of us remaining are called Overseers, countering the balance of the world around you. We all have been born with a purpose. Yours is to protect. Mine, to give you the means to do so.

“Euchouns, true Euchouns, are rare creatures. There are those called Euchouns that hold powers to shield and protect, but little compare to the feat I saw this morning. In truth, young lass, I have only seen one other exhibit close to the power,” he hesitated slightly for a moment, thinking perchance. “You know not much of being a Euchoun?”

Swallowing, I shook my head. The food tasted so good I didn’t want to stop. I hadn’t realized how hungry I had been. “It is how I’ve been known since I can remember. Gunilda perhaps can tell you more. She is Witheleghean. My mother was such. I have been told I am to protect. In that, I know.”

“Yes,” he said thoughtfully. “Much has happened over the last few years that have King Edulf concerned about Scarladin. We have searched long and hard for the Euchoun foretold. All we have found are on these grounds. We come within the spring and stay until the cold weather returns to train and develop. These grounds are protected from the Hallow Minions. We train within without fear of discovery, but in turn good magic can’t penetrate the field around us either. It is why you can’t hear your brother or feel your sister. Unfortunate, but necessary if you are to survive until you are needed.”

“Survive?” I countered. “You act as though I have been protected by some means, instead of thrust in this wilderness with no food and only a semblance of a shelter. My siblings were taken within my grandfather’s castle, acknowledged for their birthright. My sister is the most powerful Witheleghean that Gunilda says has lived outside of Witheleghe. And she has not been *protected* in the manner I have.”

“There are those that can shield your sister’s magic from the Hallow Minions. One is here. It is a form of being a Euchoun, a different type of shielding, reflecting magic off. You, young lass, have not been able to hide your powers. Already rumors abound of a Euchoun and you are not ready to be acknowledged.”

“Why not?” I asked indignantly. “Did I not save my grandfather? I did. Didn’t I?” My voice trailed off, uncertain now. My memory blurred of the night.

“Yes,” he answered me soberly. His eyes grew dim. “Yet, there is much for you to learn. In your words lies the answer to your question. If you know not what you have done, then you have your answer. The power within you needs to be cultivated. The young warrior that was thrust through with you expressed concerns as to where you would blast. He wasn’t certain if he would be caught in your field of vision. It caused for uncertainty.”

“But he killed the creature,” I said defensively, but confusion rang in my tone. I had never thought that in all I could do harm to those I had no intent.

“King Edulf is familiar with Euchouns. In this, he knows well. With the power you exhibited, comes the warning of a greater evil. The Great One does not send a Euchoun as powerful as we suspect you could become without a threat. It has been written. In all, you must prepare.”

My eyes lit up for in that I could do, for that was my purpose. “It is my wish to do so.”

“It is my hope you will feel the same in the time to come. I warn you that this road is difficult enough for a male, but female? But, in all, though, the Great One has spoken and we cannot question. If it is indeed you that he has sent.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Training of a Euchoun

The sun's rays shone down through the high tree branches. Budded leaves had yet burst forth. The season had once more changed and I still lived within my forest home. Many seasons have passed, each with a hope that I would be called back to the home that I had never known, but only glimpsed. I have studied and trained with a diligence that has far exceeded even Twiten's expectations.

My life has been lived in solitude, even when the Euchouns settle within the Forbidden Forest’s boundaries. For in the time since Twiten announced his intent in my training, all his students no longer remembered my outburst of power. Twiten, I discovered, had magic within him. All the students except one have forgotten the incident of my arrival, only the one who shields my sister from the dreaded Hallow Minions, my one and only friend, Johannes. He has no last name or none that he remembers. Over time, I discovered I trust no other as I do Johannes.

So, I have trained for the Euchoun I was from a distance. Even in my small world, I could not be acknowledged for the power they suspected. In all, while the Euchouns dwelled within the walls of the deserted castle, I had served more like their servant,

waiting upon their needs. Yet, I watched and studied. The library Twiten opened wide for me, and during the time they are gone, I lived within the books that were left. It was the only room I was allowed in after their departure.

I had been content, I supposed, for I believed in my purpose. I had seen the evil and had trembled. I refused to do so again. In that, I believed and held to. I had to, for at times I felt a void within me that pain eludes. I missed my siblings and while time passed, a pull within me grew. I know not to what or whom, but I had it not within my grasp - not yet.

Turstan, thank the Great One, came when he was allowed. He worked with my training with a sword. Although my stature and strength could not hope to fend off a male opponent, Turstan wanted me prepared in every facet to know what a warrior feels.

"It will be needed to protect and with all comes understanding of the danger faced," Turstan said more than once. Staggering back from his frontal assault against me, I crawled back onto my feet with sword in hand. Always sword in hand, Turstan said; never drop my sword. I listened well to Turstan.

When the students dwelled within the castle, Gunilda and I resided in the castle. The roles have been reversed here in the Forbidden Forest. I had become a maid for Gunilda also. She is revered by the students as a teacher of good magic. Her knowledge of Witheleghe allowed her to be of use to Twiten. And her health greatly improved with their need upon her.

It was only during the lonely months after they had left that once more she fell into despair. We returned to the small cottage to endure the winter. Improvements had been made to the shelter we called home. A door and shutters for the windows had been added to keep the weather out. The students built another room for Gunilda, who they loved dearly. Twiten helped in designing her room with articles to remind her of her home. In the months of their departure, she found comfort within the four walls.

I lived the same as I did before the additions to the cottage. My bed was hay and my blanket thin. Twiten deemed that I needed to learn humility. I held my tongue, for how much more was there to learn? My mind and heart clung to the knowledge that it was for the better. I had much to learn and over the years I have comprehended the importance of all.

Twiten reinforced within me the importance of focus. Over time I learned to concentrate solely upon an object and control my power. In all, I have felt readied since the others left when the leaves turned last season, but Twiten said that I would be called. So I have waited.

I let no one see the hurt within me. I have knowledge I have not much. I lived off of one tunic during the warm weather, having only one new one since I arrived. One I had to weave myself; I found I am not talented with my needle. Gunilda saved the tunic with her skills. During the snow and cold, I had a pair of boots and a warm coat. All have grown tight from wear and growth. I complained not even this season, when my slippers have no more sole upon them.

Not that I didn't have my secrets, but I held to them dearly, fearful that they might be taken from me, as most I cared about. Secrets from the Forbidden Forest...the Wood Spirit visited often with the others gone. At times I wondered if the Wood Spirit was real or a figment of my imagination. But, in all, I found escape with the spirit. He talked to me

of past times; legends of the past; the path of a Euchoun, a true Euchoun, of which he holds I am.

The Wood Spirit has let me see within the world of which I am no longer a part. The Shimmering Pool in the forest lent me the view of the world denied to me. I have seen my family, Falco and Sareta. In that, gave to me comfort, but, in all, I have seen the world within the castle walls. In my excitement, I tried once to show Gunilda, but she saw not what I had; only Johannes saw the scenes within the Shimmering Pool. He had done so only by accident, but he held within him my secret, for I held his.

Quiet, shy Johannes sat and told me all I wanted to know about the people surrounding my family. My heart raced when I saw Cono for the first time in the Shimmering Pool, tall and broad of shoulders, muscles abound on his frame. His hair lengthened down to his shoulders; his dark eyes intense on his look.

“So handsome,” I whispered on the sight.

Johannes laughed. “In that he is, Kela.”

For in all, I laughed with Johannes because we shared his secret that I had discovered within the Shimmering Pool. His lover was a Sordarin warrior, Larko, from the Challow tribe. It had been shown to me shortly before he returned the second season. Confused, for both were male, I watched both men kiss. The finding confused me, but being who I was, I hesitated not in questioning Johannes.

Vehemently denying all to me until I showed him the Shimmering Pool, he saw the scenes of Yucca.

“You don’t understand,” he said in a low voice. “I will be dishonored, at the least. And, in all, we both could lose our lives for our feelings.”

“Then why do you chance it?”

“For he is my life,” Johannes said simply.

“In all, I don’t understand,” I answered in a plain manner. “But I know that the Wood Spirit says the Shimmering Pool shows me only what I need to see. In all, could it be you need me to share your burden. I have lost my family, Johannes. You are my only friend. I cannot believe I was shown to do you harm. In my heart, I know I’m not. It will not be me to betray you.”

Touched, he said not much. And through time we have not mentioned it again. Johannes says not much anyway, but he has stayed a true friend. It was through Johannes I learned all about the court of my grandfather. He sat beside me at the Pool and told me who walked through the scenes before us.

The scenes come and go as the wind blows: some clear, others foggy. Some last only seconds, but I have glimpsed my home and all within.

I recognized all that entail my family with Johannes’s words.

“Queen Beatrix takes delight in all her family. As you know, she is not your grandmother by birth, having married King Edulf after your grandmother Althea’s death. Her children are Prince Archibaldus and Princess Iris. Your Uncle Archibaldus had his sights as heir thwarted with Falco’s reappearance, but has never shown resentment toward the disappointment, although his sons have shown barbs at Falco.

“Roderic, the oldest grandson of King Edulf, has long been a thorn in Falco’s side, but the young prince manages admirably. It is his ability to read his cousin’s thoughts I’m certain that has saved Prince Falco. Roderic is known for his womanizing and drinking more than his military genius, as you have witnessed from time to time. His brother Silas

follows Roderic around, but when he doesn't, he's not a bad sort. Lady Dogmar is mother to the two along with Belasquita, who would be of the same age as you I suppose. A dark haired beauty who is challenged only in her beauty to Amicia, Princess Iris's oldest daughter.

"Amicia is known for her sweetness, contrasting Belasquita in more than one way. Her blonde hair shines as the sun, it is said, and her eyes glow as the deep ocean blue. She has two sisters, Wymarcha and Cinara. From what I understand, it was been Princess Iris who has taken to your sister, Princess Sareta, as a mother. Princess Sareta is the darling of the court. Her sheen, I had to shield, but the beauty within her shines. She, when she matures, will surely overshadow all in her glory. She is well loved by Queen Beatrix as well.

"Lady Dogmar has her eyes set on a crown for Belasquita, having pressed King Edulf to attach her daughter to Prince de Folur of Brixtone. I gather she married Archibaldus with the promise of becoming queen herself. I don't believe she hides well her ambition, but it is to be expected, I suppose, in any court."

I watched through the seasons the changes within, for it was all that I could do.

A screech in the air caught my attention. Turning, excitement lit within me when my eyes caught sight of him circling above me. I recognized him immediately; most would have. Johannes stood tall with a large wing span, but it was his hair and eyes that called attention to him. He bore from the Osmolado Tribe, which the majority, I understood, had the distinct dark red hair with glossy sky blue covered eyes. The eyes took a long time to adjust to, whether he was looking at me or not. But in all, my solemn quiet friend knew my secret and kept it well.

I ran down to the field in front of the cottage. Gunilda and I had not prepared for the return of the group. We had assumed they would not have made an appearance for a few more weeks. A cool dampness still hung in the air. I watched anxiously while he landed before me. Instinctually I hugged my friend. There had been a time when he would have tightened upon my show of affection, but over the seasons he had grown accustomed to my gesture when it was only the two of us. I released him and scanned the sky for signs of the others.

"You are alone?" I asked, gripping his hand. Johannes gave me a tentative smile.

"For the moment," he answered. "Twiten may well be at the castle as we speak."

Twiten traveled through unseen portals; one lay at the castle. It was the reason why Gunilda and I weren't allowed to stay during the time the castle was unoccupied. Portals were dangerous when used without a seeing eye to guide one. I had been warned about the dangers numerous times, but I had watched and deciphered the proximity of the portal. But if the truth be known, I had spied upon Twiten. The word "forbidden" had that effect on me.

"I'm so glad you are here. I have to show you the Shimmering Pool..."

He stopped dead in his tracks, jerking back my hand abruptly. "Kela, I forgot!"

"Forgot what?"

"Your slippers," he admonished himself, staring down at my bare feet. "I promised, but with all that happened it slipped my mind. I will send Larko back when..."

Forgetting completely about the slippers, I stuttered, "You aren't staying..." My excitement was immediately lost with the thought of losing my friend, my only companion.

His eyes dropped to the ground, hesitating. Evidently the news he had to share would not bode well with me.

"It is why I came early. I won't be back. I have bonded."

My eyes lit. "That is wonderful, Johannes. It is what you hoped. It is what we all hope. It means you are strong..."

"It is to your brother, Kela," Johannes interrupted abruptly.

For a moment, an eternity, I stood with my mouth open but no words uttered. My mind raced. Long had I believed I would bond with Falco. I had long believed we had already. Twiten had taken for granted the bond would materialize. One did not bond twice.

"I...I..." I stumbled on my words. I swallowed back my feelings. I walked over to him, leaned up to his face and kissed his cheek. "It is wonderful. I know of no other to protect my brother as you will. Twiten must be excited to have a Euchoun finally bond..."

"I am not you, Kela. We both know you are the stronger. It means only your destiny lies with another, or it may mean you need not bond to complete your destiny," Johannes spoke as if he had practiced the words. "It is confusing to Twiten, also. It is why he is here."

I nodded, but the realization of losing my dear friend along with my dream of standing by my brother...but in all, I could not take back from Johannes his triumph!

Johannes took my hand. I smiled slightly, regaining my composure.

"Come," I said finally. "If I have you not for long, I want to show you the most amazing thing. I'm not sure what it means, but it's so pretty. Sareta must be coming into some new power."

"Power?" Johannes asked. "You have me confused."

"Then come. Hopefully, the Pool will show it to you. It is fascinating, truly."

I pulled Johannes behind me until we stood above the Pool. I fell to my knees. Waving my hand over the still waters, I said clearly, "My sister."

To my joy, the waters swirled. Shortly within the waters, the figure of Sareta emerged. She sat within a large room with blaring sunlight, but she sat back in the corner. She was laughing. I saw not with whom she was laughing, but that wasn't important. What I had seen earlier, I saw clearly even more so.

Bright beams of different colored beings, seemingly like birds, fluttered around my sister. Their wings beat ferociously, no more than a foot from her. Their beaks moved as a woodpecker upon a tree, except it seemed they were pecking at air. When I had seen them before there had only been a couple; now they seemed to have multiplied.

I turned back and smiled broadly at Johannes. "Are they not the most beautiful creatures? They were only a couple not more than an hour ago. What do you think they are?"

Johannes's face turned solemn. He bent over the scene. "I see nothing except Princess Sareta, Kela. What are you seeing?"

“You jest,” I countered. “The pretty bird-like creatures of different colors, a multitude of colors. They are so beautiful: surrounding Sareta, trying so hard to get to her.”

Suddenly, Johannes jerked my hand and stood back up. He gripped my waist about to fly with me. He had never done so before.

“What is wrong, Johannes?” I cried.

“I can’t see them, Kela, but what you are describing are Minions! Hallow Minions that are trying to get at your sister through my shield!”

Never had time seemed so slow when Johannes flew me to the castle. Twiten stared at us when we landed on the balcony of his room. I heard Johannes utter words, but all I understood was my sister was in danger. Twiten whipped words at me.

“What does the room look like? Where is the window entrance? The sun shines which way? She sits upon what?”

“Let her go, Twiten,” Johannes said. “Let Kela lead the way. Let her see. She will find her sister. I didn’t see the Minions. Kela did. We don’t have time.”

I felt Twiten’s eyes upon me. He nodded and with his hand on my shoulder he turned me. I stood, staring into blankness. Next, a thrust through a barrier landed me unto the hard floor beneath me. Behind me Twiten and Johannes entered.

Hundreds of Minions now seemed to have converged around my sister, who sat startled by the sudden appearance of us in front of her. She rose, but Johannes screamed to sit.

“I see them,” Twiten whispered.

I crawled to my feet. My eyes fixed upon the creatures. I flicked my hand, swiping back a band of creatures against the stone fireplace. Unearthly screams emerged while from the corner of my eye, I saw Sareta’s eyes betray her fear.

“My shield can’t break through to reinforce it,” Johannes called. His eyes laid against the creatures but to no avail. His shield couldn’t penetrate the Minions’ magic.

His couldn’t, but I blared mine against Johannes’s shield around my sister. The force of my power bounced off, sending the creatures into the air and freeing the shield for Johannes.

Contain the threat!

Without hesitation, my hand swirled, encapsulating them. Johannes slid next to me. “Let me within.”

Backing up, I parted my hands. Johannes eased within without letting any escape.

“They are before you, Johannes.”

His eyes lit with his repellent magical shield, forcing the creatures against mine. The Minions began to simultaneously explode. A moment later all was quiet.

It’s done. Let go.

As I was told, I released my shield. Johannes turned and stared at me. He nodded in relief toward me. All around me, I found eyes upon me. My sister stood in awe. To my surprise, Falco rose from his seat. He smiled at me, but it was behind me that I saw the warrior, tall and dark. His eyes held mine. Cono!

My heart raced. I was within the castle walls in front of my family! I turned back around to Falco and stepped toward him, but in that instant I felt Twiten’s hands upon my shoulder. Immediately I felt the thrust back through the portal.

Before I had time to take another breath, I was once more in the Forbidden Forest. Twiten stood beside me.

“You need to return back to your cottage, Kela. I have to return and decipher all that occurred. I wish it could be different, but for now go home. You have done well, extremely well.”

He stepped back and disappeared. I was alone, again.

Days passed. I heard nothing, saw nothing in the Shimmering Pool. Gunilda took to her bed, her concern magnified for her precious Sareta. I had gone back to the castle and contemplated entering the portal once more. Gunilda’s words worried me.

“Hallow Minions!” she cried. “They found her! They would suck the magic out from her, leaving her an empty shell.”

“Gunilda, she is safe. We killed them all. Johannes shields from the Minions' magic. She is strong herself. She needs only to be taught to defend herself. She is at an age where she should learn. She has the power within her.”

“Ah, she is not you, Kela,” Gunilda saddened. “You, without question, could. Sareta is Witheleghean. It is hard at times to defend oneself.”

“But she has Falco, Gunilda...and me,” I answered. I sat beside her. I, too, felt the overwhelming helplessness. “King Edulf would never allow her to be put into danger, Gunilda. I have been told she is the darling of the court.”

I wondered myself after I comforted Gunilda. How could I see the Minions when Johannes couldn’t? What happened to cause Johannes' shield to weaken?

I walked, and then sat for hours at the Shimmering Pool waiting for a sign all was right: sitting, staring at the still water.

“Kela.”

I turned to the familiar voice. Johannes had returned. I rose to greet him, but behind him another walked. His face I had seen a million times in the Pool. Falco! He smiled broadly. I froze in disbelief.

Falco stood tall...a proud Sordarin warrior. It was one thing to have seen him within the Pool, but another to see him in his glory in person. His face I would have always known, but he had grown. He towered over me now. He swept me in his arms and hugged me tightly. Tears flowed freely down my cheeks. I cared not if it wasn’t seemingly for a warrior to cry. He kissed my cheek and hugged me again.

“I knew it was you! I told Grandfather there was no one else who would ever have such power,” he exclaimed. “He told me I must be mistaken, but I knew I wasn’t. I told Johannes he had to take me to you, but it wasn’t until Cono went to Turstan...”

Breaking from my brother’s embrace, I saw Cono standing, smiling at me. I glanced back at my brother. “We are here, Kela,” Falco said soundly. “Sareta is also. She is with Gunilda.”

“I don’t understand, Falco,” I struggled to find my voice. “Did you not know I was here?”

“Kela, we were told you were dead,” he said simply.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Bond

Falco stood beside me as we walked back to the cottage. He struggled with what he faced before him. His temper rose.

"This makes no sense, Kela! At one time I thought I kept hearing your call, but reasoned it couldn't be. I don't understand the need for all of this. We will, of course, bring you back. You can't stay here."

He walked through the door of the quaint cottage that had been my home. He glanced over at the small pad in the corner. "What is this?"

I hesitated, embarrassed, for I had to admit all in front of Cono.

"It's where I sleep, but come, Gunilda will want to see you," I said, trying, for at least a moment, to change the subject. They had come. It would be enough to leave this place.

"No, wait, Kela; I want to know all. Why are you here? What did you do?" Falco demanded. He grabbed my arm, giving me pause.

"I don't know, Falco," I whispered. "Except Twiten told me I had to train to become the Euchoun they hoped. It is all I know. It is all I have clung to. Poor Gunilda has been dealt with harshly by being torn from Sareta, Falco. I've had no dealings with the king. I haven't seen him since that night in his chambers when the Arachnid attacked."

"You know nothing since? It has well been over four years," Cono asked. He kicked the bed I slept in. He bent down, disgusted with such. "Have you not even a blanket?"

"Gunilda is cold," I said.

Falco, visibly shaken with the scene before him, thought for a moment. "I blame myself, Kela. I should have better listened. When Grandfather told me of your death, I should have known, for I had seen his feelings."

"His feelings?"

He swallowed hard and shook his head. "I'm not quite certain, but I picked up upon he believes you are weak, your Witheleghean half. He wanted you strong, unflinching. He does not know you as I. But how does this? Unless...."

"Brother, I don't understand," I answered.

Falco eyed his sister. He shook his head. "Nothing. I'm trying to make sense where there isn't any. Why keep you from me? I have grown to know Grandfather well. He has his reasons, which I'm certain he feels are for the best."

"Best?" I pressed my lips together in manner to contain myself. All these years apart! How could they be for the best?

"I will find out. Now, though, we celebrate! For we are together again, never to be parted," Falco declared.

I had never been to a feast before but Sareta called for a generous supper laid upon a large table within the Forbidden Castle. The hall lit brightly with candles and a fire mended. Smiling broadly, I ate, happier than I had been since I could remember. Sareta sat next to me, holding my hand, afraid I would disappear. Completing all that I had never stopped loving, Turstan sat across from me. Johannes and Cono sat at the far end next to Twiten, who had appeared, allowing for the celebration to the fullest.

My heart warmed as the fire that burned brightly. Gunilda glowed sitting on the other side of Sareta. Her eyes brimmed with merriment, for she had her child next to her; it was evident also that the small one had missed her nurse.

“I’ll talk with Grandfather, Kela. I’m certain he didn’t mean this to happen. If he’s worried about such, I can cover all. I will tell him,” Sareta gave her sister a glowing smile. “He must not know how it is for you. He has given me all. I will...”

“You have done plenty, my little sister. If you ever attempt such an action again,” Falco interrupted. “It was Sareta herself that weakened Johannes’s shield around her. She wanted Amicia to see her sheen.”

“I wanted only for her to see it for a moment!” Sareta exclaimed.

“A moment was all it took,” Falco reprimanded his youngest sister. “All know that you are Witheleghean. You have to expect the Hallow Minions to be in wait for an opportunity.”

“Can she not protect herself from the Minions?” I asked in earnest.

“Most definitely. She has put it off too long as it is. Grandfather is setting aside time for Twiten to show her,” Falco offered, glancing over at Gunilda. “And of course, our dear Gunilda.”

“I’m to return?” Gunilda’s old tired face beamed with the prospect.

“It is what seems the best course of action at the moment. At least for a time,” Twiten said. “My attention has been redirected by King Edulf, which includes ensuring Princess Sareta’s safety. King Edulf feels it could mean that Asmeodai is making a move.”

Sareta turned to me, her irritation of the dark conversation clearly seen in her face. “Sister, I have been wondering of what you’re wearing. I can’t sit by and let you sit at the table in such.”

Before I could blink my eyes, I sat in a magnificent bejeweled gown, rose colored, soft against my skin. My hands reached to my hair, twisted upward in fashion. I could feel slippers, comfortable against my toes. I glanced over and found Cono smiling at me; obviously he liked what he saw, but the moment dissipated quickly for Twiten interceded.

“Princess Sareta, I must protest. In all, I realize your happiness in finding your sister, but we aren’t at court. She isn’t a lady in waiting. She is a Euchoun. She needs not the luxury which surrounds you. To face the dangers that awaits her, she can’t...”

Immediately I saw the fear in my sister’s eyes for me. I tightened my hold on her hand and lied, “I’m fine, little sister. I have all I need. Truly, my happiness lies in fulfilling my destiny so designed. I’m touched, thank you, but I have no use for such a gown. Not here.”

She waved her tiny hand over me and frowned. “I don’t see the harm.”

Neither did I, but Twiten had allowed me to see the family kept from me. I pressed not.

“Would it harm her to have slippers for her feet?”

I glanced up. Johannes spoke under his breath. I had never heard Johannes speak to Twiten in that manner. Twiten nodded and Sareta smiled brightly, lighting up the whole of the room. A moment later I had slippers upon my feet.

In that moment, though, a sensation swept through me. I was not like my siblings. In an action of kindness, pity, I had been humiliated. I had never remembered ever being as

embarrassed by my appearance. The joy surrounding me edged way to a sudden feeling of self-pity I had never encountered before.

I looked up to find Cono's eyes on me. Those eyes didn't seem to leave me all night. Did I disgust him? I wondered. Was he telling himself if I had listened to him none of this would have happened? I didn't know. I sat back the rest of the evening and listened, exchanging looks with Johannes. He held within him the same questions as I. The talk had been to bring Gunilda back for Sareta. Yet I stayed within my rags.

That night, I lay in my room at the castle at the far end away from everyone else. I could find no sleep. I rose from my bed. I needed air. I left the castle without a word to anyone.

The trail back to the cottage was well worn, but a long walk. I cared not. I needed the time. The sounds of the forest surrounded me, sounds that now I found comfort in. Suddenly overhead a shadow appeared, silhouetting the ground beneath me from the moonlight. I looked up as I climbed over a small rocky hill, wondering who was leaving the castle.

In the moonlight, his wings spread wide over the cloudless sky. He circled overhead. My eyes lay mesmerized upon the Sordarin who within moments landed before me. He did not say a word at first. He just stood there: too close, too tall, too dark. He smiled at me.

"Are you heading somewhere?" Cono smiled a wide, arrogant grin.

"Should you not be back at the castle with everyone?" I said. "My destination is not your concern. Now, please go along with your flight. I have no intentions of detaining you."

"You're not." He reached out and touched my face. I recoiled. I have never been touched in that manner for any reason. "I have waited for this opportunity to talk with you without everyone's ears." He paused for a moment, glancing down at my bare feet. "The slippers weren't comfortable?"

My eyes flamed. To be ridiculed! I stepped around him. His arm halted my progression.

"You walk unprotected in the dead of night?"

"You don't know me well," I answered blandly. "I'm not afraid. Of what? There is no one here to do me harm. And even if there were, why would someone try to harm me?"

"I can think of a few reasons." His eyes glanced over me in a way that made color rush to my cheeks, happy at least the night's dim light hid my embarrassment.

I faced him in the night. "I can well take care of myself. I have been trained well."

"In that, I don't question." His head tilted to hold to my eyes I had tried to divert. He looked upward. "It is a grand night for a flight. Do you not think?"

"In that, I wouldn't know."

"Then it is time to find out."

Without another utterance, his arms rounded me and upward he soared. My arms instinctually clutched his neck. He laughed heartily. "It is better than blasting at me. Much better."

At first I dug my head into his chest. I closed my eyes and faced the wind. Oh, the taste of what freedom! Slowly I opened my eyes. I drank in the feeling, the sight, and the

remembrance of once before flying high in the sky with the one that held me. I wanted it to go on forever, for the Sordarin warrior who held me to bring me out of Forbidden Forest. Instead he lit upon the cliffs high above the forest.

His arms released me and I stood along the edge. So tiny, all beneath my gaze seemed. Oh, the beauty. I turned to find his eyes dancing upon me. The anger igniting within me only moments before dissipated.

“Thank you,” I uttered. “This is so beautiful.”

“It is,” he agreed. He stepped closer to me, so close I could feel his breath upon my neck.

His arms rounded me, pressing my face to his. My lips pulsed beneath his touch. My whole body did from his proximity and gaze. I gritted my teeth. What was I doing acting like a fool! His dark eyes considered me. They lured me. Their color deepened. He smiled vaguely.

He looked handsome with the moonlit highlighting him in the darkness. I had no time to consider my situation when he lowered his head. His lips touched mine delicately and kissed me softly. His lips lingered a moment, rested only an extra instant. He cupped the nape of my neck with his strong hand and kissed me again. This time, I responded back.

My body trembled with his touch, his kiss, his closeness. His kiss provoked something inside of me that caused me to forget for a moment all around me. When he broke from me, I stared up at him in shock. I would have stepped back further but his arms held me tightly.

“I don’t want you to fall.”

My eyes widened with fascination of the depth of feeling he evoked within me. Finally, however, I realized he was playing with me.

“Let go,” I said. “You may do this often. But I will not be treated such. I may look as though...”

He shook his head. Then he kissed me again. “I have never done this before, nor wanted to with anyone else. I told you I wanted to talk with you. I want to understand all that you have been through for the last four years. It may well have been four years, but I remember well the power surging through you. And, in all, it may show conceit, but I believe well that you are stronger with me by your side.”

“I don’t understand what you are saying.”

“I’m saying I witnessed a Euchoun almost destroy the entire Royal Unit with one blast when I touched her. I fought alongside of her when she helped destroy an Arachnidean leader. I have dreamed of a girl in a mist for years. I have felt a pull toward something I couldn’t explain until I saw you when you saved your sister. Did you not hear me when I called to you? I did not speak a word, but you heard me. Didn’t you?”

I stared strangely at him; I nodded only. I had heard the words and trusted him. “I did, but, in all, Cono, I know all I have been trained to do. Your words...Johannes says that I’m too naïve. I will not be used. I know what my purpose is and will complete it...”

“With me.”

“With you?”

“Kela, can you not understand? From the beginning it was you and I. Within you now, even though your words say different, you do not fear me.” His hand caressed my

face. “No, you don’t fear me. You feel the pull, the call within us. Us. Kela, we are bonded and have always.”

“Bonded? With you? You want to be bonded with a girl? I know of no other who would want such except my brother. Johannes thought perchance I was to battle alone...” My voice faded, for he shook his head.

He reached down and took my hand in his. He brought it to his lips and kissed it. “You have a power within you that few have seen. With following you within the tunnel that night, the blast when we retrieved you, and if the legends hold to be true, it will be needed. Do you doubt me?”

“I know of no other bonds that find one in another’s arms.”

“In that, I’ll admit. It may play that I should keep my hands off of you, but in that also Kela, I feel drawn to you as I have never been drawn before. Tell me you don’t feel it also.”

“How am I to compare?”

“Then I take it as a yes. I don’t want you comparing. Not Johannes?”

The question took me by surprise. “He is my friend only.”

“Good. I want your eyes only on me,” he laughed. “This is good, but beware, Kela. I have not the best of tempers and my patience is non-existent at times. I put nothing in front of my mission. Nothing.”

“Neither do I.”

His hand found my face again. “In this, I know we are to fight together, be together, Kela. I don’t know why King Edulf has hidden you for these years. I don’t know why, but I do know that we are going to the Payelaga Desert. I want you there with me.”

“How? Openly flaunting...”

“I have thought of it. Johannes is going with Falco. He can help. I will take you there as my page. No one will question me. You will be beside me without question and we will see where all leads. Are you ready to meet your destiny, Kela?”

“Yes,” I said.

My life changed from that moment. No longer was I alone in the world. Cono’s words touched me, for within me the truth was made known. In all, I know that I hold not much knowledge of the world outside my existence, but Cono lived within me. I told him not my revelation. For although I trusted his word, I betrayed not my heart.

Twiten cautioned me when Cono made his intentions known to Twiten that I was to be by his side. Twiten wasn’t certain of the connection, of which I had no doubt.

“He lacks not in confidence. He has never, but Kela, you have to be aware that many will try to influence you.”

Twiten walked with me no more than a week after, a week that had been filled every day, every waking moment with Cono. There had been no more kisses or promises made in the dead of night, but I read in his eyes as he did mine.

“Is he not the greatest Sordarin warrior?” I asked and knew well the answer. “Would it not be logical that I would bond with one such as he? Who else? My brother has bonded with Johannes. Surely, you have to believe I’m to bond.”

“I do not believe that any can dive or soar as Cono. No, in all, I will concede his prowess in battle. He is an outstanding fighter, but he has offended seasoned warriors with his confidence. I am certain he could defeat almost anyone in single combat.”

“I see not the problem. How long do you plan to hold me back? You hesitated not with Johannes. Am I not stronger?”

“We cannot make a mistake here, Kela. It could prove fatal.”

I laughed. “Are you scared, Twiten? Where is your faith, faith in the Great One? You have taught me for well over four years. Cono feels the pull, as do I.”

“Perchance, pardon my frankness, but the pull you feel has nothing to do with being Euchoun,” he said soundly...bluntly.

My eyes flamed, as did my face. “Explain yourself quickly, Twiten, because I will not be insulted in this manner. I have sacrificed, denied my birthright to become what I was born to do. Do not question me!”

His eyes met mine without anger. “It is not you, Kela, I question. True, there is not another warrior with the skills he possesses. And yes, you have trained but in that training you have been sheltered from the world. Cono is an ambitious man, my dear. I hold only to your interest.

“Even with your brother, King Edulf has had to tread softly. After your father died, the old traditionalists seemed content with the way all had emerged when King Edulf married again. The prior queen hadn’t been accepted readily. Many felt that Queen Althea hadn’t been the proper wife for King Edulf. With Prince Archibaldus becoming the heir apparent, the tribes accepted without question his lineage to rule.

“But with the rules of lineage, Prince Falco holds the direct line. Make no doubt, Kela, that your brother has had his own difficulties to face, but over time he has emerged from the shadow of your grandfather. In all, it takes time to learn to rule. One may know how to fight, but not how to rule; how to train a unit of men for battle, but not how to bend a man to his will. The king feels his course is set to become a great leader.

“But within the court, one has to have their eyes on all. Acknowledge the deeds of the brave, but in a blink of an eye, the brave can turn to an arrogance of believing they, too, have been chosen. It would be a clash, pitting you against your own when we have a greater evil to defeat.”

I stared at him confused. “What are you telling me, Twiten? That Cono is a traitor?”

“No, I’m saying there are those that hold to their own ambitions and it might be said that of Cono. It has been long prophesized at his birth that he was born to be a great ruler one day. His grandmother believes it is Scarladin.”

Shaking my head severely, I said gravely, “I have held my faith to you, Twiten, but in this you are sadly mistaken. There is no other as loyal to Scarladin than Cono. How dare you question him! Do you not believe I know my brother? I may not have seen him for over four years, but if there was an issue, Falco would detect such.”

“Black magic could shield Falco from his gift.”

“You are wrong, Twiten. Cono saved Grandfather. Falco says he has shown his bravery time and time again. How dare you!” My unquestioned faith in Cono exploded at Twiten.

“I want only to caution you. You are right. Cono has never exhibited any signs of deceit. In all...the prophesy could have only foretold his bonding with you,” Twiten said. His hand pulled at his long gray beard as he did when he pondered a situation.

“Cono said he felt from the first the power, the bond.”

Twiten tilted his head to me and nodded. “Perhaps...perhaps. I will think upon it.”

Within the next week, preparations were made. I was to go with Cono to the battle front. Twiten acknowledged we were bonded. I had never felt so alive.

CHAPTER NINE

The Payelaga Desert

I smiled broadly, dressed in my garb. A loose button-down brown shirt covered my chest, which had been bound tightly to give the appearance of male: uncomfortable, but a necessity. My arms remained free. The leggings fitted so that the shirt covered down to my knees. The sandals tied up my leg. A large floppy hat sat on my head, covering my braided hair which had been twisted into a bun.

Falco wasn't happy with my hair. "If this is to work, she needs to cut it. One burst of wind and all will be for naught!"

"I have faith it will stay in place," Cono countered, quite forcibly I thought. "She is to be my page. I will tend to her needs and will worry about her appearance. The braids under the hat should be sufficient. If discovered she is female, it will be my reputation that will be tainted, prince."

My eyes caught Cono. I had never had someone defend my needs before. I would have cut my hair for this journey, but to my shame; the loss of my long hair would have been a great sacrifice. I dreamed not of much, but in my return to my family I saw myself dressed in the fashion of the ladies in the Pool in all their finery with my hair pulled back in the most fashionable manner. Not in the manner of a page!

Johannes said that most pages wore their hair cut like a bowl had been placed on their head and cut around. But I would not have to make the sacrifice. Not yet. Cono winked at me. I blushed, for he had that effect on me.

Johannes watched and, I believed, found the whole of the situation amusing. Twiten found nothing amusing, constantly reminding of my mission, of which I could never forget, but I was to leave the forest! Leave the forest! In all, I realized that most would not find excitement in being deployed to a desert, but in this I found freedom.

Gunilda left on the morrow. I hugged her tightly. I wished I could have found some solace in the fact that she was beyond my own excitement. She, too, had been a prisoner within the realms of the forest. Although she had no knowledge of my adventure planned, I would have thought she would have been concerned about leaving me behind. There was nothing. I refused to contemplate her reaction. I was to go to battle!

It was a mild, cloudless afternoon, perfect weather the day I arrived at the encampment. Northwestward, domes lay visible along the horizon of mounds of rock formations. Straight ahead, lines of tents mellowed the landscape edging the desert sands, along with scores of Sordarin warriors littering my view, on the ground and above. Under my feet lay grass, brown and brittle. But I was too preoccupied to notice the scenery.

I reflected upon on my view. In truth, much of the allure of my venture had left me. First of all, my journey to the encampment had not only been frustrating, it had been indubitably disagreeable.

I saw not Cono during this time. I reasoned it was with reason to play this charade. Cono had made a stance for me. Determined not to disappoint him, I endured the journey in silence. Twiten allowed me only to transport into Yucca. From there I was directed in with the other pages.

I found quickly I had not the freedom I had around the forest. Confined with giant stonewalls, a swirl of activity surrounded me. Countless warriors interacted within the frame. Wagons rode in and out all the day, filled with supplies. Walking toward the dusty center, a large burly man drilled out orders for me, even before I was introduced by Falco's underling. I stood confused and not understanding most going on around me.

I thanked the Great One that a young page, Siegfried, took pity upon me. Kushner, the head of us, thought me to be slow and seemed irritated that I would join the ranks at this late date. Siegfried told me only to follow him, in which I did. The night was long. I slept not much. The room was cramped, but each of us had our own pallets. The noise bothered me. I had been used to the sounds of the forest. I had little privacy allotted to me, but upon the good side no one much noticed pages, insignificant as we were. I held only to the thought that on the morrow I would be back with Cono.

For the first time, I doubted our plan. Harder still was the silence imposed upon me! Before I left the forest, for some reason, all consented upon the fact that I should appear mute! And above all, keep my head down and never, Cono reminded me, never look anyone in the eyes.

"One look into those eyes and all would know they belonged not to a boy," Cono cautioned in a sober tone. In that, I took to heart.

After the initial shock of all around me, I reminded myself only that I followed my destiny. My reasoning taught me that all was a test around me. I watched the sun rise and heard the horn sound. All rose without a word in the hall where the cots aligned. We were summoned to ride within the holdgate. I was on my way to Cono. I was on my way in battle.

Enduring the long flight to the best of my ability, I leaned against the side walls of the holdgate. My stomach unsettled with the swaying of the large cart. A sudden resentment encompassed me to the unfairness of the male species to be able to fly in the wind. Unlike me, who had to be transported within a transport cart filled with supplies of food, animals, and weapons.

The stench overwhelmed me the closer we came to our destination. I felt I couldn't breathe with the sweltering heat. My arms chafed with rubbing against the bounding of my chest. The whole of the holdgate smelled of the foulest odors, for the trip was long. Never had I been more thankful than when I could feel the fleogans ease their pace and felt their descent downward.

With all that is good! The holdgate's door opened finally. I felt a burst of fresh air, hot though it might have been, rush in. Mingling with the other pages, I crept out the door when the supplies had begun unloading. My intent focused only on finding Cono. So enthralled with my new surroundings, I didn't noticed everyone else had left. I turned abruptly, hearing Kushner's voice bellowed out for me.

“Where is that boy?”

“I’ll take charge of my page.”

A voice walked soundly up behind me. Never before I had felt relief with such a beautiful voice.

For a moment, I forgot all and met his eyes. His eyebrows rose in a reprimanding manner. I bowed immediately, like a page should show respect. I could have cried. I ruined all before my training began. I was happy now to lower my head, so none saw the brimming tears. I followed silently behind Cono.

“I would have sent him over in the morning, Lord Rothworth. I had thought of offering you another. I’m not certain if this one will work out for you. I have a scrapping young lad, Siegfried. Has a lot of potential.”

“I assure you I’m quite pleased with my page, Kushner. I will let you know otherwise if the need arises.”

Cono dismissed my keeper and I followed him. He moved quickly. His strides longer, more assured, I fell behind. A moment later, he slowed his pace. I heard acknowledgements toward Cono when we passed by, but they were brief, for Cono took no time to stop. Only when we came to a large tent did I gather the courage to look upward.

I followed Cono within the tent. His tent set large and abundant, but entering, I noticed only one bed and wondered if he was the only one within. To the front of the tent lay a pallet, clean with bed covers. I glanced up to find Cono’s eyes on me. He walked soundly over to me and turned me so he faced the entrance. But quickly his arm rounded me, pulling me into him.

He caught me off guard with his actions, but the moment his lips touched mine I stopped thinking altogether and focused on him. I kissed him back, weaving my hand into his hair. I lost all train of thought except his lips on mine.

He broke from my lips, but lingered. His fingers ran over them, staring into my eyes. I felt flushed.

“I worried so about your trip. All went smoothly?”

I nodded, for I could find no words. His hand cupped my face. He whispered, “I wish all were different now. This façade...having you so close within and...you understand we can’t be caught in each other’s arms like this. From now on, I will have to use more caution. There will be no more talks as I’m talking to you now.”

“I know,” I said simply, although certain my eyes betrayed my want to be as I was now.

“I will look after you. Do not doubt but until we have proven ourselves there can’t be...” Suddenly he laughed. “You haven’t a clue, do you, of the danger of staying in a tent alone with a man?”

I answered indignantly. “Gunilda has warned me. Of course...” my voice lowered. “I...know a lady would never find herself in the situation I have placed myself in, but, Cono, most have not been trained in the manner I have...Do you think less of me?”

“By the Great One! No, my Euchoun. Never. I would plunge my dagger into one who questioned. You are so innocent in some manners, Kela. So...innocent.” His mouth descended down upon mine again. “This will not be easy, Kela, for this bond we have - we can’t let others see yet. Not yet.”

I nodded, but in that moment footsteps interrupted our talk. I stepped back as did Cono. Only moments after, Falco entered without notice. From Cono's look, I could see irritation and quickly surmised Falco would be the only one to enter without notice.

My time alone with Cono ended. My mission began. Falco wasted no time in spelling out my duties and responsibilities that would be expected of me. Lighter than most pages, I assumed, for, in all, I was to observe the maneuverings. Over the next few days a routine emerged. I worked from sun up to sun down.

About ten thousand Sordarins boarded within the encampment, composed of many of the different tribes of Scarladin, each with their own division. Cono taught me. He taught me the tribes - the Challow tribe from the middle region of Sordarin, small, but quick; the Acciptritutes from the north, muscular and Cono said strong fliers; the Mortalita tribe from the south, known for their strategies and intelligence; the Lanka tribe from which Cono descended, dark-skinned and agile. Cono said they were the fastest fliers. I listened while he told me that each tribe had their strengths in which the strength of Sordarin survived.

"King Edulf uses each to their strengths, which makes us stronger as a unit. We fight together. Never as one."

I watched from a distance while Cono led. Twiten's words were brought to question, for without a doubt, Cono had been born to lead. Falco also commanded attention and none would dare challenge his position. I found that my brother's unpretentious nature and unmistakable courage made him extremely well liked by his men. But my eyes lay with Cono. The days wore on. I began to feel Cono's movements in the sky. Meditating, I felt as if I could almost see what he saw while he flew. No, there was no doubt within me that we were bonded.

Within the camp, I became like a shadow that no one took note. I was merely a page, a silent one at that. In that, it allowed me the freedom to observe. Keen observation of their soaring skills was needed to be able to protect my warrior in battle. I took to the task. I learned while I watched all; the strategic maneuvering meant only one thing to me: no immediate opportunity to do battle. The only action I had seen had been in my imagination. The waiting, anticipating was surely the worse, I thought, than the fighting would ever be.

Over two weeks passed with no sightings of the Arachnideans. The rumors of a stirring calmed. Instead, I found my will tested night after night. In the heat of the day, the coolness of the night lent to me yearnings I had no knowledge possessed me. Although I slept on the pallet in front of the tent and Cono on his bed, I could not help but watch Cono when he readied for bed. I resisted not the temptation to stare at his muscular frame, broad shoulders, and wings. He showed no shame at his body, the sculptured muscles of his leg and chest. His manner teased me often, offering to help me with my binding around my chest in the mornings or at night when I removed it. At times he would smile at me in a manner that I wanted nothing more than to creep up into his bed. No, I understood in this was the danger that Twiten worried upon.

The day had been long. I waited for Cono to return from the grounding tent where strategy was discussed and formulated. Sodden with sweat and covered with sand, he returned in a bad mood. He snapped at me soundly, for I had fallen asleep in wait for his

return. At most times Falco and Johannes accompanied him, but this night he returned alone.

“Are you, too, questioning your involvement?”

Startled, for I was sound asleep, I jumped up and for a moment unaware of where I stood. I wiped my eyes, but with his tone my own aggravation swelled.

“I question nothing, Cono. I never have.”

He shook his head and his wings fluttered. He walked over to the edge of his bed and sat. His hands covered his face. I ran to his side and fell to his knees.

“Tell me, Cono. I am not a child.”

His hands broke from his face. “King Edulf has reconsidered this approach. Falco has expressed his concerns about you being discovered. I suppose our connection is harder to hide from the eyes of all. My actions toward you have been discussed of why I’m being soft toward a page. A page should show signs of becoming a warrior instead of watching our maneuverings, staring in amazement at our soarings.”

“I have never seen such before...” I responded in defense of my awe. My head drooped; my heart sank. I swallowed the involuntary bitter tears of disappointment and rejection.

“It is useless, I suppose, Kela. It is my fault as well. I cannot treat you as a lowly page. I want you by my side and in that...we can’t do as of yet,” he said bitterly. “Falco wants to send you back with the morning sun. The scouts have come back with no signs of the Arachnideans. We will be moving out further along. Harder terrain...”

“I’m to go back. Where? The forest?” I whispered, struggling with my emotions.

“It is the thought.”

I sat back and fell upon the floor of the tent, overcome with a sense of failure. “But it hasn’t been that long. I haven’t seen a battle...”

“That is one of the problems, Kela. Falco asked me how are we to train as it is now. We can’t do so openly in front of all. We have nowhere to do so privately except the forest.” He bent down and took my hands in his.

My chest heaved heavily. My gaze locked intently on him. “I can’t leave you.”

My words seemed to hang in the air for an eternity. He said nothing, but his eyes told me all I needed to know. His eyes broke from mine. There wasn’t a choice.

“We may have more time than the morrow. The winds have picked up. A desert storm is descending down on us. There will be no flying with the winds. It could give us more time, not much...”

I had not noticed before, but now I heard the winds whistling and felt them pushing briskly against the tent. Then a sudden cry screeched in the air: a high echoing cry. One even I knew well what it meant.

Instantly, Cono leaped to his feet and gathered me upward. “We’re under attack. Don’t leave my side until I fly.”

“Never.”

The moment we exited the tent, we struggled with the wind. A violent hard wind encircled the camp with the sand from the desert. Blown backwards, Cono caught my hand. I couldn’t see, for the sand blew in my eyes. Immediately, my hand flung wide. The wind beat against my shield, but we could move again and see. I caught Cono’s eyes. His hands rounded my waist.

“Keep hold of the shield.”

I stepped in unison with Cono. Sordarin warriors scrambled out of their tents, beaten back with the wind. Suddenly I felt air under my feet. I was in flight.

“The higher we go, extend your shield.”

The shield widened. More Sordarins took to the sky within my shield. I heard commands and wings fluttering in the darkness, with only the moonlight to guide. A moment later my brother was by my side.

To the right, Kela. Swing your shield to the right.

For a moment I doubted my shield would widen that far out, but a surge of energy ran through me with Cono holding me tight. From behind me, Falco yelled out commands. I couldn't see, for I was afraid to let the shield down, but suddenly Cono unfurled his wings in a tremendous downward thrust. I dove hard and fast in Cono's arms.

A moment later we landed upon the sands of the desert. I could feel the ground trembling beneath me.

They are coming from below!

Winded, I caught my breath, losing hold of one side of the shield. I looked up. In the dim light I could make out movement in the dark, slowly ebbing their way out of the ground: hundreds of them as if ants exiting their mound, crouching, and then leaping forward only to hit upon my shield.

They are coming from tunnels below. They have to be.

Need to cover the opening.

If we can find it.

I listened to the frantic thoughts of Falco and Cono. Cono leaned his head down to me. “If the tunnels beneath the sand, it could not be stable if...”

I knew immediately of what he wanted and nodded. My arms heaved downward. The ground shivered slightly, but little else. Cono rounded me, taking my hand in his.

“Now!”

With his hand in mine, I intertwined my fingers together, gone for the moment the shield around everyone. The winds blew fierce, but Cono didn't let go. Over my head, I raised my arms and with a sudden motion, I lunged my hands downward with Cono's.

The ground shook with a tremendous bang. Beneath me the ground gave way. I heard frantic calls to fly from Falco. I had no time to think, only react. I could feel Cono struggle to fly in the winds.

“Shield!”

I couldn't see with the sands, but I rose back up the shield. Immediately we were back in flight. Cono lifted me back up to shield all around. My head spun, but I refused to give in to the blackness. For how long I hovered over the encampment, I knew not. In the midst of all, Cono handed me over to Johannes. I saw not the battle, nor the outcome. I focused on shielding the camp. I knew only when Cono returned for me.

“Let go! All is finished! The storm is over. The battle won.”

Weakened, I stared into my warrior's eyes. He took me into his arms. Then a worry encompassed me, for in my vision I saw the moon set. The sun rose at nearly the same moment. I had no hat. My hair hung down around me. All would know I was a female.

Cono laughed as he read my thoughts. I knew nothing else except I was in his arms. Safe in his arms. Then all went black.

CHAPTER TEN

Emergence

I awoke in a strange chamber. The stones of the walls told me quickly I was within a castle, exactly where - I didn't know. I edged off the soft bed. I had been cared for. The room was as I had not known since my banishment: large, with hanging tapestries of flying Sordarins in battle; a cold hearth to the side of my bed; and great wooden chairs arrayed along the wall.

Washed and dressed in a misty gown of pale silk, I marveled at the feel of the material against my skin. My hair hung long down my back, brushed to a shine. Sunlight broke through slits in the stone walls. I glanced around my room. It held a balcony for Sordarins to enter.

Curiosity overcame me and I swung my legs off the bed. For a moment I sat to regain my balance. My head spun. My head hurt; my arms ached.

"Take care."

I turned to the sound of the voice. Walking in the open door, Twiten smiled broadly.

"Where am I?" I asked in a low dry voice that crackled.

"At Hovoamia, King Edulf's manor to the east. It was the closest to the Payelaga Desert. You were flown here while all was completed. You have slept for well over five days."

I looked up at Twiten, waiting with expectation. I waited, holding my breath for a word, a sign, the least hint of satisfaction. He stared at me, pressing his lips together.

"King Edulf has acknowledged your bond with Cono and is persuaded that the actions of the other night has deemed well for Scarladin. The Arachnideans attacked with the desert storm at the most inopportune time. It seems evident that they had waited until such an opportunity. If not for your actions the whole of the army would have been wiped out."

"And Cono?" I asked, trying to steady myself when I stood. I reached for the side of the bed.

"Without question, I find that my misgivings were unfounded and unquestionably you are stronger, much stronger, with him by your side. Do you realize what you have done?"

"No; I reacted only," I answered honestly. I moved toward the balcony. Twiten walked beside me. For a moment, my breath was taken away when I reached the railing. My room towered above the ground. Far below me lay the gardens and the wings of the manor. I breathed in deeply. Figures appeared, walking below. I could not make out whom, but they seemed like ladies in their finery.

"The reach of your shield exceed any expectation, Kela. At one point it was said the whole of the camp was shielded. The magnitude of the thrust on the ground crumbled the tunnels beneath the camp. From that moment, with your shield keeping the winds back, the Arachnideans had not a chance.

“I have so many questions. To do so, without training along with Cono and with prior experience with Cono when you were younger, King Edulf feels that your bond is instinctual. It does not need to be reinforced but will, when together, protect.”

Confused with his words, I turned back to Twiten. “I don’t understand what you are saying.”

“I believe it will be for King Edulf to tell you what he has planned. He is happy, my dear, extremely so.”

My heart pounded rapidly. “I can return? I can be acknowledged once more?”

“Given that keeping you a secret isn’t an option at this moment, I would find King Edulf hard pressed not to recall you, but caution is still advised. It would not be such a bad time, would it? Within the month, you will be eighteen. I would suspect the king would have something in the works.”

My heart burst with joy. “And Cono?”

“It is not for me to say, but if it was, I would not separate the two of you.”

“Where is Cono?” I asked. I held tight to the railing. The ladies had withdrawn back into the manor while I watched.

“I expect he will be here within the day,” Twiten said. “He has sent messages for you. I have told him you hadn’t awakened, but seemed in good health and was in good hands. He seems quite taken with you, Kela. It is good. Is it not?”

I turned back to Twiten astonished by his words. “Truly,” I asked. “I want nothing more.”

“Truly, Kela, I want nothing more than to see your eyes gleam as they do now.”

Turstan burst into my room shortly after Twiten left. After making sure I was whole, he gleamed with pride and had me recite the entire venture. Rumors abounded about my performance. King Edulf had not confirmed my existence, which I found strange. In my mind I cared only if I left the Forbidden Forest and took my place that my birthright demanded, my Euchoun presence allowed.

“Alas, I have not been told of your return, but it would have to be imminent.”

Turstan sat alert in his chair. His eyes gleamed with the light of a brightly burning fire. He looked straight ahead at me. “The king is a wise man, not prone to emotions, for sure, but he uses wisdom at most times. He will recall you when it is deemed best for you and Scarladin. Remember, my child, it is the life of a Euchoun, of a warrior.”

Kela frowned. “Do you not believe I will be recalled? Pray, what will you have me do? Stay in the forest forever?”

“Nay, Kela, but within the forest...,” his voice faltered, but his meaning clear. My eyes welled at his response. Turstan’s, my warrior guardian, the hard-hearted soul, concern lay not with the welfare of Scarladin. His worry lay with me. In that, I found comfort.

I rose. Leaning downward, I kissed his cheek and wiped his own eyes which watered. I sat beside him and his arm rounded me. My head fell upon his large shoulder and I sat there until he took his leave.

Sareta visited, for she resided at Hovoamia during this time, along with Gunilda. I found I resided high above all else in the tower. No one else knew of my presence at the manor. Gunilda said Twiten waited for King Edulf to make known about my appearance.

I recovered rapidly. I wanted nothing more than to start my new life. I waited impatiently for Cono, but I said nothing to Sareta. The news of the battle had traveled quickly, leaving Cono's actions highly acclaimed across Scarladin! In turn, Sareta excitedly took measure in, leaving out my role in the battle.

For some reason unknown to me, when Gunilda left us alone, she seemed to mistakenly think I would take heart in the fact she felt Cono had a connection to our cousin, Amicia. Her words exhaled praise for Amicia's beloved, which annoyed me to no end.

"Belasquita would not consider a great warrior as Cono for her attached; only a prince or a king will do for her. Amicia cares only that it is Cono. Is that not most romantic? To have a love so deep."

"Is it returned? Has Cono spoken those words to Amicia?" I asked; my voice rose higher than I intended.

"Why no! Kela, of what do you speak? No lady can be alone with a suitor or any man before they are attached. It is not done. Her reputation..." She looked upon me. Seeing my expression, she leaned over to me. "You are different, sister. You are a warrior yourself. Why look at yourself! When you returned as you did, you were dressed as a boy, dirty and filthy! If not for me when I changed you, you would be dressed in that dreadful tunic and shirt. You have never cared for the etiquette that is required in court..." She hesitated. "Or do you? Oh, why did I not think of such? With Belasquita being attached soon - it is said to the heir of Brixtone - and you are the eldest granddaughter. It should have been you, but, Kela..."

I stared intently at my frivolous sister. She thought I gave two hoots for who Belasquita married! Did she not understand of what I had just accomplished? More so than any frivolous talk of illogical matches!

I drew in my breath so not to say the words on my lips. Sareta was a child. She couldn't understand the world around her as I did. Cono loved me. He could be with no other. He had no need for a princess, for was I not one? No, we were one...bonded forever.

In the still of the night, I found no peace. Sareta's words haunted me. In all, I could deal with all around me if I had only Cono by my side. But in the cold night's air, I had not Cono. I was alone in my bed while all below me partied. I had seen the celebration begin from the balcony.

The manor exploded with lights and music. I watched for a time, but my view was blocked, though I heard well the celebration. Within me doubts again formed. In all, would not the celebration be the time to announce my return? I could stand by Cono. Yet, I lay within my bed without even the thought of anyone telling me what was being celebrated.

Finally, I crawled out of bed. I paced over to the railing of the balcony, staring at the manor below. I saw above me Sordarins in flight. On patrol, no doubt, I thought, for all below to enjoy the victory.

Soft diffused moonlight lit the sky, shadowed by the wings of brave Sordarins. I stood staring out before me, trying to collect my thoughts. So engrossed in my thoughts, I paid no mind to the figure flying above me, taking time to circle me. Only when he at last

swooped down before me, my heart leaped. I stepped back as the warrior, my warrior, landed. He had come back to me.

I whirled in a graceful motion around to face him, creating whispers of moving air no stronger than the breath of a hummingbird. A moment of light touched his face, his handsome smiling face. All my doubts encompassing me dissipated upon the smile.

I stood before him in my simple gown with no jewels to adorn me, my hair long down my back without a fashionable twist: only myself as I was. His hand reached toward me and I shivered with his touch. If he spoke words, I heard them not, for I couldn't breathe when his arms rounded me. He pushed back my hair from my face and my neck, and caressed my face.

"Never have I returned to such a sight."

He kissed me over and over again. Then his lips traveled down my neck and a sensation swept through me. His hands held me tight against him. I forgot all about my surroundings or where I stood. I had no restraint with Cono. My hand went to his face. He took my hand and kissed it, holding it to his lips. His eyes lay on mine.

"What of everyone else? Could not someone walk in upon us?" I asked, drawing upon every word.

"A celebration is ongoing. None will miss me, since I haven't acknowledged my return and any that know you are here believe you are sleeping. Would you prefer me to leave and let you rest?" he whispered, but I knew well he wasn't leaving my side. "Most will be entertained tonight. And for us, tomorrow...is tomorrow."

I eyed him suspiciously, for I didn't comprehend his meaning. His eyes sparkled with my confusion.

"We have time tonight that we will not have in the days to come, when we won't be allowed this freedom. Your brother, the king, Twiten..."

His words hung in the air. My heart pounded. His hand slid down my arm. I should have been ashamed of my appearance in my nightgown, or perhaps admonished him soundly that a lady would never accept such behavior. Yet, I trembled in his arms.

He gave me no more chance to think. His mouth came down hard upon my mouth, releasing a yearning within him as my own exploded. I had no thought to deny Cono anything. He ravished my mouth and cries emerged from me that I had no control over. His lips descended down my neck and caressed down my side. I did not fight his hold on me and he grew bolder. He pushed us to the back of the room toward the bed.

His hand slid beneath my gown. My eyes widened when he took the end of it and pulled it upward over my head. For the first time, I was afraid. Gunilda had told me tales of fallen women who gave themselves to men. I had paid no attention to her, but her words echoed in my head while Cono kissed me. I was ignorant of the world, but alarm fled through me. With my hesitation, his gaze sought mine and he kissed me gently.

"I will not know you completely tonight, Kela, but this I know, as do you. We are meant to be together. In my heart I feel it. I want no other but you. You are mine as I am yours. I will never hurt you, but will protect you forever. Tell me you don't want me to stop because you want me as I want you."

"I want nothing more than to be with you here at this moment."

"Trust me," he whispered while his wings covered us. He kissed me hard while his hands finished pulling my gown off of me, uncovering my breasts. He lowered his head

and for a time my world shocked at the pleasure he gave to me. Sensations piled on one another. I was lost in his essence.

His mouth teased me. His hand caressed me to a point where I begged him for more. He leaned upward and kissed my mouth again, turning me and pulled me to him. His arms wrapped around me, holding me tight against him. One hand cupped my breast while the other covered me in the most intimate of places. Pushing me back tight against him, he stroked me, prodded me to respond. Stunned, my body exploded with sensations. Suddenly he released me and touched me no more. My body's pleasure eased. I opened my eyes. He pulled me to him and he smiled down on me.

"I went farther than I intended," he uttered. His wings fluttered slightly before they collapsed into a resting position. He moved quietly to the edge of the bed so he could find comfort on his side as his wings rested off the bed. He bent down and brought up the covers around us. His arm rounded me, pulling me to his bare chest. I stared at him, suddenly embarrassed at my behavior. I lay naked in his arms. Tears welled in my eyes.

His hand wiped it back. "Oh, Kela, don't. I told you we are meant to be together. But I should have never taken advantage of you as I did, but...to all the saints...I could not contain myself. But your innocence is still intact," he said gently. "Barely perhaps."

"I..." I searched for words to say. I wanted to say I loved him, for my heart swelled within me, but he had not said the words to me. He leaned down and kissed my lips.

"You will not have to worry about my intentions after tonight. I intend upon talking with King Edulf. I have already laid a foundation about my feelings and I don't think he will object, but I will wait until then before...before we consummate our union. I want you happy, Kela. Always."

I needed nothing else. He held me in his arms and talked. He talked to me of everything: the battle, his home, his grandparents, his mother's family, Scarladin... At some point in the night, we slept for a time and when I opened my eyes, his were on mine.

"Kela, Kela," he uttered my name as if it was sacred. "I think all is senseless, this need to hide you from all eyes. I see no reason why you can't be by my side. I don't care what anyone thinks of having a female for a Euchoun. One that I intend to mate..."

His words faded. I turned to him. "We will be together always, Cono?"

"Always," he said.

Cono had no qualms about his presence in the morning light. He played my maid, dressing me in a manner that no one would suspect upon my sight he had held me in his arms until the morning light appeared. He even took to my hair, brushing it and at times running his fingers through it. I laughed joyfully and gave no thought to how all appeared, for I was happy, truly happy.

With the greatest reluctance, he flew off when we heard footsteps at my door. For a brief moment I thought he was going to stay and make known to all our actions, but then he smiled down at me, kissed me, and took to the air. I stood on the balcony when Twiten walked in with Gunilda.

I stayed within the spot Cono had kissed me, eyeing the sky before I turned to greet my visitors. My face, no doubt, beamed my happiness. It could not fail to do so, but immediately I saw within Gunilda they brought news, news that had upset her and in turn, I comprehended, would myself.

"I thought I was to see the king," I said feebly, trying desperately to come up with some reasoning to stay. "Would he not want to see me?"

"I'm certain that he will see you, but he sent word that this is to be immediate. Only for a short time, Kela, to go to the safety that the Forbidden Forest offers," Twiten offered, but the words did nothing to soften the blow.

"In all, why is Gunilda returning with me? If only for a short time, I can fend for myself," I said. My eyes lay upon a desolate Gunilda to once more be ripped from her ward. My arms rounded my old nurse, for the news seemed to have greatly aged her. Her wrinkled face whitened; her eyes yellowed; her body sagged. "There is no need for her to be swept away once more. She should stay..."

"It is not for me to say, Kela," Twiten lowered his head. "The king has ordered. The orders were specific."

Hopelessness encompassed me, for no argument would rescind the king's orders. I saw in Twiten's eyes his own doubt with the action. The only comfort I took was in being able to say goodbye to my siblings and Cono. Falco, in his manner, assured me all was for the best. His loyal belief in our grandfather remained steadfast.

Sareta cried and clung to Gunilda; my heart broke for Gunilda. For although I was certain Sareta was saddened by Gunilda's departure, the separation tore through Gunilda.

"I want not to be parted from you again," Sareta wailed. Her arms wrapped firmly around me. I hugged her tightly.

"It is not for long," I assured her in my confidence.

"It is such a shame. For I wanted you to be able to share in all the celebrations. Why Prince de Folur arrived last night, quite unexpected! Belasquita was beside herself. She told Amicia her announcement would be made soon for all to see! Belasquita says it will be the largest celebration that Scarladin has ever seen! Amicia says it makes sense because Belasquita will be soon with her eighteen year." Sareta carried on to the point where I half listened. She leaned into me. "Wymarcha and I foresee Amicia will not be far behind, even though she has a year to announce the attachment."

I looked at Sareta strangely. I worried about my sister. Her focus seemed not upon the problems we faced, I faced, but with the incidentals around her. But a brief moment of envy surfaced within me. She was young, carefree in her thoughts, waited upon her every want. She had not the worries of the world weighing down upon her. She had only the issues in front of a princess. Wrapped in the security of protection around her, I found all ironic that her own magic far exceed those that protected her. Then all faded when Cono flew into the room.

The speed of his landing had him almost stumbling. Regaining his balance, his face betrayed his emotions, but before he could utter a word, Twiten stopped him.

"It is not my decision. King Edulf gave the orders early this morning. I would assume it will only be temporary." Twiten's hand fixed upon Cono's massive shoulders, pausing him in the path to my side. "Do not act irrationally. This means little. All has been proven, Cono. It should not be a worry on your mind. I will transport both back within the portal, but if you want a moment, I will wait."

Cono didn't hesitate. My heart beat soundly. Cono took my hand. From the corner of my eye, I caught an astonished look on Sareta's face at Cono's bold move in front of all, but, with all, I gave it little thought.

Cono led me out to the balcony, pushing me gently back against the stone wall. Immediately, his wings expanded to give us a semblance of privacy. His hand cupped my face. "This makes no sense. Give me the word and I will fly you out of here at this moment. I will..."

My hand touched his. I shook my head. "I, too, was taken aback by Twiten's words, but, in all, the thought occurred to me. My eighteenth year is fast approaching. The king must have plans for us then. Is it not the perfect time to announce my reappearance? It has to be!"

My eyes searched his, hoping I was right; that in all, it was not a punishment but only biding time until the king would announce it to the world. Cono's eyes softened on me and nodded.

"Of course, it has to be." His arms pulled me to him. Never had I needed anyone to give to me hope as I did at that moment. His hand caressed the top of my head. "The day the moon sits on the blue center. I will give all until then. If the king doesn't recall you by your day, I will come and recall you myself."

My head turned upward to his. He knew which day was my date. I smiled. "I will be waiting."

Then to my surprise, he leaned down and kissed me, a long yearning kiss. I wanted nothing more to stay in his arms, but in the next breath I heard Twiten in the doorway calling to us.

With reluctance, Cono let go of me. I turned and walked back within the room. Before I could glance back over my shoulder, my surroundings swirled in front of me. The fog dissipated to the view I had long grown accustomed...the Forbidden Forest. There I waited...

The Legend has only just begun...

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