

**THE BOND
BETWEEN
SISTERS**

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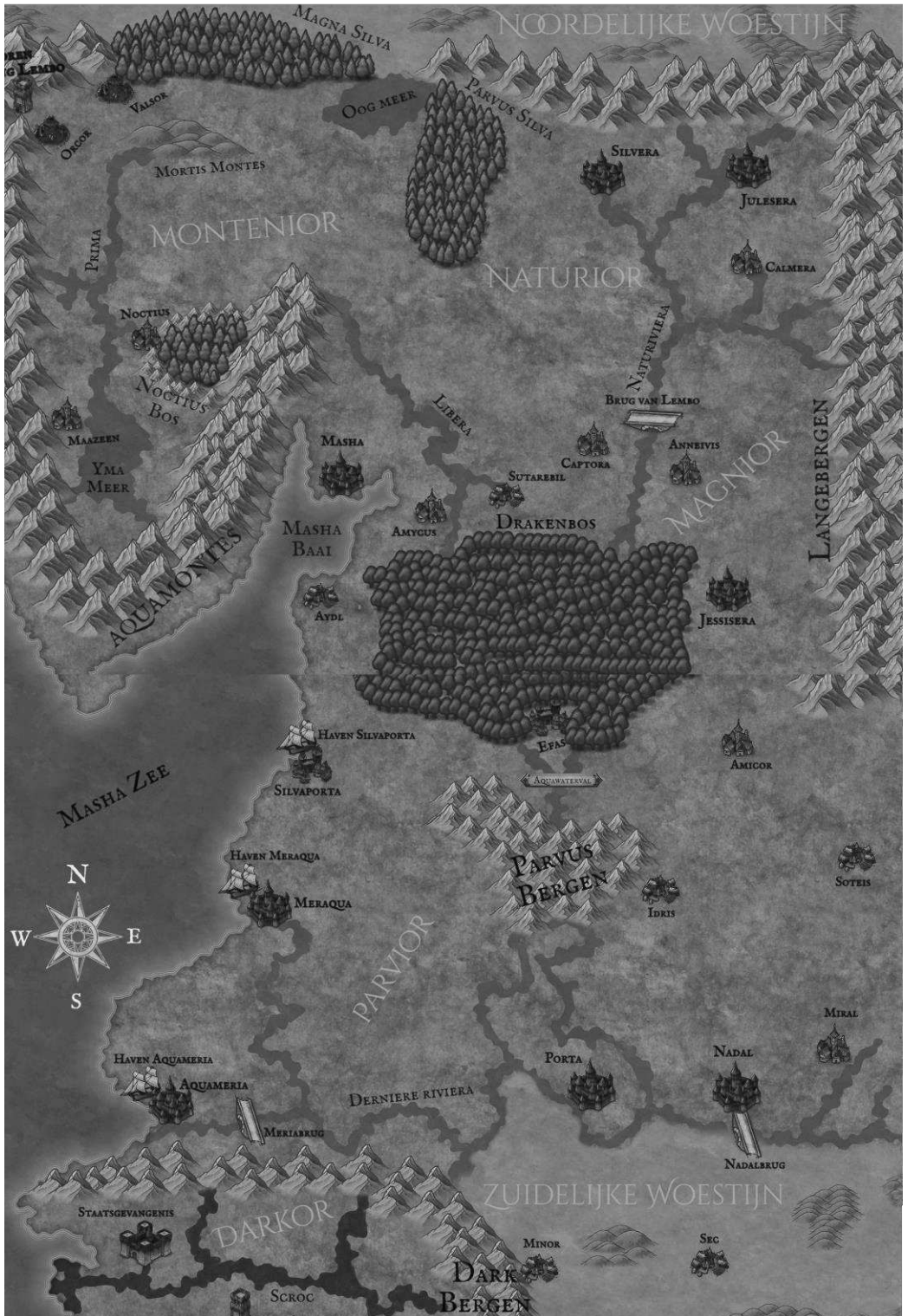
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*This one is for you: for all the people who believe in me as an author
and have given me that push to continue writing and to finally
publish my book.*

Be blessed!

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PROLOGUE

In a land far away, called the Eastern Realm, a dark King ruled in the year 482. Due to his savage rule, the Eastern Realm was shrouded in darkness, where evil prevailed. The dark King was a cruel and despotic sorcerer, who ruled his Kingdom with an iron fist. His name was King Lembo.

When his mother, Queen Masha, was still in power, Lembo was seen as an ambitious man with good, although somewhat revolutionary, ideas. Many people however gave him their support openly and believed that he would become a great King when his mother would hand over the crown to him after a prosperous and long reign.

But this support was not enough for Lembo. He had believed for years that his mother had reached her peak and it was time for him to take over. After many years of careful planning, he treacherously had his mother murdered and took the throne for himself. The takeover was so smooth that at first, no one realised what had really happened to Queen Masha, everyone thought she had died of natural causes caused by the stresses of ruling a Kingdom.

But soon it became clear that the good queen had not died of a natural heart attack. Rumours spread that she had been murdered, murdered by her own son. These rumours gained more strength when Lembo showed his true nature. He began hanging people who spread these rumours about the death of his mother, whom he missed so terribly. Speaking ill of the new King would no longer be tolerated.

It did not stop with just hanging evil tongues. Soon Lembo began tracking down and eliminating his possible opponents under the guise of 'threats to the entire Kingdom.' 'These people undermine my authority,' Lembo once said in a speech. 'It is safer for all of us that they leave this world. They are not controlled by any laws and will plunge us all into disaster. I will not let that happen. This is my Kingdom and I am in charge here. Anyone who denies this or helps those who deny it, deserves nothing better than death, because those persons are traitors to the country; a danger to the state and its well-being.'

People began to realise that inconsiderate words were becoming dangerous. Newspapers were censored and replaced with state-run newspapers. Newspapers that spoke ill of the King were completely shut down and their owners were sent to jail or worse: brutally murdered. Plays, which were a popular form of entertainment, were only used for propaganda and soon the curtain fell for this form of art altogether. Books and parchment scrolls were also strictly checked before publication. Any document that even

hinted at Lembo's tyrannical rule was burned. Anyone in possession of compressive documents was immediately arrested and sent to the state prisons, which slowly but surely began to fill up.

Without something to pass the time, the days were long for the people of the Eastern Realm. The people knew only long working days with little money to be used for house and family. Most of the money went to taxes that Lembo imposed to maintain his defensive fortress and monstrous army. This caused the majority of the population to live in poverty. Only the wealthiest - such as the nobles, governors, and other local aristocracy - managed to keep their heads above water.

A year after his cunning takeover, Lembo left Aquameria where he had grown up. He left his family behind to become a better ruler elsewhere and he travelled to the land of Darkor, from where he imposed his new terror. With dark magic, he built an unbeatable fortress, where he built his own army in the large underground mines beneath the Dark Tower, after it became clear that the normal people were increasingly losing their support for the new King. Orcs, gnomes, trolls, and other dark creatures that instilled a terrible fear in the people when spoken of, were created in Darkor and carried out Lembo's commands during the years. It didn't take long before the people out of fear for their lives submitted to the tyrant's will and their will to resist was reduced to a small smouldering flame.

Only a few brave men, the Freedom Fighters, still had the courage to secretly resist. However, the people were so afraid of the King's wrath when he would find out that Freedom Fighters were present in their city or village that they would betray possible Freedom Fighters. The reward promised by the king for such treachery made it easier for people to betray their villagers and friends. Due to the clandestine conditions in which the Freedom Fighters had to operate, it never came to an open revolt on their part, allowing the King's tyranny to continue.

The King also had no worries about other possible opponents, because he had eliminated them long ago. He had five enormous armies that served him until the end and also had a real Shadow as an advisor. A shadow that terrified even the bravest man and brought him to his knees. No one would dare to take this creature on. The rebellious cities were under his control and the elves, who still did not fall within his Kingdom, were surrounded by cities that did fall under his wings. He was completely safe.

One day, however, a prophecy was made by an unknown sorcerer. The prediction was about the King and soon rumours spread: the King would not be able to maintain his authority for much longer. The downfall would be sealed by the actions of three sorcerers. From the moment this prophecy was known to the King, an unprecedented fear struck and he swore that he would not rest until he had found and killed the three sorcerers. He had his five armies searching for these mysterious magicians, but no matter how he searched he found no sign of the three individuals who were his undoing. No

one knew anything about them and no matter how much he tortured people; he got no useful information from them. He decided to end his desperate search for now, until new rumours about the existence of the three sorcerers would arise. But he was warned and would not be negligent anymore, as he had been for a long time. A warned man counts for two.

Although the King remained vigilant, the thoughts of the mages faded from his head but never from his heart. A few years passed by, during which the King almost forgot the prophecy. The port city called Porta, where the ominous prophecy came from, had gained hope that his end was near and something was brewing there. Something he needed to make short work of immediately, before they rebelled openly and he had to wage a war there. And thus, the ominous words faded into the back of his mind. On Porta his whole focus was.



After five years, the King's old worries regained strength. It was a terribly hot day and King Lembo was sitting on his throne in his tower in Darkor. Monstrous servants served him, his Kingdom was expanding more and more, but the King was still not satisfied. He felt that there was an impending danger. Something or someone would rebel against him and take over his throne. He wondered if Porta had suddenly come up with a defence plan that would decide the war against him. A foolish war, that had been going on for years now. What else could be troubling him after all?

'Valtor!' the King commanded. 'Come here!' A monstrous creature of the Orc race immediately came to him upon hearing his command. He was practically crawling towards him. Valtor was a large, broad Orc and Lembo's strongest warrior, known for being able to kill large numbers of people, elves and dwarves in one blow of his 'Axe of horror'. But now his shoulders were hunched and he hardly dared to look up. Exactly as the King liked his servants best

The King had five armies of this type of violent creatures, but Valtor was the leader of the largest army. This army guarded the land of Darkor, where the King's fortress stood. Even though the land was protected by the Dark mountains, the King felt it necessary to keep one of his armies here due to a great fear that had been part of him a few years ago. What did that fear relate to?

In addition to his largest army, the King also had four other armies that fought his wars and carried out his will in the other four lands of the Eastern Realm. The only lands that the King did not want to be part of his Kingdom were the Northern and Southern Desert. The King found it much too dry there. There was no profit to be gained from these territories. If people did not obey him and they would flee, these two lands would be the only places they could

go to and there they would die of thirst and starvation. That saved him work. Then his executioners could deal with more important opponents than a few runaways.

Valtor knelt before the King and bowed his head in a sign of respect. In a sneaky tone, he asked: 'What can I do for you, mighty ruler?'

'Stand up, Valtor,' commanded King Lembo. 'I want to know if you or one of your men have experienced anything unusual in the prisons.'

'No, Sire, everything is quiet in the prisons.' The monster laughed maliciously. 'There was only one of my men who fell over a pile of excrement.'

The King was disgusted and if Valtor was not so important to him, he would have had him beheaded a long time ago. Now he spoke with barely suppressed annoyance: 'I want a part of your men to guard the prisoners day and night. If any of those traitors have contact with the outside world, kill him immediately! No questions asked!'

'Of course, my Lord. But it is almost impossible to have contact with the outside world. The walls are too thick and...'

'Nothing is impossible, imbecile!' the King snarled. 'Don't you realise that communication can be done telepathically, when dealing with a magician? That viper brood can accomplish a lot with spells and you wouldn't even know if it happened right under your nose!'

'Of course, Sire. You have informed us well. You always protect us from danger. Great is your power and wisdom. I didn't want to offend you, Sire. But the prisoners who are in the cells are only Freedom Fighters, no Magicians.'

'Don't speak against me, Valtor! You know that to go against my will, can cost you your head!'

'I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I didn't mean to be disrespectful.' The Orc shrank back even further.

'But you have a small point, so to return to your thoughtless statement: the prisons are not only filled with those rebels, the so-called Freedom Fighters. There are also some Magicians and Dragon Tamers rotting there. And one of them is enough to pose a danger. Never let your attention falter and keep that scum under 24/7 surveillance, do you hear me?' said the King tiredly. 'The Magicians and Dragon Tamers were only recently thrown into prison and I haven't broken their minds yet, like I have done with the other prisoners. They still pose a threat to me and the entire Realm. Go now! Do as I asked and keep me informed!'

Valtor nodded respectfully and then left the room. King Lembo stood up and looked at his desolated residence. Once Darkor, which was then called Varvenor, was a land like all other lands, full of forests, blue rivers and vast meadows. The land was inhabited and worked by large, prosperous farmers. At that time, the land was fertile and produced the lion's share of the agricultural products in the Eastern Realm.

Then came the black sickness. One day, a farmer found his crops, which had been green and healthy the day before, black and wilted. The farmer in

question, Farmer Maeghan, accused his brother Xeroghan, who controlled the adjacent land, of his failed harvest. Xeroghan would have been jealous of his brother's success and was now taking revenge by cursing his crops with an incurable disease.

However, it soon turned out that they were dealing with something worse; something that could not be stopped by any means. There was no question of magic, but of a natural phenomenon: a virus. The virus spread quickly and soon Varvenor turned into a barren wasteland, not much better than a desert. The once prosperous farms were now abandoned and looked more like ruins, vulnerable to the whims of the weather. A reminder of a far glorious past.

Varvenor was then called Darkor, black land, and no one dared to venture behind the Dark mountains. No one had any business there. Darkor was a land of death and destruction; no life was possible. This was the state in which Lembo found the land many years ago. However, the abandoned land did not scare him; on the contrary, it met his needs. This was a place where no one would bother him any time soon. This was a place where he could expand his armies in peace. But above all, this was a place from where he could move his pawns through the other countries of the Eastern Realm without having to lift a finger himself.

Now Darkor was black everywhere: the water, the ground, the air, and even the Dark mountains. Darkor was not so big, but now, thanks to Lembo's influence, it was powerful once again. It retained its status of 'black land', but the meaning had changed. Darkor was no longer a land that was dead, but sowed and produced death, just as it had sown and produced crops in better times. In Darkor, many of King Lembo's slaves and servants worked in workshops above and below ground. In those workshops, weapons and horrible - but powerful - creatures were made, all of which were used for maintaining order in the rest of the Realm.

King Lembo turned his back on the window and walked out of the room. His two gatekeepers bowed to him and walked ten feet behind him to his destination. The king paid no attention to them and walked without saying a word up a steep spiral staircase to the top of the tower. There stood a giant, red dragon, but the king did not flinch. The dragon opened its eyes and when it realised it had company, it roared fiercely and spat out a massive column of fire at the intruder. King Lembo raised an eyebrow unimpressed and lifted his magical staff effortlessly, putting out the fire that spread in a glowing hot whirlwind.

'Well, Fortior, is this how you greet your master?' King Lembo asked lazily through his thoughts and walked towards his dragon. The dragon lay back down, reassured, and let itself be petted by its master. With his thoughts, the king contacted the dragon again and said: *'I have a task for you, my old friend.'*

As if he had spoken the magic words, the dragon immediately stood up and

replied bloodthirsty: *'Tell me, master. I want to fly again. Long distances in the sky. Tearing people apart! I'm tired of lying on this tower like an obedient watchdog. I want more food than the occasional servants you send me, when they have been disobedient. I want human flesh; not rat's brood.'*

'Hold on, my friend. You know why I keep you here.'

'Yes, no one must have any suspicion that you have bred me. No one must get any idea of your next war move,' the dragon said uninterested. *'What task awaits me now? Can I devour Valtor this time? That snake's brood is so broad, there must be some taste in that meat at least.'*

'No, Valtor can still be useful. I want you to fly to the prisons instead. I have a feeling that one prisoner or maybe several are in contact with the outside world through their thoughts. I want you to go there, because you can better detect communication that happens telepathically than Valtor. It's up to you to feed yourself on your trip to the state prisons in a way that you find desirable. Do it discreetly though. No one must know of your existence.'

'As you wish, my lord,' said Fortior, and he rose into the darkness without looking back. King Lembo watched him for a moment and then walked back down the stairs to his throne, followed by the two gatekeepers who looked back at him in fear, as if they feared Fortior would turn back around and devour them after all.

On his throne, the King briefly thought, but he still felt uneasy. There was only one right now who could give him the answers to his questions. He summoned one of the gatekeepers to him and sent him to the dungeons to fetch his most powerful servant. A creature that people feared so much that they didn't dare to speak his name. a creature with the gift of foresight.

After a quarter of an hour, there was a knock on the door. The gatekeeper came in and bowed hesitantly. 'The Shadow, my lord, has arrived.'

Lembo waved him away and said, 'Bring him in.'

The gatekeeper disappeared through the door and returned a few moments later with a terrifying creature. It was a Shadow. A Shadow was the ghost of a murdered vampire. He served the King loyally and often predicted his future with human bones. The Shadow also fought in important wars, but this rarely happened. However, if he did fight, a victory was guaranteed. The Shadow was a skilled magician and an unbeaten warrior, leaving nothing of his enemies behind. The Shadow couldn't be killed, only with a shot or a stab between the eyes. That's why sometimes, the mere sight of the Shadow was enough to make his enemies beg for mercy. The Shadow was particularly feared for his knowledge of black magic, with which he had killed thousands of people who tried to thwart him.

The Shadow bowed briefly to the King and asked: 'What can I do for you, Sssire?'

'Predict my immediate future, Shadow. I feel that danger is looming and I can't put my finger on what kind of danger it is. I have no opponents anymore, except in Porta. Maggots that I will soon give the final blow.'

The Shadow took his bag of bones, shook it and emptied it on the stone floor. He studied them carefully for a moment and then said: 'You're right, Sssire.'

'I knew it!' said the King angrily and he hit the floor with his staff. 'Who's threatening me this time, Shadow?'

'I see that a triplet is born. Three people who have magical gifts.'

'A triplet?' That was not the answer he expected, but still his heart seemed to miss a beat. He thought briefly, but the prophecy slowly came back to his mind. His blood seemed to freeze. 'The three magicians,' he said softly. His anger built up. 'Which family will these children belong to?' He finally exclaimed. 'I'll send my army after them and bury the children one by one!'

'No, my lord. If I may advise you: Leave them in peace! The triplet will not usse their magical powerssss, if they are raissed in peaccce.'

'I did not ask you for advice,' said King Lembo as he menacingly pointed his staff at the Shadow.

The Shadow recoiled hissing, as if he had been struck and asked carefully: 'What are you planning then, my lord?'

'I want to know immediately when new children are born in my kingdom. And I want to know who they are. Establish a law that takes effect immediately. New-borns must be registered immediately at the local city hall under penalty of death. This way I will find out who the triplet belongs to. And when I know that, I will take them away from their parents. I may try to raise them myself, so that they can practise dark magic and stand by my side. And when that is the case, I will automatically be the most powerful ruler of all the lands and I will be rid of any threat again! And when they will not obey my wishes, I will kill them after all.'

The King let out a chilling laugh that even drowned out the heavy thunderstorm outside. He was alert again and he would wait until that infamous day would arrive, when the three magicians of his nightmares would be born. The three men that would, according to that feared prophecy, lead him to his downfall. But he was once again one step ahead of mankind. No one would overthrow him. The throne was his forever.



And in that same fierce storm, 1400 miles away in the small town of Sutarebil, a triplet was born, whose father could not be present at his children's birth. He had been taken prisoner by the terrifying King just a few months earlier. The woman had never forgiven King Lembo for taking away the love of her life, and she decided to carry out her own little rebellion.

After giving birth to the triplets, she bribed the doctor and made sure that the birth of the three was hidden from the King's attention. She secretly raised her three daughters in their small village and thus the three children

grew up as the three young witches that Lembo feared so much. However, he still did not know that the prophecy referred to these three powerful young women: Lana, Dana and Ivana Liwel.

The three sisters, however, grew up without their gift at first and had to deal with the everyday problems that growing girls face. The girls did not yet know what gifts they would receive and had no idea of the deeds they would perform with them.

I A DISASTROUS HUNT

One day, Lana Liwel woke up early. Although she would have preferred to stay in bed a little while longer – the sun was barely visible and there had been a severe storm in the air for the past few days – duty called. She stretched and yawned, carefully getting out of bed without waking her older sister, Dana, who with their mother didn't have to get up until two hours after sunrise for their work.

However, the animals in the Dragon's Wood didn't wait, so Lana gently woke up her other sister, Ivana, and pointed to the first daylight peeking through their thin curtains. Ivana grumbled briefly, but then quickly brushed her long, wavy chestnut-brown hair. While Lana washed her face with the water in the tub that was in a desperate need of a refill. Maybe a task for them after the hunt, if they still felt like it.

Although hunting in their village was seen as a man's activity, no one raised an eyebrow when the two sisters were seen riding towards the Dragon's Wood before dawn. Everyone knew that Amelia Liwel was not blessed with a son who could take on the role of the man in the family. The Liwels were not well-off and although the people of Sutarebil often helped the single mother and her beautiful, kind daughters with food and clothing, the daughters were still forced to help their mother put food on the table from a very young age.

Ivana enjoyed hunting and since Lana had discovered during one of her small adventures that the Dragon's Wood was full of edible fruits and a variety of animals, she often went hunting with Ivana. Additionally, Lana had another reason to accompany her sister. Lana was a bit of a rebel. In their normal everyday lives, there was no adventure. Each day was filled with the same boring tasks, and so her eighteen-year-old life was one continuous string of days without any prospects.

However, life under the rule of King Lembo was too short, so you had to enjoy every day. Life should be one big adventure. So, if Lana had the choice between the mind-numbing work in the sewing workshop with Dana and her mother or the exciting hunt, she would always choose the latter. Although she was not a fan of killing living beings so that she and her family could survive, taking care of their own meat was still cheaper than buying meat from the local butcher.

This division of labour had, of course, led to some discussions. Dana had not found it fair that she had to help her mother in the sewing shop whole days in a row, while her sisters were allowed to spend their days in the fresh air and often came home empty-handed still. Lana had deliberately left this aspect of the hunt out of their arguments. Dana was right: the hunt could often

yield to nothing. Lana was not a good hunter; Ivana was easily her superior in that regard. And if Ivana had a good catch in sight, Lana was sometimes inclined to sabotage her sister's shot, because she found it too sad for the animal to die. This caused some arguments with Ivana during hunting, but even those arguments, Lana preferred over long days patching up holes and tears in the villagers' clothes.

Lana's unwillingness to take responsibility also caused a lot of tension between Dana and Lana. Dana believed that her two sisters never came home with food, because they didn't take hunting seriously enough. And that, while she and their mother worked themselves almost to death every day. On this, Dana had to make a side note however. Ivana could and wanted to be serious about bringing food on the table, but often chose Lana's side. Ivana would then try to hunt seriously, but as soon as Lana began to lament that it was sad to shoot animals, Ivana let her prey go. Or when Ivana didn't give in to her sister's complaints, Lana deliberately scared Ivana so that she missed her shot. Lana was definitely an animal lover, but that didn't bring food to the table. While it was actually easy for them to get prey, Dana believed.

The three sisters had received the gift of reading and blocking thoughts at the age of 32 seasons old. They had had to learn the latter by themselves, because their thoughts were no longer safe for the other two. Through their thoughts, they could also communicate with each other, when words could not be used. They could also talk to animals telepathically, although they never got a verbal answer from them, only a vague image of the world, as the animal saw it. They often used their gifts to get into the thoughts of animals and to soothe them - for example when they were hunting. That's why Lana considered it an abuse of their gift to calm the animals during hunting: the animal after all had every reason to be afraid of them when its life was at stake.

Despite this, the three girls generally enjoyed their gift very much. It felt good to be special in an otherwise boring existence. That's why they couldn't wait for their individual, active gifts to reveal themselves to them. Their mother had told them once that they would get their first active gift approximately on their 72 seasons birthday. And since they were finally at this age, the three girls waited in excitement to see what the long-awaited active gift would be like.

With her thoughts on all the different active gifts she knew and read about, Lana mounted her brown mare, Erin. Ivana, who was already sitting on her white mare Arwen, held a wet finger in the air. She tested from which direction the wind was coming, so that their prey wouldn't smell them early on in the hunt.

Lana glanced back at their monotonous village and had to admit that she hated Sutarebil. There was always work to be done to survive and there was never any fun to be had. Everyone worked until they literally fell, but no one ever got better from it. Most of the money went to the King's taxes. To a

horrible man, who was sitting somewhere in a godforsaken place and investing their hard-earned money in meaningless wars, while in Sutarebil the people were struggling to survive. She couldn't wait to get out of this unjust place and see the world. She would leave this all behind and make something of herself. She would find that place where Lembo's claws had not yet reached.

There were festivals in their village from time to time that brought Lana some kind of pleasure, but even those had to be organised according to strict rules. There were always fixed stalls selling their goods, fixed activities that could be done, and every festival was closed with the same play being performed, where King Lembo was portrayed as the saviour of the Eastern Realm. Absolutely no deviation from these activities was allowed. Lana probably hated these rules even more than her place of residence, as she saw in those rules the cause of the decline and poverty of Sutarebil.

In the distance by their house, there was still an outraged whinnying to be heard. Cela, Dana's black mare, was the cause of the noise. The animal seemed to disagree that her two companions were allowed to go riding while she had to stay at home. You have Dana to thank for that, dear, Lana thought bitterly. Their mother's grey mare, Aria, was unaware of any wrongdoing and galloped playfully after a butterfly.

'Ivana?' Lana asked and looked at her sister mischievously, when the outraged horse no longer provided her with distraction. 'Shall we do a race to the forest edge?'

'Come on, Laan. We aren't children anymore,' Ivana said irritably, while she adjusted her bow on her back. 'I'm here to hunt, not to play.'

'You just don't want to, because I always win,' said Lana and she stroked her mare's neck. 'Isn't that right, Erin? She's just a chicken.'

'I'm not a chicken. And stop blackmailing me.'

'I'm not blackmailing you. If I was blackmailing you, I would say: 'If you don't have a race with me, I'll tell Shuragh you like him.' And I'm not doing that yet. Although that is a pretty good idea, now that I think about it.'

'You keep your mouth shut, Laan,' Ivana said threateningly.

'Will you have a race with me then?'

'Yes, fine. Ugh, I should have kept quiet. But okay, if you won't tell anyone about my feelings for Shuragh, then I'll participate in your childish race. And second condition: if you let me hunt properly today. Mother and Dana are watching me closely, whenever we come back with empty hands. Today I plan to do something about their constant disappointment.'

'Agreed,' said Lana reluctantly, 'But don't expect me to look at the poor animal, if you kill it. And I'm sure as Hell not touching it.'

'And I am not asking you, sister,' commented Ivana soothingly. 'Shall we get started now? Better to be done with it.' Without waiting for Lana's answer, they simultaneously dug their heels into the flanks of their horses and they shot forward. They rode at a fast pace towards the Dragon's Wood. It seemed as if they were flying and that's why Lana enjoyed the ride immensely.

As usual, Lana was the first to reach the edge of the forest. She patted Erin's neck contentedly and said softly: 'You did well once more, girl. Now you can rest.' Ivana arrived shortly after. 'I won again,' Lana teased Ivana.

'Lovely. Are you satisfied now?' Ivana asked sarcastically. 'Then we can hunt. And woe to you if you don't keep your promise.'

Lana let Ivana take the lead and she followed her sister in a gallop into the Dragon's Wood, where the wind immediately decreased. However, the daylight also no longer reached them, as soon as the leafy canopy was above their heads. Lana hissed from the cold and quickly hid her hands under her travel cloak to provide them with some warmth.

The forest's paths were soon not wide enough to ride next to each other. Lana ordered Erin to follow Arwen and the two sisters rode after each other to their regular open spot in the forest, where they always left their horses safely. The horses had enough grass there to nibble on and water from a calm babbling brook if they got thirsty.

After riding for half an hour in the forest, the two sisters reached this spot and they jumped off their horses lively. The open air here felt wonderful, because it felt as if they could breathe better here than between the trees, where a constricting and suffocating feeling predominated. A strong gust of wind blew through Lana's hair and she closed her eyes in enjoyment.

However, Ivana – a woman on a mission - had already walked back into the forest with an arrow ready on her bow. Lana had long ago swapped the bow for a dagger, because Ivana was better at precision work and had a better chance of actually shooting a prey. For safety, Lana pulled out her dagger and followed her sister into the forest. She felt safer in the dim light of the Dragon's Wood with a weapon in her hand. There were few dangerous animals in this part of the forest though. At most a pack of wolves, but they did not show themselves during the day. It was only necessary to be careful in the evening. That's why the two sisters had a curfew: they had to leave the Dragon's Wood well before sunset.

The Dragon's wood didn't seem to deserve the notoriety it enjoyed. It was wild and sometimes arduous to walk through, but it was the commonplace arduousness of a dense forest. The Dragon's wood felt alive with all the insects buzzing, the wind rustling through leaves, iridescent beetles scuttling, spider webs glistening with the morning dew and woodpeckers thumping the tree trunks.

To be able to hunt, you had to be able to track well and Ivana had developed a talent for this too. She scanned the ground for footprints, broken twigs and trampled leaves, because this told her where a prey had gone. She felt how wet the ground was, because this told her if there might be a drinking spot nearby. She stroked plants and tree trunks, because the smallest unevenness told her if animals had passed by. It was truly educational and beautiful to watch her sister work, Lana thought.

After half an hour following a fresh trail, Ivana had a deer in her sights.

The little animal stood between two trees calmly nibbling a piece of moss. The two girls quietly sat behind a bush, while keeping a close eye on the animal. Ivana reassured the animal through her thoughts, while Lana tightly closed her eyes in anticipation. Ivana pulled her bow back to behind her ears in one graceful movement, concentratedly closed one eye while aiming, and then let go of the bow string. With a loud, hissing sound, the arrow shot through the air and hit its target. The deer fell to the ground with a thud, and Lana felt like she was going to be sick. She couldn't get used to this at all no matter how often they hunted together.

Ivana turned around sympathetically when she felt Lana's discomfort through their thoughts, and she stroked Lana's back soothingly. 'I'm sorry, Laan. I also hate killing animals, but I also don't feel like begging the perverted butcher of our village for a piece of overpriced meat,' Ivana said. 'Besides, this is sadly a part of nature. It's kill or be killed. If we hadn't brought death on him today, a wolf might have done it tomorrow. We've at least given him a quick and relatively painless death. My arrow made sure of that.'

Lana had to admit that there was some truth to Ivana's words. The butcher of Sutarebil was the worst man in the village. He knew that the people of Sutarebil had hardly any money and had to work hard for their food, yet he still made the prices of his meat ridiculously high. He was willing to negotiate though, but only if something else of value was offered that he could profit from.

'I do understand, Iva, but I still find it sad,' said Lana. 'Those creatures did us no wrong.'

'I think it is sad as well,' Ivana said and she patted Lana's head. 'Are you feeling better now?'

'Yes, I'm feeling better again a bit,' said Lana as she cast a fleeting glance at the dead roe. Ivana came out from behind the bush and walked cautiously towards the deer. This was the first time in a while that she had caught an animal this size and it was also visibly difficult for her to not feel sick when she saw the lifeless animal lying there. Nevertheless, she knelt down and stroked the roe over its slender neck while murmuring a prayer for forgiveness. If they ate sparingly from this deer, they could get by on the amount of meat that this deer would yield for one or two weeks.

'Lana? Good news. With this meat, we can last for one or two weeks!' Ivana called out excitedly as she stood up again.

'That is really good news. Two weeks without hunting. I still hope though that we can continue our little trips to the Dragon's Wood,' Lana said and she came out from behind the bushes.

Ivana picked up her dagger and asked: 'Could you go and get me some branches to make a fire? We should better skin the deer before we take it with us. We can also sell the hide at the leather tanner.'

Lana nodded palely and disappeared behind the trees. Ivana sterilised her knife with some water she had brought in a water bag, when she heard a

rustling sound between the leaves and the sound of branches breaking again.

'Lana, is that you already?' Ivana asked, turning around. To her great horror, it was not Lana standing among the trees, but butcher Ridel from the village and he aimed his crossbow at Ivana with a triumphant grin on his scarred face.



Lana sighed as she thought about the roe and the lifeless look in its big brown eyes. Ivana was right. The animal hadn't suffered and it was a matter of survival of the fittest, but she still felt guilty for taking an innocent life. Who gave them the right? They were not goddesses, so why could they decide on a life and the deer not?

Lazily, Lana broke off some dry branches, as she heard Ivana calling her name. Lana growled irritably and turned grimly back around. She had only been gone for a few minutes and Ivana was already complaining that it was taking too long? Sunset was still a long way off, so she had plenty of time to gather some branches for a fire. Lana had just watched her sister shoot an innocent creature. Why did Ivana not understand that she needed some time to process this and definitely did not want to be involved in skinning the animal as well? Besides, after last night's storm there were not many dry branches to be found.

The idea that she actually would have to eat meat with the smell of deer blood still fresh in her hair and clothes, made her stomach turn. She would be just as happy with a meal of nuts, fruits and vegetables, but the rest of her family insisted on adding at least one piece of meat to their meal once a week. For Lana, it was not necessary. Let Dana and mother take a life. See if they dared to eat meat after that.

Muttering to herself in annoyance, Lana started to walk back, while collecting some semi-dry twigs that lay on the path. But when Lana reached her sister, she saw to her great horror the butcher standing next to Ivana, holding a bow aimed at her. He had his back to Lana, so he had not seen her yet.

Lana immediately took action and crept up on him with the dagger in her hand. As she got closer, she heard that the butcher was trying to extort Ivana and her anger increased. He was trying to take away their hard-earned prey, so he could resell it to the poor villagers at a profit. Not going to happen! Not on her watch!

Lana clenched her teeth. She wished the butcher would end up in hell. He was a greedy brute. He also had unsavoury friends who were in direct contact with the king. Lana had never been able to catch him in such practises, but she was almost sure that the butcher was involved in betraying people to his friends from Darkor. He was a criminal and deserved nothing better than

to burn in hell.

Suddenly, Lana was startled by two things that happened in succession. Blue flames erupted out of nowhere around the butcher and ate at his clothes. The man screamed in pain and dropped the crossbow trying to put out the flames that were eating him alive with both his hands. He soon looked like a living torch. Lana looked at her left hand, which she had unconsciously held out in front of her. Had she summoned those flames? Was this her long-awaited, active gift?

Before Lana could answer her own question, Ivana suddenly screamed in pain as well. Lana felt the blood drain from her face. Had she accidentally set Ivana on fire as well? Lana ran quickly to her sister and to her great relief saw that her sister was not disfigured by blue flames. However, her relief was short-lived when she saw that the butcher's arrow had somehow found its way into her sister's arm after all.

2 CAUGHT IN THE ACT

Lana felt her anger grow as she saw her sister's pain, causing the flames that licked the butcher to grow even larger. However, she also felt a fear that grew by the minute. The butcher was known to use poison arrows during hunting. This was to prevent wild animals from being able to flee. When an animal was shot by a poisonous arrow, they would immediately drop dead, so thereby the chance of still escaping was reduced to zero. However, this poison was also deadly to humans. Humans' blood took up the poison and carried it directly to the heart in mere minutes. If Ivana had been hit by one of those arrows, they would only have a matter of seconds to save her life...

'Help!' the butcher screamed when he noticed Lana, who was still rigid behind him, overwhelmed by her fears.

Lana looked at him and asked anxiously and at the same time angry: 'Did you use one of your infamous poisonous arrows?'

'Help me put out the flames first, then you'll get your answers! Put out the flames now!' His shouting turned into painful moans.

'Listen, Mr. Ridel! I'll help you after you answer my question!' said Lana coolly.

'Are you crazy? I'm on fire, you little she-devil!'

'My sister is the one dying! You heard me and I don't like repeating myself!'

'Agree!' the man screamed in pain as the flames gained strength again. 'Agree! No, it wasn't a poisonous arrow, I think. I was following you, so I didn't take one with me. However, I don't rule out the possibility that a poisonous arrow has been left in my quiver. They are quite difficult to distinguish from the normal ones, you see?'

But Lana had heard something else that made her anger flare up: 'You did what?' she asked in a rage, causing the flames to grow larger and warmer, diverting from the butcher's painful face. The flames had a bright shade of blue now.

'Stop, Lana!' said Ivana weakly. 'He doesn't need to die!'

'Frankly, I don't know how to stop this!' Lana admitted in fear, as she didn't want to hurt the butcher despite all the bad things he had done, let alone kill him.

'Don't you remember what Mom told us?' Ivana asked soothingly. 'When you first get your gift, you don't have it under control. Your gift is awakened by strong emotions, such as anger. You can only stop it by calming down. Mom was going to teach us later how to call up and use our gifts voluntarily.'

'Are you really telling me to calm down?' Lana asked, completely

surprised. 'This man followed us and he hurt you!'

And the flames rose two feet higher once more. This fuelled Lana's fear more than her anger, and she started breathing calmly. Gradually her anger began to subside, and the flames became smaller, but to get rid of them completely, Lana knew she had to be completely calm. That's why she tried to think of something nice that would take the rest of her anger away. She thought of the dreams she often had about leaving Sutarebil. Finally seeing the world. Away from all these obligations and living her life as she wished. Her heart made a joyful leap, and the flames finally disappeared completely. The butcher fell unconscious to the ground. From pain or relief, Lana dared not say. It actually mattered very little to her.

'Well done, sister,' Ivana panted, holding herself upright onto a tree. Lana ran to her and put an arm around her. Supported by Lana, Ivana stumbled to a rock and sat down. Lana felt quite weakened after her magical endeavour and fell down next to Ivana, breathing heavily.

Ivana looked disgustingly at the unconscious butcher. 'He followed us, he told me before you came. He wanted to take the doe with him.'

'I had already suspected that. That was one of the reasons for my anger.'

'He knew we were going hunting. Next time we have to be more careful. I don't want to see him in the forest again, holding me under fire. He won't let this go. He will want revenge.'

'He wants revenge?' Lana exclaimed, with a look at Ivana's arm. 'He shot you, remember?'

'Ow, Laan, you know the man. His pride has been hurt, since you defeated him. I expect that he wants to get back at us in the only way he can hurt us.'

'Food,' Lana finished her sentence. 'He knows we're capable of providing for ourselves now and he'll want to take that away from us. Let him try! We'll be extra careful now.'

'We have to be even more careful than that. And not just with hunting. He's seen you, Laan. The butcher is not the smartest man alive, but even he will have come to the conclusion that you started and stopped that fire without saying anything. You can be sure he'll immediately tell one of his criminal friends, once he comes to. I just hope they don't take him too seriously, because this could end badly. If the king hears about your ability...'

'That's a worry for later,' Lana said, as Ivana moaned audibly. 'That arrow needs to come out now or the wound can't be bandaged,' she added after examining the wound.

Ivana turned a sickly pale colour, while saying: 'Shouldn't that be done by a medicine man or something?'

'Don't you trust me?' Lana asked, a bit hurt.

'I do trust you, but you're weakened now. You'll shake so much that you'll do something wrong.'

'Being weakened doesn't mean I can't think. Well, don't complain so much. Did you want to get on your horse with that arrow still stuck in your arm then?'

'No, but...'

'Then let me do this. The blood will harden and it'll hurt even more to remove the arrow then, or even worse, you'll get infected. I don't suppose you're looking forward to that, are you?'

Ivana shook her head and let Lana do as she pleased. The mistrust was completely unjustified, because Lana took care of Ivana's arm as best she could. First, she broke the arrow in two and gave Ivana the end to bite on, while she herself firmly but skilfully pushed the rest of the arrow out of Ivana's arm. It was the worst pain Ivana had ever felt and for a moment she thought she would faint. But Lana already tore a strip from her travelling cloak and began to bandage Ivana's heavily bleeding arm. Ivana was surprised that Lana wasn't a housewife. She would be extremely competent in treating the wounds of small children. Ivana voiced her thoughts and Lana laughed.

'And then sit in the same house all day; cooking, cleaning and taking care of children? No, thank you.'

'Don't you want to get married at all then? Don't you need a loving man? You have already received a few proposals from handsome men, but you declined them without thinking.'

'If you get married, you automatically become a housewife,' said Lana indifferently. 'Sorry,' she added sympathetically, as Ivana's eyes closed from the pain of tying the makeshift bandage. 'By the way, Iva, you have also received a few proposals yourself,' Lana added to distract her sister. 'Are you really waiting for Shuragh to court you?'

'A little bit, but mainly I don't want to be tied down yet. Not now, at least.'

Lana suddenly thought about the rumours that were going around in the village about Dana. The villagers believed that Maragh Londel, Dana's haughty and irritating boyfriend, had asked her to marry him. Since Ivana had a better relationship with Dana, she should be able to provide some clarity on this subject, right?

'Iva, I have to ask you something now that we are talking about marriage and such. Do you really think that Dana is going to marry that jerk Maragh? Dana takes you more seriously in these matters than me, so has she said anything to you perchance?'

'She has said something, but she did so in confidence. So, I can't and won't say anything more about it,' said Ivana, as they stumbled back to their horses. 'I think you should ask Dana yourself about this kind of thing. I don't want to mediate between you two in matters of the heart.'

'You know that Dana doesn't trust me, just because I'm a bit less responsible. So, there's no point in asking her.'

'She is ten minutes older than you, yes,' sighed Ivana.

Lana's face fell: 'What does that have to do with it? Does she always have to act superior towards me just because of that? I want to have a good relationship with both of my sisters, but that won't happen if Dana doesn't treat me as her equal.'

'Go talk to her then, Laan. Dana thinks that you find her a nuisance.'

'I don't. Well, sometimes I do. But that doesn't matter now. I love her just as much as I love you.'

'Tell her that and everything will be fine,' said Ivana as she got into her saddle with Lana's help. Lana got into her saddle much faster and then they rode back to the village to the medicine man, without even looking back once at the unconscious butcher.



Dana was bored behind her sewing machine and wished she was with her sisters instead, outside in the woods. It had turned into such a warm day! Dana often felt jealous of her two sisters, who got to go hunting in the woods. Of course, this was also a form of work, but there was also a lot of fun involved. On the other hand, Dana was also proud of herself. She was the only one of the triplets who worked and provided for her family financially. Furthermore, she was going to get married first.

Dana wasn't sure if she loved Maragh Londel unconditionally, like the love-struck princesses in fairy tales loved their princes, but Maragh's family was practically nobility and had a lot of money as a result. She realised that if she married the eldest Londel son, her sisters and mother would also benefit financially.

Dana sighed. It might seem selfish to get married for money, but she was doing it for her family. Wasn't that unselfish instead? Besides, wasn't marriage just an economic transaction anyway? Did love even exist in marriage? She would learn to love Maragh. If such a thing as love even existed, it just needed time. She couldn't let this opportunity pass her by. She sighed, wondering if her sisters did anything in return for her sacrifices for their family.

Dana shook her head to dispel this bitter thought. Maragh was a handsome and smart young man, with the only drawback being that he could come across as a bit conceited at times. He had a proper job at his father's leather factory. Maragh knew he was good-looking. He liked to let people know that as well. However, Maragh had a heart of gold and always treated Dana well and with respect. He bought her gifts, complimented her, and wanted to show her off to all his friends and family. He was proud to have her as his girlfriend, even though she didn't wear expensive dresses or glittering jewels. He had chosen her and would take care of her. She had made the decision to marry him on her own. Maragh hadn't forced her hand in this. The

only ones who knew about the proposal were her mother and Ivana. They supported her decision and Ivana had decided to try harder during the hunt in exchange.

What Dana had really wanted from Ivana though was that she would have taken over her work at the tailor shop for one day only, so Dana could have some time alone with Lana. She would do almost anything to improve her relationship with her youngest sister. All those endless arguments made nobody happy. Yet, it seemed like nobody understood that she needed a day off, just one day, so she could go hunting with Lana. How much that would change things!

She still hadn't told Lana about her upcoming marriage to Maragh. She told herself that the right moment had not presented itself yet, but deep down she knew she was too afraid to tell Lana, because Lana was more outspoken than Ivana and made no secret of her disdain for Maragh. Dana was sure that Lana for one wouldn't support her marriage.

Dana was so lost in her thoughts that she got quite a good scare when Lana stormed into the sewing studio. Reluctantly, Dana blushed a little: be careful what you wish for. 'What's going on?' Dana asked, standing up in shock when she saw the fear in her sister's eyes.

'Ivana was shot in the arm by the butcher when we were hunting. When I bound her arm, she was doing just fine. However, on our ride home she became paler and more feverish and suddenly she fell from Arwen.'

'Where did you go hunting and how did the butcher get there for crying out loud?' Dana asked, grabbing Lana by her shoulders and examining her anxiously. 'Did he do anything to you?'

'No, not sexually fortunately. He wanted to take our catch, but then shot Iva. That's bad enough, it seems to me. If you don't mind, I'll tell you the whole story later. I want to go back to Ivana right away. I left her with the medicine man. Where is mother?'

'I'll get her. You go back to Ivana so someone is with her when she wakes up. Has the medicine man seen her or is she waiting for treatment?'

'Ivana is being treated now as we speak,' Lana said hastily, as she ran out of the tailor shop again.

Fortunately, they had few customers that day, so Dana didn't take the time to clean up her work table. She quickly closed the door instead so no new customers could come in. Her mother had an important meeting with their boss Dalagh, Dana knew. Dana walked quickly to his office and knocked three times on the door, but in her hurry and fear for her sister's fate, she didn't wait for her boss's permission to enter.

So, she walked into the office space and stood still, when she saw what was happening there. Her mother was just freeing herself from the arms of their boss, who was extremely embarrassed and was looking at his leather shoes. Dana's mother smoothed her curly hair and straightened her dress, but Dana had seen enough. This was not a normal work meeting.

Her mother tried to say something, but couldn't form any words due to her shame. Dana was speechless with anger. It seemed like she was the only one who was actually working today. Even her mother couldn't keep herself occupied with her daily tasks. No, she found it more interesting to 'chat' with Dalagh instead. Important meeting? Sure.

'Dana, honey, can't you wait for permission before you barge in somewhere?' Amelia awkwardly asked.

'Can't you tell your daughters that you're cheating?' Dana asked angrily.

'Dana, dear, it's not what it looks like.'

'No, it never is, right mom?' Dana snapped. 'It doesn't matter right now: I didn't come here to find out the truth, although I'm now wondering how many shocks I'll have to endure today. No, I came to get you. Lana just came to see me. There's been an accident in the woods: Ivana has been shot by mister Ridel and we need to go there now. She's in a bad state.'

'What?' her mother asked incredulously.

'She's being treated by the medicine man and I'm going there now, so if you have time in your busy schedule to come with me to see your other daughter, I would greatly appreciate it.'

With these words, Dana angrily turned and stormed out before she would say any more hateful things in her anger. Soon, she was caught up by her mother. 'That hurt, Daan,' her mother said, wounded. 'You acted like I'm the kind of mother who is never there for her children, when you know very well that I would do anything for you girls.'

'I'm sorry then,' Dana said sincerely, but she refused to look at her mother still, 'but that doesn't explain why you didn't tell us that you were in a relationship with Dalagh, our boss, mom!'

'Because I didn't want you to react like you are doing now. As if I am doing something wrong.'

'But you are, Mom!' Dana snapped and stopped. 'Dad is gone and you immediately started seeing another man.'

The Liwel sisters had never known their father. As far as Dana knew, he had already been gone before they were born. According to her mother, he had known that she was pregnant and had suspected that she was having triplets, since it ran in his branch of the family. However, he never even came to see his daughters and Dana had always wondered why. Where was he? Her mother had told them that he had left her, but the reason why and where he was now, her mother had never told them. The grief was still too fresh, she always said. Well, apparently not so fresh, Dana thought venomously, when she remembered her mother in the arms of their boss.

'That's not true, Dana. And you know it. Your father has been gone for 76 seasons and I can't wait for him forever. He himself said that I should move on with my life when he... when he left us.'

'Where did he say he was going? What was so important that he left

his pregnant wife behind?’

‘I can't tell you that yet. I can only say that I've left your father behind after 76 long seasons of waiting for his return. He won't be coming back to us. I'll never forget him, but I'm ready to move on with my life.’

‘I thought that a marriage meant that you are loyal to each other forever,’ Dana said angrily, secretly wondering if her own marriage would hold up when her mother's and father's did not, even though they loved each other unconditionally. ‘Isn't the famous phrase: until death do us part?’

‘You don't understand,’ her mother sighed and she rubbed her curly hair in frustration. ‘How could you understand? You're too young to understand what your father and I have been through.’

Dana finally looked at her mother and said, ‘No, I don't understand! I don't understand anything of what you're saying. And can you blame me? I don't know anything about my father, only his name and that he's gone. We don't know where he is or why he left, because you never told us anything about him. And if you want me to accept and understand your relationship with Dalagh, then you'd better tell me all there is to know about my father very quickly!’

For a moment there was a long silence and Dana feared she had gone too far, but then her mother reluctantly said: ‘If that is what the three of you really want, then I agree. I have been keeping the truth from you for far too long now. You are right, honey. Perhaps you girls are old enough now to learn about what really happened to your father.’

3 THE ACTIVE GIFTS

She had waited for it for so long and had whined about it so much that, now that her mother finally gave in, Dana briefly forgot everything and suspiciously asked: 'Are you really telling us the truth? All of a sudden?'

'Yes, you are old enough now, as I said. I have been holding back the truth for far too long, because I still see you as my little girls who need protection from the harsh, cold world. However, you have already developed into strong and smart young women. And soon you will receive your first active gift. I can hardly speak of children then. My strong girls.' Amelia laughed proudly. 'It's time to tell you the truth, but on one condition: I will only tell you once we the three of us are together again. Ivana also has the right to know what happened to her father. Besides, I can't bear to tell this story multiple times. The sorrow after 76 long seasons is hardly diminished, whatever you may believe.'

'Ivana,' Dana cried out in shock and a little ashamed, as she realised, she had completely forgotten about her sister. She immediately picked up the pace and after five minutes they reached the medicine man of Sutarebil.

The medicine man lived in a large wooden farmhouse on the outskirts of the village. Behind the former farm was a large barn, where the cattle used to be kept. Now this large stable was converted into a treatment room. On the ground floor, the medicine man had set up a waiting room and on the first floor, his patients were treated. There were beds there and a large stock of medicinal herbs and plants, bandages, and potions that the medicine man needed for his treatments.

Although he only worked in a small village, the medicine man was an honest man with extensive knowledge of all kinds of diseases and ailments. He claimed to have received a medical education in the north, in the city of Julesera where all the great medical names came from. The education lasted ten years and covered all areas of medicine, after which the student specialized in one or more areas.

Dana had never been to Julesera, but when the troubadours and merchants stayed in Sutarebil each year, they told stories about the white tower where so much knowledge flowed. If there was anything Dana wanted to see in her life, it was Sia's Tower, named after the goddess of medicine.

Dana stormed along with her mother past the medicine man's house without announcing themselves and they went straight to the backyard. Lana was already pacing impatiently there. When she noticed them, she asked irritably: 'What took you all so long? Did I not make it clear to you how serious this is?'

'I had to get Mom away from the boss for a moment,' Dana said bitterly.

But when she saw Lana's questioning look, she said: 'Don't ask.'

'How is Ivana?' Their mother intervened concernedly. 'Have you heard anything about how the treatment is going?'

'I don't know. I'm not allowed to be with her while they're treating her because of the risk of infection.'

'I'm going to look for someone who can tell me more. I can't just wait here and do nothing,' their mother said anxiously as she went to find someone who could alleviate her worries. Dana and Lana walked into the waiting room and let themselves drop onto two stools, tensed. Although Dana was biting her nails nervously, she saw out of the corner of her eye that Lana was still looking at her curiously.

'You don't want to tell me again, do you?' Lana asked disappointedly. 'Something happened after you went to get our mother. What?'

'No, I can't tell you yet because I don't understand it all myself. Besides, it's not my secret to share.'

'No, it never is.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'You know what I mean. How is Maragh for example?'

Dana turned her head away so that Lana wouldn't see her face turn red. 'Maragh is fine. And so is our relationship.'

'Fine? Is that what you'd call it?'

Dana chewed on the inside of her cheek. She and Lana were talking without any accusations being thrown back and forth. Could she now tell Lana about her upcoming marriage? Dana lowered her eyes guiltily when she said instead: 'Yes, we're happy together.'

Lana looked straight ahead for a moment and Dana could swear that her sister's eyes were watering when she said in an unprecedentedly serious voice: 'I'd like to talk to you, Dana. Really talk. No small talk. Ivana and I also talked about it in the Dragon's Wood. I think a good conversation would be good for the both of us. Although we're triplets, we don't do it nearly enough.'

Dana briefly felt a surge of annoyance that her sisters had talked about her while she was absent. 'I would also like that,' she said only, as it was no more than what she herself had wished for during her work.

'Why don't we ever have this conversation? It just leads to conflicts between us. There are so many things I want to say and know, but I never get the time to ask. You might think that I just want to have fun and can't take on responsibility, but that's not true. I can also have an adult conversation.'

'I know that, but I thought you found me to be a nag. That's why I never approached you.'

'I don't find you to be a nag, Daan,' said Lana with a grin and added: 'Well, except for some exceptions then.'

Dana laughed relieved and hugged her sister tightly. 'We'll have that conversation soon, okay? I want to stay updated on what's happening with Ivana now.'

'Me too. And I'll tell you what happened as soon as mother returns.'

'Okay,' said Dana and then they were quiet. They were both too worried about their third sister to talk about other things. Dana rubbed her arm where she felt flickers of Ivana's constant pain, which was due to the close bond they shared and the telepathically gift they shared.

Thankfully, their mother returned from the first floor not much later. Amelia looked as if she had seen a ghost and Dana jumped up to offer her mother the stool she had just been sitting on. 'Mom?' Dana asked carefully as she caressed her mother's upper arm. Lana bit her lower lip anxiously, a tic she always showed in times of distress.

Dana's touch brought Amelia out of her reverie and she said in shock: 'It turned out that there was still a small amount of poison in the arrow that struck Ivana.'

'She won't die from that, will she?' asked Lana in fear. The colour had drained from her face and Dana understood why. Lana said she had treated Ivana in the Dragon's Wood. Her sister was surely wondering if she had wasted any crucial minutes by trying to treat Ivana's wounds. With her free hand, Dana squeezed Lana's shoulder encouragingly. Lana grabbed Dana's hand as if it were a life raft.

'No, not that. However, the poison in this amount can prevent the wound from healing on its own. This can cause Ivana to become severely ill and it seems that this is now the case.'

'And what are they doing about it?' asked Dana, when she saw the medicine man walk by agitatedly.

'They have already cleaned and re-banded the wound. Now they are mainly trying to lower the fever. Afterwards, they will give Ivana a mixture of marshmallow root to get the poison out of her body.'

'Can't they do that now? What's the point of lowering the fever if the reason for her fever is still in her body?' asked Dana, confused.

'Due to her fever, she refuses to eat and drink. The medicine man has just barely managed to provide Ivana with fluid in another way.'

'When will Ivana get better? How long will she have to stay here?' Lana asked worriedly.

'At least a week and maybe even longer. The poison that's raging through her body is not often used and the side effects vary from person to person. That's all the medicine man could tell me. However, he's doing his best and we know that there's never been an illness he couldn't cure,' their mother sighed. 'Lana, please tell me what happened. As far as I know, you were just hunting and animals can't shoot back.'

Lana took a deep breath and told them what had happened exactly. When Lana got to the part about her new gift, she had to explain twice how she had used her gift and how she had been able to activate it. Dana was fascinated by Lana's gift and wished she could have such a useful gift as well. She had hoped to be the first one, since she was the oldest of them. However,

she was glad for Lana. And a fire gift... that really fit Lana's fiery character. She allowed herself to fantasise for a moment about what gift would fit her own character.

'The gift of fire,' Amelia whispered with tears in her eyes. 'It seems like you resemble your mother not only in appearance.' She then told them that she had also gotten the gift of fire first, during a moment of emotional turmoil. She had had a fight with Heron Liwel, who would later become her husband. Heron had teased her along with a few other boys, something that had been going on for years. On that day, his usual teasing had not gone well and she had wished to be able to hurt him. As a result, the sleeve of his tunic had caught fire. Out of fear of repercussions, Amelia had fled home, where that same evening Heron had stood at her door. Amelia, who had expected him to come for revenge, was never more surprised when her tormentor came with a bouquet of beautiful orchids to apologise sincerely. Since then, his behaviour had completely changed and he had even helped Amelia learn more about her power and how to control it.

'How romantic!' muttered Dana.

Lana smirked. 'I didn't know dad was a bully.'

Amelia smiled warmly. 'Essentially, he wasn't really. He was still young and young men don't know how to deal with feelings well. He expressed his affection for me in that nasty way of his.' She laughed at the stunned expressions on Dana and Lana's faces. 'Don't forget girls, true love often starts with a fight.'

Lana shook her head as if trying to get rid of a nasty thought. 'But you can't just control fire, right?'

'No, I can move things with my mind. Moreover, where there is fire, there needs to be water.' She winked. 'It seems I had to be balanced, so I have a gift that allows me to control water in addition to a gift for controlling fire.'

'And there's a chance that we've inherited your other gifts?'

Amelia thought for a moment, then nodded. 'It seems unlikely that all three of you have a gift for controlling fire.'

When Dana heard this, it didn't matter to her what gift she would receive. Both of the gifts that were left, sounded good to her. Images of what she could do if she could move things or use water as she pleased shot through her head. She couldn't hide a grin.

Their mother let them speculate excitedly with each other for a while, then said seriously: 'There's a reason I never told you before what gifts I have.'

'Yes, mother. You never told us or showed us what you could do.'

'That was done for a reason. Our gifts must be kept a secret. King Lembo would love to add three new witches to his army.'

Lana shuffled her feet awkwardly. Embarrassed, she said: 'That will be a little difficult, mother. The butcher saw that I set him on fire. Furthermore, Ivana told me to stop the fire. The butcher is not stupid and he certainly saw that I was the one to stop the fire and not by kicking it out.'

‘That’s a serious problem, Laan. Of all the villagers, he’s the one who absolutely shouldn’t have discovered it. Everyone knows the butcher has shady contacts. Before we know it, King Lembo will be at our door! There’s nothing else to it: we have to try to bribe the butcher,’ their mother said worriedly.

‘Maybe he forgot the whole thing while he was unconscious?’ Lana suggested hopefully.

Their mother shook her head sorrowfully: ‘No, mister Ridel is not the type to forget such important things.’

‘Speak of the devil and he shall appear,’ Dana said, gritting her teeth when she saw a very familiar person stumbling towards the barn.

Lana and mother turned around and saw the butcher stumbling inside. He looked terrible. He walked like an old man with a wooden leg and he had burns all over his body. When he saw Lana, he grinned maliciously though and he walked towards them. Amelia stood protectively in front of her daughters, when the butcher took his crossbow and pointed it at them.

They had mere seconds. Dana couldn’t watch how the arrow would bury itself in her mother. She first wanted to scream, but she realised almost immediately that this would be the stupidest thing she could do. There was no one who could save them in time and if the butcher got scared, he would certainly wound them. He had already shown that with Ivana.

Everything happened in one moment. They looked at each other for a while hostilely. The butcher’s grin got wider and he let the arrow fly without hesitation. The world stood still as the arrow flew towards them in slow motion. Dana couldn’t let this happen. She screamed: ‘No!’ and raised her left hand.

And suddenly a stream of water shot from the rain barrel outside, which like a whip caught the arrow mid air and slammed it against the wall. Everyone looked at Dana as she looked at her hand that she had stuck out stunned. Exactly the same – at least that’s how Lana had just described it – as when Lana used her active gift for the first time. Was this finally her long-awaited gift? The gift of water? When Dana redirected her control elsewhere, the water whip fell apart, causing them to stand in a small puddle of water.

The butcher quickly overcame his shock and menacingly said: ‘Well, well, Amelia, three witches brought into the world, eh? I assume they are registered with King Lembo, because that is the law after all. Does our King know that your little girls are witches though? I assume not, because otherwise they would have been taken away by the King himself a long while ago already. However, it may so happen that someone by chance tells the truth to him or one of his spies. You never know what happens after a few rounds of beer.’

Lana could no longer contain herself and broke free from her mother’s grip. White-hot anger visibly flared up in her and the flames of her gift curled around her. Lana didn’t feel this, however, and stormed towards the butcher.

He drew a dagger to protect himself from her flames, but before Lana could do any damage, the man was thrown away from her by an invisible force. He flew out of the stable, out of sight.

Ivana descended the ladder trembling and sweating, but she held up her left hand. She looked sick, but determination radiated from her face. Astonishment at seeing her ill sister out of bed displaced Lana's anger and the flames around her disappeared immediately. Ivana stumbled weakly to the stool and collapsed there exhausted. The three girls looked at each other in amazement. They had never expected that direct danger would be the reason for the activation of their gifts, but it seemed that all three of their active gifts had revealed themselves today in a moment of dire need.

They only broke their eye contact when there was a new shuffling sound on the stairs. A confused medicine man came down the stairs. His glasses were crooked and he had a huge bump on his forehead. He walked towards Ivana and threw a caring arm around her. He gently lifted her up and almost carried her to the stairs, since Ivana's legs were still too violently shaking to support her body weight.

At the bottom of the stairs, he stopped for a moment and said to Lana: 'You could have told me that you are witches, then I would have treated your sister with more tact.'

'What happened?' mother asked worriedly.

'Well, I wanted to take care of Ivana's wound,' said the medicine man with a merry twinkle in his eye, 'and apparently, I caused her pain by doing that. Before I knew it, I flew through the air like a lost bird caught in the wind. When I finally got back on my feet, I couldn't find my patient anywhere.'

Lana secretly imagined the medicine man flying through the air with an incredulous face and she grinned at her sisters. They apparently understood Lana's reason for joy and they also laughed. This situation was too bizarre for words.

However, their joy came to a quick end when the butcher came back into the stable. His face was twisted with anger and he had to hold onto the doorpost due to a deep cut in his leg. That man never gave up! Dana automatically stood in front of her sisters protectively, holding the hands of both, not knowing what the butcher would try now.

'This was the last time you attacked me, witches,' said the butcher furiously. 'I will personally make sure the King finds out about your true nature. He will undoubtedly find you. He will have you burned. Count on my revenge becoming the truth! Even if this is the last thing I do!'

4 GOOD RIDDANCE

Trembling with fear, the three sisters sought each other's support, but their mother was also ashen. They had never seen the butcher as a real threat before. He was good at swindling and he was also quite the pervert, but they had never considered that he could destroy their fine life by just one conversation with the wrong people. However, this thought now penetrated them with a shock.

Mister Ridel spat on the ground and stumbled out of the stable without being treated for his wounds. The medicine man shook his head and said: 'You really have to be careful around him. He often goes to the tavern and talks to the strangest people. It doesn't surprise me if he has indeed contact with King Lembo without having to look for the King himself, if you understand what I mean.'

After these words, the medicine man firmly took a deathly pale Ivana by the arm and helped her upstairs. 'Come on you,' he said worriedly, when he saw Ivana's complexion. 'You need to rest. This effort was much more than what you should have done.'

'What should we do now?' asked Dana after a short period of silence as she sat down at the bottom of the stairs since her legs no longer wanted to carry her. 'We can of course hex or threaten the butcher or his family. After all, did he not have a wife and a daughter? For a normal man, those two things are the most important things in his life.'

'But the butcher is not a normal person,' Lana countered. 'I have often seen him being a real jerk to his own wife and daughter. I doubt he cares enough about them to save their skin and to leave us alone.'

'No, and besides: we don't threaten or hex people,' Amelia said firmly. 'You have not yet mastered your powers. Soon people will die.'

'That's it,' said Lana and she grimaced briefly. 'I can help with that. Leave it to me.'

'No, Laan,' said Dana sharply and she grabbed her sister by the arm.

Lana realised too late that Dana had read her thoughts and said indignantly, 'Stay out of my head!'

'You didn't shield your thoughts either,' Dana defended herself. 'But that's not important right now. If we carry out your plan, we're just as bad as he is and maybe even worse. Besides, we don't know if he has already informed a spy. If he dies, we know nothing and we can still be in danger. We have to interrogate him first.'

'And then what? You know what he did to Ivana. I want him to pay for it! Don't you want revenge for that? He could do the same thing to other people and things might not end well for them! I'm saving more lives than I'm sparing

by getting rid of that man! That doesn't make me bad, but a hero!

'What's this about?' mother asked sharply.

'Lana has a plan, but I find it quite...'

'Irresponsible,' Lana filled in angrily.

'That's not what I was going to say,' Dana said.

'But that's what you think, right? That I'm irresponsible?' Lana asked sarcastically.

'Ladies, stop it now!' their mother intervened, standing between them.

'We have more important things to think about. We need to come up with a good plan quickly. Bribing still seems to me the best and safest option to handle things. If we offer enough...'

Dana looked at her sister in the meantime and said telepathically: *I don't think you're irresponsible. I know you want to do this to protect us, but this is a sacrifice you shouldn't have to make. I'm afraid of the consequences of your plan. Besides, it's just not right!*

And of course, you know best like always, Lana retorted.

'Well, let's put everything in order,' mother said without being aware of the telepathic conversation that the two sisters had had. 'Enchanting and threatening aren't options, because we are good witches and we don't do that kind of thing.' Lana made a strange face, causing Dana to grin bitterly. 'We could keep an eye on him so we know when he meets with shady characters, but the chance of getting caught is much too high and we won't achieve anything with it. The butcher is too smart and sneaky to be stopped by a few women. I fear, however, that we will have to offer a lot of money to bribe him. Where are we going to get the money from? Maybe Dalagh can give me an advance if I explain the situation to him. Dana, do you think you could ask him...?'

Suddenly the three women were startled by footsteps and a moment later Dana's boyfriend Maragh entered the stables. He looked around arrogantly and then saw Dana standing there. His face tightened into a cocky grin and he walked firmly towards her. He ignored Lana and Amelia completely and immediately took Dana in his wiry arms. Without saying a word, he kissed Dana at length.

'I heard in the pub that Ivana was injured badly and she was being treated here,' he said after a long kiss, that, according to Lana, should have lasted at least half as long. 'I came as soon as I could to show my support. What terrible news. How is she doing?'

'A thousand guesses who he heard this news from,' Lana said bitterly, but just a little too loudly.

Maragh looked at her angrily and then turned back to Dana and said piqued: 'I would almost think you haven't told Lana yet, dear. She talks a little too... contemptuously, I would say. She wouldn't talk like that if she knew I was officially joining your family soon.'

Another shock. So, the rumours were true for once? Dana was

becoming Mrs. Dana Londel? 'What should she have told me then?' asked Lana cheekily to hide her ignorance, but her curiosity also began to grow.

'You haven't told Lana yet?' their mother now also asked. She looked at her eldest daughter angrily.

'I haven't had the time yet,' Dana said awkwardly and she blushed vehemently.

'Then let's tell her now, shall we?' said Maragh indifferently, looking at Lana with a sneaky grin. 'This is the perfect time, dear. With Ivana being so ill, good news has to be conveyed anyway.' He grabbed Dana possessively around her waist and continued: 'Well Lana, your sister and I love each other immensely as you well know. And we have decided to take the next step. I asked your sister's hand in marriage and gladly, she said yes.'

After saying this, he turned to Dana and kissed her again exaggeratedly long to make his point. Dana wanted to pull away to tell Lana the truth, to apologise to her sister, to ask her for forgiveness, but she did not get the chance to do so. All she saw of her sister was her back as she ran out of the stable without giving them a second glance.



Lana was so angry that she couldn't think clearly. She felt the inner fire inside her longing to be released, but she managed to control it. However, it took all her effort. She couldn't risk anyone seeing her gift after all. But good Gods, she had never been so angry before! Anger and the feeling of betrayal flowed like wild rivers through her body.

In her mind's eye, Maragh's unbearable grin, Dana's shame, and her mother's words kept appearing and feeding the inner fire in Lana, until she could barely contain it. When she walked out of the village, she screamed thus with anger and felt a flame form in her palm. Angrily, she threw it at the nearest bush, which immediately burned down to the ground.

Deep down, she felt not only angry and betrayed, but also sad and disappointed. Why was she the only one who didn't know about Dana's wedding? It was true that Dana got along better with Ivana, but that their relationship was so much worse that Dana wouldn't tell her this joyful news hurt Lana deeply. She felt excluded, like she had never felt before.

Moreover, she felt powerless. Today so many things had happened that she had no control over. First her new gift, then Ivana's injuries, the butcher's threat, and now Dana's engagement. Her life was changing too fast and there was nothing to be done about them. Bitter tears ran down her cheeks. She had to do something to get rid of these feelings of helplessness and anger. She couldn't change Dana's decision, but there was something she could influence.

She suddenly stopped and turned around. At top speed, she ran back

to the medicine man, praying that she wouldn't meet her mother or Dana on the way. She was lucky since she didn't see anyone. Quickly she grabbed her mare Erin by the reins, who she had left behind at the medicine man.

She was breathing hard from the effort, but the feeling that she was about to explode was still there. She had to do something with her emotions, otherwise there would soon be accidents. A wrong word spoken and she wouldn't be able to control her inner fire anymore. She imagined herself running back into the barn and directing her fire at Dana. She shuddered: her sister didn't deserve that. At least she did not...

Lana mounted Erin and, in a trance, rode back to their house, which was just outside of Sutarebil. She let her mare graze in the meadow and ran into their barn. Their barn also consisted of two floors, just like the medicine man's and Lana climbed the ladder to the top floor. On the first floor were bales of hay and straw and this is where Lana had hidden a kettle and books.

Ever since their mother had told them that they were witches, Lana had secretly brewed drinks in anticipation of her active gifts. She usually brewed harmless drinks that worked within an hour, but Lana had also concocted a potion especially for Maragh and put it in his drink, resulting in him getting a major breakout of pimples. He (rightly) pointed Lana out as the guilty one, but no one believed that the sweet, but sometimes mischievous, Lana could do such a thing. After all, she didn't have the power for it.

However, she did *have* the power and people had underestimated her for far too long. Tonight she would make her power felt. Lana hung the kettle on a stand and lit the fire under it. Then she went to the Libera river, which was a quarter of an hour's walk from their house, and got some water. Back home she poured it into the kettle and let it boil. In the meantime, she read through the recipe for a drink containing St John's wort. Under a loose shelf, Lana pulled out the ingredients and pounded them. Once she added the ingredients to the cauldron, she stirred it for five minutes and then let the potion simmer.

Meanwhile, Lana went into their house and got a black travel cloak with a big hood out of the wardrobe. She carefully draped it over her head, so that nobody could see her face. Quickly she ran back into the barn, filled a small bottle with poison, and then went to Erin, who had gone to the other side of the meadow. With her thoughts, Lana impatiently summoned her horse: *Erin, come here! It's me, girl. You have to take me back to town. Later you can rest.*

Lana hesitated for a moment as the consequences of her plan dawned on her. Perhaps there would be no later. Perhaps she would be arrested immediately and thrown into the mayor's cells within an hour, waiting for the city guard of Amycus to take her to the city and lock her up in the cold dungeons there. Or perhaps her deed would be punishable by death and she would be executed immediately on the village square by Captain Erdor.

Lana climbed onto her mare and took a deep breath. Her heart was

pounding in her chest, and for a moment, her anger was overshadowed by fear. She didn't want to spend the rest of her life in a dungeon or die tonight. She had too much to live for. But what should she do? Sooner or later, suspicions would arise, even if she was smart about it tonight. And then what? Should she flee? She couldn't stay in Sutarebil and put her family in danger. Where should she go then? She had no relatives or friends outside of Sutarebil. Where could she be safe?

Lana firmly shook her head and made sure she was doing the right thing. The butcher had become a real danger to them. He was not the type of man to make idle threats. He would make sure King Lembo found them. And there was no talking to the King. They would either have to serve the King or be arrested as enemies of the Eastern Realm. It was her fault that the butcher had discovered they were witches, and as a result, it was her responsibility to solve this problem.

But was murder the solution? Because that's what it came down to, no matter how she looked at it. Saint John's wort was poisonous, and if she managed to administer her potion to the butcher, he would surely die. Was she willing to sacrifice her soul to protect herself and her family? After all, murder was the worst crime. Murder would tear her soul apart. But it was that or be murdered, and didn't Ivana say that the same was true in nature: eat or be eaten? If that was really the case, she would eat tonight, however sick she felt afterwards.

Before she got any more conscience-stricken, she spurred Erin on and they raced back to the village. After ten minutes they arrived at *The Joy of Night*, the largest tavern in the village, and Lana set Erin next to the other horses. Lana briefly adjusted her hood and nervously looked inside. It was very crowded, which greatly increased the chances of her being caught. She could still turn back now and everything would be okay. Then she could still come up with a decent plan with her mother and sisters.

As she considered this, she saw Maragh's haughty face again. She heard his venomous words. She imagined the sneer on his face, because he knew all too well that Lana knew nothing about his proposal and it would hurt her if it came out. And that was to be her brother-in-law? And was she supposed to just be okay with it all? The fire inside her flared up again. She took a deep breath and then walked into the tavern. *At least this is something I have in hand, Daan*, Lana thought grimly. *Aren't you proud of your rebellious little sister? You made me do this after all.*

In the tavern it was a hubbub and Lana couldn't see how she could ever find the butcher among this noisy, drunk crowd. Carefully, Lana walked to the bar and sat there unnoticed with her hood still on. She cautiously looked around and then saw the butcher sitting in a quiet corner with a thin, vile looking fellow. The man had a gaunt face and bloodshot eyes. Both men had their heads together and seemed to be in deep conversation despite the noise around them.

Lana knew that the butcher's conversation partner was not a resident of Sutarebil and felt her heart skip a beat. Was she too late already? Was this a spy of the King? Had the butcher already informed him of the three witches living in his village? Maybe if she rushed things now, she could still limit the damage. If she carried out her plan now, they might still be safe. She prayed to the gods that she was in time, otherwise it was all for nothing. Then she would be a murderer for nothing...

Lana called the bartender and ordered a mug of beer. When no one was looking, she poured the potion into the pitcher. She stirred the poison well into the beer so that the butcher would not see or smell it. Then she commanded the bartender in an unrecognisable husky voice: 'Give this to Mister Ridel. Tell him it's from an old friend.'

The bartender sighed gruffly and took away the mug of beer. Lana wanted to stay and watch at first, but then decided it was time to go. It would be too risky to stay now. The bartender could easily point her out as the guilty party. Hood or no hood, nothing could save her then. Quickly she sneaked out of the bar, but stayed by a window to see what would happen to the butcher. If they were to look for her now, she could immediately get on her horse. She would be gone before anyone could stop her. However, she was secretly morbidly curious about whether she had mixed her first important potion well.

Nothing seemed to be wrong with her victim at first: he took sip after sip and nothing happened. Lana began to doubt her abilities, when all hell broke loose. The butcher turned red in the face and gasped for air. It was as if he had run a lot and was now catching his breath with his hands on his knees. Soon his eyes rolled wildly in their sockets and a foam formed around his lips before he fell motionless to the ground. His eyes were completely white and he seemed to be breathing no longer.

Lana bit her lower lip and prayed to the gods for forgiveness for this atrocity. She had only done it to save her family... Lana looked one last time at her victim with mixed feelings, but then decided to leave. She had lingered here for too long already. It was then that she felt the blade of a sword pressed against her neck and realised that she had made one big mistake: after all, where had the butcher's liaison gone?

5 NO MORE LIES

Lana remained silent, raising her hands in surrender. In the meantime, she took in the situation in an attempt to escape from this precarious position. She was trapped between the wall of the bar and a pungent smelling, bony male body. Although the man was skinny, his sword arm was anything but feeble: at the slightest provocation, this guy would certainly cut her throat. Running away or fighting would therefore not be an option, because her attacker would not give her the chance.

Was her gift perhaps the way out? Lana hesitated for a moment, but decided not to use it. Her gift was too unpredictable at this moment; she could just as easily hit a passer-by or set the entire bar on fire. Moreover, she was currently so afraid - now that Arash the God of death was looking her in the eyes - that she doubted she could even produce a spark. What choice did she have left to get away from her attacker then?

Lana moved a little so that she could see in the reflection of the glass who she was up against. The situation only got worse when she saw that she had been right: she was caught by the companion of the butcher. It was as she had feared. In the commotion that had arisen, she had completely lost track of him. She had managed to keep herself so well behind the scenes and now her curiosity had played a trick on her. How could she explain what she was doing here? Secretly looking at a man who had just breathed his last breath. She should have fled as soon as she could! If Dana had been here, she would have had a lot to say. And this time, Lana could not deny her sister's opinion of her. *Irresponsible.*

'Well, well,' said the man with a wicked grin when he intercepted her gaze in the window. 'Are you enjoying the show, masked one? Do you like to watch the God of death at work? I'll tell you an interesting fact. The man you're so unabashedly watching is the butcher of this village. He was offered a drink by a strange person at the bar just now. I warned him not to drink it, but the man was naive. He probably thought he was the smartest man in the village and that no one would dare do anything to him because he always kept one step ahead of others. It just shows how pride comes before a fall.'

However, I have this strange feeling that you already knew all of this, didn't you, stranger? Let me tell you something that you may not know yet. The same butcher just told me a very interesting story about three unregistered witches in this village. Coincidentally, it just happens that this same butcher died in strange circumstances. If I had to guess, I think one of the witches poisoned him to save herself and her sisters.

And I have to be very wrong if you're not one of them.'

With a jerk, he pulled the hood off Lana's head and roughly grabbed

her hair with his free hand. Lana groaned in pain and the man laughed maliciously. 'Look at that: it turns out I was right. You match the description the poor man gave me exactly. What a surprise, witch! Butcher Ridel was right: there are witches in this wormhole. Who would have expected that?' He turned her around in a swift movement, so that they could look each other in the eyes. His small rat eyes took her in appreciatively.

'What Ridel clearly forgot to mention, however, was that you are very attractive for your kind. I had an image in my head of three shrivelled, wart-covered old witches, but I have to say that reality doesn't disappoint for once. Let's see what I'm going to do with you,' he sneered as he let the sword slide over Lana's neck threateningly. She breathed heavily from fear and her discomfort made the man even happier. 'I could of course deliver you to the King, as Ridel expected I would. However, on our long journey to Darkor, you can easily bewitch me. So that's not an option and I'm not powerful enough to transport a witch, let alone three, that I freely admit.

I could also just kill you immediately and bring your head to the king. I have you in a place where you can't defend yourself and I have a sword. If I have to believe the butcher, who so far seems to have been right, you're still newcomers to the trade. I can imagine that you can't summon your gift yet, otherwise I might already have gone up in flames.'

Lana frowned. He was right about that at least. In any case, she had not spared him voluntarily. If she could have used her gift, things would already have been very, very different. If only she could reach her gift!

'On the other hand, you are too beautiful to kill immediately, so I could also make you my slave,' the man continued, undisturbed, making up a criminal plan. 'Then I can keep an eye on you, so you can't bewitch me. I'll surely find a way to suppress your powers. Moreover, I will have such a beautiful slave at my side, who serves me at my beck and call. Maybe I can even buy a drink from a medicine man that knocks out your gift permanently. This seems like the better option to me. In any case, until I get tired of you and warn our King anyway. What do you think of that?'

Lana was afraid, but her fear gave way to disdain when she heard the man's vile plans. 'You are despicable and I'd rather die than be your slave,' she said, spitting in the man's face.

'You're a little feisty one, aren't you? Well, have it your way then,' said the man grimly as he wiped the spit from his eyes. 'If you want to die now, witch, I'll give you that here and now. I won't deny anything to a woman in need. Perhaps when I find your siblings, they turn out to be more willing.' With a rancorous look in his eyes, he raised his sword.

Lana closed her eyes and tried to summon her gift, but to her great shock, it still didn't work. She had hoped that once there was real danger for her life, her gift would activate, as was the case with the butcher in the Dragon's Wood. However, her fear was so intense, she suspected, that it blocked her gift instead. Her mother had told her this so many times. Fear was

a killer to a witch's gift. If only she had paid more attention, she might perhaps know how to decrease her fear.

Tears of fear ran down her face and, in her mind, she said goodbye to her family as she waited for the final blow. There was still so much she wanted to say to them. There was still so much she wanted to do. Hopefully, her family would now have the peace and time to lead their lives as they wanted at least. In that case, her end would be something she could be at peace with.

To her great surprise however, the final blow did not come. She expected to feel the sharp blade in her skin at any moment, but nothing happened. Did the man want to make her suffer by delaying her rapidly approaching death? She would never beg him to kill her. Then he'd have to wait a long time. Or had the man changed his mind because she was more valuable alive than dead after all? Or had someone seen him and he dared to act only after that person was gone? In that last case, she had to act fast. If she could convince a villager that she was in danger, she might not have to die today.

The truth was not far away. When Lana cautiously opened one eye again, she saw that the man was frozen in front of her with one arm still raised as if he was about to strike. His face had turned an ice blue colour and ice crystals were visible on his eyebrows. The man's breath came out in cold puffs from his nose.

Behind her and her attacker stood Dana, who had raised a trembling hand while out of breath. 'Are you okay?' she asked worriedly and took a good look at Lana from head to toe. 'Did he hurt you?'

Lana felt an enormous relief when she saw her older sister. Dana had saved her and for a moment, Lana wanted nothing more than to embrace her sister as a thank you for her actions. She was allowed to stay in this world a little while longer at least to make her dreams come true thanks to Dana's help. If Dana hadn't followed her, then this man would have taken her life.

However, her wounded pride revolted against making up with her sister, when she remembered what Dana had done. Or better yet: what she hadn't done. Dana was marrying a man that Lana did not like. Moreover, she had deliberately kept this happy event a secret from Lana. Everyone had known about the upcoming wedding, except her. When that feeling of unfairness took hold of her again, Lana could no longer respond joyfully to Dana's arrival.

So, without saying anything, she freed her hair from the man's icy grip and hesitantly looked at her attacker. He knew who they were and as soon as Dana's powers were exhausted, he would surely run to the King to report all that he had discovered in Sutarebil. The danger was not yet over. She did not want to do this, because then her soul would surely be torn apart: Two murders in one night... Would she become a villain? Was she turning evil?

Lana shuddered at the thought and was already about to walk away when she thought of her mother and sisters. If she was a coward now, she

would condemn them to captivity, torture, and maybe even death. That was what awaited them when King Lembo discovered their existence. Determinedly, she picked up the man's sword therefore instead and plunged it through him. She would offer an extra prayer to the gods tonight. They were all-seeing; hopefully they would see that she had acted from a good heart and out of necessity.

'What are you doing?' Dana asked disgustedly and she took a step back in shock. Finally, she lowered her hand.

Lana ignored her, threw the sword into the bushes and then climbed onto Erin. Dana looked horrified and disgusted at the lifeless body, but quickly jumped on her mare, Cela, and rode quickly after Lana out of the village, before they would be caught in this gruesome act.

For a time, they were both silent, but then Dana asked, riding next to Lana: 'What have you done in heaven's name? Lana, you've murdered someone in cold blood! If anyone finds out, you'll go to jail or worse: they will hang you for this! Do you want that? We were not ready to decide what to do next! Maybe mother would have found a better solution than murder! I also like to be safe, but I would never murder someone for our safety!'

Lana ignored her and looked straight at the ink black sky. She nervously rubbed her hands together as if to get rid off the imaginary blood she must be feeling there. 'Lana, say something.' Still no answer. Dana sighed: 'Are you in a shock or something? Or are you still angry with me?'

Lana looked at her maliciously and that was enough for Dana. 'Well, that's obvious at least,' Dana concluded. 'Listen Laan, I'm really, really sorry. I did not want to keep you in the dark. It's just... I didn't find the right moment to tell you about our wedding plans. That's all there is.'

'Of course,' Lana said sarcastically. 'That's why everyone knows, right? Everyone except me. I know we never really got along, but that you wouldn't tell me something so important, I really find that... Do you know how I feel right now? Like I don't matter to you at all! Like I'm not part of our family anymore.'

Dana, who felt extremely guilty, was silent. Lana looked at her sister again and tried to read Dana's thoughts. Dana was not prepared for this telepathic attack and Lana was able to penetrate the depths of her soul. This way Lana saw Dana's doubt about whether to get married; the regret that she had not confided in Lana and the desire to have a good relationship with both of her sisters. But then everything became black for Lana's eyes and she knew that her sister had noticed that she had sniffed around in her thoughts and had now managed to defend herself against this invasion. But Dana was not angry and, in some way, this calmed Lana, causing her anger to subside.

'It's time for us to have our conversation,' Lana said brusquely and she dismounted.

'Yes, this is the right moment, it would seem,' said Dana and she followed Lana's example. They let the horses run around in a meadow, while