

# CHILD OF PARADISE

BOOK FOUR OF THE PARADISE SERIES

IVANA L. TRUGLIO



JONQUIL  
PRESS

## Chapter One – Not A Word

“He’s not dead. He’s not dead,” Rilla mumbled over and over.

Shuut looked at her sister as she sat, rocking herself back and forth. Aislen was not much better. Shuut could feel the hopelessness cascading off her.

“Do something,” Shuut angrily instructed Kayte.

“What do you expect of me?” Mistress Kayte replied evenly.

“Stop your princess before she drowns the whole castle in her misery.”

There was a pounding at the door.

“Open the door!”

Shuut rushed to let King Lukys in. He immediately ran to Aislen and roughly grabbed her wrists. Shuut began to protest until she realised her feelings were her own again. Whatever his methods, Lukys had just fixed Aislen.

“What happened? What’s wrong with *that one*?”

Shuut took offence to the way Lukys spoke about her sister. This was not Rilla’s fault. Why did they always assume everything was her fault? A guilty thought trickled through her mind – she had been prone to doing that herself not so very long ago.

“*That one* just helped save your cousin’s life. You might want to thank her for it.”

Shuut stared at Lukys coldly. She knew he didn’t believe her, not really. Aislen got to her feet.

“It’s true, father. Uncle Aaron is gravely injured. Eliséo and Rilla came up with a plan to save him.”

Shuut appreciated Aislen’s discretion about the precise nature of the wound. It would surely only make Lukys more unreasonable than he already was.

“And they woke me up for it. If you don’t mind, I’d like to get some more rest before my morning lessons.”

Mistress Kayte took a step towards the door, but Shuut slammed it closed and stood in front of it.

“Not yet. Who’s going to help my sister?”

“Your sister is in shock. My skills cannot help her. I’m sure Princess Aislen is more than capable of bringing her out of her situation.”

Shuut glared angrily at Mistress Kayte. It was no wonder Rilla found herself at odds with the healing mistress so often. Such arrogance did not go down well with either of them.

“I ... don’t think I can,” Aislen said in a trembling voice. “If I lose control of my feelings again, it will only make Rilla worse.”

Mistress Kayte stood, hands on hips, glaring at Shuut.

“I cannot help her. She is afraid of what is happening out there, and nothing I do can change that. I can’t fly us to her elf and Lord Aaron to heal them myself.”

“Shuut, let her go.”

Shuut looked around Mistress Kayte to Lukys. He rubbed his temples with his fingers. His face was haggard and worn.

“I’m sure between the two of us we can help Rilla. Mistress Kayte is right – she needs to rest for her classes.”

Grudgingly, Shuut stood aside to allow the healing mistress to leave. There was

an air of hostility around her that Shuut was glad to feel leave the room. Shuut walked over to Rilla and dropped down on the floor by her side. She didn't know what else to do, so she put an arm around Rilla's shoulders. That, at least, stopped the rocking.

"He's not dead. He's not dead."

"That's right, Rilla," Shuut said quietly, hugging her sister. "Eliséo's not dead. And he likely just saved Lord Aaron's life."

"Can someone please tell me what's happened?" Lukys asked in a strained voice.

Shuut knew how close both Aislen and Lukys were with Aaron. They were surely more concerned about him than Eliséo, but Shuut knew it was the reverse for Rilla. If Rilla knew he wasn't dead, then that meant Elessa could still feel him. The fact that she couldn't talk to him, however, must have meant that he was gravely injured.

"We don't know how it happened, but Uncle Aaron was injured," Aislen explained.

"I should never have allowed him to go to Goraburg," Lukys growled.

Shuut snorted. "I doubt you had a choice. Aaron seems to be about as stubborn as the rest of his family, myself included."

Her remark only earned her a glowering scowl. She shrugged indifferently and went back to trying to soothe Rilla.

"He'll be fine," she whispered to Rilla. "With a few days of rest, he'll be up and about. I'm sure of it."

Rilla looked at her with haunted eyes. Shuut drew her close, not wanting to see the look in those eyes.

"We have to help them," Rilla said, suddenly breaking free of her hold. "We have to go there and help them!"

"Where is *there*?" Lukys asked.

Rilla's eyes glowed a bright shade of green.

"They're in the Lesa Mountains, near the Yoswen Stream."

Lukys shook his head.

"It would take days, possibly even a week to ride there. Surely Lord Ilya will send out karliki to look for them when they don't return."

"But ... but that could take days as well," Rilla protested.

"Rilla, we cannot do anything from here," Lukys pointed out. Shuut saw his fists clenched at his side. "I would appreciate if you all keep this information to yourselves until we learn something new. I must insist you stick to your normal routine. I do not want widespread panic without due cause."

"Without due cause?" Shuut found herself asking. "Your cousin, our *grandfather*, and Eliséo could be dying out there!"

Lukys sighed heavily. "I know. But there is nothing we can do about it for now. At the very least, we should spare our pain from as many people as possible. Unless you *want* all of Illaria to feel as worried as you do."

Shuut tapped her teeth together, thinking. He was right. She knew he was. But it didn't make her feel any better. She thought it was unfair to keep this information, especially from Kora and Plyke.

"Not a word, not even to the rest of your family."

Shuut checked her mental walls. They were firmly guarded. Lukys had not read her mind, but that didn't stop him from knowing what she was thinking.

“Fine,” she said angrily. “We won’t tell anyone, will we Rilla?”

Rilla looked up at her, a mixture of confusion and fear in her eyes. Shuut tried to smile at her but failed.

“Rilla?”

Her sister nodded but said nothing. Shuut knew that was the most she could expect from Rilla right now. She showed Lukys and Aislen out of her room and closed the door behind them. Left alone with Rilla, Shuut helped her sister off the floor and back to her bed. For the first time since they had been given two separate beds, Shuut crawled into Rilla’s bed and lay beside her.

\* \* \*

“Idiot,” Anya muttered under her breath as she watched Eliséo fall beside the stricken Aaron. Not trusting skin contact with either of them, she found a sturdy stick to disentangle the elf’s hands from the lintep’s.

“What happened?” Ermolai asked in confusion.

“I don’t know,” Anya replied angrily. “But Eliséo now shares a wound just like the lintep and Lord Aaron is breathing more steadily now. All I can guess is that the elf somehow made the lintep heal himself faster than usual by taking on some of the injury himself.

“A fine mess they’ve made of things. We can’t possibly leave them behind, and we can’t bring the two of them and the rebels back to Goraburg alone.”

“So, what, we just wait?” Rufina asked irritably. “Demyan’s family will not be pleased to hear that his body lay in the cold open air while we sat and waited.”

“We have no choice, Rufina,” Anya pointed out. “Unless you want to walk back to the tunnels alone, then we wait.”

“At least we can bring them in from the cold.” Ermolai looked at the snow which had just begun to fall. “The first snow of the season could be mild, but I don’t want to take the chance and be stuck outside in a blizzard.”

Working together, all three being cautious not to allow any skin contact with the lintep, they moved Lord Aaron, Eliséo, and the unconscious rebel into the makeshift hut the rebels had been hiding out in. Without ceremony, they dragged the dead rebel karliki out into the fresh layer of snow on the forest floor.

“You’re just going to leave me here?” Vladimir yelled out at them as they retreated to the hut. “You’re executing my death sentence by freezing me!”

Anya looked back at the karlik who would have been their clan leader had he only been content to wait his turn. Eliséo had somehow encased his feet in earth, making it impossible for Vladimir to move. Anya didn’t know if they really could dig him out, and she did not want to risk being in close quarters with the rebel as he was angry enough to kill them all at the first chance he got.

“Well, Vladimir, think of it this way, if you don’t survive the blizzard, at least you won’t have the shame of meeting your brother in his new position as clan leader.” Anya smiled cruelly at him. She ignored the insults hurled at her as she closed the door of the hut behind her and left the rebel to freeze.

\* \* \*

Aaron opened his eyes groggily. His head was pounding. He could barely see.

He tried to move his head but was blinded by pain. Groaning, he sent a small spark of heat into the air, creating a floating flame. Even that small amount of concentration was exhausting, but it gave him all the information he needed before he snuffed it out. He was inside the hut.

Lying still, he tried to remember what had happened.

*We found the rebel hideout. Eliséo landed us on the bank of the Yoswen Stream. My job was to subdue the karliki inside before the others went in to kill them. I did that ... and then?*

“Lord Aaron?” a familiar voice hesitantly called out. “Are you awake? Ermolai, light a candle.”

“What happened?” Aaron asked, as Anya crouched over him, shielding what little light the candle provided. “Where’s Eliséo?”

“Beside you,” she said. “No! Don’t move your head again. He’s beside you, with a gash in his head the size of my fist. What did you do to him?”

Memories slowly fought their way through the fog in his mind. Aislen had been there. She had pulled him into consciousness briefly so he could steal enough energy to heal himself. How had Aislen been in his mind?

“Aaron, the elf is dying,” Anya brought him back to the present. Eliséo had sacrificed himself in the hopes of saving him.

“Are any of the rebels still alive?” he asked weakly.

Ermolai nodded. “The one who attacked you is unconscious, but alive. We also have Vladimir, but Eliséo bound him outside.”

“Bring my assailant here,” he ordered hoarsely. Without questioning him, Ermolai, Anya and Rufina dragged the unconscious karlik over. His head still throbbing with pain, Aaron hurriedly searched through the karlik’s memories of the rebels. Finding nothing of importance, he took a deep, ragged breath. He’d never tried this before, but he knew it was possible. It would almost certainly spell the karlik’s death, but he had been told time and again that her life was forfeit – all rebels’ lives were forfeit.

He placed one hand on the fallen karlik’s head and felt around until he found Eliséo. Anya, clearly understanding what he was about to attempt, placed his hand gently over the elf’s open wound. As soon as she was clear, Aaron drew out all of the rebel’s energy. Carefully, he passed it to Eliséo, concentrating it around the wound. Using that energy, he passed a modicum of his own healing power into the elf. The healing power took hold of the extra energy, stealing its strength to heal him. It was a dangerous and delicate procedure. Aaron took great care to ensure the wound healed itself properly. It took longer than he expected but, eventually, the wound grew smaller. Aaron let his hands drop from the elf and the karlik before succumbing to darkness.

\* \* \*

“This is ridiculous,” Anya fumed, as Eliséo and Aaron both stirred momentarily and lapsed back into unconsciousness. “We’ll be here for days at this rate!”

“What do you suggest?” asked Rufina, irritably. “As you said, we can’t bring them back to Goraburg by ourselves, so we’re stuck here until they’re fit to travel.”

“Not necessarily,” she thought aloud. “We have a few choices. The first, quite obviously, is to wait here until they are fit to travel. The second is to execute

Vladimir, build something to transport the elf, the lintep and Demyan and return to Goraburg. The third is for two of us to travel to Goraburg and get help while the other stays behind to guard these two idiots and make sure Vladimir doesn't somehow escape."

"Kill Vladimir ourselves?" Ermolai gasped.

"His life was always forfeit." Anya shrugged. "What difference does it make if we kill him now? If we'd killed him in the course of defending ourselves, we wouldn't even be having this conversation."

"Don't you think Lord Ilya would want to publicly put him to death if he has the chance?" Ermolai insisted.

"I think Lord Ilya would be angrier with us for somehow allowing him to escape while we tried to transport him back than he would be if we simply killed him now," Anya pointed out.

Rufina had been quiet as she tended to the potatoes.

"Who do you propose will kill him?" she asked, keeping her eyes firmly on her task. Anya didn't answer immediately. As Rufina had suspected, Anya wasn't overly keen to kill Vladimir herself, no matter what she said.

"It's not worth discussing if that isn't the option we're taking," Anya tried to delay the inevitable.

"I saw a broken wagon on the side of this hideaway. If I can fix it, that would help us transport people," Rufina told them. "The worst of the storm is over now. I'll go and see what I can do about it. That will give you time to consider our options more carefully."

\* \* \*

Rilla opened her eyes to the weak winter light creeping in through the gaps of her curtains. She lay there, motionless. Shuut's arm was wrapped around her. Usually, Rilla would have wriggled away from the skin contact, but today she just didn't care.

*He's alive, Rilla, Elessa spoke softly through their bond. Take heart in that.*

Rilla did not respond, nor did she bother to block out Elessa.

"So, he's still alive," Shuut said as she got out of bed. "That's something at least."

Rilla closed her eyes and drew the covers up to her chin. The blankets were ripped away from her. She turned angrily to see Shuut holding them in one hand.

"Snap out of it, Rilla. He's alive. Be happy with that. We can't do anything more for him right now. What you *can* do is get on with your day. I've got the day free, but Lukys wants you in class, so that's exactly what you'll do. We can have breakfast up here if you want, but then it's on with our day."

"No."

Shuut threw a change of clothes on the bed.

"You don't have a choice. Moping around up here won't help anyone, least of all you. All it will do is make you think of the worst possible scenarios. Trust me when I tell you that keeping yourself busy today is the best thing you can do."

Rilla knew Shuut would not leave her be. It was the only reason she got out of bed.

## Chapter Two – Seers and Prophecies

Arishen walked silently alongside his guardian, Master Reuben, through the streets of Illaria. As they reached the bridge to the castle, Arishen felt his stomach tighten. His hands were frozen and clammy. He tried to clear his mind of all thoughts before Master Reuben took his hand to escort him past the invisible barrier around the castle. It wasn't enough. He knew the master lintep would be able to sense everything with that one touch. His fear that the students would pry, that they would see things he didn't want them to, that he couldn't control.

As they walked through to the outer courtyard, Master Reuben guided him to a more secluded part of the gardens.

"Arishen, would it make you more comfortable if I accompany you today?" Master Reuben placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Mistress Emeline had no right to offer you up as a prize for her students without asking your permission first. Had I known what she was planning, I might have been able to talk her out of it. As it stands, she has already promised this to her students. The most I can do now is offer my assistance."

"You have lessons to teach." Arishen dragged the toes of his shoes through the pebbles on the ground.

"I do, but I could try to shuffle things around. Perhaps I could allow Tommaso to teach the beginner students today."

"If Tommaso is free, maybe he could come with me." Arishen looked at his guardian with raised eyebrows.

Master Reuben smiled. "I didn't realise how well the two of you were getting along. Of course, he can accompany you this morning. It would have the appearance of normality, considering recent circumstances, wouldn't it?"

Arishen grinned and nodded. Master Reuben pursed his lips and his cheeks puffed out, but Arishen could not hear a sound. He knew that the lintep whistle could travel over longer distances than most lintep could communicate with just their minds. Master Reuben stood still for a moment, then cocked his head as though listening intently.

"Tommaso should meet us in Mistress Emeline's classroom," Master Reuben said as they walked towards the castle. "Keep your mind clear. Think only of the visions you want to show them. Anything else could bring in other memories or thoughts that you don't want them to see."

Arishen cringed at the memory of that exact thing happening with Rilla. "Keep my mind on my visions and nothing else. I know."

Master Reuben clapped him on the shoulder. "You'll be fine, Arishen. Tommaso will help focus your thoughts if you need him to. Just don't let those students bully you."

Arishen sat patiently in the hall as it filled with students, some of whom stared at him in open fascination. He was glad for Master Reuben's presence. It would stop them from trying to talk to him. All except Miette. Arishen saw her brown eyes widen as she spotted him. Her cheeks flushed as she ran over.

"Arishen, what are you doing here?" she asked excitedly. "I mean, not that you

can't be here. It's nice to see you again, actually, but I don't often see you in the castle is all."

"Hello Miette." Arishen smiled.

"Good morning, Miette," Master Reuben chuckled. "I see you've met my young seer before."

"Oh yes!" Miette clapped her hands in front of her chest. "We met at Pér's performance in the market square a few nights ago. He's quite a fascinating person."

"Yes, that's your favourite word to describe Arishen," Kalydron said, as he jostled Miette's shoulder from behind. "You've barely stopped talking about the *fascinating* seer since we met him."

Arishen was pleasantly surprised. He had not realised that Miette found him so interesting. Although, thinking back to the night they had met, she had asked him more questions than anyone else.

"Are you going to be a mind mistress when you're older?" Arishen asked her. Kalydron laughed loudly and Master Reuben chuckled in amusement at the suggestion. Miette stared angrily at the three of them before storming away.

"What did I say?" Arishen watched in confusion as she disappeared into the classroom.

"Let's just say, it isn't necessarily your visions that has Miette infatuated with you." Kalydron smirked.

"I ... what?" Arishen stumbled over his words.

Kalydron shook his head as another group of lintep approached them.

"Arishen, I presume?"

Arishen's stomach lurched as he looked up. A lintep with round, soft features looked down at him. Her gaze was so intense, Arishen felt like an insect for her to study.

"Ah, Mistress Emeline." Master Reuben stood. "I trust you won't mind if Tommaso joins you for this session. He has been shadowing young Arishen here for a number of days now in the event that he has an important vision."

He nodded to Tommaso as the young lintep came up behind Mistress Emeline. Tommaso's friendly wave did little to ease Arishen's fear.

"That wasn't part of my plan for the morning," Mistress Emeline said slowly, turning towards Arishen. "However, I'm certain the students won't mind. Perhaps Tommaso will be able to show them a thing or two that he has learnt to do with the young seer."

Arishen cringed at the thought. He liked working with Tommaso, but did they always have to make him feel like a project for them to work with?

"It would be my pleasure." Tommaso beamed at her.

Emeline's long, black curls swirled around her slight frame as she opened the door to her room. Kalydron and Tommaso walked in, closely followed by two other lintep Arishen did not recognise. The bell tolled for morning lessons, but Arishen did not move.

"You'll be fine, Arishen," Master Reuben said. "I have faith in you and your abilities, but that means nothing unless you do too."

Arishen gave him a hesitant smile and rose to join Mistress Emeline's class. He closed the door behind himself and turned to face the small group. Mistress Emeline gestured encouragingly towards an empty chair next to Tommaso.



Arishen sat down next to the only lintep in the room he trusted.

“Dezra, Kalydron, Sheridan, this is a very special prize I’ve awarded you for your research on seers and prophecies. We are extremely fortunate to have a human seer in Illaria. Such an opportunity has never arisen before.

“To begin with, you will each be allowed to ask a question of Arishen. Then if, and *only if*, he allows you to, you may see one of his visions for yourself.

“I must remind you that humans do not have the same abilities as lintep. He cannot shield his thoughts from you or project his visions into your mind, so you will respect his privacy and not pry any further than he is comfortable with. Is that understood?”

Arishen felt his stomach settle as Mistress Emeline introduced him. He had not expected this of the mistress who hadn’t even thought to ask his permission before promising him as a prize to her students. The students nodded seriously.

“Good, now let’s begin. Dezra, would you like to ask the first question?” Mistress Emeline took her seat on the other side of Tommaso.

Arishen studied Dezra. She was slightly older than himself. Her shiny brown hair cupped her chin making her slender neck stand out. She thought for a few moments before asking her question.

“When and how did you first realise that you were a seer?”

Arishen steeled himself for the start of the session. He closed his eyes, thinking back to his earliest memories. His dreams had always been there, but he hadn’t always known what they were.

“I can’t remember how young I was,” he said. “I’ve always remembered my dreams, but I only realised what was happening when I was maybe seven or eight years old and heard about events in our Paradise that matched my dreams exactly. I tried to dismiss it at first, but it became more difficult the more it happened.”

“May I?” Tommaso asked.

Arishen frowned and looked over at Tommaso curiously.

“You must understand that in Arishen’s Paradise, magic was forbidden. Anyone who was suspected of having a hint of it was murdered. It was extraordinarily dangerous for him to have this amazing ability.”

“Wow, how did you survive?” Dezra asked.

“Kalydron’s turn,” Mistress Emeline interrupted.

“You said you’ve always remembered your dreams, but do you only have visions in your sleep?”

Arishen tried not to grimace. “To begin with, yes, they were always in my sleep. I even fell asleep at some very inconvenient times just so the visions could come to me. It was only a few months ago that I began having waking visions.”

“Sheridan, your turn.” Mistress Emeline turned to a blond lintep. His eyes were as blue as his own. Arishen was shocked by the similarity in their appearances, it was almost like looking in a mirror or the feeling of a mostly-forgotten vision, but he had no time to stop and consider it as the session continued.

“What’s the most important vision you’ve ever had?” Sheridan asked, without hesitation. Arishen was completely at a loss. He turned to Tommaso for help. The mind apprentice knew more about him than any other lintep, except perhaps Master Reuben himself.

“That’s a rather difficult question, Sheridan. Many of Arishen’s visions have saved lives. You need to narrow it down a bit.”

Arishen reflected that there weren't any good questions these lintep could ask him. All his visions had been about bad things that were already happening or going to happen. There wasn't a single good or happy vision. Not really.

"Fine, then. Was your first waking vision an important one? Tell us about that."

Arishen closed his eyes for a moment and recalled the vision. It was not difficult. He could still feel the mounting terror as he remembered thinking they could not survive the attack, the sickening scent of burning flesh and hair, the fear afterwards that Rilla would die.

He gagged involuntarily, his heart beating erratically. Tommaso reached out a hand, but Arishen flinched away from it.

"Rilla and I were alone on the bank of the Bramble River. We were waiting for Eliséo to bring the others across when we were attacked by four men. We didn't know it at the time, but they had been hired by Lishe to find and kill Rilla. Well, they attacked us, and I knew we couldn't defend ourselves – not long enough for the others to reach us, anyway. That's when I had my first waking vision.

"Initially, I saw how I was going to be attacked seconds before it happened and so I could defend myself better. Any time I tried to focus on Rilla, all I saw was fire coming out of her fingers and burning the men."

"Did she do it?" Sheridan quickly asked.

"One question each," Arishen objected, looking over to their teacher.

"That's my question, then. Did she do it?" Mistress Emeline asked, clearly just as caught up in the story as her students.

Arishen sighed. "Yes, but please don't tell Rilla about this. She's a very private person. She won't be pleased to know we were talking about her."

"Rumours of that have been floating around the dining hall for days," Dezra said with a shrug. "At least now, we know they're true."

That only made Arishen feel slightly better about telling them himself. He was not convinced that Rilla would look favourably on this turn of events.

"I have a question of my own, if I'm allowed," Arishen said. Mistress Emeline gestured for him to continue. "Do all seers have visions of bad things? I mean, does anyone ever have a vision of something nice happening?"

Mistress Emeline shook her head. "Even among the lintep, seers are rare. Perhaps Tommaso can answer."

Arishen looked over to his friend. Tommaso raised his eyebrows.

"I honestly don't know. I can tell you that I've only ever read prophecies of bad or unfortunate events, but that's not to say no seer has ever had a good event show itself to them. It could simply be that only the ones that deal with bad events need to be recorded or told to someone."

"What about the prophecy with Rilla?" Arishen asked before he could think better of it. "That's not actually about a bad event."

"That's true," admitted Tommaso, "but it was to help bring about the end of a bad circumstance. I'd say it falls into the same category."

"There's a prophecy with Rilla in it?" Kalydron asked in surprise.

Arishen closed his eyes in despair. The prophecy was well known outside of Illaria. Why didn't they know it here? Rilla was certainly not going to be impressed with him now.

"You've all had one question each. That's it now." Arishen crossed his arms, refusing to answer.

“Ah, yes, that’s enough questions,” Mistress Emeline answered hurriedly. “Arishen, have you thought about whether you might allow the students to see a vision for themselves? One of your old ones perhaps? One you think is not so important?”

Arishen wondered if it would be easier to show them old, short visions from the Paradise, rather than allow them to ask him more questions.

“If you don’t mind, can Tommaso look at the visions first, just to...” He didn’t know how to finish the question. He knew Tommaso would tell him if he was showing too much or not limiting his thoughts enough.

“Yes, of course,” answered Mistress Emeline easily. “We shall proceed in whatever manner makes you most comfortable.”

Arishen was again surprised by this teacher. He closed his eyes and thought back to his earlier visions. It was insignificant to anyone but himself, but all he could think of was the vision of Kalid fashioning wooden bolts for her door and window and sleeping with a chisel under her pillow. There were not many pleasant visions in his past, so this one would have to do.

He focused on the vision, brought it to the front of his mind, ignoring all other thoughts. When he opened his eyes again, Tommaso was ready for him.

With more care and respect than either King Lukys or Lord Aaron had used on him in the past, Tommaso touched Arishen’s mind. Arishen felt the intrusion but could do nothing about it. To distract himself, he focused ever harder on the vision of Kalid. He saw it played over in excruciatingly slow detail before Tommaso left his mind.

“Thank you, Arishen,” Tommaso said. “I think that is a perfect example. Mistress Emeline, would you like to have the first turn?”

She hesitated for only a moment. “I suppose there won’t be many opportunities like this again. Thank you.”

Once again, Arishen recalled the vision of Kalid. He was surprised to find that Mistress Emeline’s touch was much subtler than even Master Reuben’s. Had he not been specifically waiting for her to see his vision, he may not have noticed she was there at all. Dismissing the thought, and knowing that she must have heard it, Arishen focused on Kalid again until the older lintep left his mind.

“Remarkable!” she exclaimed. “And this is one of your *less* significant visions? It’s amazingly detailed. Why didn’t her face change at all?”

“Oh, that!” Arishen cringed. “I never see faces. If I know the person, I can tell who it is, but I don’t actually see any faces.”

“How interesting!” Mistress Emeline cocked her head to the side as she studied him. “So, were you projecting her face specifically for me or does that happen with every reliving of the vision if you know the person?”

“I ... hadn’t actually thought about that,” he admitted. “I suppose when it’s just me, I know who the person is, so it doesn’t make a difference, but possibly because I’m thinking of that person you get to see their face.”

“My turn?” Dezra asked, barely masking her excitement. Mistress Emeline nodded and Arishen quickly cleared his mind of everything but that vision. Again, he felt the lintep’s touch, but this was much rougher than any other he had felt before. He tensed and instinctively grabbed Tommaso’s arm.

“Gently, Dezra.” Tommaso hopped into Arishen’s mind to guide Dezra’s movements. Arishen focused on the vision again, playing it in his mind much

faster than it normally did. *Anything to get this girl out of my mind!*

“Sorry,” mumbled Dezra, as she retreated. “I guess I need to practise my skills a little more.”

Arishen didn't reply. He was still rigid from the shock of her rough intrusion. He felt his fear and anger subside too quickly and realised Tommaso was forcibly calming him.

Arishen sighed. *You can get out now. I'm as calm as you're going to get me.* After a deep, steadying breath, he finally met Dezra's eyes.

“I guess you're used to dealing with people who have walls around their mind, like Rilla and Plyke, but I don't have anything.”

The young lintep hung her head in shame. Arishen felt horrible that she would have heard his thought about getting her out of his mind, but there wasn't anything else he could think to say to her. She would know he was lying if he said he didn't mind.

“Let's move along.” Mistress Emeline broke the tension.

“I'm not so sure about this,” Arishen said. “I don't have any control over what they do in my head. Master Reuben told me that unskilled lintep could damage my mind.”

Mistress Emeline folded her hands in her lap. “I understand your fears, Arishen, but you must also understand that this is a rare opportunity for my students – even for myself. We will respect your privacy and my students will attempt to be as gentle as possible. Please do not punish them for lack of practise on humans.”

Arishen shook his head, torn with indecision. He knew his position in Illaria was tenuous. The only reason he had been allowed to enter in the first place was because Rilla and Plyke had insisted they would rather die than leave him and Tika behind. Would they banish him for refusing Mistress Emeline's request?

“I suppose I have no choice.” He rubbed his arms as a chill wind swept through the room.

“Thank you, Arishen.” Mistress Emeline tried to catch his eye, but Arishen evaded it. “Kalydron, why don't you go next. Be gentle with Arishen. His mind has no defences. The lightest touch will allow you to see his vision.”

Kalydron nodded as he stared at the pale and downcast Dezra. Arishen hoped the warning was enough to guide Kalydron's actions. He prepared himself again, focusing only on the vision of Kalid and waited.

Soon, there was another presence in his mind. Arishen tried to keep a grip on his vision but found it hard to concentrate. Random thoughts of Rilla kept clouding his mind. *Is Kalydron trying to find visions of Rilla?*

*You can tell?* Kalydron's surprised voice echoed in his mind. *Sorry. Please show me the vision you showed the others. I'll stop looking for Rilla.*

Arishen pursed his lips and tried to forget about Rilla, but the more he tried to forget about her, the more he thought of her. He tried desperately hard not to think of the vision where she shot flames from her fingers but realised too late that was now exactly what Kalydron was seeing.

“Out!” he yelled. “Get out now!”

Tommaso was instantly in Arishen's mind, creating a shield in front of the vision and gently ushering Kalydron out. Arishen felt them both leave his mind and hid his face in his hands. He couldn't help the tears that flowed.

“I'm sorry, Arishen,” Kalydron reached out to comfort him. Instinctively,

Arishen flinched from his touch. Kalydron dropped his hand. "I'm sorry."

"What just happened?" asked Mistress Emeline harshly. "Kalydron, what did you do?"

"I ... looked for Rilla," he admitted, sheepishly. "I didn't know it would be so easy."

"Kalydron, I expected better than that from you," Mistress Emeline chided him. "Arishen allowed this with the understanding that you would take a quick look and leave his mind not search through it to find what you want."

"You *know* he doesn't have a wall and can't hide anything from you. You had no right to do that to him. I'm afraid I must ask you to leave now."

Arishen wiped his eyes on his sleeve as Kalydron walked to the door. Why had the stupid lintep searched for Rilla? Why did so many things out of his control make his relationship worse with her?

"Don't tell Rilla, okay?" he called out to the retreating lintep. "She'll never forgive me if she knows what you saw."

"It wasn't your fault, Arishen," Kalydron pointed out. "I'm sure she won't be angry with you, but I won't tell her if you don't want me to."

"You don't know her like I do." Arishen shook his head. "She'll be furious with me, even more than if she finds out I told you about the vision before you looked for it."

Kalydron slumped his shoulders as he left the room. Arishen felt all eyes turn back on him. He knew what they were going to ask. There was one person left. Would he allow Sheridan to view the vision?

"Do you promise not to stray?" Arishen looked at him warily. "Don't think of anything. Just watch."

Sheridan nodded gratefully. Arishen wasn't certain he trusted this lintep but didn't think it could be much worse than what Kalydron had done. He tried to think of the vision with Kalid but couldn't concentrate. He kept thinking about Rilla and all the times his visions had affected her. Even the most recent one about Lord Aaron.

Without realising it, Arishen nodded his head slightly. In seconds, Sheridan was in his mind, seeing his vision of Lord Aaron and Anya walking in the tunnels of Goraburg as a Karlik lay in wait to kill them. He tried to think of Kalid, but all that happened was he merged the two together.

*Lord Aaron was in Kalid's room with locked window and door.*

*The room shifted to a dark enclosure.*

*It shifted again.*

*Lord Aaron, Eliséo and a karlik were on a makeshift wagon. Anya and another two karliki – a male and a female – were dragging the wagon through the deep snow.*

*"I think we made the wrong decision," the female karlik grunted, as she pulled on a rope slung over her shoulder.*

*"We can't go back now," Anya replied through gritted teeth. "There isn't enough food there for the five of us to last until these two idiots recover."*

*"What was that?" the male karlik asked.*

*All three of them stopped, the wind howling around them, and listened.*

*"We must be near the Yoswen Stream now. That must be what you heard," Anya*

*tried to reassure him. She took up her rope again and started forward. With a shout, she jumped back as four yoswen came charging at them through the snow.*

“What was *that*?” Sheridan asked in surprise. “I thought you said you were going to show me a not very important vision. That looked quite important.”

“Tommaso, I need Rilla.” Arishen tried to calm himself. If Eliséo was asleep, he didn’t know if Rilla would be able to help. He couldn’t tell if this was happening now or was going to happen. Either way, it was bad.

“I’ve called her,” Tommaso told him. “Now, please show me what you saw?”

Arishen forgot about the rest of the lintep and focused on Tommaso and the vision. He usually found it reassuring to have a more experienced lintep, like Tommaso or Master Reuben, in his mind. Training with them, he noticed they could focus on certain parts of the vision, slow down everything and take in all the details. This was *not* one of those times.

As the vision focused on the three people in the wagon, Arishen realised that the karlik was dead. He looked more closely at Lord Aaron and Eliséo. His heart skipped a beat. They weren’t just asleep. The constant jolts from the wagon catching in the snow should have woken them. It was only when Eliséo’s face turned to the side after a particularly nasty bump that Arishen saw the wound at the back of the elf’s head. He certainly wasn’t sleeping. He was unconscious, which meant Lord Aaron probably was too, otherwise the lintep would have healed the him.

“They’re going to die!” he cried out in a panic, just before the door handle turned.

“Quiet!” Tommaso covered his mouth, but it was no use.

“Who’s going to die?” Rilla asked as she ran over to him. “What did you see? Show me.”

Arishen couldn’t answer her. He just kept shaking his head.

“Tommaso can show you,” Arishen mumbled. “Don’t look in my mind.”

He could see the fear on her face and knew he wouldn’t be able to concentrate enough to show her properly, without tainting it with his own fears of what might happen next.

Rilla looked expectantly at Tommaso. She grew very still.

“Can you do anything?” Arishen asked, not quite knowing how to ask what he really needed to know. There were too many people still in the room. Too many people who didn’t know about her secret bond.

“No, I can’t. Not this time.” Rilla shook her head, tears trickling down her face. “Has it already happened?”

“I don’t know,” he whispered.

*Why do I always see things that make her world fall apart?*

“Arishen, is there anything I can do to help?” Mistress Emeline gently touched his elbow. He looked at her without seeing. He was numb to everything.

“May I see the vision?” she persisted.

Arishen shrugged indifferently. The only person he didn’t want in his mind right now was Rilla.

He barely felt it when Mistress Emeline brushed against his mind. There was no focus left in him. He couldn’t hold onto the vision. It mildly surprised him how gently she sorted through his thoughts to find the source of his pain. The vision

that proved Rilla's grandfather, Rilla's elf and Anya were all going to die at the mercy of yoswen.

His vision swirled until he was watching the movements from far above. The Yoswen Stream was just to the left of the party as they travelled north through the thick snow. A flicker of recognition caught his eye. The white ghost gum they'd entered Goraburg through, so many months ago now, was to the north-east. It would take them over a day to walk there through the snow – if they weren't killed or injured by the yoswen first.

"We know exactly where they are," Mistress Emeline announced. "Now we simply need to alert someone who can help us."

"But there isn't anyone," Rilla protested. "I can't..."

"Can't what?" Mistress Emeline asked curiously.

"Nothing. There's nothing we can do." Rilla tried to cover up her error. "Not now."

"What's going on?" Dezra asked. She was the only one who hadn't yet seen the vision. Arishen was too tired to show her. He could barely keep his eyes open.

## Chapter Three – Slap

Rilla watched in surprise as Arishen fell asleep. He hadn't needed to do that after his visions for a while now. Seeing his vision brought her mixed feelings. Even though Elessa had reassured her Eliséo was still alive, it gave Rilla a sense of relief to see him. But with the knowledge that neither he nor Lord Aaron could protect themselves, a growing sense of terror was mounting. Her heart raced as she tried to smother her fear and come up with a plan.

What they needed was a way to communicate with Eliséo or, better yet, Anya. Even if Elessa told her how to communicate with birds, Rilla doubted Anya would be able to understand a message sent that way. Unless, perhaps, it was written. Rilla closed her eyes.

*Elessa, is it possible?* she asked as she showed the tree her idea.

*Not for you,* Elessa replied. *For that, you really do need to be an elf. Unless the bird was a fringa.*

There were no fringa in Illaria – of that, Rilla was quite certain. But what if they were to go into the Outworld?

“Horses,” she said aloud, as she opened her eyes. “We need horses to get to the boundary of Illaria.”

“How will that help?” asked the lintep teacher. Rilla did not recognise her. “We can't ride all the way to them.”

“No, but we can call the fringa and maybe they can fly there,” Rilla explained, hopefully.

“That's one idea,” the teacher admitted, “but they are small birds and can't possibly reach the Lesa Mountains quickly enough. I think a better idea would be to get word to the crystal dragons. I don't know what's been going on, but there were two of them here a few weeks ago. Perhaps there is a way to get one of them to return.”

Rilla stared at the teacher, a flutter of hope in her stomach. *Why didn't I think of that? When is Pyrid due to come back? They must have set a day.* Hurriedly, she sent out a few tendrils to find King Lukys. She found him in the audience chamber. If she disturbed him there, he would never forgive her. As she retreated from the room, she felt Aislen.

*When is Pyrid due back?* she asked the princess.

*Not for another two days,* Aislen replied, crushing Rilla's last hope.

Two days was too long. Rilla could feel Aislen's concern but was too distraught to explain any further. She pulled her tendrils back into her mind. She couldn't think anymore. Her mind was as frozen as her heart. As frozen as her elf and grandfather would soon be.

\* \* \*

Aislen could feel Rilla's fear and despair with that one brief touch. Even as her young cousin retreated, Aislen could feel the girl bleeding out warmth into the air. It was subtle enough that anyone else might not notice immediately – other than Mistress Isis, perhaps.



Making as little fuss as possible, Aislen excused herself from the royal audience and followed the tendril back towards Rilla. If Isis were there, Rilla would not have been allowed to get to this stage, which meant she was in danger. As soon as she was out of the audience chamber, Aislen broke into a run. Without bothering to knock, she barged into the room where she could feel Rilla freezing to death.

A single glance told her that Mistress Emeline and Tommaso had not grasped the gravity of the situation. They were just as concerned about the collapsed seer as the motionless girl.

“Princess Aislen! What are you doing here?” Emeline cried out.

Ignoring the surprised teacher, Aislen quickly lit a roaring fire and fed as much heat into it as she dared. Slowly, and more calmly than she felt, she stood beside Rilla and placed a hand on her chest. She drew on the heat from the fireplace to feed into Rilla, but as quickly as the heat was replaced, Rilla let it out again.

“Mistress Emeline, I need you to calm her. I can’t risk doing both things at once.”

To her credit, the mistress didn’t argue. Aislen felt Rilla’s fear lessen, but the emptiness inside her cousin expanded, cold and relentlessly chilling. Shaking her head in frustration, Aislen continued to feed heat into the girl.

“What happened?” she asked no one in particular. “Why is she so upset?”

“Arishen had a vision,” Tommaso answered. “May I project it to you?”

“No!” Aislen cried out before taking a moment to calm herself. “No. If you touch my mind, right now ... it’s not a good idea. I need you to call Mistress Isis and Master Bastienne. Better call Kayte and Aurelius too.”

Aislen heard Tommaso’s whistle. It was a wise move. He did not have enough power to find them all. As she waited for the others to arrive, Aislen kept feeding heat into Rilla as fast as the girl was discarding it. There was only one thing she could think of to stop the cycle. But surrounding Rilla with her power, trapping her within, was not something Aislen wanted to try – especially not when Rilla trusted so few people as it was. She didn’t want to become one of the many people who had betrayed her in her short life.

“Where are they?” she cried out in frustration.

“I don’t know if they’re in the castle,” Tommaso told her. “They might not have heard my call.”

“Dezra, Sheridan, run to every classroom. Get all the teachers you can even if they insist that they’re busy. Get them now!” Mistress Emeline instructed her two remaining students.

The two students needed no encouragement. Aislen heard their footsteps racing away.

“What now?” Emeline asked. “Is there nothing else I can do to help?”

“I don’t know what else to do,” Aislen almost sobbed in frustration. “Calming her only made things worse. She’s like an empty husk inside, drained of everything. What happened?”

“If you would only let me show you the vision,” Tommaso insisted. Aislen tried to keep her temper with the apprentice.

“Tommaso, if you touch my mind right now, I cannot control what will happen. I may suck you into the same cycle Rilla has thrown herself into. I don’t have the energy to keep both of you alive.”

“I don’t know who all the people were, but some of them, including Lord Aaron and an elf, are out in the Lesa Mountains, in the snow. They’re either going to be

attacked or have now already been attacked by yoswen,” Emeline explained.

Aislen looked up sharply at the mistress. *Why is Aaron in the snow? It doesn't matter. At least he's alive. Eliséo really had saved him.*

“I don't understand why that would make Rilla react like this,” she spoke her thoughts aloud. “Surely, the karliki can handle a yoswen?”

Thankfully Emeline did not question how she knew there were karliki involved, or why she seemed to know that both Eliséo and Aaron were not in a state to defend themselves.

“That may be the case, but there are four yoswen and only three karliki to fight them,” Emeline pointed out softly.

Suddenly, it all made sense to Aislen. Of course, Rilla now feared that she would lose the one person who had never betrayed her, who had done everything in his power to keep her safe. The unfortunate thing was that there was nothing they could do about it.

Masters and mistresses flooded into the room. More than would be helpful, but Aislen wasn't in a state to argue. She was slipping into the same state as Rilla. Empathy may have been her strong point, but it was *not* the skill she needed right now. It was only making things worse. With her hand on Rilla's chest, she could feel her cousin's terror.

Too distracted to block it out, Aislen could not help but see Arishen's vision flicker through Rilla's mind. She narrowed in on Aaron lying pale and motionless in a makeshift wagon. If the boy's vision was true, Aaron would die. Aislen was not prepared to lose him. Not now. She had already almost lost him when he was attacked by a karlik. She couldn't do it again – not so soon.

“Aislen, control your feelings!” Bastienne shouted. The words sounded far away, but quite insistent.

*Control your feelings.* That's what she had always been told when she was younger. Her lack of control had been the reason the entire castle had drowned in her emotions many times in her youth. Instinctively, she practised the exercises she'd been taught long ago. As she calmed, she noticed that all the masters and mistresses were looking at her for direction.

“Rilla is distressed. Calming her didn't work. She is losing heat as fast as I can replace it. Does anyone have an idea how to help?”

“Why is she distressed?” asked Jorg asked. Aislen nodded to Tommaso who projected Arishen's vision to him. Jorg gasped audibly. “Good grief! What can be done?”

“That's not our main concern right now,” Aislen told him sternly. “We need to help Rilla.”

“But Lord Aaron ...”

Aislen interrupted him, “Can wait for now. There is nothing we can do for him. But I see you partially understand what has Rilla so distressed. Now, what can we do about it?”

“What was the vision?” Mistress Vika asked. Before Tommaso had the chance to show her as well, Mistress Emeline stopped him.

“It doesn't matter what the vision was,” the younger mistress told them. “We don't need any more people distracted by it. All you need to know is that there is nothing we can do about it right now. We need to find a way to help Rilla. Princess Aislen cannot be expected to feed heat into the girl indefinitely.”

“What happened when you calmed her down?” asked Bastienne.

“It made things worse. She is letting herself freeze and she doesn’t care.”

“Make her angry,” he suggested. “It can’t make things much worse, can it?”

“It might not make things worse, but how will it help?” asked Isis from beside him. “You may simply reverse the situation and have her draw in too much heat instead. I’ve seen her do that and don’t want to have to fix *that* problem again.”

“What’s your suggestion, then?” Emeline asked Isis. “You know her better than most of us.”

“I’m certain Princess Aislen has already thought of my suggestion, but it’s not one I think either of us would be comfortable doing,” Isis said quietly. Aislen looked up sadly. If they had both come up with the same solution and no one else could think of anything else, perhaps they had no choice.

“We could ask someone else to do it,” Aislen suggested.

Isis shook her head. “Even if it isn’t one of us, she would still never forgive us. Besides, that won’t actually solve this. It will only keep you from having to replace the heat in her body. We’ll still need to figure out a way to bring her back.”

“If she’s upset about my vision, maybe we can find a solution to that and make her understand it will be fine,” Arishen suggested timidly from his prone position on the floor. Aislen looked over to find seer trying to prop himself up on an elbow. “Is there any way to reach the Lesa Mountains or the crystal dragons quickly?”

Silence greeted his question. Aislen looked around the room at all the masters and mistresses assembled. With some of the greatest minds in Illaria, it was ridiculous that they could not find a solution.

“What if we combine our powers?” Vika suggested. “Could we somehow reach them then?”

“No, combining them won’t make them stretch further,” Bastienne refuted.

“What’s going on?” Kora asked as she entered the room with Plyke.

Isis quickly explained the situation to them. Aislen watched Kora closely. She was just as unusual as the rest of their family, but most people didn’t realise. Perhaps she would have a reasonable suggestion.

\* \* \*

*Can we talk to Eliséo?* Kora asked Isis directly. Even though Rilla had explained the bond between them to some of the lintep, it wasn’t common knowledge and Kora meant to keep it that way.

*It appears he’s unconscious and she can’t contact him,* Isis replied. *But ... She thought to herself for a moment. Do you think it’s possible for Aislen to talk with her tree? When Rilla first explained her bond to me, she told me anyone who has skin contact could potentially talk to her tree, her elf and anyone with skin contact to her elf.*

*Anything is worth a try at this point,* Kora shrugged. *Can you take over from Aislen so that she can concentrate on the tree? I’ll explain when she is free from her task.*

Isis nodded slightly.

“Aislen, you’re looking a bit tired. Why don’t I take over for you?” Isis asked the princess, catching her eye and looking over towards Kora.

“Thank you, Isis,” Aislen replied, wiping her brow. “That would be most helpful.

You're certainly more skilled with heat and cold than I am. Perhaps you'll have more luck with her."

\* \* \*

As soon as Aislen was free from Rilla, she turned to Kora. *What's your idea?*

Kora explained her theory. Aislen didn't immediately reply.

*That could be dangerous,* Aislen said eventually. *Rilla is quite powerful and even though empathy is not where her talents lie, she is still perfectly capable of sucking me into her state. In fact, I've already fallen into it once. If it hadn't been for Bastienne's reminder and my years of practise, I would have been just as lost as she is.*

*You'd rather let her die?* Kora asked bluntly. Aislen narrowed her eyes angrily.

"There are too many people here," Aislen suddenly announced. "If you think you can genuinely be of assistance, please stay. If not, return to your classes. Everyone in this room will be in danger from Rilla if things get out of control, so I want the minimum number of people here."

Many of the masters and mistresses looked suitably annoyed. In her raw state, Aislen could feel the annoyance rolling off them. They had just been dragged out of their classes by Emeline's orders and now that Aislen was free from Rilla, they were summarily dismissed. With low grumbles, most of them left.

Aislen looked around at those who remained. Emeline, Tommaso, Arishen, Plyke, Kora, Bastienne and, of course, Isis. *Where are Kayte and Reuben?* she wondered.

"Arishen, are you happy to work with Mistress Emeline rather than Master Reuben for the moment?" The young seer barely hesitated before nodding. Perhaps he had already realised that Mistress Emeline was more skilled with seers than his guardian. "Very well, then. The two of you work together with Tommaso to see if there is anything else you can tell us about the vision. Emeline, I know it's unconventional and more than a little dangerous, but if you can try to induce another vision, that may help us."

"In ... induce a vision?" Arishen stammered. "Is that even possible?"

"It is," Emeline replied quietly, "but I've only read of it before. As Princess Aislen mentioned, it's meant to be quite dangerous for the seer. I would suggest we focus on your current vision. We can try inducing a vision when you've trained up a bit."

"But I'd do anything for Rilla," Arishen replied instantly. "I owe her my life!"

"Rhanya bought your life," Plyke reminded him. "Rilla only kept us safe in the Outworld because of her promise to him."

Arishen shook his head, "You forget that she didn't tell anyone about my visions in the Paradise. She saved my life more times than I could ever repay her. What do you need me to do?"

"No, Arishen," said Emeline. "We'll see what more we can tell from your vision, but I refuse to help you induce another one."

Aislen hid her disappointment as Mistress Emeline stood her ground. She left the seer and his guides to their work, instead turning to the others. Plyke, Kora and Bastienne looked to her for direction. She knew both mother and son were well aware of Rilla's unusual bond, but Bastienne almost certainly wasn't.

"Master Bastienne, if you cannot think of a way to force Rilla to stop spilling out all of the heat within her, perhaps it would be best for you to leave us as well."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "You still haven't tried my suggestion of making the girl angry."

"Bastienne, leave it alone," Isis looked up with fire in her eyes. "Making her angry will not help."

Bastienne held his hands up in defeat. "I know when I'm not wanted. I'll be in the library when you finish with her and want to explain exactly what happened here."

Aislen saw him make way for Mistress Kayte to enter as he walked out of the room.

"Watch what you say in there," he told her, pointing back over his shoulder. "These people have no sense of humour. Apparently, I'm not to make her angry."

Aislen had no time for the old master. She motioned for Kayte to close the door behind her.

"What did she do this time?" Kayte asked, clearly annoyed.

"Kayte, have a little compassion," Isis growled through clenched teeth. "Not *everything* is her fault."

"It's *my* fault," Arishen called out from across the room. "If you need someone to blame, then blame me. If I hadn't reacted so badly to my own vision, maybe she wouldn't have either."

"Let's see it then," Kayte turned to him. Arishen paled as she moved towards him. Aislen lay a hand on Kayte's arm.

"Not directly from Arishen," she cautioned. "I think Emeline can help us instead."

Arishen nodded gratefully. Aislen waited alongside Kayte for Emeline to show them the vision.

"So, she's scared that they're all going to die?" Kayte asked, in a softer tone. "I assume there's still no way to contact them?"

Emeline and Tommaso looked up in confusion. Aislen only shrugged.

"Then we need to calm her down," Kayte reasoned.

"I tried that," Emeline pointed out. "It made things worse."

Aislen did not miss the patronising way Kayte smiled at the mind mistress. "I do not believe she is calm. She may simply have gone numb, which can sometimes be confused as the same thing. If that's the case, it makes sense that she's worse off now."

"She was panicking," Emeline bristled. "I did what I needed to do to stop her from becoming completely hysterical."

Aislen stepped in to diffuse the situation. "No one is accusing you of anything, Mistress Emeline. Your efforts are greatly appreciated. I think we all need to keep ourselves calm now. The tasks we each must perform can easily spiral out of control if we aren't careful. Perhaps you could take Arishen to Reuben's rooms and continue your work there."

Emeline smoothed down her dress as she calmed herself. "Very well. Arishen, Tommaso, with me."

Aislen waited until they had closed the door behind them before turning to the healing mistress. "Really, Kayte! Sometimes, it would do for you to hold your tongue. Now, if you're so certain she made Rilla numb instead of calm, fix her yourself."

\* \* \*

Kayte raised her chin defiantly and walked over to the motionless girl on the floor, being careful not to get in Isis' way. The night before, Kayte had been forced to show Rilla, Plyke and Shuut how to steal energy from another lintep. Rilla had almost killed her. Admittedly, the naive girl had no idea what she was doing, but that almost made things worse.

How did this girl always get herself into these situations? Kayte placed a hand over Rilla's forehead and closed her eyes.

The girl was devoid of all feeling – completely numb. Kayte shook her head in anger. She hated it when lintep dove into situations without thinking through the consequences of their actions. It so often led to someone else cleaning up their mess.

Counting down from ten, she calmed herself with deep breaths.

*Rilla, I need you to concentrate.*

There was no reply.

*Rilla, come back to us.*

Still no reply.

*Rilla, wake up!*

Nothing. No response at all. Kayte's anger bubbled over. She threw that anger into Rilla and slapped her across the face. Suddenly, there was fire in the girl's eyes.

"How dare you!" Rilla yelled, sitting up and pulling away from everyone.

"Well, looks like Bastienne was right after all," Kayte looked at Rilla smugly. "All I needed to do was make you angry."

"Kayte!" yelled Isis. "How could you be so reckless?"

Kayte crossed her arms and lifted her chin. "She's not bleeding out heat anymore, is she?"

Isis placed a hand on Rilla's arm and shook her head angrily.

"You didn't know it would work," Isis lowered her voice. "You could have pushed her the other way instead. *Then* what would you have done?"

"She's had plenty of practise calming me down," Rilla glared at the healing mistress. "You probably thought that would be the easier option, didn't you?"

Kayte shrugged nonchalantly.

\* \* \*

Aislen held her head between her hands as she listened to the two mistresses argue. All the while her uncle was lying unconscious, somewhere in the Lesa Mountains, about to be attacked by a pack of yoswen.

"Enough!" she cried out, louder than she intended. When she looked up, all eyes were on her. "We do not have time for this bickering. I understand why Rilla panicked – I'm almost there myself. But it won't help anyone."

"There isn't anything we can do," Rilla pointed out. "Eliséo is unconscious. I can't reach him like that. You said Pyrid isn't due back here for two days, which will be too late."

"Arishen's vision doesn't show them dying," Isis pointed out hesitantly. "Perhaps they won't."

Aislen looked at the fear and doubt in Rilla's eyes and felt it all around her. "Let's assume, for the moment, that they survive the attack. They won't be left unharmed

and, almost certainly, won't be able to return to Goraburg without help. With Emeline's assistance, we've seen roughly where they are, so once Pyrid arrives, we can ask him to take a few of us there to help them."

"Assuming they're still alive when we get there." Rilla's voice trembled.

Aislen struggled to hold back her own tears. "We have to believe they will be. There's nothing else we can do for now."

"Mistress Kayte, will you give me some more healing lessons before Pyrid arrives?" Rilla asked the healing mistress.

"Oh, no. *You* won't be going," Kayte replied firmly. Before Rilla could protest, Kayte continued. "You are too close to this situation and if you injure yourself, or anyone else, no one will be able to help you. I will go."

"I'll go with you, then," Rilla insisted. "How could it hurt to teach me more before we leave?"

"Ah, Rilla, I think Kayte is trying to tell you that you won't be going at all." Aislen laid a hand on Rilla's shoulder. "Your power is too unstable. We cannot afford to have anything happen to you while our focus should be Aaron, Eliséo and the karliki."

\* \* \*

"But ..." Rilla stood there helplessly, staring from one lintep to another. Everything was catching up with her. She had barely slept the night before. Her fear that Eliséo had died trying to save her grandfather had almost been too much to bear. She had tried to block it out all morning. But this ... it was all too much. Would she be forced to wait here while others went to save them? Would they really die now, after everything that had happened?

The tears finally started to flow. She collapsed to the floor in a sobbing heap. She barely heard the door open and close or felt the arm that wrapped itself around her, holding her close as she cried until there were no more tears to shed.

When she finally looked up, she was surprised to find Kora holding her and the room was empty. "Where did you come from?" she asked, sniffing quietly.

Kora smiled sadly. "You're not the only one who fades into the background when they're scared or upset. If people forget about you often enough, it just seems to happen more easily.

"When the others realised they couldn't do anything more for you, I reappeared so they could leave to organise who else would need to go with Pyrid."

"I wish they would take me with them," Rilla insisted. "I need to know that they're alive."

Kora looked at her strangely for a moment. "Can't you tell that from here? At least with Eliséo ..."

For a moment, Rilla focused on her link with Elessa, trying to feel anything of Eliséo. She let out a deep breath. "He's alive. For now."

"Let's just be happy with that and try not think about the 'later', just for now,"

Kora suggested. Rilla took another deep breath and smiled half-heartedly. "Good, now I need your help. I need to organise a more permanent solution for Abelin. You remember the lintep boy Plyke found at the broken Paradise? He can't stay in Illaria forever. I'd like for him to be the first student in my plan for a new school."

## Chapter Four – Distractions

Cold wind bit at her face as Lishe pulled her cloak closer around her shoulders. The weather had turned from mild autumn to bitter winter in the space of just a few days. Bending her head into the wind, she rode her horse ever onward towards her hope – the only unbroken Paradise of which she knew the location.

She did not know how much time she had to solve this riddle before those meddling fools decided to destroy another one. Having no idea how they had destroyed that first one, all she could hope was that the humans from Deuterfoss would delay them. She had certainly left enough of a trail for them to find the broken Paradise and cause some trouble.

*It's around here somewhere*, she thought to herself as she looked along the small stream flowing through empty fields. She had followed the banwep along this very stream all those months ago.

“Along the stream, over to a small cluster of trees, barely worth a mention. Where is it?”

Lishe dismounted and led her horse as she walked through the long, damp grass. This weather had made everything damp, even when it wasn't raining. It must already be snowing in the Lesa mountains to be so cold down here.

As she walked, there was a slight resistance against her body. Irritated by the obstruction, she forged ahead, head still bent low against the fierce wind. Her horse pulled against the reins as she dragged her along.

“Come on, you dumb mule,” she muttered, tugging firmly at the reins. “It's only wind.”

Try as she might, she could not force her to come any further. She looked up angrily, but her jaw dropped before she could yell at the poor beast. The open fields had disappeared only to be replaced by a small country village. Thankfully, she was too far away for any of the humans to see her.

Turning around, she saw a blurred version of the fields. Quickly, she stepped back outside the Paradise boundary.

“So, you don't like the boundary, huh?” Lishe stroked the horse's neck thoughtfully. “Well, at least we found it.”

She looked back towards the Paradise. It was quite amazing how invisible the boundary was from the Outworld. She had spent years trying to find them, but without the banwep's help, she may never have found one at all.

*Time to try harvesting this power.*

Lishe placed her hand on the barrier and smiled. Now that she knew it was there, she could feel powers intertwining beneath her fingers.

*So much power!*

If she ever managed to obtain all the power in these Paradises, no one would ever have power over her again. *She* would be the head mistress in Illaria and every lintep would fear and respect her. It gave her a heady feeling just thinking about it.

\* \* \*

Kora tried to distract herself from her father's predicament. It was the only way



she knew how to cope in these situations, of which she had been in too many. If she failed, all that awaited her was an overwhelming, crushing sensation that she would not survive.

Pushing the thought aside, she watched Abelin play with some of the younger students in the castle. Just like Tika, he immediately endeared himself to all around him. It helped that his Partner, Lorella, was such a sweet child. She was clearly in awe of all the magic surrounding her. Kora smiled at the way Abelin protectively watched over Lorella. Their Partnership would be a strong one indeed.

“So, what’s your plan?” Rilla asked from beside her. “Where is Abelin staying at the moment?”

“Here, in the castle,” Kora answered, pulling herself away from the young Partners. “I’ve put the two of them in one of the rooms specifically set aside for students. Father is paying for that, but it’s a temporary solution.”

Rilla arched an eyebrow. “Exactly how does Lord Aaron have so much money at his disposal? I never actually see him do any ... well, work, I suppose.”

“Ah yes,” Kora nodded. “Father never needs to work a day in his life. He and Uncle Kynon own a great deal of land in and around the city. Uncle Lukys owns the castle itself and much of the rest of the land. It is a rare lintep indeed, outside of the royal family, who owns their own property.”

“So, that’s why Lord Kynon can waste his days doing nothing,” Rilla sounded quite unimpressed. She had every right to be. Kynon was well known for wasting his time. He never deigned to help Lukys or Aaron with running Illaria. In fact, it was only in recent days that Kora had seen him take an interest in politics.

When Kora returned from the broken Paradise, Kynon had taken her aside to ask about her lessons with Lishe and Nyssa. Apparently, her father had asked him to investigate the entire affair for him. Unfortunately, she had not been able to give him any new information. Her old masters and mistresses had told him all they could remember. Kora explained how they had experimented between lessons, but that only served to shine a light on Lishe’s character – it did not show them what other skills she might have accidentally come across.

“Uncle Kynon isn’t so bad,” Kora shrugged. “At least he’s doing his part to help solve the Lishe problem. What I need you for is to help me solve *this* problem.”

She nodded towards the young lintep and his Partner. “Abelin can’t stay here forever. I need to find a place for him and Lorella to live safely. Somewhere he can learn to use his powers without fear of humans and somewhere Lorella can live safe from lintep trying to use their powers on her the way all lintep in Illaria think it is their right to do.”

“Didn’t Master Bastienne say something about his town?” Rilla asked. “What was it called again?”

“Statera,” Kora nodded. “Yes, he did say Abelin would be welcome there, but he’s so young that I don’t know if he could properly earn his keep. I don’t really know how the town works.”

“Well, why don’t we find him and ask more about it?” Rilla suggested. “If you’re going to start a string of schools, you may as well find out about the first town you plan to do it in.”

Kora looked at Rilla thoughtfully. It was amazing how little anyone in their Paradise had noticed the girl. *Me included*, she admitted guiltily.

They found Bastienne in the library with Guiscard and Kynon, poring over a small book on the librarian's desk. The three old lintep did not look up as she and Rilla walked into the spacious room. A grated fireplace was lit, but it did little to warm the chill air down the long, dark aisles of bookshelves.

"May we interrupt?" Kora asked as they approached the men. As one, they jumped and looked over at them. "Master Bastienne, if we could have a moment of your time, we'd like to ask about Statera."

"Ah!" The old master's eyes lit up. "I'm always happy to talk about my home town. What would you like to know?"

Kora looked uncertainly towards Rilla.

"Where is it?" Rilla asked. "I mean, how far away is it?"

Kora suppressed a smile at the fact that Rilla already had a plan.

Bastienne nodded happily. "Kynon, I've got prettier company now. Don't wait for me. Guiscard, a map if you please."

Kora laughed at the look on her uncle's face as the old master linked arms with her and Rilla, leading them towards the chairs by the fireplace. Soon, they were settled with a map spread over Bastienne's lap. He pointed to a small dot, north-west of Illaria, towards the human town of Deuterfoss.

"This is where I grew up," he told them. "There were a few human settlements around Statera at the time. I can't say if they're still there. It's been a number of years now since I last returned."

"If I want to take Abelin and Lorella there, will you join us?" Kora asked hopefully.

Bastienne broke into a serene smile. "Nothing would make me happier. Do you plan to take them there soon?"

"Actually, that's the reason we came to see you," Kora told him. "I know you said they would be taken in by the people living there, but surely there must be a cost involved. I need to know that cost before we take them."

"The cost for the children would be negligible. You needn't worry about it," Bastienne reassured her. Kora wasn't convinced.

"Master Bastienne, I appreciate that two children might not cost much in the grand scheme of things, but I can't very well walk into a town I've never been to before and simply leave them there without providing for them. Besides, if I plan on creating a school of sorts for any other lintep children we find along the way, that can't be the solution for all of them."

"Why not?" asked Bastienne, rather obstinately. "It would be up to individual families if they want to take in the children. If they do, the children would be treated the same as any other family member.

"They would be taken care of and taught to use their skills until they are old enough to become an apprentice in whichever trade they choose. At that point, they will be earning their own keep and contributing to the society. So why can we not leave it at that?"

Kora wanted to protest, but each time she thought of something, he refuted it before the words were even out of her mouth. It couldn't possibly be that simple, could it?

"You're making a fairly big assumption that any of the families in Statera, and whatever other lintep community you know of, will be happy to take in a lintep child with a human Partner," Rilla pointed out. "What if things have changed since the last time you were there? What if they aren't as accommodating as you remember?"

I think Kora is right to be worried whether or not Abelin and his Partner will be accepted in your village.”

“Things may have changed a little over the years,” Bastienne conceded with a shrug. “But there is no chance that they have changed so much that an orphaned lintep *child* would not be welcome in my town.” Bastienne waved aside their unspoken protests. “No, no. You listen to me now. I know you both had bad experiences in that Paradise of yours and, Rilla, I realise the human villages you visited on your way here were less than accommodating, but they were rather unique circumstances. A group of four apprentice-aged children with a banwep leading them – it isn’t really an encouraging sight. Even in Statera, you may have met with a little opposition.

“However, every lintep settlement that I know of in the Outworld has always been very accommodating. We are an inclusive people. Have I not already told you that children are taught by the entire village rather than just their parents? If Abelin and Lorella are taken in, it won’t be just by the one family – it will be by the entire town.”

Kora shook her head, still unconvinced. “But we’re not talking about just Abelin and Lorella. Who knows how many lintep children we’ll find in the Paradises? It may be too much of a burden for any lintep settlement to take them all in.”

“Very well.” Bastienne braced his hands on his knees as he lifted himself from the chair. “If you are so very concerned about it, I will talk with my old friends in Statera and help you sort out the entire business. If you’re so keen to spend all your money, perhaps they’ll accept a new building or some food in exchange for taking in the children.”

Kora shook her head but smiled at the old master. “Thank you, Bastienne.” She tried to usher Rilla out of the room, but the girl walked towards Kynon and Guiscard before she had a chance.

“So, what made you jump when we came in?” she asked. “You wouldn’t be trying to hide anything from us, would you?”

Kora walked over, suddenly very interested in what Rilla had noticed. The three old lintep looked guiltily at each other.

“Rilla, child, don’t you have lessons to get to?” the librarian asked. “We wouldn’t want to make you late.”

“That’s not one of your usual research tomes, Guiscard.” Kora looked over curiously. “May I have a look?”

Guiscard moved to block her hand and obscured the small book of parchment into the folds of his robes, shaking his head. “Not this time, Kora.”

Kora was about to protest when Kynon interjected. “It would be best for everyone, if the two of you were on your way now. Rilla, I believe you have an arrangement with Nicodemo to spar with him any time you have a free lesson. Why don’t you head on down there?”

“Kora, this school idea of yours sounds like it will take a lot of organising. Pér would certainly be quite happy to help you with that task. I suggest you take a little walk into the city to find him.”

Kora caught Rilla’s eye as her niece looked to her for guidance. She shrugged helplessly.

“It looks like we both have prior engagements.”

Kora glanced back over her shoulder as they walked out of the library, but Guiscard did not make a move to retrieve the book. She lifted her chin defiantly and closed the door behind her.

## Chapter Five – Altercation

Lief drew his coat closer around his shoulders as he sat astride his mount. The twenty of them, including four of his own guard, had been riding for days to this supposed broken Paradise. Not for the first time, he wondered how anyone had convinced him that the rumours were worth following up.

*They aren't.* He shook his head. *I had to come along to stop these fools from starting a fight on my lands.*

“Chrislan, how much further?” he asked, irritably.

The burly blacksmith shrugged. “We should find it soon. We’ve already crossed the Pebble Stream. Hedgefall is two days’ ride from here.”

“What exactly are we looking for?” Talise inquired, strands of her long brown hair flying loose from her braid. “Hills, a forest, a cliff?”

Chrislan exchanged glances with the other men in their party.

“You don’t know, do you?” she asked with an incredulous laugh. “We’re travelling the Outworld, days from anywhere, looking for a broken Paradise, and you don’t even have a landmark to look for.”

“Well, now, let’s be reasonable.” Lief stepped in before another argument could break out. “There must be a forest nearby. No settlement, large or small, could survive this winter without fireplaces.”

“There are clusters of trees all over the place.” Talise gestured to the trees ahead of them. “Exactly which one should we head for?”

Lief ignored her sarcastic tone and scanned the horizon. There was a creek, winding its way down just a few hundred yards north of them. Every village also needed water.

“Let’s follow that creek.” He pointed in the distance. “Perhaps we’ll find the broken Paradise along it.”

The men grumbled agreement. Talise stared at him coldly. He avoided her glare. Why had he agreed to let her come along? He knew better than to have a lady along for this journey. With an inaudible sigh, he turned his horse towards the creek, leaving the others to follow as they would.

“Look, over there!” Karsyk cried out. “What’s that?”

Lief followed the sight along his arm to a large clump of trees. “It’s just a bunch of trees.”

“No, it’s not.” Talise rode up beside him. “There’s something behind them.”

Lief looked again. Perhaps there was a smudge of colour behind the trees, but more likely, it was their imagination.

“We approach,” he began, but before he could continue, Karsyk and Raleigh were already galloping towards the trees, “Fools! Follow me.”

Lief fumed at the rash apprentices as the rest of the company trotted after them. Their idiocy could cost lives. He was not about to allow everyone else to pay for their brashness. His horse pulled roughly on the reins, but Lief held them tightly. If he lost control of this situation ... he didn’t want to think about it.

\* \* \*

Shouts of alarm sounded over the Paradise. Brynt grabbed a pickaxe and ran towards them. The five lintep guards who remained to protect them followed him closely.

By the time he reached the intruders, the fight had started. Brynt saw two of his farmers had fallen and a third barely managing to keep the horsed attackers at bay. He joined the fray, furious beyond reason. This was the third time his Paradise had been invaded and the second time they had come to blows.

Trying not to injure the horses, Brynt swung his pickaxe at the man closest to him. He struck the man across the shoulder and threw him to the ground. Brynt held the fallen man there, pickaxe against his chest as three of the lintep joined him. They unhorsed the other man and dragged him to his comrade.

*Without touching him! How did they do that?* Brynt stared wild-eyed at the lintep.

“Over there!” one of lintep shouted, nodding behind him.

Brynt turned to find a whole group of horsemen riding towards them.

“You bastards!” one of the fallen intruders yelled, clutching at his injured shoulder.

“Shut yer mouth!” retorted the only uninjured farmer. “Go, Brynt. We got these ones.”

Brynt nodded at the lintep. Tiphaine stayed behind, Noémi and Rownyn flanked him as he prepared for the next wave of attack.

It never came.

The horsemen slowed their approach and stopped over twenty yards away. One of them, presumably the leader, dismounted and held his reins out to a woman before approaching on foot.

Brynt held his pickaxe at the ready. He could feel the lintep on either side of him tense at the man’s approach, but they stood their ground.

“Get them, Leif!” came an angry voice from behind Brynt.

The blond man raised an eyebrow as he looked around Brynt to the man on the ground. He turned his attention back to Brynt with a shake of his head.

“I apologise for these two oafs,” he said from a short distance away. “I am Leif, Duke of Deuterfoss. We heard about your broken Paradise and came to learn more about it.

“Unfortunately, some of my subjects are rather hot-headed. They’ve taken it into their heads that the lintep have invaded and destroyed your Paradise and that they need to save you. I assume that isn’t exactly the whole truth, as you appear to have lintep at your beck and call.”

“Duke Leif, is it?” Brynt asked, ignoring the comment about the lintep. “I’ve never heard of Deuterfoss. What business of yours is our broken Paradise?”

The duke stared at him dumbly. Brynt shifted his weight in agitation.

“Well, whatever your reason for coming here, I don’t appreciate your men attacking my farmers.”

The horsewoman approached slowly, stopping behind the duke. The blond man looked up at her and found his voice.

“We did not condone them galloping ahead of us. Karsyk is a well-known for his impetuous attitude. On my honour, we did not come to attack you,” the duke told him.

Brynt finally lowered his weapon, though he noticed Noémi and Rownyn did not do likewise.

“My name is Brynt. I’m the ... Paradise leader.” The title still did not sit right with him. How could he presume to lead these people? “If your boys hand over their weapons, our healers will patch them up.”

“Lord Brynt, if you would allow me?” the lintep on his right spoke.

“Allow you to what, Rownyn?” Brynt asked, not comprehending him.

“I may not be the most skilled healer in Illaria, but I did learn under Mistress Kayte. I can easily heal those wounds, if they’ll let me.”

“Don’t you touch me!” A petrified man screamed behind him. “You keep those lintep away from me!”

The Duke of Deuterfoss sighed loudly. “Please excuse Karsyk. It would appear he does not trust your lintep.”

“They aren’t *my* lintep.” Brynt bristled at the comment. “If your boy is too stupid to let a gifted lintep heal him, he’ll have to make do with whatever our Paradise healers can do for him.

“Noémi, take their weapons and bring that one to the healers. Rownyn, can you heal the other one here? And take a look at my lads too.”

“Certainly, Lord Brynt,” Rownyn replied.

Noémi and Tiphaine took weapons from all the Deuterfoss riders and escorted them into the Paradise. Only the woman and the duke stayed behind.

Rownyn took a quick look at the farmers, but they brushed aside his attempts to help them. Brynt saw they only sported bruises.

“I really do apologise if Karsyk and Raleigh startled you. That was never our intention,” the duke said as he held out his hand. Brynt swallowed a sharp retort and shook the outstretched hand instead.

“No harm done. To my men, anyway,” he replied with a huff, before turning his attention to the healer.

Rownyn was on his knees beside the other injured man, Raleigh as the duke had called him, a hand laid over his ribs. He remained motionless for long, agonising heartbeats. Finally, with a sigh, Rownyn sat back on his haunches.

“It is done,” he said wearily.

Brynt looked at him closely. “At what cost to you, Rownyn?”

Rownyn waved away his concern. “I simply need to rest now. If you’ll excuse me.” He braced his hands against his knees to stand and headed back towards the Paradise.

Raleigh got to his feet and stared after the lintep. Brynt watched as he pressed his fingers against his ribs, then roughly pulled his shirt up to inspect further. “He ... my ... ribs were broken. At least two of them! He ...”

“He’s not the monster you thought he was?” asked Brynt, sarcastically. “You’ll be lucky if he ever says the same about you.”

The boy had the good sense to look ashamed. Brynt shook his head and turned towards the Paradise.

“Come on, then. It’s getting late and we’ll need to find you a room for the night.”

\* \* \*

It took her two days. Two entire days to have any success. Not that Lishe called it

much of a success to pull one tiny portion of power out of the Paradise boundary. She'd had less trouble taking more power from living lintep. Lishe breathed in the extra sliver from the Paradise, letting it settle inside her, as she placed her hand on the boundary and tried, once again, to take more.

*At least it's a start*, she thought as the new power was encased by the others. They all needed that at first – to be coddled by other powers, until they felt at home within her. If she concentrated, she could still tell each power apart from the other.

She had been harvesting power from other lintep for years now. It had been so easy to take power from the first lintep. Just like when she, Nyssa and Kora had experimented as students, she had covered him entirely with her power and tightened her grip on his, slowly pulling it out of him. It had been much easier than she had thought possible.

Lishe had found the man in a little town near Illaria. She had been surprised to realise it was a lintep settlement. Lishe had never heard of other lintep settlements when she was in Illaria. She remembered speaking to the old man for an entire afternoon. He had nostalgically told her of his much younger days when he'd had more power. He had boasted about being the only one left from a large group of them who had helped Princess Ophélie create her little Paradises.

Lishe had heard of Ophélie before. Everyone in Illaria knew of her. But this was the first she'd heard of the Paradises. The more she learnt about them, the more she wanted to find them, to somehow steal the power that had created them. Then she could return to Illaria to deal with her awful excuse for a father. Not to mention, she could become a powerful mistress. In fact, they could create a new position for her as Head Mistress. She smiled at the memory and the hope of becoming a mistress.

That first power had struggled for weeks to be free of her, but she had tamed it. After that, it had become second nature. She would feel ... empty without all this extra power inside her.

## Chapter Six – Ophélie’s journal

Guiscard waited until the girls had left before retrieving the book again. After reading the research Shuut and the twins had handed in, he and Aurelius had made discreet inquiries about where they had found that book.

He had cursed a hundred different ways when he’d found it. It was the same one Kora had shown him and Lukys all those years ago. He was certain of it even though he hadn’t had a chance to look at it properly back then.

It looked like a journal of sorts. Ophélie had documented everything about the Paradises, but pages had been torn from the front. He couldn’t remember what they were. Perhaps they had detailed exactly how the Paradises had been created. It made little difference now – they’d figured that part out with Bastienne’s confirmation.

What Guiscard found most interesting about the journal was that it named the cities and villages where Ophélie had gathered her volunteers.

“And you say all of these are lintep settlements?” he asked Bastienne. The old master shrugged.

“I’ve heard of some of them, but only the ones nearest Statera. I wouldn’t be surprised if she created Paradises near each of these groups of settlements.”

“Do you have a detailed map of the Outworld?” Kynon asked.

“Not very recent, no,” the librarian admitted. “Occasionally Eliséo will add to what I have, but it has been many years since it was updated. Wait here.”

He walked purposefully to his own private desk, unlocked the drawer and sifted through a pile of parchment until he found what he was looking for.

“Here,” he said as he laid the sheets out on the sunlit desk. “These are my most recent maps. Bastienne, can you point out where any of these settlements are?”

The old master leaned over the desk, tracing his finger from Illaria along Pebble Stream and landed on the far side.

“This is Statera.” He tapped his finger over an empty place on the map. “Along here, you have Albercott, Garstiel and Bexent. Back when I was living there, we often traded supplies with those villages. Sometimes a young lintep could even move to find an apprenticeship which suited them more.

“I know Ophélie canvassed the area for lintep willing to help create her Paradises. We were among the first. She didn’t yet know how many it would take to safely create them.

“She was young and idealistic, trying to follow in her sister’s footsteps. Her idea of the Paradises was so idyllic, she managed to convince quite a few of my father’s friends to join her. Not wanting to be left out, he joined them too.” Bastienne shook his head. “He came back to us a broken man, with so little power it was barely worth mentioning. It was only then that I came to Illaria. Ophélie promised she would give me the best magical education possible.”

“And do you think she did?” asked Kynon. “You seemed quite unimpressed with many of the older teachers when I spoke with you the other day.”

“Well, she certainly assigned the best teachers currently in Illaria to me,” Bastienne admitted, twisting his mouth to one side. “But it was on my regular visits back to Statera that I explored the opposite side of my power. *That* is still not



being taught here, or so it would seem. It is something that should be rectified.”

“And so it shall be,” Guiscard assured him. “But today is not the day to make those changes. Do you know of any other settlements, lintep or otherwise, missing from this map?”

They spent the greater part of the afternoon, plotting out the missing towns and villages on Guiscard’s map. Bastienne revealed what he knew of them from his time in the Outworld – which were lintep, which were human, and which were a surprisingly peaceful mixture of both. Those were few and far between and, as Bastienne pointed out, it could easily have changed over time.

“We need Kora’s map,” Guiscard muttered. “She told us that she found eleven Paradises. We need to see where they are and if it’s at all possible that she missed some. This map may help us find them all.”

“You shouldn’t have sent her away so quickly,” Bastienne admonished him. “I’ll bring her back.”

“She’ll be with Pér in the city by now.” Kynon got to his feet. “I’ll show you the way.”

\* \* \*

Kora should have been annoyed at her veiled dismissal, but her thoughts kept drifting back to her father. She knew she had to keep herself busy and it certainly would be best to keep Rilla occupied. With an empty reassurance that things would work out, she sent Rilla on her way to Nicodemo for a lesson before wandering over the bridge towards the marketplace. It was early afternoon. Pér would still be at his stall. Perhaps he would not mind the company if she stayed with him awhile.

These days, she felt at a bit of a loss for what to do. She had her map, of course, but that only gave her so much of a role to play in the destruction of the Paradises. The only task she had, essentially given to her by Lukys, was the creation of schools for any lintep children they found once the Paradises had been destroyed.

“Lost in thought again, I see,” the familiar voice called out to her as she passed by. Kora smiled and turned back towards Pér. “You would have passed me by completely, wouldn’t you?”

“I would have come back, eventually,” she told him, leaning in for a brief kiss.

“I forgive you,” Pér whispered in her ear as she pulled away from him. “What brings you out into town, aside from me, of course?”

“Actually, I did come to find you,” she admitted, her cheeks colouring at his smile. “I wanted to talk to you about the schools. I have a few ideas, but don’t want to start planning anything without you.”

Pér looked at her for a moment. She clenched her jaw tight.

“We can talk about schools if you like. But only after you tell me what’s happened.”

“No. There’s nothing that can be done about it and telling you will only make you worry as well.”

“Kora, I will worry whether you tell me or not. So out with it.”

Kora looked around. There were a lot of people in the market square. If she

told Pér what had happened and was overheard, it would likely cause widespread panic.

*Father is in danger, in the Lesa Mountains. There is nothing we can do until the crystal dragons arrive to help us find him.*

She expected Pér to cry out in alarm, to alert people somehow. He did not. His only reaction was to envelop her in an embrace just long enough for Kora to pull herself together.

“Stay with me a while,” he told her. “I’ll close the stall in a bit, and we can go back to my place. I’ve written down a few school ideas for you to look at. Maybe we can go over them with Plyke later tonight?”

Kora knew he wasn’t dismissing her father’s predicament and appreciated that he was willing to help distract her. She could feel his hope at the question. He’d spent too little time with Plyke over the past few days. It was difficult with the two of them living in different parts of Illaria, Plyke with his lessons, Pér with his stall. “Don’t fuss over it, Kora,” he told her. “We don’t need to change anything right now. I’m happy with the time I spend with my son. You’ve raised a fine young man.”

It was a wonder she felt so comfortable with Pér. He could read her fears as easily as she could read a book, yet she never felt the least bit intimidated or violated by it. Somehow, it was completely different to when lintepe tried to actively read her thoughts or change her feelings by touching her skin.

“I’ll stay with you.” She pulled up a stool and sat behind him.

Later that afternoon, as Kora helped Pér pack away the wares, she saw Bastienne and Kynon walking through the markets. She raised an eyebrow as they approached.

“Are you looking for something in particular?” she asked them coldly.

“We’re looking for you, Kora. Actually,” Bastienne answered, unflinchingly, “we need your help”. He looked Pér up and down. “Pér, I presume? He may join us if you so wish.”

As Pér frowned, Kora realised he hadn’t been introduced to the retired master yet.

“Pér, meet Master Bastienne. He was an advanced teacher when Nyssa and I were just girls. You wouldn’t have had him.”

Kora and her father had quickly made Pér aware of the fact that Lukys would put him to good use if he ever found out how powerful the minstrel was. It had stopped him from showing his true power in lessons and prevented him from taking advanced classes.

“An honour to meet you, Master Bastienne.” Pér extended a hand out to the old lintepe. As they shook hands, Bastienne’s eyes lit up.

“No, indeed, the honour is all mine.”

Kora looked between the two of them suspiciously. Was there any way that Bastienne had managed to gauge Pér’s true potential from a single touch? Would she and her loved ones ever be free from the way lintepe presumed to meddle with them?

“Calm yourself,” Pér whispered as he linked hands with her. Together, they joined her uncle and the master on the path back to the castle. “It’s amazing how you survived in a Paradise so long without their lintepe leader realising you were

one too.”

“Perhaps he did realise,” Kora mused. “Perhaps that’s the reason he never did anything to me. Especially if he knew he wasn’t as powerful as me.”

“There’s a lot of ‘perhaps’ in those thoughts.” Pér glanced sideways at her. “Do you really think he knew?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know what to think anymore. He was clearly petrified of anyone realising he was a lintep. To disguise his race, he ostracised his own daughter from almost everyone.”

“Almost?” Pér asked in astonishment. “There was someone willing to stand up to him?”

Kora smiled sadly. “An old healer, Rhanya. He had a soft spot for Rilla. The two of them could be found together almost every free moment they had. That was when you could see Rilla at all. I didn’t realise until the day they left that she had been wrapping power around herself, making her virtually invisible, for most of her life. It was only then that I realised Erton must be a lintep.” She shook her head angrily. “I must have done something, said something to make him understand I knew. That was when his men tried to attack me. I fled in terror, so thankful that Plyke had already escaped.”

She fought back tears. Pér disentangled his fingers from hers and draped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to him. He kissed her hair lightly.

“Plyke is safe. *You* are safe,” he told her firmly, as though saying the words made it true. “He can’t hurt you now and you *never* have to see him again. You never need to live in a Paradise again. *You* are the reason we can destroy those monstrosities.”

Kora breathed in his scent, savouring the closeness. *How could I have abandoned you? Not once, but twice!* He held her closer, letting a wave of calm and reassurance wash over her. He always knew exactly what she needed, and she loved him for that.

As they followed the older lintep into the castle, Kora clung closely to Pér. She should have felt safe, secure and confident in this environment, but the earlier dismissal paired with the sudden request to return rattled her.

When they entered the library, Guiscard was waiting for them. Pieces of parchment were scattered over his desk. Kora walked towards him curiously as he held out a small book to her. She presumed it was the one he’d hidden away from her and Rilla earlier that afternoon.

She took it and stared at it in disbelief. It was Ophélie’s journal – the one she had torn the map out of before heading into the Outworld. She shook her head in annoyance. She should have taken the entire book with her, but that would have been too dangerous if it had slipped into the wrong hands.

“Where did you find this?” she asked emotionlessly. “I thought I hid it well enough that it would stay hidden.”

“You?” asked Guiscard incredulously. “*You* hid it! Aurelius had to figure out what this book told us all by himself. If you hadn’t hidden it, we’d have known more about the Paradises before you went out to destroy that first one.”

Kora stared at him, her face a blank mask. “How did you find it?”

“If you must know, Shuut and the twins discovered it while researching the Outworld. I don’t know how they came across it in the first place, but they left it in a much easier place for us to later discover.”

“This book has ... important information. It’s not for the casual reader. I think it should stay with me from now onwards.” She held it close to her chest, immediately noticing Guiscard bristling with anger.

“*That book* will remain in this library.” A light sparked in his eyes. He shook his head. “It was you, wasn’t it? You’re the one who tore something out of the front. What was it?”

Kora stood stiff-backed. “What did you need me for? You sent Uncle Kynon and Master Bastienne out to find me. Surely it wasn’t simply to show me this book? What do you want?”

Bastienne stepped in. “There are a number of settlements listed in that book. We’ve plotted some of them on Guiscard’s map and wondered if you passed any of the others in the Outworld. We have a theory that the Paradises are all located near them.”

“Why do you think that?” Kora asked, as she leafed through the pages to find the list of settlements.

“Because I’m fairly certain the Paradise my father helped create is located near Statera. It only stands to reason that the same is true for most, if not all, of these settlements.

“I know Ophélie asked for help from more than one village at a time, so I would assume there is one Paradise per cluster of lintep villages. With your help, we were hoping to see if the settlements are near the Paradises you’ve found or if there may be more which escaped your notice.”

Kora listened intently as the old master explained his theory. It was entirely possible that she had missed Paradises. After all, she only had an incomplete map to work with.

Reluctantly, she placed Ophélie’s journal back on the desk and retrieved the map from her sash belt, placing it beside Guiscard’s own maps, ignoring the old librarian’s indignant gasp at the rough edge along the top.

She looked over the settlements Bastienne had plotted, compared them with the names in Ophélie’s book and pointed out a few more that she’d passed by in her travels.

“How do you know they’re all lintep settlements?” she asked. “I don’t recall noticing that when I passed through them.”

“I did,” Pér replied quietly, at her side.

She frowned. “You?”

“You forget, Kora, I spent years trying to find you in the Outworld. I stayed in each town along the way, almost certainly longer than you did, trying to find any whisper of information to lead me to you. It wasn’t difficult to tell that most of the people living in these places were lintep.”

Kora refused to feel guilty about that, yet again. She looked away from Pér in time to see Bastienne’s curious glance.

“The lintep in these settlements are usually quite guarded about their skills with outsiders. Many humans interact with them on a seasonal basis because they don’t know they are dealing with lintep. They must have trusted you a great deal for them to have shown you their skills.”

Pér shrugged. “I’m a friendly person. Besides, people tend to trust a minstrel more than any other lone traveller.”

“Hmmm.” Bastienne raised an eyebrow but said nothing more about it. “So back

to the maps then. Did you find Paradises around these groups of settlements?”

Kora tried to ignore Bastienne’s comments. Even though Pér’s power had been exposed when she revealed he was Plyke’s father, she still wanted to keep him out of Lukys’ clutches. She didn’t want everyone she loved to be forced to serve Illaria in whatever way suited their king.

She turned her attention to the maps before her and compared the two. “It does look like the Paradises I found are near these settlements. You can add Helsford, Hythebent and Baneforth around here. Burnkien, Dalreath and Bournebery are here, here and ... here.” She paused, racking her brain to remember her journey from over sixteen years ago. “Danverness, Snowdrift, Hazelston and Rousting are here, on the other side of the Lesa Mountains.

“I mapped out all of the Paradises I passed through. I didn’t find any near Gillenhop, Steyden, Warridean and Estilcrag. They’re above the Crystal Falls. Is it possible they helped with one of the other Paradises?”

The three old lintep exchanged glances. Guiscard shook his head. “I don’t think so. Those four are too far away from the other Paradises to have helped with any of those. How far did you travel around the Crystal Falls?”

Kora shrugged. “I didn’t want to travel too close to the Drakos Mountains, so I stayed on the east side. It was difficult enough finding a way up the cliff to get to the lake. Perhaps Ophélie didn’t actually recruit anyone from those settlements. You only know for certain that the lintep from Statera worked with the lintep from Albercott and Garstiel on this project. It’s not necessarily true that the others worked together in groups or that Ophélie was successful in finding people to help create her Paradises everywhere she went.”

“This does pose a difficult question, however.” Bastienne tapped his fingers together in front of his face. “Even if we destroy each of the Paradises you found, how do we know we’ve destroyed them all? Is this how Rilla, the child from Paradise, is to fulfil the prophecy? Is she somehow the key to finding the rest of them and destroying them all in one fell swoop?”

“It always falls back to that poor girl,” Kora said angrily. “Why must everything fall on her shoulders when we don’t even know if she really is the prophecy child?”

“Kora, be reasonable.” Kynon went to place his hand on her bare arm, but she flinched away. He shook his head as he pulled his hand back. “So, *that’s* where Rilla got it from then. You taught her not to let anyone touch her.”

“Rilla didn’t learn anything from me,” Kora retorted hotly. “Her father made sure that even *I* didn’t attempt to speak with her. Whatever she learnt was on her own or from the Paradise healer. But I’m glad that is one thing she understood as soon as she arrived. That poor girl has been through so much – she doesn’t need anyone manipulating her feelings.”

“Whatever your own thoughts on the matter, Kora,” Guiscard spoke softly, “Rilla is named in the prophecy. She must be involved somehow.”

“Then explain to me how she has a crystal heart.” Kora stood her ground. “And don’t give me any nonsense about being raised among crystal dragons for the first few years of her life. She doesn’t remember any of that, so they clearly didn’t leave enough of an impression to give her even a metaphorical crystal heart.”

Kynon shuffled his feet and avoided her gaze. She, Kynon and Guiscard were probably the only ones to know that a crystal heart was indeed involved, but it

still didn't explain how that heart was meant to beat in Rilla, or anyone else's, heart.

"Let's leave that part for now." Kynon brushed the issue aside. "What about the 'song which will destroy that which was created'? If we're still assuming the prophecy child is a lintep, even if not Rilla, could we assume the song is the lintep whistle?"

"I've always found an actual song can be more powerful than the whistle, if one performs it correctly," Pér told them. "Just ask King Lukys why he refuses to allow me to play in the castle."

Kora shook her head at Pér. She saw the way Bastienne looked at him and didn't want him giving away all his secrets. Bastienne narrowed his eyes.

"I would love for you to give me a demonstration some time," Bastienne told the minstrel.

Kora's mind swirled with thoughts that she fought to keep hidden. *What would happen if someone with Pér's power used Anya's crystal heart to sing, the way that only he knows how? Could Pér teach them to do it?*

## Chapter Seven – Nicodemo’s dilemma

Rilla walked purposefully with her swords to the guardhouse. If she couldn’t do anything else today, then she would take all her fears and frustration to the sparring ground. Perhaps Plyke and Shuut could join her after their lesson. As she neared the sparring ground, she saw a company of guards working with their weapons. They didn’t give her a second glance as she sat to watch them.

Nicodemo caught her eye as he shouted out orders to his guards. He nodded to her but indicated that she should remain where she was. In anticipation of joining them, Rilla crossed her arms and began to study the movements. Before too long, she was standing, well away from the others, copying their routine. A few of the guards finally noticed her and began laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Nicodemo asked sternly. “Have you never seen a child learning to fight before?”

“A child, yes. A Paradisian girl, no,” one replied with a laugh. “She couldn’t learn to fight if you spent all your time with her.”

“An interesting prediction, Ramiro,” Nicodemo said as he motioned Rilla over. She walked towards them with a cold calm settling inside her. “Perhaps you can show us how little skill she has.”

Ramiro immediately stopped laughing and looked angrily at Rilla. “*Me?* Why should I?”

“Are you scared?” she asked him sweetly.

“Only that I’ll hurt you, little girl,” he answered with a shrug. “Go get a practise sword.”

Rilla looked questioningly at Nicodemo. She much preferred using her own weapons, but when he shook his head at her, she placed her own swords on a small bench and went to find a wooden one instead.

She felt Ramiro’s stare on her the entire time. She studiously ignored him and used the breathing technique Master Bastienne had given her. It helped to focus her thoughts on the wooden sword and the coming bout with Ramiro. By the time she’d settled herself across from him, she was completely calm and ready to spar.

“Right, in your places.”

Rilla held her sword with both hands. It wasn’t her preferred method of fighting, but that was what the rest of them were doing and she would certainly find herself at a disadvantage using one hand, even if this man wasn’t more than twice her size.

“Attack and defend, go!”

Ramiro instantly attacked Rilla. She held up her sword to block his blow. Her shoulder exploded in pain as his sword jarred on hers. She stepped back out of his range and pulled her power out of her wall, wrapping it around her sword, making it one with her.

She took a steadying breath before allowing Ramiro to close the distance between them. He struck out again but, this time, she ducked under his sword and hit his legs with her own sword. He cried out in pain and cursed her angrily. There would be no holding back now. The furious guard gave her no room to

manoeuvre, no time to think. Everything was on instinct. She blocked where she needed to, using her power to absorb the shock, attacked where she could, making sure to make the few blows count.

“Halt!” Nicodemo called out. Rilla lowered her sword but kept a tight hold on it. She was in a battle fury and did not trust anyone, least of all the man who had just been trying to knock out her brains.

“So, Ramiro, you still think she’s not worth training?”

Ramiro looked at him angrily. “You *knew*.”

“I didn’t the first time, but I still kept up my guard, which is more than you did. She should never have been able to strike you so early on. You underestimated her, gave her an opening and she took it. I daresay you’ll both be sporting dark bruises by nightfall.”

Rilla tried to hide her proud smirk as the guard glared at her angrily.

“Rilla, would you like to continue with the one sword?” She shook her head.

“Go get another one, then. You can spar with Séverin. He’ll be a better partner for you. Just mind you actually listen if he tries to give you pointers.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him but nodded nonetheless as she went to retrieve another sword from the stash beside the guardhouse.

Séverin was waiting for her when she returned. His auburn hair glinted a fiery red in the sunlight. Rilla hadn’t seen many lintep with red hair. She wondered if they were related in any way, but quickly banished the thought as he held his sword at the ready.

“Again,” Nicodemo called out. “Take it in turns. Five attacks each and then you swap. Allow your partner to practise. You can parry, but if you are the defender, you are not to attack.”

“You go first,” Rilla told Séverin with a smile. “I need to size you up first.”

He grinned and caught her off guard. Her side throbbed in pain.

“Don’t let a pretty face like mine catch you off guard,” he warned her.

Rilla stuck out her tongue at him as he struck out again. This time she caught his blade between her two and stopped the blow before it hit her. He nodded appreciatively at her skill, stepping back out of her range again. Rilla stood on guard, watching his every move, trying to sense when the next blow would come. Without thinking about it, her power swirled all around her, flowing out to where Séverin stood, taking in everything about him. Before he’d moved an inch, she swivelled out of the way, but held herself back from attacking him.

That was his third attack. Two more to go. Rilla focused on her power, on his stance, his sword. She was so attuned to his every move that his next two attacks fell well short of hitting their mark.

“How are you doing that?” he asked. “You seem to know where I’m going to move before I do.”

Rilla shrugged. She was fairly certain this was another one of the ways she used her power differently to everyone else. King Lukys, or even Nicodemo, might not appreciate her divulging this information to all the guards.

It was her turn next. Rilla once more allowed her power to flow down her arms and around her swords, through the air surrounding her and over to Séverin. She had to think differently, now that she was attacking. But her power still afforded her an extra edge to the battle.

As she began each attack, she instantly felt how he was going to block or evade



her blow and readjusted to counteract that. Four times out of five, she hit her mark. Séverin was breathing hard by the time they were done.

“Halt!” cried out Nicodemo. “Everyone take a quick breath before we start again. Séverin, Rilla, a word.”

Rilla kept her distance from her sparring partner as they approached the head guard. She knew what was coming. Would it really matter if she told them what she was doing? Surely that would only make them better guards.

“You’re doing something different to the last time I saw you,” he stared at her closely. “You might have gotten the better of Ramiro quite easily, and to be honest, I almost expected you to. Séverin is another matter altogether. He’s one of my best guards. Well trained and perceptive.

“You not only managed to evade and block some of his blows but landed nearly all of yours on him. Even *I* find it difficult to do that. So exactly what were you doing to achieve that, young lady?”

Rilla weighed up her options. Isis had forced her to tell her entire class how she experimented with fire and they were only students. Disciplined guards should take the news more calmly and work to implement the changes if they agreed to do them.

“I used my power to help me,” Rilla finally admitted. “I let it surround my swords and then sent it out to help me.”

“Exactly how did sending it out help you?” Nicodemo asked.

Rilla saw Séverin smile.

“She let her power be her eyes. That’s how she knew when I was going to attack just as I started and how she could evade my defences without a second thought.”

Nicodemo stared at her in surprise. “How did you even know to do that?”

“Did *you* know?” she asked, equally surprised.

“Well, of course, but I never expected anyone as young and, pardon me but, inexperienced to have figured it out,” he told her honestly.

“But, if you know how to do that, why haven’t you taught your guards to do it?” she asked, confused. “I would have thought that would be one of the best ways to train them.”

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Nicodemo evaded. “How did you know to do that? Who taught you?”

“No one taught me,” Rilla replied, instantly becoming defensive. “It just happened one day, and I can make it happen any time now, barely without a thought.”

“Well, that’s a first.” He cocked an eyebrow at her. “As for *your* question. I do teach my guards to do that, once I am satisfied that they can fight well enough without their power to save their lives. If you want a fair fight with Séverin, we can ask him to use his power or you can stop using yours. It’s your choice.”

Rilla stared, open mouthed, at his statement. It hadn’t occurred to her that they might think she was cheating if she used her power. She simply knew that she was at a disadvantage age, height and power-wise. There was no way she would be able to defend herself against them without using her power.

“And I see by the look on your face that you’ve just understood exactly why I insist they learn to fight without power first. You should always assume your opponent might have as much skill with magic as you do, so if you can’t beat them in a fair fight, you almost certainly won’t with magic, unless you are somehow

much more skilled than they are, making up for your lack of experience and skill with your actual weapon.”

Rilla turned to Séverin, crestfallen. “I’m sorry,” she told him quietly. “I didn’t realise I was cheating. Would you spar with me again? I won’t use my powers this time.”

Séverin smiled casually. “But of course. Nicodemo is sometimes a harsh weapons master, but he has his reasons. I wouldn’t ever want to be caught out in a fight to realise I wasn’t skilled enough with my weapon alone to survive.”

Rilla nodded and followed him back to the sparring ground. The other guards had gathered once again and Nicodemo called a start to the training.

“First group to my right. Second group to my left. First group, attack with purpose. Second group, allow them to attack and block if you see it coming. Only attack if they leave themselves wide open. Then swap.”

Rilla was in the first group. She stood, swords at the ready, and watched Séverin. He calmly studied her every move.

*Right, no magic*, she thought as she attacked. Séverin managed to block her blow, but only just. Rilla smiled smugly, but immediately regretted it as Séverin took the opportunity to attack her. She blocked the blow, but he hit with enough force to plough through and make her hit herself with her own blades.

“I’m stronger than you,” he told her. “No matter how well you block, I’m going to injure you sooner or later if you don’t change your strategy.”

Rilla grimaced and attacked again, spinning around to miss his wooden sword and struck him across his back instead. This time, she didn’t take the time to revel in her victory. She was immediately on her guard, watching his every move. She anticipated when he would strike and moved so that he missed her completely. Unfortunately, she tripped over her own feet and fell flat on her face.

“And you’re dead.”

Rilla winced at the familiar mocking tone behind her. Shuut was lazily leaning back against the guardhouse, one foot against the wall, staring at Rilla with a look of disappointment. “I taught you better than that.”

“You must be Shuut,” Nicodemo said as he walked towards her. “You’re more than welcome to join in. Rilla certainly attributes most of her current skill to you.”

“Not sure I’m happy about that if *this* is how she’s performing.”

“Then perhaps you should show us how it’s meant to be done,” Ramiro smirked. “Grab a training sword and come on over.”

Rilla dusted herself off as Shuut lazily pushed herself off the wall. Her sister strode over to the challenging lintep, looked him up and down with a raised eyebrow then strolled over to the wooden swords. She sifted through them, weighing a few in her hands before selecting one.

“Let’s give these two some space,” Nicodemo told the others. Rilla stood back with Séverin, fervently hoping that Shuut wouldn’t permanently damage the cocky guard, even if he deserved it.

Ramiro had barely lifted his sword before Shuut attacked him. To anyone but those who knew her, it would have looked like she hadn’t been prepared before he moved. Rilla thought that’s what it must have looked like to all the guards. Rilla drew her breath in sharply, was momentarily distracted by Séverin who nudged her arm as he looked down at her, then she turned back to find Ramiro on his back.

“How did she do that?” he half whispered.

Rilla shrugged. “She’s a trained banwep. How do you suppose she survived so long in the Outworld if she *couldn’t* do that?”

Ramiro growled as he got to his feet. He lunged, but before the sword was fully extended, Shuut had already moved away and behind him, striking him across his back. He turned in a fit of rage only to take a blow to the stomach and another swipe across his legs, laying him flat on the ground once more.

Shuut stood over him, wooden sword at his throat. “I just killed you, twice.” She looked over at Rilla and shrugged. “Guess my little sister isn’t so bad after all. At least she managed to avoid getting hit, but Rilla, do me a favour and learn not to trip over your own feet.”

Rilla shook her head and smiled. “One bout for old times’ sake?”

Shuut nodded and walked well away from the prostrate lintep. Behind them, Rilla could hear Nicodemo reprimanding Ramiro for underestimating his opponent, yet again.

“It doesn’t matter if she’s smaller than you, not as powerful as you or even not a full lintep. As you can see, *anyone* is capable of flooring you if you let them. Ramiro, I want double training sessions from you for the rest of this week. If Shuut ever deigns to spar with you again, I expect you to be better prepared. That goes for all of you.”

Rilla joined her sister in a free area of the sparring ground. She readied her swords and they sparred like they had in the Outworld so many times. It wasn’t really any different now that they were in the relative safety of Illaria. Shuut still fought as though it were a fight to the death in the Outworld. What was the point of practising if you didn’t take it seriously? It was just like the hunting game she’d had them play in the forest all those months ago. The boys had seen it as only a game, but Rilla had understood that Shuut was trying to teach them how to survive the only way she knew how.

Sweat was dripping down her back by the time Rilla begged for a halt. “I know you could keep going forever, but I’m already going to be half covered in bruises.”

“Yes, you were a bit sloppy today,” Shuut replied, looking at her closely. “Are you okay?”

“Of *course* not,” Rilla answered between gritted teeth. She saw a flash of understanding in Shuut’s eyes. Distractions could only help so much.

“Right, I guess we’ll stop now.”

“I’d like a turn, if you’re still up for it.”

Rilla turned to see Séverin, who had obviously been watching them. She looked over her shoulder at her sister, who didn’t seem surprised by the guard’s request. The other guards had started to pack their gear away, looking happy to be done for the day, though she noticed Nicodemo making a show of mending a leather tunic so that he could watch their bout.

“Why not?” Shuut replied offhandedly. “I need someone to cool down with.”

Séverin flashed Shuut a grin as Rilla shook her head and walked over to Nicodemo. She put her wooden swords away, then settled down next to the weapons master to watch the show.

Shuut and Séverin circled around warily, neither lashing out at the other. Eventually, Shuut fainted and immediately backed away, watching to see how the lintep would react. He barely flinched, drawing her in closer once more. They

danced around the sparring ground, neither willing to be the first to start their bout in earnest.

“Stop wasting time!” Nicodemo yelled out.

Séverin shook his head, but began pressing Shuut, forcing her to show her defences. Rilla held her breath as her sister leaped forward. It looked like Séverin’s sword would hit her across the ribs, but somehow, it didn’t. Shuut twisted, mid-leap, to land on his off-side. She struck him across the ribs while he was still lunging forward to attack the space she’d left empty.

He turned and backed away from her, a mischievous glint in his eye. Rilla knew he wouldn’t make the same mistake again. She wondered if he’d done that purposely to force Shuut to show some of her moves. He had, after all, managed to best Rilla a few times and, though she wasn’t a trained banwep, she was still better than at least some of the guards here.

So fast she almost missed it, Séverin darted in to attack Shuut, fainted to the right and landed to the left, forcing Shuut to change her direction too quickly. He struck her lightly on the shoulder and pulled away before she had a chance to retaliate.

Shuut showed no surprise, anger or fear. Rilla knew that for her sister, this was not just another bout, it was a fight to the death. She’d dealt him a savage blow, probably cracking some ribs and leaving a massive gash in his side. He’d given her a shallow wound in the shoulder. She was still winning, but if she didn’t stop him soon, even light wounds would slow her down.

Rilla watched in fascination as they dealt blow after blow, as though they were trading pleasantries. Eventually, Shuut went to strike at his neck, stopping a finger’s width short.

“You’re dead,” she panted before moving out of his range.

“I am,” Séverin conceded, “but you’re gravely injured and won’t last out the day without a healer.”

Shuut laughed. “Good thing my sister is one of the best healers I’ve ever met. Come on, Rilla, let’s wash up before dinner.”

“Will I see you again?” Séverin called out to Shuut as she replaced her wooden sword with the rest of the gear and began walking away. Shuut looked casually over her shoulder and shrugged with a smile. Rilla thought she saw a light blush on her cheeks. She thought it hilarious that Shuut appeared to have won herself an admirer after thoroughly thrashing him.

## Chapter Eight – Loreli's scouts

Loreli flew slowly over the Lesa Mountains. She had been unimpressed to learn that she would be sent to spy for the karliki, but the task had its benefits. It had allowed her to train a flight of young clear crystal dragons. She and Grolldor had shared the training, flying in shifts with the younger ones.

Grolldor taught them how to blend into the sky and make the most of their clear bodies. Loreli showed them how to search for things on the ground – a column of smoke from a campfire, a disturbance in water, leaves rustling too quickly or out of time with the wind. They were all giveaway signs that something was amiss below.

They'd been searching the Lesa Mountains for weeks without the slightest sign of the rebel karliki. She was beginning to wonder if the rebels even existed. Perhaps they only moved under the cover of night, which would make it more difficult to spot them. Loreli looked at the horizon. They wouldn't have long before the sun set.

"One more pass before we head home," she called out to her group of five trainees. "Snowcrest and Garnet, sweep up the river, as near the ground as you dare. Hoarfrost and Shard, over to the white ghost gum. If they're going to enter through the mountains, that would be the way. Luminosa come with me. We'll take another look at the north side of the entrance.

"If you see anything unusual, signal for everyone else to join you. When you finish your pass, head back to the Drakos Mountains."

Her trainees flew off to begin their last pass for the day. Loreli could see they were tired. For that matter, so was she. It had been a long day of nothing. She'd have a word with Celtan when she returned. This was no task for the crystal dragons. What could they do to stop the rebel karliki short of killing them?

"Over there," Luminosa called out. "Snowcrest is signalling. They must have found something."

Loreli turned to see where Luminosa was looking. Snowcrest belched a steady stream of fire. Garnet dove down to the ground.

"What is he doing?" Loreli growled as she flew towards them. "He's going to get himself killed."

As they neared the river, Loreli saw what had caused the commotion. A group of yoswen were darting towards an overturned wagon, swiping at it with their claws and then retreating.

Garnet hovered and roared. Loreli and Luminosa flew in as Snowcrest joined Garnet, blocking the yoswen's path to the cart. They roared at the ugly, stocky creatures, but the yoswen refused to retreat, instead clawing their way forward and swiping their thickly padded claws at crystal snouts.

"Luminosa, turn over that cart, see if this fight is worth it."

"It's worth it," Luminosa told her gravely. Loreli craned her neck to see a gruesome sight. Two men unconscious – one with half his arm ripped off. Five karliki: three were dead, the other two clutched daggers and were staring, wild-eyed at them.

"Fire!" she roared. All of them belched out flames towards the yoswen, not

giving the creatures the chance to retreat. Several yoswen managed to get close enough to strike at the dragons' eyes and snouts, distracting them from the others who were now approaching the cart.

"To me!" yelled a karlik from the broken cart. Loreli buffeted the yoswen with the force of her wings and lashed out at the four yoswen who were slashing at the sorely outnumbered karliki. The yoswen fell into the snow. Hoarfrost and Shard dived down, snatching at the yoswen with their razor-sharp crystal teeth. They shredded the creatures and tossed them into the river thundering past them.

"Again!" she roared at her trainees. "Luminosa, stay with me."

At her command, the other trainees took to the skies and dived down in waves, attacking from above with teeth and fire. Loreli and Luminosa kept a steady stream of fire aimed at the yoswen, to keep them well clear of the cart and the survivors it barely sheltered.

When the last yoswen was dead, the six dragons collapsed in a huddled mass on the narrow, snowy riverbank. Loreli huffed out a last curl of smoke and turned her snout towards the karliki and injured people.

"Who are you and what are you doing out here?"

"I am Anya Nikolaevna," the blonde karlik stood unsteadily. "This is Ermolai. That is ... was Rufina and Demyan. We were attempting to escort Lord Aaron and Ambassador Eliséo back to Goraburg. They were injured even before we were attacked."

"That elf causes nothing but trouble," Loreli growled. "I can't believe I'm going to save his life."

"He'll survive long enough without your help. Lord Aaron won't." Anya glared at her. She ripped the sleeve off her shirt and broadly tied it around the ragged, bloody stump of the unconscious lintep's elbow. "He needs skilled healers. We cannot help him now, even if we get to the lower caverns of Goraburg."

"The lintep, then?" Loreli growled.

Anya nodded.

"We can possibly close the wound, but that is all. How long did it take Pyrid and Celtan to fly you to Illaria?"

"Most of the day." Anya shook her head, helplessly. "He won't last that long."

"Then what?" Loreli asked. "The crystal dragons can't heal him."

Anya looked at Ermolai, seemingly weighing up her options. With no little hesitation, she placed her hand in her pocket and held it tightly.

"I have ... a unique gift with me. Something the crystal dragons gave my family many years ago. Would that work?"

Loreli hissed. "*You* have that?"

"Have what?" Ermolai asked, looking from one to the other.

"Not now, Ermolai." Anya brushed him aside. "Would it work, dragon?"

"I don't know," Loreli admitted. "Celtan would be able to tell us. Snowcrest and Garnet, take the dead ones. Hoarfrost and Shard go ahead of us. Luminosa and I will take the others. Fly as fast as you can to the Drakos Mountains."

The crystal dragons moved to follow her orders immediately. Luminosa scooped up the unconscious elf and the other karlik. Loreli took charge of Lord Aaron herself, after lifting Anya to her back.

*Let my lucky stars be watching over me tonight. Don't let this fool of a lintep die on my watch!*

Without waiting to see if the others were following, Loreli flew like the wind towards the Drakos Mountains.

\* \* \*

Pyrid lay on his belly, basking in the sunlight. He was due to fly back to Illaria in another two days. Not that he minded the adventure, but the long trips were taking their toll on him. He was not as young as he used to be. Perhaps he should consider giving the task to one of the younger dragons.

*But I don't want to miss out on the thrill of it all,* he admitted to himself.

As he nodded sleepily, his gaze flickered across a shimmer in the sky. Those trainees of Loreli's needed more practise. He could see them flying towards the Drakos Mountains from miles away.

*They're belching fire! What's happened?*

He instantly belched out a reply column of fire, alerting all the crystal dragons in the crater that something was wrong. A few heartbeats later, the crater floor was covered with dragons of all colours and sizes. They left just enough room for the incoming trainees to land.

Stunned silence greeted the clear crystal scouts as they descended into the crater. Snowcrest and Garnet explained about the yoswen attack as Loreli approached, Lord Aaron in her front claws, Anya on her back.

"No!" cried out Pyrid. "What happened to him? Celtan, Lord Aaron is dying!"

Celtan pushed past the other dragons surrounding Pyrid, shouting at them to get out of his way. Loreli lay Lord Aaron down gently on the dusty ground while Anya, not waiting to be lifted from between her spikes, slipped and slid her way down to the lintep.

"Can your heart heal him?" she asked urgently. "Ermolai and Eliséo are right behind us. With the three of us ... although Eliséo is still unconscious."

Pyrid looked at Celtan uncertainly. "I've never heard of a crystal heart being used to heal. I wouldn't even know which words to try."

He saw the crestfallen look on Anya's face and wished he knew what to do. "Celtan, think of something – anything for them to say. We try that first, even just to stop the bleeding, then I fly him straight to Illaria."

"You won't get there in time," Celtan told him gently.

"Not if he's bleeding like that," Pyrid replied, gesturing to the blood-soaked cloth around Aaron's arm. "Surely we can stop the bleeding."

Celtan shook his head. "Not with the heart. There is another way, but it will leave terrible scarring."

Anya shook her fists at him. "I don't care what kind of scarring it will leave. If you know a way to stop the bleeding, you do it *now!*"

Pyrid struggled not to step away from the furious little karlik. He looked over at Celtan expectantly. The sapphire dragon visibly sagged.

"Anya, do you have a sword, any sort of blade?"

The karlik nodded and held out her still bloodied dagger.

"Place it on the ground. I don't want to burn you. I'm going to breathe fire onto it – as hot as I can. As soon as I stop, you need to take the blade and hold it against his wound.

"As I said, cauterising the wound will not be a clean way to work. It won't fix

anything on the inside, but it will possibly stop him bleeding to death before you get to Illaria.”

Anya placed the dagger on the ground and tore the other sleeve of her shirt off, ready to wrap it around the hilt when Celtan was done. She nodded to the sapphire dragon. The other crystal dragons moved back even as Luminosa descended with Ermolai and Eliséo.

Celtan leant down closer to the dagger, opened his snout a sliver and belched out fire as quickly as he could. The blade glowed bright orange, then white. He stopped and moved away, giving Anya room to pick up the blade, her sleeve sound around her hand. She knelt beside Lord Aaron and folded the shredded remains of his arm up against his elbow joint before forcing the flat of the blade against the skin. She turned the blade over once to make sure she covered the entire wound.

The karlik blanched and turned away from Lord Aaron to vomit. Pyrid turned back to see the angry and lumpy red flesh on the outside of the lintep's elbow and a charred mess in the centre. He stared at it helplessly.

“Pyrid, let's not waste any time. Grab Eliséo and let's go. Ermolai, go with one of these dragons to Goraburg and tell Lord Ilya what happened.”

Pyrid was surprised at everyone, including himself, obeying the feisty little karlik. He placed Anya on his back, gently held Lord Aaron in one claw and Eliséo in the other. Before Celtan could order any younger or faster crystal dragon to complete the task, Pyrid took off and headed for Illaria.



## Chapter Nine – Brynt’s Paradise

Leif looked around the Paradise as Brynt led them towards the healers. It looked a self-sufficient little village, but there were many things about it which were completely foreign to him. None of the buildings had locks on windows or doors. Security was clearly not an issue here. The buildings were also spread quite far apart, not like the ramshackle buildings of his city that leaned on top of one another.

On the far side of the river, there were farming lands set out in neat plots, a windmill and other water related industries. This side of the river had more buildings, with the distinct feeling that they were isolated from one another.

Brynt led them through these buildings, reassuring some of the villagers that everything was fine, but otherwise, not speaking. What must it have been like for him to have his Paradise destroyed after feeling so secure within it?

Before long, they reached the healers house but were refused entry.

“Your man is being well tended to,” one of the healers told him. “Though if he would only agree to have a lintep work on him, he would be healed within moments.”

Leif laughed mirthlessly. “You’d have more chance of convincing him to cut off his own hand than allow a lintep to touch him. Thank you for doing what you can with him. I’m sure he’s grateful, no matter how much trouble he causes you.”

“Now what?” Talise asked, once the healers had gone inside.

“I’ll show you to the tavern.” Brynt gestured for them to follow him. “I understand it isn’t the same as Outworld taverns, but it’s the only place large enough to house so many of you.”

He led them to a large, empty building. A bar stood along a wall with twenty tables spread out before it and a stage to one side. There were no other rooms, no stairs leading to another level, not even a kitchen. Leif looked around curiously. It was a decent sized tavern, possibly capable of entertaining close to one hundred patrons.

“Where do your visitors generally stay?”

“Visitors,” huffed Brynt. “We never *had* visitors. Then the Paradise boundary was broken, and we’ve been overrun ever since.”

Leif chose his words carefully. “It seems as though the lintep didn’t do any other damage than destroy the boundary. Can you tell me what happened?”

Brynt laughed. “We were invaded. Or so we thought. We saw a group of armed men approaching us and went to defend ourselves. A bunch of kids rode to stop us, but their soldiers didn’t stop, so we attacked.” He shook his head. “Such a pointless fight, what there was of it. They weren’t attacking us. It’s true, they came to destroy our Paradise boundary, with good reason from their side, but they never meant to hurt us.

“After the confusion was sorted, they left us some of their soldiers to help defend us against idiots like your boy back there, at least until we can defend ourselves. They’re to send us out blacksmiths and glaziers to show us how to create locks for our doors and glass for our windows.

“They even helped us negotiate a trading partnership with Hedgefall. I’m loath

to admit it, but those lintep aren't half bad. The karlik and the elf, I'm still not too sure about, and that sapphire crystal dragon of theirs, well, he just grows on you."

Leif gaped at the explanation then bristled as Talise closed his mouth with her fingertip.

"So, they ... it wasn't, there were others involved in this?"

Brynt laughed at him. "Aye, every race in the Outworld, including humans. They're determined to destroy every Paradise they can find."

"But, why?" asked Leif, still trying to gather his thoughts.

Brynt shrugged. "There's some lintep running around trying to steal as much power as she can. Apparently, these Paradises were all built with lintep power, so if she figures it out, she could become the most powerful being around. Problem is, she's already drunk on power and could lord it over everyone if she got it in her head to do that. So, they're trying to destroy all the Paradises before that can happen."

"How are they doing it?" Talise asked curiously.

"Don't know," Brynt replied. "They weren't very forthcoming about that."

"Will they leave soldiers at every Paradise they destroy?" Leif asked, ever the tactician. "Will they train your men to fight as well as secure your properties? Are they going to secure trading partnerships for all the Paradises?"

"Whoa now," Brynt held his hands up. "None of that concerns me. I'm happy enough with how they left us. What they do with the others is not my concern."

"It's *my* concern," Leif replied coldly. "How many of these Paradises are in my duchy?"

"Like I said, that's nothing we talked about. You'd have to meet with King Lukys himself to sort that out."

"I suppose I'll have to then," Leif muttered. "I'll speak to his soldiers before we depart. That still leaves us with your Paradise. It's within the bounds of my duchy."

"We ain't swearing loyalty to anyone," Brynt said in a low voice. "We've only just joined this Outworld and we'll be damned if any one of us is going to swear fealty to anyone."

Leif knew when to fight and when to let things slide. "Brynt, no one is asking you to swear fealty to them. However, the fact of the matter is that your Paradise happens to fall within my duchy. As such, you and any of your people, are free to request help from Deuterfoss and we will do our best to aid you.

"If there comes a time when you decide you *want* to swear fealty, that is up to you, but I will never force the matter. As far as the rest of the Outworld is concerned, you are my responsibility and I will care for you accordingly should you ever need me to do so."

Brynt crossed his arms, but his expression softened. "Well, so long as we understand each other then. You can stay the night here. We'll talk more in the morning. You'll hear the bell for the evening meal. You're free to join us in the eating hall – just follow everyone else. " The flaxen haired man left them alone in the tavern.

Leif looked around at the sparse furnishings and spotted some bed rolls. "I guess we'll use these tonight."

Talise seemed less than pleased but remained tight lipped as the other men went to claim a spot for the night. Leif instead went to an open window and stared out at the Paradise beyond. A light footstep behind told him Talise would not be

silent for long.

“I’m going for a short walk,” he announced suddenly. “I’ll meet you in the eating hall later.”

He was only a few yards away from the tavern when he heard the door open and close again. He didn’t slow his pace for Talise. Showing her too much favour, even out here, could be bad for her reputation. Then again, she’d never much cared what people said about her – as if there was anything they really could say.

“Are you going to talk with this King Lukys then?” she asked without preamble. “If he’s going to destroy more of these Paradises in your duchy, that could prove troublesome for your warehouses.”

Leif shook his head. “I don’t think so. If this one is anything to go by, the Paradises appear to be self-sufficient. What really concerns me is whether or not these people can keep themselves safe.” He turned to face her. “If those lintep hadn’t been here, how many people do you think would have died today? And all over a misunderstanding! Imagine what would happen if some fools decide they’re going to raid the Paradise.”

Talise went pale. “What are you going to do about it? Like you said, they’re your responsibility now.”

“These people need to be trained to defend themselves or they’ll have to build a defensive wall.” He shook his head again. “Or both. I’ll send for a squadron of soldiers to train and defend them, but that will only help this Paradise. I need to find out how many Paradises are in my duchy, how many are in neighbouring duchies, and make sure plans are made to ensure the safety of all of them.”

He gazed at the lines of concern on her face. He hated to worry her, to burden her with his duties. It wasn’t her responsibility. She always just seemed to be there when he needed to talk through a problem and often helped him find elusive solutions. He was coming to rely on her more than was acceptable, considering she was entirely unconnected with him. He brushed the thought aside. There was no time to consider his feelings for her now. Then again, when would there be time?

“Talise, go and rest. I’ll see you in the eating hall later.”

“Where are you going?” She rubbed her arms in the bitterly cold wind.

“Never mind.” He didn’t want her following him. “I’ll see you later.”

He expected her to argue with him. The expression on her face warned him that she would. But then she nodded and walked away. He stared in surprise at her retreating figure until she was back in the tavern before walking away. He needed answers and the only one who could give them to him was King Lukys. Perhaps the lintep soldiers knew the king’s plans. If not, he hoped they could get at least send message to their king.

Retracing his steps, Leif quickly found his way back to the healers house. He knocked on the door and waited patiently, even though he knew there were no locks, nothing keeping him out.

His patience was rewarded by the appearance of a short, wizened old man, who looked him up and down suspiciously. “What do you want?”

“Good day to you, good sir,” Leif responded, with a little bow. “I was wondering if any of the lintep are here. I have a few questions to ask them.”

“Rownyn, there’s someone here to see you!” The ill-tempered man didn’t wait for the lintep before disappearing back inside. Leif tried to hide his surprise at the old

man's manner.

Rownyn appeared at the door. "Ah, Duke Leif. What can I do for you?"

"I need information and I'm hoping you're the man to help me, Rownyn." He smiled broadly at the lintep, suddenly hoping all the rumours he'd heard of them reading minds and manipulating humans was nonsense.

Rownyn nodded. "That sounds about right. Follow me."

Leif was led down a dark hallway, past eight closed doors. Rownyn opened one of them, and ushered Leif inside. The duke was surprised, yet again, by the austere furnishings.

"Are all the rooms like this?" he asked.

"I'm certain that's not what you came here to ask," Rownyn replied, eyebrows raised. "But, yes, most of them are. These people live a very simple life."

"I think that makes my need more urgent." Leif shook his head. "Tell me, what do you know of King Lukys' plans? How many Paradises is he planning on destroying? Are they all located in my duchy or are some further away? Does he have enough men, soldiers like you, to protect and train them until they can do without?"

As he questioned the soldier, Leif was surprised at the sudden smile that appeared on the lintep's face. He couldn't fathom why.

"I think you are just the man King Lukys is looking for," Rownyn told him. "Would you permit me to escort you to Illaria tomorrow? If we leave at dawn, we should be there before midday."

Stunned, Leif stared speechlessly at Rownyn. *Illaria. I'm going to Illaria?*