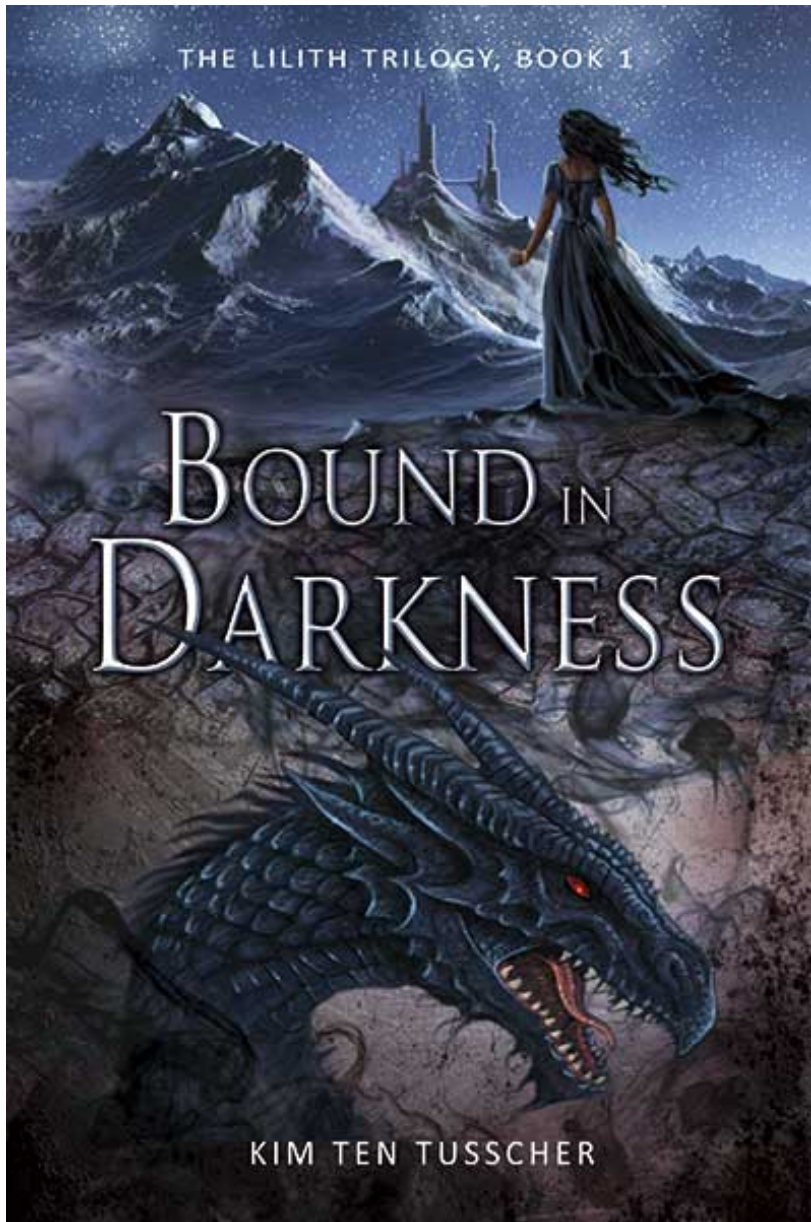


READING SAMPLE



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Kim ten Tusscher

Bound in Darkness

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~ 1 ~

A dull blow to her head caused Lilith to wake up. By reflex she tried to jump up, but the ropes around her wrists and ankles prevented her from doing so. She moaned and lay back down in resignation. Over the past few days, Lilith had been fruitlessly fighting her ties and, therefore, knew that she couldn't free herself. Lemuel's knots were just too tight.

Lilith looked around carefully. As a result of the blow, a sharp pain surged through her head whenever she moved too quickly. She expected that Pavel had awoken her and was looking for his silhouette in the semi-dark. The two men had taken her captive and the younger of the two had been the least patient with her. She was, however, the only person in the covered wagon.

Lilith did see a white stone, the size of a fist, lying next to her head. It glistened because it was wet. She knew it was hail. That was the word she had picked up during the first storm they had run into after she had been overpowered. She had also learned that it was made of ice. But how these stones could fall from the sky was a great mystery to her. In Lilith's native country the weather was usually dry, and the drought was only ever interrupted by short showers. Suddenly she spotted the hole in the hood. Hailstones were thrumming on the roof of the wagon and more stones ripped the canvas. Some hit her. Lilith tried to shift into a different position, but again the ties got in the way.

All of a sudden the wagon creaked and turned to the right. She rolled over, bumping her hip and elbow hard on the side board of the wagon. Lilith cursed. There wasn't a spare ounce of fat on her body to cushion the blows, and the jolting wagon gave her more and more bruises. Then the horses that were pulling the wagon came to a halt. The hailstones were no longer bashing the hood, but Lilith could still hear the thrumming sound. Apparently the men had found another spot for them to take shelter.

The canvas at the rear of the wagon was pulled aside and a blanket and a piece of bread were thrown in by Pavel. Behind him, Lilith could see that the storm was still raging violently. The canvas fell back down. While listening to Pavel's footsteps, she looked at the food lying well out of her reach. She twisted to get a bit closer but soon gave up as it was costing her too much energy.

Lilith heard Lemuel asking his son something. She couldn't understand

what was being said, but by now she knew which voice belonged to which man. The elder one usually spoke in a calm voice and swallowed the end of his words. Pavel had the same accent but his voice was shriller.

"I'm not going to any more trouble for her. That woman can take care of herself. She ought to be happy that we're giving her anything at all," he ranted.

The response was unintelligible. The canvas moved aside again, but this time Lemuel appeared in the opening. He climbed into the wagon, covered Lilith up, and put the piece of bread next to her face.

"Can you reach it like this?" he asked, sounding even somewhat concerned.

"It's hard to eat with my hands tied," Lilith tried.

But the man shook his head. "Do you really expect me to untie you after what happened?"

Lemuel apparently didn't expect an answer, because he brought the waterskin to Lilith's lips. After that, he jumped out of the wagon.

"I hope that other group of travellers has found some shelter as well," he called out to his son while he remained where he was. "This is no weather to stay outdoors."

Lilith's heart skipped a beat. She strained herself to be able to hear the rest of the conversation. Could Lemuel be talking about her pursuers? He had to be, hadn't he? It was unthinkable that anyone would be travelling in this cold without a very good reason. Even Pavel and his father had debated the wisdom of waiting for the weather to improve before bringing her to the capital to have her put on trial. And now there was a group of travellers – plodding through the unremitting storms – taking the same road as they were.

"We haven't seen them for a while," Pavel answered. "Come, let's go inside. I'm yearning for a nice fire to warm myself and I could do with some food."

The cracking sound of their footsteps in the snow faded. Lilith wanted to scream that they shouldn't leave her all by herself, but instead she had a bad coughing fit. When she had finally caught her breath, the only sounds that remained were those of the horses shoving their food around on the bottom of the buckets as they were eating. It was too late. If the men showed up now, there would be no one to protect her. Then it would all have been in vain.

The five men she was afraid of had been pursuing her for several weeks and were sent by her master. In a fit of despair, Lilith had fled from him, from his suffocating authority and the horrible tasks he had imposed upon

her. Running and creeping across savannahs and through forests, she had finally arrived at the mountains. She had hoped to shake off her pursuers there. But unfortunately the echo of laughter between the rocks had told her otherwise. Her pursuers had seemed confident and in high hopes of finding her soon. Those sounds had made her even more wary. Under no circumstances did she want to fall into their hands again. This had proved to be a great motivation; she had no longer felt her fatigue, and her fear had kept her going.

Now that her heart was finally beating more slowly, Lilith tried to eat the piece of bread. She sucked on it until it dissolved in her mouth. It was a long time before she had eaten the small amount. After that, she fell asleep again, in spite of her worries. Thanks to the second blanket she was at least a little bit less cold.

All of a sudden someone pulled on her shoulder. The next instant she was lying face down in the snow.

"No, Seraph, don't. Help!" Lilith cried, with her nightmare fresh in the back of her mind. She kicked around wildly until she hit someone. Only when she was pushed onto her back, did she stop kicking. Pavel was standing beside her. His eyes were glowing while he pulled her up by her clothes.

"Are you starting again?" he hissed. Then he let go of her. Lilith couldn't stop herself from falling backwards and bumped her head on the wagon. "You're going for a little walk."

"I don't want to walk. Just take me along quickly," she begged, all confused, while she looked up at Pavel.

"Are you that eager to be punished?" he asked bewildered. "Or do you think the king won't sentence you for what you did to us?"

"I'm not afraid of the punishment I might get. I've done nothing wrong."

"My brother was more dead than alive when we left him," he snarled at her, kicking her in the ribs at the same time.

"I never meant for that to happen. I only wanted to take some food and clothes and then leave again. But because you all threw yourselves on me, I had to defend myself."

Pavel snorted. "That didn't give you any reason to draw a knife."

"I'm really sorry about that, too," Lilith whispered, pulling herself up.

But just like after the fight, the man wasn't listening. "You're a filthy murderer," he hissed.

That remark stung.

"I don't even know how to kill someone with a knife. I'm truly glad I never learned *that*," she whispered while she received a blow to the side of

her head. Pavel was raising his hand again when Lemuel joined them.

"The woman will be tried by lord Yvar. This is not the way," he said, stopping his son.

Pavel nodded reluctantly and they both disappeared from her sight. When, not much later, the wagon started moving again, Lilith had no choice but to walk alongside it. Her wet clothes stuck to her body, and the cold wind rose again. Lilith sneezed. She envied Pavel, who was wrapped in a warm cape and could take shelter under his hood. He rubbed his waist with his left arm. Lemuel turned his head towards him in concern and whispered something that was lost on Lilith. The answer was drowned out by another sneezing fit.

As she wiped her nose on her shoulder, Lilith let her gaze wander along the horizon. The snow had turned the landscape nearly as white as the sky. Nevertheless, she could distinguish a thin, grey line indicating the horizon. To the left there was a group of trees, but there was nothing else to be seen. Trying to wrap her blanket closer around her body, Lilith heaved a sigh of relief. There was no trace of her pursuers.

"I hope that's not another hail storm," Lemuel muttered as he peered into the distance. Lilith now also noticed the dark clouds gathering again.

"I hope so, too. There aren't many farms around here where we can take shelter," his son answered.

Lilith quickened her pace to get alongside the coach-box in order to hear the conversation. She picked up enough words to be able to turn them into a story, which turned out to be a reiteration of a conversation they had held a few times before.

"What a year," the old man sighed. "Do you think this is a punishment of the Gods?"

Pavel shrugged. "What makes you think we should be punished? Even if the Gods would exist. Sometimes I think that all those Gods were only invented to keep us docile."

Lilith was amazed that someone could think that Gods didn't exist. It had never even crossed her mind to doubt Jakob's existence, let alone question the truth of everything she had been told about Him. She thought about it but quickly dismissed the idea. Her master had had other ways to make her obey.

"I know our faith means much to you, father. But people seem to be just as capable of creating things as the so-called Gods are, and there's no proof of Their existence."

"There's plenty of evidence, but we're just not intelligent enough to recognize the signs. Therefore, some people say it's all nonsense."

“The miracles performed by the Gods? Those are just stories that were written a long time ago, so no one knows what really happened any more. I’m convinced there’s a logical explanation for everything, including the harsh winter that sweeps over Merzia right now.”

Lemuel shook his head disapprovingly. “Maybe people like you are to blame for the Gods bringing down this winter on us. You, who put scientists...”, Lemuel pronounced the word with contempt, “...before the Gods. All these so-called men of learning have only led us farther away from that which is important.”

Suddenly Lilith slipped on the snow. She slammed head first into the ground and was dragged along by the leash for several yards before Lemuel could bring the horses to a halt. In the meantime Pavel had jumped off the coach-box. Lilith was trying to scramble to her feet, but the man picked her up and shoved her back into the wagon. Then he cautiously climbed in as well.

“Does it hurt awfully much?” she whispered. Pavel looked surprised but didn’t say anything. “I’m really sorry that I did that to you. Honestly.”

He gave her a furious glare and tied the ropes around her ankles even tighter than he normally did. Lilith groaned, but he ignored her. Before he left her alone he snarled at her, “What good are your excuses to me? Do you think they’ll make me forget what you did to me and my brother? I’m glad you’ll be punished soon and I hope the sentence will be severe.”

Pavel left, leaving a sorrowful Lilith behind. She felt a stabbing pain in her temples. This was what her master had always warned her about; people wanted to capture her, hurt her, kill her. *And only because I...* Lilith pushed the thought aside, scared that the two men would somehow pick up on it. It wasn’t even true to begin with; these people weren’t holding her captive because of what she was, but because of what she had done. As far as she knew, they had no idea what was hidden behind her emaciated, weak appearance.

She struggled with the blanket to get under it but eventually gave up. For the first time since they had started their journey, she was worried about what the king would have in store for her.

That evening they indeed failed to find a farm to spend the night, so they stopped at a clearing in the woods. While Pavel got Lilith out of the wagon, Lemuel built a fire. The sky had cleared up, holding the promise of a night that would, at least for the most part, be dry.

“I have to pee.”

Lilith turned to face Pavel and nodded at her ties. The man reluctantly

undid the ropes. The leash around her waist, however, stayed where it was. Before Lilith could disappear between the bushes, Pavel called out that she had to stay within his sight. She reluctantly squatted down on her hunches. It was humiliating that she had to do this while she felt his eyes watching her back.

Apparently he thought she was taking too long, because all of a sudden Pavel gave a tug on the leash. Lilith groped around, but her hands didn't find anything to hold on to. Lying on her back, she felt around for the gold necklace she was wearing. The man would certainly treat her differently if he only knew who he was dealing with. Lilith smirked as she imagined how he would be begging for mercy before she took her revenge. But then she dismissed the plan, she couldn't use the power of the necklace.

Walking back, Lilith observed the situation at the camp closely. Lemuel was paying no attention to her and was still sitting at the fire, which was burning fiercely by now. She extended her arms to give the impression that she would obediently let them be tied again, but as soon as Pavel tried to put the rope around her wrists, she jumped towards him. He screamed when she hit him fully in the waist, and they were both knocked down to the frozen ground. They were tumbling all over each other. Then she hit him on the temple and Pavel stayed down, stunned.

Lilith crawled towards the edge of the wood as fast as she could, but Pavel had recovered and jumped on top of her. His weight pressed her into the ground.

"You shall not escape your punishment. I won't let you," he hissed in her ear.

"We'll see about that," she gasped in reply, pushing him away from her.

Lilith jumped up and ran towards the bushes. Her heart was pounding in her ears, drowning out all other sounds. She was nearly there. Just a few more yards and she would be able to escape. Only one more yard and the bushes would protect her.

Suddenly she felt a sharp pain in her calf. All her strength was drained away and she fell face down in the bushes. The sounds returned: the men were shouting and the fire was roaring. Lilith tried to get up, but her right leg wasn't cooperating. Bewildered, she looked at the blood that was oozing down her calf. Then she looked at the two men, who were running towards her, and yelled that she surrendered.

Lemuel aimed his bow at her again to make sure that she wouldn't do anything. Meanwhile, his son fastened the ropes around her wrists so tightly that they cut into her flesh. Lilith tried to ignore the pain by focussing her attention on Lemuel's arms. They were shaking because he was keeping his

weapon drawn for too long.

Only when his son had dragged her towards the fire, did Lemuel put the bow away. Lilith gritted her teeth when he pulled the arrow out of her leg. After he had tied her ankles back together, he threw a blanket over her. It slid halfway down her shoulders, but this time the old man made no effort to cover her up completely.

“What are we to do with you? I’m glad we can hand you over to the king tomorrow.”

Lemuel shook his head disapprovingly. Lilith looked away.

Without heeding her any more attention, the two men sat down at the other side of the fire where the flames hid them from her sight. Lemuel spoke softly to his son, who from time to time answered in a loud and angry voice. Lilith knew they were talking about her but she didn’t want to hear it. She listened to the crackle of the flames instead.

When the fire was beginning to die down, Lemuel got up to gather his cooking gear. Pavel was staring into the flames. He had his legs crossed and his shoulders hunched. Lilith studied his face, which was bruised and swelling up around his temple. She didn’t feel sorry for him, given that he had done the same to her. Her jaw was throbbing because his fist had hit it full force, and she was hurting in other places as well. Every time she moved her arms, however slightly, the ropes cut deeper into her wrists.

As if sensing she was staring at him, Pavel suddenly looked straight at her. His eyes blazed with an anger that was only stirred up more because she kept staring back. He roughly poked the fire with a stick, causing it to flare up again because of the new supply of oxygen.

“Easy, son, otherwise you won’t be getting anything to eat for a while.”

Pavel threw away the stick. It missed Lilith’s shoulder by an inch.

The clattering of pans and spoons preceded the delicious smell of roasted meat and vegetables. Lilith was made aware of her hunger by the loud growling of her stomach. Expecting that the men would share their food with her, she sat up. Pavel kept moving his spoon in her direction before taking a bite. Lilith licked her cracked lips, following the spoon with her eyes.

“You’ve cooked excellently again, father. I was really starving, too,” he said with his mouth full.

Lilith curled herself up in agony.

The elder man just nodded. Lilith grew nauseated from the rumbling feeling in her stomach. The men filled their plates a second time. When they had finished those plates as well, Pavel picked up the pan and said to Lemuel, “There’s still something left, did you want some more?”

“No thank you, I’m full.”

Pavel glanced at Lilith before he got up and walked in her direction. “I’m full too.”

Expecting to get the leftovers, Lilith sat back up again. Pavel, however, walked past her.

“I’ll bury it at the edge of the wood, so that it won’t attract wild animals.”

At first Lilith thought that the man was provoking her, but not much later he returned with an empty pan. He really did rather throw it out than give it to her. Defeated, Lilith lay back down. Pavel gave her a self-satisfied grin. A voice in the back of her mind told her that it was all her own fault.

Pavel and Lemuel wouldn’t let her walk any more for the remainder of the journey. In the morning, Lilith had been given a piece of bread, but that had been all she had gotten. The men clearly were in a hurry now that they were so close to their destination. In spite of a new storm, they didn’t stop for shelter. Snow came through the torn hood and formed a small layer on the floor of the wagon. Lilith licked it up to quench her thirst. She immediately realized that she had made a mistake; her mouth became even dryer and she felt even colder. With a great deal of effort, she turned to her other side when the wagon bounced over a bump. She slid down to the back and was pressed against the tailboard. Lilith tried to crawl back but she kept sliding down.

Out of curiosity she propped herself up a little to look out through the fluttering flap. To the right there was nothing but a thick snow screen, but to the left there was a sheer cliff along which the path ascended. As soon as they turned the corner, Lilith could make out another rock pillar, in spite of the poor visibility. When it dawned on her that they were nearing their destination, Lilith lay back down feeling apprehensive.

It took forever for the path to level out again. The horseshoes clattered on bridges and grew silent again on firm rocky soil. The snow muffled all sounds.

Suddenly the wagon came to a halt. The flap was pushed aside and Pavel pulled Lilith out. With the first step, pain surged through her leg, but she managed to fight it off while the men dragged her to a building in front of them. They pushed her inside through a huge gate. Amazed, Lilith took in her surroundings. The walls were painted a dark green, and lamps, giving out a static white light, were suspended from the ceiling. It looked completely different from what she had been used to, because in the caves where Lilith had been raised torches and candles had been used for illumination. The light had, therefore, been orange and forever moving

because of the draught in the tunnels.

The walls in this palace were decorated with tapestries, but because of the speed with which Pavel dragged her along, Lilith couldn't make out what was depicted. There were many people in the palace. The Merzians made way for the trio and broke off their conversations.

Lilith received inquisitive looks but she didn't take any notice. She counted her steps and tried to remember which corridors they took in case she would be able to escape.

After a while they reached a less crowded part of the palace. When they turned another corner they encountered a soldier of the Royal Guard. He regarded both men closely and then rested his gaze on Lilith. The soldier frowned for a second. "What brings you to Nadesh?"

"We wish to speak to our king," Lemuel answered calmly.

The soldier opened his mouth to ask another question but before he could say anything Pavel pushed Lilith forwards.

"This woman broke into my house and attacked me and my brother. My brother is badly injured. That's why she deserves to be punished."

The soldier looked at her again. Her thin clothes couldn't conceal the emaciated state she was in and she barely reached Pavel's shoulders, even though he wasn't all that tall himself.

"She did all that?" the soldier asked incredulously.

Lilith bowed her head to conceal her smile and let out a sob. Maybe she could use the ignorance of the humans to her advantage.

"All right," the man said. "This, indeed, sounds like a case for the king."

He was joined by another soldier and they led the way to the chambers of Merzia's ruler. Lilith stopped hiding the fact that her leg was hurting and followed obediently. It would be to her advantage if the king was to take pity on her. It was good to have a plan and she felt confident.

The soldiers brought them to an elongated room that smelled of sweet herbs. There were large windows on one side. The curtains were open, but only a little light came in. This room was also illuminated by the cold light that Lilith had noticed before and it made her shudder. There were paintings on the other wall. Portraits of kings and queens who had reigned before the present ruler looked down on her. Some faces were friendly but they all emanated determination and authority. Their eyes followed her while she walked on.

Now her gaze was drawn to the king. He was sitting on the far side of the room, close to the fire that was burning fiercely. The closer Lilith came, the warmer she felt, but she kept shuddering all the same. The king leaned back and regarded the approaching group with fascination.

All confidence suddenly disappeared. Of course nobody would stand up for her, especially not the king. Humans were her enemy. She tore herself loose from Pavel's grip. She was immediately grabbed on two sides. Lemuel and Pavel dragged her forwards until the king gestured they weren't allowed any farther. She struggled to break free, but Pavel forced her to her knees. The two men made a deep bow and Pavel pushed Lilith's head so far down to the floor that her forehead touched the cold tiles. She furiously looked aside.

After the guard had introduced them, it was again Lemuel who spoke.

"Lord Yvar, our king. Thank you for making time for us. This woman broke into my son's house. We beg you to punish her."

"Did she steal anything?"

Hearing his voice for the first time, Lilith looked up. Even though Yvar's question was directed at the man, he looked straight at Lilith. The resemblance to the pictures on the wall was striking. King Yvar had the same piercing eyes and his demeanour radiated both inner peace and power. He held her gaze for a few seconds, during which it seemed as though he could look into her very soul.

"Food and clothes."

"Was that all?"

Lilith finally managed to avert her eyes.

"She was also extremely violent when we caught her in the act."

It was of course Pavel who brought this to attention. He took out Lilith's dagger and made a step forwards. One of the guards immediately jumped between the man and the king. Pavel started back. Stammering his apologies, he handed the weapon to the soldier. The king ignored the entire incident.

Then he addressed Lilith, but she kept avoiding his gaze.

"What's your name?"

She replied almost inaudibly.

"Why did you want to steal food and clothes?"

"I hadn't eaten for days and I was cold," she snorted. Why else would she even go near his species?

"She nearly killed my brother, lord." Pavel related what had happened.

"Do you deny this?"

Lilith shook her head but remained silent.

"Wouldn't you like to say something in your defence? Don't you realize that I'm going to have to punish you and that this is your only chance to tell your side of the story?"

"I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt," Lilith sighed. She wondered if

anyone would believe her. "All of a sudden two men threw themselves on me. I don't remember grabbing the knife, I just suddenly had it in my hand. I'm sorry."

There was a brief silence before she continued in a soft voice, "Honestly, I didn't want to use violence. You must believe me."

"Lord Yvar," Pavel interjected agitatedly and pushed her away from him. "She fought like a lunatic. She could have surrendered but instead she became violent." Pavel pulled up his clothes. A red stain on the bandages around his upper body emphasized his words, "She used the knife very efficiently."

"Is there anything else you want to say, woman?"

"There's nothing to add."

The king sighed deeply, thinking hard.

"The woman is to be punished for theft and assault by means of flogging."

Pavel was mumbling contentedly, which worried Lilith. She didn't understand the meaning of the words the king had used, but during their journey the man had repeatedly wished that Lilith would be punished severely.

"Furthermore, I will award you, Pavel and Lemuel, a sum of fifteen gold pieces in damages. The woman will repay me this sum by working for me."

There was another moment of silence. Cautiously, Lilith looked up at the king. She hoped to read a clue in his eyes as to what was going to happen to her, but she saw nothing. Then Yvar addressed his guards.

"Take these loyal citizens to the kitchen where they can have something to eat. Bring the prisoner to the flogging room and notify everyone."

The two soldiers pulled Lilith to her feet.

"What are you going to do with me?" she whispered. She didn't receive an answer. She glanced over her shoulder at the king. He was bent over his papers again. "What's going to happen?" Lilith wrestled herself free and turned around. Without looking up, the king motioned for the soldiers to take her away. "This isn't fair. Tell me what's going to happen," she growled.

The men grabbed her by her shoulders to drag her away. Lilith realized that this would be her last chance to escape. She seized the men up. Obviously they were big and muscular, but that wasn't necessarily an advantage. If she could only surprise them... Lilith slid her gaze farther down. The men's swords were temptingly close at hand.

Almost immediately it dawned on her that this plan was doomed to fail. Even before she could obtain a weapon, one of the soldiers would have

worked her to the ground, and the other would be pointing his sword at her. It wasn't even unthinkable that they would kill her on the spot. To die was her biggest fear. Lilith believed that her Creator would punish her severely in the afterlife. It was best to go along willingly. Whatever punishment the king had imposed upon her, it clearly wasn't the death penalty. After all, he had said that she had to work for him. It was her only spark of hope.

In the corridor they passed a tapestry that caught Lilith's attention. It depicted a yellow, grassy plain with a cloudless, clear blue sky in which brightly coloured birds were flying. Near a pond stood some trees, and animals were trying to quench their thirst. A zebra looked at her and drew Lilith into the world she knew so well and almost longed for right now. At least she knew what to expect there.

Lilith had halted for a second, but now the soldiers urged her on. Soon they reached another wing of the palace. The soldiers opened a door and, after having pushed her into the room, closed it with a muffled bang. She was alone.

Lilith looked around the room suspiciously. On the walls there were pictures of people engaged in horrible acts. They were tumbling over each other to kill others or to get away after having raped and robbed a woman.

But there was something else that drew her attention as well. The red-tiled floor sloped down towards the middle of the room, where there was a large pillar surrounded by a gutter. Lilith hesitantly approached it. There were four metal shackles on chains riveted to the pillar. Even more anxious, she again wondered what flogging was and she had a deep sense of foreboding. A text had been chiselled at the top of the pillar. She made it out letter by letter and whispered the words: "My blood for my sins."

That didn't bode well. She turned around and limped towards the door. She rattled the door handle and pounded on the wood. When the door suddenly opened, she fell headfirst. Two masked men caught her.

"If you don't cooperate you'll only make it harder on yourself. It's your choice," one of them warned her.

Lilith, however, kept fighting to break free.

A third soldier loomed up in front of her. "Need a hand?" His face wasn't covered and his eyes glistened with amusement.

"Of course not, we can handle a little lady like her. We have done this before," was the irritable answer.

The men dragged her backwards into the room. Lilith didn't get a chance to regain her footing. She tried to bite an arm, but one of the men immediately pulled her head back by her hair. Now she noticed that the

ceiling was painted as well. The people behaving shamelessly on the wall were punished in the outer ring by creatures with strange faces. They were as void of any expression as the masks of the two men dragging her along. In the middle ring, twelve men and women sat on thrones with their backs to one another. Some were talking to each other as though there was nothing going on around them, but most of them were looking attentively at sentences being carried out. Then she recognized the God Jakob. He was pointing at a man who was tied to a wheel.

“Please help me, Lord!” she prayed. “Please!”

The two men didn’t stop until they reached the pillar. Now that Lilith could stand again, she kicked the soldier on her left straight in his crotch. He lashed at her, cursing. His fist hit her jaw in the exact same spot where Pavel had hit her before.

“If you think that hurt,” hissed the other one while she groaned, “then wait until we’re finished with you.”

Next, he undid the ropes around her wrists. Lilith didn’t hesitate for even a second and pushed him away from her. She grabbed her amulet. “Qi ga ullar brut i-qi libèr...” Her hand was pulled away and a man put a metal band around her wrist. Her other arm was grabbed as well, in order to secure it. Nevertheless, she sang the final words, “...qi ouander i-a drag!”

The chains rattled when the men pulled them in until Lilith was pressed tightly against the pillar. In spite of this, she smiled. They wouldn’t be able to stop her in a few seconds. But when the men fastened the shackles on her ankles, Lilith understood that she hadn’t been fast enough. Now it had become impossible to draw on the power inside her. She desperately started to pull on the chains, but they wouldn’t yield.

Suddenly Lilith felt something cold beneath her clothes. With a tearing sound, the back of her tunic was cut open. She begged the man to stop, but he didn’t listen. She felt the blade on her arms when the man cut her sleeves. After that, he did the same with her trousers, so that Lilith was hanging naked in the shackles.

“What are you going to do to me?” she gasped.

The other man appeared in front of her. He took an object from his belt and held it in front of her face. Tied to the end of the wooden stick were three leather thongs. “This is a scourge. Do you know what that is?”

Lilith shook her head.

“In a few minutes you will.” He let the thongs slide over her arm. The metal beads on the ends felt as cold as ice. He stopped when the door opened again.

Judging by the sound of the footsteps, a big group now entered the room.

Lilith couldn't see them until they were well into the room. Pavel and Lemuel were following two soldiers. The son was smiling contentedly at her as he took up the seat that he was directed to. A veiled woman looked at her with concern but then averted her head like the other women.

Suddenly the king appeared in front of her. In a clear voice he informed her of her punishment. "Woman, because of your wrongdoings against Lemuel and his family, I sentence you to fifty lashes with the scourge."

He gave her one final stern look, as if he was waiting for her to say something. Then he turned around and sat down next to the veiled woman.

"The punishment shall be carried out now."

Before Lilith could prepare herself for what was coming, she heard a crack and felt a blow against her back that slammed her into the pillar. The ensuing sharp pain spread through her spine and radiated to the rest of her body. All her muscles contracted briefly. Another blow immediately followed the first, but this time she was hit on the other side. Now Lilith understood what her punishment was.

The executioners counted each blow they inflicted and after the third one Lilith started to groan. She pulled at the chains with all her might. Time and again the scourge swished and the thongs cracked, resulting in excruciating pain. This was cruel: the men were beating her up while she couldn't even defend herself. Lilith shook her head wildly because it was the only part of her body she could move.

It wasn't long before Lilith felt blood seeping down her body. "Seven." Crack. Pain. "Eight." More swishing and more pain. She couldn't do anything to cushion the blows. She knew when the scourge was going to hit her, but it was impossible to be prepared for it.

At nine she started to pray. "Lord, give..."

"Ten."

"...me the... strength... to get... through... this... Please... help me." Her words kept being interrupted by new blows to her back. "Jakob!"

Lilith pulled forcefully at the chains. Suddenly her left hand was free.

She started pulling at the other chain. The next blow curled around the side of her body.

Then the executioners walked up to her. Her hand was pulled away, but Lilith yanked herself free. She lashed out wildly at one of the executioners. Her nails scratched his mask before her fingers got a hold on it. Lilith pulled it down so fiercely that the laces on the back snapped. Her hand was grabbed again.

"It's no use resisting," the executioner whispered. His eyes flashed with anger. Lilith spat at him in response. "Vixen, you're asking for it." The man

wiped the phlegm off his face while his companion tied her hands together with a rope. After that, the men walked away again.

“Twenty.”

He had aimed for the back of her knees and had hit even harder than before. Lilith’s knees gave way and all of a sudden the chains had to carry her entire weight. When her wrist broke, she didn’t feel the scourge any more for a brief moment. Lilith started screaming and clenched her right fist around the chain in an attempt to get her weight off the shackles.

By now, she could feel the difference between the two executioners. The strands of one scourge lashed the spots that had already been ripped open, while the other one unflinchingly found the most sensitive parts of her body.

“Twenty-seven”

The man groaned while he put more speed into the whip. Lilith looked at the people watching from the side line. The smile on Pavel’s face had disappeared and he looked deathly pale. Lemuel blinked with each blow.

Sweat dripped down Lilith’s forehead and stung her eyes. She closed them, but she couldn’t stop screaming. Her screams reverberated against the walls but couldn’t drown out the sound of the scourge. The swishing, the cracking, it was deafening.

“Please, lord Yvar, make them stop.”

Lilith opened her eyes when the words registered. Her vision was still blurred, but she could see that the veiled woman had turned to the king. He, however, ignored her.

“Please, she has been punished enough.”

Despite the woman’s pleading, the blows kept landing on Lilith’s ripped skin. Sweat was stinging the wounds. Her feet slipped on the mixture of blood and sweat on the tiles. Lilith kept looking at the woman, who was shrouded in an orange, trembling glow. “I have scorched her,” Lilith thought deliriously. She wasn’t aware of the counting any more. “And the flames have spread to me. I have become the victim of the fire that I lighted myself.”

This flogging was justice, even though it could never undo what she had done. Pavel’s brother had survived, but many others hadn’t survived an encounter with her. She had no right resisting this punishment.

So Lilith stopped screaming. The leather thongs swished through the silence; the metal beads slammed into her body. She felt all three of them, but not so much as a sigh escaped her lips. Almost immediately the whistling sound returned. She pressed her cheek against the cold stones.

“Thirty-eight.”

The executioner yanked the beads out of her flesh. Her shoulder was

starting to hurt because it was carrying her entire weight. She thought it was weird that she noticed this now. The rest of her body was hurting so much more. Nevertheless, she tried to pull herself back to her feet, only to immediately get hit in the back of her knees again.

“Enough.”

The word quietly seeped through the sounds of violence. The ensuing silence was instantly supplanted by her own gasps for air.

“That was enough,” the king repeated.

It slowly started to sink in. It was over: no more swishing. The scourge wouldn't tear her apart any further. The executioners walked up to her. They were panting as well and their red tunics stuck to their bodies because of the sweat. Lilith heard the king say that Pavel and Lemuel would be compensated for the six remaining lashes she hadn't received. This meant she would have to perform more duties, but she was happy that it was over for now.

Without speaking, the executioners released her from the chains. Their touches were soft compared to what they had done to her earlier. Lilith cast a final glance at Pavel and Lemuel before they left the room. The son had his head bowed and was visibly shaken by what he had seen. Lemuel wasn't responding to anything, so a soldier had put a hand on his shoulder and was guiding him outside. Suddenly she felt a hand on her cheek and her head was turned sideways. Lilith was carefully laid down on the floor. The tiles were delightfully cold.

Then the veiled woman appeared in front of her. “Good Gods, she's still conscious,” she stammered.

“She's very strong. Let's first try to relief some of her pain,” somebody who Lilith couldn't see answered. At the same time something was pressed to her lips. Lilith would have recognized the scent anywhere.

“No,” she whispered powerlessly, even though she had actually wanted to scream it out loud.

“It's all right, this will help you sleep.”

The veiled woman carefully stroked her hair while the other woman poured the liquid into her mouth. Lilith tried to spit it out, but somebody pinched her nose and covered her mouth, forcing her to swallow. When they released her, she growled once more.

“It's for your own good. Soon you won't feel anything any more.”

The words sounded farther and farther away. The woman's voice was distorted as the world around Lilith became blurred. She didn't feel the hands that were taking care of her any more. She only heard her own heart

beating in her temples. A stab of pain went through her body when somebody touched her wounds. She held on to the pain to try to stay awake. Eventually, she had to let go and then there was nothing.

Ghalatea stroked Lilith's sweat-soaked hair again. She wondered what this young woman could have done to deserve this. The king never told her why somebody had to be punished and she always assumed that he was just, but this girl... When Lilith finally closed her eyes, Ghalatea looked up at Betr's in relief. "She's asleep."

The other woman nodded and continued taking care of the marks left by the whip. It was nice that she had taken the initiative to dress the worst wounds, no questions asked. This gave Ghalatea the opportunity to focus on Lilith's left hand, which had had the flesh stripped off when she had pulled it out of the cuff. While the Ancilla Princeps bandaged the hand, she realized that the wrist was probably broken, so she splinted it. After that, she washed the woman.

"It looks as though she hasn't had much luck in her life so far," the Ancilla Princeps whispered while her fingers traced the scars on Lilith's arms and legs. "She's extremely undernourished and scarred. What on earth has happened to her?"

Ghalatea immediately rearranged her veil to conceal the scar on her own face even more. Betr's briefly looked at her and then glanced at Lilith. Then she shrugged. She'd always been a bit indifferent, but then again, maybe it only appeared that way because she didn't speak much.

After a while they wrapped Lilith in a blanket. Putting her on the stretcher wasn't any trouble at all because she hardly weighed anything.

Ghalatea felt the knot in her stomach tighten as she watched the two soldiers carry the stretcher out of the room. Betr's followed them, and Ghalatea remained behind alone. The king wished to speak to her. He had told her so before he had left the flogging room. Ghalatea knew very well why he had demanded this. She should have kept her mouth shut, like she always did.

Ghalatea looked around one more time. The floor was still covered in blood. Servants would come in later to clean the room, but the Ancilla Princeps knew that the stench would remain. It was as if the pillar absorbed the smell of blood, sweat and pain of everyone who was punished here, mixed it and poured it out again. Their screams slumbered in the silence. Lilith's screams, however, were drowned out by other voices. Memories of her youth forced themselves upon Ghalatea and she ran from the room.

Breathing deeply, she stood still in the corridor but she couldn't calm down. Even though the memories of the baptism ritual she had undergone

in the name of the Goddess Margal when she was a sixteen-year-old girl always lingered in the back of her mind, the Ancilla Princeps was perfectly capable of keeping them at bay. But not today. Lilith's flogging had opened the floodgates, and images, sounds and feelings washed over her. Ghalatea sought support against the wall and buried her face in her hands. Through the fabric of her veil she felt the rough edges of her deep scar. The acid that had been used in the ritual had eaten away the flesh on her temple and cheek. She quickly pulled her hands away. Servants came by, so she aimlessly started walking. The king would have to wait a while longer, she had to calm down first.

Suddenly Ghalatea found herself in the flower greenhouse that was an outbuilding of the palace. The flogging room with its harsh, smooth walls wasn't very far from the greenhouses, but the contrast couldn't be greater. The atmosphere was warm and humid, and even in the middle of winter the air was heavy with the sweet scent of flowers. Flights of steps led the Ancilla Princeps down and she walked underneath arches of honeysuckle and passion flower. But today she was blind to their beauty.

"Good afternoon, my lady..."

Only when she had passed the two men, did Ghalatea realize that they had greeted her. Even then, she didn't bother to turn around. This wasn't a good day anyway. Why had the king thought it necessary for her to attend the flogging? Why couldn't she have stayed in the kitchen, where it was safe? Then the doors to her memories wouldn't have been wrenched open this violently. Then her friends' screams wouldn't be drowning out all other sounds right now.

Ghalatea fell to her knees near a bed of lavender and whispered their names, "Ghudrun, Marougha, Eligh..." Tears streamed down her cheeks now that she saw their faces before her. She pulled a twig off a lavender bush and held it to her nose. It gave off a fresh scent that she had never smelled before she had come to Merzia. She rubbed on the leaves to intensify the scent. It helped her to suppress her memories of the things that had happened a long time ago, and she thought back to the flogging of that afternoon. Who was this woman who had appealed to Jakob so desperately?

She was startled from her thoughts.

"Ancilla Princeps, have you noticed? The peonies are in bloom!"

Vester shared her passion for flowers and he looked elated while he walked up to Ghalatea. She shook her head and got up, happy for the distraction. "This early?" she asked, quickly wiping away her tears.

The man led her to the rear section of the greenhouse where there was a bed filled with large flowers. Double peonies grew next to single peonies

and the colours varied from almost white to a dark purple. It was wonderful to see these plants in full bloom while outside the winter still held the world trapped under a blanket of snow. Vester took a sharp knife from his belt and handed it to Ghalatea.

"I'm sure you would like to cut a bouquet of peonies for lord Yvar."

The Ancilla Princeps, however, declined. It was high time to call on the king. She might come back later.

"You spent a lot of time on the woman," the king said, at long last breaking the silence. Ghalatea had stood in front of him for several minutes.

"To be honest, my lord, I didn't come here straight away," she confessed nervously. "There were a lot of things I needed to think about."

His expression was gruff. "Do you understand why I want to speak to you?"

"Of course I do, my lord. I'm sorry that I spoke during the execution of the punishment. I shouldn't have interfered."

Yvar gave a satisfied nod and rose to his feet. He put his hand on her shoulder and led her to a windowsill. There he scrutinized her with a penetrating gaze. Ghalatea had often witnessed how other people told him things they actually didn't want to tell him, only because the king looked at them this way. She smiled, he had been like this since childhood.

"Tell me, why did this specific punishment affect you so deeply? You've witnessed floggings before."

The smile immediately vanished from her face and Ghalatea heaved a deep sigh. It didn't matter how many floggings she attended, she would never feel anything but abhorrence for this form of punishment. For a moment she wondered whether she should say this out loud but she decided to remain silent on the subject. "The screaming got to me. It brought back memories of the day that my friends and I were maimed."

"I thought as much."

Yvar put a hand on hers. Again his gaze penetrated her, but this time his eyes were full of compassion. It was just like thirty-seven years ago, when he had sat by her bed as a young boy after she had just arrived in Nadesh. While his mother was looking after the refugees, the young prince had sat by her bed and had held her hand. Ghalatea nodded, of course he understood.

"How did your friends fare afterwards?" Yvar asked her.

"Eligh was chosen to go with Margal to Emek Jaryi. Other than that, I can't remember much of what happened after the Purifications. I was scared of being left behind because I didn't have a family any more, so I followed

the other refugees. Sometimes I think I remember at least one of my friends coming with me, but Ghudrun never reached Merzia. She probably died from her wounds during the journey, so we may have left her behind.”

Ghalatea bowed her head and dabbed her eyes with a corner of her veil. Yvar got up but returned moments later with a glass of water that he pushed into her hands.

“I think we just left them where they fell down, because nobody cared about anyone else. That’s what’s eating away at me, maybe I could have saved her. I should at least have stayed with Ghudrun when she died and given her a final resting place.”

“There was nothing you could have done, Ghalatea. I clearly remember that you were in an extremely bad shape when you arrived at the palace. The only thing you could do was make sure you reached Merzia. If you had let anything distract you from that goal, you would have died as well.”

Ghalatea nodded and drank some water. She knew all this, but it didn’t feel that way. All she felt was guilt, because she had left her friends in the lurch.

Yvar gave her another look of concern, but then his expression grew stern. In a cautioning tone he raised the subject of the flogging again.

“Next time I expect you to not interfere with the punishment. You forced me to let the flogging continue longer than necessary. I wanted to tell them to stop, but what kind of king would I be if I followed orders from my Ancilla Princeps?”

Ghalatea’s hand flew to her mouth in shock. She was responsible for the prolonged duration of Lilith’s punishment.

“Let this be a lesson for the future.”

“Certainly, my lord. It will never happen again.”

He nodded approvingly. “I never doubted that. I hope you understand why I’m telling you this.”

Ghalatea took another sip of water. By reprimanding her, he had resumed his role as king. The transition was big and unexpected.

“What else has been weighing on your mind?”

Ghalatea put her glass down and told Yvar about Lilith’s scars.

“Some of them were the result of cuts that she scratched open numerous times, but others were clear evidence of deep wounds, and on the inside of her right wrist there was a thick line. The wounds were administered with terrifying precision.” Lost in thought, Ghalatea shook her head. “Maybe it’s a religious ritual,” she suggested. “I’ve read about certain tribes where scars are a part of their faith.”

The king gave a vague answer as if he didn’t really care. That changed

when Ghalatea said, "There is something else. The woman said a prayer during the flogging."

"You could understand her?"

Ghalatea nodded. "I think she spoke Naftalian. It closely resembles the language of my people. There are only a few differences in pronunciation. She begged Jakob for help."

There wasn't much else to say about it, but the Ancilla Princeps knew that this was important. Deep in thought, Yvar stared at his hands for a while before he told her she could leave. Ghalatea jumped to her feet and curtsied.

"I want you to take good care of our prisoner. She still has a debt to repay. If you find out more about her, I want you to inform me."

"Of course, my lord, I will."

~ 2 ~

Nadesh was already shrouded in darkness when the gates opened. The man slowed down his horse, but as soon as the metal-bound doors were open wide enough, he rode through at full speed. The sound of the pounding hoofs on the bridges cut into the silence of the night, but he didn't care about that. He purposefully rode on to the only single-storey building among the blocks of flats. Given that the capital was built on rock pillars, it was a sign of great wealth when a building didn't exist of more than one storey.

A stable hand was waiting and took the horse from the nocturnal traveller who hurriedly jumped off the animal. Subsequently, he rushed up the palace stairs and moments later found himself in the king's room. He had entered without knocking.

Yvar wasn't surprised by this late-hour visit. He put down the book he had been reading and welcomed the visitor, "Good to have you back, Ferhdessar."

Dozens of candles illuminated the room with an orange glow. All other sources of illumination were turned off. This made Ferhdessar smile. He had provided the capital with electricity, but whenever Yvar took some time for himself, he hardly ever used it. Yvar preferred the atmosphere of candle light to the static artificial light. Not so lifeless, he had explained once when Ferhdessar had asked him about it.

"I'm also glad to be back," the sorcerer answered while he took off his cape. He had walked straight to the fireplace. He glanced at the large vase with peonies that stood in the centre of the mantelpiece. "I don't think we've ever experienced such a hard winter. The hailstorms are horrible, I had to take shelter several times. One would almost say it was a mistake to leave the palace, but my journey wasn't a waste of time."

"Have you discovered anything new about the situation in Naftalia?"

"Pontifex Peschi is dead."

"Murdered?"

Nodding, the sorcerer brushed the snow out of his short hair. "His entire city is destroyed."

Ferhdessar only wore his hair longer on the sides. The ends of two plaits hanging in front of his pointed ears caused wet spots on his chest. Two other plaits hung behind his ears and reached past his waist.

“First the Pontifex Maximus and now he,” the king muttered, frowning.

Ferhdessar nodded again and took the kettle off the stove. He swirled it to see if there was anything left. “I hadn’t expected that the battle between the pontifices would take this long. Peschi’s odds of becoming Maximus were pretty good. It looks as if someone has eliminated a rival.” In the meantime he held up the kettle and looked questioningly at Yvar, who gestured that Ferhdessar could have the last drops of tea. Warming his hands on the glass, Ferhdessar flopped into a chair. The king sat down as well but remained silent.

As Ferhdessar took a sip, he contemplated the situation. The events in Naftalia worried him and he feared that the next Maximus would target Merzia in his hunt for new followers. This meant it was vital to stay abreast of all developments. He tried to get to the bottom of every rumour – no matter how far-fetched – to find out the exact truth behind it. Unfortunately, information coming in from Naftalia was few and far between. Nevertheless, he was convinced that Peschi would have crossed the borders into Merzia if he had seized power.

“It’s a relief that he’s dead,” he therefore exclaimed, “but there are others who can be just as dangerous.”

Ferhdessar shuddered at the thought of how the pontifices had attracted followers in the name of Margal. Ghalatea was a living example of their practices.

Yvar nodded, “I’m glad the mountains separate us from Naftalia.”

“Let’s hope they’ll keep protecting us in the future,” Ferhdessar said with a hint of doubt in his voice.

They fell silent once again, both lost in their own thoughts.

“A prisoner was brought in today,” the king said, and he related what had happened with Lilith. “She’s probably from Naftalia.”

“What makes you think that?” Ferhdessar asked.

“Ghalatea suspects so. The woman said a prayer during the flogging. The Ancilla Princeps could understand her.”

“Who was she praying to?”

“Jakob.”

Ferhdessar was surprised. Why would the woman pray to this God? One would expect her to beg Ischa or Trudh for saviour or strength. When he said this out loud, the king answered, “That’s not what confuses me the most. Don’t you think it’s strange that a woman from Naftalia believes in our Gods instead of Margal?”

Ferhdessar had to agree. The power of the pontifices was great and they wouldn’t allow anyone to believe in any other Supreme Being than the

Goddess. Perhaps the rumour about the new prophet was true after all. Ferhdessar had once heard about a man who, in the name of Jakob, had set his sights on Naftalia as well. But when he had been unable to find out anything more about this prophet, he had discarded the rumour as nonsense. Maybe he had been wrong. He definitely had to look into this.

"I'll talk to the prisoner tomorrow. How far am I allowed to go?"

Yvar shrugged. "You know the rules, Ferhdessar. You can use only customary magic on prisoners, unless they pose a direct threat to you or give their consent."

Ferhdessar gave a disappointed shrug. During his journey he had acquired a magical key that he would have loved to have tried on this woman.

Lilith was awakened by the lights turning on. She was lying on her stomach. The pain in her body, which grew more intense with the slightest of movements, instantly reminded her of what had happened the day before.

There was a light-green, plastered wall right in front of her face and she could only just see the bottom of a tapestry depicting plants and birds. She carefully turned her head the other way. The first thing she saw was a simmering fire, but then she spotted the man entering the room. He was dressed in a stately, dark-red robe that hung from his shoulders in many folds and emphasized his height.

He looked at her closely as he calmly walked towards her. "So, you're awake. That makes things easier."

Lilith shuddered. What was going to happen to her? The king had said that she would have to work for him, but surely he hadn't meant right away? She could hardly even move. She stared back to hide her fear. Her left nostril quivered.

The man sat down next to her on the bed and said in an emotionless voice, "You're Lilith, right? I'm Ferhdessar. Sorcerer and..."

Lilith didn't wait for him to finish his sentence. A sorcerer! Groaning, she moved her arms and legs under her body to get up. She wanted to get as far away from him as possible. She was fed up with these men.

He, however, put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her back down on the bed. "Hold on, that doesn't seem wise. You're supposed to rest. Apart from that, there's nowhere you can go anyway."

Ferhdessar put his hand back in his lap, but the pressure on Lilith's shoulders remained. She twisted to shake off the feeling, but it only got worse.

"You'd better not do that, it's counterproductive," Ferhdessar confirmed her suspicion. Now Lilith was absolutely sure that he hadn't come with good intentions.

That impression was reinforced when he pulled her right hand towards him and shoved a wristband around her arm. The sorcerer mumbled some words that made the metal shrink until it closed tightly around her wrist.

"What is that?" Lilith asked anxiously. She tried to pull the band off.

Ferhdessar explained coldly, "This is something all prisoners get and that won't bother you unless you try to escape. It won't even do anything if you leave the palace." He leaned forwards and lowered his voice, "Put so much as one foot outside Nadesh, however, and you'll feel that you've made a huge mistake."

Lilith felt a shiver run down her spine. She started to pull even harder. "Get it off! Get it off!"

She took a swing at Ferhdessar, but he caught her hand. Despite her attempts to pull free, Lilith couldn't prevent him from putting a second wristband on her arm. A stabbing pain surged through her arm and up to her shoulder. It hurt so much that it felt as if her wrist was broken again. She couldn't hide the pain.

"Calm down, Lilith."

"No, I won't calm down. Why should I?" she ranted.

The pain was increasing and expanded via her neck until it pressed behind her eyes. What was this man doing to her? Hadn't she been punished enough?

"The pain will disappear when you calm down."

She reluctantly followed his advice. The pressure did, indeed, subside. She looked at him again, still gasping and fighting her anger.

He didn't look like the other sorcerer she knew. Or... Lilith took another good look at him. Apart from his pointed ears, in which three silver earrings glittered, and the deadpan expression on his youthful face, he did wear the same sort of clothes as her master, with strange symbols along the borders. But her master usually hid them underneath inconspicuous outer clothing.

"What are you doing to me?"

Ferhdessar shook his head. "At first I was hesitant about doing this to you, but you gave me no other option. I think it would be best if you controlled your anger somewhat. You now know what this band does, so next time think before you lose your temper."

"You're all the same," she hissed. Straight away her arm started to hurt again. So she took a deep breath. "What do you want from me?" she growled. The band burned, but she could bear it. She wouldn't let him tame

her completely.

"There are some things I'd like to know about you. First tell me where you're from."

"That's none of your business."

"Why the secrecy? It would be best if you just told me everything I want to know, I'll find out..."

Before he could finish his sentence, the door flew open and the veiled woman stormed into the room.

"What are you doing here?" she snarled at Ferhdessar.

"Lord Yvar ordered me to talk to the prisoner," he answered agitatedly. "She presumably has important information."

"And the king ordered me to take good care of Lilith. So that's what I'm going to do. She's much too weak to answer your questions right now."

Ferhdessar snorted. Then the woman noticed the metal wristbands.

"Was that really necessary?" she asked, pointing at Lilith.

"You know that we do this to all prisoners. There's no reason to make an exception for her."

The woman waved her arms dismissively. "As long as you don't use her for your creepy experiments. Now, get out!"

To Lilith's surprise, but also relief, the sorcerer got up. Nevertheless, she felt even more scared now. What important information had Ferhdessar meant? And the experiments the woman had spoken of alarmed her as well. Lilith hoped she would never have to experience what they entailed.

"We'll continue our conversation another time, Lilith. I'm looking forward to it."

"Leave," the woman hissed again.

When Ferhdessar had left the room, the woman carefully lifted the sheet. She clicked her tongue and removed the bandages from Lilith's buttocks.

Lilith succumbed to the soft, caring hands that applied new bandages and tucked her in again.

"Are you cold or are you afraid?" the woman asked in a soothing voice when Lilith shivered.

"Both."

The bed moved when the woman got up, and the fire flared up high when she threw on new logs. After that, she opened the curtains. A pale light entered the room, but the woman didn't turn off the lights.

"Who are you?" Lilith asked suspiciously.

Nevertheless, the woman answered calmly as she sat down next to her again and plucked away a few hairs that were stuck to Lilith's lips: "You're right. My name is Ghalatea. I'm here to take care of you."

Lilith nodded and glanced at the door. After Ferhdessar had left, two soldiers had taken up post in her room. She sighed. It had all been for nothing. Her escape hadn't gotten her far and she hadn't found the freedom she had sought. Feeling overconfident because of the potions her master had given her and the fever that had set her body ablaze, she had chased a dream which – now that the anaesthesia had worn off – turned out to be nothing but a utopia. Her master had warned her about this so many times.

“Netaligha?”

Lilith was startled. Ghalatea had asked her almost in her own language if she was all right. She hadn't expected that, and it made her hesitate.

“Do I look all right?” she finally snapped at her.

The woman just nodded understandingly while she laid a cloth underneath Lilith's face. Then Ghalatea held a spoon in front of her mouth. Lilith started to eat greedily. It had been an entire day since she'd had her last small bite of food. The plate was empty much too soon.

“Don't you have more for me?”

“You'll get some more later. It isn't good to eat too much at once.”

Ghalatea pulled the cloth away and used it to wipe Lilith's mouth. Then she folded it and put it on the serving tray. All her movements were so calm that Lilith started to think that maybe this woman did have her best interests at heart.

“Are you from Naftalia?”

She was immediately on her guard again. The Ancilla Princeps asked the same questions as the sorcerer, but Lilith didn't intend to answer them. It didn't matter where she came from any more, she wanted to forget about all of that as soon as possible.

“How was your night? Have you slept well?”

“That's a bit hard when your body is aching all over,” Lilith snorted.

Ghalatea nodded and took a little glass bottle from her pouch. She removed the cap and held it to Lilith's lips. Even though her nose was stuffed up, Lilith recognized the heavy scent. So she pressed her face into the pillow.

“It will help you sleep, so you won't feel your pain,” Ghalatea tried to persuade her.

“I don't ever want to drink that stuff again.” The pillow muffled her words.

“It's just a mixture of herbs.”

Lilith looked to the side, but kept her lips pressed together.

“I only wanted to relieve your pain a bit,” the Ancilla Princeps tried again while she capped the bottle.

“I don’t know what you people want from me, but I do know what this potion can do. And it won’t ever do that to me again!”

“In that case I’m afraid there is nothing more I can do for you. I’m truly sorry. I’ll come back later to give you something more to eat.”

She gave a few more tugs on the sheet that covered Lilith and threw another log on the fire before she addressed the soldiers, “I want you to make sure that the fire keeps burning brightly.”

The men nodded and followed her out of the room.

“If there’s anything wrong with the prisoner, I want to be notified immediately,” she added before she closed the door.

Lilith kept staring at the door for a while and wondered what to think of Ghalatea. The woman seemed very friendly, but at the same time asked the wrong questions. She had to be careful, because this woman might be more dangerous than the sorcerer. She wouldn’t reveal anything to him, but when the Ancilla Princeps was around she dropped her guard, increasing the risk that she might let something slip.