

*Part One. Because he's got my back.*

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If Adayeze thought he could do it, maybe he could. But then again, she never really told him the truth, especially if she was about to go sneaking out into the world. He'd only just found out about her leaving, thanks to Lelani.

"I'm sure you'll be fine, Okan. I mean, come on. How hard could it be, really?"

"Hard enough." Okan answered glumly.

He was going to help the servants unload the week's slaves today. This was a difficult job because he had to get all of the slaves into the quarters *uninjured*. And sometimes, slaves decided they wanted to try to get away, which was hard because he had a sword. Only on bad occasions did things go wrong, and a sword was used. Okan hoped this day was not like one of those.

He stared at himself in the mirror. The blue and gold mail armor that he was wearing glistened in the sunlight streaming through his windows. He stood stiffly, liking his regular jeans and t-shirt better. They were more comfortable than these.

"Why do we always have to have lilies covering everything?" he asked off-topically. He hated having lily carpets, lily curtains, a lily bedspread. It all was annoying after a while.

"Okan, you know why." Adayeze said, picking at her new red and white dress.

"Sorry; I think I need another explanation. 'They're the perfect sign' does not explain anything." Okan imitated his father.

Adayeze sighed like he was irritating her. That barely ever happened.

"They are the symbol for the royal family because of their fanciness. They look very special and pretty and...fancy, I guess. I was looking for another word, but whatever." She shrugged. "I guess they just liked the looks of it." Then she looked up from her nails. "Better explanation?"

Okan frowned as he realized he was missing his sword. "Yeah, sure." He told her, sounding as distracted as he was.

"Here it is," Adayeze said from behind him. Okan turned to see her carefully picking up his silver sword case with the silver handle of his sword sticking out of the top.

"Oh, thanks." He walked over to her, slumping in relief. His father would've gone crazy if he lost the thousand dollar sword he'd just gotten for his sixteenth birthday. He took the twenty pound weapon, noticing that Adayeze was having a bit of trouble. That was the difference between Adayeze and Lelani. Lelani loved using swords and bows and arrows, but Adayeze liked healing and hated fighting. She usually steered clear of arguments, but sometimes she and Lelani would get into the occasional squabble.

"No pro, bro." Adayeze smiled.

"Please don't."

"What?" She asked innocently, but Okan didn't answer. He knew that she knew what he was talking about.

Suddenly there was a small tap on the door. “Hmm?” Okan asked, preoccupied by trying to get the sword-strap on right.

“Comin’ in.” Lelani answered, turning the doorknob and peeking around the door.

“Fine,” Adayeze called before Okan could.

Lelani strode in the room, quietly closing the door behind her.

“How’s Mom?” Okan asked worriedly. Benji had been extremely ill since summer began, and the family had had to stay in the castle instead of going to their usual vacation at the Bahamas. Because of that, Adayeze had decided to travel the world, but she too was anxious about their mother’s health.

“She’s . . . okay. . . . Sleeping right now.” Lelani answered calmly. Sometimes it was scary how she could seem so calm in the worst of times. After all, she was only twelve.

“Kay.” Okan nodded, swallowing. What if something happened to her? What if she somehow got too sick to get better? What if she . . . died?

*No, he thought sternly to himself. Now’s not the time to be thinking negative thoughts about her. She’ll get better. I know she will. It’s just a matter of time.*

He sighed.

“Okan?” He glanced up at Lelani. She was staring at him.

“Yes?”

“Are you going to work with the slaves today?” She asked.

“Yes.” Today was his second day getting to work with the slaves. Two days ago, he’d turned sixteen, old enough to begin watching them as an apprentice. He had been waiting for this his whole life, and he was determined not to do anything wrong.

“Can I come?” She inquired unexpectedly.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because.” Okan was becoming tired with the short answers, but what was he supposed to add to them? ‘Yes, I’m going to work with the slaves, Lelani’? No, he hated adding extra words to sentences.

“Because why?” Lelani was starting to irritate him.

“Because you’re too young.”

“Can I at least watch you?”

“Dunno.”

“Can you ask Dad?”

“Yeah.”

“You will?” She sounded relieved and excited at his answer, making him snicker to himself.

“I didn’t say that.” He told her.

Lelani realized what he meant and rolled her blue eyes in frustration. Okan grinned. “Will you ask Dad?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“Nope.” Okan shook his head, his short, screwed-up hair catching a breeze from his open window.

"Pretty please?" Lelani begged.

"No. But *you* can."

"I don't want too. I want you too. It would make things easier." She explained.

"How?" Okan raised an eyebrow.

"I dunno." She shrugged.

Okan shrugged too, walking to the door. Adayeze smiled and waved, and he nodded in response. She mouthed "Good luck!" and he scowled.

"Come on, Okan! I *really* want to go." Now they were making their way down the long hall that was decorated in a crimson color with gold lilies *everywhere*, Okan noticed.

"I know you do, Lani. And guess what? If you ask Dad, you might be able to."

"Okan!" She snapped, running ahead of him and blocking his path.

"Hmm?" He looked down at her face. Suddenly, he was snapped into a trance.

"Please?" Lelani asked softly, her puppy-dog eyes huge and innocent.

Okan narrowed his eyes, and, even though he didn't want to, nodded. Lelani squealed. She always got to him when she had her puppy dog mask on, he observed moodily. "But you better stay out of the way of the cart. Understand?"

Lelani nodded excitedly, hopping on her toes. "I won't let you down!"

Okan huffed and continued walking, with his sister trailing behind him. He remembered something and quickly spun around. She almost ran into him, but he struck his hand out and caught her shoulder.

"And no interfering." He hissed. Lelani smiled mischievously; Okan knew what she could do.

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As they made their way out the door, Okan noticed his father, King Zeheb, talking to one of the servants. With his graying, shoulder-length hair, and scarlet red cape on, he looked more like his father than himself. The only difference was the height—King Zeheb was much shorter than King Dylan had been. Okan was taking after his grandfather rather than his father because he was already six-two. King Zeheb was five-eleven, and Queen Benji was five-seven. None of his siblings took after their parents, Okan pointed out. Lelani was almost as tall as Benji at the age of twelve, and Adayeze was about six feet, done growing.

The servant, a young man with light skin, nodded and hurried away, heading for the outcropping where the slaves worked. King Zeheb glanced at the entrance gate where the slave cart would be arriving and then turned around. When he spotted Okan waiting, he smiled.

Okan beamed, and Lelani popped her head out from behind him. Their father's smile became history.

He set his mouth in a straight line and marched over to them.

"Hello, Father." Lelani said excitedly. She didn't seem to notice that he was not happy, too.

“Okan, you know you are not allowed to bring anyone with you.” King Zeheb’s voice was almost as sharp as an icicle.

Okan winced. “I know, but . . . it’s just . . .” he gave up, exasperated. “Dad, she gave me the *puppy-dog eyes!*” He complained.

Zeheb looked down at his daughter, whose eyes were darting everywhere in a hurry to take everything in before it went away. “Lelani,” She looked up into his eyes without flinching. “Go back inside and help Adayeze get ready to go, or check on your mother.” He instructed.

“Mother is sleeping and Adayeze doesn’t want my help. Okan said it was okay if I came.” She said sweetly.

“Hon, you gave him the *puppy-dog eyes.*” Zeheb said matter-of-factly. Lelani nodded. Either she didn’t understand or she didn’t care.

King Zeheb sighed in annoyance. “Fine, but only this once.”

“Okay, but—” She started, but Zeheb was smart.

“*Only this ONCE.*” He used the voice that told her she couldn’t change his mind, not even with her puppy-dog eyes.

“Fine,” She pouted, crossing her arms.

“Alright. Let’s go do this.”

King Zeheb, Lelani, and Okan were all standing in the middle of the cart way, awaiting the arrival of the slave cart. Lelani was having trouble keeping still and she was getting carried away with having armor.

“Lani, stop prancing like a monkey. Act serious, please.” Okan instructed.

“Sorry.” She forced herself to stand still with her arms at her sides.

When they finally heard the clattering of hooves, servants and guards all lined up on the sides of the cart way and got prepared to unload the slaves.

As the gates opened, the slave cart rolled through, flanked by two police cars.

Okan took a deep breath. This was it. It was time to show that he had mastered this part of the test.

He pulled out his sword, making a soft ringing sound, and King Zeheb and Lelani copied, holding it at their sides. Lelani stood taller and set her expression, and when Okan watched her, she looked as old as him and as taught as he was. Darn it, how did she do that?

As the door to the slave cart was opened, the first slave stepped out. It was a young girl of about fifteen, Okan could guess. She looked stunned to be standing right in front of the King of Mikalakia, and she seemed to be holding her breath.

Behind her, a boy stepped out of the cart, and he looked about thirteen. There was a sort of resemblance between the two kids, but Okan wasn’t sure they were related.

When the door closed behind them, Okan started. Surely there were more? There couldn’t only be two slaves this time? This was the smallest amount they’d had in years! And lucky him, on the day he started training.

Okan faltered, and King Zeheb seemed just as stunned.

Lelani looked the same. Sometimes, like now, she was able to hide her feelings behind a mask she would wear to parties. She hated them: they always embarrassed her.

“King Zeheb, Prince Okan.” The cart-driver seemed startled—Okan couldn’t blame him—to see Lelani. “Uh, Princess Lelani . . . I present to you Saba and Saban of Mikalakia.” He bowed, and all of the servants and guards followed his lead. The two slaves seemed lost.

The cart-driver grumbled something in the girl’s ear, and she widened her eyes. She quickly curtsied, and the boy bowed. They made these guesters so perfectly, Okan wondered if they’d been taught by someone.

King Zeheb nodded firmly. “Thank you, Avi. Saban and Saba, you will each be going to a quarter, Saban in the male’s quarter, Saba in the female’s quarter.” When he mentioned this, Saba and Saban exchanged glances.

“Sir?” Saba asked hesitantly.

“You are not allowed to speak!” Zeheb spat at them. They both flinched. Okan felt as though he wasn’t being fair to the children, but he quickly pushed the feeling down.

“Yes, but sir—” She began.

“Silence!” Zeheb retorted.

“I’m sor—” She tried again.

“I said—” Zeheb started to say something else, but he was suddenly interrupted.

“Let them speak!” Lelani shouted, glaring at her father. Zeheb was so startled that he became silent. Okan stared at his sister in shock. She’d never spoken to anyone that way, especially not the king.

Lelani ignored all of the pairs of eyes looking at her in surprise, and turned her gaze to the kids. Her gaze softened when she saw how scared they looked. She stepped forward. “I hear you would like to ask something?” Lelani asked.

“Um, yes . . .” Saba waited for Zeheb to interrupt, but when he didn’t, she continued. “I would appreciate it if my brother could stay with me . . .” She trailed off uncertainly.

Lelani nodded thoughtfully. She suddenly turned to Okan. “What do you think, Okan?”

Okan was so stunned that his mouth dropped open. All eyes turned to him, and he felt his cheeks grow hot in discomfort. He clamped his jaw shut.

Okan tried to see if this was a joke. Lelani’s expression stayed composed. “I—I, um—I don’t—” He stuttered. His eyes flickered to the slaves. They looked so hopeful it was hard to resist.

He looked at his father. Zeheb’s face looked colder than Antarctica.

Panic arose in his throat, choking him. How could he let his father down? But how could he separate these two children who looked so helpless? Either way, he was breaking someone apart.

*Which one of these decisions will make me better?* He tried. It didn’t work. He did not have an answer for that question.

“Okan? We can’t wait forever.” Lelani interrupted his thoughts.

“Oh, right. Uh, well, I think everything should go regularly . . . um, Saban in the male’s quarters, Saba in the females. Sorry, but I don’t think that would be a good idea.” He told the girl.

She was stiff. Even the wind seemed to swerve around her, purposely missing her long, curly, dark brown hair. Saban was biting his lip, holding something back. Okan couldn’t help feeling guilty for picking this decision, but when he looked back at his father, Zeheb looked proud of his son. This reassured Okan, but only just.

“Well,” Zeheb stepped up, now taking responsibility. “Guards, take these two where they belong and assign them to their jobs. I’ll have to send one of my servants to refill the spaces that I have cleared. There were not many slaves this week.” The guards nodded and led the slaves off, surrounding them.

Okan watched them until he couldn’t see through the crowd of guards. He then focused his attention on his father, who was staring down at Lelani. He glanced down at Lelani. She was looking at the ground.

“Lelani Naomi Dytean, what do you have to say for yourself?” King Zeheb asked with the sharp voice he always managed when he was yelling at Okan.

Lelani looked up at the gates, and then straight into her father’s eyes. “What do I have to say for myself? I have to say that you are *not* a good king. I can’t believe I didn’t notice it before.” She criticized. Then she spun sharply and basically stomped over to her white Oldenburg mare, mounting quickly and kicking her heels in to make it trot away.

King Zeheb’s fists were trembling in rage, and Okan almost dropped his sword. No one had *ever* said *anything* like *that* to *King Zeheb*. Especially a twelve-year-old.

“She knows what her punishment is,” Okan’s father said before striding angrily to his brown Arabian.

“But she won’t listen.” Okan mumbled under his breath before hurrying over to his black Friesian. As he rode away to the slave quarters to check on the slaves, he couldn’t help wondering if he passed the test.

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Everything was going normally at the males’ slaves’ quarters, so Okan went to check the females’. Most of them were working in the field, so he checked there first. He had his sword with him so the slaves wouldn’t try anything funny.

He didn’t want to check *every single last cornstalk*, so he just pranced around the perimeter, looking as far into the crops as possible for him.

It didn’t take him long to notice a girl sitting out of the working slaves. She just sat, not looking at anyone, not doing anything. Okan rolled his eyes and kicked his heels into his Aries’ flank, moving him so that he stood in front of the girl.

As he made his way over to her, Okan recognized the girl. It was Saba, the slave that had been delivered to the castle today. And she was already causing trouble. *Mental note*, he told himself. *Keep an eye on this one.*

“Excuse me?” Saba acted as though she hadn’t heard him. Okan knew better. “I don’t believe sitting down is one of the assignments that were made to you.” He told her.

Saba looked up at him with hard eyes. "I know."

"So I think it would be wise to start working." Okan suggested.

"Okay." She shrugged.

Okan waited. She didn't move. "Now," he tried.

"Fine!" Saba snapped. She looked furious. Why was she furious? Had he said something wrong? Or was it because of that morning? *Whatever, it doesn't matter.* Okan thought to himself.

He began riding away when he heard someone call his name. Okan looked around and spotted Lelani cantering towards him on Gemini, her Oldenburg.

"What?" He asked, turning around to face her. He could just see from the corner of his eye that Saba was watching them but trying to hide it.

"Adayeze is about to leave. Would you like to say good-bye?" Lelani asked, though she knew his answer.

"Of course I do! What kind of question is that?" He asked. Lelani grinned.

"A good question." A voice answered. Okan whipped his head to his left to see who had said it, but no one was nearby except . . . Saba. He watched her for a few moments, but she just continued working as if she hadn't said a thing.

"Did you hear anything?" Okan asked Lani suspiciously.

Her head flew up and down in quick surprise as she frowned. "Um-hum." She answered anyways.

Okan raised his right eyebrow to ask her if she thought Saba would've made the noise. Lelani just shrugged, but Okan saw the edges of her mouth rise up into a smile. He narrowed his eyes but didn't say anything, just brushed past her on Aries and kicked her boot with his own. She giggled before spinning her horse around and trotting next to him. Okan couldn't help glancing back at Saba to see if she was doing anything suspicious. He frowned at the results.

Saba was nowhere in sight.

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"You'll take a whole bunch of pictures, right?" Lelani asked hopefully as Adayeze climbed into her plane. Everyone had said good-bye to her at least twice, and Adayeze looked a bit nervous about leaving her home without her family, but the reassurances given to her from Benji, Okan, and Lelani helped sooth her stress a little.

"Of course I will, Lani. I will even send a whole bunch of post cards with pictures just for you, so you can hang them on your bulletin board." Adayeze promised her. She smiled as the door started to close. "I love you all, and I miss you already! Good-bye! I'll get each of you something special!" She held up her thumbs in excitement and everyone smiled.

"Bye!" Queen Benji called, blowing kisses at her daughter.

"Bye, Ada!" Lelani said multiple times as the plane took off.

“Good luck!” Okan called. He was kind of bummed that she was leaving because they had a close relationship, being the two oldest children. They’d never really had an argument before, though once or twice it would get close.

“Good-bye, Sweetie!” Benji called, beginning to snifle.

King Zeheb just waved, smiling as Adayeze’s face peered through the window of the plane. It became smaller and smaller and smaller, and then, all of a sudden, Okan couldn’t see his sister anymore.

Although his family was standing right around him, and his horse behind him, Okan felt loneliness begin to creep around him. Adayeze was like his first best friend that would always be there, and without her, Okan began to feel hollow. He hoped that time would move quickly so that Adayeze could return soon and Okan wouldn’t have to feel like this. He never knew loneliness could be so painful . . . happen so quickly.

King Zeheb sighed. Everyone turned their heads to him.

“Well, I hope she has a good time and doesn’t worry about missing us too much.” Okan immediately felt guilty.

“Yes,” his mother agreed. “She is a grown girl and so it is good that she is moving on.” She sniffed.

“Well,” Okan said, wanting to get away from this feeling. “I’m going to put Aries away.” He mounted his horse. “See ya.” He put Aries at a canter and headed for the stalls.

Okan had hoped that putting Aries away would at least take a half an hour. But even when he worked slowly, twenty minutes was all he needed when he knew how to do it right. He decided to climb his favorite apple tree to get a rest, let all his worries go away for the time being.

He walked out to the female slaves’ quarters, keeping his sword in handy, passing the bathing quarter and striding out into the corn field. When he reached a large apple tree in a clearing at the side of the cornfield, he glanced around to make sure no one was looking, and began to climb.

Okan climbed the tree until he was as high as possible, then he plucked a good-looking apple from a nearby branch, checked for holes, and dug in. When the sweet, juicy flavor filled his mouth, Okan closed his eyes in pure delight, savoring each bite as he devoured the apple.

Although he was caught in the apple’s wonders, Okan had practiced this so many times, listening for even the smallest rustles, so it came naturally to him.

The rustle he heard was that from either a human or an animal, if it was a human, the person was very skilled in sneaking around. *But I bet I could be even quieter*, Okan thought smugly. He shook his head, clearing his mind so that he could focus on the problem.

As the noise moved further and further away, Okan decided he wanted to find out what his was—like he *wasn’t* going to—and swiftly but silently moved around the branches until he knew he could make a silent leap to the ground.

Okan snickered to himself as he thought about what he was going to say to this slave. She knew that this was against the rules. It had to be girl because these were the female’s quarters. The males had their own special place.

He pushed through all the bushes blocking his path, faintly hearing the rustle of the girl's own movements. He was happy he'd learned how to sneak around everywhere so well, just like the rest of his siblings.

He was acutely aware of the fact that this slave was headed out to the fence. Worry creased his brow as he wondered if there was a hole somewhere in the fence surrounding the quarters.

Suddenly, a twig snapped, and the person and Okan both froze. Okan swiftly noticed that he'd made the sound. Before he knew what had happened, there was a rustle, and the slave disappeared. Okan ducked his head into the blueberry bush to his side and searched around to try to figure out where she went. There was no one anywhere. Even in the trees, he saw nothing except for the occasional brown flicker of a sparrow's feathers. He sighed. He was going to have to practice his sneaking technique, and work a little harder, since he hadn't snuck around in so long.

He stood straight and began walking home, disappointment hanging in the air surrounding him.

*I really should start asking Lelani how she manages to sneak into my room when I'm focusing.* He thought desperately.

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Darkness fell over the horizon, *finally*. It seemed like years after Okan had wanted it to be dark so he could go outside and sit watch in his tree to try and figure out who was sneaking around.

Lelani had come into his room that day, wondering what he had been doing.

"It doesn't take that long to brush a horse." She'd said.

"It does to brush Aries. He's a special horse." Okan had tried to say.

"No, he's just like any other horse. What were you really doing, Okan?" She'd asked curiously. *Overly* curiously. She'd made him tell her. Yes, *made* him tell her. She used her special 'power' to overcome his stubbornness and he'd told her.

"Stalker," She'd called him afterwards.

"No, I'm not a stalker. I was trying to find out who was breaking the rules." Okan had reminded her.

"Whatever." She'd shrugged, walking over to his window. "It's still pretty bright out. Too bad it's summer, huh?" The side of her cheek had pulled up into a smile. She knew what he wanted to do; their minds connected that way, somehow. It was the same with Adayeze. It would freak Okan out sometimes.

Now he was here, prepared and waiting for the last hint of the sunset to fade away and let him be free to explore.

*I might as well go downstairs to wait.* He told himself with a sigh.

As he skidded down the hall to the elevator, he wondered about Lelani, her having that special talent, and immediately quieted down. It was already bad enough that she knew what he was up to. She had a big mouth, and wasn't likely to keep the secret.

Now that he thought about this, he was anxious to get outside so that King Zeheb wouldn't catch him.

Outside, the wind blew long and hard, ruffling Okan's hair and making him feel free. Night had come, and now he was ready to fulfill his mission. His father would be so proud of him.

The slaves in the girl's quarters were beginning to shut off the lights for the night, leaving only a few of the huts' lights on. Okan slithered behind the dark huts, meaningly avoiding the others. It didn't take him long to find the familiar, worn down path that led to the apple tree. He couldn't help relaxing as he trudged down the pathway, keeping a lookout every which way.

Unconsciously, he plucked an apple from one of the low branches hanging down off of the tree, biting into the hard, red crust. He waited there for a minute before remembering what he was here for, and climbed the tree, finding the familiar branches.

He was relieved that Lelani didn't know about his "relationship" with this tree, or he would've found her here, waiting for him, with an amused sneer on her face. Okan knew exactly what she would've said, too.

"You know, you're so loud, I bet even grandfather would've been able to find you." Their grandfather, Winston Flerriy, was deaf. He was Benji's father, so when he came to visit, she was always careful and protective. She loved him almost more than she loved Zeheb; they'd formed a very close relationship when Benji was a child. Okan couldn't hold back his smile at the thought that he was quiet enough to be able to fool Lani.

He settled into two large branches, low enough to the ground to be able to hurry out of the tree, but not low enough to get seen. He couldn't come here in the winter because there was nothing in the tree—unless he wore brown—so Okan would come here every time possible. Now was one of those times.

Suddenly, Okan had an annoying thought.

What if she didn't come? What if she'd already gone to the gate? He grew grumpy at the possibility of missing the slave. He knew it had been a slave. Who else grabbed at bushes to stop the rustling? And, he'd seen the flash of a hand. True evidence.

But what if she didn't come today?

I'll come back tomorrow. Okan promised. I'll come back every day until I figure out who it was. And after that, too, to make sure there are no more.

He hesitated for a second, and then added: *And I'll have to check the males' quarters.*

After thinking this through, Okan wasn't too worried about finding out who the person was that night. *Let them come, get away with it today,* He thought carelessly. *I'll be waiting every other day, though.*

And then, feeling triumphant, he climbed out of his tree and headed off silently into the night, like a ghost, back to the castle.

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It had been almost three days since Okan had visited his tree. He'd wanted whoever was stealing the food or going out to the gate to think that he was done watching out. But waiting a week was hard for him, especially when his father was complaining.

"I've found missing corn! I do *not* want there to be *any* missing corn! You check those slaves or else I will turn you into one of them!" He'd yelled at his servants, pointing accusingly at the female's quarters. All of the missing corn had been reported from there.

Whoever was stealing the crops, Okan noticed, was only taking a little at a time, trying to make it unnoticeable. But Okan had noticed. That was why he'd told King Zeheb, and after a quick check, he'd been proved correct. Now Zeheb was on the verge of blowing up from the tantrum he was having. Okan and Lelani were watching from Lelani's window in amusement as he yelled and screamed and pulled out his hair.

"Watch when he finds out that some of his squash and tomatoes and potatoes are missing, too." Lani said between her giggling.

Okan chuckled under his breath. "I wonder; should we tell him? He'll blow up if he figures anything else that is going wrong with his plan out."

"Of course we should tell him!" Lelani said, like it was out of the question that they didn't tell their father. "It'll be hilarious. Hysterical. I'd pay a million dollars to see this again. But if he blew up..." She pulled her lips back to reveal her teeth in a mischievous smile.

Okan paused, trying to picture it. "I agree." He nodded. "When should we do it?"

"Today!" Lani answered right away. "Right now! It'll be better if they're closer together."

As they skittered down the hall, a disturbing thought popped into Okan's mind.

"What if he has a heart-attack?" He asked Lelani.

"Now *that'll* be priceless." She said, giggling even harder than before. When she glanced up at Okan's face to see if he was laughing, she noticed his serious expression and tried to control herself. "It'll be fine. I doubt he'll have a heart-attack. And if he does, we have immediate access to the best doctors on Earth, remember?"

Okan shrugged, not wanting to ruin the fun of breaking the news, and Lelani continued laughing again.

"Think of what he'll look like." She said between breaths.

Okan glanced down at her, saw her little face, red with hilarity, and started laughing too. Soon, both he and Lelani were cracking up, barely managing to keep themselves upright.

One of the servants in the elevator eyed them skeptically as they stepped in. Okan held up his pointer finger to signal he wanted to go to floor one before cracking up again. He leaned against the side of the elevator for support and saw Lelani gripping the rail to keep herself from falling flat on her face. The servant looked a bit worried, but Okan waved a hand at him, signaling that everything was fine. He looked incredulous.

The tiny *bing* for the first floor sounded, and Okan tried to compose himself, taking deep breaths to become calm again. Lelani continued laughing, and she started hiccupping. That made her laugh even harder, since her hiccup is high and quick.

Okan was finally calm, but Lelani was still laughing making him want to join in.

“Lani, if you want to see his face, you have to stop laughing.”

“Okay, okay!” She said, taking deep shuddering breaths. *Hiccup!* She was about to begin laughing, but Okan gave her the look that said, *Don’t even think about it.* She took two more breaths. *Hiccup!* Stayed composed. Another breath. Then she opened her eyes.

“Okay, ready to go.”

“Good. Stay that way until . . . you know.” Okan instructed, and she nodded.

They walked out into the sunny garden surrounding the back entrance where their father was, slowly making their way to Zeheb. As they approached him, they made out what some of the servants walking away were saying.

“. . . know who was doing it. You know those two new kids that came last week? Yeah, none of this had started until they showed up. I’m guessing the girl is the one taking the corn from the field . . .” He was saying.

Okan stopped in his tracks.

“Come on! Keep moving! He’s leaving!” Lelani tried to push him, but he was bigger than her so he barely moved an inch.

“That new girl . . . do you think it would be her?” He asked, a smile creeping onto his face.

“Maybe . . .” Lani said slowly, watching their father go. “Man, Okan! We won’t get to see his face!” She complained with a pouty look, crossing her arms.

“Oh well. Come on, get your horse.” He told her, beginning to walk to the stables. “We’re going for a ride.”

Lani was way too loud. Okan regretted bringing her along. She gave them away.

There were times, exactly like this, that she decided to chatter on and on, going nowhere and getting nowhere with her conversations. Okan was trying to locate Saba without giving anything away, but with Lelani going on like she was about to lose her voice for the rest of her life, the job was almost impossible.

“. . . And Avni told me that it was so stupid that he said that, but still, I mean, come on! She cannot really think that he’s going to let her do something as *different from her type of things that she does* like that! Why? I don’t know! Don’t even try to answer that!” Lelani threatened, even though Okan wasn’t even trying to listen to her. “And then I said: “Well, you know, Avni, that . . .”” And it continued on like that. So annoying.

Nothing was happening. Okan couldn’t think of why he thought something should happen. It was stupid to think a slave was going to try to steal food while he was out here watching.

“and I *cannot* believe what she said to m—”

“Prince Okan! Princess Lelani! Your father has declared a meeting at the High Towers right away!” One of the servants, riding skillfully on a brown Thoroughbred, cantered up to them, looking as though he’d been trying to get to them as fast as possible.

“We’re coming,” Okan sighed. He’d gotten nowhere, no thanks to Lelani.

“What?” She asked, looking confused.

Okan stifled another sigh. “Follow me.” He turned his horse and set Aries at a jog, leading him up a small hill that led to a road that led to the High Towers.

When they finally reached the stone towers that were made for meetings only, Okan and Lelani dismounted.

“Alright,” He started, tying Aries up on a post made for horses. “Lani, you stay here, and I’ll go get the tickets.” In order to get inside the Towers, you had to have tickets. The royal family always received tickets for free. The servants that were escorted by the family were free, also. Other than that, anyone else had to pay up.

Okan walked up to the building and entered, striding to the counter to receive his ticket, flashing out his ID for the servant behind the table. He nodded boringly and typed a code into the wall, pressing his hand against the hand thermometer. A door was opened, and the servant walked inside, the wall closing up behind him. Since this was going to take about five minutes, he sat down in a cushioned chair in front of the desk.

The screaming started two seconds after.

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As Okan strode away, I tied Gemini to the pole, wishing I could go with him. But, of course, only people sixteen and older were allowed inside, or else the alarm would sound. I’ve only gotten in once, when I used my special power on the machine, but then Father found a new alarm that wouldn’t be harmed by me. It’s so unfair.

I paced out into the field that surrounded the Towers, wondering why Okan had brought us here.

Suddenly I saw a daisy. It was all alone, out in the middle of the meadow, about ten paces away from the forest. I had the urge to go pick it. So, of course, I did.

As I leaned down to snap its stem in half, the sun disappeared, and I glanced up to see a shadow standing over me. Before I knew what was happening, my eyes were covered and everything became darkness. Dread streaked up my spine as I felt strong hands picking me up off the ground and walking away, in the direction of the woods.

I was being kidnapped. I had no choice. I couldn’t do anything. My powers only worked when I could see the person or thing. I was helpless unless I did something. So I screamed.

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The wailing ended a second after it started, but by then Okan was out the door. It was Lelani. No one older than that could scream in such a high pitch. Unless they were really, really scared.

Okan raced over to Aries, already breathing hard. His fear grew as he looked around. Lelani was nowhere in sight. Anxiety pulsed through his veins as he pulled Aries’ reins off the post and mounted, kicking his flank to get him at a gallop.

The sound had been coming from near the woods. So that’s where he was heading. Forget the meeting. It wasn’t important compared to this.

It took him less than a minute to make it to the edge of the forest, and Okan searched frantically for any sign of Lelani or her kidnapper. There was nothing. Not a

single shoe mark of even a dropped item. When this person planned, it planned well. Obviously in this plan, there was no messing up. Mistakes were forbidden. Which made all of this even worse.

Anxiously, he galloped Aries back to the post, tying him quickly and racing inside. Gemini was still calmly grazing in her same spot, unmoved. Okan wished furiously that it had been Gemini that was stolen instead of his sister, even though the horse meant a lot to Lelani.

By the time he made it to the meeting, King Zeheb looked ferocious.

“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!” He yelled, slamming his fists against the marble table and standing up clumsily. “I ordered you here—”

“Dad, Mom! Lelani was kidnapped!” He said quickly, panting from the run inside.

“I don’t—wait, what did you say?” Zeheb’s temper still flared, but surprise sprouted in his voice.

“Lelani! She was standing outside and then someone came and kidnapped her! You have to do something!” Okan repeated, the seconds ticking by making him even more apprehensive.

“Lelani?” Benji gasped, putting her hand close to her mouth. “Lelani’s missing?”

“Yes! She was just outside a minute ago and then I heard her scream and—”

“Guards, search the meadow. Where did she go?” Zeheb asked, hurrying to get to the elevator. Okan had to jog to keep up with him, even though he was taller than his father.

“To the woods.” Okan answered immediately.

“Search the woods and the meadow, then. I want every millimeter of that forest covered with your eyes. You *will* find my daughter.” Zeheb said sternly.

“Yes sir.” The guards saluted, and then they ran down the steps, pulling out walkie-talkies to communicate with the other guards.

“What has happened?” one of the nurse’s came out of the elevator, almost running to the meeting room where Benji was.

“Lelani’s missing!” Okan yelled behind him to answer the question. He heard the nurse gasp, but it just made him mad. If she was so worried, why didn’t *she* go out and help look for her?

*Stop it, Okan. You know that not everybody can go out searching for her. Lelani will be fine. She’s twelve, for goodness sakes. He thought. Twelve . . . that was way too young for her to take care of herself. Wasn’t it? There was hope, right?*

“Maybe we’ll find her sitting right outside.” One of the nurses was saying to a different nurse.

*No we won’t. Good try, though.* Okan thought negatively. There was a reason for all of this, and the kidnapper wasn’t going to just let it all go to waste. Even King Zeheb was smart enough to know that.

They rode down in the elevator, practically jumping off the walls.

There was no way he would be able to live without Lelani. He had to find her.

Alive, of course.

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Darkness was not a fun thing to be in at a time like that. After the kidnapping, the guy slung me over a saddle, strapping me in and then mounting another horse to lead the one I was riding. It was way too bumpy. *The least they could do would be getting me a decent ride.* I thought solemnly. There was no room for fear. I could not be scared at this point.

We'd been riding for hours now, *nonstop*. It was the worst riding experience ever. Worse than when I had been three and my horse had bucked me off. I'd broken my arm, yet this was still worse.

I had a brief thought of what Okan was thinking then. *I can't believe I didn't tell her to come with me and stand by the door. This is all my fault!*

*No, it's not, Okan.* I decided to try and answer the thought I thought he would be thinking. *Everything's gonna be fine. You'll see.*

But a voice in the back of my head told me that things might not be okay.

This could be just the beginning.

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Okan was 99.99% positive that Lelani was trying to get him to calm down.

He'd just had the thought of Lelani sending him her thoughts: *No, it's not Okan. Everything's gonna be fine. You'll see.* Right after he'd thought: *I can't believe I didn't tell her to come with me and stand by the door. This is all my fault!*

Yeah right. Everything was *not* gonna be fine. Everything was gonna be horrible. Horrific. Terrible. Anything *opposite* of fine. Lelani had been *kidnapped* for goodness sake! He was *not* going to calm down until she was back in her room, sleeping peacefully and happily.

But what if that never happened?

No negative thoughts, no negative thoughts. He reminded himself desperately.

Suddenly he heard the clomping of horses' hooves against the pavement. The guards were heading out. Lelani's kidnapper would not get away with this, Okan knew. At this notification, he grew somewhat smug.

"Okan," King Zeheb pushed his door open, slowly treading into his room.

"Yes?"

"Could you check the slave's quarters? I don't feel like going out right now. Maybe you should take a guard along . . ." He began to consider the idea. Okan was horrified.

"No, no," he said quickly. "I have a sword." He reminded his father. Zeheb nodded tiredly.

"Alright. Make it quick." Then he left, leaving Okan alone in the darkness of his room. Moonlight was cast over his bedspread from the window, and Okan walked through it, making a shadow on his bed for one second.

Outside, everything was peaceful. It was as if nobody had been kidnapped, everything was okay, nothing was going wrong. Okan rode Aries down to the men's

quarters, checking each of the huts. All lights were off, all of the beds filled. He went to check the girl's quarters.

It was the same. Everything was peaceful, quiet, normal. Nothing to worry about. Or was there?

Two beds were empty. Okan first considered the idea that his father had ordered them for the next slaves that would be coming on Saturday, but that was five days away.

He rode around the back, checking again and paying more attention. Nothing out of the ordinary. He sighed, thinking it was stupid to be suspicious. Nothing was happening that was supposed to be suspicious making.

And then he heard it. There was a rustling noise coming from the bushes seven meters away.

Okan was suddenly on high alert, stiffening to listen.

Slowly, silently, a shape emerged.

The shape of a girl.

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The girl hadn't even noticed he was standing there until it was too late.

Okan snickered as she saw him, her expression going blank in shock. He'd gotten over his shock at seeing Saba standing there in a jiffy. The servants had been right. He'd considered the option, but after Lelani's kidnapping, he'd forgotten about it.

Saba looked as though she was about to bolt, so Okan pulled out his sword. "I don't think that would be a good idea." He said.

She swallowed and stood stiff, watching the sword. "What are you doing here?" She muttered.

"I was just about to ask you the same question." Okan observed. "What you're doing here is more important. You're supposed to be sleeping."

"I'm not tired." Saba's voice was cleared of feelings.

"That's too bad. You're not supposed to be out here. Stealing, huh? Well, that's all over, now that we've caught you." Okan was almost snarling.

"How can you be so sure?" Now she sounded calm. It was nerve-wracking.

"Why, you think you could get away?" Okan began to feel a grin coming.

"Maybe," Saba was looking unsure. He silently congratulated himself.

"It'd be a lost cause." Okan warned her.

"I'm sure I could try." Saba was glancing around.

"Okay, if you come steadily, there won't be any injuries." Okan sighed.

"I'm not coming with you!" She said accusingly.

"Fine, I'll get the guards."

"I'll be gone before they can get into their capes." Saba told him.

Okan considered this idea very unlikely. "Really? Well, it's a good thing I'm smart then, isn't it?"

Confusion clouded her eyes for less than a second before dissolving. "I guess so." She was looking around desperately for a way to escape.

“Alright, you can ride, I’ll walk, I guess.” Okan said.

“Excuse me?” Now Saba was being stubborn. She crossed her arms over her chest and raised her eyebrows. “I already told you: I’m not going anywhere with *you* or *anyone*.” She reminded him.

“Oh, I must’ve forgotten.” Okan said. “I guess I’ll just have to wait for them to come looking for me.” He shrugged. *Just like Lelani*. Okan suddenly thought. “Hey, by the way, have you heard the news about Princess Lelani?” He asked casually, using a suspicious tone.

He was unprepared for her response. “Oh, yeah. I’m sorry about her. Really.” She sounded oddly serious.

“Yeah. Thanks. Whatever.” He grumbled, glancing down at the ground before snapping his head up to make sure she hadn’t slipped away while he’d put his guard down. She was still there, pity smothered all over her face. Okan scowled.

“I am, really. It’s horrible that someone would do that. Especially to an innocent little girl like her. She was really brave, you know.” Saba babbled.

“Hmm.” Okan was starting to feel awkward.

“I wish I could be more like her. Her confidence really inspired me to—” She stopped suddenly, and stared at her feet. “Never mind.” Saba said quietly.

“To *what*?” Okan pressed.

“Never *mind*.” Saba said forcefully.

“*Tell* me.” Okan pushed through clenched teeth.

“Well, you probably already know, anyways.” She concluded. “Fine. That’s why I decided to take my chances with stealing the corn and stuff.”

Okan was a bit disappointed. He thought it’d be something more stunning, more surprising . . . he didn’t really know the word.

“Oh, right.”

“See.” She pointed out.

“Then why didn’t you just say so?”

“I don’t know.” Saba sighed, sinking down into the soft grass underfoot and stretching her legs out in front of her.

Okan’s worries seemed to get less important as he talked to her. Everything that he’d worried about that had to do with the slaves stealing food was demolishing in thin air. He was becoming less and less concerned with Saba stealing food. When they talked, everything that he worried about—except for Lelani—didn’t matter. And it annoyed Okan in the weirdest way. He didn’t understand any of it.

Glancing up at the sky, he noticed that dawn was spreading across the horizon. King Zeheb must’ve been freaking out about him being late.

“Well, I should be going.” He said, taking a deep breath.

“You’re not gonna take me along with you?” Saba asked, standing and brushing off her dirty red dress.

“My amusement at my dad’s expression got the best of me.” Okan said ironically, sheathing his sword and mounting Aries, who’d been grazing quietly near the large tree standing off to the side.

“Huh, right, okay, whatever. I’m just going to get my b—self in bed and go to sleep for a few . . . minutes.” Saba said, stuttering over her own words.

“So where’s the basket?” Okan wasn’t fooled.

“In the bushes.” Saba sighed. “You can take it if you want. Say you collected it for your father . . .” She hesitated. “Before it is all gone.” She smiled at her little joke.

Okan sneered. “Very funny.” But he didn’t move for the basket. He wasn’t they type of person who liked to take credit for other people’s work.

“Fine. I’ll just take it back to the others.” Saba shrugged, walking over to a blueberry bush and digging through the bushes. She brought out a humungous hand-woven grass basket that was filled with blueberries, corn, squash and carrots, mulberries and apples, strawberries, mint leaves, and chives.

“Shhheesh,” Okan said, taken aback.

“Sorry, but you guys have a whole bunch of bushes and plants growing everywhere around here, and you ignore them all. Except for the apples,” She added. “Sometimes I can’t get any apples ‘cause they’re all gone.”

“Sorry,” Okan apologized.

“Thought so. Figured it was you when I heard that stick snap.” She grinned. Okan’s eyes widened and Saba chuckled.

“Well, I shouldn’t be surprised.” Okan mumbled.

“Hmm?” Saba asked, preoccupied.

“I’m leaving.” Okan said instead.

“Kay. Bye.” She looked up and waved, strangely enough.

“Yeah, um, bye.” Okan said before setting Aries at a trot back to the castle. When he glanced back, he just saw Saba disappearing in on of the huts and meeting up with another girl in the same hut. It looked as though the other girl was about to start cooking.

*Typical*, Okan thought. He urged Aries on to a canter and they set off for the palace entrance in a hurry before the guards came looking for them.

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I couldn’t believe it.

They wanted me to help them steal some slaves out of the slave quarters! And they told me that if I didn’t do it, then I would never make it back to my family. Oh, how I wished Okan had already rescued me and I could be free of worry. Like that was ever going to happen!

They’d finally let me see, thank goodness. That’s the only good side to this.

There were two, both of them men. They both looked like brothers, maybe twins. They had light brown hair that flowed down to their shoulders and green eyes that glinted in the sun. They were tall—six-one, maybe—and they looked to be about eighteen. You could say they were cute—if you hadn’t been kidnapped by them. *Lucky me.*

“Okay, kid.” The one named Ceylon began. We were sitting under a humongo maple tree eating apples and newly made, *stolen* bread and drinking grape juice. He was

the nicest of the two, and he wasn't the one who'd kidnapped me. "What do ya know 'bout sneakin' around the slave's quarters and stuff?"

I shrugged. It had taken me forever to think of a punishment for them, and finally I had decided to go with the silent treatment.

Rico sighed in annoyance even though this was the first thing annoying I could think of that I'd done. "O-kay." It looked like Ceylon was searching for the right words. "Um, do you know *anything* about it?" He decided.

I shrugged. This was really making a difference. It was actually funny, doing this to them.

Rico looked as though he was about to strangle me. *Good job, Lani.* I thought to myself.

"Maybe we'll just have to get her little friend to help us." He suggested with a smirk.

My eyes bugged out of my head—I'm sure of it—and desperation flared in my eyes.

They *wouldn't!* They *couldn't!* They *would* leave Avni alone, and I would make sure of that! She didn't need to have the same fate as they'd given me. I wouldn't allow it. It was out of the question. And Rico *knew* I wouldn't let him get away with saying that.

"You will leave her alone." I said in my low, intense, dangerous voice. I was quick enough to catch the lightning fast flash of fear go through both Rico and Ceylon's eyes before they cleared it away. Yeah, that's right. *Be afraid.*

"Then tell us." Rico said. His voice sounded a bit shaky, not as strong as I had been able to catch in my tone. But, I *am* one of the *only* people that my family has *ever* heard sound so perilous. Not including my grandfather.

"No." Now I crossed my arms and looked away from their hazel eyes, trying to ignore them. *Darn it,* I thought unhappily. *There goes my punishment.*

"Come on, kid. We're just trying to help our friends." Ceylon tried. Actually, it sounded more like he was pleading.

"Huh, who *broke the law.*" I reminded them. I *still* couldn't believe they were trying to get me to do this. Notice how I keep saying *trying.* 'Cause that's exactly what they were doing.

"No, they broke a *stupid* law." Rico said irritably. "Which is *barely* breaking a law."

I was tired of this. *Just leave me alone, for Pete's sakes!* "Maybe if I can get some sleep on *solid ground,* then I'll tell you. But I have to be on *solid ground.* Not slung over a horse like a dead animal! *And* you have to let me sleep *as long as I want.* Understood?" I asked, satisfied. That was the only way I might let them find out my secrets. One or two of them, at least. Only the weak ones, though. The ones that most likely would not get past the guards. I'd tried them once, and, yeah, *I almost died with a sword through my stomach.* Luckily, I survived to tell the tale.

The two could tell they weren't going to get anything out of me unless they allowed this. They both sighed with exaggerated patience, and I grinned evilly. "Fine." Ceylon huffed. "But not longer than a day." He added quickly. I rolled my eyes.

"Okay." I shrugged, leaning back against the tree. "Got a pillow?" Ceylon tossed one my way. "Thanks!" I was beginning to get a little bit cheerful. I know; stupid, right?

But it's true. Tricking them—sort of—was a lot of fun. Especially if they'd just kidnapped me and were hoping they could get me to steal some of *my father's own slaves*.

"Goodnight!" I called to them joyfully. The guys were sitting under a tree four yards away from where I was, and their heads were pushed together in conversation. Their figures had been shadows in the darkness, but as dawn set in, they became more pronounced. They glanced at me like I was crazy, and Ceylon called "Goodnight!" my way.

As I pulled the blanket over my shoulder and rested my head on the worn down pillow, I knew Okan would be searching for clues. He was always there for me, always having my back. Then, suddenly, I couldn't help giggling to myself at the trouble I'd caused for my kidnappers so far. There was still more to come.

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Okan was anxious again.

Once he'd returned home, Zeheb had delightfully welcomed him, thankful that he'd returned. Okan had lied, saying he'd found nothing that led to the "mystery" of the missing crops, though he'd decided "to keep watch in the bushes."

"Oh, bummer." His father had muttered, looking extremely disappointed. Okan had stifled a grin.

But after he'd had a bit of sleep, he'd woken up to a whole new energy filled with worrying and worrying and more worrying. About nothing in particular.

He'd finally decided to sit up in his tree and eat an apple, trying to clear his mind and relax. He was sitting in a small patch of sunlight streaming through the branches, and he was content—for the time being.

That was why he didn't notice the human form sitting beneath him, waiting patiently for herself to be seen. It took him a while to see her though, and by the time he did, it was the middle of the afternoon, while he tried to climb out of the tree to prepare for slave practice.

Okan slipped out of the tree after many attempts to untangle himself from the branches, landing with a small *thud!* He bit into his apple, about to walk away, when he saw it.

A little piece of red fabric was sticking out of the bush, almost entirely covered with leaves as if the person hadn't wanted to be seen.

Okan sighed, knowing at once who it was. Saba hurried out of the bushes, knowing as soon as he'd huffed that he'd seen her.

"Hello." Okan said as politely as possible. As she stepped out of the bushes, a smile flickered across her face.

"I wasn't going to come," She explained. She looked a bit embarrassed. "But I knew you'd want to know." She hesitated, obviously wondering whether she should continue. "I . . . I think I know where your sister is."

Okan had been playing with his apple core, wondering if he should climb back up the tree to escape from her swift gaze. When he heard her say the words 'know where

your sister is', his mind raced, and he instantly moved his head up to look her right in the eye. He didn't have to use words to tell her to go on.

"I know who took her." She continued, moving her eyes elsewhere to avoid looking at his emotion-filled eyes. "They are my best friend's cousins, Ceylon and Rico. She was hoping that they wouldn't put their horrible plan into action to try and save her—she's here too. But when she found out that Lelani was missing, she knew what had been done. She wished desperately that she could do something, but no one would listen to her." She said, finally meeting Okan's eyes. "Because, after all, she *is* just a slave."

"What happened to Lelani?" Okan asked, hoping the fear for his sister didn't show in his voice or on his face.

"When they kidnapped her, they took her deep into the forest so that no one would be able to find them. They walked through water so that even the best tracking dogs would not be able to find their tracks. They camped, and they talked to Lelani...or they're talking, either one. Anyways, they told her that they needed her help to rescue some slaves from here. If she didn't help, then she'd, um, well, she'd never return home. If she did, then she'd be returned, safe and sound. My friend also mentioned something about Lelani's friend . . . Avni, I believe." She looked deep and thought as she tried to remember the name.

But of course, she was right. Lelani had a friend named Avni. And why was Avni being mentioned in this? Surely they hadn't used her name as a threat? Unless they were smart enough to know that Lelani would do *anything* to keep her best friend safely out of this . . .

"Who is your friend?" He asked her suddenly.

Saba didn't answer. She looked hesitant, like giving this secret away could change everything. Okan suddenly realized that it could. If she thought he would. . . . He decided it was best not to think about that at the time.

"I'm not going to hurt her or anything . . . like, turn her in. I just want to speak to her." Saba didn't look convinced. "Look, this is for my sister, okay? And plus, you can trust me. I didn't turn *you* in, did I?" Okan knew he had a very good point, and when her expression changed, he knew he'd convinced her.

"Fine. Come with me. Her name is Sibel, and she'll expect you to call her by her name, understand?" She was being oddly strict about the one rule, so Okan just nodded, not wanting to make any trouble.

They were treading to a small hut near the corn field in the female's slaves quarters when Saba suddenly tensed, whipping her head around to face an unknown sound, and when Okan looked to see what was wrong, there was a slight breeze. He turned to ask what the matter was, but Saba wasn't there anymore.

*How does she do that?* He wondered when he noticed the form of a horse and rider coming towards him.

As the figure came closer, he noticed there were two, one in front, the others in the back, and they were his friends, Iranae, Madge, Bao, and Tayyib. He saw Hagar coming from his left with Aries, and Okan couldn't help smiling. What were they doing here?

“Okan! Hey!” Tayyib called, raising his right hand in a wave. Everyone was smiling excitedly. They hadn’t seen each other in while.

“Hey, guys! I didn’t expect to see you here!” Okan told them, walking forward as Hagar came and held out Aries’ rein for him to take. Okan mounted, not really wanting to talk to his friends here.

“We decided together that we wanted to visit, because we really felt sorry that we hadn’t come to see you when we found out . . . um . . .” Iranae began, but she decided not to finish.

“Oh, yeah. It’s okay. You can talk about it. I think I’ve figured some of the clues out.” Okan said. He gave a warning glance to everyone to dare them to ask questions right now.

“Oh, ‘kay. Well, let’s go inside and get something to eat. We’re *starving*. And I mean that literally.” Madge suggested, giving him a friendly smile.

“Good idea.” Bao agreed, nodding enthusiastically. As they all put their horses in a trot for the pasture, Okan couldn’t help glancing back to see if Saba was still there.

She was nowhere in sight. Again.

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Madge wasn’t joking. They really were hungry. They’d met up with Hayden, Hagar’s little sister, before heading for the kitchen. The cook had already whiffed something up, some shrimp, grape juice, and salads, and everyone had eaten like there was no tomorrow. Except Okan, he’d just eaten an apple, so he wasn’t as hungry.

“This is *great*.” Tayyib said through his stuffed mouth.

“I know. I can’t believe how good this tastes right now.” Bao was stuffing his mouth with shrimp after shrimp.

Okan stared at them, bewildered. “Don’t you have cooks at home?” He asked sarcastically.

The twins and Iranae laughed. “Of course. We just didn’t have time for a big breakfast. You know; lessons and everything.” Iranae shrugged.

When all the food was gone, the friends sat back and relaxed for a bit, enjoying the time together.

Okan couldn’t believe they were here. It was almost like a miracle. He hadn’t seen his friends since their last birthday—not including his—that had been nine months before.

It seemed like two seconds before Hagar sighed and all heads turned his way. Being nineteen and the oldest, he was sometimes the most responsible out of everyone. “Okay,” he began. “Time to talk. Okan, we want to know about where Lelani was at the time of her kidnapping. Maybe we could pick up a clue or two at the site.”

Iranae and Madge were looking nervous to get to the main topic, and Bao and Tayyib seemed to be weighing their options on saying more.

Okan stifled a sigh, too. “I told you, it’s fine. You can talk about it. I think I’ve—” Okan began, and Iranae interrupted.

“Yes, Okan, we know, you think you’ve got it. But we can’t help you until you let us know what it is you’ve found out.” She complained.

The twins, Bao and Tayyib, looked at him expectantly, and Hagar watched Okan carefully. Madge was biting her lip. Okan knew her well enough to know that she wanted frantically to say something.

“Yes, Madge?” He asked as calmly as he could get himself to be. He was hoping to avoid telling them about Saba just yet.

Madge looked extremely embarrassed. “Was it that obvious?” She questioned. When everyone, even Tayyib, nodded, she stared at her feet. “You’ll be mad if I mention it.” She said quietly.

“No, I won’t, Madge. I doubt anything you’ll say will make me upset.” Okan soothed.

Madge shook her head. “Yes it will. You’re already keeping it a secret. I can’t just say it without your permission.” There was an edge to her voice, and that made Okan anxious. What did she know? Which secret did she find out about?

“Come on, Madge! You can’t expect to keep it now that everybody knows! Please?” Tayyib begged. He was starting to get irritating.

“We don’t have to know about it. If they want to keep it a secret, then fine.” Iranae shrugged, but her voice gave away her grumpiness at not knowing.

*Not knowing* what? Okan thought unhappily.

*I’m here, Okan.* The thought seemed to answer his question. Okan whipped his head up, glaring at Madge. Madge looked stunned. “What do you mean?” he asked angrily.

“What are you talking about?” Her voice only gave away surprise.

“What do you mean, *I’m here*? What does *that* have to do with anything?”

“I didn’t say that!” Madge looked hurt at his words.

“Yes you did! *In my mind!*” Okan didn’t care if she looked innocent.

“I can’t send thoughts, Okan.” Madge sounded angry now. She was standing behind her chair, clutching it with all her might.

“Well what did I just hear then?”

“I don’t know!”

“Yes you do. Don’t lie.” Okan was burning with rage, but luckily, he was able to conceal his emotions and only put some of his distaste in his words.

“I’m not lying!” Madge *had* to be the sensitive one, didn’t she? She looked on the verge of tears.

“I don’t believe that.” Okan said, glaring at her with fury.

Madge returned his gaze. She seemed to be holding something back. Then the water in her blue eyes spilled over and she turned, stomping from the room, her straight, light brown hair, waving behind her. As she left, her swift hand reached out and clamped the doorknob, slamming the door behind her blue dress.

Everything was silent for a few moments while Okan’s glare bored into the door.

“She wasn’t lying, Okan.” Hagar seemed too calm to be normal. His voice was light, but in it Okan heard disapproval.

“How do you know?” Okan asked stupidly. Of course! Hagar had that special sense of ‘knowing’. And he wasn’t deaf. “Oh, right.” He added quickly before he could hurt anyone else’s feelings.

“I’ll go talk to her. In the meantime, I think you, mister—” Iranae pointed almost accusingly at Okan’s chest. “—have some explaining to do.” Then Iranae ran to the chair Madge had been sitting in, jumping up on it and then pressing her foot to the back. Then she pressed all her weight on the foot on the back of the chair, and it tipped backwards, landing with a soft *bump*. Her long, wavy, dark brown hair flowed effortlessly behind her as she did this. Then Iranae jumped off, swiftly opening and closing the door behind her. This all went on in a matter of seconds, and it barely made a sound. It hardly took any effort on her side of the demonstration, for Iranae was built like a fox.

Everything was silent.

*Okan, I’m here!* The voice in his head returned, this time pushing him to do something. But *what* did it want him to do? *Okay, here. I’ll help you.* It began again. Okan stared into space as it talked to him, and his friends all stared. *You have to stand up, walk to the door, open it, walk down the hall, go down the stairs, walk to the main entrance, open that door, go outside, get Aries, and ride out to the meadow. You’ll find me there. If you’re on time. But you have to start now. So get a move on.*

Now that he thought about it, the person sending him this thought sounded a lot like . . .

Okan realized who it was immediately after thinking the thought. Oh. My. God. How can I be so stupid? Why didn’t I know who it was before?

He scrambled to his feet frantically, in a hurry to get outside.

“Are you okay?” Bao asked, and everyone followed him as he rushed out the door.

“Get Iranae and Madge. We’re going to visit the meadow.” Okan instructed, and he rushed outside to get Aries.

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We were finally about to have some action.

I was tired of this no-nonsense stuff. I wanted something to happen.

That was why I’d told Okan to come join us. Thank goodness neither Ceylon nor Rico could read minds, or else we’d be gone and I’d be dead right now.

They had decided that it was time to stop stalling and dragged me out here, telling me that it was time to put their plan into action. I didn’t want to do it, so I’d decided to add a little of my *own* action to this game.

“Okay, kid. You know what to do.” Ceylon reminded me.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine.” I rolled my eyes. Of *course* I did. They’d been telling me for hours what was going to take place over and over and over again. It was really annoying now, and I felt like punching someone in the face.

*Oh yeah,* I said hurriedly to Okan in my head. *Bring Gemini please.*

“Alright, since you know it so well, go ahead.” Rico tested, crossing his arms.

“Okay.” I shrugged, walking to the top of the hill in the meadow and looking out over everything. Rico and Ceylon were sitting in the grass, watching me carefully. The wind waved my long, brown and blond hair in my face, and my dress blew slightly with it. Everything looked peaceful; quiet. Then I thought of something to add to my list of demands for my brother. *Be silent, also. They’re fast and they have horses.* I told Okan.

*Shut up, will you?* He sent the thought back to me, and I smiled.

“Show time.” I mumbled as I heard the neighs of horses in the distance. I knew what was going on, but I was smart enough to know Ceylon and Rico had no idea what they were about to encounter.

“Go, will you?” Rico asked impatiently. I grinned even wider.

“Going,” I started down the hill, taking one step at a time, each with exaggerated care.

Hopefully my brother wouldn’t take long, because this was getting to be too much.

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They were riding as fast as they could while trying to be silent at the same time. It was not especially easy to Okan. Iranae and Madge had finally come out of the living room to join them, and Madge didn’t speak *at all*, but that wasn’t too much of a punishment. She was the quiet one. Okan was trying hard not to put Aries at a gallop for the field, not caring if the kidnappers got away. He just wanted to make sure Lelani was okay.

“Is she sure she doesn’t just want us to ride up and get her? Maybe surprising them isn’t a good idea.” Tayyib seemed nervous. This was a first.

“No, it’s fine. We’ll be fine. She’ll be fine.” Okan said through his clenched jaw. He couldn’t let his eagerness show, too.

Tayyib raised his eyebrows but didn’t say anything. Okan stifled a sigh.

“How much longer?” Bao asked. He was one of the most impatient people in the world.

“Two minutes?” Okan suggested.

“Oh.” Pause. *Wait for it, wait for it.* Okan thought. “How long, now?” Bao asked again.

“Bao, just go with the program.” Iranae commanded. He shut up, finally.

“You guys don’t have to get all worked up about nothing.” Okan reminded them. He didn’t want them to be disappointed.

“Maybe we should tell your dad.” Hagar said suddenly.

“No,” Okan didn’t want to tell Zeheb. He felt like his father would just make the situation worse than it already was.

“Where are we going?” Iranae asked, yet again.

“Iranae, I think you and I both know where we are going quite well, right now. So your job for the moment would be to be quiet and stay like that. Got it?” Hagar was losing his patience. It was easy to tell since he usually was so calm and easygoing.

Iranae was smart enough to know that he wasn’t in the mood for her whining, so she listened, thankfully.

Okan pushed Aries to a slow canter, trying not to press on the limit too much.

“How, again, did you find out she was here?” Tayyib sounded anxious to get a conversation moving.

“I just know some things, ‘kay?” Okan didn’t really feel like giving away his and his sisters’ little secret about being able to communicate telepathically.

“No, not ‘kay’, we have to know.” Tayyib exaggerated on the word ‘kay’. “We can’t just go out there, *expecting* her but not really *knowing* she’s there. It would be useless.”

“Not exactly.” Madge finally spoke, her voice barely traveling the length it needed to reach Okan’s ears, let alone Tayyib’s.

Everyone’s heads spun to face her in surprise. “What?” Bao asked cautiously, not wanting to make Madge unhappy again.

Madge lifted her chin up so that her hair didn’t hang over her face. “Not exactly.” She repeated after taking a deep breath. “There is such thing as being able to communicate using the mind, though it’s never been proved before, I don’t think. Or there is that special sense of knowing. You don’t know how you know something, but you know it, and no one can change your mind. So,” she huffed the large breath she’d taken out. “It is not truly useless when someone is *expecting* something, but not really *knowing*.” Madge shrugged, dropping her head again. “That’s all.” She said quietly, once again.

Everyone turned to look at Okan, waiting for him to respond to this sudden outburst.

Okan was staring at her dumbly when she’d finished her speech. When she’d mentioned “communicating using the mind” he’d almost stopped breathing. *Could she really know?* He hoped not, if she already knew something that she hadn’t wanted to share with the whole group at home.

When Bao cleared his throat, Okan snapped out of his ‘trance’ and looked around. Everyone was looking expectantly at him, like he was the leader or something.

*I am the leader.* He thought glumly. “Oh, um . . . well . . . let’s . . . keep moving. We can’t just sit here for too long. Uh, thanks, Madge.” Okan felt awkward saying that to her after the way he’d insulted her back at the castle.

It took less time to get to the Towers as Okan had expected, and at the sight of the meadow, everyone seemed to get ready for action. They didn’t really have a plan; Okan figured the “big part of the plan” was to get Lelani. And he was thankful for that.

They stood in the shadows of the Towers, watching for any signs of life in the meadow.

So far, they couldn’t see a thing. Was Lelani actually *trying* to hide from them? Did she want this to be hard for Okan, too? What if her kidnappers had—?

*I’m going to hide in the shadows of the Towers, okay?* Suddenly the voice was back in his head, louder than before. And now it actually sounded a bit like Lelani. Joy burst through Okan as he heard it, and he delighted at the thought that she was going to make this easier for them.

He turned to his friends. "Alright guys, she's meeting us here. Then we'll ride out to the kidnappers and take it from there." Everyone nodded, looking unsure because he'd just now mentioned this.

*We'll be waiting.* Okan sent her a thought, hoping she'd get it.

*Huh. This might actually be fun.* Okan grinned. He could just feel Lelani scowling.

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I hadn't planned this to happen. It just happened. What a coincidence that they were hiding in the darkness cast from the Towers. It was funny in a way.

I glanced over my shoulder at Ceylon and Rico, pretending as though I need some encouragement to keep moving. Rico scowled and Ceylon held up his thumbs. I smiled "nervously". Puh! How stupid *were* they to not catch that? *Stupid enough to steal a princess.* I thought. I stifled a giggle as I neared the towers.

Time seemed to slow down. I held my breath as I sneaked into the shadows, pressing my back against the wall. I slid in, and almost freaked. I couldn't see! It was too dark for me to see anything. I took deep breaths to calm myself, sinking to the ground.

Suddenly there was a voice breathing in my ear.

"Over here." It said.

I would've been relieved: if it had been Okan. But it wasn't. I jumped up to run away, but a soft, firm hand caught me just in time.

"Don't worry, Lani. It's just me." Madge's voice was louder, but not loud enough to be heard two feet away. I went limp in her arms, relief filling my body.

"Madge," I breathed somewhat dreamily.

"Hello, Lani. It's good to know you're okay." The smile showed in Madge's voice.

"I thought Okan would be with you." I said, glancing around then giving up because I couldn't see anything.

"He is, and so are the others. We're over in there, like I said before." Madge's blue eyes flickered to the second tower's shadow. When I squinted, I could just barely make out the shape of a white horse. Was it Gemini?

"Oh, okay. Let's go." Now I was beginning to feel anxious, like time couldn't get any slower.

"Alright, follow m—" Madge cut off and gasped silently, pulling me closer to her so sharply that I almost fell.

"What's—" I began, but then I heard it. Someone was laughing silently and evilly behind me. I turned in Madge's arms to see who it was.

"I knew you couldn't be trusted." Rico growled, stalking closer. Well, Rico's *voice* was there, but where Rico should've been there was a humungous, evil-looking tiger. One of the most dangerous animals in the world. "I should've killed you the day I wasn't sure what you were going to do to us. My mistake." The golden tiger shrugged. "But not anymore." It snarled, walking closer.

Madge and I took small steps back, our fear overcoming our bravery. I was in too much shock to be able to focus on my power right now.

As Rico got closer and closer to us, my body shut down, and Madge turned stiff. Before I knew what had happened, I felt her dress shiver, and the next thing I knew it...it felt like slicked fur. I dragged my gaze from Rico in astonishment, since he seemed to be frozen in surprise. When I looked at Madge, I couldn't see anything, but I knew exactly what she was when she bent her head down and pressed her muzzle against my hand, a sign for me to get on her back.

She was a horse. A horse! I couldn't believe it. I looked at Rico again, and he seemed to be recovering; quickly, too, so I hurriedly put my left hand on Madge's back and my right on her mane—it felt so odd to be thinking she had a *mane*—and jumped on her back. Holding tight to her mane, I bent my head, signaling her that I was ready, and Madge turned swiftly and took off in the direction of the slaves' quarters.

The light hit my eyes so hard I was blind for a few seconds, and when I could finally see, I looked behind me. Rico was following us about twenty feet behind, trying hard to keep up with Madge's pace, and Okan and the rest of them—Hagar, Bao, Tayyib, and Iranae—had come out of the shadows of the Towers, staring after us in bewilderment. I couldn't help the smile that lit my face.

I turned me head to see where we were going when I noticed something, clear but rainbow-colored, shiny, and twisted, on the top of Madge's white head. As I watched it, I realized that it was a unicorn. Madge was a unicorn! There were said to be no more alive on Earth! I glanced back at Rico. If I watched closely, I could see that he didn't seem to care about me anymore. His eyes stayed on Madge.

I swallowed a gasp of horror. He wanted Madge as her unicorn self, and he'd do anything to get her. Literally *anything*.

Where was Ceylon? I wondered then. Wouldn't he want it too? They could make a fortune. I grasped Madge's mane even harder for support, wishing there was something I could do to stop—oh. My. Gosh. How could I be so *stupid*?

I hoped that luck would come my way—since it had already avoided me plenty—and slid my hands down to Madge's shoulders. She snorted but didn't object. She knew what I was doing.

I waited a second until we were going downhill and then pushed myself into the air, letting my left hand off of Madge's shoulder, spinning so that my back was facing the ground, and then falling, landing oddly softly on Madge's back once again. This all took place in less than a second.

Good. I was facing Rico. Time to do the trick. Before I began, I saw that Okan and his friends were following us. *This will be good*.

I held on to Madge's mane with my right hand while I lifted my left in front of me following Rico with it.

Make him stop. Make him stop. Make him stop. Freeze him. Stop him in his tracks. Turn him into a human once more. Make him powerless. Make him stop. Make him stop. When I opened my eyes, I saw Rico lying on the ground face-down, looking completely frozen and human and powerless. Just like I had commanded.

I was still good at this. Thank goodness.

Madge seemed to understand that I had stopped him and she slowed, making a wide U-turn to go back. As we approached the others, they slowed their horses and then stopped. Madge copied, coming to a halt, leaving about five feet in between the others.

I waited. Nobody said anything. They barely breathed.

Finally, Okan slid off of Aries' back on to the ground. He straightened and looked at me, his eyes filled with happiness. I smiled as he opened his arms for me, and jumped off of Madge's bare back, running to him and slamming into his chest. As soon as I felt his arms wrap around me, I knew I was safe.

"Maybe it would be best if they let twelve year olds in." Okan mumbled.

"I think it would." My voice was muffled in his shirt, but I knew he understood me because a low chuckle erupted from his throat.

"Good to have you back."

"Good to be back." I pulled away from him, looking up at his face. I could tell he was holding back tears. "You didn't bring Gemini." I pointed out. He smiled.

Okan took a deep, shuddering breath. "So," he said. His eyes flickered up to Madge. I realized with a start that he didn't know Madge was the unicorn. She stood there patiently, waving her tail. "Where's Madge?" Okan asked.

I smiled. This would be a great surprise for him.

"Right there." I said, not giving any movement to show where she was.

"Where?"

"Right *there*."

"*Where*?" Okan was getting annoyed, and I held back my laugh.

"She's standing right behind me." I said calmly.

"No, she's not." Okan was really irritated now.

"Yes, she is." I took a few steps back until I was next to Madge. "Okan, friends," I started, placing my hand on her shoulder. "Meet Madge."

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Everyone's mouths dropped open. Iranae almost fell off her horse. Tayyib's eyes bugged out and Bao gripped his reins tightly. Only Hagar and Okan found the strength to compose themselves. But even Okan swallowed.

"Um . . ." Not one person knew what to say.

Madge/the unicorn flipped her mane, raising her head and letting out a powerful neigh.

"Are you sure?" Okan asked after constant minutes of silence. He was beginning to feel nauseated.

"Of course I'm sure. I wouldn't have left without Madge anyways. That's out of the question." Lelani shrugged.

"How can you be sure, though?" He asked, steadying himself by placing a hand on Aries' shoulder for support.

Lelani sighed loudly in annoyance. "Fine," she turned to the unicorn. "I think you're gonna have to show 'em." She told her.

Madge/the unicorn snorted and shook her head. Then she spun around and kicked up her heels to begin galloping.

She galloped down the small slope behind them, making a huge circle around the meadow. While she was galloping back, she started to glow, and she lowered her head, pointing her unicorn diagonally to the ground. When she started going uphill the unicorn got closer and closer to the ground. Okan clutched Aries' mane. If she let it go any closer it would catch on the ground and she would fall.

And that was exactly what happened. The horn caught some of the grass on the grassy meadow floor and Madge/the unicorn flipped forward, flying through the air.

Everyone gasped as she came closer and closer to the ground. Then, suddenly, right before she hit the ground, she glowed brighter than the sun, blinding everyone, and when she landed, the figure in the place of a dead unicorn was Madge, the girl Madge, who was crouched on the ground with one hand pressed against the soil. Her hair covered her face, but when the wind blew it flipped behind her, showing that Madge's eyes were still glowing. As Okan watched, they grew dimmer and dimmer until he blinked, and Madge was back again, human and regular. Except for the fact that she was a unicorn. *Extinct*. Not including this one case.

When the performance was over, everyone stood still, not knowing what to do.

Madge stood, brushed off her dress, and walked slowly towards the others, keeping her eyes to the ground and her hair covering her face. When she reached Okan and the others, she glanced up at everyone but immediately looked away. All eyes were on her.

There was silence. It dragged on and on and on, but no one said a thing.

Okan jumped when a low whistle sounded behind him. "Wow." Hagar said. Okan figured it was just to break the silence.

Madge hadn't looked at anyone for a while.

"W-O-W wow." Bao said, breathing out finally.

"Couldn't explain it better." Tayyib agreed.

"Oh. My. Gosh. You are *awesome*, Madge!" Iranae slipped off of her horse, racing up to stand in front of Madge. "How did you *do* that? Is that your special power? Oh my gosh, I should've guessed. You're a natural." As Iranae said this, Madge started giggling. When she ended, Madge was laughing hard, clutching her stomach as she knelt over.

Iranae started laughing too, just because Madge was laughing, and then the both of them were laughing. Soon, Lelani was cracking up too. All the boys watched as the three girls laughed harder than they'd ever seen before, sitting on the ground to keep from falling over.

Bao and Hagar were smiling, but Okan and Tayyib were wondering what the heck they were laughing at.

"O-kay." Tayyib said, looking at the other girls. "What do we do about *that*?"

"Enough worrying about *them*." Hagar said, raising an eyebrow at the laughing girls. "We have to worry about *him*." He nodded towards the guy lying on the dirt in front of them. The guy Lelani had used her powers on.

"Right." Okan said. He didn't know what he was supposed to do with this guy. "I . . . guess we should take him to my father to deal with . . ." He suggested.

“Yeah, we should begin with that.” Bao agreed, nodding his head.

“Okay. Let’s do this.” Tayyib said, jumping off of Dragon and rubbing his hands together. “Who wants to carry ‘im?”

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Okan sat up in his tree, eating an apple and relaxing. He was content now that Lelani was off with Avni somewhere.

Ever since she’d arrived home she had been more annoying than when she was three and colored all over everything, then blamed him and he was commanded to clean up the mess. No, she was even more annoying now. Okan guessed she hadn’t had time to talk when she was with her kidnappers, because she was talking nonstop now.

That was why it was such a relief to get away from her now. Okan sighed thankfully, hoping that his time to go back to her would not come quickly. He was sure it would be a nightmare.

Everyone else had gone home, exhausted from the day’s work, although some of them hadn’t even done any work. *Cough. Iranae. Cough.* Okan thought in amusement.

A crunch from below made Okan become serious again, and he sat up, pausing from his chewing.

“I knew you’d be up there.” Saba’s voice came after a second. It sounded oddly close. He looked around and only just noticed part of a red dress standing out from the leaves right below him. So, she’d managed to climb the tree. Smart. Don’t want to get caught.

“What are you doing?” Okan asked, staring at the leaves until he finally saw all of Saba’s features.

“I just wanted to see how Lelani was. She is okay, isn’t she?” She asked. Okan was surprised that Saba seemed to care a lot about Lelani.

“Yeah, she’s good. A bit *too* good. I don’t think she got to talk much with her fellow kidnappers.” Okan said, rolling his eyes. He didn’t tell her that they’d gotten Rico.

“You didn’t catch both, did you?” Saba said, reading through his expression. “Sibel knew you’d only catch Rico. He’s too anticipated. Ceylon isn’t as predictable, though.” She shook her head.

“Ceylon? Who’s that?” Okan unconsciously slid down the tree to come closer to Saba, as though he wouldn’t hear her reply.

“The other one. Rico’s twin. You didn’t know? Of course you did, Lelani must’ve met both of them.” Saba said thoughtfully.

“Yes, but she never really said anything about Ke—Ceylon.” Okan wondered suspiciously why Lani had never said anything about Ceylon. He remembered her always saying *them*, but never *him* meaning Ceylon. *Is she helping him?* Okan speculated. But he quickly pushed the thought from his mind. Of course she wasn’t helping him, that wasn’t something Lelani was known for; helping people. Or anything bad. Lelani was known as the sweetheart of Mikalakia. And that was what she was: the sweetheart of Mikalakia.

Usually. Sometimes. Occasionally. Only when out in public. In person or at home, she was observant, annoying, skillful, stubborn Lelani.

"I bet she did but you weren't listening." Saba suggested, but Okan couldn't recall any conversation they'd had where he'd been busy thinking about something else.

"No . . . I don't think so." He hesitated. "Maybe. Most likely not. I mean, these guys stole her. Why wouldn't I be listening?" Saba shrugged.

"I'm just throwing out options. But, whatever. Do you want to meet her or not?" Saba said, seeming annoyed.

*I didn't say anything that would annoy her.* Okan reminded himself. "Meet who?" When he said this, Saba huffed out and rolled her eyes.

"Sibel, of course. Who else would I be talking about?" She said through clenched teeth. That was when Okan remembered that the last time he had been about to talk to Sibel, his friends had come for a visit.

"Uh, sure, I guess." He said, wondering why he should meet her now.

"There is reason for you to visit her. You might be able to catch Lelani's other kidnapper." When Saba said it that way, Okan had a longing to catch Ceylon. Good advice was just what he needed.

"Okay, let's go." He said.

*Huh, I'm getting advice from a slave.* He thought glumly. Well, at least it's for a good cause.

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Saba took Okan the way they'd been going when his friends arrived, then she went around to the front of the small hut, pushing the door open and peeking inside.

"Sibel." She called, though there was nothing to call about. The hut was so small almost everyone in it would be able to hear a whisper from across the room.

"Yes?" A young girl's voice asked. She sounded about fourteen.

"Can I come in? I have a . . . friend with me. He . . . wants to know about Ceylon." Saba said uncertainly.

"Oh, yes, of course. Who is he?" She asked as Saba opened the door a bit wider.

Naturally, when a slave sees a royal family member has come to visit them, their eyes widen and their mouths hang open in shock, or something of the sort. Sibel copied this, freezing.

While Okan and Saba walked in to the hut, which was warm with the heat of an oven baking bread, Sibel just stood there, her eyes following Okan's every move. Her blond hair seemed to be as still as she was, copying her. She was extremely skinny, but not too skinny to go as not eating enough, and she had light skin and high cheekbones.

"Thanks. Sorry this is such a . . . an unexpected thing. I really didn't expect it to happen before you knew, Sibel." Saba apologized. Sibel just stood there, frozen. "Sibel, I'm gonna need you to move before I can relax."

"S-Sorry. I-I'm just in sh-shock." Obviously she was, because now she was trembling and stuttering at the same time.

“Sibel, it’s okay. He won’t turn us in. I *know* he won’t. You can trust him.” Saba walked over to her friend and hugged her before standing back and putting her hands on her shoulders. Sibel seemed pretty small for her age. Unless she was only Lelani’s age.

“I’ll leave if you want me to. I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable.” Okan said, inching towards the door.

“No! Sit. Stay.” Saba demanded, point at a chair at a small table. Okan did as he was told. “Sibel, wake up! You always told me that if they ever came to talk to you, you would act bored. Now look at you. You’re just like everyone else.” Saba didn’t sound happy.

After a moment there was a sigh, and then Sibel looked away from Okan, up at Saba.

“I know. I’m sorry. It’s just . . . I never knew . . . it’s . . . different.”

“I know. Look,” Saba changed the subject. “The dinner’s about to burn. I don’t think anybody will be very happy about that.”

“Oh, right. Elaine will have my tail in no time!” She laughed, hurrying over to the stove where corn-on-the-cob was cooking. She carefully used mittens to pick up the pan and pour the corn onto a clay plate. Then she went to stirring the meat that was sizzling in the pot next to the corn.

“Okay, I’m sorry about that, Okan. Sibel, being thirteen, isn’t very . . . controlled.” Saba said, turning her attention to Okan.

“That’s okay. I understand perfectly.” He nodded, wondering what Sibel had done to become a slave.

“Now, what do you want to know? There are loads, so just ask away. But try not to get too personal.” Saba said, walking over to stand next to Sibel and reaching in a cupboard above their heads to grab some strawberries, apples, and blueberries. Okan noticed that she was a bit short, so she had to stand on her tiptoes, just like Sibel.

“Oh. Alright. Well, first I want to know what strategies Ceylon usually uses.” Okan began, leaning against the back of the chair.

Sibel didn’t even hesitate to answer. It was as though she was talking about someone she truly hated. As she talked she seemed to forget about her fear of Okan. “Well, he usually likes the sneak in, sneak out thing. You know; he doesn’t like to be seen very often. That’s why he usually gets Rico to kidnap people. Well,” she added quickly. “He’s only ever kidnapped two people. Your sister, Lelani—oh, and by the way, I’m *really* sorry about that. I don’t know what they were thinking, but they got their butts kicked. Nice job! It would’ve been so funny to watch!” Now it really sounded like she hated them. “But anyways, yeah. So you might want to have those guards on extra duty. He’s probably planning to put his plan into action tonight.” Sibel shrugged.

“Who else did he kidnap?” Okan asked, but Sibel covered up his question.

“You don’t even have to ask who he’s going to kidnap.” She was saying. “He’s *definitely* going to kidnap me. He’s tired of me giving him away to everyone. He’s probably trying to get those other people too. I don’t know what he’s going to do with us. He’s probably going to let us go alive only if we promise not to tell anyone. And he’s

probably going to say ‘Oh, and if any of you decide to tell *anyone*, I’ll have all of you dead by the next day.’” She said, copying his voice.

“Oh, right. Okay. But who did he—” Okan tried to ask his question again, but once more, his question as interrupted.

“Tell them about that one time.” Saba said, a smile beginning to creep up her face.

“Oh yeah! Oh my gosh, that was so funny! Okay, so this one time, he actually succeeded in stealing a slave, and her name was Gwen, and it was so funny, because she was like, *really* super mad at him because her like, *true love* was in there, so she like, *totally* kicked his butt. He almost had to go to the hospital. And then she turned herself in so she could see her true love again. And so all of his work was wasted. She almost turned him in too, but he told her that if she dared, then he’d *kill* her true love. So she didn’t. Which I think was really stupid.” At this, Saba struck out her hand and hit Sibel on the arm.

“Ouch! What? I *do*. I’m just stating my opinion.” Sibel defended herself.

“I know, but there are plenty of reasons why she didn’t turn him in.” Saba murmured, taking over stirring the meat.

“Whatever. But anyways, it was hilarious watching him on TV—oops!” She suddenly stopped, throwing her hand up over her mouth and widening her eyes. Saba’s eyes grew bigger too, and she glared at her. “Sorry,” Sibel said through her hand.

Okan narrowed his eyes. “How’d you guys see him on TV?” He asked.

“That’s too personal.” Saba tried to use an excuse.

*Lie number one.* Okan had decided to count how many lies Saba told him. “Really? Well then why did she just say that?”

“She was running her mouth too much.” Saba grumbled, knowing she lost.

“We sort of snuck out and watched the guards who were off duty watch the news. We’re really sorry. But we didn’t do anything else, so I don’t know what there is to be sorry about.” Sibel said earnestly, glancing at him.

Okan sighed and then shrugged. “I don’t care. Nothing was reported, and someone has to catch you in action, so now it doesn’t matter.” Sibel watched him for a second and then relaxed her position. Saba did the same.

“But he is probably going to take that one way where the electric fence is kind of tattered—”

“The electric fence is tattered? Where?” Okan said, sitting up straight.

“Oh, over by that one field where there are all the daisies—well, not this year, there aren’t.” Sibel pointed out.

Okan thought. “I’ll send the guards out to check it.” *How long has Sibel been here?*

“Oh, they probably won’t see it.” Sibel continued while she and Saba worked together to punch some flour. Okan watched as they skillfully pushed their fists into the soft fluff.

“Why not?”

“Because only the most skilled people can see it. You have to have that kind of special power.” Sibel said offhandedly.

Okan snapped his head up to look at Sibel's eyes, but they were all for the bread.  
"Power?"

"Well you have powers, don't you?" Okan nodded. "What kind?" Sibel asked.

"I don't know. I haven't figured out yet." Both girls paused to stare at him in alarm.

"You don't know what your powers are yet?" Sibel gasped.

"No," Okan said, starting to get embarrassed as their eyes watched him. He shifted, felling extremely uncomfortable.

"Wow. I can't believe that. And your sixteen, right?" Okan nodded. "Huh, that's interesting. When did Lelani find out?"

"Six." Okan recalled.

"You'll probably find out this year, then. While you're sixteen." Saba said, beginning to pound the flour again.

He just sat there, wondering how she knew this. She could be wrong. She was probably going to be wrong.

Suddenly a thought came to him. One that he didn't like at all. "What if I don't have any powers?"

"Unlikely. *Extremely* unlikely." Sibel said, carrying the flour to a flat pan.

"How do you know?"

"Your skills." She answered.

"What skills?"

"You don't know?"

"Not exactly, no."

"Oh." There was silence. It hung in the air like humidity that never went away.

"When did your other sister get hers?" Saba asked, changing the subject.

"Six." Okan said distractedly. He wanted to know what skills he had. No one said anything. They just continued cooking, and it was irritating. "So what are these skills that you think I have?"

"We don't *think* you have anything. We *know* you do. It's obvious. The way you sneak around and make no noise, the way you can go unseen when you're out in the openness of a meadow. It's amazing. Not a whole lot of people are like that, Okan." Sibel said, stirring the meat again.

"A lot of my friends can do it." Okan pointed out.

"How many friends do you have that can?" Saba asked.

"Six."

"What's with all the sixes?" Sibel asked off topically.

"Sibel, you know that's not very important." Saba muttered.

"I know, but I just want to know why six is coming up so many times!" Okan raised an eyebrow. Sibel could be a little odd at times.

"Coincidences?" Okan suggested, wanting to get this over with.

"Maybe." Sibel shrugged, finally giving up. "But anyways, I don't know why all of you have powers. Maybe it's just 'cause you hang out a lot."

"Why would that affect who has powers?"

"It is possible. To get powers when you're around people who have powers all the time." Sibel assured him.

"Okay. . . Well, we're a little off topic right now."

"A little?" Saba grumbled. "I have a theory." She announced, taking Sibel and Okan by surprise.

"What's your theory?" Sibel asked slowly, being careful.

"Ceylon's going to come for you first, Sibel. I think. Like I said, it's just a theory." Saba held up her hands to empathize her shrug. "I just think you should consider it. I don't know why. I'm weird like that." She said.

"No, Saba, I *told* you already. It's your power. You know," she said, turning to Okan now. "Her theories are usually correct."

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Everyone jumped and Sibel stared at the door in horror. Okan knew that he shouldn't be here, relaxing as he was. If he was here at all, he should be tense and armed with his sword.

Saba strode quickly to the door, making sure that the person didn't try to come in.

She cracked the door open enough for herself to see outside.

"Oh, Zeus. I'm sorry. I know this is kind of odd, but could you please go ask Theresa if we could trade these chives—" she handed Zeus some chives that Okan hadn't noticed that she had in her hand—"for some mushrooms? I seem to be missing those." She asked politely, not opening the door more than an inch more.

"Oh, of course." Zeus said sounding as surprised as Okan would've thought she'd be as she took the chives from Saba.

"Thank you." She closed the door with a sigh of relief as Zeus walked away.

"Good work." Sibel said, walking over and holding her hand up for a high five. Saba slapped her hand and strolled over to the oven, picking up a glove and opening it to pull out the bread.

"Why couldn't she come in?" He asked after a while of watching them shuffle around the kitchen making stew and bread and fruit salad.

"Because we don't want anyone else to know you're here. You'll have to leave soon. Everyone's probably coming home right now." Sibel said matter-of-factly.

"Should I come back tomorrow?" Okan asked.

"I'm working. We both are." She said.

"Oh." He was disappointed. He wanted to talk with them again, not just to find out about Ceylon. He liked how they calmed him and how the atmosphere was nice and warm. In both ways.

"Okay, I'll take you back to your tree." Saba said, nodding towards the door and walking to it.

"Bye, Sibel. Thanks for sharing your information with me." He said.

"You're welcome. Any time. Just not tomorrow. Or . . . the day after that . . . or the day after that . . . or the day after that . . ."

"Okay, we both get it, Sibel." Saba sighed, opening the door and slipping out.

"Have a nice night." She called after him when he followed her silently.

Saba followed the same trail home, keeping as quiet as a mouse. It was as though she'd learned how to get through the bushes without rustling them in the short time Okan hadn't seen her.

They were quiet all the way back, both of them not knowing what to say.

When they finally reached the tree, Saba paused.

"Well," she said after a moment's hesitation. "Have a nice evening. Um . . . I hope Lelani doesn't bug you too much." She sounded as though she was reluctant to leave.

"Yeah, me too." Okan really didn't have anything else to say to her.

"Uh, Okan?"

"Hum?" He plucked an apple from the tree.

"How's Saban?" Saba asked carefully.

Okan was taken off guard. "What?"

"How's Saban? Is he okay? I really don't like leaving him alone, knowing he's only thirteen." Her tone indicated she did not agree with them being separated. Guilt crawled up Okan's spine.

"Sorry. I—" He was going to explain, but Saba gave him a look that told him to drop the subject. "He's fine. I think. I'll check tonight. Just to make sure. There aren't any problems with them, so there's really nothing to worry about . . ." He trailed off when Saba raised her eyebrows. "Never mind. See ya."

"Bye." Saba waved, fixing her features into a smile before melting away into the darkness.

"Oh, wait! One more thing!" Okan said, remembering something.

"What?" Saba poked her head out of the darkness.

"Who else did Ceylon kidnap?"

Saba didn't answer. Sorrow crossed her face and she looked at the ground. After countless minutes, she sighed. "I think Sibel will tell you that when she wants to." She said sadly, before going away again.

Okan turned and began to trek towards the castle, deep in thought. He didn't have to pay attention to where he was going; he'd been on this trail so many times.

Instead he thought about that night.

*Why wouldn't Saba tell me who was kidnapped like Lelani? And what did Sibel say about my skills? The way I sneak around so well without being noticed. Really, that can't be true.* He thought.

There was a rustling, and Okan saw a rabbit that had been sitting in the path about ten feet ahead of him bounce away into the undergrowth.

It was as though it hadn't even known he was coming, he was being so quiet.

*Gee, what a coincidence. As if to prove me wrong.*

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"Where in the world have you been? Did you *not* hear me call a meeting at once?" King Zeheb demanded as he walked through the front entrance of the castle.

"No." Okan said, biting into his apple again.

“Well I *did* call one, and you shouldn’t be so far away that you can’t hear!” Zeheb spat.

“I was only around the slaves’ quarters. I need to check the males, still, though. And Father, I think there’s a part of the electric fence that’s been torn.” He said, remembering what Sibel had said.

“I’ll get the guards to check that and the males’ slave’s quarters. But right now, I don’t care what excuses you have to get out of it, you’re getting *in* this hall right now and joining the meeting.” His father demanded, pointing down the passage at the large dining hall at the end of it.

“Okay,” Okan said with a frown. *I wasn’t trying to get out of it.* He thought about saying that, but decided the better of it.

Lelani skipped down the stairs as he walked past them, joining him at his side.

“Umm, where’d you go, to the bakery? You smell like freshly baked bread.” She commented, closing her eyes and breathing in deeply. Okan lifted his arm to smell his sleeve, and when he realized that she was right, clenched his teeth to bite back the panic.

“Guess what?” Lelani began again, forgetting about the bread. “Mom signed me up for sword practice! I can’t wait! My lessons start tomorrow! Oh my gosh, it’s gonna be so much fun!” Lani clapped as she jumped up and down excitedly. “Everyone knows except you, Okan! Jeez, where have you been all day?”

“Hiding from you.” He answered.

Lelani laughed. “Avni’s not annoyed of me.” She said.

“Maybe because she’s your friend. I’m your brother. Brothers get annoyed easier than friends, Lani.”

“Oh, I know. It’s really fun, actually, annoying you.” She admitted, smiling widely.

“It sure is good to have you back, Lelani.” Okan said ironically.

“It sure is good to be back, Okan.” Lelani said.

“Lela! My mom said yes!” Avni called after her friend, racing down the hall. Her short, blond, curly hair sprung up and down against her shoulders.

“Yay! It’s going to be so much fun, oh my God!” Lelani cried, spinning around. The friends linked hands and jumped up and down, spinning in circles.

“Oh, God, get me away, quickly, please.” Okan groaned, quickening his pace to hurry away from them.

Lelani and Avni laughed, bouncing around even more enthusiastically than before.

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Everyone was at the meet. Queen Benji, Hagar and Hayden, Bao and Tayyib, Iranae, Madge, Avni and Lelani, Grandpa Wilson, Benji’s father, all of the parents and many more royal people, some not.

Everyone except for Adayeze. The thought made Okan sad. He really missed his sister. Luckily that week’s complications had taken his mind off of her.

Zeheb and Harkin, Hagar and Hayden’s father who was governor, were the head of the meeting, each sitting at one end of the long table. When they nodded their heads at

each other and stood, everyone ceased to talk. It was regular; since they were the highest chairs, they earned the utmost respect from all the others. Hagar and Okan would take their places when they died, and their oldest son after that—if they had any sons.

“Welcome, young and old, to the final gathering before the AMY, or the Annual Meet of the Year, if this is your first.” Harkin began, glancing around the table. “Today we will be discussing the problems and achievements we’ve had since our last Annual meet. Pedlinn, you will begin.” Harkin nodding towards Madge’s father, allowing him to speak.

“Hello, everyone, Harkin, Zeheb. It is good to be here.” Pedlinn started. Okan couldn’t help his thoughts from wandering, since meetings weren’t usually his favorite activities.

He thought about Saba and Sibel and Ceylon. Why did Sibel hate Ceylon so much? Why wouldn’t Saba tell him who else Ceylon had kidnapped, instead telling him that Sibel would tell when she wanted to? What did any of it have to do with Sibel? How would Sibel even know the plans the two had used when they tried to steal slaves? He would expect that only those who’d been kidnapped by them would know.

Then it hit him. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. Sibel knowing all their plans, knowing when Lelani had been stolen that she’d been stolen by them. Knowing which technique they were likely to use. Knowing—Okan swallowed—that they were coming for her first because they knew she’d been telling everyone about them. It was obvious after he’d figured it out. He wondered why he’d never considered it before.

Okan stood sharply, basically kicking his chair out of his way as he raced for the doors. He was barely aware of the shouts of protest behind him. He *did* hear another chair push out from the table as he shoved the doors out of his way.

“We’ll be right back . . . maybe.” He heard Lelani call to their father. Then she paused. “Uh, Madge? You might be needed.” Okan didn’t have time to roll his eyes as he snatched his cape off of the rack by the door.

He glanced back as he opened the door, and Madge and Lelani were running to him, so close that if he didn’t go now, they’d run into him.

He darted towards the stables, ignoring the calls of the guards.

Since he was so skilled at tacking Aries up, his horse was done in no time and Okan mounted, kicking his heels in. Then he remembered that he would probably need Madge and Lelani and he halted, glancing back. Lelani was on Gemini, riding towards him.

Madge, on the other hand, was galloping towards them. Yes, *galloping*. She’d decided not to waste time tacking her horse and turned into one herself. Yes, she’d be useful. Dangerously useful.

“Are you sure?” Okan asked the unicorn. It felt odd talking to an extinct—almost—animal.

Madge the unicorn nodded, shaking her sparkling white mane. Okan had to steady his breath—he was standing right next to the *only unicorn on Earth!* It was very hard to stay focused.

“Kay, come on!” Lelani commanded, passing them. Okan focused on the main topic again and clicked his tongue, kicking Aries’ flanks again. Aries whinnied before bolting forward, gaining on Lelani’s filly.

Ceylon was going to be sorry, and Okan would make sure of that.

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The three rode through the darkness like shadows, never making a sound, just following Okan obediently.

Adrenaline pumped through Okan’s veins as he led the others towards Saba and Sibel’s hut. He hoped they wouldn’t mind. He was just trying to get revenge.

“Why are we going towards the slaves huts?” Lani asked him, coming up beside Aries on Gemini.

“Because that’s where we need to be for the ambush. Go back there, I don’t want Madge alone.” He ordered her, nodding his head behind him. Lelani sighed and slowed Gemini only enough so that she was next to Madge but a bit farther back than her.

Okan was thankful that she didn’t object. This was already hard enough with both girls coming with him.

He instinctively reached his hand down for his sword. He touched its metal handle, softly tracing over the carvings.

When the hut came into view, he took his hand away, not wanting to scare Sibel or Saba or anyone else.

He stopped the others in the bushes, dismounting and turning to them. Madge decided to stay a unicorn because there wasn’t enough room to run around, Okan figured.

“Okay, I’m going in, you stay here. Keep watch, it might be a while.” He told them. They nodded, and Okan snuck off, slinking over to the door to the hut, since there were no windows.

He tapped lightly on the door, hoping that would be enough, and the bustling he heard inside stopped. Even the sizzling of meat against a hot pan stopped, as though it had been pausing with them.

Okan could just barely hear two feet slowly make their way to the door. He hoped Saba and Sibel didn’t have a weapon ready to swing at him when they opened the door. Just because of that thought, Okan took a few steps back. Just to be safe.

The door creaked open, and he saw Saba’s face slowly emerge. Confusion blanketed her face as she looked at him, then looked around.

He was right here, why would she be confused? It was like she didn’t see him . . . Okan sighed. Really, he couldn’t be *that* good without actually trying.

“Sorry,” He said unhappily, taking a step forward.

Saba didn’t even flinch when she heard his voice. A smile lit her face and she looked straight at him before he was even “visible”.

She looked around again before tilting her head towards the hut, telling him to come in.

Okan took a glimpse in the direction of Lelani and Madge, and he could just barely make out the shape of Madge's unicorn body.

"Um, Saba?" He asked.

"Hum?"

"I, um, brought some friends. Do you mind if they come, too?"

"Oh, um, sure, I guess." She said.

"But—" Okan started to say that one was a horse—a unicorn, at that—but by then Madge and Lelani had already stepped out.

Saba's jaw dropped when she saw Madge, but only pleasant surprise flickered in her eyes.

Lelani was smiling widely. "Hey, Saba. Good to see you again."

"Saba, are you okay?" Sibel called, coming to the door and opening it a little wider so she could stand outside. She saw her friend frozen and looked over to where she was staring. When she saw what Saba was staring at, her hand flew up to the doorframe, steadying her slightly swaying body.

"Oh. My. God." Sibel breathed.

"What is it?" Someone else asked. That person came out of the hut, but froze when she saw Okan. "Ahh . . . do you know him?" Zeus asked warily.

Okan smiled. "I don't believe you're looking at the right thing, Zeus." Saba whispered. She tapped Zeus lightly on the arm, then pointed at Madge when she had her attention.

Zeus didn't react as lightly to the unicorn as the others did. Notice how it says *lightly*. Because Saba and Sibel's reactions compared to Zeus's reaction were extremely light.

Zeus screamed. She screamed a little too loudly, too. Probably loud enough to wake up, oh, well, *the whole country*.

"Nice going, Zeus. Get inside, hurry up. And now we have to take the unicorn inside too." Saba scolded, pushing her inside. Okan bit his lip, wondering if bringing Madge had been such a good idea, after all. He hoped that his father wouldn't take much notice of the scream Zeus had let out and ignore it.

Lelani was still smiling. She skipped up to Saba and held out her arms in a hug. Saba was almost more surprised than seeing a unicorn, but she accepted, pulling her to her chest.

Okan was on his tiptoes. He stepped up to the girls and began speaking. "Um, could we have reunions inside, please?" he hissed.

"Oh, yes, sorry. Come on. And you can bring . . . um . . ."

"Madge." Lelani told her. Saba's eyes widened.

"Madge of . . ." She didn't even have to finish. Lelani nodded excitedly, smiling even wider.

Okan nodded. "Yeah, uh, we can share secrets inside, okay?" He said hurriedly. He could hear footsteps coming towards them from the other huts.

"Okay, come on. Do you think Madge could change into a human again?" Saba asked, as if morphing was completely normal.

Madge bobbed her huge head before Okan could answer. She backed up, lowering her horn. She stuck it in the ground, moved forward, and then she was flying through the air in a front flip. Saba gasped in horror as she neared the ground, but Okan knew Madge would hit the ground unscathed.

When she had finished her performance, Saba was clutching Lelani's hand in silence. Okan couldn't help letting out a laugh as Lelani picked Saba's stiff fingers off of her hand then flexed it in pain.

Madge smiled then stood, seeming proud of herself for being able to change correctly again. She strode over to Okan, Saba, and Lelani, standing in front of Saba.

"Hello. I'm Madge." She held out her hand. Saba hesitated, and then shook it as though it was Sibel.

"Nice to meet you." She said in a shaky voice.

"I'm sorry I scared you. It's the only way to turn back though." Madge apologized.

"Yeah, and you might never get to turn back if we don't go inside *right now*." Okan said anxiously, glancing around at the darkness.

Saba sighed, rolling her eyes, then turned and walked into the hut. Lelani followed excitedly, then Madge and then Okan.

Getting inside was a relief. The warmth of the small hut relaxed Okan, and he gratefully took a place at the small table next to Lelani.

"Oh my gosh, I never expected to see you!" Sibel said excitedly. "Well, yes I did, but I didn't know if you were going to come! Welcome back!" She jumped up and down and clapped, and didn't stop until Saba put a hand on her shoulder.

"Welcome back?" Madge muttered, narrowing her eyes at him.

He shrugged. "I needed to find out some information on Ceylon." Now he glared at Lelani. But she wasn't in her place. He whipped his head around to see her standing by the door, leaning outside.

"What?" Madge asked, standing and going over to her.

"Just calling Gemini. She has my sword. Then I'm going to send her home. Aries wants to come inside. It's obvious." She told Okan, opening the door wider so he could see both horses sanding in the doorway. "Thanks, guys." She said like the horses could understand her. "Here, Okan." She held his sword through the door so that he could come get it.

Okan stood and paced to the door, snatching his sword from his sister. He noticed Sibel and Zeus staring at him, but Saba just continued cooking, not at all disturbed by the fact that he had a sword.

*Okay, so she's stunned when she sees a unicorn but she's just fine when she sees a sword. That's just not normal.* He thought ironically.

"Saba, do you have any carrots or anything?" Lelani asked.

"Uh, yeah, here, I have a few left. You can have them." Saba reached into her basket and pulled out two fresh looking carrots, taking them over and placing them in Lelani's outstretched hand.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." Saba nodded. "Are you guys hungry?" She asked them all as she made her way back to the oven.

"Um, no, not really." Okan answered, looking around. Madge shook her head and Lelani said, "I already ate."

"Okay." Saba scooped out some noodles onto a plate, then put sauce on top. She added a buttered piece of bread to that before sitting down at the table to eat.

Okan sighed again and went back to his seat across from Saba. "Okay, I think I know." He told her.

She glanced up at him. "Know what?" She said between bites.

"Who got stolen by Ceylon and his brother." When Okan said this Saba glared at him.

"I don't think you should be talking about that." She retorted. "Don't say anything to Sibel. Got it?"

"Fine, fine." Okan said carelessly. But he secretly wondered why she didn't want Sibel to be reminded. *And how did she know I thought it was Sibel?*

"I mean it, Okan. If you say anything . . ." She threatened, staring at him.

"I know, fine. I won't, I promise." She waited another second before continuing to eat.

"Why are we here, again?" Madge asked, sitting in Lelani's spot. She still looked a bit confused about what was going on.

"Oh, sorry." Okan said. "We're here to catch one of Lelani's kidnappers. We believe he's going to come here first." He explained.

Madge nodded. "Okay." She said, like this was an acceptable explanation.

Everything went along, Lelani and Sibel discussing girl topics like shoes and such over by the oven as Sibel got herself some food, then on the bed while Sibel ate. It was a good thing they both liked to talk, Okan told himself.

Nothing weird or unusual happened. The atmosphere inside the small hut was calm and happy, nothing out of the ordinary.

Okan couldn't help wondering if Ceylon really was going to come for Sibel. What if she was wrong?

He watched as Lelani and Sibel played a game of mancala with apple seeds. Sibel was going to win, he was positive. Lelani had allowed her to go first—big mistake. The people who went first *always* won. It was normal. If they knew how to play correctly. They usually did, or else they'd allow the other person to go first.

They played six games, each of them winning three since they switched rolls. Okan watched them, growing bored out of his head. It seemed like hours while he watched the girls, not knowing what to do. Madge sat silently at the table next to him, waiting patiently; something Okan couldn't do. Saba and Zeus slept, probably gathering energy for tomorrow's work.

When Saba started awake, Okan couldn't help delighting at the possibility that something was actually going to happen. She kicked her covers off, standing and rushing over to Lelani and Sibel. She started whispering frantically in Sibel's ear, and Lelani focused her mind on Saba's, probably telling her to think what she was saying.

*Book One. Criminals: Unwanted.*

As Saba whispered, Sibel's eyes grew huge. Okan stood up, walking over to them to try to find out what was going on.

*He's outside. Waiting.* Lelani told him, using her mind.

*Perfect. We'll ambush him.* Okan thought back.

*No, that's the problem, Okan. He's ready to ambush us when we come outside. So we'll have to wait until dawn to go outside. To leave.* Now that she mentioned it, that was exactly what they'd have to do if he was ready to ambush them. Perfect. Just perfect. Nothing like being stuck with a whole bunch of girls all night long.

*Great. This ought to be fun.* He thought glumly.

*Lots of fun.* Lelani told him, smiling widely.

Okan groaned.

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Waiting till dawn wasn't going to do the trick, Okan soon found out.

Since no one wanted to go outside, Ceylon figured he'd just come *inside* and take Sibel forcibly. Well, more forcibly than before.

There was a knock on the door. When no one moved to answer it, pounding rang all over the room before the doorknob turned and the door cracked open. It only opened a bit, but it was enough to get everyone to stand.

Okan could feel his heart pounding his chest like a bat hitting a baseball, and he tried taking deep breaths to calm himself.

He decided to look to Lelani, who seemed to be concentrating at the moment.

*Lani, who is it?*

*I think it's just Elaine.* He relaxed a little bit at the thought. *Don't get too comfortable, Okan. She doesn't know we like to visit.* Okan almost grunted.

*We. Funny.* He thought back.

Saba glanced at Lelani and Lelani smiled, nodding. Saba walked to the door and opened it a bit wider before letting a smile come across her face.

"Elaine." She said warmly. "I'm sorry. That was rude of us. We really thought you were . . . um . . . someone else. Come on in. And please don't faint." She added quickly.

Elaine entered silently and Saba closed the door behind her. When Elaine looked up to see why she'd said 'don't faint', she narrowed her eyes.

Narrowed her eyes! Okan couldn't believe it. She'd only *narrowed her eyes*. She hadn't screamed, she hadn't fainted, she hadn't stood frozen in place. She had *narrowed her eyes*. *That was all.* Amazing. Truly amazing.

"Oh, hello." Her voice was blank of all emotions. Okan couldn't help wondering why she wasn't so intrigued to their being here.

"Hello." Lelani said, standing and gliding over to stand in front of Elaine. She was almost as tall as her. Elaine wasn't that tall, and she was kind of old, so that was understandable. She had dark brown hair that was beginning to gray and a hard face that looked as though it had been worked for years and years.

“Um, Elaine.” Saba said, beckoning for her to sit down. She held up a hand to signal that she was fine. “Meet our friends. This is Okan, this is Lelani, and this is Madge. You know them, I know, but still.” She sounded somewhat cautious and Okan wondered why that was.

“Ah, yes. The new slave apprentice and his sister. And then here we have the unicorn.” Madge shifted uncomfortably. Okan’s eyes widened. How did she know that?

“How do you know that?” Lelani asked as though she’d decided to get into Okan’s mind at that exact moment.

“She has that special gift. You know: that one.” Saba answered, looking as though she wanted to get off of the topic of Elaine’s gift.

“Which one?”

“That one . . . you know. That one that does that thing . . . where you can, like . . . do that thing.” She stuttered.

“There are many *ones* that do that *thing* where you can, like . . . do that *thing*.” Lelani told her, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes.

“Um . . . well . . .”

“Elaine, why don’t you have some stew?” Sibel called, hopping up off of the bed and striding to the oven. Even she sounded anxious. Okan sighed. What was so important that it had to be a secret?

“I think I will, actually.” Elaine said, following her across the room. It didn’t usually take very long to get across the hut since it was so small, but since Elaine was old and slower than other people, it took her a fair amount of time.

“So, Elaine. How’s the weaving working out?” Sibel asked while scooping out some stew. She was trying to make a conversation.

“Oh my gosh! Did you make that one blanket that had the zigzags? It was blue and white and green, and it had, like . . . patterns that crossed each other, and . . . ?” Lelani searched for the right words. Elaine smiled and took her place at the table next to Madge, seeming plenty at ease.

“Yes, I did. It was beautiful, wasn’t it?” She answered.

“Yes! Oh my God! My mom wanted to throw it out because it was getting old, but I hid it in my chest and told her that I’d thrown it out already. It’s still there, you know. I’ll go get it right now.” Lelani headed for the door, probably after reading what was in Elaine’s mind.

“Oh, no. It’s fine. Maybe another time. That was one of my favorite blankets, though.” She nodded.

“It reminded you of your daughter.” Lelani said slowly, looking like she was concentrating very hard.

“Ye—how did you know that?” Elaine asked, looking startled.

Lelani didn’t answer, just stared into Elaine’s dark brown eyes. Soon Elaine’s eyes widened in surprise and Lelani smiled.

Okan shifted. Why did they have to torture him like this? He stood up.

“I’m going to check on Aries.” He said as he paced across the room.

“But—” Saba began, but by then Okan had already opened the door and stepped outside. And by then Okan had seen his mistake and Ceylon standing in his way, eyes glittering and a knife in hand.

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It was a beautiful summer morning. The meadow was full of flowers, beautiful flowers just swaying gently in the wind. It was like a sea of foam, moving as one in stretched out all the way to the end of the world, it seemed. As far as any human could see.

A girl walked here, her white dress helping her blend into the waves. Her blond hair didn't stand out much; for some of the flowers looked yellow in the rays of sunshine. Her soft mixed skin was the only thing that stood out, making her visible. But even this mixed in with the color of the sea, so that if someone had blurred vision, they wouldn't be able to make her out from the flowing flowers.

This girl was called Benji. She was a pheasant girl, living with her mother in a small village just outside of Mikalakia. She was very poor, not going to school at all because her mother could not afford to pay for this. But Benji didn't need to go to school to know. To be smart.

She learned by coming out to this meadow and listening. She would sit cross-legged on a hill in the middle of the meadow and close her eyes, listening. When Benji listened she could hear farther away than any human alive. She could tell what was happening millions of miles away, listen to even the quietest conversations: ones in the mind. She could hear the cry of a slave or the laugh of a baby.

It didn't matter what it was she could hear, it mattered what she heard.  
And what she heard remained a mystery.

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Benji couldn't sleep.

She'd been up all this time, wondering when Okan and Lelani and Madge were going to come home. She couldn't believe Zeheb had allowed them to go out without sending guards after them: it was the middle of the night! She sighed and stood, pacing around the room quietly. Zeheb was asleep and she didn't want to disturb him.

Suddenly an idea popped into her head.

She skidded over to her closet, pulling on her white robe and throwing her feet into her sandals. She glanced behind her to make sure Zeheb wasn't awake before creeping out the door and down the long hall to the elevator.

None of the elevator servants were aboard, so she pushed the number herself, waiting until the elevator finally reached the bottom floor.

Benji skittered down the hall and through the kitchen, out the back door where her horse, Crimson, awaited her.

“Alright, Crim. Come on.” She jumped on his back before kicking in her heels to make him trot out in the direction of the Towers.

*Book One. Criminals: Unwanted.*

The ride seemed endless, but when Benji and Crimson finally made it to the posts, Benji leaped off, quickly tying Crimson to a post and racing into the meadow.

She didn't care if this was where her daughter had been kidnapped. She had to be here. *Had to.*

Benji couldn't help smiling when her hill came into view. It was beautiful. There weren't many flowers these days, but that didn't matter. Benji knew she could try without them.

She settled down on the very top of the hill, crossing her legs and closing her eyes. She was going to listen tonight.

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It traveled far. Further than she ever thought possible. Listening, she could hear down to the slaves' quarters, their snoring and their shivering. They needed thicker blankets. Wasn't the yarn provided for the weavers enough?

She searched through the snoring for the sound of movement, searching the boys first, and then the fields. Nothing. She reluctantly moved on to the girls' quarters, searching. Almost at once she heard the stomping of feet and sizzling stoves, and even the gentle buzz of a light. She focused her mind in time to hear one of his last words. Then there was an answer, from one of the slaves, by the sound of it. What were they doing there? Her daughter spoke then, sounding excited. Why in the world would she be excited to see slaves? Now Madge stepped forward to say her greeting, she guessed.

As Benji listened, it sounded as though they were waiting for something. When she heard a name in Okan's head her focus sharpened.

*Ceylon, huh. I feel as though I've heard the name before . . . well, most likely not. Whatever. It doesn't matter right now.* She thought. Then she shrugged, focusing again.

Stolen. The word caught her attention. What was stolen? Or was it a person? Benji wished she could have some kind of power to go back in time. The slave began speaking and Benji couldn't believe what she was hearing. Lelani's kidnappers . . . tonight? Why would they come tonight? The guards are on high duty . . . the guards.

They probably wouldn't do anything in this situation. If they'd managed to kidnap Lelani, if they'd managed to get Okan and Madge and Lelani out in the slaves' quarters on guard in the middle of a meet. That was almost impossible. *Almost.* Unless . . . the person is extremely dangerous.

Benji made sure she knew where this slave hut was located before opening her eyes and letting everything shut out of her mind. She stood up and ran back to Crimson, mounting him quickly and riding over to the back garage where her mail and horn were located. The items in this garage were used only for emergencies.

And this was an emergency.

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## *Book One. Criminals: Unwanted.*

Since Benji was a very skilled sword-handler, she knew most of the tricks for using a sword, but she hadn't learned the newest ones.

Oh, well. She'd have to manage on what she knew.

She rode down the narrow path that led to the slaves' quarters, steering off just at the right moment to avoid making much noise but get to the slave hut as quickly as possible. Something was going to happen. Soon. She could feel it. She had to get there. Absolutely *had* to.

The huts came into sight. She steered around them, zigzagging around and around until the one hut she was looking for came into her viewpoint.

The time was getting closer and closer. Benji became frustrated that this hut had to be placed the farthest back.

Her heart began to pound extremely hard in her chest as the moment neared. Benji couldn't stand it. She kicked Crimson on harder and pulled out her sword with a soft ringing sound, holding it in her hand. As she got nearer to the hut, someone stepped out in the doorway right before the door opened.

It was Okan standing in the light.

And the other person was another man that was definitely not a slave here. But that was not why Benji's fear grew into desperation.

Okan was unprepared, and the unknown man was armed.

He had a knife.

## *Part Two. Because she's hard to catch.*

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Everything was black. There was nothing to see except for the darkness filling every corner of the space in this place, wherever this place was.

Suddenly visions filled the blankness.

The clattering of hooves. Okan, standing in the doorway in shock. Ceylon lunging forward with the knife so quickly Okan didn't have time to react. Okan's head slamming into the doorframe so hard he believed he heard a crack. Benji, all of a sudden showing up and leaping off of her horse, sword in hand. Lelani screaming and tugging her sword out of its carrier, running forward for Ceylon. Ceylon calculating his chances before turning tail and racing for the woods once again. Panic stricken faces staring at Okan, Madge and Saba running forward to take action. Madge going away and returning as a unicorn. Madge's unicorn glowing brighter than ever before, still getting brighter until a pale drop formed on the tip. The unicorn leaning her head down so that her unicorn was next to Okan's head. The pale drop turning silver in the sparkling sunlight, then dropping in slow motion onto Okan's hair, soaking in. Okan's hair turning silver and sparkly while he glowed. Then the glowing became too much, filling all of the space, which made the blackness seem the most inviting thing in the world.

And then that was what came. Blackness.

Once again.

Then there was a voice, sounding anxious and worried.

“What if the healing didn’t work? What will we do then?” The voice asked.

“It’s fine. He’s fine. Unicorn’s healing always works, even on the worst wounds.”

Another voice answered, sounding soothing and calm.

“He should open his eyes right now. He could, but he doesn’t want to. I don’t think . . .” Another voice, the voice of a younger girl, told the others. Then there was breathing surrounding the air around him. “Okan? Okan, are you gonna wake up now?” The little voice asked.

Okan shifted, trying to get the bad breath away from him.

“Yay!” The little voice squealed, clapping.

“He’s awake?” The first voice asked, sounding relieved.

*What happened?* Okan thought blankly.

“We’ll talk about that later.” The smaller voice answered his question. It was as though it could read what he was thinking . . .

*Lelani!* When he thought the name, everything came flooding back. *Ceylon! Benji! Saba! Madge! Sibel! Elaine! Zeus!* His eyes flickered and then opened and Okan was finally allowed to see. He was in a room . . . *his* room. Lelani, Saba, and Benji were around him, staring as he lay there.

“Okan! You’re okay!” Now the second voice, his mom, let down the act.

Okan nodded and moaned as his head began to throb with pain.

“Be careful, you’re injured there. He hit your head.” Saba said, placing a hand on his forehead to stop him from nodding. It was soft and warm, putting Okan in a state of relaxation.

“I think we can give him some more medicine, now.” Lelani said, walking over to the small table across the room.

“Well, we don’t want to knock him out again, do we?” Saba asked sarcastically. Lelani giggled and Benji smiled. Okan wondered if the medicine really was that bad.

“I guess not.” Lani sighed, coming back and sitting on the edge of Okan’s bed. “How does your head feel?”

At first Okan didn’t know how to speak. He opened his mouth, hesitating for a few seconds, and then found the words that were hanging right in front of his mouth.

“Um . . .” His voice sounded rough. “I don’t . . .” It throbbed again, making him wince. “Pretty bad.”

“Hmm.” Saba agreed. “Maybe talking isn’t the solution right this sec, ‘kay?” Okan began to nod but then stopped, grunting, and closed his eyes. He just wanted to sleep right now.

*Let me rest, please.* He thought, hoping Lelani had caught the message.

He heard his little sister get off the bed.

“Uh, well, let’s go get something to eat. I’m really hungry, *Mom.*” She explained, walking to the door.

*I can’t believe I’m thankful that I have a little sister with powers to speak telepathically.* He told himself, sighing as they closed the door.

Then Lelani sent him a thought, and Okan could just see her smiling that evil smile of hers. *Sleep now, Okan. 'Cause we're comin' back soon.*

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It had been a week. He'd been handicapped for a *week*.

It had felt *horrible*.

Everyone had treated him like he was a freak, not even knowing where to go or what *slave training* was.

That was why Okan felt handicapped.

*I might as well be in a wheelchair and have a special servant there to push me around. One of those old wheelchairs that you have to work in, you know?* He thought annoyingly to himself one day.

"Okan wants a wheelchair! One of those old ones!" Lelani had told everyone the whole rest of the day. But, of course—and thankfully—they had considered it a joke. April fools. The regular stuff that she would sometimes put around.

When they'd finally let him walk down the stairs without an attendant at his side, he'd suggested he go out on a walk.

"Take Lani with you." Zeheb had instructed firmly. He had that expression that told Okan there was no arguing with him about his decision.

Okan had huffed out a big breath, glancing down irritatingly at the smiling little *joke* standing next to Zeheb. "Whatever." Okan had grumbled, snatching his reins off the rack of the barn. The king had just returned from a hunting trip.

For Ceylon.

*They're gonna need more than a hunting trip to catch that jerk.* Okan thought unhappily.

Then he'd finally managed to ditch Lelani in Saba's hut with Elaine and Sibel. He hadn't gotten to see them all in a week—he'd been instructed to stay *inside only*.

*Handicapped, I tell you!* He thought desperately. Okan had been searching for a way out of it the whole time, but no opportunities had popped up in his window.

He'd gone to his tree, climbing up slowly to make sure he didn't hit his head anywhere. Then he snatched an apple from one of the branches, biting down hard to try to release his anger out on it. He absolutely, positively *hated* being watched over like a two year old. He was *sixteen*, for goodness sake! He'd been hit in the head. It had healed the first day of his long, seven day handicappedness.

Now he sat there, chomping down hard on a nice, juicy piece of apple that he'd taken his rage out on, and he was enjoying every moment of it. He'd calmed down a bit more, now that his fury was decreasing every second. He also tried reminding himself the good side to all of this: he got to wear jeans and a T-shirt; he didn't have to have those fancy outfits that he wore to meetings and such.

Okan breathed deeply, enjoying the free moments while he could. Soon he was sure his father would send out people to find him if Lelani didn't first. It would most likely, happen. There was really no doubt about that.

Okan was savoring his next bite when there was a sigh below him and someone began to climb up his tree. He was about to jump down in defense when he noticed the slave's face and rolled his eyes, steadying himself again. It was just Saba.

"Oh, hello. I thought it was someone else. But it's just you." He said to her.

"Just me, huh?" She asked, a smile lighting her face. She looked exhausted. "I thought saving you would earn me at *least* a week's worth of free time, but nope. I got none. Just a good night's sleep." She sighed again.

Okan felt pretty bad that she'd been completely ignored after he'd been assigned countless servants to *help him around*. Saba had just been kicked back out in the slave's hut, only earning—as she already said—a good night's rest.

"Sorry about that. I'll talk to my dad." Okan assured her.

"No, no, it's fine. I was just pointing it out. I don't really care anymore."

"You helped *save my life*. What should we *not* do for you?" Okan reminded her.

"Really. I mean it. I'm fine. We were just worried about you and now our worry is gone, so there you go." She explained. Okan leaned his head back against his branch in amazement. Wasn't she longing for something? Anything?

"I mean it, Okan. Don't sweat it." Saba told him again.

"Fine, whatever. But don't come complaining to me when you get cold at night." He said, grinning. Saba grinned back then looked at the ground. But before she did, Okan noticed a strange glint in the corner of her irises, a glint that made him reconsider allowing her to convince him that she was okay.

Okan opened his mouth to say something but thought the better of it before closing it again. It could wait. If he noticed it again, he'd mention it then, he told himself. No need to sweat it, as Saba had said.

But Okan couldn't help reflecting on how that spark had looked somewhat hopeful.

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They sat there for a while in a companionable silence, just thinking. About nothing in particular. Just thinking.

Okan couldn't seem to think of anything to say, and obviously neither could Saba. There really was nothing to say.

Something suddenly flared in Okan's chest and he realized that he was burning to ask her a question.

After a while, he couldn't resist the urge. "So, Saba. You never really told me who else was . . . um . . . kidnapped by . . . uh, him." He stumbled over his words, looking for the right ones to say.

"Oh, yeah. I know. Sorry, I just didn't want to talk about that around Sibel. You probably already know, though." She said, glancing at his face. It was covered with curiosity and nothing else.

"Sibel, then, was it?" He asked cautiously.

"Yes," She answered simply.

“That’s how she got here.” He said it as a statement, not a question. Saba nodded gravely.

Silence. *Again*. This time it was nerve-wracking.

“Well, how about you? How’d you managed to get here?” He asked. But he regretted it right after he was finished. The expression on her face almost gave him a heart attack.

The blood drained from her face, making her look almost as pale as the snow. She stiffened and her expression turned blank, not allowing any emotions to be released. She stared into space, not making eye contact with Okan.

He swallowed. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up.” He realized.

“It’s okay. I’ll tell you. It doesn’t matter anymore.” She shrugged, but her voice sounded dull and empty, and it scared Okan.

Saba took a deep, shuddery breath before beginning.

“I was very poor, a peasant girl. I lived with my mother and father in a small village right on the edge of Mikalakia, almost outside of it. My aunt lived right next door to us with my cousin, Saban.” She glanced at Okan as his eyes widened, then he tried to slow his heart. There was no need to get all volatile. “But the thing is; I’m the spitting image of my mother. *Almost*. She has slightly lighter skin than I, but it didn’t matter in what happened. I was still the one to be sent away.” Her voice was glum and unhappy. Sad, too. Okan wished he could comfort her.

“We were so poor that we were starving and my aunt was almost too poor to even feed herself and Saban, so she couldn’t give us help. There was only one option then: to steal. But my father got sick. If he went for the food—because he’s really good at sneaking around—then he’d most likely get the rest of us sick. I refused to steal food, because I’m not that kind of person. So that only left my mother, who wasn’t good at this but had a few tricks up her sleeve.” Okan suddenly knew where this was headed.

“She managed to break into a house without setting off the alarms. The thing was; she didn’t know there were cameras. No need for alarms when you have those, right? Exactly. And they caught her on camera, stealing food and blankets and a bucket of meat, too. And when she got home, the police came, looking for her. But my mom didn’t want to be a slave. She wanted to be free. My father didn’t want her to be a slave either. So now it was my turn.” She paused, and Okan wondered if she would go on. He could hear tears in her voice; she was going to start crying soon. “I should’ve known that my mother was the only thing my father wanted. She was everything to him, he was everything to her. Letting her go was like letting her heart go. They probably only had me for the fun of it.” A tear streaked across her face.

“I was sent away. They pretended like it was me who had taken the food, not my mother. They blamed me for everything that I had been against. My father wouldn’t let my mother go, even if it meant losing me. So the police people made me take all the food that had been stolen back to the house and apologize for stealing the food.” More tears were falling from her eyes now, and her voice was starting to crack. “The food I hadn’t stolen. Then they shoved me in that cart to go away to become a slave. But I was lucky, Saban loved me enough to demand he went with me, trying to comfort me.” Saba shook

her head. “I tried really hard to be strong. For myself. For him. I even managed not to cry when I heard that my mother had died two days later.” She said proudly.

“I didn’t care. They hadn’t loved me, so I didn’t care anymore. I knew my father would be heartbroken, wishing he’d sent her away instead of me. But now that I knew I really wanted to laugh at his foolishness, his mistake.” She shook her head sadly. “But I couldn’t. I wouldn’t. They’d sent me away.” Her voice finally broke. “I’d never forgive them for blaming me. It wasn’t fair and it wasn’t right, and they knew it.” She cried, beginning to let the tears fall harder. Soon she was sobbing, staring out through the leaves and over the field, into the horizon.

Okan swallowed, trying not to get teary eyed himself.

“It’s okay, Saba. You’re safe now. You don’t have to worry about anything like that happening to you again.” Okan said, scooting down next to her and putting his arm around her shoulder. She leaned against him and sobbed, starting to soak his shirt. “Shh. Everything’s alright.”

“No, it’s not!” She wailed. “Everything’s *not* okay! I have no family except for Saban! He’s my only hope, the only person I love! He came here with me to protect me, but I’m way over here, he’s way over there! It’s just not fair!” She cried, sobbing even harder. “It’s not fair at all.” Saba said more quietly, trying to breathe.

Okan couldn’t agree more. As he sat there with his arms around Saba comfortingly, he thought to himself.

*She’s right. This isn’t fair. And I’ll help her get out of it. No one can stop me from this now.*

He was determined to make things right.

\*\*\*\*

Okan returned home late, about an hour after the normal dinner time. He was half starved. He’d never been so hungry in his life.

*It must’ve been worse for Saba.* Okan concluded thoughtfully, holding up a hand as a servant tried to walk him to the dining hall for supper. He was *fine*. They needed to understand that.

When he got there, he did not expect to see Zeheb sitting in his normal spot, waiting patiently—there’s *a good joke for ya*—with his hands folded across the table. Lelani sat next to him, stuffing herself with food. She was probably on her third helping. Even though she was small and skinny didn’t mean she didn’t eat that much.

Okan walked in warily, taking a seat next to Lelani. Immediately a servant came with a small bowl of soup and placed it in front of him, hurrying back to the kitchen probably to tell the cook that he was here. Okan slowly picked up his spoon and scooped out some of the soup, stuffing it into his mouth. It was cheese soup with vegetables—his favorite.

Zeheb didn’t let him savor one second of it.

“Okan, let us get right down to business since I do not want to sit here like a statue all night long.” Okan was known to eat extremely slowly. “We have not been able to talk

properly since the night the accident happened, so I've decided that we should talk right now, when the two of you are here.

"First, I want to point out that you're *late*, Okan." Zeheb raised an eyebrow. Now he was talking to both of them. "But that is not the point. The point is that we were having a very important meeting and you two, along with Madge, were not there with us to explain our problems and accomplishments." He said, frowning. "Now I would like to know why that is. Your mother has decided to keep her mouth shut about everything, and I have no idea why that *slave* was in the castle." Okan instantly felt insulted when King Zeheb said the word 'slave' as though Saba was a filthy rodent.

*They're not filthy slaves.* He thought angrily. He noticed Lelani give a slight nod in agreement, her expression grim.

Zeheb didn't seem to notice their unhappy mood about his offense. "So I want both of you to tell me what has been going on around here and why you couldn't be seen at the meeting." He concluded, crossing his arms.

No one spoke. Lelani and especially Okan, had nothing to say. Okan didn't want to give up his satisfied part of life in Saba and Sibel's hut, where laughter and happiness was in the atmosphere. Here there was a seriousness that annoyed Okan horribly.

"*NOW.*" Zeheb did not sound like he was in the mood for nonsense that day. It was also obvious on his face. He had an upside down smile and his dark brown eyes were narrowed, waiting very intolerantly.

Okan glanced at Lelani, and she sighed, turning to Zeheb.

"Father, we know we disappointed you and we're extremely sorry. This is why we couldn't stay at the meet: We were riding through the female's slaves' quarters on our horses when Saba, that slave that came in with Okan, came to us. She was very worried because she had a friend—another girl—who was only twelve all alone at the hut, and she knew that the person, Ceylon, who'd stolen me was going to come that night, looking for her friend. She asked our permission to go, and we allowed her. She also told us that he would be coming at night and so when we got to the meet, I just remembered and sent the thought to Okan. Right when we arrived there, we were ambushed by Ceylon, and that's when Okan got knocked off his horse right into a tree, and I had to keep him away from Okan. That's when Mom arrived. I have *no* idea, absolutely *no* idea"—here Lelani was being so dead serious that it was impossible not to believe her—"how Mom knew we were in trouble but she was there, and she had her sword. That's when what's his name decided to retreat—there were two of us and one of them, and my scream—oh yeah! I screamed *then* went to protect Okan. But anyways, my scream had alerted the guards. Then we went back to the castle, and since Saba was right there, she told us she knew a few remedies. It would've been foolish not to believe her, Dad. That was why she was in the castle with us. And *that's* why we weren't at the meet." She finished.

During this whole speech, King Zeheb's gaze had grown less and less unhappy and more surprised. He had glanced at Okan throughout the speech, and Okan had nodded, going along with Lelani's little story. Okan was surprised that his little sister could come up with a story right on the spot, and still have it being so good with enough details to convince almost anyone who hadn't been at the scene.

When Lelani ended, everything was silent. Zeheb's eyes had widened a little and he seemed to be a bit surprised. Why?

"Well," he finally said, sighing and blinking. "I'm . . . proud of you two. You've really helped this situation and you've answered many of our questions. Maybe I should send you to a sort of spy school . . ." He considered.

"NO!" They yelled at the same time. The king smiled. It had only been a joke, Okan realized with relief. He didn't want to leave his home.

"You are both growing up very quickly. I think your mother would be proud to know you figured this out on your own." He hesitated. "With a little bit of help." He meant Saba. Of course he'd hesitate.

"Thank you, Dad. We really didn't mean to run out on you, but it was really that important." Lelani was grinning broadly.

Okan had no idea what to say. Should he thank his father for praising him? Of course he should. It would be rude *not* to.

"Um, thanks." He was hesitant, too. Zeheb nodded his 'you're welcome'.

Silence. Again. The remainder of Okan's food was brought to him, and he pushed his soup away, eager to get to the real meal. He wondered if Saba ate like this every night from everything she collected. Or stole, if that was more appropriate.

*It probably is.* He admitted to himself. Okan picked up his fork and began stuffing his cinnamon and honey carrots into his mouth hungrily.

"Well, I'll leave you two to eat in peace. I've already . . . spoken of what I needed to speak about with you, so there is nothing else for me to say . . ." He faltered then stood, quickly marching out of the dining hall. Lelani and Okan watched him leave before continuing to eat, somewhat nervously.

Lelani glanced at Okan. "You're lucky I'm good at that stuff."

"That was a close one." He agreed with a nod.

They continued eating. Finally, Lani cleared her throat. Okan glanced up at her. She raised her eyebrows expectantly.

*What do you want?* He asked, irritated.

*I believe you still have to say something to me for doing that. For covering up for us.* She explained, rolling her eyes matter-of-factly.

Okan stared at her blankly. It took him a minute.

"Oh! Thanks. I owe you one." He said.

"How 'bout we go on a ride with the horses?" She asked hopefully.

"What are you talking about?"

"You said you owe me one." She reminded him.

He slapped his forehead. "Fine, fine. A ride."

"Tonight." She added quickly, excitement ringing in her voice.

"Fine." He was really annoyed now.

"Great! Eight o'clock." She supplied.

"O-kay. Go away!" Okan ordered, about to burst.

"Sure, sure." She got up, wiping her mouth off before heading out the door.

Now Okan was alone. He wished he hadn't told Lelani to go away. He needed someone to talk to.

"You still want me here?" Lani asked, poking her head around the door.

"No," but anyone would be able to hear the lie in Okan's voice, he was sure of it.

"You want to talk to me about something. What?" She asked, walking back to her place and taking a seat, right before the servants arrived to clean it up.

Okan glanced unsurely at the servants.

*Talk in your mind Okan. I can communicate telepathically, remember? Don't be stupid.* She sighed.

*Oh, right.* He twisted his hands together. *Well, it's about Saba.*

*I know that.* She said impatiently.

*Okay . . . you won't believe me. You'll be like "Okan, that's crazy. The police would know." But whatever. I'll tell you.*

*Saba didn't commit a crime. Her mother did. But since she's the spitting image of her mother—or she was—her father sent her off instead, in her mother's place, because her father loved her mother more than he loved Saba.* He had decided to shorten the explanation so that it would take hours. Lelani loved questions.

But right now she seemed to be trying very hard to keep her mouth shut, along with the mouth in her mind. Okan smirked—she didn't want to say it. He knew she was trying to convince herself that she wasn't going to say 'Okan, that's crazy. They would know.'

"Told you so." He couldn't help saying it out loud. The servants glanced at him, then, seeing he was talking to Lelani, continued cleaning.

Lelani didn't even start speaking until they'd left. Even then she stuttered, trying to be careful about her choice of words.

"Uh, Okan . . . how can . . . you be so . . . sure about that? What if she's . . . not telling the truth."

To Okan, that sounded just like 'Okan, that's crazy. The police would know who it was.'

He crossed his arms. "Admit it. You think the police would've caught that." He demanded.

"No. Because they might not have." She stumbled over her own words. *Lies, lies.* Lelani's cheeks burned. "I'm not—oh, fine! Yes, I am, but I mean, come on! Who would you believe; a witness or the police?" She stopped, probably realizing that what she just said was kind of stupid. "Scratch that—um . . . who would you believe; a *slave* or the police? And I'm *not* trying to accuse Saba or anything, but really." She said.

"I *know* she's right. And if I have to, I'll bring Hagar to see." He said stubbornly.

"Fine, bring Hagar, see what he says." Lelani told him disapprovingly. "But I'm gonna laugh when he turns you down."

"There *won't* be anything for him to turn down." Okan told her, standing angrily. "And you wait and see. He's gonna do it, for me!" He began to stomp out of the room when he suddenly remembered something. "Oh yeah, and there will *not* be a ride, tonight!" He called before pushing past the door.

“Fine!” Lelani yelled after him, her ears burning with rage. Then she muttered something under her breath. “Jerk.”

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Hagar said he would do it.

Okan had called and asked that night, and he’d agreed to do it, even though Saba was a slave.

Now Lelani was sulking in her room, hating having been wrong. Okan was satisfied that he’d been right, and from time to time he couldn’t help laughing at her when he peeked in her room and saw her grouchy face.

Knowing that Hagar wouldn’t let him down, Okan had a good night’s sleep, waking up in the morning with a mood as bright as the sun.

Lelani, on the other hand, came down *looking* like the sun.

Okan pretended to be coughing to cover up his laugh. Lani glared at him. “Good morning, Lelani. How are you today?” Okan asked, smiling widely.

“Fine, thank you, Okan. How about you?” She asked, taking her seat at the table. Her spot was next to Adayeze’s. Okan could just picture Adayeze leaning away from Lelani’s sunny hair. He started coughing again at the joke. *It would probably be too bright for her.* He choked now.

“Okan, stop it. Lelani, why didn’t you brush your hair this morning? It looks like a rat’s nest.” Benji asked, confused.

*Understatement.* Okan thought happily.

*Shut up, maniac.* Lelani almost growled back.

*Look who’s talking.* Now Lelani stood up, slamming her fist against the table. Okan couldn’t help himself, he began cracking up. She looked like some crazed hypocrite.

“Okan, stop it. Now, I don’t know what you’re saying to each other, but it needs to stop.” Benji ordered sternly.

“Sorry, Mom.” Okan laughed. He tried taking deep breaths too calm himself down. After a few minutes, it was as though he hadn’t even started laughing in the first place.

“Lelani.” Benji told her.

Lelani sighed before pulling a brush out from one of the pockets in the robe she was wearing and beginning to comb the knots out rhythmically. “Thank you. Now eat.” She said. Okan picked up his fork and knife and cut his meat and vegetable omelet and stuffed it into his mouth. He was pretty hungry; laughing required some energy. He plugged his nose to keep from cracking up again.

When breakfast was over, Okan went outside and grabbed his tack from the hook, going to Aries.

“We’re going to the slaves’ hut, okay?” He asked his horse as he slowly groomed his flank. “Hagar’s comin’ too.” He added. Aries snorted while he chewed his oats, bobbing his head as though he was nodding.

Hagar arrived around one o’clock. He had ridden his horse, Camille, so they were ready to go the moment he got there.

“Hey, Hagar.” Okan called, raising a hand in a wave.

“Hi.” Hagar nodded his hello.

“So, you ready?”

“Yeah. Where is this slave hut?” He asked as they set their horses at a canter for the slaves’ quarters.

“Oh! Right! Um, it’s in the girls’ place.” Okan said cautiously.

“Oh, that’s fine. I guess.” His voice didn’t give away any of his emotions and Okan couldn’t see his face, so he didn’t know if Hagar really thought that was okay.

He sighed and they continued on, not wanting to lose time. They both had to do training at two. Hagar was a bit late.

“Mom.” He answered after Okan asked why that was. They were nearing the path, now.

“Understandable.” Okan agreed.

There was silence. “We came here two weeks ago to see you. Were you following her?” Hagar asked. Okan looked for a note of suspicion in his voice but all he could hear was curiosity. He decided it was safe to answer.

*And anyways, he would know if I was lying or not.* Okan reminded himself about Hagar’s power.

“Yes, I was. We were going to talk about Ceylon with one of her friends that knew about him.” He added as an extra defense on his part.

Hagar nodded thoughtfully. They didn’t speak the rest of the way there. It made Okan’s teeth grind across each other in frustration. How could Hagar be so *calm*, so *quiet*? He was almost just like Madge!

Finally Okan saw the small hut. Now they could get to talking. He hoped that Saba sharing her secret with Hagar wouldn’t make her mad. He was just trying to help. Why? He did not know.

*It’s wrong, that’s why.* Okan answered his question. *She shouldn’t even be here, suffering like this.* Then a thought came to him. Was she really suffering? Or was this better than what she had, what she’d been through when she wasn’t a slave? That was one question Okan couldn’t answer himself.

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I was furious.

Okay, so Okan had won the bet. Big deal.

Yeah right. I’d lost my ride because of him and then he just goes and wins the bet. I should’ve just accepted that Hagar was coming to out Saba in check, and let it go. Then I’d have gotten my ride.

But no. I have such a big mouth. I continued to babble on, not caring if I said something totally *mean*. It was rude and disrespectful.

Wait, don’t those mean the same thing? Let me check . . . well, it didn’t say, but maybe . . .

Oh, well. Whatever.

So here I was, sitting here, waiting for them to return from Saba's slave hut.

And I was furious. Rage was overcoming my excitement about being able to argue on Saba's cause.

I knew that Okan would tell father, that father wouldn't believe it—even with Hagar at hand—and we'd get in this huge argument. We'd look at the video, father wouldn't know who it was, we'd still be in this argument . . . la de da de da. The end.

Huh! The end. How stupid do you think I am? No, *definitely* not the end. Okan cared about this enough to make sure Saba got out of slavery. He would make sure she was gone before he let any of this go. Gone for good.

Suddenly I thought of something.

What if Saba didn't want to leave? What if she liked slavery more than the stupid life outside of it, where her father was, waiting with the lies that he would give her if she returned to him. And he would know if she got out of slavery: the police would tell him. Slaves were usually in slavery for life, even if the crime they did was as small as stealing food. King Zeheb wanted everyone in Mikalakia to know that he was not allowing criminals in his land. They were forbidden. Unwanted. Something of the past—I'll tell you some other time.

I sighed as I noticed a mind thinking about calling my name. "Lelani!" I heard one second later. Benji was always calling me to do something.

"Yes?" I was just about to call Avni. The day Okan had gone down, she'd gone home, not even getting to say goodbye to me. I'd called that night, telling her all about it and that Okan would be okay.

"Oh my, gosh! I wish I'd been there! It sounds like so much fun!" She'd exclaimed.

"Um . . . yeah! It was awesome! I got to use my sword and everything, and *I* was protecting *Okan!*" I'd told her.

"Ha ha!" She'd laughed and I'd joined in.

Those had been the happy times. When I was filled with joy.

Now I was just filled with disappointment towards Hagar for accepting to go read Saba. I'd been counting on him.

"Come play with Hayden!"

"I don't want to!"

"Yes you do, and you will!" Benji ordered. She was using that stern voice that Dad always used when we were in trouble and he was telling us to do something, or when we rejected something he wanted us to do.

I huffed. I couldn't believe this. They *knew* I was upset.

"Fine, whatever. I'm coming down." Right after I said that, there was a knock on my door.

"Lani?" Hayden's thirteen year old voice floated over to me. She sounded almost angelic. I knew I wouldn't be able to resist playing with her when she looked me in the eye and asked me. That was her special power: dazzling. She loved to dazzle, too. She'd look at someone and dazzle them, not caring who it was. Usually. Unless it was someone she liked.

I couldn't help thinking of Tayyib. She liked Tayyib. I was the only one who knew that. *She* didn't even know it. I knew it because I could tell when someone was trying to get someone else's attention. It was almost obvious—amazing that the others didn't catch it. But sometimes I was happy someone else didn't catch it.

"Hi, Hayden." I smiled at the door.

It creaked open and Hayden stepped through, closing it almost silently behind her.

"Hey," She said. Right now, with her hair down and the blond curls free to do whatever they pleased, she looked angelic. They flowed down her back perfectly, curling every which way but in the perfect formation, so that they looked delicate and special. *They should've named her Angel or Angelica or Angelina.* I thought. But I didn't envy her beauty. I didn't want to be loved because of my looks. I wanted to be loved because of me.

When Hayden turned and looked at me, her blue eyes scanned my state.

"Um . . . you don't look very happy." She pointed out.

"Huh. You think?" I asked with an edge to my tone. I jumped off my bed, landing with a small *oof!* and walked over to her. She stood where she was; in front of my door, and waited.

She was so *short*. I noticed when I got to her. She was thirteen and I was twelve, but I was almost three inches taller than her.

"So, what do you want to do?" I asked, being brave and looking into her eyes. I tried not to flinch at the imaginary sparkles I saw there.

"Well . . ." She twisted the countless bangles on her arm with her finger, thinking for a moment. "How about we go on a ride?"

Okay, I'm sorry, but this was *not* the kind of thing I expected to hear out of Hayden's mouth.

She took her beauty at an advantage. She liked to spice it up a little. She put lip gloss on and eyeliner, some blush, maybe. She dressed in those white or jean Capri pants and pink flat shoes all the time, along with a pink or blue or whatever shirt that had a lot of little jewel-like thingies on them. She liked to wear a lot of jewelry with beads or jewels and she liked big hoop earrings and bangle bracelets.

Hayden usually wasn't one for riding, if you want to say it the simple way.

My mouth dropped open and I stared at her in open astonishment. After a moment of silence, I finally spoke, since she didn't seem to be joking around.

"*You* want to go *riding*?" I asked, trying my hardest not to sound accusing.

"Yeah." She said this like it was normal.

"Seriously?" I asked, not being able to believe it.

"Yes, *seriously*." Hayden rolled her eyes.

I paused. She was thinking. Had she forgotten that I could read minds? Because what she was thinking right now made it seem that way.

*Should I talk to her about it now? Maybe I should get it over with. Am I really doing this? Am I ready?* She questioned herself.

"Sure," I decided, nodding. "Sure, I'll go on a ride with you." *We can talk.* I sent the thought her way.

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Okan rapped lightly on the small hut's door.

He didn't even get to finish knocking. The door swung open and Saba stood there, looking relieved.

"Theory," She explained shortly when Okan gave her a confused look. He nodded understandingly and then stepped inside, Hagar right behind him. Saba didn't object when Hagar came in. She just closed it calmly behind him. She looked a little too calm than normal and Okan hoped Hagar's mood wasn't contagious. He wouldn't be able to stand it.

"I *also* had a theory that you wanted me to talk about my past . . . *again*." Saba said loudly.

Hagar nodded, not even trying to hide this. Okan, though, was a little bit embarrassed that he'd come up with the idea, but not so much to make him turn back.

"Yeah . . . Sorry, but I had to prove it." Okan apologized. "Even though it probably won't even work." He muttered under his breath.

"No, no, I understand. And he's the one who . . . knows, I guess you could say." She scrambled around in her head for the right words. Her mind seemed to be elsewhere at the moment.

"Yeah."

"I know already that it's true." Hagar informed Okan.

Okan was startled. How did he know *already*?

"Oh . . ." Okan trailed off, wondering what he would say now.

"I figured you already did. Another theory." Saba said, walking over to a bed and beginning to fold it carefully—*too* carefully. Something was wrong.

Now that Okan noticed this, he thought he could detect a hint of something—resentment, maybe?—in Saba's voice.

"Um, Saba?" He asked cautiously.

"What?" She tried to sound preoccupied, like she was only half listening.

"What's wrong?"

Everything went still. Saba stiffened, stopping her work, but then sighed, knowing she couldn't hide it.

"Well, Sibel went out to work in the fields today. She has Zeus with her, so I don't know why I would be worried over anything. It's silly, really." She shrugged.

Hagar waited patiently, getting on Okan's nerves. He was trying with all his might to keep from pushing Saba to get to the point.

"And you know that night with Ceylon that he could even see her, let alone touch her, so he was very disappointed. And of course he would want to get us back . . . somehow." She didn't continue, waiting for Okan to catch on. He didn't. She sighed again, this time extremely impatiently. "Okan, he's coming back, *today*, to take Sibel when we least expect it. He's tired of waiting! Sibel is in trouble!" She decided to say it right then, to tell them exactly what she was thinking since she was tired of waiting for Okan to get it.

Okan couldn't keep his eyes from bugging out. "Now? Today? Soon?" He asked unbelievably.

"Yes! Today! If we don't get out there quickly then we won't be able to do anything about it! And I'm sorry if it isn't true, I'm just worried about her. She's my best friend and I don't want to lose her to that twirp." Saba sounded almost desperate.

"Okay, okay. We'll go out. But you can't come with us. Too dangerous." Okan said.

"Phuh! *Too dangerous!* You must be kidding me, Okan. You're really worried about my safety."

Okan suddenly realized how dumb that had sounded. "Right, yeah, I must've been thinking about someone else." He said, shaking his head.

Saba raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Hagar walked to the door, holding it open for everyone before closing it behind him.

"Um, she needs a horse." He said, nodding at Camille and Aries.

"Didn't you *know* she was going to come with us?" Okan asked, annoyed now. Wasn't that supposed to be Hagar's power?

"No, I only *know* certain things, Okan." Hagar sounded irritated, too.

There was silence. Desperation hung in the atmosphere surrounding Saba as they stood there.

"Remember Sibel," She pushed them. "All alone with only Zeus to guard her... Probably about to be stolen by Lelani's kidnapper . . ."

"Oh, fine! You ride with me and then . . . God, *now* I wish Lelani was here!" Okan said, exasperated. "Come on, we'd better get moving."

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When they got to the field, everything was peaceful. Nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

It didn't take them long to find Sibel. She was acting just like Saba—being *too* careful. She plucked the corn lightly from the stalk, slowly setting it carefully into the basket she had. *Too* carefully, as said before.

Okan had to wonder if they were overdoing it just a little, if not a lot.

"Sibel!" Saba called, sliding off of Aries and running her way. Sibel glanced up and then smiled, looking extremely relieved to see them.

"Hi," She said, setting her basket down and walking over to them. Zeus followed cautiously.

"Hey, Sibel. We just came because Saba said . . ." Okan didn't know if he should talk about it.

"Oh, yeah. Thank goodness, too, because I'm really not acting normal. If he does come, I'll need a lot of help." She admitted, glancing down at her hands. Okan suddenly realized that they were shaking slightly.

"It's okay, Sibel. We're here right now. There's no need to be afraid."

“But I am.” She mumbled. “Never mind. Thanks for coming. It’s really nice of you.” She said thankfully. “And I see you’ve brought someone else.”

“Oh, yeah.” Okan turned to signal Hagar off his horse, but there was no need. He had already dismounted. “Um, Sibel . . . Zeus, this is Hagar, my friend. He came to talk to Saba but ended up here, I guess.” Okan grinned.

“Hello,” Hagar waved a hand politely. Okan was very thankful that he was even being polite.

“Hi. I’m Sibel. This is my friend Zeus.” Sibel said, smiling at him. She looked very bright now that everyone was here. “By the way, you can leave if you want. You don’t have to protect some useless slave that wasn’t even supposed to be brought into this world if you don’t want. I don’t mind. It’s totally normal.” Sibel said carelessly.

Hagar laughed lightly. “I’m fine.” He glanced at Okan. “Though you might need Lelani if you want to defeat this guy. I *know* what he can do.”

“It’s a little too late for that.” Zeus’s voice rang out above all the others, sounding stern and serious. She was looking past Hagar and Okan and Camille and Aries at something in the shadows of the trees; something tremendously dangerous.

Everyone spun around. What they saw made them catch their breath.

There stood Ceylon. Looking evil and powerful and . . . so kidnapper like. And right next to him stood a girl with caramel colored hair, who was only a bit taller than Saba herself, with green eyes and a frightened face. And she was horribly familiar.

Madge stood next to Ceylon, her hands clenched into fists and her jaw clenched. Fire burned in her eyes like a wildfire set free in the forest.

But she was stuck. She couldn’t leave Ceylon. He was too powerful.

Saba almost lost it. She clomped down hard on her lip, fighting tears and the urge to run to Madge and save her. Sibel patted her hand comfortingly.

Ceylon’s mouth pulled up into an evil looking smile.

“Hello, kids. It’s good to see you again.” He said. His voice seemed hollow and dark.

Aries and Camille looked over their shoulder, and when they saw Madge and Ceylon standing there, they shied and trotted to their owners.

Okan reached out and grabbed Aries’ reins, keeping the horse near him.

“Well, I don’t want to stay long, so I’ve decided that it would be best to capture the unicorn girl. I’ll make a fair trade. Miss Unicorn for Miss Big Mouth. How about it?” He asked, tilting his head toward Madge. “Actually,” He pointed out, “It’s *not* a fair trade, but it’s a trade I’m willing to make. It’ll help my reputation.” Suddenly his hand went down to his pocked and he pulled out a knife.

The knife brought back memories of the night where he’d almost gotten Sibel. Where Benji had come and fought him off with Lelani.

Hagar’s breath caught in his throat. Okan didn’t glare spare a glance at him to see what was wrong.

“Yes, I see Mr. Know It All knows. I’m not even going to take any risks. I’ve decided that if you do not give me the girl, I will have to take one away from you.” He said wickedly.

Okan shuddered. Now he knew why Hagar had almost choked. He would kill Madge if he didn't get Sibel.

Now Okan spared a glance back at Sibel. The blood was drained from her face as she stared at Madge. Saba looked almost identical to her at the moment.

Okan took a deep breath and turned to face Ceylon. "Let her go." He said firmly through clenched teeth.

Ceylon chuckled cruelly. "Not until I have that girl in my hands."

Okan glanced at Madge. She was glaring at the ground. She was taking quick, deep breaths, trying to calm her rage. She seemed to be in pain, like an invisible force was working against her, keeping her there.

There probably *was* one.

"Let Madge go and we'll give her to you." Okan said.

"Ha! How am I supposed to believe that?" Ceylon asked.

"Just let her go." He repeated for the third time.

"I can see my little plan won't work. Well, that's too bad, I guess." He turned to Madge. "Change."

Madge didn't seem to have a choice. She began glow, and when she was too bright for anyone to see she morphed into a unicorn.

Except it wasn't the same unicorn. This unicorn was ragged and dirty. She had a tangled mane and tail that desperately needed brushing. Her whole body needed a bath. She looked almost brown with all of the dirt. But the thing that really got Okan going was that there was blood. Madge had blood splattered all along her flank and back and stomach. She had been neglected. By Ceylon.

Madge was shivering uncontrollably.

Both Hagar and Okan were fuming now.

"You had no right!" Okan yelled, stepping forward.

"I know I didn't, but I don't care. I did it anyways. And no one can stop me." He began laughing a horrible, dark laugh filled with malevolence. He jumped onto Madge's dirty back and kicked at her flanks to make her move forward.

When Okan and the others realized he wasn't going to turn around they hopped out of his way. Okan barely avoided Ceylon's knife.

"I'll come back for you, Missy," He hissed at Sibel. She shuddered.

Everyone watched in disbelief as they rode away, Madge looking like it was a struggle to stay on her four hooves. She let out a terrifying neigh, that sounded like she was suffering, which she was.

After they were gone, having disappeared somewhere and somehow, everything was peaceful once again. It was as though nothing had even happened.

It took everyone a while to comprehend that they were on Earth and not in the middle of a nightmare.

Saba was crying. Sibel was shivering wildly. She looked as though she'd been petrified. Zeus was standing as still as a statue, staring at the place where Ceylon and Madge had been standing. Hagar was trembling with rage. He and Madge were very good friends, since their parents lived close to each other and they'd known each other their

whole lives. Okan was staring after them, clenching his fists. The reason why none of them had gone after Ceylon; he was too dangerous to take on without a very powerful person. Lelani could've helped, but she wasn't there.

Okan wished frantically that Lelani was there right then, and that they had Madge right here with them, happy to be free of Ceylon's vicious treatment.

But she wasn't here, and neither was Lelani. Why hadn't anyone told them that Madge was missing? Okan just didn't get it.

"We need to get back. *Now.*" Zeus said, looking up and around at everyone. Saba nodded, not trusting her voice, most likely.

"It's all my fault." Sibel managed to get through her teeth that were clamped together tightly. "Everything is." She whispered, close to tears like Saba.

"No . . . no, it's not your fault, Sibel. Nothing is. It's all his." Saba soothed, stroking her hair lightly with her quivering hand.

Sibel bit her lip hard, but didn't object.

Hagar moved his gaze to Sibel, the flames in his eyes hitting her hard. Sibel flinched.

"I'm sorry." She murmured, staring at the dirt by her feet.

Okan hoped that Hagar wouldn't go off on her. It wasn't her fault about anything, just like Saba had said before. He glanced at Hagar, checking him.

Hagar took a few deep breaths before replying. "She's right. None of this had anything to do with you." He mumbled, reaching out almost blindly but managing to grasp Camille's reins like he'd known they were there. He turned and mounted, preparing to leave.

"We don't have a horse again." Saba pointed out in a low voice. Okan's shoulders slumped.

"Oh, right." He sighed, glancing around. How was he supposed to get everyone to the hut all at once?

"That's okay," Zeus said, sounding like she really didn't want to do this. "I've got a solution."

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I had a pretty good idea on what Hayden wanted to talk with me about. I'm smart like that, you see.

She'd been thinking all these weird things like: *Do I really think she knows? and Should I really admit it? It doesn't matter, if she does know. So what's the point in keeping it a secret? She probably does know because I'm always thinking these weird things . . . aren't I? Yeah, those weird things.*

So, we were riding our horses—Gemini was kind of acting up today. Why? I don't know!—and out in the meadow, and Hayden was thinking all of these things when I finally snapped.

"What in the world are you thinking about?" I asked. I was really annoyed with her.

“Oh, sorry! I kind of forgot you could read right now . . . never mind.”

“Not *read*, Hayden.” I reminded her, biting down my bad comment. I hated it, *hated* it oh so much when people told someone that I could read minds. I *cannot* read minds. I speak and listen telepathically.

Gemini tugged on the reins as I said this, and a patted her neck, trying to calm her down.

“Oh yeah, right. Sorry.” I shook my head, dismissing the slip. Everyone does once in a while, right? *Wrong. No one does. Because they know I hate it. But whatever, forget it, Lelani.* I told myself, taking a deep breath.

“But I just wanted to talk to you, Lani.” Hayden said, *again*.

*Yeah, I kind of figured that out already.* I said.

“Oh, right. Well . . .” She sounded like she was trying hard not to repeat a whole bunch of things that she’d already said. “It’s just . . . I think I . . .” *Just say it, just say it.* She urged herself.

“Does this have something to do with Tayyib?” I asked. But I already knew the answer.

“Oh, so you know? Gee, that’s good. Whewh, that saves me a lot of . . . awkwardness.” She said, looking really pleased.

“Hah, I knew I was right.” I told her. “Do you know how long I’ve considered this conclusion? Oh, I don’t know . . . nine months? Ten?” I alleged.

“Oh, huh. . . Well, that’s good, I guess.” Hayden sounded kind of nervous.

I looked over at her sympathetically. “It’s alright, Hayden. I know how you feel.”

“You do?” She looked very disbelieving. Now that I thought about what I’d just said, I really *didn’t* think I knew how she felt.

“No, but I can relate. Sort of. You know . . . family.” I searched for the right words but couldn’t seem to find them. *What a stupid excuse.* I scolded myself.

“Oh, yeah. I know what you mean. It must be hard, with Adayeze gone and you not knowing if she’s going to return.”

*Well, when you put it like that . . . yeah.*

“No, not really.” I said, shrugging.

Hayden laughed. “Wow. I wonder how Adayeze would feel if she heard you say that, Lani.”

“Yeah, but I don’t really care how she would feel.” I said. Hayden laughed again. She seemed to have relaxed now that she didn’t have to worry about telling me. “So, what about Tayyib?” I asked, focusing on the main point again.

Hayden stopped laughing and sighed, patting her horse, Opal. “I don’t know. What if he doesn’t feel the same?”

“Well that’s too bad.” I said. She gave me a skeptical look and I laughed. “I’m just kidding, Hayden. Jeez, you’re so gullible.” I complained. “But anyways, I think it’s going to be fine. Just tell him and accept what he says. He probably likes you though. After all,” I gave her an ironic look. “You are the angel of the country.”

Hayden’s face lit up in a smile. Angelic, I tell you!

“Okay. Thanks, Lani. It’s good to have a friend who can re—I mean, *communicate telepathically.*”

“Now, now, no need to be *modest.*” I said sarcastically. Hayden started cracking up. I giggled at her expression.

*Come on, you stupid unicorn. Move it! We don’t have all day.*

The thought hit me like a bullet. I knew that voice. I jerked my head up, looking around. If I couldn’t read telepathically then I would’ve missed them. Madge was really good at being quiet.

They were galloping for the forest, looking almost like ghosts except Madge was looking a bit crippled. I knew it was Ceylon on her back—I don’t know how, I just knew.

*Well, that was his voice.* I thought glumly. “Hayden, be quiet.” Hayden immediately shut her mouth.

*What’s wrong?* She asked.

*We’ve got a little situation on our hands.* I nodded my head in Madge’s direction.

Now, since Hayden is Hagar’s sister, I would expect her to know who Ceylon was, who he was riding, and what Madge was. And thank goodness she did. Instantly her face hardened.

“Come on.” She told me in her voice that said no arguing. I wasn’t going to object, though. We both kicked our horses’ flanks with our heels and set them at a gallop. Thank goodness Gemini decided now was the time to concentrate and be good.

“I’m going to fling him off the unicorn, and you tell him what to do. Got it?” She asked, not taking her eyes away from the scene. They were getting away from us. Why did Madge have to be so fast?

“Got it.” I grumbled, focusing my mind on his.

I could just barely make out Hayden lifting her hand slowly in the corner of my left eye. As her hand lifted, it began to tremble, and I watched as Ceylon started to rise carefully off of Madge’s back. I couldn’t help smiling as he began to panic.

*WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOING ON? Stop it, you useless animal! You’re doing this to me! Stop!*

I focused my mind on his, gathering all of my strength. *Okay, Gemini. Keep following them.* I told my horse. She snorted. I felt so proud.

*Okay, I said. When you fall, you will go into unconsciousness. When you awake, you will be in prison. You will not try to escape, you will not kill anyone, and you will not object to anything given to you, got it? I expect to see the most out of you. Unless you want to die right now. You will not injure anyone in the time you live. You will do what you are told and nothing else. Told by my family. No one else. Understood. Good. Now, you will fall in a few seconds . . .* I instructed Ceylon.

Perfect! I loved working with Hayden! She was so good at her job. She flung Ceylon off his horse, her hand quivering as he hit the ground, and she took her force off of him, leaving him lying there.

“Yes!” She yelled, punching her fist up into the air.

“Whoo hoo!” I yelled along with her. Madge was slowing now, breathing deeply, and glanced over her shoulder. When she saw us she let out a relieved whinny.

Don't worry, Madge. We've come to help. I told her. She bobbed her head tiredly. As Hayden and I neared Ceylon's unconscious body, we suddenly thought about what we were supposed to do with him.

"I guess I'll call my father . . . and Okan. Oh, I can't wait to see his face. To know that his twelve year old sister is stronger than him . . . and a thirteen year old, too." I said, shaking my head with an excited smile on my face.

"Look at Madge." Was all Hayden said.

I looked up at the unicorn trotting towards me and my breath caught in my throat, almost choking me.

She looked *awful*. Bloodstained and dirty, she looked like she was a dirty brown instead of white. Her mane and tail were tangled in all sorts of knots that would probably need about five baths and a few good brushings to get out of there.

"Oh, no." I gasped. Hayden nodded, swallowing. "Why would he do such a thing?"

"It's just his nature." Hayden guessed.

*Madge, how are you doing?* I asked, my mind tone very concerned.

*Not so well. Please help me. I don't think I'll be able to make it all the way back.* She pleaded. *And I really don't want to stay here.*

*Oh, have no worries, Madge. I wouldn't plan on it even if I died.* I assured her. "Hey, Hayden?"

"Hmm?" She sounded like she was thinking but do you *think* I cared?

"Do you think you could carry Madge back?"

"Yeah, sure." She answered right away. "It was only hard for me with Ceylon because I had to keep him moving along with Madge. I didn't want to be lifting him up in thin air. Oh my, gosh, that would be funny, though!" She suddenly pointed out.

"Yeah, I know." I agreed enthusiastically.

"Okay. Let's do this thingy." She lifted her hand to raise Madge off her feet and into the air, where she would be carried.

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Okay, so, first comes the unicorn. The amazing healing powers and then the cruel treatment.

Next comes the Pegasus. Yup, the *Pegasus*. Not just an ordinary Pegasus, either. An *extra strong* Pegasus. That can't run unless it wants to fly. Oh, the glory.

"You must be kidding me." Sibel said, sounding wound up.

"She's not kidding." Hagar told her. Sibel scowled.

"I *knew* that!" She retorted. Everyone was pretty fed up by now, since Zeus had transformed and they'd found out they couldn't gallop.

"Um, you guys, I just wanted to point out that we're wasting time arguing like this." Saba reminded them. She had her arms crossed over her chest and she wasn't looking very happy.

"She's right. We need to leave. We could've *been* there by now if we *had* gotten a move on." Okan agreed grumpily.

“Okay.” Sibel took a deep breath. She painted a serious expression on over her face. “Let’s go.”

Everyone nodded and got aboard their horse, Saba and Sibel getting on Zeus’s sturdy back.

She had her wings folded so that they cupped around Saba and Sibel like they were sitting in a cup. Then she dipped her head as a symbol that she was ready to walk. To walk.

Lelani had decided to talk to him. Telepathically, of course.

They were riding back, going at the slowest pace possible. It was agonizing.

*Okay, Okan. I need you to stay calm.*

*Here’s the thing: me and Hayden were taking a stroll . . . well, not really. Me and Hayden were taking ride out in the meadow when we saw someone riding through the plains. Of course, it was Ceylon. And . . . Okan’s face lit up because of his smile. He was sure he looked brighter than the sun. Everyone stared at him, oblivious. Well, you know the rest.* She finished, most likely sighing.

*Oh. My. Gosh.* His breathing quickened. *Oh my gosh. Thank you, thank you, thank you, Lelani! Okay, bye!* Okan decided he couldn’t wait very long to tell the others the news.

“You guys. You’ll never believe this!” He said excitedly, barely managing to stay in his seat. “Guess who saw Ceylon and Madge riding through the meadow?” Now, since none of the slaves knew about Hayden’s power and no one knew what Lelani could do with her power, only Hagar knew what had happened and who had seen them riding in the meadow.

“No way?” Hagar was fighting to stay calm, a smile crossing his face. Okan nodded hurriedly. “You’re kidding.” Okan shook his head quickly. “Oh my—I *have* to go!” Okan rolled his eyes up at the sky, wondering if he should let Hagar free right now. *Well, there’s nothing to fight against . . .* He thought.

It was as though Hagar could read minds too. He smiled even wider. “Thanks!” He kicked his horse’s shins and headed off for the castle, where Madge, Lelani, and Hayden were sure to be by now.

Okan sighed.

Zeus neighed longingly, beginning to stretch her wings. Sibel struck her hand out and slapped them back against her flank. She snorted but didn’t object.

“What happened?” Saba asked, watching Hagar leave and then staring, confused, at Okan.

“Lelani and Hayden rescued Madge and captured Ceylon. Their powers.” Okan explained shortly, waving it off.

Saba gasped in excitement. “Really? Oh, I’m sorry! I’m keeping you here! Go ahead, we’ll be fine. I don’t want to ruin your excitement!” She exclaimed.

“No, no, it’s okay. I’ve got the whole rest of the day to visit them.” Okan grinned and shrugged. Saba narrowed her eyes disbelievingly. “Really. I’m fine. I *want* to take you

guys home. Come on, let's get moving again." He guaranteed them, moving forward again because they had stopped when they'd begun to talk.

"Fine," Saba sounded as though she still didn't think he was telling her the truth.

Sibel had been quiet through the whole thing, Okan realized. He glanced back at her, checking to make sure she was okay. She was chewing on her lip somewhat urgently.

"You okay, Sibel?" He called back to her. Sibel jumped when she heard her name.

"Oh, yeah. Fine. Great news." She answered. Okan raised his eyebrows; she sounded like she was thinking very hard about something.

"Nothing you want to share?" He inquired.

"No, I'm fine." She called back, glancing around nervously and not making eye contact.

*There's something she's hiding from me. From everyone.* Okan knew the signs as well as anyone. *But what is it?*

He took a glimpse back at Sibel, but she'd composed herself, a smile blanketing her hard expression like a forced on mask. Something was terribly wrong. Okan wasn't an idiot.

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Everything was peaceful when they arrived back at the hut. Nothing disturbed, everything normal, nothing out of place. Okan doubted that Ceylon had decided to visit the hut before coming to find Sibel. He'd probably just wanted to get in, grab Sibel, and get out in one piece.

"Home." Saba sighed as they slid off the horses—well, not really horses, but creatures.

Sibel grinned, sliding off of Zeus, too. "Can't wait to start making fifty meals again, can you?" She asked sarcastically.

Saba smiled back. "Anything but fighting off mean *things*." Saba said, turning and walking inside. But when she said this, Sibel had closed her face again, looking anxious once more.

*Good, Saba doesn't see it, too. She'd freak out for sure.* Okan clamped his jaw together. Sibel was getting really annoying.

Saba turned to Zeus. "Um . . . you can . . . change back, if you'd like." She told her, eyeing the Pegasus.

Zeus nodded as if to say that she heard. In less than a second, and faster than the human's eye could see, she had turned back in to Zeus again, and she brushed off the hem of her sleeves and her dress, the dirt only barely coming off.

"Gonna need a good washing . . ." She was muttering to herself. Then she looked up and took a deep breath. "Okay. Let's go back inside and get something to eat and . . ." She trailed off, not knowing what she should do.

"I . . . should . . . get going. They'll be wondering where I am . . ." Okan started, glancing at Sibel and Zeus.

“Oh, yeah. After what happened to Madge . . .” Sibel decided. Okan nodded. “Yeah, I guess so. Uh, will you come back tonight, though? I’d appreciate it.” She asked.

Okan was startled and confused. “I . . . o—kay, it’s just...what do you want me here for?” He stuttered.

“Oh, just . . . stuff.” She shrugged, looking at the ground and tracing a pattern in the dirt with the toe of her shoe. Okan immediately became suspicious. “Just come, okay?” She sounded hopeful.

*Why should I even bother?* But Okan’s mouth spoke before he could stop it. “Okay, fine, but it had better not be a trick of some sort, got it?” Sibel nodded her head furiously, and Okan was even more wary of her. “Alright, bye.”

Sibel waved eagerly. “Bye.” She jumped up and down as she said this.

“Bye. See you later.” Zeus called after him as he turned Aries and trotted away.

“Yeah, see you later.” Okan muttered, wondering if he would regret this decision once he’d returned that night.

*Well, it’s too late to change it now. Might as well deal with it.* Okan thought quite glumly. He set Aries at a canter back to the stables as he thought about this, and soon he’d un-tacked his horse, groomed him, and given him fresh water before he set out in the general direction of the castle. He took his time, walking through the garden maze that was located at the side of the castle which led to the front entrance when whoever was in the maze figured out how to get out of it.

When he finally found the entrance, he knew—because of the gold-ish glow in the horizon—that the time was somewhere around five o’clock. When he opened the door, he ran into Lelani, and when she saw it was him her white face flushed in relief.

“Okan! Gee, that’s good; I don’t have to go out looking for you like Dad told me to do. Thanks!” She said delightfully. She sounded much too jolly for someone who had just been visiting a crippled unicorn girl.

Okan narrowed his eyes. “You’re welcome. What’s going on, anyways?” He proceeded to get to the more important topic.

“Oh, nothin’ . . . but come on; Madge is upstairs in the guest room. You’re lucky: her parents are here and so are Hagar and Hayden’s!” She exclaimed cheerfully.

Okan groaned “Yeah, lucky me.” He scowled at his little sister when her all too bright smile widened an inch.

When they arrived at the guest bedroom, which was on the floor under Okan and Lelani’s bedroom floor, they peeked in only to see that Madge was sleeping. She looked very peaceful, but when Okan caught a glimpse of her parents’ faces, he double checked before looking back at them.

Pedlinn and Jaki had been staring at their daughter worriedly as she dreamed, and now they seemed to tense up for something. *What are they waiting for?* He wondered, and he didn’t expect to hear an answer. When it came he nearly leapt out of his skin.

*Their waiting for her to start talking in her sleep because of a bad dream—jeez, chill. Gosh. She always has them, they say . . .* Lelani continued thoughtfully.

*What are they about?* Okan had to ask—his curiosity got the better of him.

*I'm not sure . . . it doesn't make any sense . . . they say it's like something like saving the world or something.* Lelani said. Her eyes darted to Madge and she watched her intently.

*What?* Sometimes, Okan told himself, not being able to hear other people's thoughts was very irritating.

*I—I don't—I don't know.* Lelani searched for the right words to express the feeling she had. *I don't understand what's happening in her dream at all.* Okan was stunned. His sister sounded unsure of herself? How long had it been since *that* had happened? Twelve years! All of her existence!

*Okan, you can never be too confident in yourself. It'll just hurt you.* Lani reminded him, though he already knew. Okan stifled a sigh.

*I know, but still, Lani. It's complicated knowing that you're not sure of—* Suddenly, out of nowhere and with no warning; Lelani snapped out her wings and grabbed Okan's elbows, pulling him after her up into the air until they were touching the ceiling. Or, at least, *Lelani* was touching the ceiling.

This was a stunning moment. Lelani never, ever used her wings. Not even for emergencies. So either this was more important than an emergency, or Lelani had felt like knocking the breath out of her brother.

*Okan!* She told him calmly. *I'm going to say this as politely as possible.* Her expression turned hard and her tone became angry. *Either you wake up or I'll wake you up myself! Got it? This isn't a joke. You're always worried about the wrong things and it'll do you zip when the time comes that you'll need your power for something that's actually important!* She retorted.

Okan was gasping, trying to calm his pounding heart as they hovered there silently—not literally— watching as Hagar, Hayden, and their mother and father left the guest room and walked down the hall, getting on the elevator while they talked quietly to each other.

*Well, I'm sorry I'm not perfect! And I'm sorry I disappointed you. I'll work on not doing it again!* He snapped once he'd gotten over his shock.

*You'd better.* There was no hint of a joke in Lelani's tone. Slowly she began descending, and Okan watched the floor, beginning to feel dizzy as they got nearer and nearer to the ground. *Now, Lelani began again.* She sounded normal. *Let's go visit Madge.*

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Madge had been awake when they'd entered. She had been relieved when she saw that both of them were okay.

"I was worried sick. I thought you knew!" She exclaimed.

"Knew what?" Lelani asked, leaning in unconsciously.

But Madge wouldn't tell them. She said it didn't matter if Ceylon was gone.

"Oh, okay." Lelani shrugged, but Okan could see through her pitiful mask. She really wanted to know what Madge had been afraid of.

“Lani, there’s no need to worry you if it doesn’t matter anymore.” Madge soothed. Obviously, she was smart enough to be able to see through the mask, too. Okan snorted. Lelani wasn’t very good at this stuff, as far as he knew. She’d never really been able to hide her feelings from others. It was just a talent that she hadn’t seemed to grasp when she was a kid.

But Okan wasn’t worried about Lelani’s feelings. He was wondering if Madge thought Ceylon was dead or not. When she’d said ‘gone’, she hadn’t really explained what she meant by the word. She’d just said ‘gone,’ and that was all.

And sure, Ceylon was *gone* like *gone out of the city*, or *captured*, but he wasn’t *gone* like *gone and never to be seen ever again* or *dead*.

But Okan didn’t get to ask what she meant because Benji had come in and ordered them to give Madge a chance to rest.

“But, *Mom!*” Lelani had begun to complain.

“No ‘buts’. Go. Now.” Benji had told them, pointing at the door. Lelani had given up, and they left Madge alone.

Soon, dinner time had come and everyone had gathered in the dining hall, and they had feasted. That was how Okan had figured out that Madge had been stolen that day. Hagar and Hayden seemed to already know this, and they didn’t look very happy about it.

Madge had told her parents that she was going to pick some strawberries, since they didn’t waste the products that they had in their land. And, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera . . . she ended up in Okan’s castle home.

Okan was just as pleased as Hayden, Lelani, and Hagar, and he picked at his food, not feeling very hungry. Once the grown-ups got down to business about the countries, Okan tuned them out and began thinking about later that night. Should he really go after dinner, or should he just skip? No, he shouldn’t skip. That would be mean and he would let Saba and Sibel down.

While he thought about this, Lelani eyed him dubiously. *Whacha thinkin’?* She asked him apprehensively.

*Nothin’.* He told her, scowling. She forced a tiny smile.

*You’re going back there, aren’t you?* She asked.

*No.*

*Yes, you are. I told you, Okan. You’re worried about all the wrong things!* She exclaimed disapprovingly.

*It’s fine, Lani. I’ll be back before it gets too late.* He told her.

“Okan!” Benji said angrily. She sounded as though she’d been calling his name eighty times over and over.

“Huh? Oh, sorry. What?”

“Okan, you should listen more often. I just asked if you had heard if Tayyib and Bao were going to be present for the Annual Meet. The last time I checked, their mother was going to visit her family that day and they were supposed to go with her.”

“Oh, I, uh, don’t really know. You’re gonna have to ask them.” He shrugged. He wasn’t in the spirit to talk about anything but what was happening that night. It was interesting that they would want him to come back . . .

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Okan walked up to the hut door, not knowing what to expect. If all of this was a prank, he’d be super mad at them. They’d probably think it was funny.

Once again, before he could finish knocking, the door swung open and Saba was standing there.

“Hey! Jeez, didn’t think you’d take this long! But whatever, come on in!” She said, waving him inside.

“O-kay.” Okan said, narrowing his eyes.

“It’s fine. We’re not playing any pranks tonight.” She assured him. He gazed at her, waiting for any kind of joke to enter her eyes, but there was only seriousness.

“Fine. I’ll believe you now. But if you let me down . . .” He advised. Saba laughed.

“Just come on!” She giggled, closing the door behind him.

“Okan! Did you eat already?” Sibel asked.

“Yeah, but I’m still hungry.” Sibel and Saba exchanged a look and Okan glared at them. He knew what they were thinking: *Boys.*

*Girls.* He thought, and snickered.

“Good, ‘cause we’ve got turkey!” Sibel cooed, looking like a three year old.

“Um, thanks. So, what did you want me here for again?”

“Oh, right. Uh, well, we wanted to let you know more about . . . things.” Saba said, glancing around.

“What *things?*” Okan asked suspiciously.

Saba sighed. “Sit down.” Okan obeyed. “Okay,” She started, glancing around. “Have you ever heard that saying . . . ?”

“What saying?”

“The one . . .” She looked at Okan doubtfully before saying, “Well, probably not. I had to tell Sibel and Zeus. Not many people have heard it before.” *Just get to the point.* “Anyways, I’ll tell you what it is and, I guess, what it means.” She took a deep breath before continuing. “*Roses are Blood red, Violets are Royal blue, But you’d better watch out for both of the two.*” She recited the poem.

When she didn’t continue, Okan had to ask. “What’s it about?”

“Slaves.” She said like this was no big deal. “Well, it’s about slaves, but it’s also about the royal family. They say that the poem was invented by someone who committed a crime, and their punishment was getting beaten by the king who was dressed in mostly royal blue.” Saba shrugged. “But it’s just a saying. No one has any idea if it’s true or not.”

As she told him this, Okan had a strange feeling. The feeling sent a shiver down his spine and he closed his eyes for a minute to calm himself down.

In almost an instant he felt a warm hand press against his temple and a worried voice at his ear. “Something’s wrong. My theories tell me. Are you okay?” Saba was hurrying her words so that they stumbled over each other.

Okan nodded. At least she wasn’t going so fast that he couldn’t understand her.

“I’m fine.” He said, and Saba took her hand off of his forehead. Okan opened his eyes.

“What happened?” Sibel asked, walking over.

“I’m not sure. But something went wrong. I *know* it did. It’s not a theory anymore.”

“I feel it, too.” Zeus agreed with her, jumping lightly off the bed. “This is something more serious than before. It has something to do with Ceylon.” She added.

“But *what happened?*” Sibel asked, sounding aggravated.

“We don’t know.” Zeus answered.

“I . . . I think he escaped.” Saba said, staring at the table with glazed eyes and then looking up at everyone. “Somehow he got out of the dungeon.”

“But how?” Okan questioned.

“I don’t know that. My theories only go so far.” Saba sounded just as upset as Sibel. Everyone was quiet, thinking what could’ve happened.

“I know.” Sibel announced so suddenly that everyone jumped at the sound of her voice.

“You know what?” Saba asked suspiciously.

“I know what happened.” Okan, Saba, and Zeus gave her a perplexed look that asked: *How?* Sibel clenched her fists together, looking like she was trying to force the truth out of her mouth. “Come on, come on!” She mouthed, squeezing her eyes shut.

“Sibel? Are you alright?” Saba asked, getting up and walking over to her friend.

“I know what he is.” She whispered.

“What? What are you talking about? Sibel, I think you need a rest.” Saba instructed.

“No! No, you don’t understand. I know what Ceylon is. He’s more dangerous than Rico was. And Rico was a tiger: the most dangerous animal in the world, so it is said. But that isn’t true. *Ceylon* is the most dangerous animal—or creature—in the world.” *Creature? What does she mean by creature?* Okan was getting confused now. “I know what happened because we have the same blood, we are cousins. And I regret it. I wish I’d never even met him. He took me away from my family. *His* family, too. Him and Rico.”

“Sibel! Sibel, what happened?” Saba was beginning to look scared for her friend.

*I don’t blame her. What is Sibel talking about?* Okan thought. Sibel began to shake.

“He broke out. He’s free, and no one knows. No one but you, me, Zeus, and now Okan. But soon everyone will know. He’s going to kill them. Kill them all. They *must* know. He’s coming for them right now!” Now Sibel looked like she was shivering with anger, not fright.

*Okan, what’s wrong?* Lelani’s troubled voice suddenly came into his head, and he almost sighed in relief.

*Lani! Lani, something’s wrong. Somehow Ceylon got out of the dungeon, even after you ordered him not to try to escape. I don’t know how it happened, I just know that it*

## *Book One. Criminals: Unwanted.*

*happened, and he's more dangerous than Rico. Do not underestimate him. Tell everyone now or else you'll all be toast. You have to find a way to get him out of there.*

*What is he? I can't know what to do without knowing what's coming for me!* Lelani asked desperately.

"What is he, Sibel? What is Ceylon?" Sibel hesitated. "Hurry! Tell me! They won't be able to fight him off if you don't tell me now!" Okan couldn't help the anxiety that seeped into his voice. Still, Sibel hesitated.

"I don't know . . ."

"Sibel!" Zeus and Saba yelled together.

"Okay, okay! I'll tell you!" She was crying now. Why was she crying when she hated her cousin as much as everyone else did? Okan wondered. "He's a—he's—he's a . . ." She took a shuddery breath before continuing. "He's a dragon."

## *Part Three. Because she'll always be there.*

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A dragon. When Okan had said this, I had nearly doubled over in nausea.

Wasn't a unicorn enough? All the extinct animals decide to show up today, huh? Yeah, great.

The only person who could do anything about this situation was Hayden. Where was Hayden? In the bathroom.

*In the bathroom!* My shoulders slumped. If my powers hadn't worked except for once on Ceylon, than they sure weren't gonna work again!

*But a dragon!* Oh, God. Not a tiger; a *dragon*. Even worse than a tiger.

*Oh, a dragon. Well, that helps.* I choked.

*Really? Well, you just tell me when your little tricks on him are done, then call us, okay?*

*Got it.* I gasped. I could just hear Okan groaning.

*I can't believe I don't even have my power yet! I could be a bit of a help if I'd actually get it!*

*I've gotta go. Warn everybody, you know?*

*Oh, yeah. Don't want to waste time.*

*It's already been wasted.* I said glumly before finally shutting him out of my mind.

Dad was in the middle of explaining his tax plan for next year.

". . . and then we'll—" He was saying when I interrupted.

"O-kay, dinner's over. Time to evacuate." I said, standing up and clapping my hands.

"Excuse me, young lady. I don't believe—"

"Unless ya'll wanna become sausage, I suggest we get a *move on!*" I said, roughly pushing out of my chair and quickly beginning to punch Hagar lightly in the shoulder. He scrunched up his eyebrows in discomfort and tried to get my hand away from him.

“What are you talking about, Lelani Naomi? Sit down and listen to your father!” Mom exclaimed curtly, making her voice firm.

But there was no time for firmness.

“Look, here, people. If you all don’t believe me, you can wait here to be attacked by a *dragon*. Either you get your lazy butts out of your chairs or I’m leaving without ya!” I snapped, not caring what confusion was floating around the room. There was no time to explain the situation.

“What are you saying, a *dragon*? They never existed, and they never will!” Dad exclaimed, standing angrily to face me.

“Fine!” I retorted, scooting a chair out of my way as I crashed through to the door. “I’m going to be smart and do as Okan says and not be killed, and you guys can sit here and wait for your death to come! I’m sorry this is so *last minute* but Ceylon’s escaped even though my command was on him and he’s turned into a dragon, in a few seconds going to kill us *all!*” I yelled.

Everyone was stunned into silence. No one moved.

Finally Hagar stood. Relief flooded my whole body. His power was Knowing. He knew that I wasn’t lying and neither was Okan.

“I really don’t want to die, either, so I’m gonna go with Lani. Alright?” He asked, but he didn’t even wait for their approval. “I’ll get Madge, too, so that she doesn’t have to die because of your ignorance.” He assured them. But by then everyone was jumping up out of their seats and hurrying towards me and the door.

I spun around and rushed outside, thinking all the while to myself, *Once Hagar’s agreed with me, everything’s true, all fine and dandy. Phuh. Pitiful.* I glowered silently to myself.

“I know.” Hagar murmured, coming up beside me. I gave him a weak smile and then jogged down the hall ahead of everyone to where the stairs were.

“I’ll get Madge. Go on ahead. It won’t take me long.” I told everyone, waving them on.

They paused.

“But, aren’t you a bit small to get Madge?” Hayden asked, her doubt showing like a flashlight in the darkness of a cave.

“No, as a matter of fact, I’m not.” I said before racing up the stairs. *Please, Madge. Be sleeping.* I pleaded, willing her not to be awake. I’d kept this stuff a secret for my whole life; I didn’t want anyone sharing it now. Only my family knew. I silently thanked God for giving me the power to speak telepathically, and not anyone else. If Madge *was* awake and she started thinking of this after we were done, no one would be able to hear her thoughts.

When I knew I was out of sight of everyone, I snapped out my wings and leapt into the air, pushing down, up, down, up, to gain height. As soon as I was high enough, I pulled them in closer to my body to make an arrow-like form and zoomed ahead, making all the sharp turns and ducking at just the right moments.

Finally I reached Madge’s room and poked my head in the top corner of her door.

*Darn it. She's up.* I thought disappointedly to myself. *Okay, whatever. It's too late to take it back now.* So I pushed the door open and entered as silently as an owl.

Madge looked at the door, which had creaked when I'd come in, and then blinked. She was confused.

*What is going on?* She was asking herself. "Hello?" She called.

Now that I was right behind her—or beside her, but she wasn't looking my way, I couldn't figure out any way *not* to startle her. I tucked in my wings.

"Madge." I mumbled, touching her shoulder lightly with my hand.

Madge jumped and began to scramble out of her bed until she glanced back and saw me standing there.

"Lelani." She sounded breathless, like she'd been struggling very hard. *She's still weak.* I reminded myself. "Do you have invisibility powers, too?"

I wasn't in the mood for jokes. "No," I said. "But hurry up, we're leaving. Ceylon isn't gone. He's escaped. And now we know what he was—what he *is*. We have to get out of here. He's coming." I told her.

But of course, being the unicorn he'd stolen, Madge already knew this. She gasped as I spoke and then looked around.

"H-How are we supposed to leave quickly? How did you get in here?"

I stretched out my wings and her eyes widened in shock. "I flew. Now, get your stuff together; I'll be right back." Then I jumped in the air and zoomed out of her room. It didn't take me long to reach Okan's room and then grab his mail, go into my room, grab my mail, and then go back down to Madge's room.

Madge stood ready in her clothes with a sword strapped around her waist. She nodded.

"Good," I said. Then I flew over to her, grabbed her upper arms, and lifted her into the air. "Close your eyes." I instructed. She listened to me, clenching her fists. I flew towards the huge window that faced the entrance of the castle. The next thing I knew it, we had crashed through and were flying outside with bits of glass in our hair and all over our bodies. I could just see the others riding their horses towards the main gate.

I saw my dad spot me, and then Hayden followed his gaze. She shouted and then everyone was looking at me as I carried Madge.

Thank goodness Hagar had a horse for her. I wouldn't be able to carry her for very long. I began to fly closer and closer to where they were. Madge was now staring at her surroundings, wide-eyed in amazement.

"Wow! This is awesome! I can't believe this, Lelani!"

"Then don't." I grumbled. Now everybody knew about my wings. Lovely.

As we got closer, I headed for the extra horse Hagar had and turned around so that I was flying just above the horse, enough so that Madge's feet didn't touch its back. I slowed my speed and lowered her onto the horse, waiting until her hands had a firm grip before releasing my grip on her arms. Then I glanced around and was delighted to see that Dad had Gemini.

I flew down to her and folded in my wings, landing with a *thump!* on her back. "Thanks." I said to my dad as I grabbed the reins.

He just nodded gravely, not even looking at me.  
I turned to Hayden. She had come up beside me. "I know." She said. I nodded.  
This probably wouldn't turn out with a good ending.

\*\*

Zeus had decided to fly.

Okan was riding below her on Aries while she carried Saba and Sibel just above the height of the trees.

He was hoping that everyone had been able to escape in time, and that they'd be strong enough to defeat Ceylon.

Soon they were riding down the long cart way when they spotted horses coming towards them. Okan noticed Lelani just folding in her wings to ride Gemini, and everyone was with them. He glanced up at Zeus. She caught his eye and started to lower her body, beginning to move her legs in a running motion until she touched the ground so that she wouldn't come to an abrupt stop when she got to the floor. Next thing he knew it, He and Zeus were riding side by wing. He could tell she was trying hard not to begin flying again, and he gave her a sympathetic look.

She shook her head, annoyed, probably.

They neared the others and slowed, until they were walking towards each other. Okan pulled Aries' reins, making him stop. Everyone was wordless when they saw Zeus.

"Okan, what are we going to do about this?" Benji finally asked helplessly.

Lelani answered instead. "I think the only person who can stop him is Hayden." She told them.

"I can, too." Sibel raised her hand. Everyone's hard gazes turned to her, and she looked down self-consciously.

"How?" Zeheb asked in a hard voice. Sibel flinched.

"Dad, I don't think there's any reason to scare her." Lelani said. Sibel nodded her thanks and continued.

"I'm his family." Everyone stared at her, clueless on how this was important. "There is a motto that only family of the evil can stop the evil. I'm the evil's family, unfortunately. So I'm probably the only one who can stop him. Except for Princess Hayden, maybe. What is your power?"

"I can lift things without touching them. There's, like, this special force." Hayden answered without hesitation even though Sibel was a slave. Okan was thankful to her for that.

"Yeah. Okay. Then you, too, probably." Sibel nodded. She sounded hopeful.

*She's hoping that she won't have to do it all alone.* Lelani explained. Everyone nodded. Sibel narrowed her eyes at Lelani but then decided to forget it.

"Uh, we might want to hurry. Ceylon's coming for us in two minutes." Saba was biting her lip.

"Yeah, he is." Hagar nodded.

"I need to become a unicorn." Madge announced. Everyone snapped their heads around until they found Madge.

"You must be kidding me!" Padlinn, Madge's father, exclaimed.

"You, young lady, are staying right where you are!" Jaki ordered. Everyone else just stared at her in horror. What was she thinking? Madge stared at her hands, twisting them.

"Yes, Madge! Yes, you should! That's *exactly* what you should do!" Lelani suddenly agreed, nodding enthusiastically. "Hurry! Become a unicorn. Now!"

"No!" Padlinn yelled, his face turning scarlet red in fury.

"Yes!" Lelani argued, glaring at him. "If she turns into a unicorn, she can put her power and Zeus's power"—she pointed at Zeus, who was swishing her tail, irritated—"together, and they idly become stronger than Sibel." She explained, trying to hurry.

All of the adults were silent; thinking.

Okan suddenly spotted a dark smoke rising from the garden just about a mile away, and his jaw dropped. Ceylon was setting everything on fire!

"Look!" He said, pointed at the smoke.

Everyone turned their heads to look, and Jaki and Benji gasped.

"Okay! Fine! Madge, turn into a unicorn! But if you dare hurt yourself . . . !" Pedlinn warned her.

Madge smiled lightly at her father. "I'll be fine." Then she jumped off her horse and glowed until she made a blinding light, and then, quicker than the blink of an eye, she was a unicorn.

But this unicorn was golden. It had a golden mane, golden fur, golden hooves, even golden irises. Only her unicorn was clear—the color it was supposed to be. Everyone stared at her in amazement.

"She's still healing. She's gold when she's healing." Lelani explained to everyone.

Madge walked towards Zeus, and the Pegasus whinnied politely at the unicorn.

"King Zeheb! King Zeheb!" One of the messengers yelled frantically, riding up on his bay horse and pushing through to Zeheb. "King Zeheb, you have a letter." He said. Then he bowed his head politely at everyone before hurrying out of there, glancing back at the smoke with a confused expression.

Okan watched him go and then turned to his father with a questioning look in his eyes.

"Who's that from?" Lelani asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"No." Was all Zeheb said. "No, no, not now." He looked up at the sky, searching for something.

That was when Okan knew what was coming. What was going to come soon. *Very* soon.

Dread seeped through his veins, engulfing him like a blanket.

How could this happen *now*? Why did it have to be *now*?

"No," He almost growled, clutching the reins in his hands. This was terrible. Horrible. Awful.

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Benji snatched the letter from her husband. As she read it, she wailed hopelessly. Jaki and Hayden looked over her shoulder to see what the matter was. The blood drained from their faces. They knew. In a few hours it would happen.

Adayeze was coming home.