

Prologue

All other nations retreated, leaving the Old World, which used to be shared by all, to the human nation only. But even that was not enough for the constantly growing greed in the human race. Greed was seeded deeply, and despite the best efforts of their leader, it would not leave this nation for good. There were always people who were happy to live their ordinary lives, and there were always those who were not content with it and wanted more. To want more, on its own, must be an outstanding quality, or even another gift from the creator, as it was a moving force for people to seek more. More knowledge, more development, more skills, more abilities. More joy from life. Only those who were not content with what life was offering right now would seek something more, something different, something new. And only those who seek would discover things yet not known. Many people succeed, many people grow beyond the understanding of others. By doing so, they not only empowered their own lives but also brought success to those around them.

But when stained with greed, this gift from god loses its meaning, becoming the downfall of humanity, bringing swarms of those who didn't want to share with others and, above all, those who were ready to take by force something that never belonged to them. One part hoarding, another part robbing, bringing devastation, suffering, and death to those who didn't want any of it.

After millennia of efforts, Gifted Jonathan, who represented the human nation, began to realise that his lifelong dream of uniting humanity to live in harmony, or at least to respect one another, was not going to become a reality, no matter how hard he tried.

He sought the other seventeen Gifted with the same request that he helped to fulfil so many times when they asked for this kind of help: to create a new world for his nation, where those who want to live without violence and superiority over others could move.

His request was denied as other Gifted didn't see how the same nation could have a different outcome in another world than in this one. The same people would be living there, the same problems would arise, and it would just multiply the problem instead of solving it.

Jonathan could not argue about this logic; however, he couldn't abandon his dreams either. Together with his friend, they worked on how this plan could become a reality. Desire and effort will never be overlooked, and there will always be a response.

Events didn't unfold as Jonathan wanted, but nevertheless, a new world was created, with very different rules from any other world before, but also with different alliances.

Not all eighteen joined in the creation of this newly born world, and it did not become self-sustained. The borders of such a world have to be constantly maintained by reinforcing from within with the essence of the reason why this world was created at the very beginning. If these reasons are not supported any longer, that would mean that it is not needed any more and would collide back with the Old World.

As this world was created by one person, a singular person with a clear and strong will was enough to support its existence. The creator of this world took this task on himself – a task that until then was unheard of, as no one ever believed that a person could perform such a task.

However, this time, circumstances were extraordinary – to come to live in this world, you needed an invitation, or rather, permission of the very person who created it, and in exchange for this permission, you agreed to live by the rules on which this world was created. This permission was not verbal, not something you would agree or disagree with by words or even fully understand in your mind. Nevertheless, it was crucial for anyone who wanted to become a resident of this

world. And one didn't even need to know about the existence of this world to want to come and live in it. By breaking this agreement, you lose the connection given to you and become a stranger to this world, an outcast that doesn't have the right to stay here any longer.

A gates were created for those who consciously or unconsciously wanted to come or leave, simply by choosing a lifestyle that would give an invitation to come or would send you out to a place more suitable for your lifestyle. In the early days of this world, no one found these gates to be unfair.

However, there were no written records left about it, and what used to be so natural and straightforward that no records were even needed somehow became forgotten later in history.

Jonathan created this world, and Jonathan allowed others to come and live here in exchange for an unbreakable connection to this world through him.

So his word and power were unquestionable and indisputable, no matter whether it was related to the world or to the people living in it.

People were calling him King, and after that, this world became a kingdom. A Kingdom of one ruler with unlimited power.

Can all go well under such a structure? No, it cannot. At least not for very long.

When one is caring for all, the day when that one will fall is unavoidable. The strength of the carrier only determines how far away this day is. Even the strongest of people are not born to carry the burdens of others. For them to realise it, life eventually will put so much on their shoulders that it will break even the strongest will, to break a person free from the weight that should never have been theirs from the very beginning.

When that day came for King Jonathan, he deemed himself unworthy of his place and sealed himself away from the very same world he dreamed about all his life and into which he put so much heart, thought, and effort.

The rules on which this world was created could not be changed without breaking it apart. But King Jonathan didn't leave this place defenceless or in the dark; but he stopped shining that light on those who didn't want to see it.

He left all of his knowledge available for anyone who seeks it. He made sure that this knowledge would be accessible to seekers, no matter whether others agree or oppose.

He also left his power, by which this world was born, available for everyone, too. But only one person at a time could gain and wield it. And it was not for that person to decide that he wants this power. It was for the power to choose its next bearer. However, life decisions and the desires of that person were deciding factors in being chosen or not. And no matter how much the current wielder would like to maintain it, if a new person is born whose heart and aims are more in alignment with this power, it would mercilessly leave the previous bearer and offer its strength, power, and abilities to the new candidate, a new King. Power of the King, it was called by the people. King without this power was no King any more, and anyone who received this power would become King instantly, whether they liked it or not.

A new era of different Kings has taken place.

CHAPTER

1

Intrusion

That morning started similarly to many other mornings, and after breakfast, Rainee and Anniet were making their way through the School premises. But before they had reached class, something drew Rainee's attention. She stopped, listened for a while, and then changed direction. Instead of reaching her class, they came to the square at the very centre of the town, next to the headmaster's quarters.

Rainee would visit the headmaster often; sometimes she would take Anniet with her. Most of the time, she would ask her to stay behind. But this time Rainee didn't enter the headmaster's office but stood outside for a little while, listening as if hoping to hear something.

"Are you expecting someone?" – Anniet asked, looking around too.

Despite it being just a morning, the place was already busy. In fact, it was always busy in the past few weeks as the number of residents has grown considerably.

Rainee didn't know herself why she had come to this place. She just followed her instincts that brought her here. It wasn't easy to explain to those who didn't have this feeling what it is, but she has learned not to ignore it. She stood for a few minutes looking around and listening, but nothing was happening. Actually, a lot was happening, but nothing that would require her attention, as people were just living their usual lives. The headmaster herself was sleeping in her office. Not a very usual place to sleep, but then again, not something that would need her help.

"No," - she answered Anniet's question, - "at least not that I would know."

She waited for a few more minutes, thinking to herself if her ever-so-accurate instincts had started to be less accurate now that they were no longer needed in her daily life.

"Let's go back," - she finally said, turning around.

They walked just a few steps when the ground under their feet shook a great deal, passing this vibration to the buildings around.

"Everyone, get from the square," - Rainee said in a loud, commanding voice.

People here were not used to being spoken to in such a manner and, instead of obeying, stopped to look at her for an explanation. Then, the next second, everyone was rapidly abandoning the square and scattering to all sides. One could think that they became very obedient, but one look at their faces would disclose that they themselves were surprised by this running. In no time, everyone was off the square. Just then, this invisible power that made them move away let go of its grip, allowing them to slow down and finally stop.

Before anyone could understand what just happened, the ground shook again. But this time it didn't stop, instead it accelerated, getting more violent. It was obvious that the School was transforming again, just this time in a less gentle way than usual. Usually, transformations would go in places where not many people are around and would make just seemingly mild rumbles and shakes that didn't scare anyone and didn't present any danger.

This time, the very centre of town was collapsing, or rather, breaking apart. The central square was expanding rapidly, pushing surrounding buildings aside. New golden tiles, inscribed with beautiful ornaments and carvings, were unfolding from under the ground, way more glamorous than anything this place has displayed before.

People were getting closer, watching with awe this violent but spectacular scene unfolding in front of their eyes. Where buildings were moved apart to create more space, a few new wide golden alleys appeared. The square was expanding with a vicious energy and at increasing speed. In no time, the central square size had multiplied several times. The very centre of it was changing not just in size and colour but shape too. The square was gradually dipping down, creating sloped sides that were transforming into rows of rounded seating places. The very centre of this dipped square became flat, all covered in golden tiles in the middle and green grass on the sides, creating a golden arena of a very impressive size. Only one building was not pushed away and stayed next to the newly formed square. It was the master's chambers. With its beautifully made columns, pillars, and towers, it was now nicely blending in with this new structure, as if it was always meant to be a part of this newly risen golden square. As if this impressive but lonely building, so different from any other around, was finally reunited with its natural surroundings. Even its walls started to glow, matching the new golden square that had emerged out of nowhere in front of everybody's eyes right this very moment.

A wide platform, like a podium, elevated itself next to the School master's house, with a few wide steps leading to its top. All this golden structure was taking the shape of a massive amphitheatre with an extremely large scene that was topped up with this craftily carved platform, and it was challenging to say if it was made from wood or from gold. Two large throne-like chairs had risen on that platform, adding a finishing touch to the newly done work that was performed by some unseen force.

Before the construction had finished unfolding itself, a new rumbling came, this time from the sky. There was a flying machine approaching rapidly and aiming right for the newly built square, followed by a second, third, and fourth. All four flying machines landed on the square not a second sooner or later than it had finished its construction.

There could be no doubt – no matter who has come, they are definitely those whom the School is meeting with such an impressive greeting.

Rainee walked closer to the edge of this newly built amphitheatre just in time to witness the first flying machine touching the ground. More or less everyone had heard about flying machines, but hardly anyone had ever seen them before. Now, right in front of their eyes, four of them had landed straight in the centre of this School town.

All this brought a lot of disturbance and turmoil. Many people were coming to see what was happening, but upon seeing flying machines, many changed direction and ran away. Some to hide, some to grab any possible weapon. No one knew who had come inside them.

Even at this distance, Rainee could feel worry coming from the headmaster's house. No wonder – it had never happened before that newcomers would come from any other direction than the front gates, and the entrance would always be peaceful and quiet. These newcomers just landed straight from the sky as if the enchantment of the place would have no effect on them. Never mind landing from the sky, also transferring place like it would be their own home.

All seemed like a perfectly planned invasion at first glance. The doors of the first flying machine slammed open to the ground, and, as if confirming thoughts about invasion, soldiers piled out, and in no time, they were accompanied by more soldiers from the other three planes.

Troops of soldiers clad in elegant light armour were bursting out of planes and forming symmetrical lines into neat formations. Soldiers from each flying machine were dressed in slightly different uniforms, but all were working in precise unison.

A heavy feeling of uneasiness could be felt from the residents gathered around the square. More and more people started moving closer to Rainee, until she was surrounded from both sides and behind. It was understandable that, being one of the School's martial arts teachers, she would be looked up to for comfort, encouragement, and protection. She stood at ease with her head high up and her face calm. She wasn't pretending or trying to play relaxed to calm others down. Simply from the moment the newcomers arrived, there wasn't a single moment when there would be the slightest feeling of oppression, never mind the killing intent – there was not a single trace of aggression...

In her eyes, this didn't resemble an invasion. It was more like the School was greeting old friends or family coming back, pulling out its most glamorous outfit.

Also, she had seen a lot in her life and, with so many soldiers in one place pulling themselves into some sort of formation without a single breath of oppression, of anger, of arrogance... she knew only one place where such squads existed. So even if Rainee would not recognise those who had come, she would have no worry or suspicion of anything dangerous. But she knew them very well.

She didn't even have to look at the uniforms or look at the people to know who had come. How they came and why in such large numbers was a different question. But at this time, all she wondered about was who had led this army.

Soon her curiosity was satisfied – soldiers formed a wide corridor of multiple lines from both sides of the first flying machine doors, just in time before a single figure stepped out of it. It was a young, handsome man with gentle features, slim and tall, with medium-length brown hair, dressed in a simple outfit with a single sword hanging at his side. This man didn't have any jewellery on him. The only decoration on his dark green suit was deep green emerald embroidery of wild flowers starting on the front of his jacket, running up to the shoulders, and meeting at the back of his collar.

Strangely, but despite all this simplicity, he looked nothing like simple or ordinary. Some indescribable strength was radiating from him; people couldn't even look directly at him without lowering their eyes. A thought of approaching him would hardly cross anybody's mind. But also, as a strange contrast to it, there was a desire to be close to him, like some invisible magnet would be connected from each and every heart to his single person.

Rainee was looking at him with a fond forlornness in her heart. Unlike others, she didn't feel any need to lower her eyes; as far as she could remember, she had never felt about him the same as other people. Others often would say that she doesn't feel respect for him... How blind they were – there used to be times when the respect she felt was too big even to fit into her heart, but somehow it was always different to the respect that others experienced in his presence – she never felt any need or urge to kneel or bow, or even lower her head. She could always look into those green eyes with only love and trust. She was always drawn to this man, whom others would call unapproachable and mysterious. Mysterious?... maybe. But unapproachable? That bit she never

could understand. In her eyes, he was always open-hearted and welcoming, not just to her but to every single one. When he looked at anyone, the glance would see not just the presentable shell of people, but all that was behind it too, from the body right to the soul, from words right to the thoughts. There was no need to try to look better or worse in front of him, there was no need to choose words that one said, as it was utterly pointless. What a relief and what a pleasure to be in such a company. However, by now she already knew that it was precisely what kept people away from him. For some reason, people wanted to look different in front of others and keep the real self for themselves, and felt extreme discomfort when stripped of this pretence mask.

The voice echoed in her head, bringing up old memories – "... when someone is talking to you through the mask, don't pull it down only because you can, don't pretend that you don't see it only because you can see their true face. But also don't talk to the mask. It is just a mask. Talk to the person behind it, but also not just to the person you can see behind the mask, but to the person who is wearing this mask, hiding himself behind it. A mask is now a part of a person's life. It didn't become a person itself, because once a person becomes someone he was trying to pretend to be, he doesn't need a mask any more. But it clearly indicates what a person tries to be for one or another reason. Often, humans are wearing these masks because they want to be what the mask represents, but have no ability to do so. If you are gifted enough to see through the pretend mask, then make yourself gifted at seeing what that mask is representing. By understanding it, you can understand what a person is valuing but lacking. Then it becomes very easy to help that person. Either help to become for real what they want to be or to show that the real self hiding behind the mask is a much better version, and it is best not to devalue oneself by hiding beauty under ugliness."

Meanwhile, the man who had captured everybody's attention was walking in slow but steady steps in a human-formed passage, towards the newly risen platform. The view was indeed spectacular, especially for someone who had never seen it before – that meant a majority of today's audience. With each step the man made, a few soldiers in front of him would lower to one knee, and a few soldiers behind would rise back to their feet with extreme precision. But only a few inner rows of soldiers would make this movement. The most outer lanes would stand unmoving, forming a solid wall, and other lanes in between would just lower their heads or bow when he walked by, depending on how far away they stood from this man. It looked like the walking man was making a never-ending wave with each step he was taking, achieving a perfect kneeling and bowing circle around himself.

Most people thought it required long training and exercise for soldiers to move in such a union without failure. How little did they know. In reality, the moving force was only respect. At least that's what they always say. Until now, Rainee wasn't entirely convinced – for this man she felt more respect than all the courtyard added together, but she never felt the slightest need to kneel or even bow to him... People used to say she doesn't respect him, that's why she didn't have the same reaction, but again, how little did they know...

Recruits didn't have to undergo any special training to move like this. By now, she already knew that most people couldn't stand without kneeling or bowing in his presence. All this spectacular scene was occurring naturally, and it was so synchronised only because after being recruited, you need to meet special inner conditions and undergo special training that involved mainly working with your own fears, anger, desire to please, neediness to lie, and many more, until you would be accepted into these ranks. Only then can you stay in his presence without feeling pressure, but even then, the level of this so-called respect towards him remains at a very high level,

and when standing at ease, as now, they would either bow or kneel at his approach and stand back up after he moves away.

"Who are they?", "How did they manage to come in such great numbers?", "Who is this man?", "Why is everyone bowing to him?" – the questions were buzzing around. Everyone was eager to ask but not to explain or listen to an explanation, so Rainee kept quiet despite knowing very well who they were. But then Anniet asked her directly:

"Who is he? Walking so majestically as if the place belongs to him?"

"If you had to guess, what would be your guess?" – asked Rainee.

"The only thought that is coming to my mind is the King himself, but..." – Anniet started, but Rainee didn't allow her to finish.

"If this is the only thought that is coming to you, then why are you "but"ing it? Yes, he is the King, there is no room for "but"."

Annet looked at her with disbelief, just like everyone else who was close enough to hear her reply. Anniet wanted to say something else, but every time she opened her mouth, she realised that what she was going to say would start with "but," so eventually she gave up in defeat.

Soon a whisper began to spread around "King. It is King himself", "King has come", "No wonder he looks like this", "What do you mean no wonder he looks like this? In paintings, he looks completely different" – and so on. All this buzzing was getting a bit too loud.

"Silence," – Rainee said. Her voice wasn't loud, if anything, it was more on the quiet side, but it had an immediate effect – as if turned off by an invisible switch, all buzzing around her immediately stopped. – "Respect your King." – She added in the same quiet but indisputable voice, and everyone, despite themselves, stood a little bit taller, a little bit straighter, as being a part of the parade themselves.

"And enjoy the moment," – Rainee added in a softer tone.

Meanwhile, the King approached the bottom of the platform, but instead of coming up the steps, he stopped there, facing the School's main building. He didn't show any signs of wanting to proceed any further or enter the building itself. Instead, he just stood there with his hands clasping each other behind his back as if patiently waiting for someone or something.

While he was waiting, the soldiers changed formation. The wide corridor that the King walked through was dispersed, and troops arranged themselves in a few squares, nicely filling this new golden-plated arena. All four machines shot back up into the sky and left. That was a clear indication that the incomers have reached their desired destination and are not going to leave right now.

Minutes have passed, two, three, five... Nothing changed – everyone was standing still: soldiers lined up in formation and the King on his own at the bottom of the platform facing the headmaster's facilities. All patient, still, and calm.

People who came to witness this invasion started to fill in the newly formed seats around this new amphitheatre. First, children who didn't have much care for unknown etiquette and couldn't be bothered with it. There were empty seats, so they invited themselves. With no objections raised, adults grew bolder, and soon many seats were occupied, with more people continuing to arrive. Those who didn't dare to take an empty seat stood behind. In some places, people were chatting and buzzing; in some places, they were standing or sitting quietly with calm faces as if also waiting

together with the King and his troops. Slowly, all chatter died, and each and every person was patiently waiting together with the King.

Not long after, the School headmaster walked out in swift steps, closer to running than walking. She quickly approached the King and bowed to him.

“Your Majesty, I sincerely apologise for making you wait. Hope you can forgive this inappropriate behaviour of mine.” – She said in an apologetic voice. King didn't react to this apology in any way; he just stood with a slight smile on his face, allowing her to finish her bowing and apology. The headmaster finally straightened herself up, and as there was no reaction or reply from the King, she looked sincerely lost, her eyes jumping from the King's face to the troops, then to the people sitting and standing around, and back to the King. After a little time, she finally managed to compose herself, and her eyes stopped jumping aimlessly around and settled on the King's face with a questioning expression.

Just then the King spoke.

“It has been a long time since I have had the desire to meet you, headmaster of this School.” – He said in a soft, encouraging voice while looking straight into her eyes. He didn't speak loudly, but each and every person watching this scene heard him crisp and clear, as if he were standing next to them. Rainee felt her heart get squeezed by some invisible, unforgivable hand upon hearing this voice again. – “I have heard about your place from many of your ex-students, and also, your own presence can be felt very strongly in this world. Even if it is the first time we have encountered each other at this close proximity, you can be reassured that such energy and character certainly didn't slide by me unnoticed.”

This time, there was no reply from the headmaster as she was struck dumbfounded by this comment.

“But I can see that, for some reason, time isn't very kind to you.” – The King continued. – “In my life, I have never seen such an unjust mismatch between inner and outer appearance. If you would allow me, I am eager to wave off this injustice.” – Without waiting for a reply or any permission, he raised his hand and moved it in front of her face from top to bottom as if cleaning something off.

Everyone was curious and excited to see what would happen, but there was a bit of disappointment as nothing happened and nothing changed. The King sidestepped, opening a passage for the headmaster, and made a welcoming gesture towards the steps leading up to the platform.

“Please come and chat with me a little bit,” – he said, still maintaining the same small smile on his face and warmth in his voice. – “Let me enjoy your company, and I am happy to answer all questions and satisfy your curiosity for the time being.”

They both walked up these stairs side by side. The platform wasn't high, just about a man's height, and on it stood two throne-like chairs carved in beautiful patterns. The King showed the headmaster to one chair while sitting himself in another.

Rainee watched it, thinking that nothing much had changed in his behaviour. As usual, slightly above people that served him, slightly below people that he was serving, and on the same level with people whom he was treating as colleagues. Soldiers served him, so he was above them. He treated the headmaster as a colleague, so he sat on the same level as her. As the King, his duty

was to serve his people, so everyone else could freely choose by their own will where they wanted to stay, above him, at the same level, or below. Perfect natural order.

While watching him sitting casually in this chair, distant memories started to fill her mind and heart. As a small child, she would often hide herself in a ceremonial room out of everyone's eyes and wait patiently until all the boring business would come to an end, hoping for the opportunity to catch him on his own so she could have him just for herself, even if just for a few minutes. It was not an easy task to win these moments, as there always seemed to be people around him – wanting something, talking about something, complaining, bowing, asking, bowing again, talking and bowing and talking.... Like a never-ending stream. But she was patient and persistent, and luck would ever so often be on her side. When everyone attending a meeting would leave, there were a few very precious seconds when no one would be in the room. If she was just fast enough to jump out of her hideout to run to him and climb on his knees before the chamber man or bodyguard walked in and caught her in the midway, then victory was hers. No one would dare to approach him to take her off or tell him that there are more important things to do. And he himself would never tell her off, same as he would not stop others from catching her in the middle and carrying her away if she wasn't fast enough. When safely on his knees, she could stay there for a bit, sometimes shorter, sometimes longer, and everyone else would just wait outside. She could tell him anything she wanted, and he would understand it all. She could ask any questions, and he wouldn't take them for silly or small, but would tell her what she wanted to know in a way she could understand. She would sit and watch these beautiful flower patterns on his jacket and would listen and listen. Others didn't know this, but those flowers were not just an embroidery as everyone was thinking, they were alive, they would move and dance as real flowers in the wind, some would fade off and new ones would blossom instead, and on rare occasions, even a bee would fly in and out of one or other flower. His lap, at that time, was the safest and most magical place.

When Raine's "audience" was over, he would stand up with her in his arms, walk to the doors, and hand her to one of the people who worked for him. She wouldn't try to fight or reject, but would wait again for a new opportunity.

Before meetings, a proper search would be conducted with attempts to find her, but somehow she managed to hide very well and keep very still, and nobody was able to find her. Once, a meeting was so long that she fell asleep in her hideout. She woke up in her bed, realised what had happened, and started to cry because she was so upset with herself for missing a chance. After she finished sobbing, the soft voice came from the side of her bed – "My dear girl, is it really worth being so harsh on yourself for one little flop?" – she turned around and there he was, sitting in an armchair next to her bed, waiting until she woke up. Apparently, after the meeting was over, he simply came and picked her up from her hideout, where she was sleeping, and carried her to her bedroom. Not just that, but he stayed until she woke up so she wouldn't miss her special tête-à-tête time.

Now she was thinking about how many of these "opportunities" were achieved just by her own effort and how many times he actually knew that she was hiding there, wanting her special treat, and created chances for it to happen.

Raine was standing in the midst of a crowd, looking at the King with deep affection, not any lesser than at those times when she was a small girl. She stood a considerable distance away, but as she mastered full vision long ago, distance wasn't an obstacle to seeing all and every detail. She has known him all her life, and he hasn't changed a little bit – if not for an incident that happened at their last encounter, she would still think that he is unchangeable as the world itself.

A sudden thought crossed her mind – "Does he know right now too that I am hiding among these people, watching him and thinking about him?" As a reply to her thought, a little bee flew out of the flower from the left side of the King's jacket...

CHAPTER

2

Life is unfair

Aqila was sitting at her work table in her office. She tried to concentrate on a pile of papers in front of her, but the harder she tried, the less successful she was. She sighed and pushed all books and papers away. She was so unhappy with herself lately, and most annoyingly, there was no reason for it. As long as she was living, the School had never been busier than it was now. Over 5000 students were presently residing here. And despite all odds, there was mainly peace and tranquillity within the School's borders. Somehow, all these people managed to get along and find a place that suited them and others in this temporary residence. Thanks god, enough teachers have come too, but just enough – everyone was fully occupied up to the brim. After so many years of deep slumber, the School has finally awakened to its full potential.

In older days, she would also spend much more time mingling with students, teaching and talking to them, entertaining them and herself, in other words, being useful. Everyone would say that she is still helpful, and to some degree, they would be right. Very few did an equal amount of work to what she did, but it wasn't the same as before. She was simply too tired and slow to do any more than she was doing right now.

And god, how much she wanted to do more! She looked to the side wall, and from a large mirror, there was a small, sympathetic old woman looking at her. Her eyes still had lots of spark, unusual for such an elderly person, but her face was full of wrinkles, her silver-grey hair was falling down on slumped and stiff shoulders. It didn't feel like it was her who was looking back from this mirror. She didn't feel that weary; in fact, she still wanted so much to do, to give so much to the world.

Sadness started to fill her heart, but she chased it away. She still could do so much; why be upset about things that are gone? She knew why she grew old – after decades of empty and unneeded School, she lost hope to be helpful to someone ever again and stopped seeing much point in a future, and old age crept onto her. And she didn't mind at that time. If anything, she was ready to age and die, as not much else was left for her to do. And then suddenly all changed – life came back to this abandoned place. Children were coming, adults were coming. Some old friends have returned. She also met some new, extraordinary characters. After being a teacher for so long, now she herself was attending some classes and learning new things. She had a feeling that the world was awakening and changing for the better or for the worse, and she wanted to be a part of it.

But instead of joining this turmoil that has returned, most of the time she spent inside because her body simply couldn't keep up with her heart. Thanks god that at least her mind is not giving up yet; at one point she thought that was precisely what was happening.

Her wondering eyes stopped for a second on the horse saddle that she placed as a decoration in her office. She wanted to outsmart magic not so long ago. She asked for this saddle as a gift, as she thought that if there were a constant reminder about this person, she would be able to remember who he was. But she had already given up on this idea, as no matter what she tried, nothing ever worked. Even now, she wasn't able to remember who he was, why he came, or how he came. She knew that if she concentrated very hard and just kept looking at this relic in her room, memories would slowly come back, and every time it would surprise her to the core. She remembered that

much, but as soon as she took her eyes off this saddle, all memories would fade in no time, and a few hours of hard work would be gone with the wind. So eventually she admitted defeat and gave up even trying, as there was little, if any, use of this hard work.

She looked back at the table and reached out for books to make more records, and suddenly, something inside cracked, as if some gates couldn't hold it any longer. Tears started to roll down her cheeks, her shoulders began to shake, and all the grief she was keeping inside for so long suddenly poured out as a volcanic eruption. That was so unfair! Of course she was angry! It wasn't fair for life to treat her like this. She was always so lively; she always wanted to participate in life; it was not that she stepped away from life, but life left her all alone in this place, without any indications that it would get any better. She waited so long for things to improve, but they never did, and now, when she finally gave up on hope, all had changed, and she still wants to be a part of it so badly... Why couldn't she hold on for a little bit longer? Why wasn't she given a single clue that all would change? It was so unfair, so unjust...

She cried and cried for god knows how long until finally she cried herself to sleep right there in the office over her desk. She didn't know how long she had been sleeping – it couldn't be very long as the daylight was still indicating morning outside. She was awakened abruptly by the strong shaking of the building and loud rumblings outside.

Aqila jumped quickly to her feet in disbelief. What? The School changing again? That means a new group of people has arrived... And she wasn't even at the gates meeting them... What a disgrace! Honestly, this School will need a new headmaster ASAP. She rushed through the room but suddenly stopped in her tracks. Something wasn't right – the door of greeting, that would lead her to the front gates, wasn't open... It would open automatically before a new arrival, and she would feel an inner call to go through it. But the door was dead shut...

She walked to the window just in time to see the final stages of this incredible transformation that the Central Square has taken, just before four flying machines landed in it. Aqila couldn't believe her own eyes. How did it happen? This School wasn't a place where people could just simply fly in. The only entrance to it was through the front gates. There was no written or spoken memory or story about any other entrance. There were many ways to leave the School, but only one way to enter.

Nevertheless, soldiers were pouring out in numbers. She stood dumbfounded. Honestly, she was too old for all this... The past year has been shock after shock, after shock. And there used to be times when she didn't even know what shock was.

She watched through the window as troops stood up in a formation to greet a singular man. When she saw that man walking, even greater shock had befallen her. She had never seen him, but she knew straight away that there could be only one person with such an aura around. King... How?... Why?... She watched him walking towards this stage or platform that formed itself just a few minutes ago with a million thoughts in her head. Why? And how? No matter how powerful he is, King still must be a human, right? So how has he got here? She watched him reach the bottom of the platform, but instead of going up to that fancy, newly risen chair, he stopped as if waiting for someone.

Who else is coming that even the King himself was waiting for?

Minutes were passing, and nothing had changed. What was he waiting for? Evaluation? Surely it is very unlikely that he has come here as a student, but also not likely that he has come to

share his knowledge with her students... Or might he? Anyway, who else was supposed to come if he was just standing there?

“.....!!!”

Suddenly, a thought struck her so hard that she nearly fell on the floor. "He is waiting for me!" – she thought – "Oh my god! He is standing there and waiting for me all this time, and I just hid behind the curtains!" She turned around and ran down the stairs to the front door. Aqila slowed herself down a little before walking through the door. It would be extremely troublesome if she were to either fall down or run out of breath.

What is she supposed to do now? How to behave? What is the etiquette? Well, never mind the Royal etiquette, she didn't know it, so it cannot be helped, but surely she has to apologise for her own manners, for keeping him waiting so long.

Aqila walked out to be faced with such an unusual and unrealistic view that met her. Year after year, she walked through this door, and the surroundings sometimes would change depending on circumstances; it might grow or it would shrink. But it was always reasonable; there was always a purpose behind it. What is the point of having a large city and walking long distances across empty streets just to reach the desired destination? The School wasn't a ghost town. When its premises were not needed, it would fold them down and make them either non-existent or invisible. When there is a need for it, it will expand to provide needed comfort, and no one has ever felt cramped here. Several houses would never disappear, no matter whether anyone is living in them or not, as if marked by some extra colour, extra liveliness, extra history attached to them. Nearly five centuries have passed since she first entered this place, and it has always been the same, powered by some unknown forces, obeying some not entirely understandable rules set especially for this place.

What has changed now? How could all this consistency be just swept away? King or no King, there should be no difference. There were many times in history when kings tried to find and enter this place, but never succeeded, as this School was out of their reign. May it be that the whole world belonged and obeyed the King's power, but not this little world. At least that was strongly believed until now.

She didn't know Royal etiquette, as it was not needed here. Why would it be required? These etiquettes changed with every generation, with a new set of thinking, a new set of customs. And this place provided only unchangeable knowledge that was as constant as the world itself and could be used in every generation under any tradition. No matter what time in history it is brought back to the world, it will be as useful as before, and it is up to those who have learned it how this knowledge will be applied within the rules and traditions that are acceptable for people at the current time.

Aqila has seen soldiers bowing to the King, and she knew that it had been a custom within every generation, so she bowed too.

“Your Majesty, I deeply apologise for making you wait. Hope you can forgive this inappropriate behaviour of mine.” – She said aloud.

She meant what she said. No one should be kept waiting for no reason, whether it be King or no King. There was no reply. "OK, what next?" she thought to herself, feeling truly lost. Why is he here? How has he come? What does he expect? Why was he waiting for her? Is he expecting something from her? If yes, then what? If he is already here, then there is nothing anyone could do for him, as this place now is his, not hers, not anybody else's. Why then bring all these troops? Did

he expect some resistance? To resist what? Is there any danger with those who have arrived? Shouldn't be. The School would not invite anyone who doesn't belong to this world or who means harm to others. Then why have they come? If not to conquer and not to defend?

Time was passing, and nothing was changing. Finally, Aqila's thoughts stopped jumping all around the place, and her usual calm had returned to some degree, bringing back clarity of thoughts. There was one person who knew all the answers, and coincidentally, that person was standing right in front of her, never lowering his look. Aqila's eyes stopped jumping around and settled on the King's face, expecting him to explain himself. Maybe he doesn't have to do so, but he might want to.

“It has been a long time since I have had a desire to meet you, the headmaster of this School.” – King said with a slight, warm smile playing on his lips. – “I have heard about your place from many of your ex-students, and also, your own presence can be felt very strongly in this world. Even if it is the first time we have encountered each other at this close proximity, you can be reassured that such energy and character certainly didn't slide by me unnoticed.”

That wasn't something that Aqila expected to hear. If all her life's work and achievements could have been somehow reworded, then it has been done now. The words he spoke were very simple but very strong. But words are just words. The feelings that have come with them were way more informative. Somehow, she could see, feel, experience completely all her life as a one, singular substance in this very moment. All of it, all bad and all good, all achievements and losses, or slips, stagnation and refusal. All secret thoughts that, at that time when she had them, she was hoping would never surface again, and all desires that she was raising openly for others and for herself to see and to strive for. As if someone would be able to write a book about her whole life to the smallest detail, not just events and actions, but reasons why it happened and how it felt, and even reasons behind these reasons, actions taken and untaken, wishes approved and disapproved. Nothing skipped, not even the smallest shadow of a thought, not even a dream or daydream. And then present all this in a book that could be read in a moment, as one full event, not just an event, but as one whole substance. As a person? Was that what it meant to truly see someone? To truly see a person. Not what someone wanted to be, not what someone expected from himself to be, or to perform, but what one truly was and what actions, desires, beliefs, and rules she placed on herself, what goals she set for herself. All that made this person live the life as it was lived, therefore made that person to be who she has become. What was the driving force for the direction the person was moving towards?

Is that how the King sees everyone? Then there is no wonder that people cannot stand to be close to him, as it wasn't easy to be fully exposed, to realise that there are no secrets, no hideouts, only an illusion of possibility to hide. But even then, there was way more to what she had experienced just now. There was something additional to it, something that she had learned to recognise in others but never before was able to see it in herself. That something was so unique to each person that it wasn't possible to mix it with anyone else. Some called it character, some called it personality, but it wasn't something that you learn or train into; it was something that you discover and grow into. Grow to love and appreciate it as it was given to you and only to you. It was the first time Aqila had faced it in herself, and what she saw surprised even her. So she just stood in silence, not knowing what to say in return.

“But I can see that, for some reason, time isn't very kind to you.” – King continued. – “In my life, I have never seen such an unjust mismatch between inner and outer appearance. If you would allow me, I am eager to wave off this injustice.”

His hand moved in front of Aqila's face from top to bottom as if cleaning something off. She didn't understand what he meant by it, as the words didn't make much sense, and feelings were not shared at this time, so she didn't say anything in reply to it either.

“Please come and chat with me a little bit,” – King said, showing her to this newly built podium. – “Let me enjoy your company, and I am happy to answer all questions and satisfy your curiosity for the time being.”

Aqila was never shy or someone who thinks low of herself. But she had to admit that equally, she never felt about herself as good as she was feeling right now. The message she received from the King's first words hasn't faded yet, and it was like seeing herself with new eyes. She had little to hide or blame herself for, same as she never felt the need to blame others, nor to rub truth into the faces of those who didn't want to see it. But also, she wasn't naive and saw herself and others for who they truly are. At least that's what she thought until now. Somehow, she always had this understanding that at the very moment, a person can do only what they can do and no more. And once it is done, there is no reason to hide it, nor to be ashamed of it, nor to be blamed for it, as none of it would help to act, think, or behave any differently next time. To pretend that nothing happened wasn't something that she would do either. A person must understand where they are standing. Just then, it can change the outcome of the next events. If there is no desire to change the reasons and understanding behind the actions, then no matter how much shame or blame is directed towards oneself or the surroundings, a person will behave the same way under similar circumstances. So to change, one must know where one stands. Trying to change from a fantasy point could help no one, as there is no person in fantasy, so if anything were to be changed, then it would be from one fantasy to another. How can it affect reality?

And she always was soft with herself, just as with others. At least that's what she thought until now. A few words from the King disclosed reality in a moment as if pulling off the invisible veil that had covered her until now, and actual, raw reality was presented to her heart and mind. She thought she didn't hide anything, but there was a lot. She thought she wasn't harsh with herself, but she was mistaken. She thought well of herself, but that wasn't true either. Never ever would she have imagined what a great person she was! All other things seemed just minuscule, temporary, and not important. And that wasn't an opinion. It was based on the life she lived, the choices she made, and the desires she had for the future.

When the King invited her to sit down next to him, it didn't even seem strange; in truth, why should it be any different? The only difference was that it was her place, and it was she who should be inviting him. But again, not entirely, as how the School looked now wasn't something that belonged to the place she knew.

“That is some fancy entrance your Majesty made.” – She said to the King. – “I have never seen this place so glamorous as it is right now.”

“Let me reassure you that the look of this place has little to do with me,” – the King smiled. – “But I must admit I couldn't resist the opportunity to bring with me as many of my best people as I possibly could. Chances to see this wonderful place, hidden from many, don't come too often. I thought that those who think they have already learned all would benefit greatly from seeing with their own eyes that the knowledge they obtained so far is just a handful of sand in a dune. Let them

marvel over your place for a day or two. Hope that can be allowed, and it will not bring any objections or trouble.”

“As if anyone can object when a decision is already made,” Aqila thought to herself. But the King said these words in such a simple and undemanding tone that it was difficult to take them as an order and not respond to them.

“Even if I could, I would not see any reason to object,” – she replied to the King. – “This place is open to anyone who finds a way to it. I never heard about any restrictions, and it would be a pleasure for me to host so many bright people. But wouldn't it be better to bring them through the front gates so they could make a more meaningful entry, leading to understanding what is wanted from life?”

“It may well be,” – the King agreed, – “but I am not a babysitter to bring anyone to the School and leave them here. My motive wasn't of this kind. Whoever wants to stay will have to find a way by themselves. However, it isn't easy to search for something when you don't know that there is something to search for. Reminding, or rather, at this time in history, introducing this place back to the world was one of my intentions.”

Introducing this place back to the world... Wouldn't it mean that the world has forgotten about it? The number of people residing here right now would disagree with it, but Aqila wasn't fooled by it. No matter how many people are here now, one wave doesn't make an ocean, one stream on its own doesn't make a river. Some events are happening right now in the world that made these changes, and once they pass, all will return to the old rhythm.

“So this is the intent of your visit?” – she asked with building curiosity.

“One of them,” – the King smiled again.

“It is a very honourable cause,” – Aqila said, – “but I don't see how the School would open its borders for someone led by it.”

That was true. This place wasn't built for those who wanted to improve the world. This place was built for those who wanted to improve themselves. How they will use this knowledge later, whether to benefit the world or to bring detriment to it, was something that the School would not take into consideration. No one with a desire to change the world, for better or for worse, will ever find this place. It wasn't the School's purpose to enlighten the world. The purpose of this School was to enlighten people who live in this world. As long as people grow within themselves, there is no chance for the world around them to shrink.

“You are right,” – the King said. – “It wasn't the reason why I was invited.”

“Then what was it?”

“A combination of factors.”

“Are you willing to share them?”

“To the degree that I can break it into understandable pieces. Nothing in this world comes in pieces, so it cannot be accurate. But I can share the top highlights of the whole event that brought me here. Of those, I have already shared two.”

“Yes,” – Aqila agreed, – “but neither of them is enough to gain entrance.”

“True. But the desire of a person is a very powerful force, and it activates the world to create possibilities for it to be fulfilled. It is up to the person to notice these possibilities and take them. My desire to meet you and see this place and to reintroduce it back to the world was born a long time ago and never ceased to grow. I don't think it could have been ignored for the mere fact that I am a King. This fact could just make it more challenging to create a possibility for it to become a reality. I firmly believe that if I hadn't occupied this position, we would have met a long time ago.”

“Is there anything this place can teach you?” – Aqila couldn't refrain from asking it.

“I doubt it,” – King replied.

“Then have you come to teach?”

“From my coming, many will benefit and many will learn, but not directly from me.”

“I doubt you come here to express yourself in something that the rest of the world would not allow.”

“I doubt it too,” – King smiled.

“Then it is a service that you could provide for those who are already here.” – Aqila said firmly, as that was the last option. King already clearly indicated that he didn't break boundaries, but was invited to this place.

King didn't reply, just his smile widened.

“May I ask what services you are going to perform?”

“The major one is already done,” – King said again.

Aqila looked around, not fully understanding what he meant. Surely this service wasn't to transform the Town Square into this glamorous place? She looked at King again with a questioning look.

“Most obvious things are most difficult to notice,” – King smiled at her.

“So you have already finished your mission here?”

“I have finished the services that were required of me, yes. But I haven't finished my mission.”

“Which is?”

“There are many hearts here, and in the outer world, that look for the opportunity to join my ranks. As I am already here, there is no reason to postpone it any longer. And as this desire comes in significant numbers, I will need the help of my generals, so I came here to summon them back.”

Once again, King said something that Aqila didn't understand.

“Generals? But there are no generals here,” – she said aloud, looking around. He didn't even bring any generals with himself.

“But that's where you are mistaken,” – King replied with a smile.

“Is there some special way to summon them?” – Aqila wondered, thinking that maybe there was some sort of secret ceremony that could be performed only at this place. Who knows, as nobody truly knew what mysteries lay in these premises until they were disclosed. And time after time, here would happen something that no one ever even imagined to be possible.

“Nothing of that sort,” – King replied more to her thoughts than to the question. – “I think simply informing them that their services are required will be more than enough.”

“And how are you going to pass this information?” – Aqila asked, watching him with curiosity, bracing herself for some sort of unseen magic.

CHAPTER

3

“Found you”

Rainee was standing surrounded by her students and colleagues, but her heart wasn't with them at this time. Gosh, she didn't even realise how much she missed the life that was unfolding right now in front of her. If the King had come on his own, it would have been difficult enough. To see so many people who not so long ago were a big part of her daily life was hardly bearable. Her body might be staying here, but her essence was down there with people who had just arrived. Why has he brought them here? Maybe it wasn't strange for others who knew little about the King's visits. People strongly believed that he was always travelling surrounded by his troops. The reality was that he hardly ever did it. In fact, she couldn't remember him ever coming like this. He didn't need protection or bodyguards, nor did he have any need to shine or show off. What was going on now was a complete mismatch to a regular visit.

It was obvious by now that he knew about Rainee being here. Was she the reason for his visit? If so, why all this display?

When the headmaster came out to greet him, things started to get even more interesting. Everyone around was disappointed when the King waved his hand in front of her and nothing happened. How naive they are. There is no such thing as the King making a move and nothing happening. If eyes cannot see it, it doesn't mean that there was no change. It was not clear yet what change it was, but he doesn't speak in riddles, so it has to be directly about the mismatch in the headmaster's appearance, and Rainee could only agree to what he said, to all that he told about Aqila, as she truly was a remarkable person. If she had chosen a different path, she would have been a general long ago.... Here she did it again! She cannot stop herself from thinking that way, and probably never will...

Everybody watched how both the King and the headmaster walked up the stairs and sat down for a chat. It didn't even occur to anyone what an achievement it was on Aqila's side. There were not many people who could do it. Many people could approach the King when they wanted something, but that was just about it. Aqila didn't want anything from the King; she had no favours to ask, so this, let's say, exception wasn't in play now. To walk like this next to him or sit down and chat wasn't something people were able to do, at least not many.

Rainee was deep in her thoughts when suddenly two hands slid at her sides from behind and two strong arms wrapped around her, engulfing her in a bear-strong hug, pulling her back and pressing her to someone's chest. Not just anybody could do that!

“Found you.” – A familiar voice whispered in her ear.

Rainee didn't need to hear this voice to know whose arms had just embraced her. In a moment, all else in the world faded away and became non-existent. She turned around, pressing herself to this person's chest and hugging him back with all the strength she had. One second, two seconds, three... she knew that she could not stay like this, ignorant about the rest of the world around her, for very long. Make it thirty, she said inwardly, taking the most from these few precious seconds. Keeping them only to herself and sharing them with no one else, just the person she had in her embrace. She could feel his breathing on her hair, and these two arms around her were providing perfect shelter from anything around. She could stay like this forever... thirty. "Damn it!

Time passes so quickly," Rainee thought, lifting her head up to meet these two grey eyes she missed so much. His head bent down, and she knew that the world will have to wait for a little bit longer. How long? She didn't know; she allowed herself not to think right now about anything else but his lips as they kissed her and his heart beating right next to hers.

But no matter how much she loved and missed this man, the things happening right now were something that would not repeat themselves if missed.

"I found you," – he repeated again, this time looking into her eyes. – "Love your new look," – he added, gently stroking her face a few times before bending down for another kiss.

"How come you are here, not with him?" – Rainee asked after their lips separated.

"My presence wasn't required," – he smiled, not even moving his eyes to follow the direction Rainee's head pointed.

"Then how are you here?"

"I wasn't told to stay behind either," – he said. – "And I had a hunch that you might be here."

"So you knew where he was going?" – Rainee asked with a bit of surprise.

"No. But what difference does it make where "here" is?"

"Do you know what he is up to?" – Rainee asked, turning around to catch up with the conversation.

"I have no idea."

"Do you think he has come for me?" – Rainee asked again.

"I certainly hope so," – he said, hugging her again from behind, resting his cheek on her head, and holding her closely.

By now, many eyes were already watching them, and whispers were spreading all around.

"Maintain order!" – Rainee said in a calm voice, and the whispers around died off. Most of the eyes rapidly returned to the King until only one intense gaze was still locked on her. Rainee looked back at those wide-open eyes, blue as the sky, and winked at the girl behind them. She smiled at her in encouragement before returning most of her attention to the conversation between the King and the headmaster.

"Is there anything this place can teach you?" – the headmaster asked.

"I doubt it," – the King replied.

"Then have you come to teach?"

"From my coming, many will benefit and many will learn, but not directly from me."

"I doubt you come here to express yourself in something that the outer world would not allow."

"I doubt it too," – the King smiled.

"Then it is a service that you could provide for those who are already here." – the headmaster was very firm on it. – "May I ask what services you are going to perform?"

"The major one is already done," – the King said.

The headmaster, like everyone else, looked around, trying to figure out what it was that the King had already done, but couldn't see anything apart from this incredible School transformation.

"Truly, people are so blind in their ignorance..." – Rainee thought to herself. Sometimes she wondered how they even see where they are walking if they cannot see what is right in front of them.

"Most obvious things are most difficult to notice," – the King smiled.

"So you have already finished your mission here?"

"I have finished the services that were required of me, yes. But I haven't finished my mission."

No matter how hard Rainee tried to give all her attention to the events going on in front of her, it proved to be an impossible task. And not because of the man who was holding her in his embrace. She didn't need to spare any attention here, as it was as natural as returning home, and her heart was filled with as much happiness as there possibly could be. No. Her attention unwillingly was returning to one girl who was standing all this time frozen to the ground, incapable of taking in what was going on around.

Things will change for everyone attending. It was unavoidable. Some will experience it more strongly than others. Unfortunately for Anniet, this change will be very strong and will bring lots of pain at the beginning, and she truly hoped that the girl would be able to see a broader view behind it, not only the pain of loss and separation itself. It would be heartbreaking to see her stuck in the happiness of yesterday and the pain of today. Against all her will, she was glad that Anniet had this mystery friend of hers that should not be too much affected by these events, as earthly events don't affect people who have been removed from it. Because of his unusual circumstances, there was a big chance that he would stay unaffected and would be able to provide her company and support. It wasn't a good practice to be reliant on somebody else, and to do so was new for Rainee herself. She must have changed much more than she realised.

Hands holding her pressed slightly harder in support, reminding her that she is not alone and that the man behind her fully understands her struggles, no matter how new and strange they were even to her. She already knew that when the time for change comes, it will be difficult for both of them, but knowing in advance doesn't make pain any less.

"There are many hearts here and in the outer world that look for the opportunity to join my ranks. As I am already here, there is no reason to postpone it any longer. And, as this desire comes in significant numbers, I will need the help of my generals, so I have come here to summon them back." – the King said.

"So that is true," Rainee thought, hearing these words. Change was unavoidable now.

"Generals? But there are no generals here." – the headmaster said in a surprised voice while looking around again.

"But that's where you are mistaken," – the King replied.

Once again, people started to look around with searching eyes. However, those who were closest to Rainee didn't look around. Instead, they were looking directly at her.

"Generals? Is he also here?" – the man holding Rainee asked. – "No matter how hard I try, I cannot feel his presence."

This question stirred something inside Rainee, connecting dots that shouldn't be connected.

"Is there some special way to summon them?" – Aqila asked.

“Nothing of that sort. I think simply informing them that their services are required will be more than enough.”

Rainee was feeling that all that was going on right now was too much even for her. All had become crisp and clear, same as it had been many times before, and all was on the brink of exploding into already familiar nothingness. Still, some unseen power was holding it back, not allowing it to disappear, and tension inside her was building to the brim.

“And how are you going to pass this information?” – Aqila asked.

“There are many ways to do it,” – the King said, – “but informing by word will be enough.”

Rainee gave a short glance to Annet, who was completely ignoring anything else that was going on around and watching only her. It was obvious that she was hearing every word the King says, but Rainee knew that what she will hear next would not bring her any comfort.

That forbidden knowledge inside of her was building and ready to explode, never to return, but it wasn't allowed to do so, as if two enormous powers opposing each other were clashing. It couldn't go on like this much longer, and the next few minutes will have to decide which side will come out victorious and which will be silenced.

Rainee knew that right now she was the only person seeing the whole picture; that is why she was bearing the full weight of what was going on. How strange that this girl, unaware of anything, somehow has been drawn to the very epicentre of these events. How will it all end up, Rainee herself didn't know yet, as, despite all her knowledge, she was only a spectator this time. She felt the King's look and turned towards him to meet his eyes.

“General Rainee,” – the King said, looking directly into her eyes, – “better known to society by the name of Rainbow general, is expected to resemble her position in tomorrow's inauguration that will take place at midday in this very square.”

Rainee didn't move, didn't acknowledge him. "Tomorrow," so he's giving her a day off. Kind and thoughtful, like always. Nothing really changed... but is it true? She had no strength to think about it right now, as this tension building inside was bringing so much anticipation that she could hardly cope. The time had come for the deciding moment, to which side it will be unleashed.

All troops below lined up and saluted her in unison.

The King's eyes moved to another side of the crowd and got locked on another person. Everybody's eyes followed it as if by some unseen command, and in no time, every single person was looking at a man, nearly middle-aged, dressed in gray, a bit dusty clothes, holding a little shaggy pup under his arm. There was nothing much to look at, and if not for this imposing command that locked everybody's look on him, people would have turned away a long time ago. Despite herself, Rainee marvelled once more at the King's abilities – how did he know? The spell wasn't broken yet, and it wasn't certain that it would be broken at all. She knew it very well, as the tension inside of her was in waiting, and the outcome wasn't known yet. One slip and it will overcome that opposing power that obviously was coming from the King himself.

“Same applies to General Blake,” – the King said, looking directly at this man, captivating him not only with his but everybody else's attention.

"So he is going for it!" – Rainee thought, standing taller.

– “Also known to society by the names Alistair, Dark General, Shadow from a sky, Prince of darkness, Merciless, General of the sky, Eagle with sword, Prince of shadows, Shadow of the Rainbow, Black death...”

"He knows the key," Raineer thought to herself, listening to the King naming all these titles. But can he unlock the door with it? That was the real question.

With each word the King was saying, people who had gathered around this strange person were moving further and further away until he was standing all alone in a large, empty circle that was growing bigger with every name the King pronounced.

He himself didn't look bothered about it in any way, nor did he care too much about what the King was saying. He stood calm and all this time was looking in the same direction. And that direction wasn't towards the King.

With each name the King mentioned, his appearance changed in people's eyes. Not drastically, but still very visible. His clothes didn't look so dusty any more, his face didn't carry middle-aged features, he was getting taller, his pup, which he placed on the ground, was growing up rapidly, exceeding the size of a very large dog, his colourless hair started to get more and more black colour in it. It wasn't even a true transformation; it looked more as if some kind of picture was drawn over him, and with each word, the King was rubbing off this realistic painting, revealing what truly was under it.

The King was mentioning many names that people had never even heard of. It probably came from distant places or had been so old that nobody remembered them by now.

“..... lately known under the names of Anthony and Ghost of the past, and given the name Forgotten by the last ruler.”

With that, the King fell silent, and in that large empty circle was standing a young man, dressed in a black suit, with medium-length black hair falling on his shoulders, and next to him stood a large black hound with slightly reddish eyes. Troops of the King's Army changed formation to face him and saluted in a similar way as they had, just a few minutes ago, saluted Raineer.

“I think that has been done now: information passed and my generals have been summoned,” – the King said, looking back at Aqila, who was sitting speechless while looking at that newly disclosed person. – “We can continue our conversation if you wish to do so. But my suggestion would be to go less formal so that everyone could do whatever they like and prepare themselves for tomorrow's big day. As I have come all uninvited and without warning, I don't expect you to be ready to host so many guests. Please allow me to do it so this meeting could be a true celebration and not just a boring gathering where few speak and many listen.”

With that, he moved his hand, and following this move, all across the streets of the town, rows of tables with drinks and food appeared. Also, everyone suddenly felt somehow released, like some sudden switch had cut off invisible and, even until now, unknown strings, and everyone was free to do whatever they wanted to do.

CHAPTER

4

In a grip of fear

"To do what?" Anniet thought. She was still looking at Anthony, who stood now all alone. She didn't see this transformation that everyone was speaking about. He looked the same as he always did, just his dog had grown. But even then, the dog always felt much bigger than he looked. The only thing that she could not understand was how she hadn't recognised him right until this moment. What was it? How could she look at him, speak to him, and not recognise that he is the very same person she has seen in so many pictures and paintings?

The fear that started to rise the moment the King mentioned his name was growing bigger and bigger, seizing all her body, locking every joint, nailing her to the ground without a single ability to move.

Just a moment ago, when she recognised the person Rainee was hugging so tightly, she froze at the realisation of who Rainee truly was and what that meant for her life. The realisation that just like that, in a single moment, she had lost her friend, who was replaced by some legendary figure.

This time the fear was different. She was truly and honestly afraid of the person she called a friend from the day they met. It was him! The most scary person in the world! The one who mothers would mention to their children when they would become too disobedient. The merciless warrior so often painted with a bloody sword and the head of an enemy in his hand. The one who doesn't listen even to the King himself; therefore, he could do whatever he likes, and no one will ever punish him, as there was no one who could. The one who has destroyed the lives of so many women who have been brave enough to lay their eyes on him. How this intimidating personality fit in with always so friendly, considerate, and gentle Anthony, she didn't know. But now Anthony was gone, and this scary general was standing in his place and still looking at her. He was looking at her all the time since the King mentioned his name, and he was still looking now. And this look, which always brought her so much encouragement and comfort, now froze her heart in terror to the point that she wanted to vomit.

Someone's hand took her firmly but gently by the shoulder and turned her away from Anthony. She looked up straight into Rainee's face.

"Nothing has changed." – Rainee said while looking into her eyes and stroking her cheek gently. – "Just names. They are only names. Remember that."

Annet looked all dizzy at her friend, who wasn't even her friend any more. How could she even trust what she was saying? How can she trust anyone ever again?!

People were piling around, more and more coming and squeezing. If the Dark General was given a lot of respectful space after discovering who he was, the Rainbow General attracted everyone like a magnet attracts a pile of needles. In no time, there was no room left around.

"I will see you tomorrow. Right?!" – Rainee said to her again. – "Just remember what I just said."

With that, a pink, bat-like wing had enwrapped her together with the man who stood all the time next to her, and the next moment they both were gone out of sight.

Anniel was taken aback by this sudden disappearance and wanted to run after them, but there was nowhere to run, and there was no one to run after. She gathered courage and looked over her shoulder to the place where Anthony, or rather the Dark General, was standing a minute ago, but that place was empty too.

"Gone," she thought, looking around. Both are gone. Why are people around so happy? Why are they hugging each other, saying that they have come back? Who has come back? All she could feel was just a loss.

"Who would have thought!" – Marcus said next to her, – "did you know it?"

Anniel shook her head in reply.

"That was a proper Ghost of the past!" – Marcus couldn't stop expressing his joy, – "Are you coming to celebrate?"

Anniel shook her head again before walking away.

She had nothing to celebrate. All she wanted to do right now was to hide and be alone. Rapidly, she was making her way home, trying to avoid all larger gatherings as she didn't want to talk with anyone right now.

Luckily, her house was on the outskirts of the town, and here it was peace and quiet as everyone was gathered in the town centre.

Anniel walked in, locked the door, and double-checked if it was locked. She would not open it, no matter how long someone would knock. In fact, if she heard the knock, she would probably die on the spot, as the only person who ever did it was the one she was trying to lock herself from. But who is she kidding? If he wants to enter, then there is no lock that would be able to keep him away.

What has happened just now? Is this some kind of joke or bad dream? If it is a dream, she wants to wake up as soon as possible. But no matter how hard she tried to wake up, nothing happened.

All was so interesting and promised so much adventure when that strange person, who appeared to be the King, came. And then that other man came and took Rainee away... It wasn't what actually happened, but that was how it felt.

First, she couldn't understand what happened, as the joy emitting from Rainee was so great that it spread around like lightning, and she was happy herself too, for no apparent reason. Then she looked and saw Rainee hugging tightly a man who was somehow very familiar, but she knew she had never seen him before. And how she hugged him! Even before they kissed, Anniel already knew that it was her boyfriend, the same one that she had spoken about, what now seemed so long ago. And she was happy for her. And he truly looked as she described him, with his strange-looking but very pretty eyes and brown hair nearly up to the shoulders. But then a stronger and stronger realisation that she had seen him was creeping into her mind until it struck her down like lightning, and she didn't recover since. It was Prince Angus.... There was no mistake in that, as he could hardly ever be taken for anyone else. Wildly known as Pink General because of his pink dragon and very gentle and loving character, he was ever interested only in one woman and openly showed his affection to her. There were endless stories and songs about love between Rainbow General and Pink Prince. There were many tales built up on this love. Also, it was firmly believed that the love of this Pink General had died nearly two years ago. Then why was he kissing Rainee and holding

her in such an embrace? And why is Rainee holding him back so strongly? And why is she so happy? The distant talk between them surfaced in her memory:

"You should be a General," – she had told Rainee once.

"Why do you know I am not?" was the answer. Just at that time, she didn't take it for an answer; she thought it was a joke.

Now it didn't look like a joke any more. When the King said that he was requesting General Rainee, better known as Rainbow General, to return to his service, Anniet wasn't even surprised, same as everyone else who saw her in Prince Angus's embrace. And that was it... There was no Rainee any more. There was only the Rainbow General.

She didn't look like a Rainbow General. And Anniet had never heard about General Rainee. There was only the Rainbow General. People also would call her Lady Ren. Was the name Rainee another fake name, similar to someone else's who was disclosed today? Anniet tried very hard not to think about him, as she didn't want to know anything about him. She didn't want her sweet and naive friend to be stained by the name of that scary legend. But her wish wasn't granted, as thoughts were coming and coming back again, finding their way through the gaps no matter how much she tried to close them off.

"It is just names," she said, "nothing else has changed, just names..." But said who? If it were Rainee who said it, she would drop down all her defences and would trust her. But she knew nothing about this Rainbow General who spoke in her place. How can it be? What is she supposed to do now?

Annet spent a few hours in her room pondering over the same thoughts again and again until she realised that there was nothing to stay in this room for any longer. She didn't want to go to celebrate. She didn't have anything to celebrate. After contemplation, she decided to go to the library. Life must go on; her friend Rainee would want her life to go on. It will never be the same, so why shouldn't it start today?

Annet left her room and found herself walking in the opposite direction to the library. She knew very well where she was going; there was no lying to herself. She just wanted to look at it once more before it all disappears tomorrow. Anniet left town and walked on a so familiar road. At one point, she stopped to look at the little cottage under the trees. There was a part in her that was screaming not to look, and there was a part that was sobbing about something that she never even had. She ignored both of them.

"It is just a name," she repeated to herself while looking at this little cosy house that was so dear to her, despite anything that happened. And really, what happened? Not a lot. It was obvious that the Dark General fell under some spell, and the King's coming released him from it. He told her many times that he wanted to tell Anniet his name but could not. He even said that he doesn't want to risk her forgetting him. Also, the way he looked at her today... Well, it cannot be changed, as Rainee likes to say. But there is no Rainee either, she thought, turning away from the cottage and walking further towards the house in the distance. Just today something was different there, something didn't match.

She walked a little bit closer and then stopped as if frozen to the ground. She knew what wasn't matching. The colour of the surroundings was very unusual, very pink. It looked so strange, and she was going to come closer to investigate when suddenly that pink colour lifted up its head

and looked at her with large, warning eyes. That's what made Anniet stop, and she nearly backed off, just her legs were not listening.

It was Prince Angus's dragon. Little Wonder was her actual name. "Blessing from the sky," people used to call it. Well, she didn't look little, and definitely didn't feel like a blessing.

Her enormously big body was circling around the hill, making it impossible to reach the house on top of it. People used to say that upon seeing this dragon, you feel safe and secure. Well, she didn't feel anything of this sort.

"She doesn't look that friendly from this side," – a familiar voice sounded next to her.

She had heard this voice so many times, and it always brought her only joy and confidence. Why is her body freezing up again in fear? Anniet didn't look back. Her mind was shouting, "Go away, go away!" Her heart... she didn't even know any more what was going on in it. It was completely and utterly messed up.

They both stood side by side for a few minutes until Anniet's heart stopped beating so violently.

"Do you know why I have come?" – Anthony, or rather the Dark General, asked.

Anniet wanted to shake her head, but to her own surprise, she heard her own voice.

"To tell me that you are leaving?"

These words, spoken by her herself, were a proper stabbing to her heart. "How strange," she thought, when she didn't look at him, it felt just the same as always. But never again will it be "as always". Long ago, he made a promise that he would not leave without telling her. Now he must come to fulfil this promise.

"Will I ever see you again?" – she heard herself speaking. She must be a really brave person after all to be able to speak in his presence.

"Yes," – the answer was short.

"Tomorrow?" – she asked.

"Tomorrow too, if you will come," – he said.

She wanted to say "good", she wanted to say that she will be glad to see him again. But she couldn't. The fear was way too big. It was so paralysing that it was hard to breathe. Anniet was surprised she managed to say that much, as she had already done. It was a good while until she scraped enough courage to turn and look at him. But there was nothing next to her. He was gone. He has disappeared as suddenly as he came.

Anniet breathed out in relief, just now realising how tense she was. She cast one last look at this house on a hill where she spent so many happy days. These days obviously were over, as even if she would want to go there, she wasn't given a chance, as there would be hardly any force in the world that would be able to break through this guarding dragon. At least that's what people said. Anniet turned around and walked back to town. She looked over her shoulder just in time to see this dragon putting her head back down.

Anniet slowly walked through the celebrating town. What were they celebrating? It was difficult to say. She walked into an empty library. It was strange to see this place empty. She was greeted by the portrait of the King dressed in his golden armour. The King she saw today was nothing similar to the one in the painting. She must admit that the face was the same, but just that.

However, Anniet wasn't looking at the King. She was looking at a person standing right behind him on his right side. A young woman dressed in the uniform of any colour. Usually, painters didn't know how to paint it and would make it white with shades of colour added here and there. People would say that her armour didn't have a colour, that it would shimmer and change with every step. This painting somehow managed to represent it. Why had she never marvelled at it before Anniet didn't know.

The face looking at her, however, wasn't the same as her friend's. Anniet walked down to the second painting, portraying the Rainbow General on her own. She wasn't the same as Rainee. However, the more she looked, the more similarities she was able to see. She definitely has the same eyes. Why did she never notice it before? Anniet stretched her arm and with her palm covered the rest of the face, leaving just these eyes looking at her, and here she was. It was definitely Rainee looking at her from the painting. She moved her hand away, and a strange person, having some of Rainee's features, was looking now.

Anniel moved to another painting where Prince Angus was displayed. She usually liked this painting as his face and eyes were always so friendly. However, now she didn't feel the same and walked past it. However, she stopped by General Blake's painting and stood there for a very, very long time.

There was no mismatch in this painting, as it was in Rainee's. It was Anthony looking at her from it, painted to the very smallest details. Anniet knew why, up until now, she wasn't able to recognise him; it must be because of the spell. For some reason, everyone else saw him as a different person, but she could see him for who he truly was, just wasn't able to connect him to his true personality. But really, what was his true personality? Was it this scary half-person, half-beast from legends? Or was he this sweet, gentle, and friendly person who was telling such beautiful stories and making sure that people wouldn't go hungry? If not to mention the treatment she was receiving. He said that she will see him again. Good. She really, really wants to see him again. Maybe one day she will be less afraid. Perhaps then she will be able to go to the Capital to meet him.

This painting was drawn so well! How does it come that the King's and Rainee's paintings are inaccurate? She was looking at his black, lively eyes that, even from a painting, had such a strong effect on her. Anniet has come here to the library this evening to start a new life, but now she has realised that she doesn't want this new life. She walked to another painting where Rainee and Blake were standing next to each other. Truly, how could she not recognise Rainee in these pictures? The more she looked, the more similarities there were. She doesn't want a new life without them in it. This realisation came so naturally. But what can she do? There was nothing she could do. The King came to get them from her life, and they will follow him.

Her heart was becoming so hollow, so empty, and life was as meaningless as a place on earth can be. She heard someone rapidly coming from deeper down in the library. So this place wasn't empty after all. She should go and read something too. But no matter what, she couldn't move from this painting as if all her life depended on it.

A woman came from behind the bookshelves and came straight to her.

"What happened?" – she asked in a soft but firm voice that she had heard many times before.

The headmaster. But she didn't look like a headmaster. The headmaster was old and weary; this woman was not even middle-aged yet. What is going on today? But it didn't even look strange any more.

"Nothing really..." – Anniet said, swallowing down tears that were climbing up her throat.

"Don't give me any of this nonsense," – the woman said, taking Anniet by the hands that were numb, lifeless, and cold. She definitely was the headmaster. Nobody else ever spoke in this way, just her.

"You look very pretty," – Anniet said, looking at her. Why didn't she ever notice it before? Just because the headmaster was old? Aren't old people pretty too? She never thought about it.

"Never mind my looks," – the headmaster said, rubbing Anniet's hands and bringing back some warmth in them. – "Now tell me what happened?" – she added, stroking her face.

Anniet was about to say "Nothing," as it truly was nothing, but the headmaster didn't want to hear it, so instead she said:

"They are gone."

"Who is gone?" – the headmaster asked, following her gaze and looking at the picture herself. – "Rainee and the pain in the undercarriage? Why do you think they are gone? Come with me, I want to hear what happened."

Anniet wasn't used to disagreeing, but she wasn't going anywhere away from this painting.

However, the headmaster wasn't used to being disobeyed.

"It is only a painting; there are no people in it. If you want it, you can take it and keep it, but only after you tell me what has happened. Come right now."

Anniet didn't have the strength to refuse and followed after casting one more look at these faces so dear to her. The headmaster didn't take her to the exit. Instead, they walked across the main hall to the smaller door on the side. The headmaster opened it and showed Anniet to go first. This must be some shorter route, as they walked straight into the headmaster's office. Anniet has been here a few times before, but always with Rainee. It was fascinating to sit and listen to how these two would speak about many things that Anniet had little knowledge and understanding about.

"Sit here," – the headmaster said, pointing to the chair where Rainee would usually sit. Anniet stood for some time, not daring to sit down, as it felt somehow unnatural to take this seat.

"Don't make me repeat myself," – the headmaster said, walking to the kitchen to put on the kettle and making two cups of a hot drink.

By the time she returned, Anniet was already sitting. The headmaster was so firm... it was difficult not to do what she said. Anniet knew only one person who was firmer than she was...

"OK, why do you think Rainee and Blake are gone?"

"Why did you call him a pain in the undercarriage?" – Anniet asked in return.

"Long story," – the headmaster said, slightly smiling. – "But he is. What did he do this time?"

"Who? Anthony? He didn't do anything. He just... he just is... he is just not Anthony!"

"Well, to some degree, you are right, but also you are not. Anthony is just a name, and if you think back, the King did mention this name among many others, so it is just one of his names."

“But he was always so kind and friendly, and funny. And he turned out to be someone... someone who is so scary.”

“My little girl, with your words, you are opposing yourself. Nobody is turning into something different just because they are called by a different name. And yes, the same person can be kind, friendly, funny, and scary. It is just how people respond to something. One person might think you are funny, and you will be funny for that person; another person might think you are scary, and you will be scary for that person. And both of them could have seen you at the same time, speaking the same words, doing the same thing. It is rarely about what a person does; it is mainly about what the other party thinks. Anyway, how did you know that Anthony was kind, friendly, and funny? No one was able to remember him.”

“I could,” – Anniel said, – “I told you that before, but you were always forgetting.”

“I see. Yes, now that you mention it, I can recall you speaking about him before. How strange. Anyway, what has he done to scare you off?”

“He hasn't done anything. He just turned into the Dark General.”

“Well, this isn't right. He didn't turn out to be the Dark General; he always was him, no matter if you knew it or not. Did he behave any differently since his identity was disclosed?”

Anniel thought about what was said and shook her head, realising that it wasn't him but her who behaved differently.

“But I am so afraid of him now!” – she said, covering up her face. – “I don't know what to do!”

“This statement makes much more sense than anything you said before,” – the headmaster agreed. – “There are many ways to go over your fears once you recognise them. But no matter what way you choose, it is you who will have to do it. No matter how it got in, now it is your fear, and others cannot take you away from it, nor take it from you. No matter what others will do, it will not have the slightest influence if you yourself are not involved. No matter how much they change, it will not ease your fear. They can sacrifice their lives trying to become something that you would approve of, but it will still not work, as what you approve will shrink and shrink until there will be no room left to move, and you will be afraid of them anyway.”

“Then how do I stop being afraid? I cannot even breathe when he is around!”

“First step we did just now. We found out and identified what that fear is about.”

“You found out,” – Anniel pointed out, as she herself didn't find out anything.

“We found out,” – the headmaster corrected her. – “I could talk all day or all year, and it would not bring the slightest change if you don't want to see it by yourself.”

“Then how do I stop being afraid? Because I still am.”

“As I say, there are many ways. Most simple is to stop accepting it, as it wasn't you who manifested this fright, as he hasn't done to you anything that would bring up this much fear, which means you accepted it from other people. So you choose to refuse it instead of taking it. Same as you accepted it, same you unaccept it. You accepted it as a truth, now reject it as a lie. Fear is always a lie; there is no real reason to look much deeper. If you cannot do it, then going through fear, doing things the same way as if it didn't exist, even if it freezes you at the same time, will do the trick. Just at the same moment, acknowledge its presence, don't ignore it, don't pretend that fear doesn't exist.”

Anniel tried to think hard about how it all should work, but could not even imagine how it would be possible in his presence. Aqila watched her struggles for a while.

“Or maybe you admit that you love him so much that the thought of him being unapproachable is unbearable to you. Let me tell you that he is not. Don't fall for the image that people have drawn over him. His will is too strong to succumb to the influence and demands of others. But you should ask Rainee about that. She is much better than I am at explaining all these things. Also, she knows him more than anyone else.”

Now she did it! When the headmaster spoke so openly about her love for Anthony, as if it would be the most obvious thing, Anniel had frozen again, prepared to deny it with her life, but Rainee's name had swept all these defences, all this ice away, leaving just raw, open pain, and tears started to fall down her cheeks.

“She is gone,” – Anniel said, trying to be brave and wipe her tears away, but to no success. – “There is no Rainee, and I don't know if there ever was!”

“Don't you think that it is a bit of a strange way to describe somebody's life and the impact of the past year?” – the headmaster asked, not trying to stop Anniel's tears, but not offering any consolation either. – “Do you genuinely think that the way she lived the past year and her influence, her teachings, don't count?”

Anniel violently shook her head, quickly wiping away these treacherous tears that just kept rolling down. No, no, no, no, no, she doesn't think that way! She thinks completely the opposite! What was she even saying?

“I think the same,” – the headmaster said, as if answering her thoughts, and helping Anniel to clean her tears. Somehow, her hand was much better at it, and soon the tears stopped rolling down.

“Now tell me what happened that made you think that Rainee doesn't exist any more?”

“But she is not Rainee! She is a general!”

“Well, every general has a name. A general is just a position for a person with a name. What is wrong with Rainee's name?”

“It is not real!”

“Even if it wouldn't be, what difference would it make for the person behind it? My name is Aqila. Did you know it before? No. Well, now you know. Did it make any difference to you how you see me? I think so too. So even if Rainee would not have a name or would have forgotten it through the long years, she was called just a General by many, and after coming to this place where she wasn't a general any more, would choose this name for herself. Would it be very bad? I think it is a beautiful name.”

“Me too,” – Anniel agreed, thinking that if Rainee had chosen this name for herself, it really suits her well.

“But she didn't,” – the headmaster said. – “She was given this name when she was born by the King himself.”

“How do you know?”

“The King told me not that long ago to clear up the confusion.”

“Then how come no one knows it? I have never heard about General Rainee. Have you?”

"No," – the headmaster agreed, – "that's why I asked the King. And he said that at her inauguration, she was called General Rainee, but it was forgotten for two reasons. One was that her inauguration was so different from anything anyone had seen before. The uniform she had wasn't given to her or chosen by her, the same as her position. The King didn't appoint her to be a general. This position came to her naturally, or should it be said as an evaluation of what she was, as soon as she joined the King's army; she wasn't given a chance to assume any other position."

"And as soon as she was inaugurated, her body was clad in a uniform that no one had ever seen before, and a general's cape was cast over her shoulders by some unseen power in a way that it could never be removed, as it had become a part of her, just as her uniform. Nobody has ever seen anything like this before, nor have they seen such colours radiating out of a person; every step she took left a trace of rainbow behind. Thereafter, she was called a Rainbow General by people, or the General by the army, one part astonished by her looks, the other party astonished by her entrance." – Anniet was smiling again, telling aloud one of her favourite stories.

"So you see, you know all the answers yourself," – the headmaster smiled too.

"So her true name was forgotten?"

"Her true name wasn't forgotten at that time, but eventually, just very few people would call her by it, as even before her inauguration, most of the people were calling her Ren, a name given by her little brother."

"I didn't know Rainee had a brother."

"Me neither," – the headmaster said, – "but it does not surprise me, as we all know very little about her. People think they know her inside out, but in reality, they know only what she has done, what she has taught, what she has achieved, or even when she has failed. But that is not who a person is; it is just what that person has done. If there is anyone around who knows her personality at least a little bit, then it is you. But even then, she has lived for many years; you have known her for a very short time, so even if you had tried to learn about her all this time, you wouldn't be able to succeed."

"And I didn't even try to know anything about her..." Anniet thought to herself, as most of the time they were discussing either Anniet, Marcus, or someone else, or were just spending time together... Thinking about that, a tear again rolled down her cheek, but at least now she understood why she was truly crying. It was very selfish, but she couldn't help it. She just couldn't bear to think that these times are in the past, never to be repeated.

"Have you ever thought that she is an extraordinary person?" – the headmaster asked.

"All the time." – Anniet said, truly meaning it.

"Me too. Then I wonder to myself how we both were still surprised when it was disclosed that she is the same person who is considered to be most extraordinary by many."

"I don't know," – Anniet said, thinking how correct this statement was. The Rainbow General was always so special. And when with Rainee, she could not think about anyone more special than she was. Wouldn't it mean that she had to be more special than the Rainbow General? To tell the truth, she always thought that way. So why was she surprised to find out that it was the same person...

"The thought of losing her is unbearable..." – Anniet said openly. – "I don't understand how people can celebrate it."

“Why do you think you have lost her?”

“Because from now on, she will be someone unapproachable who lives only in stories, pictures, and a faraway land.”

“Did she ever strike you as being unapproachable?” – the headmaster wondered.

“No,” – Anniet agreed, thinking that she had never met anyone as open to everyone as Rainee was.

“Then why do you think she will be now? Isn't it again just somebody else's opinion that you have taken for granted?”

“No,” – Anniet said in a small voice. – “She doesn't want anyone around any more. Now this unfriendly dragon guards her house, and no one can reach her.”

“Silly girl,” – the headmaster said. – “Did you ever think what it means to be famous? Someone who everyone wants to talk to, to see, to touch, to be close to. If they haven't put that dragon out, then all her house would be plagued by all sorts of visitors, not caring if she wants them to be around or not. But it is so insincere. She was living here, among the same people for many months now, and until they found out that she was someone famous, they didn't bother to seek to be close to her. On the contrary, they would dispute her teachings; they would want her only for their own gain. They didn't want then to come and visit her. Have you had many visitors while you were staying with her?”

“Only you,” – Anniet said. – “Marcus wanted to come a few times, but Rainee said no.”

“Because he wasn't interested in her, nor in spending time with her. All he wanted was to gain something from her. There is a limited amount of time you can give to others without getting drained. But at least you can call Marcus genuine and capable of seeing true value in someone, even if this value is only about what you can get from them. Now, imagine if Marcus thought that he had the right to be with Rainee all the time and would ignore her telling him not to come, how would it feel? Or imagine that Marcus would not ask, but simply come whenever he felt like it. Wouldn't it be a bit troublesome? Shouldn't you be at least locking your door? Let me tell you that now nearly everyone feels like this, that she belongs to them and they are entitled to come and speak and congratulate, and to express their joy or even bring their worries. Does it look strange that they have put a guard around their house?”

Annet shook her head again. She never even thought that way.

“On top of that, she is not alone now, is she?” – the headmaster continued. – “She hasn't seen Prince Angus in a very long time and must have missed him a lot.”

“I know she has missed him a lot,” – Anniet said. – “She did tell me once herself. And she loves him so much. She said that if he came, she would want to stay alone with him, at least for some time, as all her attention would be given only to him.”

“See? Here you go, you know all the answers again. Just pain sometimes doesn't allow us to think clearly. They have been given time only until tomorrow's midday. It is not that much to share with others. What has she told you before leaving? I did see her speaking to you.”

“She told me that nothing has changed, that it is only names, and that she will see me tomorrow.”

The headmaster stayed quietly for a little while, letting these words sink in to the one who had just spoken them.

“Didn't these words say everything that you needed to know?” – she asked after a while.

But Anniet already understood it herself. She was still not understanding the part that nothing had changed. But maybe Rainee was talking about herself. In that case, she was right, and the headmaster was right. People don't change only because they're called by a different name. But things will change for her...

“Thank you for your warm hospitality,” – Anniet said, standing up and walking towards the door, – “and for all your advice. It has helped me a lot.”

“Where do you think you are going?” – the headmaster asked in an indisputable voice.

“I will go to my room,” – Anniet said, thinking that there are not that many places left where she could go.

“To do what?”

“..... I don't know,” – Anniet was caught off guard by this question. Truly, what is she going to do there? – “To sleep?” – she suggested.

“That's an excellent plan, as you do look tired. But there is no need to go all the way back just for that. Wait right here.”

The headmaster stood up and walked to the other room. Shortly, she came out bringing a couple of pillows and a duvet. Without a word, she walked to the sofa next to the window and quickly made a bed. Anniet was watching her, not knowing what to say. This kind gesture really touched her, but on the other hand, she really wanted to go and stay alone. She will not be able to sleep anyway, and she said it only because nothing else popped into her head.

“Thank you very much,” – she said, not knowing what to do, – “but I'd better keep going.”

“You, young lady, will stay right here where you are,” – the headmaster said in a firm voice. – “Take your clothes off and get into bed; if you want to shower, it is in the next room.”

Seeing that Anniet was still not obeying, she added:

“Don't make me call Rainee back here just to put you to bed. As a headmaster, I do have access to every place, guarded by a dragon or not. I believe she would be worried enough to come if I were to tell her that you have exhausted yourself to the brink of collapsing, but still are not willing to take a rest.”

That was enough! In no time, Anniet was in bed with her clothes neatly placed on a chair next to her, peeking at the headmaster from under the duvet with her wide-open eyes. Only the thought of Rainee being summoned to put her to bed was unacceptable. And what was worse, it was obvious that the headmaster would do it without a doubt. And on top of that, Rainee will definitely come! At least that Rainee that she knew. But what is she talking about? There was no other Rainee, just the one she knew. She missed her really badly, but to disturb her without a proper need was not an option. Thinking about how happy Rainee was today... She has never seen her so happy before... Didn't she tell herself that she missed her boyfriend a lot and if he came, she would like to spend time with him alone? There is no way Anniet is going to be a reason that this time would be disturbed.

“Besides, if you want to see Rainee before the inauguration, then you might be able to meet her in a hall on the ground floor of this building. The King requested permission to use it and said he would leave the uniform for Rainee there.”

Now, that was news! Anniet sank into bed, thinking that she was definitely not going anywhere.

“I thought she didn't need a uniform?” – Anniet asked.

“I thought the same,” – the headmaster agreed, – “but maybe things have changed since then. Nobody knows what has happened, but whatever it was, it must be big. People don't change in their appearance for no reason.”

“What are the reasons that make people change their appearance?”

“I don't know that either, as I haven't seen it before. But I would say pain, if I had to guess.”

“Do you think she was in a lot of pain?”

“It would be very rare that people change their lives so drastically out of joy. Sleep now.”

Annet obediently closed her eyes, thinking that sleep was not going to happen. But just by doing so, she realised that she truly was utterly exhausted. How strange... She didn't even know it. Anniet opened her eyes again, this time certain that sleep would come. She looked at the headmaster, who was sitting again at the table and watching her. She was so pretty! How could she have never noticed it before? She must be truly blind to miss it just because the headmaster was older before.

“I am glad you are young again,” – Anniet managed to say before falling asleep. – “I am sorry I didn't see how beautiful you are before. Old age must have blinded me. Hope it will never happen again.”

Aqila was sitting at the table and watching this girl finally fall asleep.

How strange to witness over and over again how the same event that brings joy and celebration for one can bring pain and suffering for another. How lucky she was to be in the library to find her. If the King hadn't requested her company, she would never have been there on such a day. She had to leave the King there to continue his research on his own. Hopefully, he didn't get offended. Well, if he did, then he did; nothing could be done about it, as she simply could not stand and ignore the pain of this child. Even in the overwhelming presence of the King, this pain could be felt crisp and clear.

It was clear as a sunny day that these events would be a hard blow on Anniet, but she saw Raine talking to her before leaving and thought all would be alright. In her wildest dreams, she would not have imagined that there was one more factor, unknown to anyone else, affecting this girl. Damn you, Mister Blake, you always manage to bring such riddles, to set such quests. Dark General... Dark General, my ass. There is as much darkness in this boy as there is in the brightest star on a dark night. How he managed to surround himself with so much fear was a pure mystery.

The fear Anniet felt when Blake's presence was revealed was obvious, same as in many others. How can someone be feared so much and loved so much at the same time? Most of these people who moved away at his first sight were in total awe of him. Very strange. That's why the feelings this girl had for him, not for the general, but for the man behind this general, were missed so easily in all this turmoil.

Aqila looked at the riding saddle that Blake had gifted her all these months ago, slowly recalling his coming. Now what she remembered didn't fade away any more. It stayed, making her laugh at herself, remembering her own actions. This boy never comes or behaves in a normal way.

But how come this girl never lost memory of him while he was under this spell? The King never explained what he meant by "Forgotten, named by the last ruler". It was obvious that this was the last touch that unlocked the spell. Who was that ruler who placed this spell on him? It had to be truly strong to overrule Blake's will.

Among all these thoughts, the last words spoken by Anniet were still playing at the back of her mind. This girl truly knows how to give compliments. When she called her pretty, it came right down to the heart. Aqila stood and looked in a mirror. One could say that she was pretty, but she never cared too much about it. Why did it bother her now? What did she mean by saying that she was young again? Something was bothering her, but Aqila couldn't grasp what it was, so she put all her attention on it. She didn't like this kind of mystery lingering around. "Time wasn't kind to you, my teacher," Blake said upon arrival, and later the King said something very similar. Now this girl mentioned her age again. "What was it?" Aqila thought to herself, searching the room with her eyes for possible clues. Nothing came to her mind, but her eyes kept going back to the working desk over and over again, so she walked there. The desk was left in a little bit of a mess as she left it in a hurry when the King came. What was she doing? Writing? No! She was sleeping. Why would she be sleeping at the desk?

And then the memory hit so hard that Aqila slumped down in a chair. She carefully looked at the mirror, the very same mirror she had looked at in the morning. Now she could remember very well what she saw in it this very morning. It was an old, sympathetic woman with gray hair reflected in it. Now, however, there was a young and pretty woman with eyes full of disbelief who was looking back at her.

CHAPTER

5

Let's make a deal

Rainee was standing and watching Anniet sleeping. She had been standing like this for more than half an hour now, still not knowing what to do: to wake her up or let her rest. Rainee couldn't remember herself contemplating before. She never saw a reason for that. At a decision moment you choose, you act, and you take all that it brings to you. Well, this time, no matter what decision she would make, she would not be able to take with her what she wanted. Humans cannot be "taken", not by other humans. They can be taken by circumstances, by life, but not by someone else. And in a place where life was taking her now, there was no room for this girl. It wasn't about physical matters. Physically, she could offer Anniet to go together, and she would agree instantly, and there would always be rooms to stay. But no matter how hard she thought, there was no room for her to grow there, or to find out what she really wanted in life. Anniet would wish to have the same life as here, just in a different place, but it is never going to happen. Right now, she was in the best place she possibly could be, and to leave it following a vision that cannot become reality can bring nothing else but stagnation and more pain. And this pain would be very cunning and difficult to disclose, as there would be nothing to complain about, even to yourself, as all that you "wanted" was given. Unhappy people playing happy. She couldn't bear the thought of Anniet becoming one of them.

Rainee made up her mind, she turned around and walked to the kitchen, made a cup of tea and brought it back. Then she sat down on the edge of the bed, and Anniet woke up instantly.

"Hi," – Rainee said to her, brushing a strand of hair from her still sleepy face.

These blue eyes locked directly on her, and a big smile came to Anniet's face. Rainee knew it would not last for very long, but what difference does it make for this moment?

As expected, after a few seconds, Anniet's eyes started to wander around these unfamiliar surroundings, and with that, her memories returned. She looked back at Rainee, but there was neither that trust and happiness in these eyes nor a smile on this face left, only uncertainty. Only The One knows when these eyes will look at her again with so much love, trust, and happiness as they did just now, if ever again. There was a wall now between them, a wall that cannot be broken from Rainee's side. All she could do was respect it and look for any opening that might help to bring it down if there was ever a desire to do so from the other side. Still, it was heartbreaking to see someone disappearing behind it and not being able to do anything about it. She could feel that the girl behind that wall wanted so badly to hug her right now and share with Rainee all her worries and look for support and guidance. But the wall prevailed; fear and uncertainty were stronger than Anniet's desire, and instead she just replied, "Hi," with a shy smile. Then, in an instant, her eyes widened, and Anniet even sat up:

"Did the headmaster call you here? But I did listen! I did go to bed!"

"So serious, eh?" – Rainee laughed, trying to imagine the hardship Aqila had gone through. – "She even had to threaten you? But I am glad that you had a rest. No, she didn't call me or say anything. I wanted to come and see you."

"How did you know where I am? Oh, you probably used your general powers..."

Rainee sighed inwardly at such a statement.

“No, I didn't use general powers, as there is no such thing as general powers. I use my own powers to be a general, not vice versa.”

“I see,” – Anniet said, lying back in bed. – “You lied to me...” she added in a quiet voice, turning her eyes away.

“Did I?” – Rainee asked while looking directly at her.

“You said that the Rainbow General was gone.”

“She was,” – Rainee confirmed.

“But you are alive!”

“I was alive a long time before Rainbow General came to existence, and I will still be me when Rainbow General is needed no more.”

There was an inner battle going on inside Anniet, and Rainee was watching her struggling. Another layer of that invisible wall was building rapidly, but it was still not there as Anniet was trying to fight it back bravely. Any attempt to help this inner battle might be unpredictable and may have a completely opposite effect than intended, but still, Rainee took a chance.

“When we spoke, I truly believed that the times when I was a General were in the past, never to return. The King calling me back was more of a surprise to me than to you. Even now, I am not sure I still have in me what everyone expects to see.”

Surprisingly, it worked. Something that Anniet already knew supported what she just said, and at least that part was sorted. “What a relief,” Rainee thought to herself.

“What happened?” – Anniet asked.

“That's a good question,” - Rainee said more to herself than to the girl. Really, what has happened? During all this time, she still didn't work it out. She thought she did, but one look at the King and she knew that she hadn't moved an inch towards any clarity. If she had to share, where would she begin? She simply didn't know. - “One day, I might tell you what has happened. But not today. It's way too long, and I am not ready to talk about it yet. I don't know if I will ever be.”

For a moment, Rainee thought that the wall separating them would crumble, but instead it just shook and remained. And instead of hugging her, Anniet curled up in bed, clutching the duvet. Her feelings were so clear, and Rainee wanted to help her and could help her in so many ways, but even if she tried, Anniet would not receive any of it, as it would never reach her while she is hiding behind that wall. Broken trust... Strange how sometimes one can go through life telling lies and still be trusted, and others can tell only the truth and still be deemed not worthy of trust. Pain is such a big disorder, twisting reality and making it unrecognisable.

“Did you come to say goodbye?” – Anniet asked, peeking at her with the corner of her eye.

“Not yet,” - Rainee smiled. So much pain in such a simple question. Her answer dispersed some of it. There is no need for all of it to attack at once.

“Then why did you come?”

What a straightforward question. Truly, why did she come? Rainee didn't say anything. Not because she didn't know, but because the answer was composed of so many little things that to tell only one was discrediting others, and to tell all was not possible.

"I am glad you came," - Anniet said, not waiting for the answer or realising that there would be none.

"Me too," - Rainee said, handing her a cup with what used to be a hot drink that had cooled down a good deal by now.

"I will follow you," - Anniet said firmly while taking the cup offered.

It was obvious that she had made an inner resolve, as just pure determination was coming out of her now. "Should I even wonder..." Rainee thought to herself while smiling at Anniet and watching her quickly draining the cup offered.

"Let's make a deal," - she said after Anniet finished it. - "But as with any deal, it would require effort on both sides."

Anniet was looking at her with questioning eyes. There was no fear left in her, but it was no consolation, as the way she was heading wasn't the direction Rainee would want her to go. She could not prevent it; if the girl decides to keep up with this direction, then it is her choice. But she could advise, hoping that her advice will be taken into consideration, and she definitely is not going to encourage it.

"OK," - Anniet promised without checking out what deal it is.

"Don't you want to hear it before making a promise?"

The girl was very smart. By now, she already knew that what Rainee was going to ask wasn't going to be easy, but still, she just shook her head.

"No," - she said, - "if I am to follow you, I will have to learn to trust you."

That was so far away from the truth that it even stabbed Rainee in the heart. "You are just beginning to unlearn it," she thought to herself. Trust doesn't need either effort or learning. It needs only... trust? It doesn't work the "learning" way.

"OK," - Rainee said aloud, - "do you want at least to hear it?"

"I do," - Anniet confirmed, - "as otherwise I will not know what the deal is, neither what you or I have to do."

"Where should I start? Should I tell your part or mine?"

"Yours."

"Very well. On my part, once you leave this School, I will meet you and help you in any possible way available to me to help you move on the path you chose to walk, even if I don't like it myself. You will have my full support and help."

"OK," - Anniet smiled. It was clear that the part "I will meet you" made her the happiest. - "And what do I do?"

"You? You stay in this School until one day it lets you out, and not before it. You study many different things and many different subjects. You ask the magic of this School to help you discover things that would benefit you most, that would help you to become you, to discover you, that would help you grow. But not in your knowledge. To grow in knowledge, you don't need any magic, just effort. Summon this magic so it would help you to grow in yourself. But to do so, you would have to trust it more than you trust yourself or even more than you trust me. Magic is stronger than me. And if you put the right request, it will guide you without failure, but only guide. Walking, you have to do yourself. In that way, you will get the most this place can offer you. But magic cannot be

tricked. For it to work, you have to be sincere. And that is an even trickier part than the one you already heard. I want you to ask it to open and provide the ways for you to grow fastest, not what you think is best for you, not what I think is best for you. The secret of the magic is that it knows what is best and the shortest and most suitable way for you, even if it opposes any thought and reason.”

While she was talking, Anniet was already shaking her head violently. It obviously was not what she wanted to hear.

“I want to come with you!” – she said in a pleading voice.

“And you will,” - Rainee smiled at her, - “if that's what you want after leaving this School. That is my part of this deal, isn't it? And you already have my promise that after you have done your share, I will be at your command to help you walk the way you choose. But before you grow enough to discover what you want and who you are, how would you know where you want to go? If you decide now, it will be based on fear and pain, on reason and common sense, on the best decision you can make now when your heart is in turmoil. It is never going to be the right outcome. Then how would I, knowing what it is based on, be able to help you? I was hoping to stay with you long enough to see and guide that growth. But life didn't grant me this wish. And I would not be able to do so in a place we would be going, even if you follow me now.

“I want to join King's Army...”

“I know you do. But the thing is that you don't want it. You want to stay with me, and it is not the same. And there is no reason to try to tear yourself apart by twisting your true wishes and making them unrecognisable. If, after leaving this School, that would still be your wish, then I will have no objections.”

“How long do I have to stay in here? After you leave, there won't be anyone to teach me...”

“If you hold this place as a prison, it will not be able to offer you anything. Most likely it will kick you out very soon. But it isn't part of the deal, is it? The part of the deal is that you stay in it as long as possible and leave only after taking all the best it could offer you. I know I am repeating myself, but this place is magical. There is no other place like this, at least I don't know any other. It will read your heart, your mind, your desire, and will lead you towards it in the shortest way possible, even if you don't believe it at the time being.”

“Can I back out of this deal?” – Anniet asked, and it was obvious that she was already beating herself for taking it so lightly.

“Yes,” - Rainee smiled at Anniet, laughing inwardly to herself. At least she regained her straightforward approach, which was a victory in itself. – “To trick you into an unwanted deal was never my intention.”

“And what will happen now?”

“Now? We still have half an hour until midday, so I will let you get ready and will go and get changed myself. Then, if we have any minutes left, we can spend them together.”

“No, I mean, what will happen when we leave this School?”

Rainee watched her, thinking to herself that she didn't know what would happen after they leave the School. They will see when they get there. But it wasn't what the girl was asking about.

“I will do all that is in my power and abilities to help you on the path you choose.”

“Even if you don't like it?”

“Even if I don't like it.”

“Because you promised?” – Anniet asked in a small voice, turning her eyes away.

Rainee waited until Anniet looked back at her and said with a smile.

“Because I want to.”

“But you will do the same now as if I were to keep up to my promise.”

“Let me tell you a secret, or rather a truth, about deals and promises. The moment at least one part doesn't want to stay in a deal any more, for any reason, there is no deal left. Every deal or promise is valid only as long as there is a desire to do it. Otherwise, it is not a deal any more, it is a restriction. And to restrict you never was neither my intent, nor wish, nor desire.”

Anniet opened her mouth a few times to ask a question, but closed it again without making a sound. She didn't need to say it aloud for Rainee to know what the question was. "What is then your desire!" was screaming in the girl's mind and heart. She was glad that Anniet didn't ask this question, as she didn't want to answer it. If she were to do so, then, at the state Anniet was now, it would be like an order, like a task for her to fulfil, and it would have an opposite effect to what Rainee wanted. You cannot order someone to want.

“Get ready,” - Rainee said, standing up and leaning over to kiss Anniet on her head. – “The headmaster left breakfast for you on the table. Make sure you eat it, as it might be a very long day.”

After doing so, she walked towards the door.

“I will do it!” – sounded Anniet's voice from behind, - “I will keep up to my side of our deal.”

Rainee turned back with a smile. She wanted to praise, she wanted to tell how happy she was because of this decision. But she didn't. Instead, she asked:

“Why?”

“Because I want to,” - Anniet said in a quiet but firm voice. This firmness was nothing like the one she used before. It wasn't so hard, it wasn't so harsh and determined. That's why it was much stronger. Firmness that would be a guiding light instead of a burden to carry through life. - “Because I think, no, because I know that you would offer me only what you think is best for me. And I want to see in myself what you want to see in me.”

Then never forget it,” - Rainee smiled at her again before leaving. She felt how some until now unnoticed tension left her shoulders, and her breathing became much lighter.

"Strange, how much unseen rubbish we are carrying with ourselves, not even knowing that it was there until it leaves," Rainee thought. But still, she was happy now. Happy and relieved. She didn't lie to Anniet when she promised to do her best to help her. However, the best she could offer here as a friend and teacher was nothing close to the best that a General friend would be able to offer. Here, even while being her shadow, Anniet was learning and growing. There, if she were to do the same, she would be feeling lonely and would lose herself, becoming something that circumstances demand. "To see in myself what you want to see in me." Rainee wouldn't say it better herself.

CHAPTER

6

Confrontation

All in her thoughts, Rainee reached the downstairs hall and, for a while, looked at the uniform left for her. There was nothing wrong with it. It was a nicely made uniform for a commanding officer of her squad. The only thing was that she had never worn one of them before. She never needed to. As soon as she would step into surroundings where a uniform was required, she would change into it instantly without even the ability to take it off. You cannot take off what you didn't put on. Right now, it seemed strange to be wearing something that was never intended, but it never bothered her before.

This style of uniform she was looking at right now was made as a replica of her own old armour for those who would be under her command, but also would command others when she was not around. It was not possible to make an accurate replica, so they tried a few designs before settling on this one. She herself thought it was a very nice-looking uniform, but still, she never needed one. If the King left it out for her, that means she will, or at least might, need it now.

Rainee took her clothes off and started to get into the uniform provided. It fitted her nicely.

There was a little crowd of people waiting in the entrance room in hopes of speaking or at least seeing her when she finished. For nearly two centuries, this behaviour was an inseparable part of her life, but she had almost forgotten about it in less than two years. Anniet had already joined them... What a restless soul. At least she didn't ignore her advice and took bread and cheese from the breakfast table and was now stuffing it quickly into her mouth. Not the best way to have breakfast, but nevertheless just as efficient. Loud murmurs were coming from that room, but suddenly, all stopped.

There was no mystery to Rainee what brought this silence. The King had come. He came from a different side of the building than everyone was gathered, but he appeared very suddenly, and at this close proximity, his presence could not be ignored. In no time, doors on the other side of the hall opened, and the King walked in.

Without saying a word, he walked to the two-seater and casually sat down. Dressed in his dark gray suit with one of his legs over another and his arm stretched across the seat's back, he looked nothing like the ruler of the kingdom that people were used to seeing. Curious heads started to peep out through the slightly open doors that, with every second passing, were getting opened wider and wider until the doorway was jammed with curious faces.

Rainee and the King were completely ignoring that unwanted company. The King was sitting watching Rainee, and Rainee was finishing fastening buttons on her snow white shirt. None of them cared about being watched or overheard. Over the years, Rainee realised that there is no need to care about it ever. Anything that will be heard will change so drastically while being passed from person to person that in these stories, there will be as little truth as if no one had even witnessed what had happened. So, ask people to leave or let them stay, it will bring the same outcome. If you ask them to leave, they will fabricate and speculate, if you let them stay, they will exaggerate and change.

Rainee didn't know why the King had come, but it was good that he did. It will allow her to accustomise to being so close to him again. She never had any difficulty staying next to him, but

this time her heart was pounding. And not because of the reasons that would keep others at bay from him. Truth to tell, she didn't know the reason for it herself. She was so glad to see him again, and she couldn't bear to stay with him in the same room. Well, it cannot be helped, things probably will never go back to what they were before. She'd better get used to this new and unknown relationship.

"I guess I owe my thanks to you," - she said while fastening the buttons on her sleeves.

It was more a question than a statement, but the King didn't acknowledge it.

"Throughout the years, I have never thanked you once," – he said instead, - "let's not burden ourselves with it now either."

They looked at each other for some time before the King continued.

"But I would rather prefer that you would have finished your work and taken the place that suits you so nicely."

"It is not my place to take," - Rainee answered coldly. – "Never was and never will be."

Despite her calm and cold voice, she was neither calm nor cold.

"The one you are appointing to this place is not ready and might never be ready for it," – the King said.

Rainee felt something being stirred inside of her again, bringing up another wave of heat, but she ignored it. There was no time now to go into self-analysis.

"I know someone who is fully responsible for him being stuck," - she said instead.

"Well, it might be," - the King didn't argue. – "Still, every man is responsible for his own actions, not for someone else's. If he cannot go over that little bit, then he isn't worthy enough to..."

The King was not able to finish his sentence. The next moment, both he and Rainee were standing in the middle of the room with the tip of Rainee's sword touching the King's throat.

"It is you who are not worthy to speak about him." – Rainee heard her own voice. Those words were spoken in an indisputable tone, and she agreed with them wholeheartedly, and at this very moment, the whole world was in agreement with this statement. None, at this moment, would try to resist or oppose this statement, as it was indisputable, just like any other truth brought in its raw state.

Whatever power had taken over Rainee, it was much faster than her own mind and much stronger than the resisting force protecting the King. Or rather, it should be said, more of this force was allying with her now than with the King. But she didn't think about it. Actually, right now she didn't think at all. She was just looking at his calm, gentle, and understanding face, so dear to her, and knew that if he were to speak one more word, she would not spare him, and there would be no power in this universe to bring him back. Even the power of the King will not fight back against the truth. And truth was on her side.

He looked directly at her with his eyes as gentle as ever, kind and knowledgeable, disclosing that he knows all, or maybe even more, of what is going on inside of her and what consequences there will be if he speaks one more word. But his lips moved, ignoring all warnings:

"My dear girl, is it really worth being so harsh on someone for one little flop?" – he asked in a calm voice, full of kindness and longing.

But such a voice too – it reached right down to the depth of her heart as an invincible force penetrating straight from the sky into a deep cave of the mountain, opening a massive crater through which bright daylight entered into these well-hidden dark tunnels. She couldn't cope with that any longer! There were reasons why it was sealed deep down, never to come out, and now it had gotten loose! Unfamiliar feelings piled in her heart, her chest, her mind, taking over her body, sweeping away any reason, breaking out and taking with it every barrier in its way, no matter how big or small. Her heart raced at an unbelievable speed, her veins popped out, her eyes became bloodshot. If there was such a thing as a beastly dragon's power inside a small human's body, that was it. She knew she was losing the last remains of her sanity to some extraordinary force that just erupted from somewhere within her, but couldn't do anything, or maybe didn't even want to do anything. Maybe she just wanted to lose at least one battle without a care! Her body contorted, filling with massive amounts of power, her hand holding a sword swung around and struck.

The floor, on which the blow landed, exploded, and thousands of never-ending streams ran from the hole made by the sword towards the furthest corners of the room, climbing up the walls, threatening to bring the whole building down.

She fell to one knee, panting harshly, while resting her head on her hand that was still holding the hilt of the sword. Tears were falling silently on the ground next to her knee, but she wasn't sobbing, she was trying to get hold of these.

That phrase, so dear to her, was said by the same person in the same voice and calm, comforting manner, but in such a different light, with such a different impact on her. What did he expect? Forgiveness? Understanding? No, she knew it was none of it. Then what? Little flop...! He had the audacity to call it a little flop... His action turned lives upside down, it still does... Twisted truth and reality up to the point where she didn't even see how it could be undone. Everyone was affected, still is affected, and still is in the dark. And he called it just a "little flop"... She felt the same feeling that exploded just a minute ago rising again, but this time at least she knew what was coming and prepared herself. What is this thing? So powerful, so overwhelming? She never felt it before?

She closed her eyes, mentally addressing The One for advice – "Is it really just a little flop?"

"Yes" – the answer came as usual in a simple answer.

"How can something that has such a devastating outcome be a little flop?" – she asked again. There was no answer. She knew why – it wasn't a question that came out of her, it was a blaming statement – The One doesn't respond to those.

If you are already in a blaming, condemning state, that means you already know your answer, so what is the point of asking or answering in such a state? When you know something firmly, there is no room to receive an answer, as they say, you cannot fill a cup that is already full. And The One doesn't empty cups, he is happy to fill them with truth and knowledge, but only when there is an eagerness to receive it. If your cup is too full, it is for you to empty or enlarge that cup to hear the answer, or at least allow others to empty it. The One will never force anything upon anyone and will reply to you only if you are willing to hear a reply, not just in the mind but in the heart, too.

She mentally stepped aside from what she was feeling, from all that she knew, and made herself open to something new, something that might be completely opposite to what she thought. Then she asked the same question again, this time in a questioning, not in a stating manner, with inner commitment to accept the answer, no matter how much opposing or agreeing with her it was,

and curiosity to find out something new. Be open-minded, they call it. Not so long ago, she didn't know how to be closed-minded, but things have changed by now. At least years of teaching others didn't go to waste, and now, when she needed it, she knew how to pull herself out of this closed state and was able to do so.

When the question was repeated in a different manner, open to receive a reply, no matter what direction it would take, the answer started coming straight away. Many people didn't learn how to talk to The One as they expected the talk to be the same as with other people, or maybe a mind read or thoughts transferred to their head. With such expectations, after lots of training, when clear in mind, they were able to receive "yes" and "no" answers at most. How naive. The One doesn't speak through the mind but through the heart, not to the body but to the soul, he isn't bound by the limitations of words or thoughts or language. How could one even think that the knowledge he had could fit in any of these expressions? Even when listening to it with all heart, with all soul, she knew there was an extraordinary limitation in humans, how much they can receive without breaking down. There was no cup big enough to hold it all, as all cups of all worlds were fitting in The One itself.

Reply would come in the simplest possible complete package of knowledge, understanding, and most importantly, through the feelings, suitable for the particular person it was addressed to. It cannot be shared as it is unshareable, as other people would not understand your package, as they have different lives, different understanding, and different abilities, and when The One would send a reply to them, even if the question is the same, the reply for them would be different. It would lead to the same truth, but by the route that is most suitable for that particular person and not for anyone else. Information received can and must be shared at any opportunity given, but the "package" from which this information has come is impossible to share. How can words help here? One may know a million words, yet it might not be sufficient to convey a single feeling for the other person to understand what the speaker was trying to express.

The answer came in understanding how a moment's decision can be taken by the river of life, enlarged, inflated, and picking up speed over the years. How it would escalate to enormous power, engulfing everything on its way and growing bigger from all that it had absorbed. One moment's choice, one decision, risen from mainly unselfish motivations, including one lie while trying to benefit many, while trying to do the right thing... A real example of how one little flop, one little mistake, one lie could get out of the creator's control and become such a powerful influence, influencing and changing people's lives and the history of the nations. The greater power one has over the world and others, the greater influence such a mistake will have on others and on the world. It is not about how big the mistake is, it is mainly about who made it.

Rainee calmed herself down, stood up, with one move pulled her sword from the ground, leaving a deep opening in the floor, and with a swift movement mounted the sword back to her side. She straightened herself, looked again into the King's eyes for a few seconds, and said in a loud and commanding voice:

"By the order of the King, leave now and return to your usual lifestyle in exchange for the awareness and knowledge you just witnessed. If you choose to stay, you can keep your knowledge, but by staying, you make a lifetime agreement to join the King's services, obey, and accept orders from your King and superior royal officers at all times. If you choose to leave this position at any time in the future, all knowledge of Royal matters you gain while serving the King, including moments you have witnessed now, might be lost to you, no matter how much time passes. If you

choose servitude, your life will belong to the King first and only then to yourself. You have 90 seconds to make a decision – leave or stay. Time starts now.”

After finishing her speech, Rainee stood straight with one hand resting on the hilt of the sword. The King, on the other hand, walked back to the sofa and seated himself in the same relaxed position, with his arms stretched across the sofa's back and one leg over another.

Rainee was looking at the King while waiting. What she said obviously wasn't addressed to him. Before the King came, she was alone in this hall, but not in the building. There were very few people in the next room, trying to get a glimpse of the "legendary" General, who was supposed to be dead, but apparently had secretly taken a vacation from royal forces to teach them in this remote School. When the King came, they got quiet but didn't leave.

None of them would understand what had just happened, and what had happened was not a part of their lives. All that they witnessed came by accident. What has been seen and heard cannot be reversed without a person's permission. Still, it was also not fair to people to be left with lots of confusion in their minds about what just happened, and they didn't have any chance to understand any of it, and if left as they are now, their lives would change drastically, they might even be called mad people. So she had given them a chance to go back to their normal lives and forget what they have just witnessed, or stay and join the Royal courtier ranks, then they can know and find out more. She made it very clear what she meant not only by voice. To inform them, she also sent each person an understanding message of what she just said, so everyone was denied a chance to misunderstand or misinterpret. Also, each of them was fully informed about how their personal life would continue if one or another path were taken, based on the knowledge and possibilities of this very moment. Such a prediction can be very accurate or not, depending on how many unknown factors will join in the future. But nevertheless, it was entirely understandable for those who received it to realise what twist life would take depending on the decision made.

She didn't have to wait long, just after a few seconds, people started to sneak out of the building. It didn't surprise her. No matter how interesting it might be to learn some things about the King or a General, to change life completely for it, one needed dedication and desire, not just to be randomly dragged into it. And despite many of those who were leaving now having a wish and desire to join the King's services, and after forgetting what they had just experienced, most would sign up for it, it wasn't the same. People didn't know how it felt to be at the King's services or under the command of others. After signing, they would find it out slowly, and if it doesn't suit, they are free to leave and come back at any time. That's the beauty of not knowing in advance, you take it slowly and see what is best for you. Now she passed information on how it will really feel without giving time to adapt to it – take it or leave it. Not many can do it. There has to be a reason behind, stronger than all you just discovered.

The way she informed everyone didn't leave them any doubt that this decision would be irreversible and would take place as soon as 90 seconds ran out. And it was irreversible, and no other arrangements or agreements were needed – the word was passed, the message sent and received, the decision chosen was final.

She didn't need to go and check if anyone was still left in the room – she could feel everyone who was in the room, in the building, or even outside. She knew very well how many were affected by the scene that had just occurred and made sure that each and every one of them heard what she said and what the outcome would be. She even knew how they felt after hearing it.

Seconds were ticking, people were leaving, the King was resting, and Rainee was standing at ease. Three, two, one – time was up. The King lifted his eyebrow in a questioning manner. Rainee couldn't "read" the King's feelings in the same way as everyone else's, but this time she could easily guess what that raised eyebrow meant, as she herself was surprised, too. But she didn't say anything, so the King broke the silence:

“A friend? Can it be that after so many years, you found a friendship in someone else, not just that black devil of yours and those two good-for-little sons of mine?”

"....." – Rainee snapped out of her thoughts. First, after realising that despite all odds, not everyone left, she was surprised. Then touched to the depth of her heart by the reason why her friend Anniet stayed, but after the words "good-for-little sons" left the King's mouth, all that was forgotten, and the same overwhelming feeling overflowed her again. By all means, what is it?!

“That, my beautiful daughter, is anger.”

Anger... Rainee has felt anger in other people many times, but it never felt anything like this...

Has she become an angry person? Still, anger is just an emotion, just a feeling. She has taught others how to let it go countless times, and she has witnessed success many times, too. As with any other feeling, you just walk through it, acknowledging and feeling it through, not taking it together, leaving it in the past, but without a reason to return to it. For every feeling to rise, there has to be a reason. Once the reason is acknowledged and accepted and lived through, that feeling is not needed any more.

Never before has she done it on herself, never before did she need it, but it worked the same as if she had done it many times. Anger was rapidly draining out, disclosing what it was hiding behind, and to no surprise, it was pain. Such an enormous amount of pain that it nearly crushed her. The “well-known” reasons for this pain came up, but she chose not to acknowledge them. Firstly, she didn't want to, and secondly, it will enwrap her back in the same vicious circle from which the King obviously has just unwrapped her. If she brings up the same reasons, it will bring the same outcome, as for change to occur, something has to be changed.

“Dark has become a popular colour lately,” - the King said, standing up, - “but I don't think it would suit you in any possible way.”

“Are you telling me that I have become an angry person?” – Rainee asked in a relatively calm voice. She can bear this pain, she can keep it open and live with it until the true reasons for it are found and discharged. Or should she say, ways to discharge them are found. It is just another pain. One more layer. Good that it has been opened, no matter how badly it stinks.

“People don't become angry,” - the King disagreed, - “they experience anger.”

“You just introduced it to me, so it is obvious I didn't experience it before.”

“But you did,” - the King smiled. – “Just even you yourself didn't realise the way you used to experience it. Everyone calls this part of you vicious, fierce, and temperamental. But I disagree. I admire her, neither less nor more than the rest of you. Unfortunately, she cannot help you right now, so you are left all by yourself. I have never seen such an ability before and find it most remarkable, and have been jealous of it so many times.”

It was more than obvious to Rainee what the King was talking about.

“Did you... kill her?” – She asked in a quiet voice.

"I would never kill any part of you," - the King said softly.

"Can I have her back?" – She asked, closing her eyes as she didn't want them to reveal the pain she was experiencing because of this separation. Now it has become so clear and obvious, as if these few words said by the King had pulled away some veil that was closing her eyes. Her beautiful dragon was famous for its tantrums and unpredictable moods that sometimes made even her wonder what was happening in her head. Now it has become more than clear. Each dragon possessed the ability to help its master in the most beneficial way. It was funny to call the person of the dragon a master, as there were no masters in this relation. Not even a relation. It was the same person in two forms, or rather, a piece of a person's soul born into a non-human creature. So up until now, she didn't even know her own dragon's real ability...

"Yes," - the King answered to her question, - "if you can handle her."

"I will," - Rainee said firmly, without a single doubt in her voice. Long-lasting tension was finally broken, and she felt relieved again – she will get her back! Not so long ago, for such a promise, she would run and hug the King, or at least would smile at him with all the gratitude she was experiencing, ingrained in that smile. Now things were different, and instead her eyes were turning away - a very unpleasant feeling.

"I don't like the person I am becoming," - she said, forcing her look back to the King.

"You are the same person as you have always been," - the King disagreed again. – "It is just that our relationship has reached a turning point where we cannot see what is in front of us, and the road here is slightly bumpy. None of us is used to these unpleasant situations, and it feels awkward. That's all."

"I haven't forgiven you," - Rainee said.

"I didn't expect you to."

"Then why did you come?"

"How many reasons do you want to hear?"

"Two," - Rainee said without thinking. There is no time or possibility to name all the reasons that make one take a decision. To hear only one, it would make it "The Reason" when there is never such a thing. So two is the minimum number one should choose, and preferably the maximum number too, as when mentioning only two, the most important with the most weight will be named.

"I missed you, and I want you back at my side," - the King said without hesitation. After a bit of thought, he added, - "Both of you."

Then he turned around and walked to the door leading outside.

"Do you regret what you have done?" – Rainee asked in a bit lost voice, - "If there were a chance to go back and change things, would you do it?"

The King stopped for a second, then turned around, walked back towards Rainee, and stood in front of her, looking into her eyes.

"I wouldn't change a tiny movement of my finger in my past," - he said.

Rainee lowered her head. The answer was what she expected. By his character, he was always taking the best actions for the moment, and it was silly to expect anything else. The King continued:

"By now, you already have seen how one action can behave like a ripple in a pond, spreading out, disrupting, and changing life in ways one would never predict or imagine..."

It seemed to her that he wanted to say something more, but fell silent for some reason. Raineer lifted her head again to look at him. The King was looking very intensely at her, and she could see that he was contemplating over something. That was entirely out of his character – never in her wildest dreams could she imagine that the King is capable of contemplation. Then, as if he had decided on something, he stepped closer to her, while still looking into her eyes, he brushed her cheeks with his palms in a gentle stroke, lifted her head by the chin so he could see her face better, and said in a very gentle voice.

“Through my life, I have been grateful to the heavens just for very few things, but you, by all means, are what I am the most grateful for. Not because you are sharing my blood and flesh – it means nothing to me, nor should it be of any importance to others, but because what person you are, what being you always have been, and what character you have become. If I have ever done anything good in this world, then the universe has already repaid me thousands of times by bringing you into my life and allowing me to be part of yours. Even if the whole world thought me to be selfish and condemned me for it, but if, by some divine interference, I were sent back to the past, I would not risk taking a single extra breath than I did, in fear of making the smallest impact on it.”

Then he placed his lips on her forehead in a gentle but firm kiss before turning around, walking out of the room, and closing the doors behind himself. On his way out, he smiled at the young girl who was waiting impatiently for the moment when she would be able to get into the room he had just left. But his smile was neither answered nor noticed as all the girl's attention right now was on Raineer, and she didn't pay the slightest notice to the King.

Raineer was left standing all alone in the room, rooted to the floor. Never in her life had she felt so lost and completely hopeless. The wave of this newly open pain engulfed her, trying to swallow her and take her away to the place she didn't want to go.

Then two small hands hugged her tightly, and a small, lean body pressed to her. The same two hands that didn't dare to stretch towards her when the owner of them needed comfort and support were now holding her tightly without any reserve. All the walls, so strong in the morning, were crumbled and gone, and this small, still childlike soul was fully open to her once again. Open to give and open to take.

But Raineer didn't like what she was able to give right now. All she could feel right now was overwhelming pain, and part of her wanted to shield this girl from it so badly. Part of her wanted to tell this girl to go and wait somewhere in a safer place until this harbour becomes a reliable place again. But she did none of this.

You cannot teach someone by words. You cannot take someone to the place that you cannot go yourself. You cannot teach someone to be open while being closed yourself. You cannot teach someone to trust when you are not trusting yourself. Another unfamiliar waters where she has not been before... All her experience and knowledge were screaming that the pain she was in right now would crush this girl, as she was yet so small, so little, like a little child. It might sound funny to describe this way a person similar in size to you, but nevertheless, that's how it felt and that's how it was. And still, all that this girl wanted right now was to share Raineer's pain... That's why she stayed, that's why she came now.

Raineer made it very clear to her what life would be like if she chose to stay and sign herself to the service of the King. It was so opposite to what Annet expected, and it struck her very hard. She fully understood now why Raineer wanted her to stay at the School instead of signing for a life like this, where Raineer herself would be just a very rare and random visitor, no matter how much she

would want to be the opposite. She made it clear that if she stays, she will have to leave this School when the King leaves. By doing so, she would be free to do what she likes, without any restriction, only if she leaves this service. But in this case, she would lose all that she has learned now anyway, just the starting point by then would not be known. But Anniet still stayed. Against all odds, she didn't leave. And the only reason for that was this little moment she wanted to offer to Rainee.

Somehow, she knew that Rainee was in pain and all she wanted was to be with her until it passed, in hopes of being able to make her feel better. In other words, to share the pain. There are reasons why those who are not yet ready cannot feel the feelings of those who are above them in depth. It is too big for them to handle. Too much to fit in something too small.

"To grant this wish should be equal to approving suicide," Rainee thought, hugging Anniet back and lowering down all her defences. "To refuse this wish would be to kill this girl by my own hands..."

In a state Anniet was in right now, with such an open soul, she would absorb all the actions Rainee would do and would take them as the basis for her life. To push someone aside when they want to help, to devalue someone's best efforts as not important, to tell someone that there is nothing they can do, to show that the best course of action to save others is to build a wall against them, to teach that not everyone is worthy of trust, to show that not every friend is of the same value. In other words, to mess up and mix all the values that were told and learned until now with completely different actions, by proving that what you say and what you do might be completely different, if reason dictates it.

There is no way Rainee will do it, as none of this is true. And no matter that logic dictates differently. Mind and logic are powerless in matters of the soul.

So she would better show this girl that you can trust even if your own mind wants to oppose it and doesn't understand how it could work. To show that no road should ever be closed by fear. To show that you can trust, and this trust is not even a hope, as hope is way too much smaller. To trust in what? She wouldn't be able to tell herself. Definitely not in this child, who knew so little yet. But still, why not? Trust does not require knowledge.

It was a nice surprise to find out that all the pressure that was holding such a firm grip on Rainee, pulling her down and drowning, didn't have the same sort of effect on Anniet. Anniet just felt very, very sad, but she was OK with it, and she didn't feel any need to hide it or to be ashamed of it. So she just cried for no apparent reason. "It must be true that one's own pain is most difficult to handle," Rainee thought to herself while holding crying Anniet in her arms.

They stood like this for a long time, Anniet crying into her shoulder and Rainee holding her tight with one arm while stroking her hair with another. It was difficult now to say who was consoling whom, but still, this overwhelming pain in Rainee's heart was slowly leaving, being replaced with warmth and love that this little girl was radiating at this very moment.

"I am sorry," - finally Anniet spoke. - "I don't know what has taken over me. I thought you were sad and wanted to support you, but instead I became sad myself and ruined your uniform..."

She was looking guilty at the soaking wet and creased Rainee's shirt, which was spotless and snow white not so long ago. Rainee looked at it too, thanking The One for this stain of tears instead of the blood of her father on it. But she didn't say any of it to Anniet.

"You should stop apologising for things that you didn't do," - she told her, gently cleaning her face with the sleeve of the very same shirt Anniet was concerned about.

Somehow, life seemed a much brighter place again, and the reasons why it felt gloomy before became simply unimportant. It was strange to be on the other side, as that's how others would feel after allowing and accepting Rainee's help.

"Thank you," - she told Anniet, stroking her cheeks and lifting her head by the chin to have a better look at her.

"What for?"

"For being my friend." – said Rainee, kissing Anniet on the forehead, then picking up the uniform's jacket from the floor where she had dropped it, what now seemed ages ago, and walking to the door. To herself, she thought that this scene was sort of déjà vu, where she herself could experience being on both sides. The only difference was that Anniet was following her closely while the King had left on his own.

What she didn't know was that when the King walked out of the building, he met a young man, all dressed in black, with knitted brows and determination on his face, even the big black dog at his side was in an attacking pose.

"I was expecting to find you here," - the King acknowledged his presence, - "but she doesn't need neither your protection nor support right now, you should reconsider this habit of yours and let it rest in peace."

The young man didn't answer, but was about to enter the building that the King had just left.

"Not this time," - said the King, - "this time you come with me."

"I am not on duty yet, so I refuse," - the young man replied calmly without changing the course of his actions.

"I think you misinterpret our relation," - the King said, - "this way." – He added, walking towards another building that seemed empty and unoccupied for the time being.

Deep surprise could be seen on the young man's face when his body, as if obeying some unseen force, turned around and followed the King. All aggressive behaviour disappeared from the man's dog too, he followed behind and obediently lay down next to the front door after the King and his master entered the building.

Several minutes have passed, and the door burst open. The young man dressed in black walked out. He turned back and said in a simple voice, – "I refuse," - then walked away with his dog following him. They stopped by the building where his original intended destination was, pondered for a bit, but didn't enter it and walked away instead.

Chapter 7

In a spotlight

Anniel was trying her best to keep up with Rainee.

"You are late," she pointed out.

"When everyone is waiting just for you, you cannot be late," Rainee said.

This logic didn't make any sense to Anniel, but again, what does she know? No one ever waited just for her. Well, when her patients would be waiting for her arrival, no matter how fast she tried to be, she was always told she was late. But maybe it is not the same.

"I won't be able to stay in School now?" she asked.

"No," was the short answer.

"Do I then sign up for King's Army?"

"You are already signed up for King's services."

"To do what?"

"Don't know yet."

"It was you who signed me up..."

"For King, not for myself."

"So what should I do now?" Anniel asked in a bit stressed voice, following Rainee through the front door and nearly bumping into her.

But it wasn't Rainee who was standing and waiting for her. Or maybe waiting not for her. As truly, this majestic Lady General, donned in a uniform so bright that even the midday light seemed a bit dull against it, and who was being saluted by all those soldiers filling the golden square, could not be waiting for her...

Throughout all of today's events, Anniel completely forgot that this door led to the very epicentre of today's events. She didn't forget that there had to be a recruiting ceremony, but she definitely forgot about where she was and where this door would take her.

Every single person attending was looking now at Rainee, no matter where they were – in the Central square, in the seats of the amphitheatre, or standing behind the seats. Even those on a raised podium were looking at them.

Anniel felt like they were looking at them, not just at Rainee, and was getting smaller and smaller from the weight of these few thousand pairs of eyes.

"You sit down, relax, and enjoy the show." Anniel heard Rainee's voice next to her.

Once Rainee spoke, all the spectators exploded in loud shouts and a thunderstorm of applause. When she walked out, everyone around fell into a deadly silence, as if seeing their beloved hero again would have taken their breath away. And when Rainee spoke, her voice could be heard all across the place, loud and clear. With her words, this breath was returned to the people's lungs and now they were using it with all their might, shouting and cheering.

Nobody knew who these words were addressed to, and Anniel herself wasn't sure any more either. As a confirmation of who they were addressed to, Anniel felt Rainee's hand on her shoulder, and when she turned her head, she met Rainee's eyes, which were looking at her with the same

warmth and encouragement as always, from the same smiling face that belonged to her friend, not to some unknown legendary character. When Rainee moved, she was surrounded by these strange shades of shimmering colours that were somehow engulfing her. The cape across her shoulders truly looked like a part of her and was emitting more of these colours than any other part of the uniform. However, if Anniet had to choose only one colour to describe this armour, she would have to say white. The word "light" would describe it better, but there was no such colour as light.

Now she understood why this uniform was called an armour. Rainee's clothes consisted of many scales overlapping each other; one could say resembling dragon scales, just in minuscule size, and also assembling into a few larger pieces that were overlapping again, as if they were large scales made out of tiny scales. Just these large pieces didn't look like scales any more, but more like naturally assembled pieces of human-made armour. All this could be seen only at such close proximity. If Anniet were standing a few steps away, she was sure that Rainee's clothes would look like they were made from regular material. Anyway, it suited Rainee nicely, and she did look truly glamorous in it. But no matter how glamorous her outfit was, she still looked the same as her best friend and teacher, just dressed in this strange outfit.

"See," Rainee smiled at her, "I told you – only a name. Don't pay too much attention to those names. Let's find you a seat. You don't want to miss any of this show; it might amuse you to see it for the first time."

Rainee spoke in her regular voice, but despite all this tremendous noise around, Anniet could hear her very clearly, as if they both were in some separate bubble not affected by the surroundings. A distant, long-forgotten memory came back to Anniet, how on the very first day they met, she promised herself never again to mix up Rainee with some unearthly mysterious being, as she was only a person, no matter how many strange abilities she had. She was glad that this memory popped out because it was so true, and she made this promise once more, despite these extraordinarily strange surroundings.

But what should she do now? It was easy for Rainee to say that she should go and find a seat. All seats were on the other side of this enormously big, golden square field with all these neatly lined soldiers. Luckily, King's podium was moved a good deal away to the right and wasn't next to this entrance any more, as it would be incredibly uncomfortable to walk out from the doors straight under the eyes of the King.

Annet was trying to locate a safe route so that she could sneak out of the situation she had put herself into, when soldiers in front of them moved in unison, creating a wide passage.

"Come," Rainee encouraged her to walk through it. Seeing that Anniet didn't dare to do so, she gave her a little nudge. "It is the same people watching us now who have seen us walking together countless times. Wouldn't it be more strange for me to walk on my own? Think that we have come to the School, and I will go to my desk, while you will go to join the other students."

These words were said in such a natural way and brought so much understanding with them that it was difficult to resist. Rainee stepped forward, and Anniet did the same, marvelling at her own courage. They walked through this human-made corridor to the middle of the square, where the path was separated into two. The passage forward was leading to the spectators' seats, where the first rows were mainly occupied by children and seemed pretty jammed, but somehow they all shifted to the sides, creating space for one more bum to be placed. The passage to the right was leading directly to King's stage, where King was sitting in his throne-like chair, and two of his generals were standing on his right side.

Rainee pointed Anniet to the seat made for her and waited until she safely reached it. Even before she turned around, the passage that she had just taken was closed as if it had never even existed.

All dazed, Anniet sat down just in time to see Rainee wink before turning away and walking towards King. The next moment, the noise around, which seemed to be at its highest peak already, increased several times, as a large dark shadow dropped from the sky right behind Rainee, taking the shape of a young man dressed in a black, casual suit, and only a cape of a General over his shoulders, as black as the darkest night, revealed that he was occupying this highest position.

However, the crowd didn't need any introduction to who it was and got completely berserk seeing these two long-lost generals together again.

"It's only a name, it's only a name, it's only a name..." - Anniet was chanting to herself while watching Anthony walking behind Rainee. Well, it didn't work. It wasn't only a name. Even if it was, then which one name? He had so many! It took King a long time to mention them all. Still, Rainee said it was only names. She trusted her, so why does it not work? The headmaster taught her yesterday how to overcome this fear, too. She did say that this fear is a lie, just like any other. That she has to let it go, just like any other fear. But how is she supposed to do it?

Anniet was certain that the headmaster told her the way to do it, but she just couldn't remember it.

By now, Rainee and Anthony walked up the last few steps leading to that raised stage where King and two other generals were waiting for them. Prince Angus and Prince Ragnar. Pink General and General Ragnar or Sleeping Dragon. Well, this sleeping prince wasn't that sleepy today, as without any consideration about etiquette, he left his position as soon as Rainee got up those steps and grabbed her in his bear-like hug, lifting her from the ground and swinging her around a few times before putting her back down again. Rainee didn't look either offended or surprised by such a greeting. If anything, she seemed very happy to be greeted like this and smiled at him all the time. She even ruffled his hair in response. After letting go of Rainee, this young general turned towards Anthony. Here he wasn't greeted with the same warm smiles. If anything, Anthony's posture and facial expression were so cold that he gave the impression of the most unapproachable person in the world. But Prince Ragnar must be a very brave person, as he didn't pay any attention to all this unwelcome greeting and rewarded Anthony with the same strong and welcoming embrace. It was evident that he was trying to lift him from the ground too, but with no success, as if Anthony would be weighing a few tons and would not be just too heavy but even unmovable like a mountain itself.

Prince Ragnar was taller and more muscular than Anthony and would neither give up nor get upset about such a cold shoulder. When everyone, including Prince Ragnar himself, was fully convinced that he would fail in lifting Dark General, suddenly this strange force of gravity let go of its grip, and Anthony was lifted and swung around like a feather. It made General Ragnar so happy that his joy could be felt even at this distance.

By now, Rainee walked towards the King, who was sitting in his chair with his hand supporting his chin and watching this complete disorder among his highest-ranked generals. Rainee greeted him, slightly inclining her head, and King smiled, acknowledging this greeting. That was all the greeting King received from his long-lost generals. Rainee stood next to Prince Angus, who

took her by the hand and never let go while standing together. Dark General, who finally got released from Prince Ragnar's grip, didn't spare King a single look, but just stood next to Raine. With that, order on King's stage was restored, and the recruiting ceremony could be begun.

During the time while Anthony was greeted, Annet went through many phases. Seeing this cold and unapproachable look on the face, she used to see only smiles and friendliness, squeezed her heart so badly that even the hidden words that the headmaster said yesterday dropped out of it back in an opening. She tried to hide it again, but her heart right now was so small that nothing could be hidden in it.

"Maybe you love him so much that the thought of him being unapproachable is unbearable to you"... That's what she said. And she said it in such a simple way as if it was the most natural and obvious thing. She desperately tried to hide these words away in case someone else would sneak into her heart and read them there. But to no success. The phrase "It's only a name" was playing in the back of her mind all the time as if she were trying to convince herself of it. But how can it be only a name? The headmaster said that he is not unapproachable, that it is only what people say about him... Looking at Anthony now, it didn't seem like just words. Oh, thank god she never told him how she feels about him... That would be unbearable. What she is saying! Not how she feels about him! How she felt about him. Surely these feelings are left in the past, never to return. Then why doesn't it feel that way?

The unexpected flood of joy had overtaken her at the moment Prince Ragnar finally managed to lift him. It was so obvious that Anthony allowed him to do so, but it didn't bother the young prince at all. The victory was his, and he was overflowing with joy and happiness so much that it was shared with everyone around. Did Anthony know it would make him so happy? Was that the reason why he waited, resisting for so long? Anthony, she knew, probably would behave like this.

Prince Ragnar didn't look afraid of Anthony... And he himself didn't look that scary. Then why Anthony, no, a Dark General was so frightening? Dark General... She didn't want to call him Dark General. Well, yes, he was dressed all in black, but it didn't make him dark. Or did it? Well she didn't know. But black always suited him so well. Still do. He didn't change that much while in uniform, just got his cape on, and this cold face expression. If he ever looks at her with these cold eyes, she probably will turn around and run away. That is, if she will be able to move. Coincidentally, Anthony's wandering eyes slid by the audience and stopped at her.

Annet froze for a second, being caught staring at him like this. Just now she realised that despite sitting so far away, she could see all that was going on the stage down to the smallest detail. And these dark, beautiful eyes were now looking directly at her. They didn't look neither cold nor scary. They looked the same as they always did when looking at her. With so much kindness and gentleness and lots of curiosity. And they were so warm... She could even physically feel this warmth. Why did she ever think that his look was cold? What a peculiar thought... It was never cold, and it wasn't now either.

"It's only a name" suddenly got a completely different meaning. If to forget all the names, he has received since becoming a general, and take out of consideration where he was standing right now, he didn't look that different. Annet knew that she should feel uncomfortable after he looked at her for so long, but surprisingly, she didn't. If anything, it felt very similar to the very first day when

she came to his cottage and he was looking at her all the time without lowering his eyes. She is never going to call him Dark General. There is nothing dark about him. Maybe he has to be cold and scary while being general? That would make a lot of sense. Thinking about how many people plagued Rainee after finding out who she was... It probably was happening all the time. It was known to everyone that Dark... no, that Anthony was always looking after her. How could he chase everyone away otherwise? Definitely not with this soft and warm smile he is smiling at her right now. Anniet couldn't do anything but smile back at him.

Seeing that the general is looking this way and smiling children around got all ecstatic and started to scream and shout, jumping and waving their arms, covering Anthony away from Anniet's sight. The moment was lost. When she could look back at him, he wasn't looking at her any more.

It was difficult to understand if she was feeling relief or sadness over it. But the promise she made to herself just a minute ago only strengthened. She will never call him Dark General. General Blake was his actual title. Was Blake his true name? She couldn't say it didn't suit him. But still, somehow it didn't feel right either.

Annet tried to concentrate on what was going on around and what King was saying, but it wasn't easy. Rainee told her to go sit down, relax, and enjoy the show, and she tried to do her best not to miss any, but her thoughts were not with the events that were taking place right now. Her thoughts were only with two people participating in this event. Rainee looked so beautiful. God, how amazing she was! But no matter what, a thought that she might be something other than just Rainee she had known for so long, never crossed her mind again. Gone? No, she is definitely not gone. Just busier, more occupied, carrying more responsibility, but that's it. What if Anniet will be able to see her just very rarely? It makes no difference.

She was fully aware now that after today, her life would change drastically, and despite being relatively close to Rainee, they both would be as far from each other as possible. She will have her responsibilities, no matter what it will be, and Rainee... Rainee will be occupied with hers. Once she already said that if she were a general, she wouldn't be able to spend time with Anniet, as generals are extremely busy. Now, after the understanding Rainee sent to her earlier, she became fully aware of what it meant. They hardly have any time for themselves ever. All their time is dispersed between duty and people, might it be protecting them, or teaching, or training, or many other small details that everyone thinks to be very minuscule, and it is. However, after adding up hundreds and thousands of them, it is so time-consuming and still leaves only a few happy, while many unhappy.

When she received this understanding, it horrified her. When she saw her possible life in the Capital, it didn't look so bright. No matter if she would join King's Army or be assigned other duties, she would be able to do so little yet, and her progress would be either slow or limited. Only then did she fully understand why Rainee wanted her to stay in this School. While in this School, she would not see Rainee at all for a while, but when she would come out, she would be a completely different person. All time spent here would be oriented to her own improvement, not about her changing herself to suit others, and her progress would be very rapid. After this School would let her out, she would be a completely different person with much higher abilities and potential. If then she were to choose to join King's services, much more would be open for her, maybe even places where she could work alongside Rainee, not just spending time with her, but helping her in many possible ways.

After seeing that, the decision she should make was clear, and she didn't wonder why everyone else left in a hurry. If at that very moment Rainee had been happy and smiling, she would have done exactly the same. But it wasn't the case. Rainee was in so much pain... Something that was going on between her and King was hurting her so much that she couldn't bear it any longer and exploded, nearly bringing the building down.

For a moment, Anniet was sure that Rainee was going to chop King's head off and was surprised to see that it didn't happen. And the way King looked at her and spoke to her... She was sure now that he loved Rainee a lot. Then how did he hurt her so badly? Only at that moment did she understand what the headmaster meant when she said that only a lot of pain can make people change not only their lifestyle, but even their appearance too. There was no way she could leave now and forget about it. All she wanted to do was to go and hug Rainee and hold her tightly. How could she even think that Rainee was some mighty hero who didn't need anyone and could do all by herself?... Truly, some thoughts are so ridiculous... However, they feel so real at times. She wanted to come in at that very moment, but some invisible power wouldn't allow her to enter the room where her friend was torturing herself. If there would be a lock on a door, it would not hold so strongly as that power. She waited, and waited, and waited, and then King left, and she was free to go in.

Things didn't go her way; instead of helping and consoling Rainee, she felt so sad that she couldn't stop crying, and Rainee had to console her... How strange. She didn't feel sad before hugging her. But it doesn't matter now, as by the time this sadness slowly vanished, Rainee was feeling much better.

Now she was slowly recalling what she had heard while being held away. So Rainee was his daughter... He himself called her daughter, but Anniet thought maybe that was just how he felt about her. But then he said that Rainee is his own flesh and blood. And Rainee never objected to that. So that was the truth. This must be a lie she was talking about. It must be a secret, that's why Rainee told everyone to leave before it could be revealed. King had only two children, two sons. Both were standing now next to the King, and one of them was firmly holding Rainee by the hand and looking at her with so much affection, time after time. What a rotten situation... Were they really brother and sister? If so, wasn't this love a little bit wrong?

She thought again about Rainee's reaction yesterday when they both met. "I found you" he said. So he has been looking for her all this time. And she was so happy. Through the months spent together, Anniet thought she had seen Rainee happy many times; now she knew it was nothing. Even now, just standing next to him like this, Rainee was much happier than she had ever been through all the time they knew each other. Anniet didn't even know how she knew it; she simply knew it. She also could feel this overwhelming love coming from Rainee towards Prince Angus, and just because of it, Anniet would like him a lot too, if not for this strange, angry feeling towards him she was unconsciously experiencing. That was so strange. She never felt this kind of anger towards anyone. Also, he hasn't done anything to upset her.

Annet's thoughts were going round and round about what she had witnessed, what she had heard, about the words King spoke, how he spoke, about Rainee's reaction. Until she couldn't think about it any more, as it was making her dizzy, and she told herself to stop and relentlessly chased away every memory or thought related to it.

She was trying to concentrate on what was going on in front of her, but to no success. And there was a lot that was going on! On any other day, it would fully captivate her attention. But today it just seemed mission impossible.

After a short speech, King informed that because this recruiting ceremony is being held in a different and special place, it will be held in a different order than usual, and it will be available to be known to anyone in the world, no matter where they live, as long as they have any interest in it.

It was known that if the King wanted, he could let his nation know what was going on, or even show them what he wanted, no matter how far away they were, no matter to how many people. "Call of the King," it was named. Anniet didn't know what it was or how it worked, as through her life she never received this "call of the King," nor did she know anyone who would have received it. But apparently, in previous generations, it used to happen, so her attention was captivated by it for a short time, wondering how it would feel, but she didn't feel anything. She didn't know if it was because it didn't work, or because she was already here seeing all without any call, or she didn't fall into that group of people who would be interested in these matters. Probably the last one, as her mind truly was occupied with other things.

Then the King asked permission from the headmaster to use the School's gates with a slight alteration. He said that everyone who has a desire to join the King's Army and will take a step towards it right now will find themselves standing at the gates of this School. It will not grant them permission to enter a School and stay in it. But if they are ready to take a service, then after walking through the School gates, they will find themselves coming into this square. If they are not prepared, then after walking through the gates, they will find themselves sent back home or to the place where they could improve and try again next year. Where they will be sent will depend on their inner desire and commitment. He explained why entrance to School cannot be granted and what the rules were to find this entrance by themselves to arrive here as a student, as a teacher, or as a service provider.

For those who are already in School, there will be different rules. They will have to walk through the same gates, but they will end up in this very same square, no matter whether they are accepted to the King's Army or not because they already found the way to this place by themselves.

Then he asked all King's Army soldiers, who were still standing on parade, to leave this golden square, and once it was done, the square was divided into five areas. Then the wide door appeared out of nowhere, and King asked School residents, who wished to join King's Army, to leave through that door and return through the gates.

That was a strange request, but those who wanted to join didn't question and soon about three-quarters of the attending spectators left. Some children tried to sneak through it too, but to their own surprise, they just walked through that door as if only a frame would be standing there, emerging on the other side, while every adult who walked through it would leave this place. Soon, everyone who wanted to go left, and there were only children running through the door from both sides. But soon, even they abandoned it as there was not too much fun to walk through the empty frame. When they left, the door disappeared as silently as it had appeared.

Anniel couldn't see the front gates from where she was, but somehow she knew that there was a tremendous number of people already waiting, and even more were arriving.

Meanwhile, in the square, five new doors appeared, each leading to a different divided area. The word divided didn't suit it very well, as there were no visible divisions, but somehow it was well known where the borders were.

In no time, people started to walk in through these doors, mainly filling the three middle parts of the Central Square.

Anniel knew that all these people just walked through the front gates that were wide open now, and several people could walk through them at once. Surprisingly, after walking through these gates, they didn't enter a room with many doors. Instead, they stepped straight into this square or vanished out of sight.

The arena in front of Anniel was filling in with people, some of them she knew, some were entirely new. But she didn't pay much attention to it. Her mind was occupied with her own thoughts, with her own worries. And after forbidding herself to dwell any more on what she had seen in King's and Rainee's confrontation, there was mainly only one person left among so many, where all her thoughts rotated. After their eyes met once, he never looked back at her again. Strangely, but she was happy about it. This way, she could freely examine him without fear of being caught staring for so long. Now he didn't look either cold or warm. If anything, he looked... bored? Was that just her imagination, or was he really not interested in what was happening around? With so many events, how can one not be interested? But then again, wasn't she just the same? As long as she knew him, he never looked bored. On the contrary, he was always very interested in everything that was going on. But she must admit he was never interested in other people. So many things that he has said to her in the past were surfacing in her memory right now. He told her once that she brought happiness to his dull and monotonous existence. Was it dull because no one could recognise him? But now, when everyone knew who he was, he didn't look much happier. He said that he would happily exchange everybody's memory of him for the memory of one person, and that he didn't even need to do that, as it already happened. And she will never forget his look when he said these words. He also said that he doesn't want to be forgotten by her... She could hardly imagine how it could happen. If she closes her eyes, she sees him smiling, when she opens them, she sees him standing carefree but a bit bored. He did look much happier when chatting with her than he does now, while standing next to the King. She wondered if it was her imagination or if he really felt this way.

Now she was a little bit happy that she was going to leave this place for the Capital. If she were to stay here, she would never see him, and by the time she would leave this place, he probably would already have forgotten about her. Now she will be able to see him time after time. Even if just from afar, like now. Maybe he will even want to stay her friend... Do generals need friends? Rainee does. She thanked her for being her friend and even kissed her on the forehead, and she still could feel this kiss staying there. Looked very similar to how King kissed Rainee, and it was obvious that King loved Rainee very much. Does it mean that Rainee also loves her very much? It would be nice. But she should stop dwelling on King's and Rainee's relationship.

Anthony kissed her once... Just on the head. But up until today, she remembers it very well. He came to stay with her when she was feeling sad and angry. Isn't it similar to how she wanted to stay with Rainee when she was feeling angry and sad? Why wouldn't she? She was Rainee's friend; of course, she would not let her suffer all by herself. Was it the same reason why he had come to keep her company that night? It would be nice, as it would mean that he is her friend too. Or at least he was. She did behave very unfriendly yesterday. But she was so afraid! She still is. How come she is not afraid of Rainee? She is supposed to be stronger than him, as everyone said that there is no

stronger person than the Rainbow general. So it is not strength she is afraid of. Anyway, how can such a small woman be so strong? Anniel wondered, looking at Rainee. She didn't look that strong! On the other hand, Anniel knew that she was. But it was alright. She remembers now. She chose to see Rainee as a regular human and nothing else. Can she do the same with Anthony?

She tried to convince herself that he is just a human, like everyone else, and to her own surprise, she found herself wondering what she was talking about... Of course he is human. What else could he be? So it is not what makes her afraid. Then what is it? Might it be that the headmaster was right after all? That she loves him so much that realising that he will never answer these feelings terrifies her? Still good that she never told him about it. At least she doesn't have to worry that he will break her heart and destroy her life, as apparently that's what he does to everyone who falls in love with him. That must be true. Her heart was already bleeding every time she thought about him, and her life is utterly messed up, what to destroy there... She wondered how it would feel to break somebody's heart and not even know about it? Probably very strange. Hope he will never find out about it. Especially when he didn't even do anything to contribute to it.

By now, the square was already filled, and nobody was coming through these doors any more. The area next to King was the most scarce. The second had more people in it. Third and fourth were most jammed, with the only difference being that in the third area, there was a mixture of unrecognisable faces and those she knew, while in the fourth, there were only people from School. The fifth area was empty with a singular person standing in it. She knew this person very well. Another friend of hers, who yesterday was so happy, was now as grim as death itself. Anniel was genuinely hoping that this place, occupied just by him, was something really, really special and only people as special as Marcus could step into it. As no one else apart from him was there.

But King spoke and shattered these hopes, swiping them away. He explained that people occupying the place furthest away from him could not be evaluated; therefore, they can neither be accepted into the King's Army, nor offered another occupation, nor even advised on how to improve further to be accepted next time. People in the fifth area, in other words, Marcus, will have to work on self-analysis and come up with solutions on how to improve by themselves. The fourth area is not accepted into the King's Army, and only people who already reside here found themselves walking through that door. Everyone who didn't belong to School was sent either back home or to the places that would help them improve. Same people here, if they wish, they can choose either to carry on with their lives as they feel best or seek advice, and it will be given. People in the middle area do have the potential to join the King's Army, but they also have the potential to excel in some other areas. So, before committing, they are advised to seek counsel first and then make a decision, or they can ignore this advice and walk freely to the second area right now. First and second areas are accepted to join the King's Army. The only difference among them is that people in the first area are ready to accept the King's gift if inaugurated, while people in the second area would be greatly advised to wait for it until they improve. That way, their gift would be stronger, more reliable, and more compatible with the personality they are going to become while in training. People in the first area can also choose to postpone King's gift if they wish to, but their improvement in the area that affects King's gift wouldn't be as significant as for people in the second group. People from the second group can ignore the advice given and ask for the King's gift now, and it will be granted. So now, when everyone knows in which group they have been placed, they can freely move and choose which group they want to be in. As the placement for the first three groups was only advisory. Anyone who wants to receive King's gift today should stand in the first area, everyone who either

doesn't want it or chooses to postpone should go to the second area. Choice should be made now, as the longer one lingers over a decision, the less they know what they truly want.

This was something entirely new, as up until now, such a proposition was never offered. Everyone joining King's Army was offered King's gift, which could be either accepted or refused. Not many have ever refused it, as by refusing this gift, you would refuse your dragon. Same as everyone knew that two top generals, out of four, have refused this gift, but still have stepped on the highest pedestal. After they had done it, some people tried it too, in hopes that this brave step was what made them generals, hoping for the same outcome, but it didn't happen; they simply didn't get dragons, that's all. After that, no one tried it ever again. The proposition to postpone it for a while and receive it later in a stronger form was never heard of option and people didn't know what to do. Some knew and firmly chose where they wanted to be, some were lost and torn apart.

While all this little chaos was going on, Prince Angus left King's side and stepped down. Some people thought that he was coming to help them choose, but it wasn't the case. He walked past everyone and strolled straight to the opposite side of the square, where Marcus stood all by himself, going from despair to rage and back to despair.

"You are aiming for something that is not yours to aim," - Prince Angus said, putting his hand on Marcus's shoulder and looking straight at him. – "It is not possible to fit into what you are not meant to fit, that's why you cannot be evaluated. A bird cannot fly in a ground. When it seeks a place in the soil, none can be given, and no advice can be provided on how to achieve this place. After all this is finished, come with me to the Capital. I will teach you how to walk the path you seek."

"Thank god for that," Annet thought to herself. She was worried so much about Marcus right now that such an offer was like a true blessing.

But then something happened that neither she nor anyone else who knew Marcus had expected. He pushed Angus's hand away.

"I don't need your pity," - Marcus said while looking at Prince Angus with eyes that didn't have any of the usual compassion or eagerness left in them.

"You cannot refuse something that wasn't given." – Angus replied. He didn't look upset or insulted by such treatment.

Marcus was about to say something else, but then changed his mind, turned around, and walked away. General Angus stood there watching Marcus leave, as if hoping that he would change his mind and return. But Marcus never did; soon, he turned the corner and was out of sight.

By now, people from the fourth area had already dispersed, leaving the arena and finding seats in the auditorium instead. The first and second groups finally managed to get into some order. The third group was the most undecided. Some have left to take seats in the auditorium, some joined those who stood in the second group, and some even moved to the first group. And some didn't know where to go. So General Angus turned around and walked to those who were still in doubt to give them an advice. Shortly, he was joined by Rainee, Anthony, Prince Ragnar, and some other officers that Annet didn't know, and slowly, the third area was cleared too. So now there were only two groups left standing in this golden arena.

King waited until his generals returned to his side before standing up and speaking again.

"So this concludes our recruiting part," - he said in his calm but so clear voice. – "Let me ask you if everyone is happy with where they stand? Let me wave away some incorrect beliefs and

understandings. There is no oath or pledge ceremony required to join my ranks. Never was and never will be. I know that most of you have heard about different ceremonies at different times. I must admit that some generations wanted to include them in the inauguration, and I never objected to it, as they did no harm. However, it was just a ceremony, and they never had any effect on the bond between you and me when you joined these ranks. Nor will it have any effect on the bond you will have between you and your commanding officers. It was just a way how people, at these times, liked to approach, or to celebrate. Today, we are gathered in a very special place that has allowed people from many different parts of the world to come and join this event. From very different habitats, with very different customs. Under these circumstances, one custom or tradition cannot be held more important than another, so none will be followed. Your inauguration has already started, and some of you already know what it is and how it feels. For those who feel a bit lost, I will repeat my question: Are you happy and content to stand where you are right now? Only when you ask this question to yourself and hear the answer from your heart, not from your mind, will you be inaugurated. No one who is not sure yet, will join these ranks, as only those who left all doubt behind can enter. It doesn't matter that you are already standing here. For you to stand here is just an indication that you are accepted into my army. It is now up to you to join it. The door is open for all of you, but it is up to every single person to walk through it. Doubt or unhappiness about the situation cannot fit through that door. Neither can the desire to be somewhere else, to do something different. You cannot retain those and walk through the passage opened for you. Right now, it is your choice what to do: let go of these companions that don't fit and walk without them, or keep a hold on them and stay. From my side, there is no pressure to do one or another, and to pressure yourself will not work either. The place you are seeking is offered only for those who seek to take it in free will, knowing and understanding that it will be a lifetime commitment. Not because you cannot leave it, you are free to leave it at any time you wish. But because for those who choose to join it, there will be no reason to do so. Those of you who still stand in a doorway, not knowing what is holding you back, allow me to show it to you, but still don't expect me to force it into your face if you are not willing to see it. This commune is based on free will and personal seeking. Only those who seek will get, only those who allow themselves to be led will be led. There is no forcing, pushing, or dragging included. Just because you made a move to come here and were recognised as a suitable candidate, doesn't mean that you must join. Many of you will not. And it doesn't mean that you are weaker than those who will. It just means that another part, another path of your life is calling you more strongly. Often it requires more strength to follow a true call that comes from the heart, than to obey the command of reason and common sense. If by now you still don't know what to do, still don't know if you have passed, that means you did not. It is time now to choose what you would wish to do: leave it or accept my help to lead you one way or another. If you don't feel this help is not because it is not offered to you. It is because you are not willing to accept it and are not allowing it in.

If you cannot allow this little bit, then you won't be able to survive in the place you are seeking. I can show you why, but it still requires a drop of trust. But you don't have to do so. All you have to do is answer my question to yourself with your heart without reasoning it: Are you happy with where you stand right now, and it will put you at ease.

While talking, King was standing with his hands behind his back, looking directly at the people in front of him. It was clear that while he spoke, more and more people became somewhat confident and at ease, but there were also those who became more and more restless, as if looking

for a dignified way to escape. But with his last words, even those started to calm down until eventually everyone calmed down and were looking at the standing King.

“Congratulations,” - King said, smiling at them, - “to those who have joined and to those who didn't. Those who have joined don't get confused later when you find out that your experience wasn't the same as others; it has to be. Those who have been suggested higher ranks already – well done, you are already a step or two ahead of others. Those who have been assigned to a certain division, congratulations on joining your new family. The majority didn't receive the assignment only because you can do well in more than one, or your heart's desire to be in one, while your abilities indicate something else. You will be able to choose by your own choice until the right place suits you. Now we will have a short break, and after that, only those who have chosen to receive King's gift today will be called back later in the day, to meet their spirit friends. They are widely known as dragons, or gifts of the King. But it is an incorrect description, as spirit friend doesn't necessarily have to be a dragon, it is just its strongest form, and they have already been gifted to each of us on the day we were born, by the King of the magic, as an outer part of our own selves. All we have to do is recognise them. The ceremony that will be performed later this evening will just strengthen your already existing soul friend, no matter if you have recognised it by now or not, and will bring it to its highest potential possible for this very moment and lock it in this shape. And your soul friend's highest potential depends only on your own inner state, which can either grow or degrade in the future. Therefore, the advice given was to indicate what would be more beneficial for you, to receive it now or later. More information about soul creatures will soon be available in my libraries, presented by General Raine, who recently made outstanding discoveries on this subject.

However, right now, the general's own soul friend is in a restrained form, as not so long ago it lost connection to its keeper. I cannot think of a better time for a reunion. Everyone who wishes to witness this reunion is welcome to do so, but keep in mind that it might be a frightening experience or even dangerous. Soul friends are strong creatures by nature. The stronger the person, the stronger their soul friend becomes, and it is every person's responsibility to keep their soul friends under control. If the connection between a person and their soul creature is lost, it is not easy to do so until the connection is re-established. Until it is done, the creature will act on its own accord and might, or in this case I should say, it will, present a danger to others. Everyone who doesn't want to experience it should leave this square now until Silver leaves or is reconnected to General Raine. Walking, running, or leaving will not be permitted later to prevent hazard caused by one trampling another.”

chapter 8

Awakening

After King finished his speech, he waited for a little while, but no one moved an inch. There was no way anyone would miss such an opportunity to see the legendary dragon of the Rainbow General. No one really understood much of what King said about connections and restraining, but it was obvious that something interesting and unseen was going to happen, so everyone stayed. Some mothers tried to call their children back from the front to a safer place, but to no success. There was no way any of them would leave the front row and go to hide now.

King moved his head slightly, and every new recruit marched out of the arena to stand together with King's troops behind the auditorium. They marched in such unison that one would think that they had already been trained for many years. Not everyone marched away. There were many people left behind, and it was obvious that it must be those who didn't want to join. They walked quickly to the auditorium to take empty seats.

In no time, this large golden square was left completely empty once more.

King moved his hand, and a small, simple, empty table appeared in the middle of an empty square. Without a question or hesitation, Rainee left King's side and walked to this table. She placed her hands over her heart as if covering something, and then slowly but steadily pulled it out. A loud whispers spread across the audience, seeing blood spreading across her chest and hands. But Rainee herself wasn't bothered about it. She lowered her hands down to the table, leaving an open bleeding gash in her chest that was closing rapidly by itself, soon leaving no trace of damage, and the bloody stain was fading too until it was gone without a trace.

Anniel knew what was in Rainee's hands even before she revealed it. Not many would know about it, but there was a little painting of a dragon on Rainee's chest. Neither tattoo nor painting was a correct description for it, as it was three-dimensional with lots of detail. But these details weren't painted; it looked like a growth of the skin, or more like skin covering something under it.

Anniel asked once if that was a tattoo of Rainee's dragon. Everyone knew that members of King's Army would keep their dragons on their bodies in a so-called tattoo form, and they would come out only when called out and would return after. She had never seen such a tattoo. Truth be told, she had never seen anyone from the King's Army either. So she didn't know what it looked like. "It is my dragon, but it is not a tattoo," was Rainee's answer. Anniel never asked anything about it again as she could feel that Rainee was not keen to speak about it.

Now, seeing Rainee gently placing a little, hardly a palm-sized, dragon-shaped item covered in her blood, she knew that it was an actual item that she was carrying under her skin in her flesh.

But she didn't have time to ponder over it any longer.

That small item started to grow rapidly, increasing in size drastically with each second. Soon it was the size of the table, then bigger, and bigger, and bigger. Rainee was watching it with immense concentration on her face and stepping back only as much as there was room needed to allow it to grow.

A growing thing was resembling a huge dragon, but just a shape of it. If anything, it looked more like a mummy of the dragon... No, more like a dragon wrapped tightly into some sort of skin or leather. Even the ties that were binding it up could now be seen. It was difficult to say if it was

elastic or rigid, but it was somehow stretching, so it shouldn't be hard, but by the look, it seemed as hard as a stone or iron. By now, it had exceeded any reasonable size of a dragon and already filled half of the square, and was still stretching. Rainee looked like a little midget next to it, and Anniet thought, just what size was her dragon?!!

It could be seen that all this stretching was starting to have a toll on this outer layer, as it probably had reached its normal size, and now stretching was making it thinner with each stretch, making it even see-through in places. In addition to that, there was some extra force stirring inside as if trying to break loose. Now, all this strange black thing was taking two-thirds of the arena, towering over people, and was still stretching further, giving an expression that it would not hold much longer and would explode, as the power within it was gaining more and more strength. And it did explode.

Anniet was sitting in the first row and was already shielding her eyes with her hand even before the explosion. She was prepared as she didn't want to miss anything. Her primary concern was about Rainee. Never before had she seen her with so much concentration. She was like a tiger watching its prey, prepared to jump at any moment. When that outer shell exploded, instead of shielding herself, Rainee sprinted right into the middle of it and leaped forward and high in the air, missing a slender black spiky beast that erupted from this shell, just by a few inches.

The explosion was so strong that people around started to scream, but mainly in fear, as not even a single gust had reached them. The very moment it exploded, a pink substance covered them all, shielding them perfectly from any danger or even discomfort and withdrawing quickly when there was no hazard left. Anniet looked in the direction it came from and saw a pink dragon whose wings were shrinking rapidly, approaching Rainee. The black beast, that she was trying to catch, was rising to the sky, threatening to disappear from sight and escape, but it was met by another black creature, much smaller than the beast, but it must be much stronger as it knocked it down easily.

The beast wasn't happy about such treatment. It turned in the air, looked towards the town and the people gathered below, opened its big mouth and fired an enormous, never-ending amount of fire, circling around, with the intent to burn away everything and everyone that it could see.

By now, Rainee was already close by, standing on a pink dragon that was bravely carrying her towards this monster. Seeing this beast opening its mouth, Rainee bent her knees and leaped again towards it at the same time pushing the pink dragon down, who obeyed her perfectly, gliding down and spreading her wings in all directions again, creating a perfect umbrella across the town, and not a single ember of this fire deluge managed to get through it. This time Rainee almost succeeded. Her aim was accurate, her leap was precise, she ignored the fire in her way and emerged untouched on the other side. However, the beast noticed her approaching, closed its wings and dived down with a spin, avoiding Rainee's hands again. It dived right towards the protecting wings of the pink dragon, but surprisingly, these wings didn't have any effect on the beast itself. It did stop its fire, but the beast dived through it as if there was nothing in its way. It crashed back to the ground in the middle of the square and shattered into pieces.

Shattered to pieces was the most accurate description, as it did break into six or seven four-legged creatures, resembling more reptiles without tails than dogs or any other known animal, and dashed in different directions towards the audience. Anniet could see one of them aiming towards the place she was sitting. Its white, enormously large fangs could be seen very clearly against its black and sleek body. Its powerful front legs with large claws were pushing the creature's body closer with every pull. A loud ferocious growl sounded at Anniet's side, and she nearly died of fright at the

sight of a massive black hound rising from the ground. The approaching creature saw this hound too and turned its direction instantly.

Anniel looked to her side and saw General Blake's Deamon lowering his head and slightly wagging his tail as an apology for scaring her before guiltily moving away. "No! That will not do!" she thought, sliding from her seat and getting a firm grip on Deamon's neck. He didn't do anything bad! He just protected her! She is tired of being afraid when others are nice! Gosh, how soft his fur was! Deamon sat down immediately, staying close to her. Anniel didn't forget that King forbade walking during the event, and truth to be told, just a second ago, she wouldn't be able to make a move, no matter how much she would try, as if some stronger force would keep her in the seat. But this force didn't restrain her from going after Deamon.

Meanwhile, the events were unfolding very fast. These charging creatures were stopped by a strong field of white energy force. Anniel looked to see that it was created by King's Army members dressed in white uniforms resembling the one that Rainee was putting on this morning. After smashing into these force shields, these creatures just shook their heads, blasted some fire, which wasn't able to penetrate through these shields either, and seeing that there was no success, reassembled themselves back into that scary black monstrous dragon, getting ready to take off back to the sky. Then a loud, ear-piercing screech sounded. Penetrating all around, sending through everyone a blast of vibrations and locking them to the ground, making you feel that you will shatter into a thousand shreds if it does not stop soon. Anniel clung to Deamon for her dear life after experiencing it. She could feel that this sound had a much stronger effect on Deamon, but he completely ignored it as if nothing was happening. The black creature must have felt it much stronger as it got dizzy and shook its head violently before shooting back up. But Rainee was already waiting for it there on a pink dragon, and this time that dazed black creature wasn't able to avoid her grip.

Anniel didn't know what she expected Rainee to do when she will catch this monster, but definitely not what had happened. Rainee just pressed herself to this creature's back, hugging its neck strongly as if she were hugging the best friend in the world, and closed her eyes with the biggest smile that could come across a human's face. With that, they both were out of sight, disappearing into the depths of the sky, and no one had stopped them this time.

Happy... Rainee was again happy beyond what Anniel could understand. She must be really brave to be able to love such a scary beast... So it really was her dragon... If that's how dragons look like, then Anniel wasn't sure any more if she would ever like to have one. While thinking she was still pressing hardly this soft and cuddly hound while looking at another blue yellowish beast who had caused this unbearable sensation just by making a noise. It was standing next to Prince Ragnar, and both of them looked pretty pleased with their efforts. Then this blue scaled dragon with yellow ornaments swirled in the air, turning into nothingness, and Anniel could swear that he somehow, despite being a few meters tall, got under Prince Ragnar's armour.

With that, the short break was finished, and the King invited those who wanted to receive the King's gift back to the square.

Anniel didn't want to return back to her seat, as by now her bum and legs were already very stiff and sore from all this sitting, and it seemed that no one objected to her sitting down on the ground. Also, it was so nice to hold this beautiful, cuddly animal in her arms. She completely forgot who it even belonged to. Well, she didn't forget about the person himself, as after Rainee left, he casually

landed back in the square, bringing up a lot of uproar with it. It was he who had knocked that scary beast back down from the sky, proving once more that the sky was his domain.

After that, nothing that Annet saw surprised her any more. This place was full of the weirdest possible creatures, with the strangest powers, and all laws of the physics she knew until now were defied, and any normality was not normal here, and any abnormality was taken for granted in this place where people could fly, speak silently but be heard everywhere, love most terrible beasts, make themselves bleed and heal again as if nothing had happened, keep the creatures larger than horses under their shirts, be happy to the moon after receiving as a gift some scary creature and calling it a friend, being visibly upset if the gift they received wouldn't be as frightening as they wanted it to be. All this didn't make any sense, but that was what was happening right now.

King was pulling out from somewhere, these strange-looking dragons, and presenting them as soul friends to everyone who asked for a gift from him. How did he know who was supposed to receive what, was a mystery, as the owners definitely didn't know what they would receive in advance. People around were shouting and cheering about all the large and scary dragons, and would keep silent and clap just out of politeness after a nice and friendly creature would be presented.

All this scene unfolding in front of her was making Annet dizzy, and she would happily go for a snooze right now. No one would probably even notice it, as around here, there were no people left. Everyone moved forward, a bit closer to the King's stage, and would look at her time after time, probably wondering why she didn't want to get a better seat. But she could see everything well from the place she was right now, and sitting on the ground was much more comfortable than on these hard seats. If she moved any closer, she might get stomped over for sitting on the ground. So she didn't go and was very content where she was. Just tired and a little bit hungry. She even thought that after all this is finished, maybe Anthony will make her something nice to eat, before remembering that, for some reason, it is not going to happen. Right now, she couldn't even remember these reasons. Maybe because he was busy involved with this ceremony going ahead. This cape suits him nicely. He looked so handsome... Maybe when she goes to the Capital, they will still be able to stay friends. What a strange thought! Why wouldn't they be friends just because moving to a different place? Of course, he will be much busier there and will not have much time for her, but still, it doesn't matter. She will be happy with as much as he can spare. Even right now, he was looking at her with a little bit of a concerned look. "He probably already knows that I am hungry and is worried about it," Annet giggled to herself while indicating that she is alright. His smile is so nice and warm, she never could do anything else but smile back. She sighed for the one millionth time to herself, thinking that it was a pity that they could only be friends. But it is probably for the best, as Dark General was very unforgiving for those who fell into a different relationship with him. But why does he have to be a Dark General? He must be a general, as he was wearing a general's cape and was standing next to the King and advising everyone who wanted to hear something from him. But she was sure that he had a different name than Dark General. General Anthony? No, that didn't sound right. Oh well, never mind, all is just simply too much, too confusing, and she felt completely exhausted to think any harder about it.

Lucky that he allowed her to keep his dog with her. She always knew that dog was much bigger than he looked. What is his name? Oh yes, Deamon, after Dark General's dog. No, he was a Dark General's dog... No, he was Anthony's dog. In any way, she was glad Deamon stayed with her. He had his head on her knees and was snoozing peacefully. Lucky he... She would like to go for a snooze too... Why are dogs allowed to do what they want all the time, but not people? Didn't sound fair. But Deamon's coat was so silky! She would never ever think that way just by looking at him.

He seemed so shaggy. But when touched, it was so smooth! Another wonder out of many. Anniet just couldn't stop stroking and cuddling him, and Deamon liked it a lot.

How much longer will this ceremony last? It wasn't even halfway through yet... Out of many thousands who walked through the gates, only a small portion were offered to join the King's Army, and even less actually joined. And only about one hundred asked for the King's gift. But even with such a relatively low number, it was taking a long time for King to gift them all. No wonder he didn't take all these thousands who wanted to join to his army. If he had, he would probably have stayed here for a week or more, only making gifts. Of course, everyone deserved to have some attention on such an important day, and all these dragons they received were really beautiful. But it doesn't make it any easier to wait. Others didn't look so tired, so why was she? Luckily, everyone has probably forgotten about her, as no one has looked back for a long time now. So maybe no one will get offended if she would have a little snooze.

This thought was so appealing that Anniet could not resist it and quietly lowered her body to put her head down on Deamon's shoulder. He was so soft. And he smelled good, and he felt like a very good friend. To stay like this was way more comfortable than to keep sitting. She tried to watch this ceremony for a little bit longer, but it wasn't easy. Out of all people, only Anthony would look at her time after time. He didn't look too concerned any more and smiled at her as if encouraging her to take a rest. Deamon moved slightly, snuggling around to make her even more comfortable and to shield her from unwanted looks. And that was the last thing she could remember from an inauguration ceremony.

CHAPTER

9

Beauty of the dragon

Rainee was holding Silver in her embrace allowing her to fly as fast as she wanted, in any direction she wanted. All Rainee could feel was happiness and the wind passing by. She also could feel an immense amount of stress, rage and uncertainty coming out of this powerful body carrying her forward, but Rainee didn't pay much attention to it. It was way too familiar to her what her dragon was feeling right now, and also not important, as with every move of her wings, these feelings were being pushed back into the past, where they belonged now. Silver was alive, and she got her back. That's all that matters right now. And it was so incredible to be able to feel her again, to feel through her again, to see, to hear, to share. King Armanin must be truly something impressive, being able to create such a gift for everyone that never ceased to last through the centuries.

Rainee could feel that slowly her own joy was entering Silver's heart too, pushing away all that stress, and her flight was becoming more oriented, not so frenzied. Not just looking for something where she could release her anger, or an aimless attempt to escape, or to find something that was impossible to find. It must have been really horrible for her to lose this connection. Dragons were not meant to live on their own. No one who doesn't have one will ever understand what it is, what it means. No matter how it looked before, it was a kind thing for King to seal her like this. The second kindest thing would have been to end her. But he didn't. He found a way to retain her! And Rainee has her back now! A bit mucky, a bit scruffy, but all this is washing away rapidly.

Silver already started to realise that something that she thought was lost had returned, and recognition and response were rapidly coming back. Once worries leave her, they will be gone for good and will never bother her again. This extension part of humans wasn't meant to retain these kind of memories. At first, they were not even meant to go through such traumatic experiences.

Finally, Silver's sanity started to come back, and her colour started to return. Rainee ran her hand through her scales glowing in the sunshine. Long before she met Silver in this form, she was seeing and feeling it in her dreams. Rainee had never seen true Silver's form in a dream, but time after time she would see and touch these scales that looked sharp as a razor to the eye and were soft and flexible to the touch as a grass dancing in the wind and irresistibly calling her. The dark colour that was engulfing Silver was leaving rapidly. Dark didn't suit her. Now she fully understood what King meant, saying the exact words to her herself this morning. Was she radiating the same darkness this morning as her dragon was just now? That would have been a very dark rainbow, Rainee laughed to herself.

Rainee sat up straight and looked at her dragon. Shiny and bright as it used to be, none of that dark dirt left on the outer appearance, none of that pain and anguish left inside her heart. She was so beautiful that it was difficult to appreciate her. Silver let a loud sound acknowledging that she agrees with what Rainee thinks. There was no loneliness left in her, no pain or memory of separation, no aggression towards those she held responsible for what had happened. Dragons are beautiful; they don't keep grudges or memories about dark times. They think neither good nor bad about themselves. They think about themselves what their person thinks about them. The more one loves their dragon, the more powerful and beautiful it becomes. The way one loves their dragon is the way the dragon is shaped. It is not a puppet, the shaping is not like this, it also cannot be

manipulated or talked into something. They have their own character, their own likings, but all based on the person. Like some strange reflection in a mirror that reflects something unknown with an additional touch to it.

Rainee asked Silver to go down, and Silver obeyed instantly, even before the complete thought could be manifested. Dragons, same as any other creature of magic, listen to the heart, not to the thoughts. The heart is much faster, and the thought is very slow in comparison. Heart is steady, thoughts are wobbly. Thoughts mean little to the creatures of the magic. They can hear it, same as words, but they don't place any importance to them.

They landed in an empty field, and Rainee slid off Silver's back and stood in front of her for a long time, admiring this beautiful friend of hers. Silver liked this kind of attention. Not flattery, not even awe, but just true, raw appreciation of her beauty. For Silver, there already wasn't any moment, when they were not together left. It doesn't work that way in a dragon's mind. When Rainee was teaching people relations with their sword, she would describe relations with the dragon, and it would fit perfectly with the only exception that the dragon had its own mind, feelings, and was fully capable of making its own decisions. If Rainee were to say to Silver that she missed her, Silver would never understand what she meant. She doesn't live in the past, she lives in today, in this moment, and at this moment they were together, so to say that I missed you would make no sense for her.

Rainee sat on the ground and then slowly lay down. Finally complete again... Bruised, scratched and lost, but complete. That's how she was feeling right now. The biggest void in her life now was King. How strange. He was always the strongest pillar. The unmovable one. The one she could fully and utterly rely on. Could fully trust. People don't even understand what that trust was. How strange... Why is all of it gone? No, actually, it is not gone; it is still there, but covered by so many things. She had witnessed it in another just a few hours ago, and all looked so clear and understandable there, and she could lead Annet out of it without fail if she would just let her. Then why is it so difficult or even impossible to see it in herself? "Will you lead me out of it?" she asked. "Yes", the answer from The One came instantly. "Even if I fail to see the reason?" "Yes". That was good to know. She already knew it before asking, but still, it was so comforting to get this confirmation.

It was difficult to understand how people live their lives without communication with The One, without their soulmate, without their soul friend, without even knowing themselves... Where do they find joy? How do they find a sense of fulfilment? Or better saying is why don't they want that joy and fulfilment that is always available but rarely taken.

A little kitten jumped on her chest, purring and clawing her white uniform. Rainee wasn't sure why King prepared this uniform for her. Was he in doubt, too, if she would be granted one of the natural general uniforms again, or did he want to spend time with her so he could crack through that anger that was lingering inside? She must admit he surely risked it all to do so. Was he prepared for it, or did he simply know her better than she herself?

One mistake, one lie and then a lifetime of truth. Her lifetime. He never lied to her as long as she lived. But still, all life engulfed in lies. She wanted to forgive him, she just didn't know how. Never before had she had any difficulty in doing so. He taught her that she should never ask for forgiveness from others, as it is not hers to ask, but forgive others instantly, as it would just hurt her not to forgive. And she trusted, and it worked. It always works. Then why is she not capable of forgiving him now? What is it? There was no reply from The One. Or rather, to say there was a

reply, but she didn't hear it. The only reason for it is because she doesn't want to hear the answer. She wasn't even trying to clear herself and ask again. She could feel strong resistance to do so, which meant there was a part in her that didn't want to do it; to force it through would mean to disrespect herself, to break herself, and there was no reason for it. One part of her wanted to know what the other didn't, and there were no additional influences that would require a fast decision. So she just made a choice that she wants to know and let it be. The answer will come with time. A more correct way to say it is that the opportunities to find the answer will be presented now over and over, until she finally takes one of them, and then she will know, and then she will be able to forgive. Anything forced now would work, but through so much confusion, hurt, and resistance that it would probably take much longer to recover and heal all the "broken" parts than just to wait for the opportunities to be presented. The One doesn't appreciate force, and the world he created doesn't support it.

The little kitten on her chest curled into a little ball and fell asleep. Rainee stroked it a few times, fondly looking at it, and closed her eyes too. Just for an hour.

As expected, she woke up after an hour. Silver was already waiting for her. Rainee thought about where she wanted to go, and with a flash, Silver slid under and was in the air in no time. All was back to normality as if this hardship, Rainee had been going through for the past two years, had never even happened. Rainee wasn't sure if this place was still on School premises or they had left while flying before, but Silver was taking her without a doubt or uncertainty, so there was no need to bother. Hardly ten minutes passed, and Rainee could see a familiar town below. The next moment, she was left walking towards her place next to the King while Silver slid from under and left. Rainee never told Silver what she should do or where she should stay while on her own, and her little dragon always managed to entertain herself in such ways that made Rainee wonder sometimes.

She passed Ruffus, Blake and Angus, smiling at them. Each one so dear and each so different! There was no same person, and the concept of name wasn't even needed, as there was no possibility ever to mix one person with another, no matter how they are named. This time, she didn't take her place between Angus and Blake, but walked to the King and stood behind him on the right side. Usually, she would stand here when on her own with King, but she chose to do it now because she wanted to. She was fully aware that the feelings King is receiving from her right now are not matching her actions, but she wanted to change it, and it has to start somewhere. One cannot expect things to change by themselves without an effort, or at least indicating what direction this change is required.

The enormous roars of cheers greeted her. People were happy to see her, but how little do they know about her... Even now, despite all that King said before Silver's awakening, most of the audience greeted her as a successful monster slayer. King clearly said that it will be her soul friend, soul creature. Not many understood or even tried to understand it. They just saw a monster, and she was met as a conqueror of it. Well let them be. None wanted to see any more than they do now, so her services are not required.

However, these cheers didn't reach one sleeping person at the back of the arena, who was covered by a few different layers of protection right now. Under that many layers, not just a sound would ever reach her, but no one would even come closer to disturb her. Annet definitely didn't need her touch to top it up, but Rainee couldn't help herself. Seeing her snuggling into the very same beast

she was terrified of just less than a day ago was rather peculiar. So Anniet made a move too... The direction of that move was very desirable and will make Anniet's life much easier and happier.

Inauguration was slowly coming to an end. The last few people received their "gifts", and now it was just a matter of showing and explaining the basics of how communication with these creatures works and demonstrating it in practice. After everyone had a go and succeeded, the inauguration ceremony was over.

Now there will be a short celebration, then everyone who joined the King's Army will be able to choose how they want to reach the Capital, by flying machine or via the School's gates, which would take them directly there. This suggestion brought another roar of applause and satisfaction, and it was obvious that no one was walking through the gates. Flying machines were so fascinating and very rarely used as they required an amount of energy that not many possessed. Surely everyone will want to come in them.

Not a second later than the ceremony was over, Blake stepped off the stage, walked across the square, captivating everybody's attention, and scooped the sleeping Anniet into his arms. He did it so gently that it didn't disturb her in the slightest. After picking her up, Blake looked around for a moment as if contemplating where he should go now and then turned towards the headmaster's quarters, followed closely by Deamon. People fell silent in confusion after seeing it.

Earlier, when Deamon had risen among people to chase away the attacking beast, it scared everyone around with the same effect as that black approaching creature, with only the difference that he didn't intend to hurt anyone. For some reason, not known to them, Anniet got hold of this beastly dog and wouldn't let it go. So people moved away. At first, they were still looking at her time after time, wondering why she kept holding it in her embrace. Some say she was fearless, some could recall seeing her with Dark General when nobody knew who he was and thought her to be one of his subordinates, some said that she probably was just grateful to Deamon for trying to save them from that attacking creature. But minutes were passing, and everyone slowly forgot about her, returning attention to events unfolding in front of them, and were surprised to see her being picked up and carried away by the Dark General. What has happened that she fell unconscious? There didn't seem to be any visible wounds, and no one noticed her lying until now, despite everyone being around and all these newly born dragon exercises going on just few meters away from her. Again, many speculations have arisen, but no one knew for sure. All they could do was watch her being carried away, and the headmaster following them shortly. Even on such a day full of excitement, it was still interesting what was going on, and there were many who wanted to follow to find out, but their attention was taken away by a large, beautiful silver dragon coming from the sky and circling above their heads. Everyone recognised whose dragon it is and soon everything else was forgotten. It wasn't very often that Rainbow General's dragon would show itself so openly.

Rainee didn't want Anniet to be disturbed. The inner battles she was going through in the last two days were extremely energy draining, and even after a small amount of it, good rest was needed. With the amount Anniet was experiencing right now, one should sleep for a week or two to recover fully. So she made this little diversion to draw attention to herself, and it worked as a charm.

Rainee, with Angus and Ruffus, stayed among the celebrating people and were happy to answer all the questions, give any advice, or just be looked at. King didn't linger around, however, Rainee knew that he still hadn't left. She could feel his presence very well, even when he suppressed it to this very minimum, as he has been doing for the last two days. That was entirely out of his character. It was normal for him not to join these sorts of celebrations, but it wasn't usual for him to

stay around. Was it because after leaving, he would not be able to come back? It might be the case, but his mission here was already finished, and this time given now was solo for the purpose of saying goodbyes and gathering all things one might need for a new life. Right now, King was in a library, which could lead to thinking that he was doing some research. But it would not make any sense as King would never do research at the last minute. If he needed more time, he would just arrange all events to give him as much time as required. Also, he wasn't sentimental, so it is not likely that he just lingered there for that reason.

When everyone was getting more or less ready to leave, she walked to the library. As expected, King wasn't reading anything. He was looking at the endless pictures of the past Kings.

“Do you think these paintings are correct?” – He asked when she walked closer.

Rainee didn't need to have a look at them as she had already done it many times before.

“I think they must be very accurate,” - she said. There was already a new painting of her at the greeting hall with her new looks. So it took the library a very short time to update on it, as she stepped out as a general looking like this, hardly a few hours ago. But King already knew it, so it wasn't what he was asking about. – There are no paintings in the Library of the Kings, but once you take in someone's life story or even a story told by someone else, you know precisely what people looked like, just as you would know from your own experience. Those faces that I did read about look exactly the same.

“I thought so,” - King said. – “There is never more than four generals painted with any of these Kings.”

Rainee didn't reply to it. It wasn't a question; it was a statement, and she had no objections to it. Also, only this King had four generals painted in this library. Every other King had from zero to three.

“Is there any information about the Second King in that library?” – King asked

“No.” – Rainee answered. It didn't surprise King as he probably already knew about it.

“Same as here.”

They stood next to each other in silence for a few minutes before King spoke again.

“A decent King and his five generals will unlock the door and invite true magic back to this world”, - he said.

Rainee didn't answer again. She knew this phrase very well. It was challenging to say if it was a prophecy or a legend, but despite never being written anywhere, it was always alive among people.

“Every King of the past knew this prophecy, or prediction, or omen,” - King continued, - “despite no one ever seeing a written statement of it. Don't you think it is very strange that, through the years, no one ever had a thought to write it down?”

“I think it is very strange,” - Rainee agreed. - “ But there might be a reason for it. If written, it might lose its meaning. As in the distant past, Kings didn't have generals, they had knights. At that time, the phrase was "A decent King and his five knights will unlock the door and invite true magic back to this world".” -Rainee added, surprised to herself that just now, when speaking with King, she realised it.

“Fascinating.” -King said deep in his thoughts. - “There is nothing written about it in this library either. For a phrase to stay alive through the lifeline without being changed or drowned into legends, there has to be a powerful protection placed against it. Nobody does such a thing for no

reason. And I am not the first of the Kings who thought the same way. That's why the position of the general is must be with every King, despite not everyone of them having a use for them. And you are right. Now, after it was said aloud, it became so clear that these people are not tied to the name they are called. Somehow, into our times, the belief has been brought that this title is for those who lead an armed force. But there was a time when there was no armed force, as there was no need for it. But still, there were generals, or knights, next to the King. Never less than five. And each King at some point tried to improve itself to the best to become a decent King, as it was obvious that this part was missing to fulfil the prophecy.” – King fell silent for a short time before continuing, - “My father had fifty generals, I myself have eight. How does it come that there are no generals next to my father in this library, and next to me are only four? Do you think a general has to serve for a certain amount of time to count?”

This trait of thought never crossed Rainee's mind. It was so evident now that one would wonder how it could be missed. However, most simple and obvious things are most difficult to spot. And most of the time, those are what bring the most change.

“I do agree with you,” - Rainee said aloud, - “but not to the thought you expressed.”

King smiled to himself after this reply. He wasn't even looking at Rainee all this time.

“Then where are we going to get a fifth one?” – He asked.

It wasn't clear if he was talking to himself or asking her. Even if he was asking, Rainee didn't know the answer.

“Sorry, I couldn't give you more time,” - King said, finally looking at her. – “You wanted to talk to me. I am all yours.”

So she was right. She was the reason why he was still here. Or at least one of the reasons. She wasn't sure what he meant by his first phrase. Definitely not an apology as he never apologised and taught her never to do so. So no matter what he was referring to, he must truly have wished that he could have done differently. It wasn't an apology; it was just a simple statement. Still, she wasn't sure where he would have liked to give her more time. It might be more than one occasion. But she wasn't going to talk about it now. And she knew that it wasn't why King waited for her.

“When are you going to tell him?” – She asked, looking straight at King's eyes.

“To tell what?” – King asked.

“That I am your daughter.”

“We can do it now,” - he said, looking at her, - “he should be here any second.”

After saying that, he looked over her shoulder, and she saw an expression on his face that Rainee thought King was incapable of having. It was true pure surprise, as if he had seen a ghost. Rainee quickly turned around to look back with her hand already on the hilt of her sword, and the same expression as she just saw on King's face came across her face too.

There was no ghost or some unearthly creature. It was Angus walking towards them with a questioning look in his eyes. There was nothing wrong with him apart from the fact that he was not present. Only those who knew what feeling someone's presence meant would understand why there was such a shock on King and Rainee's faces. If someone would stretch a hand to take something that was clearly in front of them, just to find out that there was nothing to take, they would be less surprised, as there would be more explanation for it.

Rainee always felt Angus's presence. She also felt him in the same way as anyone else around, but also had this different, additional feeling like a part of her own self would be in a different place. Right now, she was still maintaining that unique feeling towards him, but this "different place" was somewhere far away when Angus was right here. The sense of presence coming from every person close by was completely absent. Next moment, as if some force finally acknowledged that something was not right here, Angus' body steadily disappeared out of sight.

After the initial shock, Rainee understood what had just happened. He was sent away. Not by King, as it was obvious that King was even more surprised than she was. Why wouldn't he? He always knew where everyone was around him. To see someone this close without knowing that he was here must be a real shock. Strangely that he even handled it so well.

Rainee didn't look back at King but walked away in big strides until Silver came and took her. She couldn't bear to stay with King at this moment. She was having one blow after another. She couldn't stay with him because all her essence wanted to blame and scream at him right now. And he hasn't even done anything. At least not this time.

She never knew how it would look to be next to someone who found a way to this School. Now she knew. With only the difference that Angus didn't find a way into here. The School actually sent him away. His presence couldn't be felt as he was already walking in a different dimensional space. But he definitely heard what she had said, and it shook him to the core.

Blake was already waiting at the entrance, but she didn't want to see anyone right now, so she left him behind. There was no faster dragon than Silver, and there was no one who would be able to catch up with her if Rainee didn't want them to. That is, if not to consider King, but he would never chase after her when she wants to be alone. And right now, she didn't want anyone around. She knew Blake was coming after her, and it made her really angry with him. He is so unreliable! Nothing can be entrusted to him, not even his own life and happiness!

This time, Rainee felt it – a spark of anger in her, and it drained right into Silver, who screamed loudly at this blast of anger inside and increased her speed, leaving this rage far behind. It was gone from Rainee and from Silver. So King was right about Silver's ability. How strange, Rainee never even thought that way. Now all of it makes so much sense. She does remember herself being a pretty tantrum-throwing child until one day it somehow vanished and never returned. Until the day Silver found her and came into her life.

"Sorry, my beautiful girl", - Rainee said gently, stroking Silver's back, - "it has to stop for both of us."

With anger drained out, clear thoughts returned. No, Blake was very reliable. She could predict his movements one hundred percent all the time. Just he did what he wanted, not what Rainee would wish him to do.

At first, Rainee was going to search for Angus and explain to him what had happened. But there was a slight problem - she didn't know where he was. She could go back and ask King. If Angus is not in a mist, King will know his location. But then she slowed down. No matter how much she didn't want to admit it to herself, there must be a reason why it had happened. Random things didn't happen at this School. Angus was led to hear their conversation, but was sent away with just a small drop of the truth instead of being allowed to hear all. School doesn't make such mistakes, at least it shouldn't, so by any logic, it should be the shortest route to achieve what is wanted. It didn't feel that way at all. She could feel how lost Angus was right now, and with all her mind, she could not

see a way for him to go through this on his own. But still, he was separated from the only two people who could help him right now and was sent away. She could feel how badly he wanted to return to her, but still, no matter all this desire, he was not getting any closer. She also could feel how badly he wanted to figure out what's going on, and his desire to find out the truth was strongest of all.

Despite all her thoughts, Rainee still conducted a proper search for some time. She knew that she had left the School's premises and returned to the outer world this time. There was no mistake about it. The moment she crossed the border, it was as clear as breaking the water's surface. She didn't know it before, just because she hadn't experienced it before. It might be that it is best for Angus to be where he is right now, but no one said that she cannot be with him. She wanted to be with him, and she left School with this desire in her heart. Rainee was hoping that this was where she would be sent - to the place where she could find him. Upon seeing Capital lights in front, deep in her heart she already knew that it was not the case, but still, right now, she had nothing to do in Capital, so she just searched for what couldn't be found.

CHAPTER

10

Black with no darkness

Aqila was one of just a very few people who could see Anniet sleeping. She could feel layers of protection cast over the girl, but it didn't affect her. She wasn't too sure of the reason, but most likely because of the intention, why she wanted to keep an eye on Anniet. If this child had struggled for much longer, she would have had to go and interfere with it herself, as honestly, with so much going on in her head, it was surprising that she still didn't have a bad fever. It was peculiar to see that, for support, she clung to the very same creature she was afraid of the most, belonging to, or rather being part of, the person she was terrified of the most.

Aqila herself didn't feel much better than this girl. It cannot be helped. At least she understood what was going on. In everybody's life, there are some things that are taken as a standard, as something unchangeable. Not because it couldn't be changed, but because you would not have even a single idea that it can be any other way, as in your life, it simply is the base of all understanding. When these things change, reality starts to slip away, and the mind is not capable of catching up with it and eventually tries to shut down to restart. Otherwise, it would just over-burn. To help restart it, you could occupy yourself with something you know very well or with something you like. Or, most preferably, a combination of both. Then your mind takes this task or activity and puts all attention only to it; all the rest stays in the background, given no attention, just unknowingly registering what is happening. That way, the mind is allowed to realise that reality has shifted, and now there are new rules, new understandings, new something, whatever was overwhelming it. The mind is only a tool given to humans. A wonderful and mighty tool, but still it is way too small to understand all the complexity of life, and it cannot catch up with a soul, especially if it was given permission to override it. Mind sets boundaries and then takes it for reality. When this reality is shifted, it cannot stretch with it; it simply doesn't have the capacity. Then it needs to restart. If a person cannot do it consciously, then they are drawn into sleep, where the mind is given much more flexibility, and after a good sleep, they will be able to wake up with new boundaries for a new reality. Or even in its most desirable state - open for the unexpected. If a person cannot help themselves and also resists sleep by overpowering it, then they might end up in a situation where their mind will get completely cleared, either of things that bother it, or of all memories altogether. It happens just to give a person a new start, as obviously they were not able to cope with their lives any longer. Under such circumstances, those who don't understand what a true person is, and believe that a person is what they know, remember and can do, would think that the person is gone or got crazy. Reality is that personality didn't change at all, only the knowledge kept in the mind, not in the heart, is reduced to the amount that the mind can cope again.

All the events going on for the past thirty hours were pushing Aqila to that reset point. Nothing that was normal, steady and unchangeable existed any more. For those who either didn't notice changes or didn't know that whatever was happening was abnormal, all that was happening was just an exciting event. But not for her. She was always open for new and unexpected; however, every person has some base that they hold unchangeable, and her base now was being broken and shattered many times, much faster than she could recover. So at some point, she just stopped participating in this "chaos" that the King's coming brought, and concentrated on what was known to her and what she liked to do. It couldn't be anything connected to the surroundings, as that's

where all the chaos was going, and she concentrated on what she herself liked to do, no matter what the surroundings were. She liked to help people, she liked to watch and observe them, and find ways to help them grow, notice when they were getting off track, create opportunities to take opportunities someone already has but didn't notice by themselves. She liked to explain unknown to others, breaking it down into understandable pieces and making it known. She just liked noticing those who needed help and was making sure they received it. So that's what she was doing today. And it worked perfectly. She left this place for King to run to his own liking and took care of the people who were coming or already were here. It benefited everyone.

Anniel didn't have this luxury. She didn't have this knowledge or understanding of how to apply it, even if she were told. She wasn't yet self-aware enough to distinguish what she really was. To see the difference between what she really liked and what she was taught to like, taught to think about herself. What behaviour was coming from her heart, and what from the rules set in her mind. Her mind was very open to take in new things, but not in the direction these events have taken her. Her base was kicked out, and she had nothing to rely on any more. Luckily, Rainee has managed to gain her trust again so quickly, which kept her going and prevented her from going into total shutdown. But all of it was way too much for one person to cope with.

Aqila wanted to help her so badly, but just didn't know how. And then the girl helped herself. Her true kind nature erupted from the grip of fear upon believing that she might have upset somebody undeservedly, may it be just a dog. And then she found comfort in its company. Aqila was keeping an eye on Blake, trying to understand how much of his input was in it, but couldn't read anything, as this boy had grown up way beyond her reach.

Nevertheless, it was clear that the girl's uncertainty and worry were draining out as fast as she was allowing it, and layer after layer of protective shields were steadily covering her as soon as she stopped resisting them. First, preventing any outer emotional influence, then making her not interesting to anyone who was just nosy, or worried without the ability to help. Then, creating a bubble around, slowly disconnecting the atmosphere within this bubble from all that was going around, as if it were two completely separate worlds. All the sounds must have become so distant in that little personal world. And it worked. Anniel finally chose to give up on this outer world, which was not interested in her any more. She curled onto that scary hound, feared by so many, who looked now as soft as one could imagine, and finally allowed herself to leave all worries behind and go to sleep. As soon as she did, an extra layer came over one after another. Under such a protection, even if the cataclysm or war were to start around, nothing, neither sound nor breeze of wind, would reach her, nor anyone would look at her or would get into this little space, even by accident.

What Aqila was witnessing was a true masterpiece of work done by people with much higher abilities than her own, and it was evident that it was done by more than one person. But all worked in such unison. When Rainee came back, she also added a little touch of her own. When such a protection is cast, only the person within it could choose to break it. Luckily, that person was now sleeping soundly and slept undisturbed over all this ruckus with newly obtained dragons.

Aqila wasn't sure if, after all is finished, she should go and take this child away. Under any other circumstances, she would have no doubt about it, but she wasn't even sure that her house would be a safer place than the girl was in right now. Also, her guard curling around her was a scary and protective creature; there could be no doubts about it. Aqila was sure that Blake's dog would not harm her, but she wasn't sure that she would be able to cross over this protective layer, and even if she succeeded, would this guard allow her to take Anniel from him.

But someone else didn't have any doubts about it. The moment the ceremony was over, Blake walked firmly towards Anniet, ignoring all spectators, crossed the protective barrier as if it wouldn't even exist, and lifted the girl so gently that it didn't disturb her in the slightest. Then he looked around, not entirely sure where to go next. "What to think there about?" Aqila thought. The only building close by is her premises. It was difficult to say if Blake heard her thoughts or came up with the same conclusion, but he did just that. Soon, he and Anniet were inside the house, and Aqila followed them.

By the time she walked in, Blake had already put Anniet on the very same sofa that she had made a bed for her last night. The day was very busy, and no one had time to take the duvet and pillows away, so they served just for the same reason again. After covering Anniet and tucking her in, he stood there for a while watching her sleeping face.

"She will miss you," - Aqila said. No matter how hard she tried, she could not figure out what Blake was feeling about this girl. Truly, her feelings could not be a secret for him; it was all over the place and so open. Her thinking that it is same sort of secret would make one laugh, if it weren't too painful to witness. Surely he could not miss it? Or could he? People are most blind to matters that affect them directly.

"No, she will not," - he said while still looking at Anniet, - "she will miss you, as she will be coming to the Capital."

That was something new to Aqila. Why would Blake think that she would be coming to the Capital with them? Right now, she was in the best place she could be. Why would he want to take her away?

"She might not want to do what you wish." – She pointed out.

"I didn't choose it for her. It was her own choice. And I do agree, this school is the best place for her to be right now. But it is in the past, as she has chosen a different route."

"She never joined King's Army!"

"There are more ways to join King's services than just signing up for his army."

Aqila couldn't hold it any longer.

"You really like this girl?"

"What's not to like here?" – Blake asked, shrugging his shoulders and finally turning away to come sit at the table.

"You know how she feels about you?" – Aqila asked firmly while looking directly at him.

"I didn't become blind after leaving this place," - Blake answered with a smile, ignoring her harsh tone.

So he did know. But he never answered these feelings. So he must be feeling about this girl differently. Maybe it is even for the best.

"Your reputation in... these matters is not too outstanding," - Aqila said, carefully choosing her words. Not because she would be afraid of this so-called merciless general, but because he had feelings too.

"Very gently said," - Blake smiled again, - "you have been kind as always, my teacher."

This phrase clicked something in Aqila, and she said in a much sterner voice.

"Promise me right now, this instant, that you will not do anything of such sort to this girl."

Blake didn't reply to it, just kept looking at sleeping Anniet.

“What are your motives?” – Aqila continued, not happy about this silence. – “What are you going to do when you take her to the Capital?”

No answer again.

“You, young man, answer me right now. Don't think even for a minute that this cape of yours will give you any exemptions. In fact, why are you still wearing it? Take it off, as it doesn't give me a good impression.”

“I cannot.” – Blake spoke finally.

“You cannot what?”

“I cannot take it off while I am on duty. It is part of me.”

This simple statement brought Aqila back from wherever she was heading. Why is she so harsh on him? He hasn't done anything to deserve it. Of course, he cannot remove it. Everyone knew that Rainbow General's cape cannot be removed, and there were many tales and songs about how it was given to her by The One himself, and she has become the first general known to people to come in a power that way. Also, everyone knew that on the very same day, a second general was appointed by this unseen power, in the very same way, but no one ever gave a thought that his cape was the same, irremovable. It was firmly believed that Dark General liked to wear his cape to impose power over others.

“I also cannot answer your questions,” - Blake continued, for the first time bringing his eyes from Anniet to Aqila. – “They are based on fear. There is nothing I can say that would satisfy you unless it meets your fear requirements. My teacher told me once that these kinds of questions are meaningless, as to meet the fear's requirements is equal to enlarging and strengthening it. Same as to disagree or fight with it. There is no person in fear, so there is no point in talking to it.”

Aqila felt silent for a long time. He was right. In all that he just said. It was she who taught him this, and he remembered it very well. Also, it was true about her fear. It wasn't him she was afraid of, more of the place this girl will go. But at the same time, she didn't have much trust in him, just as she didn't have much knowledge in the area where she tried to pressure him. It wasn't even her place to ask him anything, never mind to command or request promises that had nothing to do with her.

"I must be getting really tired", Aqila thought, sitting down at the table too.

“But King is right,” - Blake continued while looking at her, - “when you truly desire something, it does come to life, no matter how impossible it might look. I did want to see you again all this time while I was away, and was looking for a way to do it. After seeing you, I wanted so badly to pull you out of the state you managed to get yourself into, but I just didn't know how, but I was looking for a possibility. And finally, I did want you to remember me so badly. Each and every one of these desires seemed impossible to fulfil, but came into reality. I am as happy as a person can possibly be. I never told you thanks for all you have done for me, nor am I going to do it now. Before I knew too little to understand, now I know too much to fit it in words. But still, I want to say that I am extremely happy to see you again, and you truly look beautiful. I am sorry, I have never noticed it before. Own troubles do make people blind to everything around them.”

Aqila was listening to him in disbelief. Boy she knew would never say such things. So he did grow up. But still, he was so much the same. And reminded her of someone else so badly. After his last words, it became very clear whom.

"You two really are so similar," - she said, wondering how such a connection or resemblance is even possible. - "Why are you so alike?"

"I didn't come here to teach." - Blake said, moving his eyes back to Anniet, - "So I am going to leave it for you to work it out."

"Some things never change", Aqila thought to herself, but she couldn't be angry or cross with him any more. Instead she was smiling

"You will have to come and see if I figure it out correctly", - she said

"It would be meaningless, wouldn't it?" - Blake answered. - "As I have already received all I wished for. This place doesn't provide meaningless meetings. But on the other hand, friends always meet again, and in my heart, you are a very dear friend to me."

"Boy I knew would never speak like this."

"Man I know never does it either. However, things change every day. It was nice to say it."

Aqila looked at him for a long time, and he allowed to be examined. He didn't change that much. After all these years, his appearance was more or less the same. Maybe just a tad older. His openness was the same. Why, just a few minutes ago, she thought she could not read him any more? Wasn't it because she was trying to read a non-existent person? When that happens, you truly are going to be left on your own with your imagination.

"You are never going to let this girl go, are you?" - She asked more of herself than of him.

"Never is a very long time," - Blake answered anyway, - "but I cannot disagree."

"You had so many opportunities to let her know."

"Did I? It feels to me that I didn't have a single chance."

"She never forgot you."

"She never knew who I am."

"Does it make any difference?"

"Doesn't it? How do you think she would feel now if our relationship had taken a different turn?"

This question didn't receive any answer as there was none. Aqila looked back at sleeping Anniet. The humongous in size Deamon was lying next to her bed. He has definitely grown in size a lot since she last saw him. And she didn't mean that small midget pup Blake was carrying while under the spell.

Without saying a word, Aqila stood up, walked to the kitchen, and made two cups of hot drink, thinking to herself what a rotten situation Blake managed to put himself into. It was difficult to say whether it was even his own fault, as really, he hadn't done anything to put himself into it. However, he hasn't done anything to prevent it from happening either. He was carrying this strange reputation for decades and never tried to remedy or change it. Now it backfired on him badly.

"So, what are you going to do now?" - Aqila asked, bringing drinks, one for Blake, one for herself.

"A question with many answers," - Blake smiled at her, picking up the cup offered. - "I think I will just take it as it comes. In every aspect. I cannot spend my life trying to prove to people that I am not what they think I am, nor apologise for who I am."

"Not even for her?"

"Especially for her."

"It will be hard, and it might take a long time until she gets over this fear, no matter if it is deserved or not."

"I am not in a rush. She can take as much time as she needs. But what about you? You have handled this situation splendidly. But what next?"

"Me? Never thought about it. What about me?" – Aqila didn't understand the origin of this question.
- "What about me?"

"What are your plans for the future?"

Aqila was looking at him, puzzled. She tried to turn this question from different sides, but it didn't click anywhere and made no sense, no matter where or how she would place it.

"I am afraid I still didn't understand the question," - she said in defeat.

"It is a simple question, isn't it?" – Blake smiled. – "Didn't you ever ask it of anyone?"

"Yes, but..." - she stopped herself. She didn't want to be reminded again about her own teachings.

"Yes" and "but" never go together without hidden corners. If "yes" and "but" are placed next to each other, it is a straight indicator that there are some unknown or unwanted factors. Unknown at least to someone in a conversation, and this someone wasn't Blake this time.

"What do you expect me to do? Come out and join your ranks?"

"Oh, but please don't. It cannot get more boring despite all the excitement going around. You would get so suffocated."

"I cannot imagine myself anywhere else than I am right now."

"But still, a place is not a person, and when a place slows down, a person doesn't have to do so. If a place dies, a person doesn't die with it. Even if you think that this world cannot offer you anything any more, there is no reason to slow down and cripple yourself before crossing over. When dying from old age, it is not an old age you are dying from, but a lack of life and disconnection from yourself. After crossing like this, it would be hard to shake it off. Wouldn't it be better to do it full of life and knowing who you are? But that is, if this life truly has already offered you all that you might need, what is rarely the case."

"I never thought that way," - Aqila admitted, - "I have never heard anyone speak this way, nor have I had any education about it."

"I believe you are in the very best place possible to get any education you seek," - Blake smiled at her.

"Would you stay and educate?" – Aqila suggested thinking to herself that by now, he knows so much that the seats between them have swapped long ago. "I didn't enter here as a teacher," - Blake said with laughing eyes, - "and if you are looking for services, then better seek a teller's advice as just an education might prove to be insufficient."

"You came here neither one nor another just because of the choice you made," - Aqila pointed out to him, remembering that none of the entrances refused him.

"Aren't choices what determine the direction we move towards?"

Aqila couldn't argue with that.

"I will be going very shortly, as the time of departure is getting close, and she will need to get herself ready." – Blake said standing up. - "Also, she might want to say goodbyes. Not being able to do so haunted me through the years."

So that was him who was waking her up. Aqila was wondering why Anniet was coming out of a deep sleep for no apparent reason.

"Don't you want to stay and help her to get ready?" – Aqila asked.

"What I want is irrelevant," - Blake smiled at her again, - "it was true pleasure seeing you and talking to you again. You can never doubt that your kindness and efforts are never forgotten or undervalued. Take better care of yourself than you have been doing up until now."

He looked once more at her with these cheeky black eyes full of an open grin and turned towards the door. When he was walking, this majestic, deep, rich black surrounding him was truly emanating confidence and power, unwillingly imposing his superiority over everyone around. No wonder he got such a reputation. One would need to know him well before seeing his true self beyond this aura. What is she even thinking... It probably is his current true self. Then, how to see a person behind it, she would not know and wouldn't be able to advise.

Blake was already closing the door behind him when a silent voice sounded from the other side of the room.

"Please don't go."

Aqila turned around to find out that Anniet was sitting in a bed, but her eyes were not looking at her; instead, they were locked on a nearly closed door.

The door slowly opened again, and Blake stood for some time in a doorway as if allowing Anniet either to change her mind or get accustomed to him standing there. As there was no unwelcome response, he walked back into the room.

Aqila was watching them with extreme interest. Blake stood there very impressive, not imposing but also not trying to hide or shrink. He did keep to his word and didn't try to pretend to be someone else. Anyone, seeing him like this for the first time, would probably turn around and leave or walk around in a large circle. Those who could see him only with their eyes could easily find him intimidating. And he didn't try to shake it. On the contrary, his pose was saying that if this is all you want to see in me, then it is yours. His aura was so large that even for Aqila, it was challenging to grasp. But still, the colour emanating from him might be black, but there was no darkness in it. He was not smiling while looking at Anniet, but there was also no cold expression he was radiating while standing on stage next to King.

Annet, on the other hand, looked so small against him. But, against all odds, also very even. She was sitting on a bed with her legs bent under and was looking directly at his face. There was no terror, that she was radiating yesterday, left in her any more. Her heart was so open right now that it was difficult to bear. Not because it would be a bad thing. No, this state was such a rare quality in people and so difficult to obtain. That's why it was giving goosebumps. Anything that will be offered will be taken straight into the soul without any resistance. There was a tale told among people brought from an old world about a beauty and a beast that flashed into Aqila's mind. And she thought to herself how very inappropriate it is for the situation. One thing, the "Beast" here was extremely handsome. And second, for anyone who could use more than just physical eyes, it would be obvious that openness in this so-called "beast" is equal to, or even bigger than that on the other side. Anything that will be offered will go straight into the soul. Just on this part, experience,

knowledge, and self-awareness would prevent it from being closed, if what is received would bring only dirt and pain. When the girl didn't have such a luxury. That's why her vulnerability was much more evident.

They looked like this at each other for a couple of minutes and then it was interrupted by a third party. Deamon, who was patiently waiting behind Blake, couldn't hold any longer. He squeezed past Blake, even pushing him away, and with his head down and tail wagging in apology for such impatience, skulked quietly towards Anniet, pressing his head to the bed, as if trying to hide out of sight and stay unnoticeable, just at this side of the room. It looked so funny to see this hound, who never got scared of anything, behaving like this, and this move broke the tension, as one could do nothing else but laugh at it.

"I am sorry if I offended you yesterday," - Anniet broke the silence, lifting Deamon's head and kissing it softly before stroking him. - "I don't know what has taken over me. I wasn't thinking clearly."

"You shouldn't be apologising for things that you did not do", - Blake said, smiling at her and shaking his head at the sight of Deamon, who was now completely satisfied and content with his eyes closed and his head resting on Anniet's shoulder.

"You and Rainee keep telling it to me, but I never understand why, because when I do something, it is done, and there is no one else around. I just didn't expect you to be... who you are. I still don't know how to understand it, but I hope nothing will change and you can still be my friend."

"Things will change." - Blake said in a soft voice, - "But I will always be your friend."

"That's good to know," - Anniet said with a smile while closing her eyes and nuzzling Deamon's soft coat. She finally looked as contented as Deamon was. - "You know I will be going to the Capital with King," - she added, looking back to Blake.

"I know," - Blake confirmed.

"Will I be seeing you there sometimes?"

"Yes."

"Is that why you have come? To take me there?"

Smile on Blake's face grew bigger.

"If you allo..." - Suddenly, he stopped in the middle of a sentence, the smile on his face disappeared, and he turned his head as if listening to something. Deamon also jerked his head up and got all tensed. - "I won't be able to take you, as I have to leave now. But I will see you there." - Blake said and vanished with a gust of wind.

Deamon stiffened in Anniet's hands, and Anniet let him go. He ran a few steps, then returned and looked completely lost, as if not knowing where to go and what to do, like being torn between two places.

"Go," - Anniet said, pushing him gently towards the door.

At first, Deamon tried to resist, but then, as if pulled by some unseen power, dashed forward and disappeared, leaving the room. He didn't leave through the door, he ran directly through the wall as if it weren't even there.

CHAPTER

11

New place, new start

Anniel was still looking at the wall where Deamon had just disappeared. She knew that she should be considering it abnormal, but somehow, now everything seemed acceptable, just something she didn't know that was possible before. She wondered where Anthony had to go; he was so worried! Something came up unexpectedly to startle him so much. He looked very nice in his uniform. A bit scary, but nice. Not scary scary as she thought about him yesterday, but scary because she didn't know anything about this part of him.

So Rainee has left with that scary dragon, and now Anthony has left unexpectedly too. The inauguration ceremony must be over now. Oh, right, she fell asleep in the middle of it. Was it Anthony who carried her back? She giggled quietly to herself, imagining how she must have been dangling in his arms, similar to Marcus when he was carried.

Anniel looked around the room to find out that the headmaster was sitting at the table and watching her. There were two cups on a table, so they must have been sitting here with Anthony for some time.

"How long did I sleep?" – She asked aloud.

"Not nearly enough," - Headmaster said

"I hope it didn't offend anyone. I just felt tired for no apparent reason."

"I am sure it didn't. In this show, you were just a spectator, so entitled to do whatever suits you best: watch, leave or sleep."

Headmaster was talking in such a soft but convincing voice, and what she said made lots of sense, so Anniel didn't see any reason to doubt.

"He left in such a hurry," - she said, - "do you think something bad happened? Do they always leave like this?"

"Something unexpected must have happened, but it does not necessarily have to be bad. And no, it was the first time for me to see them leaving like this. But you should know him better. I knew him as a boy, you know him as a man."

"Do I?" – Anniel wondered at such a statement.

"Wasn't it you who spent so much time with him in the past year? I would give a lot to be able to do so. He is such an interesting person now. Always was, but at the time when he came here as a student, it was mainly a potential of what he could become, just like any other child."

It was so interesting to hear a little bit about Anthony's past that Anniel was listening to every word said.

"I don't know him as a general," - she said, thinking that she still didn't know how to connect that majestic officer with Anthony's face, to her friend who was always so simple. But was he really? If he was so simple, why did he always look so different from anyone else?

“You didn't join King's Army,” - the headmaster said, - “you are not his subordinate and he is not your commanding officer. Why would you know him as a general? It wouldn't make sense.”

“I don't know how to behave with him now... And I don't know who he is, as the man I met doesn't match him as a general.”

“Well, that doesn't make sense either. He is just one person, and a general is just a position he occupies.”

“Like Rainee?”

“Like Rainee.”

“But she is always the same, no matter whether with a general uniform or not.”

“You see it this way only because you allowed yourself to see it this way. If you still think that she is someone unreachable, that's how it would feel to you. To find something out, you have to give it a try. Did you try to behave with Blake the same as before after finding out that he is a general?”

Anniel shook her head.

“Then you will not know. He might be or he might not be the same. Now you are just thinking for him, what he would do based on your knowledge, and because what you think about your friend doesn't match what you think about general Blake, they don't connect.”

“What if he doesn't like it?” – Anniel asked in a quiet voice. – “Me being with him so familiar now, when he regained his status?”

Thinking back about how they would spend time together and talk casually about anything. How it could be done in the same manner with the person he had been disclosed to be, she didn't know

“That you will have to find out by yourself. And you will be able to do so only if you give it a try.”

“So, what should I do now?”

“Now? I think we will go and pack your things. Time for departure is coming close, and knowing you, I don't think you would like others waiting for you.”

This reply wasn't about what Anniel had in mind when asking this question, but it was good that the headmaster reminded her about time. Anniel was already on her feet. No, she definitely wouldn't like to keep anyone waiting.

Anniel didn't have many things, but that little she had was scattered between her own place and Rainee's house, so she had to go to both places to collect everything. Luckily, they didn't have to walk back. The door from Rainee's house led them straight back to the headmaster's office. So she wasn't joking, after all, when saying that as a headmaster, she has access to every place. Truth to be told, Anniel never even thought that she was joking or bluffing.

By the time they came back, a couple of flying machines had already taken off, and people were boarding the rest. Anniel was told that she could simply walk through the gates to reach the Capital, but she chose not to. First, she really wanted to fly on this mysterious flying device, and second, she didn't want to be on her own when reaching the Capital, as she would not know where to go.

So she grabbed her bag and dashed through the square towards the closest machine. Then she dropped everything on the ground and ran back. Through all this rush, she never even managed to say either thanks or goodbyes to the headmaster!

The headmaster laughed wholeheartedly, seeing her running back, and shared a hug with Anniel, listening attentively to all her apologies and thanks. But it was so apparent that she already knew all

that Anniet wanted to tell her! She probably had said goodbye so many times before... So eventually she just lifted Anniet's head and kissed her on the forehead, then hugged her once more and told her to hurry and catch up with the others.

It was done just in time. After picking up her things and reaching the flying machine, Anniet was one of the last people to board. Inside the flying machine, it wasn't as exciting as she expected. It was just a large, triangular room with many chairs jammed with people, that's all. When the machine took off into the air, it got much better, as the bottom of it was see-through, and once it started to lift, it felt more like the ground falling down. Soon they were so high up that Anniet's head began to spin at such a height. Through that little gap under her feet, Anniet was able to see the town and fields and mountains around it.

The flying machine did a circle over the town, and it was a little bit heartbreaking to see all that had become so dear getting further and further away and then disappearing out of sight.

It was so strange to be taken away from all she knew to some mysterious place that she had never seen before. At least she wasn't on her own now, so it wasn't so scary as leaving her home for the first time.

She took her eyes from the see-through floor and looked around just to find out that most of her companions were looking either down to the ground or at her... That was a little bit unexpected and uncomfortable. Why were they looking at her? Oh, probably because after all this running, she looked like a proper mess. After all, she slept on the ground for some time, then jumped out of bed and, without a single look in a mirror, ran around until she got here...

Anniet quickly brushed her hair with her fingers, smiling guiltily for such an appearance, and lowered her eyes back to the floor. These machines were going so fast! Or maybe it felt like this because they were getting lower again. These surroundings were very different to those at School. There was just one town with lots of nature. Now, below were many houses with wide streets and lots of people on these streets looking up at them. The flying machine was getting lower and lower until it was nearly touching the roofs. And then it landed.

That was it. Didn't take very long, hardly fifteen minutes, if even that. Doors soon opened, and everyone got out. Anniet could see that most people were as worried and nervous as she was. Submerged in their own worries or excitement, they forgot about Anniet, and she could finally breathe in relief. She found it really, really difficult to cope with so many eyes on her.

Luckily, upon arrival, they were not left to their own devices. Many people were greeting them. Anniet was welcomed by a nice-looking middle-aged gentleman and found herself taken to a different direction than everyone else. That scared her a great deal, and it didn't go unnoticed by her guide.

"Don't be startled," - he said with a smile, - "It cannot be any other way, as everyone else has come here to join the King's Army. Your assignment is not known so far, so I will just show you to the place that will be your home, and you can go and meet your friends later."

That comforted Anniet. That's right, how could she forget? Everyone else had to go through the inauguration to come here, and only she skipped this step. She would rather have stayed with everyone else, as it would be highly unlikely that she would dare to go and disturb others while living in a different place. All the true friends she had weren't there anyway. Rainee flew away with her dragon, Anthony disappeared into thin air, and Marcus walked off, angry as death itself, never to be seen again. Everyone else was always friendly with her, but she didn't feel around them the same

way. Well, maybe she will have to be braver and try to understand other people more, as from now on none of her best friends will be at her side... She was about to thank this man when a familiar voice sounded from not too far away.

“Thank you Gilbert. But I will take it from here.”

Anniel nearly broke her neck by twisting it so hard towards that voice. It was Rainee! Walking towards them, still dressed in that white uniform she was putting on this morning with her jacket buttons undone. Well, it should be said that just half of the uniform was put on, as she managed to put on only trousers, shirt and jacket, and left behind all other pieces due to lack of time. So she was neither eaten, burned, nor crushed by that black beast!

Just now Anniel realised how worried she was about it. She wanted badly to run and hug Rainee, but she didn't know if it was appropriate to do so here, in this strange place, where she was utterly oblivious of the customs. She was torn apart for a few seconds, but then common sense lost the battle. She dropped her bag and ran to meet her friend, giving her a huge hug.

Rainee didn't object to it. She held her back and pressed her cheek to Anniel's head for a few seconds, then took her by shoulders and led her back to the man she had just called Gilbert.

“Lady Ren,” - he said bowing to her with his eyes full of sparkle and the smile on his face. – “So it is true. You did come back. It is so nice to see you again.”

“Likewise, likewise,” - Rainee answered him, - “but tell me where are you taking my little friend?”

“King requested a nice place for her to stay, so we are heading to the Green Pavilion.” – Said Gilbert, looking like a person who finally understood the meaning of the King's request.

“Very thoughtful of you,” - Rainee praised, - “but she would be feeling a bit lonely in that big and empty space. I know a much better place, so you could leave this task to me.”

“Could you enlighten me about your choice?” – Gilbert asked. He didn't look upset about Rainee disapproving of his choice, and it put Anniel at ease because she didn't want to bring any troubles and disagreements on her very first day.

“Yes. There is an empty apartment next to mine, so she can use it.”

This choice brought surprise and confusion to Gilbert's face, and he looked like someone who wanted to say something but didn't dare. Seeing that Rainee is taking this silence as the end of the conversation and is about to leave, he said:

“But what if the owner of this apartment wants to use it?”

“Then we will take it from there. But you know yourself that he has refused it a long time ago.”

“But wouldn't the history just repeat itself?” – Gilbert was still insisting. – “What if there are objections to her staying in this apartment?”

“I was under the impression that you are in charge of accommodating people in the Royal Palace? I would ask if things have changed, but there is no point in asking, as I know they didn't. Do you have any objections? If so, I am glad to listen.”

“No, I don't have any objections,” - Gilbert admitted in defeat. – “You are right, I am in charge... Just things aren't the same here after you have left.”

“Let me reassure you that things were just the same when I was here, now and will be if I have to leave again. It is not me setting the order for this place. I can only remind about it.”

With that, Rainee took a bag from Anniet, who tried to oppose it with all her might to no success, and showed her to follow.

“So, how did you like the inauguration ceremony?” – Rainee asked.

“It was fascinating,” - Anniet said while looking around all these majestic surroundings they were walking through. Somehow, with Rainee at her side, all her worries were gone, and she could really appreciate the beauty of the Royal residence. They didn't even reach a palace yet, but there was a lot to look at, as this place was like a separate town within a city with its own side buildings, yards, passages, gardens and squares. – “Unfortunately, I fell asleep before it ended, so I didn't see it all, but still, it was interesting. What about you? How did it go? Did you get your dragon back?”

“I did,” - Rainee said, looking at her with a smile.

Anniet could feel the happiness spreading around from Rainee. How strange, she thought, smiling involuntarily from this warm affection Rainee was feeling about her dragon; people truly could love most hideous things. She was wondering if Rainee sees her dragon in the same way as everyone else. Maybe there is some kind of spell or something else she is not familiar with, to love this beast so much. She was sure that everyone else in the auditorium was feeling the same way as she, as everyone was screaming and shouting in fear when Rainee's dragon was released.

Rainee was walking next to her without saying anything, just smiling to herself.

“Your dragon is very scary,” - Anniet said aloud, not able to hold it back.

“Only because you saw her at her worst,” - Rainee answered. – “She was lost and confused, and it built a lot of anger in her.”

“Why did it happen?”

“Dragons are not meant to live on their own without a connection to humans.”

“But how can this connection be lost? I didn't think it was possible.”

“Me neither”, - Rainee said. – “I don't think it was lost completely, as I believe she would have died. But the connection between me and her was always wide and open like a large river. When it suddenly shrank down to just a little droplet, it must have felt like nothing to her, like it was gone completely.”

“But what happened?”

“One day I will tell you, but not now.”

“Is it a secret?”

“There are no such things as secrets. It is complicated, and with only words, it will bring a lot of confusion to you, that will make you see things differently than they truly are.”

“Was she that scary beast that tried to burn down Capital?” – Anniet asked after a while.

“I cannot be sure about it, as I wasn't present, but I believe that it was her”. – Rainee confirmed her guess.

“Why is her name Silver?”

“Because when the sun shines on her scales, it emits a silverfish light”, - Rainee said with a fond smile on her face.

Anniet tried to imagine it on the beast she saw. She tried to see that black, fire-spitting creature being nice and friendly and radiating rays of silver after itself, but couldn't do it, no matter how hard she tried.

Eventually, Rainee laughed, interrupting her thoughts.

"What do you think about me?" – She asked.

"Sorry?" – Anniet didn't understand the question.

"If someone were to ask about me, how would you describe me in just a very few words?"

"Beautiful, kind and loving." – Anniet said immediately. – "And many other things, but you asked just a few," - she added.

"Now imagine that this someone would have seen me just for several seconds this morning while I was angry with King. Would they agree with your statement?"

Anniet didn't reply, as at first she didn't want to remember Rainee at this moment, second, no, if someone had seen her just at that time, they would never think about her in the same way.

"Wouldn't they be frightened?" – Rainee wouldn't let go.

"They would," - Anniet had to agree.

"Were you frightened?"

Anniet shook her head.

"Why not? It must have been very scary to witness it. I nearly chopped King's head off, and if not for the magic of the place, the building would have collapsed, and without outer force interference, everyone who was in the building would be crushed by falling walls."

"But it didn't happen."

"No, but not because I did something to prevent it. Wouldn't it make me a scary-looking beast for anyone who doesn't know me apart from that very moment?"

Anniet could do nothing but agree with it.

"But here you are walking next to me, not just without any fear, but not even blaming me for what had happened. Why were you not scared? Instead of running away, you came in and hugged me."

"Because you were not scary, you were just in a lot of pain. I just wanted to help you."

"Then how can I feel differently about my girl? She might look scary and dangerous to you, because you have never met her before. For me, she was just in a lot of pain, and I wanted to help her. Also, I missed her so much because I hadn't seen her for a long time."

"So, usually she is not like this?"

"No," - Rainee smiled again.

"Then how is she?"

"In a way, dragons are similar to the person they were born from."

"Then she must be very beautiful if she is born of you."

"Now you are starting to get her true picture." – Rainee said, opening the doors and letting them into the palace.

With all this talk, Anniet completely lost touch with her surroundings and only now realised that they had approached the palace. Not from a front, but from its side, and Rainee let them in through

relatively smallish side doors. Small wasn't the correct name, but in comparison to the front doors she saw earlier, it was relatively small. It led to a large beautiful hall rich in decorations with wide stairs on the other end. They walked up these stairs to reach a wide luxury corridor with brown and golden decorations, with a lavish carpet in the middle and endless lights illuminating it from the sides.

Anniel was looking around, thinking that just in this corridor would fit more than one of the houses she used to live in. Further down, the corridor was taking a turn, and it was not possible to see what was behind it. At this end, there was only one door, and Rainee walked straight to it.

Anniel was looking around with awe.

"Who lives here?" – She asked.

"You are going to live here," - Rainee said, opening that door and letting her in.

They walked into a very spacious room with large windows, superbly decorated, but still nothing close to the luxurious hall and corridor they had just walked through. There was a very large and comfy-looking corner sofa that could easily fit ten or more people, a few armchairs, a large dining table, an area dedicated to the kitchen, another area with bookshelves and a large desk and a door to another room.

"This place is smaller and less extravagant than the one Gilbert has dedicated to you. Still, I think it will suit you much better, as I believe you would be feeling very uncomfortable anywhere more luxurious than this. Also, this place is much closer to all you might need, while it is quiet and no one will come to disturb you, unless you ask."

Anniel was looking around this room, a few times larger than the one she had at School.

"Is everyone here living in such premises?" – She asked, thinking that just accommodating newly arrived people would take an extensive area.

"No," - Rainee smiled at her, - "No, most of the people are living in smaller places unless they specifically want something larger."

"Then why was I given something even bigger than this one?"

"Because Gilbert wasn't sure what to offer you. King asked to give you a nice accommodation, and he knew nothing about you, so under such a request, he decided it was better to overdo than underdo."

"I see," - Anniel said, thinking that King must be really thoughtful. – "Gilbert said that this accommodation belongs to someone?"

"Yes and no," - Rainee said. – "It was given to Blake, but don't worry, he never lived here. He doesn't like this place."

"Oh..." - that was all Anniel could say. So this was General Blake's place. Or Anthony's. She looked around with new eyes. "What's not to like here? Was it too small for him?" – "Why doesn't he like this place?" – She asked aloud.

"He found it suffocating," - Rainee said, and Anniel thought that "yup, too small" to herself, - "this part of the palace is built slightly different from the rest," - Rainee continued, - "you cannot hear or see much what's going on outside while you are here, so he felt too isolated."

"Oh, I see. So that was the reason," - memory of a stormy day came into Anniel's mind when inside Anthony's cottage, there could not be heard either wind or rain. Is that what isolated means? Then

Anthony didn't mind being isolated in his cottage. But she chose not to follow that thought. – “So where does he live now?”

“When in Capital, he lives above the gates to the city. It used to be a resting room for grooms as it is close to the stables, but Blake chased them away, saying that they could come and rest in here. They did try a few times, but didn't feel good enough, as it would bring them tension just to be here, so nobody was able to rest. Also, there came a lot of opposition from ministers claiming that these quarters shouldn't be used for such a purpose, so eventually Blake was just given a second place that he is using until now, and this place was left empty.”

“I see,” - Anniet said again, - “shame as it is a lovely place. You said you live somewhere close?”

“Come, I will show you,” - Rainee said

They came out back to the corridor and walked further. After turning the corner, the view didn't change a lot, and there was another door. The corridor itself stretched further with an additional passage to the left.

“If you turn to the left, then you could reach a main palace. If you go further down the corridor, you will reach Ruffus' apartment and then Angus' at the end. I myself live here,” - Rainee said, opening the door and letting Anniet in.

“Who is Ruffus?” – Anniet asked

“You know him under the name of general Ragnar.”

To her surprise, Anniet walked into a very similar furnished room. It did have more touch to it as it felt like someone was living here, but just that. Size and planning were very similar to the accommodation she was shown as her own.

“I will not invite you right now,” - Rainee said, -“you are tired, so let's go back to your new home, where you can make yourself comfortable and have a good rest. Don't be afraid to walk around or check anything. Anywhere you can walk in, you are allowed to be; anywhere you are not allowed to be, you will not be able to come in. You have to remember only this rule to know where you can go and where you cannot.”

With that, she led Anniet back to her apartment before leaving.

Annet stood in the middle of the room, looking around. While boarding the flying machine and on her way here, once again, she was prepared to take the hardship of a new life. She was ready to work hard to earn her place. Once again, things turned out completely different, and no hardship was requested. She got the nicest place she could think of, in fact, the dream place. Her closest neighbour was Rainee. The man who greeted her was very nice too. No one requested anything from her, and she was free to go and do whatever she wanted.

Then why this time the feeling she had is different?

Because now it wasn't about a place any more. It was about people.

Just now she realised that secretly she was hoping to submerge herself into the work, being commanded over and fulfilling duties that she would be expected to fulfil, so she wouldn't have to think that much, to feel that much. She was hoping to get somehow distanced from the person she had become in the past year, so she could keep that time safely in her heart and treasure it as the best time of her life while doing something that would require physical effort but wouldn't take much of her inner self.

This wish was not granted. Why should it be? She wanted to start from the empty page and open a previous one only on rare occasions when she would see her friends again. But Rainee has already told her that no adult human is an empty page and all new can be built only by either improving what is already there, using it for one's own advantage or dismantling and letting it go. When put that way, the choice was clear and there was no room for doubt. She is not dismantling and letting go of anything that happened to her so far. Or at least what happened in the past year.

With that, things got slightly brighter. Maybe not about the future but about herself.

She thinks she doesn't know what to do? Well, she was just told what to do: customise with the place and make herself comfortable. And have some rest. Why does everyone keep telling her to get rest? Is she really that fragile that she needs more rest than anyone else? "I must be..." Anniet thought, leaving a spot in the middle of the room where she had been rooted for the past several minutes.

She walked to the door, on the other side of the room, and opened it. It led to another spacious light room with an enormously large bed. Never before had Anniet seen a bed of such a large size. Do the generals need so much space to sleep? They must do. She touched the bed just to find out that the cover was very smooth and the mattress was super soft. To sleep in it probably feels like sleeping on a cloud covered with another cloud. But somehow she didn't want to try it. There were also a few armchairs and a couple of lounging chairs by the window. Nicely carved drawers and wardrobes matched the décor of the room and added a very friendly touch. She opened one wardrobe, wondering how much space was in there, then another and nearly stepped back, feeling her heart being squeezed by some unknown feeling. This wardrobe wasn't empty. It had a few black jackets and black trousers hanging in it, and also a row of silky shirts. Mainly black, some plain, some embroidered, some with pressed patterns. There were also a few white shirts as a contrast to all this black clothing. All new, all untouched and never worn, as if completely ignored by the owner. Someone had shown proper care to provide the true owner of this place with things he might need, but this gift-giver was brutally ignored.

Annet ran her hand over the row of shirts, thinking to herself that they are the most beautiful she has seen. Some were decorated with golden tiny threads, most of them with black, so delicate that they didn't even look like embroidery. There must have been hours of work from proper craftsmen put into it. Shame, she thought, closing the wardrobe, Anthony would look outstanding wearing them.

This discovery made her feel somehow more at ease, and this place didn't look any more like a museum or a gallery but more like a home. May it be that these clothes have never been touched, but still, the intention of the place was to make someone feel comfortable and at home.

She had a peek through one more door she found in the bedroom, just to find a nice-sized bathroom with a shower and a bath.

Annet got back to the living room, brought her bag to the bedroom and unpacked her things. She did feel now much more comfortable in this place than at the beginning. "One part of the assignment is done!" – She thought happily to herself. Two left: to rest and to look around. She looked through the window, and it was already late evening and getting dark, all she could see was just many lights. Maybe looking around will have to wait. So let's do resting. She wasn't feeling tired, but hey, what does she know... Every time she thinks this way, it turns out that she falls asleep as soon as she touches the bed. So she got in a shower and then climbed into bed. Yep, just as she

thought, the bed was so soft that it didn't even feel like lying on anything. So she closed her eyes and went to sleep.

At least she thought she would go to sleep. But sleep didn't happen. She tried over and over again with no success. After half an hour or so, she finally gave up on this exercise and got dressed again. OK, second part of the assignment failed, well, at least she tried. So then, investigating is left.

Annet bravely looked all over the apartment but didn't find anything catching her attention, so she walked to the front door and opened it. After walking out, she didn't feel that brave any more. This corridor was really so luxurious! Same as a hall downstairs. Luckily, her apartment wasn't like this. Rainee was right, she would feel very uncomfortable in such surroundings.

She walked down the stairs and, after marvelling around for a bit, peeked her nose outside. The evening was dark, and Annet didn't dare to venture out in case she wouldn't be able to find her way back. So she crossed this large hall again and came up the stairs. She walked down the corridor, passing her own room, passing by Rainee's room and came to the crossing. Rainee said that if she turns left, she will reach the main palace. Does she want to go there? No, not really. She doesn't know anyone and wouldn't know how to explain herself walking around a place she wasn't invited to.

The carpet under her feet was so soft! No one would ever hear anyone walking on it. She felt an extreme urge to lie down on it as it must be very, very soft. Annet restrained herself from doing so. Rainee said that two princes were living just further down the corridor. There is no way she would allow herself to lie around. What if one of them would be coming home and stumbled over her... And she definitely isn't going to investigate that side of the corridor, as she didn't want to be caught sneaking around somebody else's living premises, never mind their personalities.

So her little adventure was kind of over. Didn't even really start... Then what should she do? Annet found herself standing by Rainee's door. Would Rainee mind her coming in? Rainee, she knew, wouldn't mind. And as there was only one Rainee, the rules might be the same here, too. Headmaster's voice echoed in her head, saying that if she wants to find out, she has to try. With that, she knocked on the door. No one answered. She probably is not at home. After a bit of contemplation, Annet pushed the door, and it opened easily.

As expected, there was no one inside. Annet still walked in. She looked around. Her eyes were drawn to the paintings on the wall, and she was wondering if Rainee had drawn them. One captivated her attention more than others. It was a painting of the silver glitter dragon scales and a small child's hand touching or stroking it. Just by looking at the painting, Annet had a feeling of these scales captivating and calling her. When the word "dragon scales" is used, it automatically brings an image of the strong, hard scales. But this wasn't the case. It felt more like blades of grass dancing in the wind. And to this child's hand, it felt so soft. Annet didn't know how she knew it, but she simply did. While still looking at the painting, Annet sat down on a sofa, deep in her thoughts.

CHAPTER

12

Spilled secret

Rainee was sitting in her room on a windowsill. From above, she was looking at the night scenery of the royal town. Double feelings were taking over her in turns – at moments she would love this city to its smallest corners, at moments she would like to leave it and never return.

She was resting her back on the cushions, and the heavy curtains were fully concealing her. She felt nice and cosy in this little space, on one side, a thin glass was separating her from the outer world, and on the other, a heavy curtain was shielding her from her own room, her own life, her own duties.

Duties – that's a heavy word; she never felt like doing any duties. Not until now. It is not a duty to live life and to do things you want to do and be happy... But now she was feeling as if she didn't really belong anywhere any more. No, actually, she knows very well – she belonged with Angus, but he left. Left in confusion and distress, and he was still in more or less the same condition. Even though she didn't know where he was at that moment, she simply knew how he felt, the same way you understand how your hand is, even when you can't see it. She didn't really feel sad that he left; it must be good that he finally will have time for himself, free from anyone's influence, as it should have been many years ago. But at what price... How can he make a journey to find himself when, instead of clearing things up, all what he heard just muddled the waters, putting more dirt in it when his life already was like a swamp full of lies, demands, requests, and restrictions. How did he even manage to grow up to the person he was under such conditions, she didn't know. She always thought that his and Ruffus' lives were unfair and complicated, but little could be done about it. Alas, she still cannot do anything now either, and it has just become more complicated.

Someone knocked on the door. It was a bit unusual. Since she was promoted to a general, no one had knocked on her door. People living in a palace always used to avoid her for one reason or another, and after her promotion, no one would come to disturb her when she was in her room. She didn't need staff; if there were an emergency, she would be called directly by King, and only people who had entered her room for the decades were only Angus, Ruffus, and Blake. But they never knocked. To think about it from today's perspective, one could say it was a lonely life... Such a thought never occurred to her before. Why would it? She had her friends, she had her place, she had her life. But now was not before. Now she knew what loneliness was. It didn't even depend on whether you were on your own or among other people. After that day, when The One granted her wish and allowed her to peek behind the King's impenetrable fortress, she never got back to her normal self. Until that day, she was completely confident that she could read all feelings and know people very well, and then such a blow – she didn't know anything even about the closest people to her, never mind others; she knew little about herself, too.

Rainee completely ignored the knock and didn't pay any mind to it. But soon she was dragged out of her thoughts again because the door opened and someone walked inside. In any other place, she would know who was behind the door before the person came in or even before they approached, but this part of King's palace had a bit different privacy rules, and some enchantment was separating

rooms, preventing those who were inside from knowing what was happening outside and those who were outside would not know what is going on inside. Only very basic physical senses would make their way through that enchantment, but it provided so little information that it was equal to nothing.

As soon as the doors opened, she knew that it was Anniet who had come. Of course it was her, she wasn't accustomed to this place, and she was a bit lost all by herself. She knew only her and Blake, so she came to see her. It is just that Rainee didn't want to see anyone at this moment, so she stayed unmoving behind a curtain and drifted back to her thoughts. Anniet stayed. She walked around the room looking at the paintings and decorations placed around and then sat herself down on the sofa. Rainee didn't mind – it even somehow gave her comfort that Anniet was here, she just didn't want to talk to anyone, that's all, but she actually appreciated company at this time.

Not long after, she heard the doors of her apartment opening and closing again. Rainee wasn't surprised this time. Blake had (has) come. He walked in firm steps without hesitation. He knew exactly that Rainee was in this room and where she was. Rainee was expecting him to come – she didn't know how he did it, but every time she needed something, he would register it at the exact moment and would offer his help – truly remarkable. She just felt a desire to have company, as it made her feel comfortable, and here he was offering it.

After he walked in, Anniet stood up, alerted. She felt uncomfortable being found on her own in Rainee's room uninvited and started to explain herself, but Blake lifted his hand to silence her and simply said.

“You have done nothing wrong.”

It was interesting to observe the relationship between these two – she knew what feelings Anniet carried towards Blake. What Rainee didn't know was whether these feelings would be answered by Blake yet.

After Blake entered King's Army, assigning himself as her bodyguard, she wasn't able to fully see through him. He was very open, but at the same time, there were corners in his heart that he was not willing to share and wanted to keep for himself, and she respected it. These corners would make him act against any understanding.

But now Rainee was pretty curious. It was interesting how he would handle this situation that he was put into. She didn't think he deserved it, but nevertheless, there was some input of his own in it, too, as he never tried to remedy this fear spreading around his name and his person. It has somehow become his signature without him even signing anything, and now it has backfired. A general he was and a person he was didn't match, but he was both, and for any relation to work, both have to be accepted; otherwise, any relation is doomed from the very beginning. It was obvious that Blake knew it. How well he will master it, that's a different story. Anniet was already in love with a person; can she love the general too? If she cannot, then she won't be able to see the person behind the general she fears. Surprisingly, terror was already over. That was a very promising start.

He answered Anniet in a short, simple reply, but if there were anyone else, he wouldn't have bothered to answer at all. Well, who knows how all will develop and at what speed. She let them be to their own devices and continue watching through the window. They spent some time in quiet, then Anniet broke the silence:

“Anthony, can I ask you something?”

“My name is Blake,” - was a short reply.

"I know now, but can I still call you Anthony, as this is a name I met you..."

"No," - came a short and simple answer.

Rainee smiled to herself upon hearing it - firm and straight forward as usual, some things never change.

When at School, Blake wasn't like this. All that Anniet shared about him finally was free to surface and stay and Rainee could remember it clearly. By nature, Blake was very talkative, and he didn't hide this side of himself from Anniet. He would also tell stories to her and the children at the campfire nearly every night. Somehow, this spell set him free to some degree. Nobody was expecting anything from him, nor did anyone put any pressure, so he could just be whatever he wanted, and it was acceptable; no one cared, as no one remembered. Now, when back in old shoes, he still can do whatever he wants, but it is not accepted by others, or rather to say his actions are misinterpreted and judged all the time. For Anniet to see his true side again, which was shown so openly until now, she will first have to go over her fear of him as this cold, unapproachable legendary person, as she thinks of him right now. If she cannot accept him like this, then that picture that she herself or others have drawn over his true self will always linger between, and fear will return every time he behaves in a way that connects him to that image. True relation, true love is not possible in this state. Rainee didn't know how much of it he understands, and how much time and effort he is willing to put in it, to remedy the situation, and what his steps are going to be. There was no question about what was going on in Anniet's heart – it was in such a muddle that it would be difficult for her to come out of it on her own. Rainee was wondering how much help Anniet will receive from the other party.

"OK then, Blake," - Anniet said, first time pronouncing his actual name aloud in front of him. – "Would you answer me truthfully if I ask you something?"

"Yes," - was the answer. Rainee thought it was a good start for Anniet to get such a promise. That meant he was willing to put himself in a situation with no way out.

Anniet pondered a little bit over her question, not knowing how to bring it up in a mild manner, but couldn't think of any other way to ask, so she asked straightforwardly.

"Do you know that Prince Angus and Rainee are brother and sister?"

Rainee smiled sadly to herself upon hearing this question. So much confusion... How can it be helped, she didn't know.

"No, they are not brother and sister," - Blake answered firmly.

"I know that it is a secret, but I thought, as you all have been friends for so long, you might know about it."

"They are not brother and sister," - Blake repeated himself without hesitation or the slightest doubt, - "where did you get this idea from?"

"I heard it myself when King was talking to Rainee. He called her daughter and also his own blood and flesh, and Rainee didn't object to it; in fact, she already knew it. So she must be his daughter. Or do you think King lied?"

"King never lies." – Blake said after a short pause and went silent again for a bit, - "if you didn't mishear what King was saying, then it must be true. If he said that Rainee is his daughter, then she must be King's daughter."

"That's what I was thinking. But if she is the King's daughter and she and Prince Angus are in love with each other, doesn't it complicate things? If they are siblings, how can they be in this kind of relationship?"

"When did you hear it?" – Blake asked.

"Yesterday morning."

"Then I know exactly when that conversation took place," - Blake replied with a bit of hesitation in his voice, but it soon dispersed and he spoke in his usual firm and undeniable tone, - "If Rainee is King's daughter, and she already knew it before King came, then there isn't a chance that they are brother and sister. Her attitude to him didn't change, her feelings towards him didn't change, and there was no uncertainty floating around. So there is only one way – if she is King's daughter, then Angus is not his son; he must be adopted."

"Just like that," Rainee thought to herself with a sigh. A few seconds and all riddles are undone, all dots back where they belonged. Riddle solved without a single clue given and without the slightest doubt from the solver himself. That's how trust works. It doesn't require time or explanations. When trust exists, help is simply not needed.

Anniel was looking at Blake in disbelief, ready to bring up some opposition, but didn't have a chance as the voice of a young man came from behind:

"Am I adopted too? How come I know nothing about it?"

Anniel nearly died on the spot after realising that someone else had heard what they were talking about. Blake wasn't bothered about it in the slightest. In fact, he must have seen this man entering the room as he was facing the doors.

"No one has adopted you." – Rainee finally couldn't hold back any more and stood up from behind the curtain.

Anniel was startled to realise that the question that was intended for one person only had been brought to a much bigger audience. First, she looked in disbelief at Rainee, who appeared out of nowhere in a room. Then returned her gaze to the man who had just entered and, upon recognising him, put herself in a deep bowing position, saying in a stammering voice:

"Prince Ragnar!"

"What are you doing?" – He asked while looking at her.

Anniel thought he was asking what she was doing by disclosing such a secret and was trying to find words to explain herself. But the prince wasn't a patient character who could wait two or three seconds for a reply, so he turned to Rainee and demanded:

"Ren, what is she doing here? And why did she call me like this?"

Anniel thought that she was in real trouble now to anger King's son on her very first visit – she couldn't explain what she was doing here, simply she didn't know what to do, and came to her friend's room in hopes to find her, but as the room was empty, she decided to wait and things have escalated from there. But how can she explain herself to this short-tempered prince? She didn't know. She started to tremble from distress and then felt someone's hands gently straighten her from a bowing position. It was Anthony, no, it was Blake. At the same time, from the other side of the room, Rainee answered the young prince:

"Obviously, she is bowing to you in greeting and calling your name in recognition."

“Why is she bowing to me? I thought you said she is your friend. And why does she call me this way? Is it because I am adopted?”

“OMG, Ruffus, don't be so dramatic! You are not adopted, OK, no one is. And Anniet just arrived. She knows nothing about you so far, so she doesn't know how to behave with a madly acting prince. Can't you see that she is frightened of you?”

After hearing this, the prince smiled, walked to Anniet, and pressed her in a bear-strong hug, even lifting her from the floor. After letting her go, he showed her to sit back and said:

“I was thrilled to hear that Ren and Blake brought a new friend and wanted to meet you badly, that's why I came. Don't call me neither prince or Ragnar – I am not your officer, call me Ruffus, I like it better.”

“Idiot,” - said Blake, shaking his head.

“No, call me Ruffus, not an idiot,” - the young prince kept talking to Anniet, - “I prefer the name Ren has given me over how Blake is calling me.” - Then he turned back to Rainee and asked: - “So what about all this adoption thing? How come Angus is adopted but I am not, if we are brothers? And what about you? If you are a father's daughter, then why did he never said so? Didn't he know?”

Colours on Anniet's face were changing from white to red and white again, hearing all this being talked in such a high voice as if the young prince didn't have a single care that someone would hear it. Strangely, others seemed not surprised or affected by it either. Rainee couldn't see her like this any longer and, ignoring Ruffus' questions, walked over to Anniet and sat next to her.

“I am sorry I didn't want to cause all this hassle,” - Anniet said.

“You have to stop apologising for things that you don't do. If you do something wrong, then I or someone else will tell you. This place is not where people are shy to point out the wrongs of others. So, at least if no one says that you did wrong, simply take it as confirmation that, in fact, you have done nothing wrong. I understand that you think you should have kept it as a secret what you had heard in a conversation between me and King. But you do realise that I knew that you were there, and King also? And he knew that you would be able to hear every word he said?” - Anniet nodded her head. – “And did the King ask you to keep a secret or not to talk or inquire about what you heard?” - Anniet shook her head. She started to understand where Rainee was leading with these questions. – “Then, if King knew that you heard all he said, and he didn't ask or order you to keep quiet, why do you think you must not talk about it? One thing I want you to understand from this moment. The impression you got about King is nothing close to what he really is. He doesn't make mistakes, he doesn't miss things, he doesn't misinterpret, and he doesn't expect from others anything that he didn't ask for. He has chosen to speak about it aloud, which means that there is no need to try to hide it. Everything that is spoken will spread sooner or later. If one doesn't want it to spread, then there is no reason to say it aloud.”

It made a lot of sense, and Anniet started to calm down and snapped out of that stress ball that she was becoming.

“King was behaving very strangely,” - Blake said while slouching in an armchair, - “He exercised some of his magic to make me walk with him.”

“Prince of the darkness finally was schooled,” - Rainee laughed, - “you spent here all these years, and I can tell you just the same as I just said - the impression you got about King is nothing close to what is real. I keep telling you that, but you simply are not trying to understand it. He has been

spoiling you rotten since the day you arrived, and you are taking it as your personal achievement and power. He didn't exercise any of his powers on you; he just actually stopped suppressing his power so you would have a small flash of what the relationship between you two would naturally be if King didn't put effort every single second, when you are next to him, to suppress his natural powers so that you could have your own ways in front of him. He doesn't have to try to make you do things; all he has to do is want you to do something. I keep telling you that, but somehow you thought that you are immune to it. I will tell you right now, he is putting effort every moment that you would be able to retain this belief, because as soon as he stops, you would feel the weight of a King's power. You cannot avoid it. It is what the power of the King is, that is the King's relation with his people.”

Blake sat quietly for a while, but everyone could see that he was unhappy about what he heard. Then he finally said:

“So, if King asked me to do something in the future and I refused, does it mean that when the time comes, I will have to do it anyway, even if I refused?”

“Did he ask, inform, or order?” – Rainee double checked before answering.

“He asked,” - Blake replied

“Well then, obviously, he left you a choice; otherwise, why would he waste his and your time talking about it?”

Blake nodded, seemingly satisfied with a reply, and didn't say anything more. Rainee was curious to know what King asked of him to do, but as he wouldn't say, she chose not to probe.

Seeing that his questions have been ignored for the time being, Prince Ruffus flattened himself down on a floor covered by soft carpet, not paying any attention to the empty armchairs around. As soon as he did, the little tabby gray kitten jumped onto his chest for playtime.

Annet looked around; she felt a little bewildered. She was in a room with the three top people of the entire kingdom, bowing to no one else but the King. So many legends, so many stories were written and told about them –about their bravery, strength, power, wisdom, and loyalty, and here they were just ordinary people lounging around and laughing at each other, behaving suspiciously normal. "Rainbow general" was sitting next to her, with her legs crouched under, hugging a cushion and teasing a famous "Prince of Darkness" who was sitting calmly in an armchair, radiating peace and comfort from within, filling the room with friendly atmosphere, that only he himself was trying to break time after time by saying something cold and sharp... And famous "Sleeping dragon, Prince Ragnar", supposedly very fierce and short-tempered, was lying on the floor with one hand under his head and another stroking a little kitten on his chest with his eyes closed as if sleeping.

She turned to Rainee and asked in a hushed voice.

“Is he called Sleeping Dragon because he sleeps a lot? Is this how he restores his supernatural strength?”

Rainee didn't have a chance to answer as Ruffus suddenly happily sat up and turned to Annet.

“No, no, it is nothing like that, I sleep only when there is nothing else to do. It is not me who got this name, it is my dragon.”

He jumped to his feet, came close to Annet, and opened his shirt, exposing his bare chest for her to see. Annet wasn't expecting such a movement and shrank back on a sofa away from the half-naked prince. A loud, threatening growling sound came from the front doors as if all this ruckus inside

would have awakened some beast from hell. Blake immediately stood up and dragged Ruffus away from Anniet. Ruffus was reluctant to move aside but finally obeyed. While he was tugged away, Anniet recovered from shock and could see what he was trying to show – on his chest was something like a tattoo of a peacefully sleeping dragon. On a closer look, one would be able to see the breathing of this dragon. While she was looking at it, the dragon opened his eyes, looked at her, then yawned, changed position, and went back to sleeping...

“Put your clothes back on, you are scaring people,” – Blake ordered before turning around and going back to his chair. Ruffus tucked his shirt back in place, and the growling outside the doors also finally stopped.

“Was that your dragon?” – Anniet was really curious to see it again, but didn't want to cause any more commotion, so she decided not to say anything about it.

“Yes,” - Ruffus answered. – “And because he sleeps all the time, people call it a sleeping dragon, and somehow I become known to people by this name too, despite me having nothing to do with it.”

“How can you say that you have nothing to do with it when he is your dragon?” – Anniet asked.

“Well, he might be my dragon, but he rarely does what I tell him to do, so I don't know why I should be blamed for his behaviour.” – Ruffus seated himself back on the floor and lifted that small kitten to his lap before continuing, - “I would rather have a dragon similar to Ren's. I don't know why King gifted me with a sleeping dragon. Everyone else has normal dragons, Ren didn't ask for a dragon, but he, anyway, gifted her with the best dragon ever, and it is only I who ended up with a sleeping dragon. Sometimes I think that King doesn't like me that much...”

This time, it was Rainee's time to jump to her feet. She walked to Ruffus, seated herself behind him, enfolding him in a tight embrace, and rested her head upon his shoulders, staying with him like this. After a short pause, she said gently:

“Whenever this thought resurfaces again, you label it with "a lie that should never be trusted" and don't keep it in your life any more.”

“I know that what I said shouldn't be true, but look at it from the side – I accepted "King's gift" and all I got is this sleeper. I must admit that when he finally awakes, he is pretty impressive, but it happens so rarely that I learned to live a life without him being in it. And despite being appointed to be a general, I am hardly ever sent anywhere or allowed to do anything. Unless I truly rebel, I am told to stay at Dad's side, and my squad is named King's first squad, King's bodyguards, King's protection. But you and I know that it is only words. King doesn't need any protection, never needed, and will never need. And even at these few rare occasions when no one else but King himself was able to reach a site on time, neither I nor my squad could keep up with him. When we came, all was already sorted, so it would have been best not to come. When I heard just now that I might be adopted, I thought maybe that is a reason why I am treated like this. But you said I am not and I believe you. Also, Blake said that Angus is, and that must be true, too. The more I think about all this, the less I understand, and I don't know what to do now - try harder to understand or leave things as they are.” – He waited for a bit and continued, - “The thing is, I don't want to understand, but I don't think I can leave it all as it is without knowing more either.”

Rainee waited for a bit longer, but as Ruffus didn't speak any more, she gently ruffled up his hair before answering.

"I am not sure what I would have said to you before my last journey. I know that I would be able to point you to the right direction, but, without the knowledge I have now, it would be difficult for you to believe me fully. But while travelling, I was led to a very special place where many so-called secrets of our world are open to explore for anyone who finds and enters it. So now I would like to share with you all some of that knowledge that has been lost for us. Because we don't know many things, so much of what is happening, we interpret and understand in a very distorted way."

"Why didn't you say that you are going to travel?" - Ruffus asked in a complaining voice. -

"Neither you nor Blake. I was so worried when you both had gone. If not Angus, I wouldn't even know if you are still alive. Even he wasn't sure for a long time - we were so worried. Angus promised never to leave me like this, but now he did the same - he left without saying anything. If you didn't want me to go with you, I would understand; I wouldn't follow. I am not like the Shadow."

He gave a glimpse to Blake's side. This look opened to Anniet a new meaning to Blake's "Shadow from a sky" nickname. Everyone in a kingdom knew that he was extremely loyal to Rainbow General and would follow her everywhere, but she never thought that this nickname was related to it. She always thought that it was related to his real shadow from the sky when he was high up. But "The Shadow" from Ruffus' lips indicated a bit of a different meaning. And where did Prince Angus go that it upset his brother so much?

"I am sorry I didn't let you know before I left. Angus, too, didn't have a single chance to do it, even if he would like to. His leave has taken all of us, including Angus himself, by surprise. I cannot say that he is all good now because he is not. It is not about where he is but how he feels. All he has to do is find a time to connect to himself, and the best way to do it is to travel on his own." - Rainee said. - "I want to tell you all some things that I have learned while in the Library of the Kings, but let's eat first." - Rainee stood up, letting go of Ruffus, picked up the little kitten from his lap, and put it on her shoulder. - "Should we go to the palace kitchen or go to town to get some food?" - She asked.

"Can we go camping?" - Anniet asked eagerly.

"It is not exactly what I meant," Rainee thought, but why not. But where? You cannot camp in a city. Before she could say anything, Blake stood up and said:

"I will find a place and prepare food." - After saying that, he walked to the window, opened it, and without a second thought leaped out. At the same moment, a black shadow-like dog with red eyes entered through the closed door, crossed the room without making a single sound, and disappeared into the wall below the window.

Annet ran to the window to see what had happened there. She looked down to the ground that was a few meters below with fear, but Blake wasn't there. She looked a great deal lost - what just happened, why Blake jumped through the window at such a height, and where is he now? Her eyes were wandering in all directions.

"Such a show off... Don't pay him any mind," - Someone told her from behind. It was Ruffus who was standing behind her and also looking through the window. - "If you are looking for him, here he is heading towards the gate towers."

He pointed to a big human-shaped bird in the distance, rapidly fading out of sight. Watching him disappear in a dark sky, Anniet felt how her heart was also shrinking, allowing an emptiness to take over its place. Realisation of grim reality has crept over her. Surely the man she met and knew till

now was disappearing out of her sight, not just in the darkness of the night but also out of her life. The warm and friendly cook she met was steadily fading, allowing the legend of the kingdom to take its place. "Shadow from the sky", "Black devil", "Prince of the Darkness", and many more nicknames given to the cold and arrogant general that bowed to no one and obeyed no one, had no friends because he despised friendship, refused to obey even a king, and was loyal only to the other legend of the kingdom - Rainbow General. Speaking of her, she too came to the window to join them in watching Blake disappear in the dark. She could feel Anniet suddenly becoming sad and lonely, as if not belonging to this place.

"Stories usually are not true, you know," - Rainee said quietly, putting her hand on Anniet's shoulder, - "he is a person that he is, no matter what anyone thinks or says about him. Bear it in mind, or the real person will disappear from your eyes, and you will see only what others think or say about him."

The moment Rainee put her hand on her shoulders, it was as if someone had pulled a veil from Anniet's eyes. Her vision completely changed, and the darkness of the night was somehow lifted; not that it would become light, but darkness didn't hide anything any more. Anniet could see Blake in the far distance again. Maybe small in shape, but every detail of him was crisp and clear as if he were standing next to her. The only difference was that instead of arms, there were two large black wings spread widely in the air. Feathers seemed to grow through the clothes, blending into one with his black jacket and trousers, the same colour hair was fluttering in the wind while he was soaring through the sky at great speed. As if knowing that he had been watched, Blake looked back over his shoulder before somersaulting. A black dog-shaped shadow with red glowing eyes was following him on the ground.

All three watched until these two shadows, one in the sky and one on the ground, finally disappeared behind the hill. Then they left the room too, but through the door like any other regular person would.

CHAPTER

13

Last camping

By the time Raine, Ruffus, and Annie arrived at the camp set by Blake, food was already bubbling hot on a fire. Around the fireplace, there were comfy seating made from branches, leaves, and moss, and Blake himself was lying down on the grass, looking to the stars, using as a pillow a huge, black, shaggy dog who was resting peacefully on his side. Blake didn't show any signs of noticing them arriving, but by now Annie already knew that nothing slips by him unnoticed. So she was sure that Blake knew they had come.

Raine found plates ready waiting next to the fire and dished food for everyone. Ruffus was really chuffed.

"It has been ages since we camped like this." – he said. – "We should do it more often."

Raine looked at him fondly – while she and Blake were relaxing at the School for the past few months, Ruffus and Angus were carrying all the weight they used to share between four.

After the meal, Raine told them a little bit about her travel; she didn't mention the reason for leaving, and no one asked. Mainly, she was eager to share some information she found in a Living Library, as she liked to call it.

She told a story about what the "King's gift" was and why it was called that way. This gift had nothing to do with the kings of this kingdom. It was a gift given by the King of the magic kingdom, Armanin, to his friend, King Jonathan, at a time of need. King Jonathan received it in a dragon's form, but only because he himself was very strong and powerful at that time, and any other form couldn't support having a part of his soul. That's how soul friends obtained the ability to grow into the dragons, who were creatures of the magic world and never lived here in the wild. Gifts like this couldn't be done for one singular person without affecting others living in this world. If King Armanin had brought this dragon creature to this world and gifted it to King Jonathan, then it would have been a singular gift, having no effect on others. But he didn't. He altered King Jonathan's structure, separating a part of him and growing it into the creature that was a part of King Jonathan and also not, while in this physical world in a physical body. By doing so, this alteration affected every single person who belonged to this world from that moment to this very day. On a day when a person is born, their soul friend is born too. It cannot be any other way as this alternation is now a reality in this world. Soul friends are not born into powerful creatures because a small child is not a powerful being. The stronger the person becomes, the stronger their soul friend becomes, and it can take the shape of a stronger creature.

No matter how far away it is born, the soul friend will always find its way to its person, as it is not possible in any other way; it feels a strong call to reunite with the rest of a soul. Many people spend their lifetimes together with their soul friends without even knowing that it's a part of them. Some like them, some don't. For some, it can be the most lovable pet, for others, it can be the most annoying wild animal that keeps pestering them. The less a person is in tune with itself, the less likely it will recognise its soul creature, and unfortunately, these days, that was a majority of society. The less a person likes their true self, the less they will like the soul creature, as it is like an open exposure of something unpalatable. It can come to such a degree that a soul friend is chased away for good, never to return, and they live separately until the human dies.

For the soul creature to reach a dragon shape, the person themselves has to be that strong. Not physically, as physical strength has nothing to do with it, nor does a strong mind, knowledge or education. Not many people understand what this growth is, not many people have a dragon by themselves.

At some point in history, one of the past kings found a way to reach soul creatures in their full potential, bring them up into the physical form and lock them in this shape. By that time, the true understanding of the soul's friend was already lost, and therefore, the belief was born that it was the current King who was making these "gifts". And this belief was taken for knowledge, that's how it became a custom.

Reality is that a soul creature is not created at this time, it is just pulled into a different shape depending on how strong the human would be at that moment if he were suddenly cleared of all false understandings, false beliefs that are surrounding a person by limiting and shrinking it. If also all human creations like lies, fears, resentment, shame, guilt, responsibilities, liabilities and so on are taken away. If all suppression by others and by the person themselves is wiped out. Then there would be a true self as it stands at that very moment, not even known to the person itself, and according to that true self, the soul creature can take its strongest form. That's why "King's Gift" cannot be performed on children, as they have not grown into it yet.

So by performing "King's gift", a soul's creature's power is increased immensely. But also, its potential in the future is taken away. No matter how much a person develops, their soul friend loses the ability to grow together as it is locked at the past potential. Same with decreasing, if the person would lose their ways and decrease by shrinking instead of growing, the soul friend would stay in the same strong shape and could be used to cause a lot of damage. That had happened in past generations of the kings. This is why the King's gift is now given only to those whom the King finds worthy to join his services. However, to get a dragon soul friend, one doesn't need to accept a king's gift; all one needs is to recognise oneself, then develop and grow. The less hidden and restrained the person is, the less improvement in the soul friend would be, even if the King's gift is accepted and performed.

That explained a lot about the new trend at the inauguration ceremony when the King suggested postponing receiving the King's gift.

Rainee also told about living tapestries instead of books that contained stories with all details preserved, not like those told by words and how just touching them you are drawn into somebody's past life not just finding out about it but also experiencing it the same way as that person experienced it. Or nearly the same way, if your own limitations don't allow you to feel it all. That's why this library could not be visited by anyone as it was built to share King's experiences mainly and to understand these experiences one needed to be advanced enough, otherwise these tapestries will have no meaning and would spread more confusion than understanding.

She shortly told how the current King came into power, but it wasn't accurate as neither the current King nor anyone who witnessed it had ever visited the King's library so records were made by old John who came after the events and knew what happened only from what others told him.

She even retold the story of the first King for Ruffus.

By the time she finished, it was nearly morning, but no one felt even close to sleeping.

“So Ruffus, as you can see, King has nothing to do with gifting you a sleeping dragon. He enlarged the powers of your dragon to its maximum potential on the day you received it, but it is you who have to decide what to do in life for your dragon to get any interest in it.”

“But how can I find what I like if he doesn't allow me to go and participate in any action?” – Ruffus wondered. – “I am always left at home to do nothing.”

“Unless you really want to go somewhere,” - said Rainee, - “tell me how many times King forbade you to take an action when you really wanted it? When you wanted not just to be with Angus or me, but actually to do something.”

“When you put it like this...” - Ruffus was trying to think hard, but finally gave up. – “I don't really understand what you are saying.”

“I am saying that the only mistake the King has made with us is that he has spoiled us. He was and still is babysitting us by watching after every step we take, making sure that every wish we make would become reality. He does it so naturally that we take it for granted and think that this is how things are. Look at Blake. How many years have passed since he was assigned to King's services? And only now, for the first time, he experienced what it really means to obey the King. He thinks that King performed some kind of magic to make him walk with him, and up until now, refuses even to understand that King is performing magic on him for all these years, every single minute, so that Blake could remain completely free and his will would be unaffected by King's presence. It is not King's desire to have a relation like this; it is Blake's desire. But King knows what is in Blake's heart and grants it without even being asked.

“So are you saying that if I did not have this special exception granted by the King every time he tells me to jump, I would jump?” – Blake asked, frowning.

“No, I say that you would jump the moment that thought would start to make its way to King's mind,” - said Rainee.

“OK, but what about me?” - Ruffus asked, - “I don't see how he is spoiling me.”

“Of course, he is spoiling you. You say he doesn't allow you to go anywhere, which is entirely not true – you love staying at home, and you hate going to the missions.”

“Well, yes, it is usually so boring at these missions, and even when there is an action, it is just the same and same and same. I don't know how you people can do it all the time. I am happy to help sometimes, but people just keep asking and asking. I want to leave and tell them to do things themselves.”

“I know you do, and King knows it too. He knows very well that you are just an extremely oversized toddler”, - now it was Blake's time to laugh. – “If not for your wish to be with me and Angus, you probably would still be a small child, as you still don't know what you want for yourself. All you wanted was to travel with us. Then you joined the army after us, not because you wanted to, but because you wanted to be with us. That is not how things should be. And no matter what you, or even King himself think, I think he loves you the most, as you remind him of himself – he was robbed of his childhood and forced to become a leader of this crumbling nation without a choice. So he does everything in his power so that the same wouldn't happen to you. He simply wants you to be a child as long as you need to be, until you find what you really want. Even if you are in this overgrown body, he sees you as you are, not as you present yourself. I told you that a million times, but you never listen.”

Silence fell over the camp; everyone was sunken into their own thoughts. Anniet was thinking about King's words addressed to Rainee, when he said that she is the most precious to him. At that time she thought that there must be a really special connection between King and Rainee if King puts her way above others. But now, after what she had learned, she had second thoughts.

“And what about Angus,” - Ruffus broke the silence, - “no one explained to me how it comes that Rainee is father's daughter and Angus is not his son?”

“I don't know how and why it happened,” - Rainee answered, - “there were no records about it in the library. King himself never made a way to it, and the recorder of the King's story probably didn't know about it either, as he never made any record about it. But King knew that Angus was not his son and chose to introduce him to the world as his first and only child at that time. It must be something really special and remarkable he had seen in him.” – She waited for a bit and continued. – “Unfortunately, to Angus, that made his life a lie from the very beginning. It is not easy to become true in yourself if your whole life, from the first day, is based on lies.”

“But you did it,” - Blake said, - “your life had to be a lie too from the very first day.”

“Me?” – Rainee raised her eyebrows, - “My life didn't change that much, if anything, he just freed me from the burdens of a King's child by placing them on Angus's shoulders and allowed me to enjoy complete freedom without expectations from others, while I still could enjoy all the benefits.” – She felt silent for a bit before continuing, - “He always was a father to me. He could not be a better father than he was, so this lie didn't really take away anything from me; if anything, it acted as a shield, allowing me to be whatever I wanted to be, not what others expected me to be.”

Everyone became silent again. Then, in unison, Rainee, Ruffus, and Blake rose to their feet. Anniet stood up too, giving them a confused look, she didn't understand why suddenly such haste.

“King is calling,” - Rainee explained.

They put out the fire and called their horses. There were only three horses, and Blake seemed not in any mood to fly. Rainee was going to offer Anniet to ride together with her, but then changed her mind and decided to see how things would develop without her making decisions. She mounted her horse, Ruffus his. The horse that brought Anniet here belonged to Blake, so he jumped into the saddle too. Anniet wasn't too concerned about it.

“You three make your way back, don't worry about me. I remember the way, and King is not calling for me, so I will walk.”

“Nonsense,” - was Blake's reply. He leaned down, lifted Anniet as if she were weightless, and seated her in front of himself just a moment before urging his horse into a steady gallop while supporting Anniet with one arm around her waist. The other two followed behind.

This move took Anniet off guard. Before she could realise what had happened, she was sitting on a galloping horse in gentle Blake's embrace, pressed to his chest in such close proximity to his face that every time he breathed, she could feel it on her head. For Anniet herself, she was not breathing at all, or at least it felt that way. She was sitting on a horse sideways with her back supported by Blake's holding arm, which was gently but firmly pressing her to his chest. Her head was devoid of

thought entirely, or rather, there were so many thoughts buzzing through her head that they didn't make any sense, so it had the same effect as if no thoughts at all.

All the feelings that she tried to forget and bury deep down were yanked back up by this simple move, and she realised that all the efforts she had put into it were swiped away just like that. This realisation frightened and hurt her – if that would be Anthony, she knew until now, things would be so different, but he wasn't. He was... then she realised that she didn't even know who he was. All she knew about him herself was Anthony from School, and all she knew about the general was only titles and tales heard from others. She tried to think, but her thoughts would leave before she could reach them. All she knew was that the only thing she wanted to do right now was to put her head on his shoulder and stop thinking. She didn't dare to do so, and fighting it was hurting her to the point that tears started to build in her eyes. "What a really distressful situation", - she thought.

But at this very moment, Blake lifted his other hand and gently pressed her head down to his shoulder, right in a place where she wanted it to be. He waited some time until she relaxed before moving his hand away.

Anniel was stunned by this action. The thought crossed her mind, "Can it be that he knows what I am feeling?".

"Yes", - came the answer from just above her head.

Anniel was dumbfounded. So she was right, he can understand what she was feeling.

"All the time?" - She thought again with caution.

"Yes", - Blake answered to her.

Then another realisation crossed her mind, and she voiced the question aloud this time:

"Can you read my thoughts?"

"Sort of," - Blake replied. Then added after a short pause, - "I cannot read or hear thoughts but rather feel them, and this feeling creates a thought in my mind, it can be very accurate or not depending on many things."

"So this is how they know so much about each other even when saying a little," - Anniel thought. This is a very tough ability to have – one with it must always be able to sense when the other side is lying.

"Yes," - Blake answered directly to her thoughts as if trying to disclose how little she can hide from him...

"That can make a life very difficult," she thought not knowing how to react to all what she just discovered, "or very easy depending on how open one wants to be." She was staying tense for a while, not knowing what to do with this new information. The ride was very smooth, as the saddle was different from those she had seen before. It was flat, soft, and comfortable, and the horse's movements could hardly be sensed. It felt more like flying through the air on a cushion than riding a horse. Anniel started to relax and realisation about all this situation flooded over her. So he knew how she felt all the time... Bunch of thoughts were hiding behind the corner ready to take a grip over her but she chased them away. "No," she corrected herself, "it makes life very uncomplicated and easy as there is no need to think about how to act or what to say. The best way is just to do and say what you think."

With that realisation, such an inner peace engulfed her. No need to hide anything because all is already known... "What a blessing," she thought at the same time, putting her arms around Blake's

waist in a firm embrace and relaxing herself into this moment. Listening to his heartbeat, inhaling his scent, and feeling his steady breathing. How good it was to be able not to hide any more that she wanted to stay like this so badly. A little smile came to Blake's face as if some hidden tension had been released. Anniet didn't see it. Truth to be told she didn't see anything around, right now she was where she wanted to be for so long and nothing else mattered. She closed her eyes and stopped worrying about anything.

Senses started slowly to come back to her. First, she felt the unusual warmth of somebody's body next to her, then smell followed, then the feeling of arms holding her in a cradle. After that, memories started to come back, and Anniet opened her eyes just to realise that she had fallen asleep. No wonder – it was already morning, but still she felt a little embarrassed. Even worse, they were not in a wilderness any more and not galloping. Horses were now walking at a steady pace through some settlement, and the city could be seen in the distance in front of them. They couldn't gallop any more because, despite it being early morning and raining badly, people were rushing out of their houses to meet and greet them. If they would try to gallop, there would definitely be some casualties, as people, especially children, were getting very close, nearly under the hooves of the horses. Word was spreading faster than a horse could run, and citizens were very eager to catch a glimpse of the Rainbow Lady and her Dark Knight (as they call them) safe and sound back to the Capital after everyone thought they had been gone for good.

Because she was asleep, Blake used both his arms to support her, holding her like a baby in a cradle. She was wondering what people around them thought, knowing his reputation as an unapproachable lone wolf, now carrying her like this on his horse. She looked up but didn't see any displeasure on his face, but he didn't look back at her either. Calm and somehow cold face was not paying any attention to the crowd around them. Anniet looked around, she couldn't understand how she managed to sleep through all this ruckus – probably this noise was what finally woke her up.

She looked to the side and saw that Rainee was riding next to them, and when she felt her look, she smiled warmly at Anniet. Unlike Blake, she was showing lots of attention and affection to the people around, sometimes even pulling a flower out of the empty air to give to a child. Ruffus was riding behind them; he didn't get so much attention – not because people didn't like him, but he was always here, and no one thought him being dead for the last year, so all glory and celebration were going to Rainee and Blake. And Anniet. Despite the fact that she didn't need to be celebrated, as no one knew who she was.

Annet sat up a bit straighter, with regret pulling herself away from Blake's chest. She thought it would be best if he would put her on the ground away from this procession, where she didn't really belong, so everyone could admire their loved Dark General without her being part of it. She looked up again at Blake's face, not knowing how to say it. This time, he looked back at her and gave her a small smile before saying in soft but indisputable voice:

“I am not leaving you behind.”

Simple and short reply as always. “Fair enough...” Anniet thought leaning back to his chest.

Then a new thought came to her head, it was raining and people around them were wet, but neither she nor Blake were wet at all... How can it be? She looked up and saw that just before reaching them, droplets of rain were pushed to the sides by some invisible force. She looked at Rainee – same. None of the three riders were getting any rain on them despite there being no umbrellas over.

Actually, around Raine, there was a pretty large dry area, and children tried to stay next to her and run back to the rain and out again. Around Blake, there wasn't such a dry patch; if anything, the water at his sides looked even more intense, as if trying to keep everyone away.

"I thought you like rain," - she said, suddenly remembering him standing outside and getting soaking wet.

"I do," - Blake replied, - "But it is way too much more challenging to maintain a presentable appearance when wet than simply push the water away."

So it was important to him to be presentable after all. Remembering the conversation not so long ago, she probed again.

"But if you want to present yourself in a certain way, even if it doesn't match how you are feeling, wouldn't it be noticeable to everyone straight away?"

"And why would it be noticeable?" - Blake sounded a bit curious.

"Well, if they can understand what you feel and even feel thoughts, wouldn't it be obvious?"

"Who? They? They can understand little and feel even less!"

"Oh, sorry, I didn't realise this is a way of communication only for people in the royal palace."

"It has little to do with the royal palace, either. If anything, it would frighten them to death to find out that someone can see through their lying faces. That's why they are terrified of King, as it is impossible to lie in King's presence; that's why they keep flattening themselves to the ground at the sight of his shadow and scoot off as soon as they have a chance. Don't think too highly about this place; it stands only as high as the people who reside here boost themselves up by bragging about themselves".

"Cheerful as always," - Raine said from aside, - "don't listen to him, people might not be as good as they try to pretend, but they are definitely not as bad as this dark personality says."

Blake didn't object to it, just put his gaze back on the road. By this time, they had finally left that settlement, and people were left behind for the time being.

"So it is your special ability?" - Anniet asked again.

"No, everyone can learn it, but very few have done it, as they simply don't want to."

"Why is that?"

"Because it is not some magical skill that you learn to read others," - Blake explained, - "it comes naturally when you yourself become open to others. As it works both ways, to be able to feel others, you have to be open for others to feel you. Most people cannot bear it; they would love to know what others are thinking, but would rather die than open their own thoughts for others to read. Little do they understand that it makes no difference - you cannot hide what you feel and think from others, you can only pretend to yourself that no one can see you through and live in that fantasy world. That is precisely how most people live. Under fake pretences."

Blake didn't say anything more, but from this short outburst, Anniet started to realise how difficult it must have been for him to live like that, and that's why he was keeping everyone at bay.

"Don't let him discourage you," - Raine said, - "people are not like that at all. They simply want to be better than they are, but don't know how to do it or don't have enough courage, so they try at least to present themselves in a better manner than they truly are."

“Such a different opinion about the same thing,” Anniet thought to herself. But she didn't go into details about who is right and who is not. She just felt a little bit sad for Blake, who, after being schooled a second time, didn't say anything and was looking at the road with a calm expression.

“Didn't you say that you try to put on a presentable appearance? Isn't that also a bit of pretence?” – Anniet asked

“No, I am just showing them what they want and expect to see.” – Blake replied.

“But you know, people do love you,” - Anniet tried again.

“They don't know me, so they can neither love nor like me. They love their own story they created and their own labels they labelled me with. I don't mind or care about it and show what they have fallen in love with – the legend that they created themselves.”

His face didn't show much emotion, but Anniet somehow knew that he didn't like this place. If you don't like where you are, then why not leave? But she didn't say it aloud. He must have some reasons, and if he wants to share it one day, he will share. But honestly, she didn't like this grim and sad atmosphere that he was submerged in now.

Anniel stretched her hand out to the side to feel the cold raindrops falling into her open palm. On an impulse, she smiled and sprinkled Blake's face with it. He didn't flinch but looked down at her, and she could see that his eyes were laughing again, even if the face didn't change that much. He looked at her for a few seconds, and then she felt rain falling on her – first on her face and head, then on her shoulders, then all over her body. She flinched first, but then laughed out loud. She looked at Blake, who was also covered in rain and smiling at her. A strange thing was that despite being drenched by water, his appearance didn't change – his hair didn't soak, his clothes were not affected by moisture. She looked at herself and realised that she was the same wet and dry at the same time. She could feel every drop of rain, the water would run down her face, her cheeks, her hair, but would not leave any other trace, just that feeling.

“It is truly amazing,” - She was very impressed and amused by it, - “how do you do it?”

“He never says how he does it”, - unhappy voice belonged to Ruffus, - “I asked him many times to teach me, but he never does.”

Then the rain stopped again, but this time it stopped falling from the sky.

“Sorry,” - Blake said, - “I am not that good at magic, for me it is easier to cancel rain altogether than to stay dry in the water.”

“It is because you do it the hard way,” - Rainee said, - “you try to do all by yourself when you could simply ask...” - But she couldn't finish as the other two interrupted her in unison:

“... ask for help from The One!!”

Rainee looked a bit bewildered by this.

“But guys, if you know and remember this, why on earth do you never ask for his help but try to solve things by your own strength? Even this so-called strength of your own is given to you by him. So even when you use just that, it is still with his help...”

“You know Ren because he doesn't speak with everyone the same way he speaks to you.”

“That is so not true. He speaks, but you don't listen. And it is not like you need to listen much when asking. The One is not deaf like you lot, she hears very well when you ask. So ask and...” - but she was again interrupted in the same manner by her two companions, repeating to her in unison:

“... ask and you will receive!”

“Yes, exactly - ask to receive. So why on earth do you never ask?”

The other two didn't say anything but laughed. Mood was lifted, atmosphere brightened. The city was close now.

“Let's have some fun?” – Rainee asked.

Blake looked at her and smiled.

“Why not.” – Blake replied, - “Truth to tell, I am not in the mood for all these funeral processions. Look how many of them have gathered there – it would take ages for us to pass by.”

For the moment, Anniet thought he was going to fly away like yesterday to avoid that crowd of people that could be seen by now in front of them. Instead, he just tightened his embrace, pressing her firmly to his chest, and all three horses sped up to a mad gallop, not the one like before, but at full speed, or truth to be told, much faster than horses should ever be going. Anniet couldn't watch any more as there were people in front who were approaching awfully fast, and she thought they were going to be trampled by these three dashing horses. By then, a silver bird flew down from the sky in front of them, spreading its wings wider and wider, slowly assuming the appearance of a dragon rather than a bird. A massive black hound caught up with it, running somehow seemingly at ease but being able to keep up with this mad speed. A black dog with red glowing eyes and a dragon-like silver bird just above it, and riders dashing at the enormous speed towards the people... That should be a really terrifying sight to see if you were standing on the front lines of the crowd.

And the crowd started to scream. But it wasn't screams of horror but rather of high excitement and anticipation. The moment the dog and the bird reached the crowd, they didn't run into it, but somehow, space was bent, creating an extra room where there was no room. Like a magical interdimensional bubble travelling through the crowd, created by bird's and dog's combined powers and disappearing after riders passed by. The sight that people haven't seen for years. It was definitely true. Their beloved Rainbow and Dark generals, who they have been grieving for months, have really come back. Safe and sound, they were back at the Capital city in their full former glory.

After dashing at this speed, the Royal Palace was reached in no time. All four were smiling with all faces – Anniet at feeling this for the first time and the other three for remembering carefree times when they would like to pull up shows and pranks like this way more often than recently.

Full of high spirits and laughter, they entered the Royal quarters where squads of recruits were waiting for them and saluted at their arrival. Before getting to the meeting office, Rainee saw the person she was looking for and was hoping to meet before reporting to King, and she made her way right to him with others following behind.

“Master, I am so glad to see you here today,” - she addressed him, jumping off the horse in front of the old man. It was old John. Last she saw him at School, but was hoping that he might follow them here, and her hopes were granted – here he was. - “I am so happy that you have come. I don't know what the orders are going to be, and I didn't want to leave my friend on her own or with someone she is not familiar with.”

“I am glad to be at your service as always.” - Old John smiled back at her.

Blake also approached them, slightly inclining his head in meeting John, but didn't show any signs of the affection that Rainee had for this old man.

“That's where we part for now,” - he said. It was addressed to Anniet, and she understood that the friend Rainee was talking about must be her. She felt a bit of pain when Blake lifted her with one arm and put her on the ground. This pain wasn't from him lifting or from riding for a long time. More like a pain to be taken away from home against your own will... She tried to hide it away as she didn't want to be ungrateful, and she definitely didn't want others to think her being clingy.

Meanwhile, Rainee kept talking to the old John.

“She knows you well, and you know this place well, so you would be the best guide to show her around. Please look after her, introduce her to the customs of the Capital and the palace, and don't allow this place to swallow and digest her before she at least understands what is what. I was hoping to do it myself, but I have a feeling that I might not have time for it now, and she is too dear for us to be left careless without some sort of protection.”

Then she turned to Anniet and put her hands on Anniet's shoulders while looking in her eyes.

“Thank you for coming into my life to be my friend, and for following me to this part of my life, too. Only The One can truly understand how happy it makes me to meet a friend like you. I am not saying goodbye, but here my life first belongs to the King and the kingdom, and only then to myself. I cannot promise to be at your side every time I would like to. But I am leaving you in the best company one can find in this world. Ask him whatever you want to know. All that is related to my life, I leave for you as an open book to read, and as John has been in a living library with me, he knows every aspect of my life as if he had lived it.”

Annet couldn't hold any more and embraced Rainee in a firm embrace. They stood like this for a short while. Then Rainee pulled herself away, gently brushing the tear rolling down Anniet's face, and effortlessly jumped back on her horse. Before riding off, she addressed John again:

“Teach everything she wants to learn and tell her everything she wants to know. The more she asks, the better.”

“Very well,” - old John said, - “from what perspective should I bring the knowledge to her?”

“From every perspective that you have available.” – Rainee answered.

John's eyes moved from Rainee to Blake before asking again.

“Can I use every perspective known to me?”

Blake narrowed his eyes before answering

“Keep to your own perspectives, old man, and stay away from anything you think you know about me.”

After saying it, he turned his horse away without a second word. Rainee and Ruffus joined him immediately, and all three were soon swallowed by the crowd of people and disappeared from sight.

Anniel stood quietly, looking into the distance where her friends disappeared a while ago. They were out of sight by now, and all that could be seen in this direction were the faces of other people, but right now she didn't see with her eyes but with her heart, and her heart was with those she loved. Loved was the only word that fitted, as anything else was not just too small but even inappropriate.

Love... How can the same feeling be so different and still be the same? If someone were to ask her right now who she loved more, she would never be able to answer, as it was simply incomparable. Then why does one bring so much joy when another brings so much uncertainty? Why is she happy to display love for one person for everyone to see, while love for another she would hide deep inside, not just from others but even from herself, if only she would know how to do it. Why is she prepared to take one under any conditions, even if there would not be a positive response or even a rejection, while in another rejection seems so unbearable that she didn't even dare to take a risk to disclose it. But is there anything even to disclose... As she has been proven repeatedly to be the opposite.

"Rainee thinks very highly of you," - Anniel said while still looking in the distance. She spoke to Old John without looking at him, but somehow she knew that he would not have a single doubt to whom these words were addressed.

"She always was a very sweet girl," - Old John replied, - "and she still is."

Just as Anniel thought... There are no secrets.

"Can everyone here read people's minds?" - She asked, finally taking her eyes from the place that swallowed those she wanted to be with and looking to the man she was entrusted to.

"My child, there is no such thing as mind-reading. Never was and never will be."

"But you know what I am thinking?"

"To know what you think and to read your mind is not the same, is it?"

"For me, it looks the same," - it truly did. No matter what, she could not see a difference.

"When you look at the small child looking at the cupcake on the table, don't you know what he wants?"

Anniel just smiled and didn't say anything. It is not a secret what would be on a child's mind.

"So you see, it is not that difficult at all, and there is no mind-reading included. How a child would behave, why he wants this cupcake and what he will do are the interesting parts and more difficult to predict."

"So, I look like that child looking at the cupcake?" - Anniel asked, lowering her eyes and thinking that she must look just like that while looking at Blake. Looking at something that she cannot reach.

"For me, you look like a child who is seeking something that he already has. The only question is what you will do with it."

Anniel looked back at Old John. She wanted to ask so much, but the weight of the surrounding eyes couldn't be ignored much longer.

"Everyone is looking at me..." - she said in a quiet, desperate voice.

That was true. Since the moment she woke up in Blake's arms, she was constantly under the surveillance of so many eyes... And it wasn't just random glances. Everyone around was constantly looking at her. It wasn't that bad while in Rainee, Blake and Ruffus' company, as she could easily say that everyone was looking at them, and she got attention only because by chance she was in their company. But now they left a while ago, so there was no reason for people to linger around any longer. But everyone stayed, and it was she who got all the weight of these curious eyes as everyone was looking directly at her. And talking. And whispering. And pointing... She didn't really know neither how to cope with it nor how to react to it.

"That's the price for being friends with someone famous," - Old John said in a soft voice. - Besides, I don't want to be harsh on you, but I am somewhat famous myself, you know... - He added, looking at her with laughing eyes. - Especially now, when our friend called me her master so openly. That somehow broke the tension, and Anniet laughed too. He was right - everyone knew who the Old John was. He wandered the world for so long that there were even speculations that he might be even older than King himself. The Wanderer was his nickname, as he never stayed in one location for too long but would go from one place to another. You would hardly find a town or a village in the world where there would not be at least one person who had met this wanderer. It was known that he was very respected in the Royal palace and by the King himself. Also, despite there being no recorded or spoken event about him ever using force, he was feared a great deal. Strangely enough, the higher position one would occupy, the more they would evade Old John (old John). There were tales about generals and ministers of the past, who would scream in anger just at his sight on arrival to Capital. However, there were no tales about him ever confronting any authority. Also, many would say that he was a master and teacher to the Rainbow general and helped her to gain all the power she has. Many would deny, saying that these suggestions didn't have any footage, as Old John didn't know that much himself. That he had amnesia and could remember nothing, which is why he kept wandering around, and his soul would not rest until he remembers who he was and what had happened to him.

"Sorry," - she said, smiling at him, - "I didn't mean to discredit you."

As a confirmation of John's words, a group of Anniet's past colleagues from School approached. Their curious eyes watched Anniet, but after greeting their addressed Old John, not her.

"Master John, when and where will your classes be available? We would like to rejoin it as soon as possible." - A young woman asked, speaking on behalf of the entire group.

"Nice to see you again, Emily," - John said. - "I love your spirits and eagerness, keep them up, and when there are such classes, I will make sure you all are informed. But I didn't come here as a teacher, as it is not my place to teach."

"So you cannot teach while you are here?" - Emily's voice was disappointed, and John's reply had the same effect on everyone around.

"What I can do and what I will do are not necessarily the same. Here are many outstanding teachers. I am sure they will take good care of your development. If you include in your future training that little I already taught you, then even better, it will make me happy to see you using it.

"Why can't you teach while you are here? What will you do?"

"I can teach, but it wouldn't be appropriate because I am neither in charge of the King's Army nor a member of it. Where my services are needed while here depends on the request of the commanding

officers of the Royal quarters. And as the request from one of them was to be a guide, that's what I intend to do."

Now Anniet received a few really stinky looks and quickly spoke up.

"No, no, it's alright, I can look around by myself. You can go and teach others, I don't mind at all."

"My little girl," - John said, - "you are kind as always, but still have very little knowledge, and that little that you already have got overpowered by overthinking, how not to be a burden or obstacle for others. It is entirely up to you if you want to use my services offered or not. But it is not up to you what I will do with my time if you choose not to use it. Everyone who makes you think differently just puts you off track. Don't pay that much attention to them. All of you have been educated about the usage of somebody else's time. If someone has forgotten it or disagrees with reality, there is no need to follow them, as by following these so-called "lights", you will find yourself swallowed by darkness in no time."

"....." – and here she thought Rainee being firm and straightforward.... Now Anniet fully believed that this man was Rainee's teacher. Rainee just didn't catch up with him, that's all.

This seemingly harsh reply put Anniet's heart at such ease. She marvelled at why it had a different effect on others who apologised, wished a good day and left. Why would they get offended or even upset after being reminded about something so obvious? Of course, it is neither for her nor for anyone else to distribute John's time. It was so good that he had reminded her about it; it took away any responsibility for something that she wasn't even responsible for. But how firmly he said it!

"No wonder that people are afraid of him", Anniet giggled to herself. After that, even the glances of the surrounding people stopped bothering her so much. Isn't it just the same thing? Something that she cannot change, no matter what she does or how she behaves?

"I want to use it," - she said aloud, referring to his services that she, just a minute ago, refused so carelessly.

Rainee would ask now, "To use what?" to make sure that Anniet understood herself the full impact that randomly said words might have. But Old John didn't, he just smiled and said:

"Then I am all yours."

"Because Rainee told you to?" – Anniet asked, thinking about how much more power Rainee's word has in this place.

"When someone asks something wise, why should it ever be rejected?" – Old John neither confirmed nor denied her statement.

Now it was Anniet's time to smile.

"But not today," - she added, - "I don't think I have anything to ask, or want anything to see today. I am a little bit tired, and I just want to go and have a rest." – She thought for a few moments before adding a true reason why she wanted to go home. – "I also want to stay by myself as I want to think about what has happened and what I have learned."

Old John didn't say anything, but it was obvious that he didn't have any objections.

Annet's current home wasn't that far away, but she was glad that Old John was with her, as it would still not be an easy task to find it while being surrounded by so many people. Luckily, everyone was good-willed and would part in front of them, letting them pass by. Crowds also didn't follow them to the very door but stopped a good deal before, as if there would be some invisible barrier. Anniet even asked Old John if that was the case.

“And yes, and no,” - was a reply. – “In the Royal quarters, there are areas where everyone can use at any time, and there are areas only for those who have some sort of business or need to be there. It is not forbidden for anyone else to come, and if you try hard, you will succeed. But one who doesn’t have anything to do in an area of a specific use will feel like an intruder and will have an urge to leave this place as soon as possible. This feeling is very overwhelming and unpleasant; not many want to experience it, so it is much easier to stay away.”

“I see,” - Anniet said, - “I think I know what you mean, as I feel just like that when I am approaching the palace. Is it because I am staying in a place that really doesn’t belong to me?”

“No, my dear, we are talking about two completely different things, and it would be good to separate them now before it gets too complicated. You feel that way only because you think that way. It is not even the real feeling. You just convinced yourself that you don’t deserve to be in this place, and it has become your little reality. But all of it is just in your head and in your beliefs. As no one else is involved, it is entirely up to you to clear up this misunderstanding, as otherwise you will live in it. To experience how truly this place feels, you will have to come out of that little false reality you built around yourself, for yourself. Only after waving it off as non-existent, you will be able to experience how much love and welcoming thoughts have been put into this place while assigning it to you. There is a big difference between feeling what is going on around and thinking. One involves discovering, and the other involves guessing based on previous experiences.”

“One leads to growth, another leads to stagnation,” - Anniet said, smiling to herself and fondly thinking how Rainee would finish this explanation.

“You have a very good teacher,” - John smiled at her while opening the door to the already familiar hall, - “don’t think even for a minute that she would lead you to the place that you truly don’t belong.”

“No,” - Anniet replied, smiling to herself, - “I have a very good friend.”

“It is even better,” - John didn’t argue.

“How will I find you tomorrow?” – Anniet asked

“Just look for me,” - he said, staying by the door and not going any further. – “When you want to see me, I will find you.”

That was a funny way of arranging a meeting, but Anniet didn’t argue. She walked across the hall to the stairs, then turned around to see if Old John was following. But he wasn’t here any more. She was all alone in this large, luxurious, but empty place. Anniet looked around once more, wondering to herself why there is such a glamorous and spacious hall looking like a waiting room that could host a hundred or maybe even more people, if no one is allowed to come here... She herself felt like she was not allowed to come here either. But Old John said that it is not true, that it is just her own thinking, that if she wants to know how it truly feels, she has to stop thinking that way.

Annet sat herself down on the stairs. There were plenty of seats and chairs around the hall, but somehow she was feeling much better while sitting here. “What has happened?” she asked herself. The question “When?” popped into her head. That was a very good question and matched the first one perfectly. When did it start to happen? That was easy to answer. A long, long time ago, when she arrived at School and met her friends, who turned out to be some extraordinary people. No, that is not right, who were always extraordinary people and then turned out to be famous too. That sounded more accurate.

So what has happened? Nothing had happened. She just moved to a different location with her friends, and that's all. Then why is she feeling so tense and cannot think about anything? Yes, Rainee is right, to get the correct answer, you have to ask the right question. Now, when she knew the answer, her whole body started to shake, and she felt like vomiting any minute. And all this experience didn't have anything to do with either Rainee, Blake, or the place she was in .

To be honest, she didn't even know why it was happening, but she knew who caused it, and for the first time after arriving here, she mentally thanked Rainee for accommodating her in this place, where no one would come just to look at her. All these watching eyes... Why did it feel like judging? Why did it feel like she did something wrong and has to improve immediately? Improve what? She hasn't even done anything... Where can she improve? And no one even said anything to her, so why does she feel this way? A price for being friends with someone famous. If that is the price for being friends with Rainee, she will pay this price happily every day. No matter how bad it feels, it is just a little bit of shiver and nausea, that's all. She is not going to pretend in front of others or be less happy when in Rainee's company to avoid it.

Did Rainee know that she would get so much unwanted attention? Is she herself suffering from it too? She remembered how Rainee behaved while surrounded by a crowd of people. No, it didn't look like she was suffering. Well, at least this place now felt like a welcoming, calm harbour. Who cares that it is very posh? John was right, now she can feel how much thought and care Rainee put into accommodating her here.

That raised another question, and it made her even more dizzy to think about it. Does everyone in this place know how she feels about Blake? This thought squeezed and squashed her down, and she was feeling as small as a human can possibly be. No, to be honest, people are never so small, it is just like a piece of rubbish in a corner. Why does she feel this way? Why does it feel so wrong to love him? Before she found out who he was, she never felt that way. She even wanted to tell him so badly, and only the fear of losing his friendship prevented her from doing so. So why now, just a thought of telling it to him makes her feel like fainting? And she doesn't even have to tell him anything as he already knows... But just how much does he know? As apparently there is no mind-reading after all.

While in his arms on the horseback, she didn't feel this bad. In fact, she felt completely the opposite. Even if he didn't feel about her the same way, it wasn't too bad, as he didn't judge or make fun of her either, but still was the best friend she could ever ask for. So why does it feel completely different now when even with her open eyes, she sees these watching and whispering people pointing at her. What do they whisper about? Do they think that she is too audacious to feel like this towards their beloved general? But she didn't know that he was their general before falling in love with him. Otherwise, she would never do. What she is even talking... Of course she would.

All these thoughts were going round and round in her head until she realised that if she continued like this, she would faint right where she was sitting, as it was obvious that she was starting to have a bad fever. It would be best if she went and got some remedies before going to her room, but there was no such possibility. First, she didn't know where to get it from; second, she didn't have that much strength right now; and most importantly, all these watching and judging people were out there, and she was definitely not going out to be looked at again.

All dizzy, she stood up and slowly walked up the stairs while supporting herself on the rails. What is going on, why has she suddenly become like this? She was so happy on their journey back. She could remember very well Blake's arms holding her in his embrace and his ever-so-gentle but firm

hand pressing her head to his shoulder. That's what she is going to do, she is going inside and will stay in this memory as it makes her feel so good and maybe all the rest will just fade away.

Anniel walked into her apartment and closed the door behind her. It was so nice and cosy here, why did she ever even think this place was not homely? She made it to the sofa and stayed there as she had no strength left to go to the bedroom. She curled in a corner and leaned on the backrest of the couch in the same way as she was leaning on Blake's chest while riding and forgot about anything else, with all her soul returning to that little happy moment. A room around her was spinning rapidly, and it felt like the sofa was flying through the nothingness, but it was even better as it gave her the impression of galloping on the back of Blake's black stallion while resting her head on his shoulder.

Time was passing, and she was locked in the weirdest dreams and hallucinations. She was in so many places at once, and these strange and crazy events were rotating around her all the time without allowing a single minute of rest. She was at School where people were telling her to do better, no matter how hard she tried, but she was Marcus there, not herself. She was at home, where people would keep a close eye on her, making sure she didn't do something inappropriate. She was drowning in a river while at the same time choosing who was supposed to save her. And many, many other things. Also, everywhere were faces of people, some familiar, some she had never seen before, and everyone was watching her, observing every move, making sure that she stayed and behaved as she was supposed to do, that she would not take what she wasn't supposed to take. Also, she was desperately looking for someone. At first, she thought it was Rainee, but it couldn't be, because Rainee was with her in this room, repeatedly trying to lift her heavy body from the sofa and take it to the bedroom, but would not succeed no matter how hard she tried. Deamon came at some point, emerging silently through the wall, and she thought that he was real. She asked him to come closer, and he obeyed, but when she tried to hug him, her hands would find just an empty space where he was supposed to be. Deamon would just look at her with these reddish and clever eyes of his, as if asking what the hell she was doing. Rainee asked Deamon to help carry Anniel to the bedroom, and he tried, but they both failed to do so, as Anniel was just too heavy and scattered in too many places. But all this didn't really matter, as all this time she was also sitting in a gentle Blake's embrace, listening to his heartbeat and feeling his breathing on her head. And it somehow held her together through all the madness surrounding.

At some point, Blake came. He came through the door, like normal people would do, like Anthony used to do. He walked towards her, touched her forehead and then lifted her from the sofa and carried her to the bedroom. It was so strange to see him succeeding where Rainee couldn't. Then realisation came to her that Rainee was just an illusion and Blake was real, that's why he could do it. If she had any strength left, she would get all guilty and embarrassed because of the condition she was in, as everyone else surrounding her now expected her to feel this way. But she didn't have any strength to fulfil these expectations, so she just lifted her hand and reached up to touch his face, hoping and fearing at the same time that he would be real and not an imaginary one. For a moment, she thought that her hand had touched him and nearly shrank back in fear, but to her own surprise, it didn't, instead it went right through him. "So, he was also a hallucination, same as everything else", she thought with relief and also hidden disappointment. Never before had she been carried by a hallucination... She tried to touch his chest, but her hand went right through it. It was so strange, as her head was supported by it firmly. But what does she know about the rules in the delusion world? Somehow, with him close by, all watching and judging people backed off, giving her a little bit of rest.

He placed her in bed, took her shoes off, covered her with a duvet and tucked her in carefully. Then sat next to her and placed his hand on her forehead again. Just now she realised how cold she was. And also burning. How can one be cold while burning so badly? With difficulty, she pulled out her arm from the duvet and tried to touch him again. He looked so real! But no matter how many times she tried, she never succeeded. Even the same hand that she could feel on her forehead, and was somehow cooling her, was untouchable to her own hand. These struggles took so much strength from Anniet that he eventually took her hand and put it back under the duvet, relieving her from these fruitless efforts. "Sleep", – she heard his voice, before his hand returned to her forehead. She tried to argue, but neither had any strength, nor was there a point to argue with the phantom, so she just closed her eyes, feeling how this burning heat inside was being drained through that gentle palm on her forehead, until the sleep took over her wondering mind.

She woke up later in the day, lying in a bed, drenched in sweat and shivering from the cold. She was so wet, as if just fished out from a lake, before being put into bed, and now her body got so cold that she couldn't stop shaking badly. All her experience as a healer and common sense were telling her that she has to get out of bed, take her wet clothes off and put on something dry, also change a sheet and duvet, or at least flip the duvet over to the dry side. Otherwise, she will never get warm. But now she fully understood why her patients would be so reluctant to do these few simple moves, which would bring back comfort and lead to recovery. She was that patient now, and unwillingness to follow these steps easily won over common sense, which right now was tired and didn't have much strength to argue. So she just wrapped herself deeper into the duvet, which didn't provide any warmth any more, and tried to go back to sleep, ignoring the overwhelming chill.

She must have succeeded, as the next thing she knew, someone was pulling out the duvet from her, and it brought her back from these weird and cold dreams she was having. Anniet tried to resist as much as her frozen and numb hands would allow, in attempting to cling badly onto this duvet that was mercilessly pulled away anyway. She couldn't do much more as her body would not listen to her that much, and she couldn't even turn around to see who it was. Must be her mum, she thought, curling tightly into a small ball and waiting until she starts to pull her clothes off. It did happen, but in a completely different way than she expected. All her clothes left her with a single yank without even changing her position. It felt so weird that it got attention even from her faded mind. But she couldn't ponder too much about it as the next second, a soft and fluffy material covered her shaking body, and she was gently lifted from bed while being wrapped in it. Anniet froze for a moment upon seeing this, so familiar to her, black jacket close to her face again. But soon relaxed, realising that she was still in a nightmare. Well, it couldn't be called a nightmare, rather being pulled out from a nightmare, but still it was a dream or hallucination. She fought that fluffy blanket vigorously until she got her arm out to try to touch this phantom again, with just the same result – her hand went right through his body without any resistance. This battle with the blanket totally exhausted her. In no time, her limp hand was wrapped back into the same blanket.

"Out of touch," - she giggled silently to herself. Just like that cupcake... With that, all tension left, and she stopped worrying about what she should do. Dreams don't obey a person, at least not to her. All she could do was relax and experience it. And as it was a nice dream, she was hoping to remember it in the morning.

She was carried around the bed to the other side. For a moment, she thought with regret that she would be placed there and tucked in again. But it didn't happen. Her phantom sat on a bed with her on his lap and covered them both with a dry side of the duvet. He was emanating so much warmth that it even started to fill Anniet's frozen body, which was still shaking violently. A thick duvet

wouldn't allow this warmth to escape, and with no way out, it stayed here, making it a cosy and pleasant place. Slowly, her body started to unlock from this penetrating cold, bringing back a little clarity to her mind. Secretly, with her hand, she found a way out of this wrapper of blankets and duvets and tried to touch again this untouchable person, whose body felt so warm and solid to the rest of her body. Same results... No matter how many times she tried to touch the very same chest that her head was resting on, her hand would just go through, as there was nothing there.

Anni couldn't understand this logic, but she was happy that she didn't have to, so she just let go of trying and hugged this phantom, who felt pretty solid to the hug. But she didn't ponder about it. Finally, she was warm and in a nice dream. The watching faces, which were still surrounding her every time she closed her eyes, were still there, but somehow unimportant, like left behind the window in a different world that didn't have any influence here where she was right now. She closed her eyes and allowed that dream to carry her away. Her phantom obediently bent down to kiss her on the head, but didn't follow the rest of her dream, he just tightened his embrace while breathing silently into her hair.

15 chapter

Rainee was sitting at the meeting hall surrounded by officers, ministers, clerks, managers and other, god knows how many leading people of the kingdom. So many of them she could remember only from the very first few meetings at the beginning of her life as a general. So many had come... Everyone wanted to see and witness with their own eyes the so-called "return of the generals". Nobody could be blamed, as it was an unheard-of event that the highest-ranking officers would leave and then return. No one was sure what was going on, as no one was sure what the rules were going to be. And to be frank, many didn't even think it was true until she and Blake stepped into the hall. After this doubt was satisfied, everyone wanted to congratulate and update. So it is going to be a long and meaningless day while listening to the things that were obvious without hearing them, and saying things that were pointless to say, as all these talks didn't change anything, just satisfy pointless customs and rituals.

Time after time, she would look at Blake, who was sitting in front of her, as grim as a gloomy day, and wondered if he always felt about these meetings in the same way as she was feeling right now. If that is the case, then no wonder he is always so bored. It was very strange to find out that she herself was feeling just the same today. These kind of meetings never used to bother her, no matter if they were meaningful or meaningless. But today was different. She could feel the full weight of wasted time spent with people that, on one hand, she knew very well, but on the other hand, they knew nothing about her at all. King has already made it clear that tomorrow morning, she and Blake are expected to be on the western continent, as the stirring in the mist was getting very intense there. That means two hours travel for her and around six for Blake. That's if they didn't get rusty... Just a few hours left, and they both have to spend these few hours locked in this room listening to people who have nothing to say, but want to be heard. And to do it willingly was a real challenge.

Why was it a challenge now? It wasn't ever before... Was it because she valued her time now more and would gladly distribute it to something more meaningful? Spending time with Angus was out of the question, as he was far away and she didn't know where. But she would gladly spend this time with Silver, as she hasn't seen her for so long. Or with Blake. One could say that they were spending time together now, but were they really? Or with Ruffus, who has so much to tell her, but still was never given a chance to do so. Or with Annet, who right now was having a really hard time and would do better with a friend at her side. Or even on her own, organising her own thoughts, asking The One questions, so she could get a better grip on what is happening in her own life.

Instead she was sitting here, listening and smiling to the people with really low priority in her life. At least it wasn't completely fake, as she wouldn't be able to bear it. She really missed all those who surrounded her right now. Just timing was not right, but no one cared, as no one really saw people behind their leaders. Leaders reappeared, so they were grabbed as soon as possible without any consideration of the effect it had on them. I was always this way. Why should it have changed in these two years...

And time was getting more and more inconvenient, as one little and lonely person would do with her time much better than all these people together. In one moment, they both, she and Blake, lifted their eyes to look at each other. Annet walked into her room, and all connections towards her were lost. Rooms at the general flank were granted with that exceptional enchantment, that once the door is closed, it loses all connections to the rest of the world for those who were inside. While inside,

you will not know what is going on outside, and those who were outside would know nothing about those who were inside. Only dimmed physical senses were left, but what good were they while being so limited?

So Anniet was out of reach for both of them. It was such a strange feeling to be “cut out” like this. She never experienced it before, as she never tried to keep such a close track of someone who had entered these rooms. Blake gave her a stinky look before returning to work. She knew why. If she hadn’t offered this room for Anniet, he would be able to keep an “eye” on her no matter where she was in a palace. Rainee herself too. However, this decision was not made considering what would be better for Blake or for her. It was made with a thought of what would be better for Anniet. Even now, when it backfired like this, she would stand for this decision as the best for the person who so suddenly disappeared from their reach. And at such an inconvenient time... She was feeling really poorly, and now no one would know how she was unless they went to see her physically.

Blake was doing so well today. Maybe he didn’t radiate smiles and happiness, but he was listening to everyone, being attentive and even answering. At the same time, while being worried about Anniet. She could feel his worry. Never before would he show such a feeling so openly. So he is really going for it, no hidden corners, no way left for retreat. One good thing was that Anniet did go to her room with the intent to rest. As that was the only thing that would help her right now. The big question was whether she was resting.

Rainee thought about how she would try to influence Anniet to take this rest if she were close by and tried to do it now, without even knowing where she was. Surprisingly, even to herself, some sort of unknown connection was established, but it was too weak to influence Anniet in any way, no matter how much she tried. But Rainee had a strong suspicion that Anniet was not feeling any better. She was pondering what to do when Deamon’s presence disappeared. She looked at Blake and could see his face getting more and more concerned. So he sent Deamon to check. It sounded easy as she was doing it with Silver all the time. But she also knew that not many could do it. And for Blake, it was exceptionally difficult as his dragon was different. His dragon was a part of him, not just at a soul level, but physically too. So to send it away, it would be something similar to sending your leg or arm away. She couldn’t even imagine. Rainee knew that he tried to do it many times in the past, but it never succeeded. One could say that when Blake was in the air Deamon was always far away from him, but it wasn’t entirely true, as he would never be left too much behind or would go too far in front. Deamon was some very extraordinary creature who had a different understanding of space and physics, which is why walls were never an obstacle for him. But distance was. But not distance up or low, only left or right. As if you would be able to see them both only from above, they would always look next to each other, no matter if one is high and another is low.

Now Deamon's presence was gone, so he must be in the room with Anniet. Rainee tried to connect to him, to see what Blake sees, but again it didn’t work that well. But Blake’s face was going grimmer and grimmer, so it wasn’t something good that he was seeing. Eventually, Blake stood up and walked out of the room, leaving everyone speechless. Everybody's eyes turned to King, who was sitting in his chair, at the end of the room, with his chin resting on his hand, and for Rainee looked as bored as Blake had been before getting worried. King didn’t react to Blake’s leave. Seeing everybody's eyes on him, he just raised his eyebrows as if asking “What’s the matter?”, but, as nobody asked anything, he didn’t speak either. Then everybody looked at Rainee, who right now was so relieved that her smile was much warmer and more genuine than throughout the day, and that comforted people.

So Blake's action was added to "General Blake's quirks", and the meeting continued without him; however, people felt upset and even insulted. Rainee marvelled once more at how little they knew about him, despite working together for years. The moment Blake left the room, Deamon reappeared. So in truth, Blake never even left, only the part that everyone desired to see walked off. Half an hour passed, and Blake came back. Then, after a few hours, he left again, this time for much longer. Then he came back again. Rainee was smiling inwardly to herself – he really tried his hardest. She could not even remember Blake putting so much effort before. Blake, she knew from before, wouldn't be bothered to come back after the decision to leave was taken. She even knew why he was trying so hard, even better than Blake knew himself. The person he was doing it for was sitting at the end of the room. No matter what Blake was thinking or saying, he felt extremely grateful to King for pulling him out of the situation, where he himself was powerless. No matter King's motives, his actions did what Blake was seeking, but wasn't able to achieve. So now he tried his best to return the favour by doing what was expected of him. Or at least what he thought King was expecting him to do. Rainee was sure that his efforts didn't go unnoticed or undervalued by King, but she sincerely doubted that anyone else would notice it.

And she was right. After Blake's second return, the prime minister asked in a slightly sarcastic voice:

"Are we boring you, general?"

Blake didn't reply to it and didn't even spare him a look. That wasn't the way the prime minister used to be treated.

"You know it is not for ourselves that we are holding this meeting. We have always been here and know all that is going to be presented, so it is not any of us who need these updates." – The prime minister added.

His words received not just many murmurs in agreement, but also sparked an interest in Blake's eyes.

"Is that how everyone here feels?" – Blake asked, looking around.

All the darkness from his persona was gone, and he looked really interested. So for a moment, no one was afraid to say what they thought, and many confirming voices backed up the prime minister. No one objected.

"Oh, thanks The One for that!" – Blake said happily, standing up again, - I am so glad that you finally realised by yourselves, that you truly know all, and there is no point to discuss it over and over again. So I am happy to finish this meeting as it is no longer needed.

After saying that, Blake turned towards the door, and Rainee stood up to follow him. Ruffus got on his feet, too. That brought a shock to everyone else, and the prime minister called in a stammering voice:

"Well, we might know all of it, but you, General Blake and Lady Ren were absent from here for two years. So this meeting was called to inform you both about events and outcomes."

Upon hearing it, Blake stopped and turned around.

"Even if I was absent from here for the past two years, I didn't become neither blind nor deaf. And I definitely do not require all day to catch up with what has happened in such a short and uneventful time. Please, in the future, never call any meetings for the purpose of informing me about anything, as it causes a lot of misunderstanding about what these meetings are for. I am sure that for this little

that may slip by me unnoticed, King will spare a few minutes of his time to bring it to my attention. Everyone, have a pleasant evening.”

With that, he walked out of the room, followed closely by Ruffus. Rainee had a proper hard time holding her laughter back, so she just inclined her head to King and everyone else before leaving, too.

“So this will conclude today’s meeting,” - she heard the calm King’s voice behind the closed doors.

“But your Majesty....!” – complaints piled after.

Rainee didn’t listen to those, thanking inwardly the prime minister's big mouth for freeing them from a few more hours of agony. Once again, it was proven that when you put sincere effort into something, you will always be rewarded. Maybe in a way that is difficult to connect to the efforts, but nevertheless, a reward is a reward. If Blake wouldn’t try this hard to stay in this meeting as much as he possibly could, he would have just a very little time more for himself today, but these meetings would be plaguing them in the future, when now, highly unlikely, it will ever be called again.

All three walked straight to Anniet’s apartment.

As Rainee was already expecting, Anniet was sleeping peacefully, and only a lingering feeling of heaviness and smell of sweat and fever revealed the struggles that this place witnessed a short while ago. But even that was fading rapidly.

“Is she already willing to accept your help?” – Rainee asked, sitting down in a lounging chair next to the window.

“Only in her dream.” – Blake said, taking his place in an armchair next to the bed.

“I see,” - the reply wasn’t unexpected. – “What will you do now?”

“Me? Don’t know,” - Blake said, - “wait for an opportunity, I guess.”

“What do you want from her?” – Ruffus was curious.

“What do you think?” – Blake asked, looking at him.

“I don’t know,” - Ruffus said honestly, - “she is already in love with you. So what else do you want?”

Rainee was sitting with her eyes half closed, looking through the window. It wasn’t that often that these two would speak with each other so casually, especially on the topic that distressed them both so greatly. So she was happy just listening and not interfering.

“I guess more than that,” - Blake said after a short pause.

“More?” – Ruffus wouldn’t let it go. - What more? Ren always says that love is the most what one could offer. What more do you want? Aren’t you a little bit too greedy?

Here it goes... Rainee thought to herself. But to her surprise, it didn’t go anywhere as Blake didn’t go into his regular teasing mode.

“Maybe.” – He said instead, - “But still I want more than that. I cannot tell you what it is as I don’t know myself yet. So I will just wait and see.”

Gosh! He really has changed a lot! Rainee thought, looking at Blake.

“I see,” - Ruffus said, sitting down in a second lounging chair. – “I am dying to know how you all have met. Would you tell me?”

“Why not.” – Blake said, surprising Rainee once more.

That’s how they spent the rest of the evening, well into the night. Three of them talking and one sleeping. There was no need to be afraid that their voices would awaken Anniet, as all of them knew very well how not to cross the barrier that separates living from sleeping. The word “living” wasn’t very appropriate, however, it was how it felt – sleeping was like living in a completely different world. When Rainee wanted to wake up at a certain time, she would tell herself that she has to come back, not wake up.

“Do you want a ride?”

Rainee offered when the time came for Blake to leave. He was pretty wasted. She didn’t know what he did to calm Anniet down, but it had a proper toll on him.

“No,” - Blake said, - “I will do with a bit of time for thinking.”

“I want a ride!” – Ruffus said eagerly.

“I thought you were staying?” – Rainee asked.

“No, I was told to go with you.”

“When?” – Blake was curious too.

“Not that long ago.”

“I see,” - he said, standing up and looking at Anniet for some time, - “before you leave, could you tell the old man to take better care of her than he did today?”

These words were addressed to Rainee, but she didn’t reply. Blake, same as her, knew that there was nothing that Old John could have done to prevent Anniet from getting into this state. No one could. Also, she was sure that if they were not around, Anniet would have received a helping hand from someone else. There was no history of someone dying from illness in the palace. But despite knowing all this, she was going to visit her master before leaving anyway.

Blake stretched his hand, and very, very slowly, a blanket inched out from under the duvet, unwrapping Anniet from it. He had to stop a few times not to disturb her too much. Eventually, he succeeded, the blanket was in his hands without waking the sleeping person. Blake folded it and then walked to the wardrobe. He opened it and was obviously taken aback by what he saw. He looked at Rainee as if wanting something to ask, then changed his mind and closed the wardrobe. He was about to open another door, but then changed his mind again and, with firm movements, got back to the wardrobe he tried at first, and pulled out a black satin shirt, very similar to the one he was wearing right now. With the shirt in his hand, he walked back to Anniet and here stopped again, as if not sure what to do. Eventually he gave up and turned to Rainee who was not looking at his struggles directly, but nothing has slipped by her unnoticed, and she was laughing inwardly at Blake, who usually was so certain in all he did, now stumbling over something that didn’t make any sense, but still he wanted to respect it, as it might be important for the very same person he was trying to help. At least someone in this room didn’t have any problems or worries about it.

“I will help you,” - Ruffus said eagerly, seeing that Blake wants to put this shirt on Anniet.

“No, you won’t,” - Blake said in an indisputable voice. – “In fact, you are coming with me.”

“Why would I come with you?” – Ruffus couldn’t understand, - I will be coming with Ren, we don’t need to leave just yet.

“This is my place, and I say who and when can stay here, and you are not allowed to be here by yourself while she is sleeping.”

“Your place! How suddenly it has become your place when you never even lived here!”

“Don’t you mind where I live, it doesn’t change the fact. So visiting time is over. We are going.”

“But Ren is still here!”

“Ren has different rules. What I just said doesn’t apply to her.” – Blake said, showing Ruffus to the door.

“Sometimes you are so mean...” - Ruffus couldn’t understand this treatment, but didn’t argue any more. – “So if she invites me, I cannot come?”

“If she invites you, you can come. But she hasn’t done it yet, so the rules are mine.” – Blake was relentless.

After pulling Ruffus to the living room, he returned and handed the shirt to Rainee.

“I don’t want her to get startled after waking up,” - he explained himself. – “And also, I think she would like to wear it.”

Rainee was choosing what to do – laugh at Blake, or try to be serious, but Blake didn’t give her time to choose and left, closing the door behind. She could still hear unhappy Ruffus’s voice for being chased away like this, but soon it faded away, and it was quiet in the room once more.

Some of the human customs were so meaningless that it was really difficult to respect them all the time. Nudity was one of them. People were going crazy one way or another. Most of the population would prefer to undress themselves only under certain circumstances and only in front of certain people, while another, much smaller group would try to expose themselves to everyone at any time given...

What to hide there and what to expose? You have a body as it is, why would you hide in shame, or show it to somebody who doesn’t want to see it? The body was just as you thought. If someone wants to hear your thoughts, you tell them; if someone doesn’t, you don’t. There are times when no matter what others want, you either say what you have to, or want to, because of the circumstances and surroundings. Or you don’t say it if it distresses people around, and there is no reason to over-count it. And there is no way to conceal what you are thinking from those who truly want to know it. The body is just the same. The less people around you are worried about some strange rules, or locked up by shame, or even guilt, the less you have to think about what others will think and find appropriate. Appropriate... it is a very strange word. Why would someone even say what is appropriate for others? Even without ever seeing someone without their clothes, Rainee knew precisely how they looked to the smallest detail. Is that’s appropriate? If not, then why did The One create everyone like this, and only those who blinded themselves by shame and guilt have lost this ability, alongside many others.

However Blake was right. At this time, if Anniet would find that Blake helped her to get dressed or undressed, she would feel uncomfortable. There was no reason to hide it, but there was no reason to highlight it either. If she felt that whatever way Blake helped her was a dream and she was happy to accept this help only in a dream, then why point out that it wasn’t? If she wants to know, then she will ask, and she will find the truth. If she is happy not to know, then this is her personal life, and no one has either the right or the reason to interfere.

Rainee was glad that Blake had chosen to step in and help Anniet. It was partially his own fault for what she was going through, so it was just right that he was taking actions to help her go through it as much as he was allowed to.

It was interesting to witness him changing more rapidly now, just in a few days, than he did in the past decades. And the change was genuine as it affected him in every aspect of his life, not just in one. That was the easiest way to see if someone is just trying to behave differently under certain circumstances, or if the person is really changing. In the first scenario, there is no change, just an effort to be different, but it will disappear under the first pressure. In the second scenario, it will stay and will affect every aspect of a person's life, no matter if it was intended or not, and with every pressure it will just get stronger.

Rainee walked to Anniet's bed, lifted the duvet away and gently sat her up. She wasn't afraid to wake her. Or should she say that she was sure that she would wake her, but it would not interfere, and Anniet would go back to sleep as soon as allowed. She was in a state like little tired children are, when no matter how much you shake them, the maximum they can do is to open their eyes to have a glimpse at you, and go back to dreamland. That was exactly what happened now. Anniet opened her eyes and smiled upon recognising Rainee, but couldn't be bothered about why she was here, nor what she was doing, and instantly got back to sleep as soon as her head touched the pillow again. Whatever Blake did to chase away her worries worked perfectly, and after all this fever she had, her body was exhausted so badly that now, when her mind was finally at peace and worries gone, all she wanted to do was to sleep and recover.

Rainee tucked Anniet back and watched her for a bit. Gosh, how fragile people are before they grow, she thought to herself. And no matter how fragile they are, they are also so strong. Part of her would like to see Anniet at the peak of her potential as soon as possible, but part of her hoped that this day is nowhere close yet. She stroked her cheek once more before standing up and leaving the room.

Rainee walked through the empty palace towards the King's quarters, thinking to herself that she hadn't been here for such a long time. Then left the building through one of the back doors and turned towards the Flower Pavilion. As expected, Master John was already waiting there, and they walked into this old, mysterious building together.