

THE LIGHTFIRE SAGA

By Sandra Stewart

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Samples of:

Book 1

Book 2

Book 3

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Book 3, Prologue

Alaysa, Lady of the Lightfire, carried a deadly burden. Every day, her body died a little more. Her Healer, Janek could not help her. She carried a weight only a god could carry: the whole Lightfire.

Alaysa had led her Chosen into the depths of Mount Destare to free her brother, Andrew, thought to have died during her journey to the Darsinnian's keep, my mother, Princess Laurel, and my father, Prince Lexon. At that time, she too carried the complete Lightfire but tainted with the desperate souls of the past Ladies. She had discovered the terrible secret of the Faberians, the giants that had been gifted with the ability to hold and cherish the Lightfire from the dying Ladies over the past 1000 years. They carried more than just the Lightfire. They carried the trapped souls of the dead Ladies. The giants had not been allowed to release the Lightfires by their god, Vega, the goddess of vengeance, and sister to Saiven. She had become obsessed with the resurrection of her sister. She knew the power all six Lightfires held and she did not trust Darsis, the god who loved Saiven, to complete the rescue.

Vega had grown impatient. She knew Alaysa would take the five pedalmas, the pieces of plate that Lord Zaren had used to trap Saiven's soul, away with her to Mount Destare, Lord Zaren's home. But Vega also knew that Alaysa was the last piece. Vega needed her Lightfire and she had to kill Alaysa to get it. The Land saved Alaysa. Her Lightfire blew the top off the mountain, killing the giants' priestesses and freeing the Ladies and their Lightfires. The Land called upon its ancient sea creatures. Without their help, Alaysa would not have been able to bear the Lightfires and escape the island.

While on the island, Kir, the Honoured Doctor-Messenger had made a fateful discovery. One of the rules of the curse of the Lightfire stated that the bond between the Lady and the Healer went one way. If the Lady died, then the Healer would die immediately, but if the Healer died, his death would not affect the Lady. She could choose another priest to become her Healer. Kir had discovered that the bond went two ways. Whatever physical injury happened to Alaysa, also happened to Janek, and whatever injury happened to Janek, happened to the Lady. Because their bonding had been by accident and without the controlling spells of the Darsinnians, Alaysa and Janek had been tied together for life. If Janek died, too, then Alaysa would die.

This is why I hate this day, this day of celebration. This is the day, so few years ago, that both Lady

Alaysa and Healer Janek died. Here. At the palace. In front of me, my parents, the few remaining of her Chosen and her Lightfire Guards. None of us saw it coming. Darsis came out of nowhere. He had the fever that the Ancient Ones had used during the war to fight the gods. In his delirium, he did not know what he was about to do. And he took her from us. From me.

Alaysa had given up so much for us and for my kingdom. She had fulfilled her promise to the Ancient One, Maer, the dragon. I think Alaysa knew that to heal the land she had to first accomplish the task Maer would give her. And it was not an easy task. She did succeed at it, but at a high cost to herself. She became exiled from both my kingdom and their kingdom. Even the gods had forsaken her.

I refuse to forget her. And as long as I live, I will not let anyone else forget her.

Notes from the personal journal of the twenty-first Emperor Justin

Chapter 1

“You’re not going.”

“I have to go.”

“No, you don’t. How many times...?”

“I have to go. You know I do.” Alaysa stood with her arms crossed in front of her chest, her feet slightly apart to keep her balance on the rolling deck of the Traveler.

A group of men sat on the deck or leaned against its railings. One of the men stood in front of her, his hands on his hips, matching her stance. He still wore the robe of the Darsinnian priests but had cut it short at his thighs so that he could wear pants for warmth and freer movement. Strands of long brown hair had escaped their tie and flew into his bloodshot eyes.

“No, you don’t,” he waved his arms in the air, “We need you to start healing the land. She can wait.”

Alaysa sighed and looked to her right. Kir, her Doctor-Messenger, two years younger than she, intently studied the laces on his boots. He didn’t want to get involved in their argument. He had taken on a great responsibility after his teacher and mentor had been killed at the Keep defending Alaysa a few months back. If she had only moved a little quicker, the older priest would still be alive today. Kir had to keep both she and Janek, her Healer, healthy. He found more comfort in his books than he did in a debate. His thick black hair had grown almost into his eyes and nearly touched his shoulders. He refused to meet her eyes. She knew he would not help her unless he absolutely had to. The youngest of her Chosen, he did not have the confidence to speak up.

Eric sat beside him, absently twisting a knife he had stuck into the ship’s deck. He watched them both, a slight smile on his face. He seemed to enjoy when Alaysa and Janek argued. They had become too much alike since the bonding and their battle of wills always made for an enjoyable encounter. But he would not interfere either, Alaysa realized. His job as Captain of her Lightfire Guard was to keep her and Janek alive. At moments like this, she wondered if his job also meant to keep them from killing each other. He brushed his curly, orange hair from out of his eyes so he could better see them. Three years older than Alaysa, he had inherited his position when his father had died protecting Alaysa. She wondered if he still blamed her for his father’s death.

Leaning against the railing overlooking the ocean, Prince Lexon and his wife, Princess Laurel watched. His face, shocked and her's, concerned. Lexon had never seen Janek and Alaysa fight with such intensity before and she could see the reaction on his face to see his brother fight with someone who could kill anyone else with a touch. Lexon, still weak from his ordeal at having to share his body with Lord Zaren, absently hung onto his wife's hand for strength and comfort. Zaren had taken Laurel back to his cave when he had stolen Lexon's body and imprisoned her in the golden crystal. Alaysa was supposed to have married the prince because of tradition and politics but when she had been kidnapped two days before the wedding day, Laurel had to pretend to be Alaysa and marry the prince instead.

Laurel, even though she had hated Alaysa at first, because she would never get the chance to marry her love, the prince, had grown to respect the girl from the mountains as Alaysa called herself. Laurel had grown up in the palace with Janek, then called Janek, and Lexon so she had known the two of them as younger brothers. Janek, the Emperor's illegitimate son, had been taken away to live in the Darsinnian Keep for the rest of his life. She had not seen him, again, until he had arrived as the Lady's Healer.

Laurel, like everyone else, had grown to admire this young girl from the mountains. Alaysa had taken on the three grueling tests of the Lightfire and survived. Alaysa was only thirteen years old, five years younger than she and Lexon, two years younger than Janek. Yet she stood in front of them all, making a decision greater than even Lexon, the future emperor, would ever have to make. She glanced at her husband. His blonde hair nearly matched the shade of her own. She had tied her hair beneath a kerchief and made him wear a hat so as not to catch a chill. Zaren had refused to sufficiently feed Lexon's body, so until they returned to the palace at Christentown, Laurel had to keep Lexon's undernourished body from becoming ill. It would be too weak to fight any virus and she had to keep him from dying.

Alaysa looked past Laurel's shoulder to the lower deck. The giant, Luindad, from an island called Faber had distanced himself from her group. He sat at the opposite end of the ship on a pile of rolled rope, writing in his journal. No one trusted him anymore, but she felt deep down she still needed him. His people had stolen the souls of the past Ladies of the Lightfire and kept them for their own purposes. Alaysa had destroyed his home. Now all he had was his work. His people had been the official record keepers of the Ladies and he stubbornly refused to give up that position. Even now, she knew he listened in on their conversation.

Stretched out beside the giant, a dragon lay asleep. Tay had come to stay with her while at the emperor's

palace. He was one of many dragons from the Ancient One's hatching. She wasn't sure why he had been sent other than to accompany her, but she had a feeling she would find out soon.

Lastly, on her left, stood her oldest brother, Andrew. He had accompanied her when she had been taken from her home to test the Lightfire but had only made it a few miles when Lord Zaren's dead soldiers had attacked them. She had been forced to leave him, the priest Darvek and Sir Thomas, Eric's father, behind as she had been shoved through a travel hole directly into the Darsinnian Keep and to safety. She had believed Andrew had died a few moments later. Now, he leaned against the railing, his face blank. He had had a lot to catch up on and rarely joined in any of the conversations. She knew he would be watching and learning. He would speak up when he felt it important enough to voice his opinion. Andrew had dark brown hair like the rest of her family. She had been the only one with dark red hair, almost black, but it had never been enough of a difference to make her wonder if she shared the same blood with her family.

When she had explained to him about the Emperor's belief that she was the first born child of King Stefan, the founder of Christentown and all the lands surrounding and his first wife, Alaysa, he had not believed her. How could a god bring forward nearly a thousand years a child who would save the Land, he had said. Alaysa told him Darsis had never denied it. Even Zaren had agreed that it had happened. Her own parents had told her as much, saying that she had been brought to them as a child when Andrew was only a few years old. Andrew had remembered her arrival but thought that was how babies came. Then he had begun to believe and he said something that made her heart melt.

"No matter if you are my sister by birth or not," he had held her hands and looked directly into her eyes, "You will be my sister forever."

Now, she looked at him and wondered if she had changed in his eyes. She wanted his support, but he remained stubbornly silent. She turned to the man who stood in front of her. Janek, her Healer. He had been tricked into bonding with her. They guessed that Darsis had diverted the travel hole so that she arrived in the library where only Janek would be and not in one of the other rooms at the Darsinnian Keep where more priests would be waiting and would know what to do with her. She did not know only Darvek could make travel holes. When Janek could not reopen the travel hole so the others could be saved, her fury made her strike out at him. He caught her fist in his hand and at that moment, the transfer between Lady and Healer began and finished.

They shared each other's memories and thoughts from that moment on. He could feel when she was emo-

tionally and physically distressed. The Lightfire blocked out his emotions from her, but it did not block out physical injury. If either one hurt themselves, the other felt it. If she cut her finger, he bled. If he broke an ankle, she limped until he healed. Janek's job was to heal her wounds but now it became more complicated. The Lightfire guards had to guard Janek from injury more than they had to watch over Alaysa.

"I will not break my promise to the Ancient One," Alaysa said, "I have to go. She called me and I have to do as she bids. Besides, she said she will help me."

To gain safe passage through the Ancient One's forest, Alaysa had to promise to come when the dragon, Maer, beckoned her and to do as she bid. Lord Zaren's shadow bird had been following herself, Andrew, Darvek and Sir Jackson. She had seen no other way through the forest without Maer's help. Wild creatures, part man, mostly animal had taken over the lands once populated by the dragons. They killed for food. They killed anything or anyone to satisfy their hunger. Alaysa knew this from the stories she had been told. Unfortunately, two of her companions would be dead within the day. That she could not have known.

But when Maer had called to her, the dragon had also told her in an urgent voice that Alaysa must come so that she could help her. Alaysa carried more than her intended share of the god's Lightfire. Saiven had given her all the Lightfire when she had saved Alaysa's life. The Lightfire when used gave the bearer great power and a feeling of a god's invincibility, but it also gnawed at the human side. It slowly destroyed the flesh, blood and bone of the mortal body. Alaysa would be dead within a year if she did not find a way to control the damaging effects of the Lightfire.

"We can help you," Janek looked at Kir, "He'll find a way to block the power of the Lightfire. Then you can start..."

She held up her hand. "Janek, there's nothing to argue about anymore. If I don't go, then who knows what will happen? We may need Maer's support in the coming days and months when I do start the healing." Alaysa glanced at the prince. She knew his kingdom had dwindled in the last few centuries as the plague had killed his kingdom. Very few people lived within its borders. "I am running short of allies."

"What could be so horrible that the dragon would ask of the Lady?" Lexon spoke up. "She needs Alaysa to heal the land as much as the rest of us do. I wouldn't believe the stories of other people dying because their tasks were so horrendous."

"That's what makes me concerned," Janek said, "We don't know what Maer will ask of Alaysa. I don't

have a good feeling about this.”

“Alaysa, what do you feel?” Laurel asked.

Alaysa glanced at her, grateful. “I don’t know how long I can hold the Lightfire within me.” She held out her hands. They trembled slightly. She clutched her hands into fists. The trembling stopped. “She has offered to help. I can see no other way. I have to go.” She looked into Janek’s eyes. “We have to go.”

“That I don’t understand either,” he said, his shoulders drooping. “She insisted I come but that the others shouldn’t?”

“She said you must come, but that if any others came, not all would return,” Alaysa said, glancing to the lower deck where her Lightfire guards sat dozing on the larger deck.

“We’ve survived far worse than a walk in a forest,” Eric spoke up, “Only a direct order would keep us from accompanying you.”

“Then it’s settled,” Lexon said, “We’re going.”

“You’re not strong enough,” Laurel tugged on his hand.

“I can sit on a horse,” he said, “I’ll eat like a horse as soon as we get back. I’ll be ready. You though should stay with father. You’ll be safe there…”

“What…?” Laurel released his hand and turned to face him, her face suddenly red. “What sort of nonsense is that?”

Janek and Alaysa looked at each other. His stern face faded and he smiled. She smiled back at him, then covered her mouth hiding her laughter.

“Nothing, but you are my wife and you should…”

“Don’t you dare tell me what I should and should not do,” Laurel said, pulling her face in close to her husband. “Alaysa needs me more than she needs you. What can you offer her that the others haven’t already?”

“I…I…” he glanced around helplessly. His eyes focused on Janek.

Janek raised his hands and stepped back to the railing beside Andrew. “Brother, you are on your own.”

Eric leaned over to Kir, “Do you want to take a bet on who wins this one?”

Kir shook his head, “No contest. Maybe we should bet how long it takes for her to throw him overboard?”

“I heard that!” Lexon cried out, then he too held up his hands in surrender. “All right Laurel you can come.”

“I don’t need your permission,” the princess said, leaning back against the railing beside Lexon.

“How am I supposed to run a kingdom if I can’t get anyone to obey me?” Lexon said, dropping his head.

Laurel whispered a few words in his ear and he blushed. They giggled, their argument forgotten.

Alaysa, suddenly weary, sat down where she had originally chosen before Janek had insisted on their discussion. Eric leaned away so she could place her back against a sack of sails as she sat down slightly behind him. She leaned her head back, letting the sun warm her face. All the rest of her body remained clothed. In close quarters like on the ship, she had to keep all of her skin covered. If anyone accidentally brushed her skin, they would receive a severe shock that could kill them. She hadn’t killed anyone yet. The one person she had touched, her healer-to-be Darvik, she had put into a coma. But that had been with only her share of the Lightfire. She now carried five times more than what she should. She didn’t know how powerful it could be if she released it.

The Lightfire sat as a dull ache in her stomach. She knew emotions like anger or grief could bring it to life. She struggled to maintain an emotional calm but if any of her friends were ever threatened, she felt the emotions taking over before she could stop them. It was her weakness. She cared. She cared too much for her friends and her family. It had almost caused her death.

Zaren had sent her a vision of the massacre of her guards and Chosen in the narrow tunnels of Mount Destare while she slept. She knew if she didn’t come ahead on her own that he would send his dead soldiers to kill them all. She believed him and left her friends. Unknown to her, the god Darsis also knew of the vision. He kept her friends asleep for nearly two days, the length of time she needed to find her way slowly to Zaren’s cavern.

There she found Laurel and Andrew as she had seen them in a dream, encased in the golden crystals. Zaren had released them and then left Lexon’s body to enter her body. All he ever wanted was her Lightfire and she gave it to him, willingly. She needed him to take her body. The other five Lightfire Ladies waited inside. Zaren didn’t have a chance. They controlled him as soon as he entered. Alaysa found the final pedalma. Darsis took the Lightfires from Alaysa and forced Zaren to leave her body. He then released Saiven from her thousand-year-old prison.

Alaysa, without the Lightfire, could not live. She and Janek began to die. Saiven knew this. Darsis refused to give up his love. Saiven chose death and gave Alaysa back the Lightfires. Darsis left with Zaren trapped in one of his servant’s bodies. Darsis did not return. He had abandoned them. The gods would no longer help them.

“Land!” a sailor called out from high up on a mast.

Alaysa opened her eyes. In the distance she could see the shoreline of Christentown. Emperor Coutous waited for them. She had promised to bring back both his sons alive. Now, she had to tell him she had to leave again. The man did care for her as a daughter. He would not want her to go. She may actually have to disobey him. And then, she wondered, how many of her Chosen would follow her? And Lexon, would he disobey his father? Or would his sense of duty prevail?

Book 3, Chapter 2

The shoreline grew from a dark line to a rocky shore with small hills. As the Traveler, the emperor's personal ship, sailed southward, the city of Christentown came into view around a bend. Large warehouses sat at the edge of piers jutting out into the harbour. Numerous streets led away from the wharf. Tiny buildings dotted the streets: pubs, shops and houses. The buildings grew larger as they rose up a hill toward a huge building that glistened even in the fading rays of the setting sun.

The palace had been built on top of the tallest hill so anyone looking out any of its windows could see the city below and the harbour beyond. Strategically sound, the palace now stood sentinel over a city emptied of its citizens. No ships stood at the piers waiting to be unloaded. No workers ran along the wharves carrying cargo to and from the warehouses. No sailors, laden down with purses full of coins, hurried up the streets to the pubs.

The sailors on the Traveler spoke in hushed voices as they approached the pier. A superstitious lot, they did not like coming into a port that resembled a ghost town. Alaysa shared their uneasiness. Where had all the people gone? Had the plague made it this far already?

Tay had woken and sat with his head balanced on the railing. He scanned the city. He looked at Alaysa. "*Ladyfire?*" he spoke in her mind.

"*Would you fly over the city?*" she asked, "*See if it is safe?*"

"*Yes, Ladyfire,*." He jumped up onto the railing. Having grown a little larger than a horse, he frightened two nearby sailors who tripped over ropes to get out of the way of the dragon's outstretched wings. Tay hopped off the ship, glided along the surface of the water until he found an updraft that lifted him above the city. She watched until he disappeared over the top of the palace walls.

"Let's hope he's back before we've unloaded," Janek said. He stood beside her, two packs in his hand. She reached down for her bag.

"Do you think he'll find anything? I mean, anything that might want to attack us?" she asked. She slung her bag over her shoulder holding the straps securely, her fist resting against her chest.

"I don't know," he said, then glanced over his shoulder. She followed his gaze. Her guards had begun to strap on their armour. "They're not taking any chances, I see."

“We have a long walk,” Andrew said from her other side.

“I am looking forward to a hot bath and a soft bed,” Laurel said, behind her then her voice softened, “I hope the Emperor is safe.”

They all hoped they would find the Emperor well. The Traveler drifted up beside the pier. Sailors jumped out and ran to the moorings, large rings hooked to the top of the dock. Other sailors threw heavy ropes from the bow and the stern of the ship near their feet. The sailors grabbed the ropes and fed them through the rings. The sails had been loosened and flapped in the wind. The ship floated against the dock and the sailors tied the ropes to the rings.

Two more sailors, guided by Captain Narron, pulled out a gangplank and dropped it onto the dock. Eric and half the guards jogged down onto the dock. They hurried past the warehouse, stopping only long enough to tug at the secure padlocks on the doors, then disappeared up the city streets in small groups. The rest followed at a slower pace. Alaysa came up last. She stopped to thank Captain Narron, again, for all his help. They had officially thanked him the night before, but she still felt so grateful that she had to thank him, again.

“No problem, little lady,” he said, “Anytime you need a ship and a good crew, just ask for me. At any port. We’ll come to you.” He cleared his voice and rubbed at his eyes. “You take care of yourself, right?”

“Yes, right,” she said. She had noticed the tears in his eyes and realized he did not believe he would see her alive, again. She wanted to reassure him she did not plan to die just yet. She planned to live a long life. She would return to her mountain home where her family waited. But she wasn’t so sure anymore. The Lightfire weighed heavily. She would be happy just to get rid of it and feel like a normal person, again. She smiled the best smile she could and walked away from the captain, his crew and the ship. She fought an urge to look back.

Alaysa caught up to Janek and the others where the wharf met the streets. Lexon decided they should stay together and take the most direct route to the palace. Her guards spread out on either side of their group. They walked in pairs. Andrew refused to budge from her side. Kir walked beside Janek. Lexon and Laurel led the group. Luindad followed last.

As they walked past boarded up windows and locked doors, Alaysa felt a slight flow of life. Nothing flew in the city. Birds, bugs, all seemed to have left with the people. But something lived in the shadows. She wanted to bend down and touch the cobblestones. Even to feel the worms beneath the soil would make her feel better but she didn’t want to stop the group.

They moved into the second block of businesses. Inns and clothing shops began to appear. Small food markets and near the end restaurants a gentleman would take a lady to dine, began to appear. Unfortunately, a fetid smell of rotting garbage also appeared. Alaysa held up her sleeve to cover her nose. She wondered if the others could smell what she thought she smelled. Death hung on the air.

Looking down the alley, she saw garbage pails spilled on their sides, their contents strewn over the street. She thought she saw a tail poking out of one of the pails. Could this be the life she had felt on the air? She stopped suddenly. Janek nearly bumped into her.

“What is it?” he asked, staring down into the dark alley.

“I thought I felt something,” she said.

“I don’t see anything,” Janek said.

“We should keep going,” Lexon called out, almost half a block away, “It’ll be dark soon.”

She agreed. She didn’t want to be on the streets in the dark. Not alone. Not like this. As she turned away from the alley, a dark form stepped out of the shadows. She stopped, abruptly. A huge dog, starving, his coat matted and mud-soaked, stepped out into the light. It pointed its large snout at the air in front of her and sniffed. It stood nearly as high as a pony. Three other dogs moved out of the shadow to stand behind it. Slightly shorter, they still looked as menacing as the first dog. Alaysa heard the guards behind her draw their swords.

The dogs neither growled nor moved any closer. She crouched down bending her left knee, bowed her head and held out her left hand. Closing her eyes, she felt the air between the dog and her hand. *Hunger. Barred teeth. Torn skin. Shrieks of pain. Fear. Death. The two-legs of the pack running. Shouting. Smell of fear. Sweat. The wood that floats being pushed by the wind. Away. Away from the land. Quiet. Emptiness. The pack gone. New alliances. Chase away. Kill the weak. The strong will survive. You are strong. Join us.*

“Too much,” she gasped, the images racing through her mind. “Stop.” She felt herself dragged to her feet. She opened her eyes. Through a fog, she saw Andrew looking at her, his brow knotted. “The...the animals have reclaimed...they’ve gone instinctive.”

“Gone instinctive?” Luindad’s voice spoke from a long way off. “What an interesting phrase.”

“The dogs have adapted as hunters, again,” she said, wanting to explain, needing to explain. She had to go, with them. She leaned toward the dogs. The lead dog stared at her. She couldn’t look away. Only Andrew’s tight grasp on her arms kept her from running down the alley.

“It’s only been a couple weeks,” Kir sounded as if he spoke from inside a tunnel.

“The Land is reclaiming itself,” Alaysa rubbed at the vines around her neck. She couldn’t take her eyes from the dog. “The people are not welcome here. I should go with them.”

“Alaysa, look at me,” she heard a different voice, a familiar, warm voice. She tried to focus on it. A shadow flew overhead. Janek’s face came out of the fog toward her. She could just make out the outline of his tired eyes. “We’ve got to get her away from them,” she heard him say.

Someone, Andrew, grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the alley. She had to walk or fall to the cobblestones. The forward motion broke her gaze with the dog, but she could still feel its pull. She looked over her shoulder. Tay dropped to the street, landing heavily on his feet. He stood between the alley and Alaysa blocking her sight. He hissed at the four pairs of glowing red eyes and they vanished. Tay followed Luindad, keeping his head low to the street listening should they follow.

The fog vanished. Her head cleared. She pulled her arm from Andrew’s grasp. “I’m okay. Stop treating me like a child.”

“What happened to you back there?” her brother asked, walking beside her. The others followed silently.

“I...I...” how could she explain it when she didn’t understand it herself. “Do you remember the skunk story you told Darsen? And the other stories you didn’t tell him?”

“Yeh, about the animals that would wander into the house and scare Mam out of her wits?” Andrew replied.

“Well, they actually speak to me now,” she said, “I can understand them.”

“Can you talk back to them?”

“No, the only one seems to be Tay that I can talk to,” she said, “It’s like they either don’t understand me or maybe, don’t want to understand me. They share their thoughts and then they go.”

“So back there the dogs told you they had taken over the city?”

“It’s more than that,” she said, trying to sort the jumble of images, “It’s their way of trying to warn me.”

“Warn you about what?” Andrew asked, his voice low, cautious.

“I don’t know,” she replied. She really didn’t know.

Eric and two of the guards appeared in front of them from around a corner.

“The way is clear from here,” Eric said, “The palace is quiet. There aren’t many servants or guards left.” He glanced at Alaysa. “What’s happened?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Kir said, “Is the city really as empty as it seems?”

Eric nodded. “None of us have seen a living soul outside of the palace. Lots of stray dogs and cats, but no people.” Alaysa shivered.

Two palace guards stood at the gate to the palace entrance. They bowed as Alaysa and her party entered. Their uniforms, dirty but still intact, hinted at the hard times they had suffered recently. Alaysa knew Eric would find out what had happened and report later. Lexon could barely contain his anxiety and took the stairs two at a time. He disappeared into the foyer before they had stepped onto the top stair. They met him returning a few moments later in the foyer, Segarus accompanying him.

“Dinner has been put out for us in the dining hall,” Lexon said.

“Your father?” Laurel asked.

“His butler says he hasn’t been well since we left,” Lexon said, “He retires early. I’ll be able to see him for a few minutes tonight but everyone else will have to wait until the morning.”

Alaysa glanced at Janek. She thought the Emperor would at least like to see both his sons. She noticed Janek staring sullenly at the floor.

“Let’s eat,” she said, a little louder than she wanted, “I’m famished. Is anyone else?”

Dinner turned out to be a meager fare. A broth for soup with traces of meat, bread, cheese, wine, preserved fruit. No fresh vegetables could be seen. Even so, they ate with gusto. Her stomach full, Alaysa leaned back in her chair and yawned. The half of a glass of wine Andrew had allowed her to drink made her very sleepy. She wanted to put her head down on the table and close her eyes while she waited for Janek to finish. She didn’t know why she had to wait for him, but she felt it only polite.

“Come on, Alaysa,” Laurel said, “I’m tired too. Let’s leave these men and go see if there is any hot water in the taps.”

Alaysa nodded her agreement. A hot bath and a comfortable bed seemed very appealing. They walked together down the hallway they had walked many times before in happier times.

“It’s so quiet without everyone,” Alaysa sighed. Even though the noise and confusion of the constant parties had made her sick, she still missed the people.

“I know,” Laurel agreed, “I guess they all returned to their estates.”

They stopped outside Alaysa’s door. Laurel stepped forward to go in. Alaysa stopped her.

“Laurel, you no longer have to help me,” she said, “You no longer should. You are the future empress.”

“I can still help you find the hot water tap,” Laurel said, trying to get past her.

“I’ll be fine,” Alaysa said, “I promise not to run away anymore.”

“It’s not that,” Laurel said, glancing up and down the hall. “I know you won’t run away. Besides could we stop you?”

Alaysa smirked. “Then why don’t you want to go to your room?”

Laurel looked down at her feet, blushing. Alaysa put her hand up to her mouth, the truth dawning on her.

“You and Lex? It’ll be your first time alone?”

Laurel nodded her head. “I’m not ready. I mean this isn’t what I expected it to be. This isn’t what it should be like.”

Alaysa pulled her into her room and they sat down on the edge of her bed. How could she help Laurel? She had never been with a man before. She didn’t know what to tell her. Then she remembered what her Mam had said to her when she had started her monthly bleeding. She had said this was part of being a woman and when she found a man she loved she would become pregnant. But until that time, any man who wanted to touch her had to have her permission. If he still wanted to become friendly with her in a way she wasn’t comfortable then she was to scream very loudly and run away. If she couldn’t run away then she was to kick him between the legs. That would cause him such pain that he wouldn’t be able to chase her. Alaysa thought she shouldn’t tell Laurel all of what her Mam had said.

“My Mam once said to me that if I didn’t want to get friendly with a man then I was to tell him and if he respected me then he would leave me alone,” Alaysa said.

“Are you saying that if I’m not ready, I should tell Lexon? You think he would understand?”

“He loves you very much. I cannot see him not understanding.”

Laurel looked thoughtful. “Yes, yes, of course. I should talk to him.” She stood up. “Let’s see about your bath.”

Alaysa sighed. She guessed Laurel would always want to help her, no matter what. She heard the water running in her bathroom. “Laurel, go. I can turn off my own taps.”

Laurel stepped out of the bathroom. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’ll see you in the morning.” She watched Laurel leave and then closed her door.

She marched to the bathroom, closed the door, stripped and stepped into her bath tub. The water rose nearly to the edge so she turned off the pouring water. She dunked her head beneath the water to get the past few days' dust out of it, then resurfaced to soap her hair. After rinsing, she soaped her body and scrubbed at any mark that seemed to be dirt. Finally, with her skin red, almost raw, she lay back and closed her eyes. The heat of the water seeped into her bones. She let the steam tickle her face. When the water became too cold, she pulled the stopper, stepped out of the tub and reached for a towel.

She caught her reflection in the mirror over the sink. Pink and blurry. She wiped the mirror to remove the condensation and looked at herself. The vines stood out bright beneath her skin. Scars stood out on her hands, neck and ankles where Zaren had tortured her. Cuts and scrapes, slow to heal, marked almost every part of her skin. Her arms and legs had become heavily muscled with the constant riding, walking and swimming she had suffered the past few weeks. Her skin had become mottled with blemishes. She wondered if any man would ever find her beautiful. *Probably not*, she thought and brushed a tear away from the corner of her eye.

"Alaysa?" she heard Janek call out, "Alaysa, do you need anything before bed?"

Panicked, she leaned against the door thinking he might burst in. "No, nothing, Janek. Uh, did you find a place for Andrew?" She hastily dried herself with her towel.

"Yeh, he wanted to drag a cot in here with you, but we talked him out of it."

"Where's he staying then?" she called out, pulling on the nightgown she had brought in with her.

"Across the hall," he said, "We've all spread out. They don't feel they have to protect me anymore so we've taken our own rooms. So many of them are empty. Are you sure you don't need anything?"

"Yes," she said, "Good night."

"Good night."

She heard him close the door between their two rooms. Sighing, she looked at her face in the mirror. She thought he had maybe felt her thoughts. She would have been a little more than embarrassed if he had mentioned it.

Blowing out all the candles in the bathroom, she moved around her room to blow out the rest of the candles. One remained by her bed. As she crawled beneath the covers, she decided to let it burn itself out. Even before her head hit her pillow, she fell asleep.

Book 3, Chapter 3

Andrew didn't return during the night. Alaysa rose from her bed. She had barely slept. She worried about where he had gone. He had seemed so upset about something he had overheard yesterday and she wished she had forced him to tell her. Now, her brother had not come back and he had promised not to ever leave her alone, again.

Alaysa walked to the bathroom rubbing her eyes with the heel of her left hand. With her right hand she pushed aside the door. Sunlight poured through the window. The tiles glared where the light hit. Alaysa stepped up to the sink, put the stopper in the drain and turned on the hot and cold water taps. Feeling with her hands, she adjusted the temperature until it felt warm enough. She dropped in a bar of pink and white striped soap and reached for her washcloth hanging below the mirror. Glancing up, she caught her reflection. She dropped her washcloth and grabbed her throat.

"Alaysa, are you awake?" Laurel called from the doorway.

Alaysa slammed the bathroom door shut and stared at her neck. Then she pulled her nightgown off her left shoulder, then her right.

"Alaysa, is everything all right?" Laurel called, her voice growing louder as she walked across the bedroom floor toward the bathroom.

She pushed up her left sleeve, then her right. She felt tears of frustration stinging her eyes.

"Alaysa?" Laurel stood just outside the door.

She glanced at the door, then with a shaking hand reached for the knob and turned it. The door opened a few inches. She took a step back. Laurel's fingers curled around the edge of the door and pushed it open all the way. She stood in the doorway her eyes growing wide with fright. She slowly raised a hand to her mouth.

Alaysa held out her arms. The daisy's stems stood out brown and dying against her pale skin. The once green leaves had curled into brittle stems. Red lines on her skin stretched along either side of the swollen stems. Her skin appeared to barely hold in the vine. Laurel's eyes traveled to Alaysa's neck and down her other arm.

"Does it hurt?" she whispered.

Alaysa shook her head. "I have to leave. I have to go to her."

"I know," Laurel said, "But the emperor..."

“I have to make him understand,” Alaysa said, her voice rising, panic setting in. “She can help me. She said she would help me.”

Laurel seemed to shake her fright away. “Get dressed, Alaysa,” she said, “We’ll go see him right away.”

A few moments later, Alaysa washed and dressed in a long sleeved knit blouse and heavy cotton riding skirt, accompanied Laurel to the main dining hall. She could smell cooked bacon and sausage. She could hear a group of men laughing. As they approached the open doors, Alaysa tugged at the scarf around her neck to make sure it wouldn’t slip, then plunged her hands into the pockets of her skirt.

The tables had been rearranged end to end in two rows. Lexon and Eric sat at one row with a group of her Lightfire Guards. Janek, Kir and Luindad sat at a far end of the other row, their heads bowed over a pile of books. The rest of the Guards sat at their table. Lexon jumped to his feet when they entered.

“I see you found her,” he said, kissing his wife on the cheek and winking at Alaysa, “We thought you would sleep all day.”

“Lex,” Laurel’s serious tone made him frown, “Lex, we have to take her to the forest. We can’t wait any longer.”

The prince, suddenly serious, asked, “What has happened?”

The room became silent. All heads turned toward Alaysa. Janek stood up. Alaysa rolled up one of her sleeves and showed the underside of her arm. Janek jogged across the floor and grabbed her wrist.

“Does it hurt?” he asked, “I feel nothing.”

She shook her head. “It was like this when I woke up.”

Janek sighed, irritably. “It is not good that you carry all of the Lightfire.”

“We need to see my father,” Lexon said, “We have to tell him no more stalling.”

“Has anyone seen Andrew this morning?” Alaysa asked, “He didn’t come back.”

She saw men shaking their heads. Eric rose and ordered the guards into search parties. Her Guards rushed out of the room to cover the rest of the palace and the grounds.

Lexon signaled to one of the few remaining servants. “Do you know where I can find the emperor?”

“He has not come for breakfast yet, Your Highness,” the servant replied.

“He’ll still be in his room,” Lexon said, “Let’s go there.”

Lexon led them to the family wing of the palace. Dust covered the chairs sitting along the walls and the

paintings above them. With so few servants left at the palace, no one had had the time to clean furniture. Cooking and tending to the emperor's needs seemed to be all they had accomplished.

Lexon turned toward a doorway on the right. He knocked and put his ear against the wood panel.

"Father? Father, are you awake?"

He glanced back at Janek then turned the door handle. He pushed open the door. Clothes lay scattered on the floor, on chairs, hanging from the canopy surrounding his bed. The sheets and blankets dragged on the floor as if the emperor had just thrown them aside as he left the bed. The curtains had been drawn. Candles sputtered in the draft caused by the open door.

"Did he sleep here at all last night?" Janek asked.

"It's hard to tell," Lexon replied, lifting up a pair of pants from the floor and placing them on a nearby chair.

"He's not in here," Eric called from the bathroom.

"He's missing, too?" Alaysa wondered.

"No, he's probably just wandering about somewhere," Lexon said, "Why don't we split up and look for him?"

"I'll take Alaysa back to her room and join you," Janek said, reaching for Alaysa's arm.

She stepped out of his reach. "I'll help, too," she said, "I might also find my brother."

"All right," Lexon smirked, "Alaysa, Janek and Laurel. Laurel knows the palace better than I do. I'll go with Kir and Luindad."

Eric spoke up, "I'll go check on the Guards and report back." He dashed from the room.

"We'll take the north wing and the gardens," Laurel said, "The emperor sometimes likes to do some pruning."

"Okay," Lexon agreed, leading his group out of the room, "We'll do the south wing, the courtyard and stables. He may have gone riding."

Outside the dining room, they agreed to meet in one hour when they would decide what further action to take.

Laurel led them down the lower floor of the north wing. They searched all the offices and library and the servants' quarters. The palace had been built on rock so no basement had been dug out. The servants, instead of

sleeping beneath the emperor slept on the same floor, but had their own section of the business end of the wing. Most of the rooms had not been opened for the past few weeks. Their footsteps were the only marks left on the dusty carpets.

On the second floor, they found more parlours. Laurel said that as children they would be allowed to play up in these rooms when there were no guests visiting. They had a lot of fun running from room to room playing hide'n seek. Janek agreed, saying he remembered very little, but did have a few memories. Laurel didn't seem at all embarrassed at mentioning their childhood even though it meant resurrecting unhappy memories for Janek.

At the end of the hallway, two glass doors opened onto a small balcony that overlooked the garden. They stood in the fresh air, breathing deep to clear the dust from their lungs. The trees had dropped their leaves in the past few weeks, laying a golden carpet across the flower beds and paths. The garden stretched to the back wall. The sun had risen slightly above the tall wall. Sitting in shadow, a black spire jutted up from the wall.

“What's that building?” Alaysa asked.

“Where?” Laurel asked.

Alaysa shielded her eyes and pointed to the back wall.

Laurel held a hand to her eyes. “I don't know. Janek?”

“I don't remember it,” he muttered, “It looks like a tower.”

“We'd better check it out,” Alaysa said.

A few moments later, they walked across the carpet of leaves, their feet shuffling through the dense cover. A damp, rotting smell rose around them. Mushrooms, fungus and moss grew on the ground and along the edges of the raised flower beds. Alaysa thought it strange these would grow in the cold fall temperatures. Mushrooms especially preferred warm, wet surroundings, not the cold. Janek's boot struck the side of a mushroom. It's rounded head broke, falling sideways and spores exploded from its underside, rising nearly as high as he stood. Both Alaysa and Laurel jumped, then giggled at their fear of a mushroom.

The tower, built of stone had several small windows beneath its conical roof, but the bottom held only a wooden door. Janek pushed it open. Stairs curved up and around the inside wall. They began to climb. The tower rose a little higher than the roof of the palace. They didn't speak, hoping surprise would be on their side.

It was not a difficult or long climb, but Alaysa's heart pounded loudly in her chest. She rubbed at the back of her neck, something she hadn't done since last meeting up with Zaren. Janek raised his eyebrows in a question

and she could only shrug her shoulders. She didn't know why the daisies would be trying to warn her.

Laurel stepped onto the upper floor first. Alaysa followed and stepped around to Laurel's right. Janek followed and stood on the princess's left. Tables littered with jars of liquid and dried stuffs sat all around the floor.

Alaysa suddenly darted across the floor. She knelt beside a cot and touched the body sleeping on its side. "Andrew?" She rolled him onto his back. "Andrew!" she shook him. He mumbled some words but didn't open his eyes.

"He's been drugged," Janek said, standing over her.

"Help me get him up," she said, "We have to get him out of here."

"My children!" a voice cried out from the stairs, "It is so good to see you."

They turned as one. The emperor hefted his body from the last step onto the floor. A smaller, hunched person wrapped in a blanket followed him. Alaysa couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. It scurried over to one of the tables and began to move dishes around. Alaysa thought she heard it muttering with a scratchy voice.

"Why is Andrew drugged?" Alaysa demanded, standing up.

"He needed to sleep," the emperor said, his eyes sad, "He's been so worried about you."

"Worried..." the other person muttered, "yes, worried..."

They all looked at it.

"Ah, I must introduce you, Lady Alaysa, to my physician," the emperor said, "She has been taking care of me while you've been away."

"Not her real name," she hissed, turning suddenly and pointing a corner of the blanket at Alaysa.

Alaysa didn't like not being able to see the woman's face.

"She has been given a few names," Janek said, bending slightly trying to peer beneath the blanket.

"The first is not always the right one," she hissed, spinning back to the table, again.

"Forgive her," the emperor said, "What she lacks in the way of manners, she has made up for in her knowledge of medicines."

"Why did Andrew come up here?" Laurel asked, walking around the far side of the table where the doctor worked.

"He wanted to ask a question," the emperor said.

"The last he is..."

“What did you say?” Alaysa asked, taking a step across the floor.

“The last...” she wheezed, “Ah yes, this’ll do.” The doctor held up a glass jar with a green liquid.

“What is the Andrew the last of?” Alaysa asked.

“Your caretakers,” she said, then laughed. “They’re all gone. You’re all alone, now.”

Alaysa swayed and sat down heavily on the edge of the cot. She caught only part of the edge and slid to the floor. “Alone?” she whispered, her heart stuck in her throat. She looked up at Janek, wanting him to explain.

“Yes,” the emperor, “You have no more ties to this land, this time. We’ve taken care of that for you...”

“My family?” she said, her voice fading, “Mam? Pap?” Her sisters and brothers’ faces flashed before her eyes. “They’re...? All...?”

The doctor scuttled across the floor and knelt beside Alaysa. She clutched the glass against her chest.

“Dead.”

