

Trust

Molly Evangeline

Trust

Makilien Trilogy – Book 3

Copyright © 2012 by Molly Evangeline

Published by Living Sword Publishing

www.makilien.com

www.mollyevangeline.com

Cover Design and Map

© Molly Evangeline

Cover Images

© Molly Evangeline

© Diego Elorza | Dreamstime.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the author. The only exception is brief quotations in written reviews.

All Scriptures are taken from the New American Standard Bible, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
www.Lockman.org

ISBN 13: 978-0983774037

ISBN 10: 098377403X

:Chapter One:

Orders

A cool breeze swept across Makilien's skin. She shivered, arms tingling, though not in reaction to the damp weather. Her eyes darted amidst the undergrowth of the forest, dark with moisture, and her brows dipped low in a frown when she found nothing to blame for her growing apprehension. All was quiet, peaceful even, despite the gray sky, but she couldn't shake the feeling. Glancing at her companion, she found Vonawyn kneeling in the dirt, studying one of the tracks they'd been following since just after dawn.

Casting another wary look into the forest, Makilien knelt beside her and whispered, "Something doesn't feel right."

"These are stag's tracks all right, and I think we're catching up to him." Vonawyn's voice rang out light and unconcerned, but a little louder than necessary. She caught her friend's eyes, giving a clear message. Makilien was not imagining things.

"How long ago do you think he passed this way?" Makilien asked, playing along.

Vonawyn shrugged. "An hour, maybe. Let's keep moving."

She rose and took the lead. Though Makilien kept a close watch, she said nothing, leaving it to her friend to determine their course of action. At over seventy years old, the Elf had

much more experience in the forest than she did, not to mention superior sight and hearing.

They traveled another half mile before Makilien noticed the ground rising to their right. It had just occurred to her that this put them in a dangerous position when Vonawyn halted. Makilien stood stock-still and watched her, trying to keep up the pretense of unconcern, though her body didn't cooperate. Goose bumps rose along her arms, and her heart rate quickened.

"Get down!" Vonawyn gasped.

She caught Makilien's arm and dragged her to the ground. That very instant, something hissed through the air right above Makilien's head and slammed into a nearby tree. Sprawled in the grass, her eyes locked on the dark, quivering arrow—an arrow intended for her back.

Vonawyn grabbed her arm again, and they scrambled for cover behind two trees just wide enough to offer protection. Heart racing and gasping for breath, Makilien pressed her back against the trunk and looked over at her friend.

"How many are there?"

Vonawyn shook her head. "I only heard the one bow."

And thank Elohim she had. Makilien shuddered, almost able to feel the breath-snatching pain radiate from where the arrow would have struck.

Gripping her own bow, Vonawyn peeked around her tree. An arrow skipped off the trunk, inches from her face. She jerked back and blew out her breath.

"There are at least two of them, and they have good cover," she reported, voice taut with frustration. "No doubt they'll just wait for one of us to show ourselves. I don't think I could get a shot off and have time to hide again."

Makilien sighed and leaned her head back against the tree. If the Elf couldn't do it, she didn't have a chance either.

She scanned their surroundings. Cover was too sparse for them to run. Vonawyn made the same observation. She put her fingers to her lips and imitated the loud, high-pitched call of a sparrow.

“Do you think they will hear it?” Makilien asked.

Vonawyn shook her head, grimacing. “I don’t know. They can cover a lot of ground. They’re probably more than a mile away from us by now.”

She peeked around the tree again, this time on the other side. Another arrow came a second after she hid, this one sticking in the trunk. “They haven’t moved. I’m pretty sure there are only two of them.”

“Do you think they will move?”

“I wouldn’t. We can’t go anywhere, and they have a perfect position. Their best bet is to wait us out, it just depends on how patient they are.”

Makilien took a deep breath, heart rate still elevated. “I didn’t think we had to worry about this so close to home.”

Vonawyn’s brows furrowed. “Neither did I.”

They fell quiet for a long time as the waiting game commenced. Occasionally, Vonawyn checked the position of their attackers. Arrows met her a couple of times, but the men soon decided to conserve them. It was getting close to midday now. Sweat trickled down Makilien’s neck. Even though the breeze was cool, the air was muggy. She wanted to take off her cloak, but her tree wasn’t wide enough to afford her any room to move. With utmost care, she shifted her weight. Her legs were beginning to cramp. She glanced up at the slow patter of raindrops on the leaves, and then looked at Vonawyn.

“Any plans?”

Vonawyn tipped her head a little. “Not yet. I’m hoping they get bored and try something daring. It’s our only chance right now. If they don’t move, we won’t be able to try anything until dark.”

Makilien frowned at the thought of being trapped here all afternoon, especially if rain fell heavier. *Elohim, I don’t know who these men are or why they want to kill us, but please provide us with an opportunity for escape.* She had come on this hunting trip to have some fun and get her mind off more sobering things, but instead found her life threatened. *Please protect us.* She glanced at her friend again. “Apparently, they didn’t hear your call.”

Vonawyn just made a face as she fingered the sky-blue fletching on the arrow she had fitted to her bowstring, and silence came again. A squirrel scurried along the branches above Makilien and chattered down at her. She looked up.

“What do you have to complain about?”

Vonawyn raised an eyebrow and smiled wryly as some of the tension was relieved.

“Drop your weapons!”

Both women stood up straight at the shout that echoed from behind them. Someone scrambled in the brush, and two short cries of pain followed. Moving cautiously, Vonawyn peered around the tree.

“You can come out. It’s safe.”

Each of them released a great sigh and left the shelter of their trees. Up on the hill stood Elandir and Elmorhirian.

“Well, you two took long enough to show up,” Vonawyn said, eyeing her brothers as they climbed the hill to join them, though she had a relieved smile on her face.

Elmorhirian feigned a hurt look. “Is that all the thanks we get for saving your life?”

But the friendly bickering ended as all four of them peered down at the two men lying motionless, each pierced by a well-placed arrow.

“You couldn’t keep either of them alive to question?” Vonawyn asked.

Elandir shook his head. “We warned them and they turned on us. We didn’t have a very good vantage point and weren’t about to take chances. One of their arrows only just missed Elmorhirian.”

He and his brother approached them and pulled up the men’s sleeves, exposing their forearms.

“Just what we suspected,” Elandir said.

Each man had a black snake tattoo.

“Zirtan’s former men,” Elmorhirian murmured. “I guess this confirms they are the ones attacking travelers through Eldinorieth.”

“They’re getting pretty bold to work their way this far south,” his brother replied.

“Well, they wouldn’t have made it much farther before meeting the sentries Father has posted.”

Elandir gazed around the forest, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “We should see if they have horses nearby and make sure they are alone. We picked up their trail a ways back and realized they were headed this way.”

“Good thing you did,” Vonawyn told him.

He turned back to her and Makilien. “You aren’t hurt, are you?”

His sister shook her head. “No, thank Elohim.”

With this assurance, the Elf brothers took the lead and descended the backside of the hill. Makilien eyed the two men once more before following. Would those left of Zirtan’s army always find ways to torment Eldor, she wondered? Hadn’t

they inflicted enough pain? *At least they aren't threatening all-out war again.* She had to be grateful for this. A few attacks along the forest road, while disturbing, wouldn't threaten their existence or freedom.

For over an hour, they wound their way deep into the forest. Most of the time, Makilien couldn't see the signs they followed, but Elandir and Elmorhirian were expert trackers and moved fast, knowing exactly where they were going. Makilien started to wonder if the men even had any horses, but then Elandir motioned for them to halt.

"There, just ahead in those pines."

Peering into the trees, Makilien caught the swish of a horse's tail. They moved on slowly now, approaching with caution until they were certain only two horses stood in the underbrush. The two brothers reached them first. Makilien and Vonawyn came up behind as Elandir dug through one of the horse's saddlebags.

"Doesn't look like much more than clothes and food."

Elmorhirian checked the other. Near the bottom, he stopped and pulled something out. "What's this?"

They crowded around him as he held up a tattered piece of stained parchment. Most of the dark wax seal that once held it closed was still intact.

"Looks like a V," Elandir pointed out.

The others agreed. Amidst a winding snake design, the letter V was evident.

"I wonder who that could be?" Elmorhirian murmured and opened the parchment, revealing a brief note. "*Patrol the road just north of Elimar, but be wary of the Elves. Kill any travelers.*" His brows rose. "Well, that makes it pretty clear. There is a mastermind behind this. Those men were under orders."

“Whose orders?” Vonawyn wondered aloud.

“If it were a Z, that’d be obvious, but it isn’t.”

Elandir took the note from his brother and tucked it into his jerkin. “We should get this information back home to Father.”



The deep shadows of evening drew in when the four of them arrived at their destination. Crossing the shallow river, they entered Elimar. The glow of light from the houses dispelled some of the gloom of the rainy day. Near the center of the small city, they came to the Elves’ home and reined their horses to a halt.

“That doesn’t look like game you’ve brought back.”

From just up the path, Torick strode toward them, eyeing the bodies secured to the two extra horses.

“Turns out attackers are more plentiful than game,” Elandir replied, sliding down from his horse. “We suspected we were being followed, and then these two ambushed Vonawyn and Makilien this morning.”

Torick looked to the two women. “Are you all right?”

They nodded, and Makilien answered with a smile, “We’re fine.”

“Zirtan’s men?” Torick asked, glancing at the bodies again.

Elandir gave him a nod. “Both have a tattoo.”

Torick scowled. “They just don’t give up, do they?”

“They’re not acting on their own. We found written orders in one of their saddlebags.”

“Orders from who?”

Elandir shrugged. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t say.”

Torick following, the group entered Lord Elnauhir's house. Comfortable warmth enveloped them, and Makilien looked forward to changing into a dry pair of clothes. After a bit of searching, they found the Elf lord and Halandor in one of the studies. He greeted his children and Makilien and inquired about their trip. Elandir stepped up to explain the encounter with the two men and share their findings.

"I'm sure this will soon end trade with Aldûlir," the Elf lord said, expression weary. "Not that we rely on it, but the forest road is heavily traveled. There's no telling how many may be killed by making the journey." He shook his head. "But without knowing who or where the orders are coming from, all we can do is protect that part of the forest which lies closest to Elimar and pray the attacks will eventually come to an end."

"The men are so scattered we wouldn't know where to look if we did want to stop them," Halandor said in agreement. "The orders could be coming from anywhere."

"And any one of Zirtan's former captains could be issuing them," Torick put in.

Elnauhir nodded, resting against one of the chairs as he thought. "We will continue to monitor the situation. It appears to be nothing more than an attempt to make life difficult for us. If that changes, we'll speak to Lord Darian and figure something out."

Silence settled between them for a moment, and Makilien took the chance to exchange goodbyes with her friends before heading home. When she left the room, Vonawyn followed to see her out. They walked in silence most of the way, but Makilien noticed her friend's normally bright mood seemed to have sobered.

"Is something wrong?"

Vonawyn glanced at her and shook her head. “Not really . . . I guess I was just thinking about Aedan. When he comes home, he will have to travel through Eldinorieth.” She gave a little shrug. “I worry about him.”

“Me too,” Makilien admitted, but a quick smile came to her lips. “Don’t forget though, he has Tanzim with him. I bet anyone would think twice before attacking.”

Vonawyn chuckled lightly before her tone became more serious again. “He’s been gone a while. It’s been two months since he left.”

Makilien remembered watching him ride out that gray, misty day. There had even been a little snow still on the ground. It had been a difficult time for both her and Vonawyn. “I wonder if he is any closer to finding his father.”

“I hope so. Every day I pray it will be the day he returns. I miss the times we spent together over the winter.” Vonawyn’s tone was wistful, but she was quick to apologize. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t talk about that.”

A wave of emotion flooded up inside Makilien, something she’d spent the last year learning how to deal with, but she shook her head. “No, it’s all right.” She gave Vonawyn the best smile she could muster. “You’re my best friends. I’m happy to see how things have grown between you. The last thing I want is for you to feel you can’t share things with me.”

Vonawyn smiled, though her eyes still clouded with sadness over the whole painful situation.

“Say hello to Leiya and your parents for me,” she told Makilien at the door.

“I will.”

Makilien stepped outside and found that one of the stable hands had taken care of Antiro, so she went on her way. Surrounded by the peacefulness of the Elven city, she

followed one of the paths lined with an abundance of spring flowers, colors bright even in the dim light of dusk. But the beauty did not fully capture her attention as it usually did. Her thoughts lingered on the conversation with Vonawyn. The pain she still held in her heart made her chest ache. Aedan's absence had made it even more difficult to cope. Like Vonawyn, she prayed daily for his safe return. Losing him would be too much for her still broken heart. She took a deep breath. *Help me trust and not worry.*

Coming around a bend, the sight of a little house surrounded by maple trees, windows glowing, brought a soothing comfort to Makilien, and she hurried her pace. She ascended the porch steps and entered through the front door.

"I'm home," she called out as she set her pack down in the entry and shrugged off her moisture-heavy cloak.

From somewhere deeper in the house came a joyful exclamation of her name. In a moment, her little sister bounded into the room.

"Leiya," Makilien said with a grin and gave her a big hug.

The little girl peered up at her, eyes wide with excitement. "Did you get anything?"

"No, not this time. We saw a few deer, but not the big one we were after."

"Ah," Leiya said in disappointment.

Their parents had joined them by now, and Makilien greeted them each with a hug before continuing. "I think the game was scared off. Two men ambushed us this morning, but Elandir and Elmorhirian stopped them before anything happened."

Néthyn shared a look of concern with his wife. "Who were they?"

“Zirtan’s men. Both had a snake tattoo.”

“How many attacks is this now?” Hanna murmured, her face troubled.

“This is the fifth that we know of,” Makilien replied. “We talked to Lord Elnauhir, but like he said, there’s not much we can do. Hopefully, these men will grow tired of this and things will return to normal.”

Her parents agreed. No one liked having this worry at the back of their minds. Steering the conversation toward less troublesome topics, Néthyn said, “You arrived just in time for supper. I believe your mother just about has it all on the table.”

Makilien gave Hanna a warm smile. “Wonderful, I’m starving.”

After washing up and changing, she joined her family in the dining room. Her father offered a prayer just before they dished up. As Makilien filled her plate, Leiya looked across the table at her and said, “A man from Minarald came to see you.”

Makilien stopped, eyes jumping from the food to her sister, and then to her father. He too had paused, glancing at Hanna before focusing on his daughter. “Lord Elnauhir didn’t mention anything to you?”

“No.” Makilien let out a long sigh, trying not to let all her emotions take over at once. “Let me guess, another suitor?”

Her father gave a slow nod. “Yes. A young army captain. His name is Tylor.”

Makilien’s appetite deserted her, stomach reacting. She set the dish she held aside. “I wish they wouldn’t keep coming all the way out here to Elimar just to be told no. Did you talk to him?”

“I did. We had a good talk.” Néthyn passed a bowl to Leiya, but did not begin eating.

“And does he know not to expect anything from me?”

“I made it clear you would likely have no interest, and that, whatever your decision, he was to accept it. He was very good about it.”

“But he’s still going to be sent home disappointed.” Makilien rubbed her forehead. It all gave her such a headache. She breathed out hard in frustration. “Maybe I should just go stay at the palace for a while. Then everyone can come ask to court me and get it over with without having to ride all the way out here.”

Her father gave her a sympathetic look, but said, “It’s their choice. Makilien, if this is really bothering you, you know I can send these men away without you ever having to talk to any of them.”

Makilien considered this for a long moment. Finally, she replied, voice low with emotion, “When this first started, I thought I would be all right, but now I think it might be best if you did.”

“Then I will do that,” Néthyn told her. “I can go see Tylor in the morning to tell him.”

“No,” Makilien said resignedly. “He’s already expecting to talk to me. I can handle it once more.”

“Are you sure?”

She gave a quick nod.



Curled up on her window seat, Makilien stared out into the darkness, catching the glimmer of torches and lamps throughout the city. She tipped her head to hear the peeping

of frogs from the streams, a sound she always loved. Taking in a deep breath, she looked down into her lap at her thick, leather-bound sketchbook. She had yet to open it, and hesitated. She knew she shouldn't do this to herself, not before bed, but, fingers trembling, she opened the cover and flipped through the pages. Halfway through the book, she stopped.

A painful weight settled on her chest, and each breath became labored. She closed her eyes against the burning of tears, and then opened them again to one of the first sketches she'd ever drawn of Sirion. The page was a bit crinkled in areas and some of the charcoal smudged from past tears. Fresh ones slid down her cheeks. She pressed her palms to her eyes, trying to hold them back.

Biting down hard, she breathed out deeply and leaned her head back against the window frame, staring out into the night again. This time, however, she didn't see the beauty of it, her thoughts caught in the past. After a long time, she blinked, falling back into the present. She glanced down at her sketch and closed the book, holding it against her chest. Another few tears dribbled down her cheeks.

"Elohim," she whispered, throat hurting. "I'm struggling so much lately. Please, strengthen me and help me focus on You and what is right now, not the past or what could have been. I know I can't live that way. I also ask for Your guidance tomorrow. I . . ." She shook her head, but forced herself to go on. "I ask that You would help me be open to Your will, even if it isn't what I want."

:Chapter Two:

Uncertainty

Makilien sat straight up in bed. Her heart thudded against her ribs, pounding blood through her body. Drawing in a deep breath, she put her head in her hands. No dream had caused this rude awakening. Just a strange sense of foreboding she couldn't understand that clung to her, even now. She slipped out of bed and went to her knees.

For a long time, she prayed what was on her heart. So much confusion tangled her thoughts, no matter how hard she tried to make sense of it. When she did rise, her knees ached, but she barely noticed. Reality and hope collided inside her. She shook her head. She could not let hope win. It would only cause her pain later. But . . . what if it was true?

“Ugh,” Makilien murmured in frustration. “Impossible.”

Blowing out a heavy sigh, she walked over to her wardrobe and stared inside for much longer than necessary before choosing an outfit. Mumbling to herself, she changed out of her nightgown and into the pale blue dress. Birds sang joyfully in the bright morning sun right outside her window, oblivious to the struggle in her mind. She stepped to the door and paused, closing her eyes.

“I just can't understand this, Elohim. When is any of it going to make sense?” She drew in another deep breath. “I

really need You to guide me. I've never been so confused before."

She stepped out of her room. The sound of dishes came from downstairs. She hurried down and into the dining room where she found Leiya setting the table for breakfast.

"Good morning," the little girl said cheerfully.

Makilien couldn't help but smile as she responded.

Her mother came from the kitchen with breakfast in hand. "You girls can sit down. Your father will be here in a minute."

Makilien took a seat across from her sister as Leiya chattered about a fawn she had found the other day. Attempting to overcome her distraction, Makilien smiled and asked questions Leiya was quick to answer. Soon their parents joined them. After taking her first bite of eggs, Leiya asked, "What are you going to do today, Makilien?"

"I'll probably go over to Lord Elnauhir's house as soon as I'm finished at the stable and talk to Tylor." She glanced at her mother. "No use putting it off."

Leiya tilted her head as she too looked at Hanna. "Why are men coming from Minarald to see Makilien?"

Hanna gave her a smile. "Well, because they admire Makilien's accomplishments and what she has done for Eldor, and they believe she would make a good wife. They are hoping to win her affection."

Leiya stuck out her bottom lip. "I don't want Makilien to marry someone from Minarald."

"Now, Leiya," Hanna said gently. "That is Makilien's decision."

Makilien settled her eyes on her sister. "Don't worry. That isn't going to happen."

Leiya stared down into her lap. A sorrowful look came to her face as she murmured to herself. Though she didn't mean for anyone to hear, Makilien caught the whispered words. "I wanted Makilien to marry Sirion."

Makilien's throat squeezed, and she swallowed her breakfast with difficulty. It hurt to see how Sirion's death had affected not just her, but her family as well. They had come to love him so dearly in the short time they had been together.

She cleared her throat and took a drink of fresh milk to wash down the food. Whether her mother had heard Leiya's comment or only sensed the mood, she changed the subject.

"When are you going to begin your new dress, Makilien?"

"Um, soon." Makilien took a breath. "Maybe Vonawyn and I will go look for material today if there is time."

"I can't wait to see it when it's finished."

Makilien managed a smile. "Neither can I. Vonawyn told me what she has in mind, but I'm anxious to see it come together."

"I'm sure it will be just lovely," Hanna said, "and perfect for the celebration."

Talk of the celebration helped lighten the mood. The whole family looked forward to participating in all the upcoming spring activities in their new home. Such things had never been common in Reylaun.

As soon as breakfast was finished, Makilien and her father prepared to leave. Néthyn had work, and Makilien was anxious to get this talk with Tylor over and done with. Leiya followed the two of them to the entryway.

"Makilien, when you see Elmorhirian, will you ask him if he forgot his promise?"

"What promise is that?"

Leiya's face and tone turned very serious. "He promised he'd take me to catch tadpoles."

Makilien chuckled at her expression. "I'm sure he would never forget such a promise, but I will ask him."

Now Leiya smiled. "Thank you."

Reaching out to tickle her as she passed by, Makilien stepped outside after her father. Side by side, they walked toward the stable. It turned out they shared a deep love for horses, and since making their home in Elimar, Néthyn had secured a job working at the stable.

For a couple of minutes, they walked in silence, but Néthyn looked at his daughter keenly. "Are you all right?"

Makilien glanced at him. "Yes, I am," but she realized it didn't sound convincing. She shrugged. "I just have a lot on my mind."

Néthyn put his arm around her shoulders. He said nothing, but the comfort was enough.

At the stable, they parted after her father gave her a few encouraging words, and Makilien felt her spirits further lifted to find Antiro waiting for her at the entrance of his pasture. He nickered a greeting, and she hugged his neck.

"Good morning, boy."

He turned his head to nuzzle her face, his warm breath blowing softly across her cheeks. He could always sense her moods.

"Yeah, today isn't the greatest day," she admitted. She rubbed the velvety soft part of his nose. "I have another suitor to turn down."

Antiro stomped his hoof into the ground, and Makilien gave him a wry smile. "I agree . . . but this one will be the last."

She turned toward the stable and said over her shoulder, "I'll be right back."

When she returned, she brought a small bucket of Antiro's favorite grain and a brush. While he eagerly munched away, she brushed his black coat until it shone in the morning sunlight and took a step back to admire it. "Looks like that's it for your winter coat."

Finishing the grain, he nosed her for more.

"Nope. I don't want you getting fat."

Antiro shook his mane.

Makilien raised an eyebrow. "I'm serious. Besides, I have to go take care of Falene now."

With Antiro staring after her, she left the pasture, walking back to the stable. She stopped at one of the stalls inside, leaning against the door.

"Morning, Falene."

Responding to her voice, the gray and white paint mare turned and stuck her head over the stall door. Makilien ran her hand down the horse's face and smoothed her forelock. The horse sighed in contentment.

Opening the door, she led Falene outside, mindful of the mare's limping gate. In an area of the pasture fenced in just for her, Makilien let the horse go. She watched her take a few slow steps and stop to graze.

Makilien exhaled heavily, eyes a little misty. Most people had thought Falene should be put down after suffering such a severe injury to her hind leg, but after discovering she was still alive, Makilien just couldn't bear to let such a thing happen. She'd spent hours in the stable at Minarald caring for the horse, unwilling to listen to anyone who said she'd never be able to walk again. Her friends supported her though. Elmorhirian and one of the leatherworkers in the city had even helped

her rig a special harness and hood so Carmine could carry Falene to Elimar. It was a lot to go through just for a horse, but Falene was one link she still had to Sirion, and she made it her personal goal to see his horse was well looked after for all the remaining years of her life.

Makilien lingered at the stable far longer than usual. It was a peaceful place for her, and she didn't want to leave it. But, at last, she resigned herself once again to the inevitable and trudged toward Lord Elnauhir's house. Her stomach gave a nervous flutter as she let herself in, but the first thing to greet her was Elmorhirian's distinct outburst of laughter. This could not help but bring a smile to her face, if only for a moment.

She followed the sound into the living room. Just as she came to the doorway, Elmorhirian said, "You're getting old, Torick."

"So you keep reminding me every chance you get," the man responded in an irritable tone.

Shaking her head, Makilien stepped inside. Halandor and Torick sat in two chairs while Elandir was on the sofa and Elmorhirian stood behind him. The two Elves were grinning at Torick, Elmorhirian still giggling.

With a look of disgust, Torick muttered, "You two are the bane of my existence."

Elmorhirian snorted again with laughter.

"You just wait until I'm gone, then you'll be sorry," Torick warned him.

"Oh, don't say that, Torick."

At the sound of her voice, everyone turned to Makilien.

"Good morning," Elmorhirian said brightly.

"Morning," she replied, just holding back a grin. The Elf brothers' humor was always contagious.

Elmorhirian's eyes jumped back to Torick. "You know, she's right. You still have plenty of good years left to enjoy our company."

Torick rolled his eyes, and now Makilien did smile as she walked in to stand near Elmorhirian. A moment of silence followed. The men exchanged glances, no doubt wondering if she would bring up Tylor, not wanting to themselves. Makilien tipped her head a little. "So, where is he?"

"Uh, I think he's with Father," Elmorhirian answered. "He wanted to see the library after breakfast."

"Do you want me to get him?" Elandir asked.

Makilien hesitated for only a moment. "Yes, please."

As the Elf rose, Makilien was aware of how closely Halandor watched her. Finally, he asked, "You're sure you are up for this?"

"I'm sure," she answered, with a nod to reinforce it. She wasn't really, and she doubted Halandor believed it, but she was determined to be strong and go through with this.

Elmorhirian turned to her.

"Just so you know," he said in a conspiratorial whisper, "last night Elandir and I made sure he was a decent guy, with some help from Torick."

"I do hope you were polite."

Elmorhirian snorted. "Polite? We're always polite."

Makilien raised her eyebrows, but couldn't suppress a smile, especially when he gave her that mischievous grin of his. "So what was your discovery?"

"We like him," Elmorhirian said with a nod. He paused. "But that doesn't mean you have to."

Makilien shrugged. "We'll see."

And so she waited, stomach squeezing and churning. For some reason, this time seemed harder than usual. Perhaps

nearing the one-year mark of losing Sirion made everything more difficult. No one said much in the next couple of minutes, though Elmorhirian continued to make humorous remarks in an attempt to make her laugh and relieve the tension. She didn't laugh, but he could always draw a smile from her.

When the sound of footsteps approached the living room, Makilien pulled in a deep breath, reminding herself of all the far more threatening situations she'd faced in the past. This should be simple. Elandir entered first, followed by his father. And directly behind him came Tylor. He stepped into the room and his gaze found her immediately.

Though not in uniform, he held himself like a soldier, tall, disciplined, but the smile he offered was kind and genuine. He was certainly one of the more attractive men to come calling—dark haired with brown eyes that reminded Makilien a little too much of Sirion. She swallowed hard, attempting to will away the stab of pain in her chest. This had suddenly become even more difficult. She was glad when Elnauhir stepped in to introduce them. She didn't know if she could have found her voice at that moment.

"Tylor, this is Makilien." The Elf lord turned to her. "Makilien, Captain Tylor."

The young captain stepped forward. "Makilien, it is an honor to meet you."

Giving him her best smile, she replied, "It is good to meet you, Captain."

"Tylor, please."

Makilien gave a quick nod, but her brain wouldn't supply her with a suitable reply. Neither one said anything for a moment. Glancing around the room, Makilien realized all eyes watched them, and this further scrambled her thoughts. Tylor must have noticed it too.

“Would you care to go for a walk?” he asked. “This is actually my first visit to Elimar. I’d love to see as much of it as I can.”

“I’d like that,” Makilien said graciously, praying for clear thoughts.

Tylor turned, allowing her to precede him on the way to the door. Just before leaving the room, Makilien turned back for a moment.

“Oh, Elmorhirian, my sister is expecting you to keep your promise to her.”

“Already planning it,” the Elf replied.

Makilien smiled. “I told her you wouldn’t forget.”

Out in the hall, Makilien and Tylor walked quietly side by side. Just before they were out of earshot, Makilien caught Torick say something about a walk.

“Goodness, Torick,” Elandir exclaimed, “you’re as protective as an old mother hen.”

“What?” Torick growled. “I need to exercise this leg of mine.”

“Sure.”

Makilien chuckled softly and glanced at Tylor to find him smiling. She almost felt sorry for him. He had to feel anxious under the scrutiny of so many, and she couldn’t imagine the number of questions the poor man had been subjected to. Not many young women were as blessed as she to have such a large group of protective friends.

At the door, Tylor opened it for her, and they stepped outside.

“It’s been a beautiful spring, hasn’t it?” he asked as they descended the stairs and turned right along the main path through Elimar.

“It has,” Makilien agreed. “It’s the first time I’ve witnessed it fully outside of Reylaun.”

“What was it like there?”

Makilien took in the surroundings, mentally comparing it to her memories. “A lot less beautiful. There weren’t many flowers, and everything was always so muddy. Between the mud and the dreary buildings, spring didn’t hold the excitement and newness it does here.”

For a time, the two of them continued to talk of things such as this—her past life and her adventures, avoiding the real reason behind their walk. With some relief, Makilien found Tylor easy to talk to, at least about day-to-day topics. Her first impression that he was a kind young man proved true. He smiled often and shared her love for things of natural beauty. He also had a good sense of humor, chuckling with her when they caught sight of Torick on his “walk” close by.

It was as they drew near to Lord Elnauhir’s house once again, that the conversation reached its crucial point. They both stopped, and Tylor faced Makilien.

“I know I don’t have to tell you why it is I’ve come here. I think just about the whole city is aware of my intentions,” he said with a chuckle.

She gave him a quick smile though her stomach churned again. “Word gets around fast in a close community like this.”

“I also know I am not the first to have called on you. I spoke with your father for a long time yesterday.” He was serious now, voice gentle. “I want you to know, I am fully aware of what you are going through, and I don’t think I can even begin to imagine it. The war caused incredible pain for so many people.”

Emotion rose up inside Makilien faster than she could contain it, and she looked down at her hands, blinking as her eyes filled with tears. She didn't want to cry in front of him, knowing he would blame himself for it.

"Considering this, I think I already know your answer," he went on, "but I must ask, otherwise I'll regret it if I don't. You are an amazing woman, Makilien, one I would love to become better acquainted with and even court if you would allow it."

Makilien struggled to take a deep breath as her throat squeezed shut. Though she kept them from falling, tears glittered in her eyes. Seeing this, Tylor's expression fell.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to cause you more pain."

She shook her head, fighting to compose herself. All she could think of were Torick's words from a year ago, telling her not to give up on love. She wanted it, deeply, and she couldn't deny Tylor was the first one who had caused her thoughts to return to that conversation. But she could not let go. She just couldn't. Not yet.

Clearing her throat, she spoke quietly. "You are very kind, Tylor, and one of the most understanding men I've met in the last couple of months, but the truth is, even though he's gone . . . I still love Sirion just as much now as I did a year ago. I can't say whether I'll ever be able to love anyone else. Maybe, someday, but I just don't know. Because of that, I have to say no."

Tylor nodded without the slightest hint of persistence or frustration in his expression. "I understand. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you. I know it wasn't easy. If you'd like, I'll escort you back to the house."

Makilien gave him a grateful smile. "Thank you, I appreciate your understanding."

They walked the remaining distance in silence. At the door, she stopped.

"I think I am going to the garden for a while." She looked up into his eyes. "Again, thank you for understanding."

He nodded and she turned away, but when he said her name, she looked back to meet his earnest gaze.

"I am deeply sorry for your loss. I hope, someday, if it is meant to be, you find someone worthy of your love."

Makilien's breath released in a painful sigh. "You too, Tylor."

She walked on, trying to sort through her emotions, coming to the fountain in the center of the garden. She visited this peaceful area often to think and pray, especially in the last few weeks. Taking a seat on the edge, she bowed her head and closed her eyes, thinking things over, exhausted by it all. The last time she remembered experiencing such turmoil was back in Reylaun before meeting Torick, and she didn't want it to be this way. She yearned for direction and peace.

Though she never heard any footsteps, Vonawyn came to sit beside her several minutes later. She looked at the Elf maiden, expression weary.

Vonawyn gave her a sympathetic look. "It didn't go well?"

"No, it was all right," Makilien answered. "He was very understanding. He's a good man."

Vonawyn agreed.

"And that's just the problem." Makilien exhaled slowly. "I almost wish he'd been one of the undesirable ones."

The Elf gave her a knowing look. "Are you feeling something for him?"

But Makilien shook her head. “No, not really. I mean, maybe I could, possibly, if I didn’t still love Sirion.” She met her friend’s gaze, eyes filling again, and her voice came out thick. “This is *so* hard. I don’t want to be alone all my life. I really don’t, but I just don’t think I can let him go.”

Vonawyn took Makilien’s hands in her own and squeezed them tight. “That may be true, but don’t discount time. Time changes many things. It is still so recent, and the pain of it still so strong. I know it’s difficult, but give yourself the time to discover what Elohim has in store for you.”

Makilien closed her eyes, breathing heavily. Her friend was right, and she wanted it to comfort her, but the turmoil in her mind still weighed her down. All the conflict and confusion she’d experienced that morning when she woke hung over her, making everything harder to cope with.

“There’s more, Vonawyn.”

The Elf squeezed her hands again, worry shadowing her usual sparkling eyes. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Makilien hesitated. She didn’t know how Vonawyn would respond to what she had to say when she didn’t even know how to respond to it herself. “I haven’t told anyone about this yet because, at first, I thought it was just because I missed him so much, but it’s happening more often lately . . .”

She paused wondering if she was just crazy, if she was letting her grief affect her more than she realized, but she had to continue. Had to get it out in the open. She’d dealt with it on her own for too long. “I have times where I feel an overwhelming need to pray for Sirion. Like he’s in danger or something.”

Swallowing nervously, Makilien watched her friend, saw the surprise in her expression. She shook her head, feeling foolish. “I know it sounds crazy because why would that be if

he's . . . gone? But that's the problem. I find these urges to pray for him putting hope in my heart that maybe . . . by some incredible miracle, he is still alive, somewhere."

She groaned. "But how could he be? I realize how this all sounds, but I just don't know what to do anymore. I don't know whether to let myself have hope or if I just need to let this go. I know I am torturing myself, but I can't help thinking of what my life might have been like these last months if he was here, where we might be now. What if it's the longing for what could have been that is making me feel this way? Do I just have to let it go and force it all from my mind?"

Vonawyn said nothing at first, taking in the implications of what Makilien had told her and considering her friend's emotions. Makilien stared at her, desperate eyes searching her face for answers.

At last, the Elf spoke carefully, "I'm not sure what to tell you." She paused in hesitation. "I do know Elohim can put it in our hearts to pray for those in need . . . but I can't tell you whether or not it could mean Sirion is alive or if it is just your longing for him. I won't tell you to ignore it if you do feel you should pray. I think it would be a good idea to talk to my father or Halandor . . . especially Halandor. He knows what you're going through."

Makilien nodded, both exhausted and relieved over finally sharing with someone.

"Why don't you have lunch with us?" Vonawyn suggested. "I know Tylor will be there, so maybe you don't want to, but then you could talk to my father or Halandor afterward."

Makilien didn't give an immediate answer. It would be difficult to see Tylor again, but easier now than before. "I think I will."

With a comforting smile, Vonawyn rose. “Good. Come on.”



Despite the uncertainty surrounding her, Makilien quite enjoyed the meal. It was good to be with her friends, and Tylor still proved to be good company. But as soon as lunch ended, she focused once more on the reason she’d accepted the invitation. Stepping away from the table, she came to Halandor.

“I’d like to speak with you, if I could,” she said.

“Of course.”

They left the dining room and walked out to the terrace overlooking the garden. Taking seats across from each other, Halandor asked, “Is this about Tylor?”

Makilien shook her head. “No, actually, it’s something else. I spoke to Vonawyn earlier, and she suggested I speak to you or her father. I chose you because you understand what I’ve had to endure these months.”

Halandor gave an understanding nod, and she went on to tell him everything she had shared with Vonawyn.

“Did you ever experience anything like that? How am I supposed to react to it?”

She watched him hopefully, praying she would now receive guidance. He did not often look surprised, yet it was clear he had not expected what she told him.

“I can’t say I ever did,” he said slowly, thinking as he did so. “You’re sure it’s Sirion you feel this need for?”

“Yes, I’m positive,” Makilien assured him. “I don’t really know how to explain it, but the sense that he could be in trouble was strong enough to wake me up just this morning.”

Rubbing his chin thoughtfully, Halandor stared off into the garden.

“Halandor.”

His eyes returned to Makilien.

She swallowed, heart thumping. “Do you think it would be foolish of me to have a little hope?”

He stared at her for a long moment, noting how her eyes starved for an answer. The last thing he wanted was to raise her hopes unnecessarily, only to see them crushed, but he shook his head. “No, I don’t.”

A spark of light entered her eyes, a sight he had not seen in a long time, but he was quick to caution her, “Just be careful until there is something stronger to base your hope on. I don’t have to tell you how unlikely it is that Sirion somehow survived somewhere, but I can’t give you an answer as to why you feel the way you do. I think you should pray when you feel you should, but also pray Elohim will show you the truth in all this. I am certain He will at the appropriate time. I too will pray about it, and I’ll talk to Elnauhir. Perhaps he will know more.”

:Chapter Three:

Captives

Dawn broke over the open grassland. For the next half hour, the world would be gray, colorless—a fitting way for the day to begin. A new day of pain. A new day to find the strength to struggle on.

The last of night's chill breeze rustled the tall grass and swept over the prisoners. Sirion shivered, his body numb with the cold. He stared blankly at the shackles around his scarred wrists, the metal stained with blood long since dried. He tried to remember when he had been without them, but the days had all blurred into one never-ending nightmare. He hardly knew where or how it had begun. He remembered collapsing on the battlefield and believing he was dying. After that, only dim snatches of images, hollow voices, weakness, and pain. Though he had somehow recovered from his wounds, what followed were long weeks of sitting in dark, cramped cells, his only companions those bent on causing him misery. Grueling treks from one cruel place to another interrupted these times, and he had no knowledge of where he was now. Aldûlir, he guessed, but he could be anywhere. Wherever it was, he had never felt farther from home.

The harsh crack of a whip split the silence of early morning. Sirion flinched. An all too familiar pain radiated across his shoulders at the mere sound.

“Wake up, you worthless filth!”

Sirion squeezed his eyes shut, desperate to wish that awful voice away.

“I want to see everyone up now!”

With a heavy sigh, Sirion pushed himself to his knees. He swayed a little, stricken with a weakness he’d never known before this. Groans of misery rose up around him amid the clanking of chains. His tired eyes ranged over his fellow prisoners—thirty men and women of varying ages—ragged, filthy clothes hanging from their battered bodies.

A hulking tower of a man moved through the group, keen sight searching, almost hoping, for anyone who had failed to obey his commands. The long, coiled whip hung from his fist. Prisoners cowered around him, knowing even a wrong look could earn them a taste of its sting.

Halen—a name Sirion would forever attribute to suffering and the most abominable cruelty—moved in his direction, but he did not cower. One of the only things he had left was his dignity, and he held tight to the scrap of it that remained. He caught Halen’s cold eyes and held them just long enough to prove that, even after all this long time, the man had not broken him as he had the others.

Once satisfied all his captives were awake, Halen ordered the guards to feed the prisoners. The men picked up three burlap sacks and tossed bits of food into the group. Sirion caught his portion before it hit the ground. He stared down at the meager breakfast ration, a hard, dry chunk of bread the size of his palm. Prisoners scrambled around him, fighting for every crumb.

“No! Please! I need food!”

Sirion’s gaze jerked to the young woman chained nearest him. She reached out toward a skinny young man, but her chains held her back. The man clutched two bits of bread to his chest and turned his back on her. Eyes void of any hope, the young woman huddled into a little ball, hugging her knees up to her chest. Rocking back and forth, mournful tears trailed down her smudged cheeks.

Sirion stared at her, noting how tiny she was. His eyes fell to his piece of bread. It made him acutely aware of the deep, empty ache of his stomach and his hunger-weakened body. He needed food as much as anyone did. But, ignoring his own desires, he turned toward the young woman and extended the bread.

“Have mine.”

One of the other captive men lunged for it, but Sirion held it out of reach, making sure it made it into the woman’s hands. She guarded it like a precious treasure and stared at him with wide blue eyes.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

Sirion nodded, but his attempt at a smile failed.

The young woman tore into the bread, gulping it down in seconds. Sirion watched and tried to ignore how he craved nourishment. His eyes dropped wearily to his chains. *I need strength, Elohim.* Heaviness descended on his heart. Elohim had seemed so distant and silent these past months of daily torture and misery. Sirion had waited every moment of every day for rescue from this nightmare. Now he despaired of it ever coming. But his faith had been tested in the past, and he knew above all he had to cling to it. Without it, what hope did he have? He had to trust that Elohim had a reason

for keeping him alive on the battlefield and in the time since.

The guards moved through the group again, this time with waterskins. When they offered one to Sirion, he swallowed down as much as possible before they yanked it away. These few gulps of water would need to sustain him until midday.

“Everyone on your feet!” Halen bellowed as soon as they’d all had their water.

Sirion rose, stretching his sore muscles. His fellow captives rose around him, many struggling. This would be day six of their march to some unknown location, and Sirion wondered if all would make it.

Halen and his men mounted their horses.

“Move out!”

Slowly at first, the captives set out on their day’s trek. The people walked in silence, faces bleak and resigned. On horseback, the men surrounded the group, watching. A couple rode behind, prodding them to move faster. It would get worse later in the day. Halen’s whip was sure to be unleashed at some point.

The sun climbed up behind the captives, growing hotter with every hour. Sirion shrugged his shoulders as sweat trickled down his back and his hair stuck to his neck. Flies buzzed around him and the others like they were a herd of cattle. He gritted his teeth, allowing outrage at this treatment to keep him going.

Midmorning, the young woman he’d given the bread to stumbled. Glassy-eyed, she swayed. Sirion reached for her, but wasn’t fast enough. She went down, crumpling into a pitiful heap and forcing the entire group to stop.

“Get up and get moving!” one of the guards shouted.

Sirion knelt next to the young woman and put his hands on her shoulders. "You must get up," he urged.

"I can't," she whimpered. "I can't go on."

Sirion gave one of the guards a pleading look. "She needs water."

Hoof beats pounded behind him, and he glanced over his shoulder. Halen yanked his horse to a halt and leapt out of the saddle, fury in his dark eyes.

"She can't go on without water," Sirion said, trying to make him understand.

But Halen ignored his words. He jerked his whip from his belt and let it uncoil.

Sirion's heart beat hard. "Please," he tried once more.

Halen strode toward them without pity, raising his whip as he advanced. Leaning to shield the woman, Sirion covered his head just as the whip snapped, hot pain streaking across the middle of his back. He bit down hard and swallowed his reaction to the pain. He held up his hands. "Stop. I can help her. Just let me help her walk."

In two strides, Halen was beside him. The man bent down and grabbed Sirion's hair, jerking his head so they were looking eye to eye.

"Then do it," the man growled. His voice lowered in hatred, and he spat through clenched teeth. "And don't you dare defy me again."

He released Sirion with a shove and stormed back to his horse. Sirion focused again on the young woman who lay there weeping.

"It's all right. You can make it," he encouraged her gently. "I will help you."

He took her by the arm and pulled her to her feet.

"Now get moving!" Halen shouted.

The group moved forward, and Sirion helped the woman take her steps, supporting most of her slight weight at first until she found her strength. He wondered how she had ever made it this far. Though not as skinny as some, there wasn't much to her. A small girl, the top of her head barely reached his shoulder. Her mournful sobbing cut into his heart, and he searched for a way to distract her from their circumstances.

"What is your name?"

The young woman sniffed and brushed the back of her hand across her face. "Iryna."

"I'm Sirion." He then repeated her name. "That means 'hope'."

She gave a joyless laugh. "It shouldn't. The last thing I have is hope."

Sirion looked at her, eyes full of sympathy. At times, he too felt he had no hope. "There is hope in Elohim," he murmured as much to himself as to her.

Iryna shook her head in defeat. "I don't think I can find hope in anyone. I don't even know how I will keep on."

Gathering strength and determination, Sirion gazed out across the grassland. "You see that lone tree ahead?"

Iryna squinted. "Yes."

"Right now, just focus on making it to that tree, all right? You can make it. We'll worry about the next distance when we get there."

Iryna drew in a deep breath, expression setting with her own determination. "All right."

They walked in silence for a time. Sirion winced, his damp shirt sticking to the welt across his back. The whiplash had not broken flesh this time, something Halen could have done effortlessly. Sirion didn't understand this. Halen had been

more careful with him in the last few weeks. He couldn't imagine why since the man had never held back in the past. It certainly wasn't out of mercy.

"Thank you for helping me," Irynna broke his thoughts.

He looked down at her. "You're welcome."

Irynna stared ahead to the tree that was their goal and then back up at Sirion. "Why are you helping me?"

"Because it's right, and I hate cruelty," he told her, the spark of anger over their treatment returning to burn in his heart and fuel his perseverance.

"You're stronger than the rest of us," Irynna murmured and swallowed hard. "I don't think right and wrong matters to us anymore, only survival."

Sirion knew this was true. He had seen proof of it in the young man who'd stolen Irynna's bread, but he could hardly condemn them after all he'd endured himself. He knew just how difficult it was to fight the despair and the instinct to do whatever was necessary to survive. "How long have you been a captive?"

Irynna hung her head. "A year, almost."

"What happened?"

Acute pain crossed her face. Sirion quickly apologized. "You don't have to talk about it."

"No," she replied, voice sad. "Keeping it to myself won't make it not be." She grimaced, tears sparkling in her eyes. "Slavers raided my village. They killed my father and brothers when they tried to stop them from taking me. I'm not sure what happened to my mother."

"I'm sorry," Sirion said, burdened by what she and the others around him had witnessed. His voice lowered. "My family was killed by Shaikes when I was a boy."

"Is that how you got here?"

Sirion shook his head and shared what little he knew about his captivity. Once he'd finished, one question burned in his mind, one that had plagued him for so long.

"Irynna, have you heard of Makilien?"

She glanced up at him with a quick nod. "Yes."

He hesitated, suddenly afraid. Could he live with the answer to his next question if it wasn't the news he prayed for every single day? Could he bear that on top of all this? Words catching in his throat, he asked, "Do you know if she survived the battle in Minarald?"

Irynna peered up at him, and Sirion held his breath.

"I'm sorry, I don't know."

He exhaled, both disappointed and relieved, and once again, he prayed.

After another short time of silence, they continued talking quietly. They talked of both their lives prior to captivity, sharing their dreams and regrets. Soon they reached the tree Sirion had set as a goal, but because of their conversation, barely noticed. After all the months of only enemies for company, Sirion found great relief in having someone understanding to talk to.



Evening descended with the sun sinking into a shimmering haze on the horizon ahead of them. Sirion breathed heavily, muscles cramping and weak, and head pounding with dehydration. Beside him, Irynna was close to collapsing again. Sirion forced himself to keep on, for her sake. Praying they would soon make camp for the night, he looked up, eyes landing on a city wall in the distance. The first sign of population in almost a week.

“I think we’ve reached our destination,” he murmured to Iryna.

She glanced up, though she had to put effort into raising her head. “Just so long as we stop soon.”

They came to a well-worn road making travel a little easier on the prisoners. In another half hour, they arrived at the city gate. Sirion took in the surroundings, trying to discover clues to their location. A rough stone wall rose up twenty-five feet and circled around as far as he could see.

Through the gate, they entered a sprawling city. The streets teemed with people. Sirion studied those they passed. A few were dressed richly and looked down upon the prisoners with disdain. But most, he noticed, appeared nearly as bad off as they were—grimy, underfed men, women, and children with grim expressions. When they passed an intersection crowded with people, full understanding hit him. At the front of the crowd sat an auctioning block, and behind, rows of slaves waiting to be bid on. The city was a slave trade center, and the majority of the inhabitants were themselves slaves.

Travel was slow for the group. They wound their way down the crooked streets lined by dirty plaster buildings squeezed together to take advantage of all available space. People bumped and scowled at them, shoving them out of the way if they were especially ill tempered.

In the end, their journey brought them to a massive warehouse. Halen and a few of the guards led the prisoners inside. Only four windows high above allowed in any light. Sirion choked on the heavy air as soon as they entered. It reeked of sweat and waste, stinging his nose and throat. As his watery eyes adjusted to the low light, he saw the building was divided into cells. Many already contained large groups

of captives. A man met them in the wide aisle leading across the building. Older and hunched, he peered up at Halen through strands of wild gray hair.

“I’ve got new merchandise,” Halen told him.

The man studied the prisoners, the last bit of sunlight glinting in his cold, void eyes. He grunted and shuffled to the nearest empty cell, unlocking the door. It swung open with a loud shriek that sent a shiver down Sirion’s spine.

The guards moved the prisoners along, herding them into the cell. As most collapsed inside, the door slammed shut behind them. Sirion watched Halen stride off and sank to his knees. For a long time, silence hung around them except for the heavy breathing of the prisoners. No one said anything until Sirion heard Irynna sniff.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“They’re just going to sell us off like livestock,” she cried, voice trembling and so quiet he almost couldn’t hear her.

Sirion put his hand on her shoulder, wishing he had words to encourage her. In a way, the prospect of being sold gave him a spark of hope. His new master might not watch him as closely as Halen, providing opportunity for escape. And if he did, he already determined to find Irynna and take her with him. He could never live with leaving her behind, but to tell her where the others might overhear would be unwise. He couldn’t save them all.

The inside of the warehouse darkened. Feeling around for space, they settled in as comfortably as they could. Just when they expected to be left in peace for the night, the warehouse door creaked open. In came Halen, the man with the keys, and a handful of new men, clothed in black. A couple held torches aloft, the flickering orange glow surrounding them as they marched down the aisle.

Sirion watched them come right to the cell containing him and his fellow captives. As soon as the door was unlocked, a fearsome man with a harsh expression walked in with Halen who glared down at Sirion. "Get up."

Sirion glanced once at the other man and rose to his feet. Halen promptly detached his shackles from the main chain and shoved him toward the door.

"Keep him secured," Halen ordered the other men.

Two of them grasped Sirion's arms. Even if he'd wanted to pull away, he wouldn't have had the strength.

Halen turned back to the man still inside the cell.

"Which ones?"

The man eyed the prisoners.

"Those three and the girl."

Halen unchained the three strongest young men in the group and Iryna. Her eyes, wide and fearful, jumped to Sirion as they led her out. With their prisoners between them, the men proceeded out of the warehouse. Outside, the area glowed eerily with lanterns and a nearby pit fire. Someone shoved Sirion from behind. They moved on, heading in the direction away from where they'd entered the city. Sirion scanned the streets. Where would they be taken this time?