

ONE

HURRY, children.”
Reya squeezed the twins’ hands tighter and pulled them across the great hall. She couldn’t blame them for their hesitancy. Dread sat heavy on her heart, knowing what she would find behind the closed doors—imagining how the Queen’s children would react when they saw their mother in such a state.

Their footsteps echoed off the cavernous stone walls as they walked in solemn procession. There would be no more banquets here for a long while, Reya thought with bitterness. Adin snuffled as he trailed behind her, making Reya’s heart clench in her chest. She glanced left. Aletha wore a stoic face; only her red, puffy eyes gave away her ruse. Reya gave them both a reassuring smile, although an empty gesture.

As they climbed the massive stone staircase, Aletha reached into her tunic pocket and handed her brother a rag. “Here, Adin. Wipe your nose.”

He took the cloth, catching her eye for a moment, then stared back at his feet, careful not to trip on the irregular steps.

Reya instinctively adjusted her pace to Adin’s faltering one, listening to the uneven rhythm of his soft shoes as they marked a beat characteristically his own. She knew what effort it had taken the young prince to give up his cane and stand erect. Each time he fell, stabs of pain coursed through her own gut. Yet Adin was, if

anything, a determined ten-year-old boy, and—heaven bless him—no one could stop him once he set his mind to something.

Aletha. So like her brother in so many ways. They both had their mother's wavy copper hair and green eyes but had inherited the King's olive complexion and stubbornness to boot. Yet, it was nature's cruel joke that Aletha embodied perfection in every way—an angelic face, strong stature, and graceful posture—all gifts denied Adin. Not that the young prince ever resented Aletha or wished his miseries on his sister, for he doted on her, even more so in the recent months of the Queen's illness and subsequent seclusion. No, Adin carried the full weight of those infirmities on his own delicate shoulders, adding to the already unbearable strain of his defects.

They crested the stairs, then walked across a balustrade that spanned the banquet room. Sunlight spilled through the long row of tinted windows, casting splashes of color over the floor like pools of blood. Aletha's skirts swished along the planking. Smells of meat pies cooking in the kitchen wafted in the air, mingling with the sooty, stale aroma of the smoldering fireplace below. Reya ignored the grumblings in her empty stomach.

In the warmth of the afternoon sun, Reya realized she had overdressed. Of course, coming to court always required layering the proper tunics and cloaks, even if she was practically family. And although this effort was more for the benefit of observers than for royalty, she had no desire to provoke the King.

Below her, Reya caught glimpses of the servants as they went about their tasks, their occasional whisper drifting up to her ears. As scissors snipped, cut flowers from early blooms overflowed from golden vases. Diligent hands rubbed silver urns with soft cloths. Reya recognized the palpable tension and worry as servants dusted and mopped distractedly. Eyes filled with sadness dared cast a fleeting look up at the twins as they approached the latched door.

Reya turned and knelt before the children, taking a deep breath and fumbling with their clothing. Usually the twins wore loose, simple garments designed for play. But today she had helped them dress, picking out what she deemed suitable—nothing austere and depressing, but elegant and cheerful, wanting to give the Queen any reason to smile.

She chided herself for stalling, and steeled her emotions. Aletha, mirroring Reya, lifted her chin in an attempt at bravery, clearly more for Adin's benefit than her own. Reya stroked their heads with weathered fingers, luxuriating in the softness of their hair. The huge oak door opened behind her, and a servant dressed in the court blues and browns ushered them in, then retreated silently into a corner.

A warm wave of humidity and pungent odor drenched them; the twins made a sour face, but Reya was all too familiar with the scent of impending death. Sunlight filtering through the ceiling panes illuminated the wisps of candle smoke as they swirled like hovering ghosts, waiting. Reya shuddered.

The pallor of death stretched like a gauze over the Queen's features. Reya sent the twins a reproving look, and they closed their gaping mouths and retreated cautiously behind her skirts. She climbed the stair to the cumbersome bed and ushered the children to her side, where they gazed down at the face of their mother.

With her eyes closed, the Queen looked small and lost under mountains of blankets. Adin's hand touched his mother's clammy face, as if she were as brittle as glass. The Queen's bronze hair spilled across the pillow, framing her face, lit up by the dozens of tapers glowing on the sideboard. Aletha stood beside Adin, clenching her brother's hand, unusually quiet.

The Queen forced her lids open and looked at her children, her expression that of one whose heart has relinquished its futile grasp on hope. Aletha and Adin reflected back that same look. Reya

sensed her own grip slipping as well, but while the Queen still had breath in her Reya would not succumb to despair.

Why have I not been able to produce a cure? In all her many seasons she had treated every known illness and handily counteracted poisons from noxious plants mistakenly ingested or, on rare occasion, purposely administered. There was no plant she could fail to identify; cite uses for its seed, leaf, and root; and prepare at least half a dozen infusions to treat every known ailment in this kingdom.

But this! For months this nemesis had been unreadable. The symptoms of the Queen's ailment acted like fenweed poison, but had the fever and chills of harrowbane. Nothing Reya tried had elicited a positive reaction. She could almost sense a magical binding but could not suss it out. There were none of the obvious markers, and yet when she laid her palm on the Queen's neck she met with an odd sensation, a resonance both strange and chillingly familiar. If magic was the culprit, then it was masterfully masked. Reya had not wanted to admit the possibility, but seeing the Queen now in her final hours—the horrible reality of something evil at work, something beyond her wisdom to cure or even name—sent a shiver up her spine.

Reaching into the pouch slung across her chest, Reya extracted a small lidded jar. She gently placed her hand under the Queen's head.

The Queen stiffly turned her face toward Reya, her eyes straining to focus. "Reya." Her gaze alighted on the twins, then back on her gray-haired nursemaid, her most trusted friend. "You brought . . . the children." Her words came on papery breath, fragile and faint.

"Majesty, I am going to help you sit up. I have something for you to drink."

The frail queen struggled to comply, then shook her head in a slow motion of dismissal. "No more, please. Too many . . . tired."

As the twins nervously shifted beside Reya, she ignored the Queen's protests. How she longed to spare them this pain, but she was at her wick's end—just like the candles pooling in their trays before her. She had little faith this tonic would prevent the inevitable. She needed more time!

Carefully, she helped the Queen sip the bitter tea and watched as she made a half-hearted attempt to smile. "You don't ever . . . stop brewing these . . . *sha'arurah* . . ."

Reya took the jar and set it down on the step. Of course it tasted horrible, but there was nothing to be done for that.

She found it odd the Queen had taken to using the ancient speech more and more as she grew weaker. The old tongue was nearly extinct; few words had survived through the centuries to become integrated in daily conversation. Reya knew many more than most, handed down to her through family lore, and gleaned from reading old decaying texts that advised how to gather and prepare herbs. Even then, the words had been translated and reshaped from their original form. Apparently, the Queen's illness was unleashing her mind, causing her to dredge up half-buried words and images.

"Here, children, come close to your mother so she can see you." Reya stepped away from the bed and watched as Aletha helped Adin maneuver from the stair to the mattress. Once she got him settled, she sidled up next to him, where they drew close to hear their mother's fluttering words.

Reya fretted in the dim light as she waited in an overstuffed, ornately upholstered chair. Huge velvet drapes were drawn across the large windows that looked out on the orchard, barricading the room from the sunlight that recklessly shined everywhere else in Sherbourne. She searched her mind for the ancient word, one she had not used in a very long time. What was it? *Chamas*. A cruelty, an injustice with the overlay of violence. Like most of

the many-layered words of the ancient tongue, no modern word captured the gist of *chámas*. But at this moment in time, in this room, no other word would suffice.

As the Queen spoke haltingly, Reya could make out snatches of sentences as they hung in the still, heavy air. She watched the twins cry as the Queen weakly gathered their hands in hers. From time to time Aletha wiped her face, and Adin's, too—Adin so intent on his mother that he took no notice. Reya sighed; she found it hard to tell where one child ended and the other began.

The Queen recounted the story of their birth, a story told countless times until it had almost become a tale from a picture book. How Aletha had been born feetfirst, as if ready to stand and take on the world.

Reya remembered that night, and turned up the palms of her hands as if she could stretch time and still see the perfect little body cradled there. The smell of birth, that sweet, sickly smell of fluids and sweat. Her own legs shaking with exhaustion from hours of worry over a difficult breech delivery. Watching Aletha as she emerged out of a warm sea, first toes, then belly, then head, the cord trailing alongside her wet face, up along her upraised arms, and then—stopped. Reya had tugged gently, mystified by the sudden halt of birth, wondering what the cord may have caught on or what *yo'shana* was at work. But as Reya pondered the mystery, the Queen's sharp and sudden cry startled her.

Once more, contractions racked the Queen and she howled. Reya noticed Aletha's hands grasping tightly to something. With a ferocious push, the Queen expelled a second child—an unexpected son—who gripped his sister's hands in his tiny ones. Reya quickly gathered up the twins and gently disengaged their fingers, but not without much effort. Who knew how long they had been that way, floating peacefully, undisturbed together until the violence of birth meant to rip them apart?

Adin, clearly, had been cramped in the womb, for whereas Aletha had emerged robust and energetic, kicking and sprawling in Reya's arms, Adin was small and fragile, hunched over, breathing weakly, his skin a pale gray. Upon further exploration, Reya's heart sank. Adin's right foot and leg were twisted a quarter-turn, and his face brought tears to Reya's eyes. She did not allow herself to think of the King's predictable disappointment, only the realization of what a hard road lay ahead for this unfortunate babe.

And now that hard road was going to be even harder, Reya thought, watching Adin's heart break as he drank in every word his mother spoke. With the Queen gone, Adin would have no one but Aletha to insulate him from the cruelty of the King. A king who had every reason to be proud of this sweet, kindhearted boy, but who made no attempt at hiding his disgust—a disgust that had grown into contempt after the Queen had given birth to a perfectly formed stillborn son two summers ago.

Reya sighed, despair entering her like a flood of water, lifting and carrying her to an unknown shore. She raised herself, ignoring an old pain in her hip that shot down her leg as she approached the bed. The Queen looked over and pointed to a small pouch on the side table. Reya brought it to her.

"Here," the Queen whispered to the children, her breath nearly gone, "wear it and remember . . ." With shaking hands she slowly withdrew two silver locket on chains: simple, plain, with a tiny latch on the face of each circle. The twins turned them in their hands, puzzled. Aletha popped open the locket door and found inside a single strand of copper hair. Adin traced his finger over the tiny engraved marks on the back. Reya leaned over Adin's shoulder, and on closer scrutiny, could see the scribbles and curves of the ancient language—the *law'az*—but no one, not even she, knew how to read it.

The Queen fell back on her pillow; the exertion from talking with her children had emptied her. Reya gathered the twins to

her as she so often had. Adin reluctantly released his grip on the Queen's gown and Reya was stung anew by the poignancy of the repetitious gesture. Adin again grasping, trying to hang on to a life being wrenched away from him.

Reya leaned over and gave the Queen a gentle kiss on her clammy forehead. As she turned and took the children in hand, the Queen tugged on Reya's sleeve. Her words, like the rustle of a leaf, lingered in the stillness of the room. Reya was not sure she heard them correctly until the Queen repeated herself with an unexpectedly steady voice and an almost peaceful look spreading over her face.

"Ahabah 'az ma'veth."

The words stabbed Reya's heart, words that had not been uttered for centuries. Words that came welling up through her memory like a spring pushing its way through softened soil.

Ahabah 'az ma'veth.

Love is as strong as death.