

# *Beyond the Four Kingdoms*

## **Lily**

*Have you heard the news about Snow?* Sophie's astonished exclamation broke into my mind so abruptly that I knocked over my glass. I didn't answer immediately as I scrambled to set it upright again.

*Well? Lily!* Her impatient voice intruded again.

Jon met my gaze across the breakfast table, a laugh in his. "Let me guess. Sophie?"

I nodded and rolled my eyes even as a smile tugged at my lips.

*Look what you did,* I replied silently.

In past years I would have sent her a mental image of the now orange-stained tablecloth. But we had perfected our new skill of sharing memories, so I pushed the full experience at her instead, letting her see the glass topple and the juice gobble up the previously pristine table covering.

She pushed it aside with no more than a brief apologetic sensation shoved into my mind, clearly too impatient to form the emotion into words.

*Well, have you heard?* she repeated. *I only just heard the whole story myself.*

*Yes, I had a letter waiting for me when I woke this morning. But which astonishing part in particular are you excited about? That she's Queen Blanche now? Or that she's going to marry that guard we met in Eldon. What was his name? Alexander?*

*He's a huntsman, not a guard, remember,* she interjected, but I ignored her.

*Or that she's adopting seven children. Seven!*

Sophie's laughter rang through my mind. *Take your pick. Any one of them is astonishing. And she's not adopting the children herself. Can you imagine?* I could almost see her shaking her head. *Even you aren't ready for that sort of responsibility, Lily.*

I snorted aloud and received a long-suffering look from Jon. He knew better than to badger me for details about my conversations with Sophie until we'd finished talking. Thankfully the two of us were eating alone this morning. His younger sisters were less forbearing.

*Why don't you sound more excited?* Sophie asked. *The whole story is incredible. She paused and then her projection softened, a quiet sigh brushing against my mind. Don't tell me you feel bad about the situation with her stepmother. It's not as if any of it was your responsibility, Lily.*

*I know,* I said, too quickly, before sighing as well—only out loud in my case which earned me a slightly concerned look from my husband. *I just keep thinking that we knew something was off in Eliam. It was obvious something strange was going on there when we visited Eldon for Celine's wedding, but we didn't even try to do anything about it.*

I paused and bit my lip. *And maybe if we'd tried harder during the Tourney to befriend Snow she would have reached out to us after her father died. Told us how bad things really were, asked for help..I don't know—something! And then she wouldn't have been alone for all of that.*

No. Sophie sounded brisk and firm. I liked the new confidence she wore since becoming queen of Palinar. Even when it was directed at me. *None of this is your fault, Lily. You've made a lot of progress, don't slide back into your old ways now.*

Reluctantly I chuckled. *You're right, of course. I suppose some habits of thinking are hard to lose.*

*Just remember, Snow is good friends with Hazel, but she didn't turn to her for help either, did she? Snow made her own choices and it's all worked out for the best, so no doubt she was right. And she wasn't alone. She had Alexander, and from the sound of it, her grandfather, too.*

I straightened a little in my seat, feeling some of the sad heaviness lift. Sophie was right. My middle sister-in-law Hazel and Snow had been good friends for many years. Snow would have known a welcome waited for her in Marin if she chose to seek it.

I smiled as I lifted a piece of buttered toast to my mouth. I hadn't even recognized the weight that had settled on me since reading Snow's letter before breakfast. But I should have known Sophie would help me see things differently—she had taught me the lesson in the first place.

*I'm surprised you're only hearing about it at the same time as me,* I projected as I munched away. *We had to wait for a letter, and the latest ship from Eliam only arrived last night. But surely news of such import would have warranted Snow communicating directly with you and Dominic through your royal mirrors?*

Eldon's mirror had been destroyed, and Marin—being only a duchy—had never had one, but the other four kingdoms always had the means of instant communication in reach. Now that she was queen, Snow could talk to Sophie and Dominic whenever she wished.

*Actually, I received word from the same ship you did,* Sophie replied.

*How is that possible?* I reached for a second slice of toast. *The vessel came straight to us from Eliam and is still in our harbor.*

*I know.* She sounded smug.

It took a moment for the full meaning of her words to sink in. When it did, I jumped to my feet sending my chair flying backward. The same long-suffering maid who had already attempted to clean up my spilled juice rushed to right it.

“You're here! In person! In Marin?” I cried the words aloud at the same time as I projected them toward her.

Racing from the room, I felt Jon close behind me and came to an abrupt halt. He collided into me, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close to keep both of us on our feet.

I slipped my own arms around him in return and squeezed before looking up into his face. He gazed down at me, returning my grin.

“Sophie and Dominic are here?” A slight confused crease appeared between his brows. “We didn't know they were coming, did we?”

I extracted a hand so I could smooth away the line. “No, we did not. Don't worry, you didn't forget or anything. She must have wanted to surprise me. And she did a good job of not giving it away, too.”

I pulled myself the rest of the way free and took his hand, tugging him down the hall. “Come on, we need to find her.”

*Where are you? I projected. And why didn't you tell me you and Dominic were coming to visit?*

A mirror image of my own face appeared around the corner of the corridor, and I let go of Jon's hand to run forward and throw my arms around my twin. He stood back, not attempting to intervene until the simultaneous laughing and crying had subsided.

"I keep thinking the day will come when you two will be less excited to see each other." He shook his head. "But it never will, will it?"

"Of course not!" I gave him a mock glare.

"But you live in each other's heads!"

"I know, and thank goodness for that," said Sophie. "But it still isn't the same as being together in person." She gave my shoulders a squeeze.

I peered behind her at what appeared to be a retinue of guards, maids, and ladies-in-waiting. "Where's Dominic?"

She frowned. "He's not here. It's just me, I'm afraid."

*Is everything all right?* I asked silently, conscious of the many ears around us.

*Oh, nothing like that,* she assured me quickly, understanding my concern instantly. *Dominic and I are fine. But he had to leave the capital in somewhat of a rush, and I think he didn't like to leave me alone to worry. So he told me to go visit you. He didn't have to suggest it twice.*

She smiled at me, and I saw Jon's face lighten. His eyes had been flickering between us, obviously aware that our conversation had turned silent.

"I'll tell you all about it once I've had something to eat," Sophie said aloud to us both. "You were half way through breakfast, weren't you?"

She grimaced at me. "We came by sea and berthed next to the Elamese ship first thing this morning. I refused to eat another meal on board, so I'm ravenous."

I slipped my arm through hers and led her down the corridor, making sympathetic sounds as I did so. Unlike me, my twin got seasick.

Once she had disposed of her retinue and filled her plate, Jon dismissed the remaining servants in the room. As soon as the door closed behind them, leaving the three of us alone, I turned to Sophie, remembering to speak aloud for Jon's benefit.

"Well? What's going on, Soph? Where's Dominic?"

"In the southeastern forests. I think. Unless the trail took them elsewhere. He only took a small team of guards and trackers so they could move fast."

"The trail?" Jon sounded confused but realization flooded my mind.

"Adelaide?" I looked to my sister for confirmation, and she nodded.

"We heard fresh rumors placing her down there, so Dominic left immediately."

"Well, that's good news, then," said Jon, clearly attempting to sound cheerful. "No doubt you'll be meeting Dominic's sister before you know it."

Sophie twisted a napkin between her fingers. "Except you know this is the third lot of rumors he's gone chasing this year." She glanced fleetingly at me and then back down at her fingers. "I'm—" She paused. "I'm beginning to fear we'll never find her."

When she looked back up at me, her eyes were full of tears.

I reached across the space between our chairs to hug her. "Of course you'll find her."

She's a princess with a godmother to look after her. And you and Dominic have driven the darkness from Palinar. And now Celine and Snow have driven it from Eldon and Eliam as well. We are winning."

"But exactly!" Sophie didn't look comforted. "The darkness is gone from Palinar, so if the godmothers truly were protecting her all this time, why have they not returned her?" Her voice dropped. "We don't know for sure they have been protecting her, remember. Only that their godmother told Dominic she was gone and 'no longer his concern'—whatever that means."

"None of what happened in Palinar was her fault," said Jon, strength in his voice. "From all I have heard—and now seen for myself—of the godmothers, I cannot believe they would have allowed her to come to harm after her father's crimes and her mother's tragic death."

I bit my lip and glanced between them. "Not permanent harm, anyway. Like Palinar. The kingdom suffered some unpleasantness in the short term, but it was for their own protection, and the pieces were put in place for you to free them."

She glanced up at me, and I needed neither spoken nor projected words to read the shadow in her eyes. I well remembered how close we had come to failing Palinar.

"What if the pieces aren't enough in her case," she whispered.

"Or maybe Dominic will find her this time," Jon said. "Don't give up hope yet."

Sophie took a deep, steadying breath, shaking her head slightly. "No, you're right, of course." She smiled tremulously at me. "I guess I feel the need to stay strong when I'm at home. To keep the people and Dominic from giving up hope. They all loved her so much. She must be a very special girl."

I gave her another hug. "I understand. And you don't have to be strong when you're here with us. Feel free to melt into a little puddle if you like."

"Uh, please don't," said Jon with a comical look of horror. "If you melt away while you're staying here then Dominic will come after me. And he's always terrified me."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said, looking fondly at my husband. *He's so ridiculous sometimes*, I added silently to Sophie.

*He loves you.* Warmth had returned to her face. *Just as he should.*

We shared a smile and then her earlier words flashed back through my mind.

"Dominic is down in the southeastern forests, did you say?" I asked. "Near the border with Talinos?"

"Yes, that's right." Sophie at last began to eat in earnest.

"I hear they finally withdrew their army from their border with Palinar," said Jon, sitting back in his chair.

"About time." I sighed. "Palinar has been free of the curse for a long time now, I can't imagine why they still felt it necessary to keep their forces in readiness. Dominic and Sophie were hardly about to attack them, and all the wild animals disappeared when the darkness was lifted."

Jon smiled slightly. "Well, there's caution and then there's Talinos. They've been like this for years. Surely you remember what Pearl and Opal were like during the Tourney."

"Poor things," said Sophie softly, her voice full of sympathy for the young Talinosian princesses. "I don't think I've ever met such timid girls in my life."

“They couldn’t be more different from their brother, could they?” I asked, thinking of the Talinosian crown prince whose daring bordered on foolhardiness.

“Ah, but don’t forget he was largely raised in Trione with Teddy and Millie as a ward of Uncle Edward and Aunt Juliette,” said Jon. “His younger brother Percy stayed in Talinos, and he’s almost as fearful as the girls.”

Sophie and I both turned to him with interest. “I don’t think we’ve met Prince Percy,” she said. “He would be, what? Sixteen? Seventeen?”

“About that.” He frowned thoughtfully. “He’s about the same age as Hazel and Snow. And you’re right. He hasn’t been to any of the recent weddings. And he didn’t come to the Tourney either. No doubt too scared to leave home.”

“How sad,” I said softly.

“You know, I’m sure there’s something strange about it,” Jon continued. “When we were children I never noticed anything odd about any of the Talinosians. I can’t pinpoint exactly when things changed, I guess it crept in gradually. But when Palinar fell, the whole of Talinos reacted badly, I remember that much. It’s like their fear crippled them. And in all the years of the curse they barely did a thing beside barricade the border and quake in their boots.”

“It must drive Gabe absolutely crazy,” Sophie said absentmindedly as she reached for a piece of fruit.

“Oh, definitely.” Jon chuckled, the sound dying off as an arrested look took its place.

But my mind had already reached the same thought. It was why I had brought up the border in the first place.

“Every kingdom reacted differently to the darkness that was infecting you all,” I said, jumping in. “And it seems to me that Talinos hasn’t been freed yet. If rumors are placing Adelaide in the border forests...”

Sophie sat up straight. “You think she might actually be across the border in Talinos? That might explain why we haven’t been able to find her.”

Jon glanced at me, and I grinned encouragingly.

“I think I might write my old friend Gabe a letter,” he said. “Tell him to keep an eye out. No harm in that.”

“No indeed.” Sophie bit into a shiny green apple. “No harm at all.”

“And who knows,” I said fighting down a grin, “I hear Gabe is very popular with the ladies. If she’s enchanted like Snow and needs to be freed with a kiss, Gabe would no doubt be just the man.”

I gave them both an exaggerated wink, and Sophie laughed while Jon groaned.

“If that’s how the situation plays out,” he said, “I nominate Sophie to be the one to tell Dominic. He and Gabe always clashed when we were younger.”

“Done,” said Sophie promptly. “I would be more than happy with Gabe as a brother-in-law, and I’m sure Dominic would come around to the idea.” The humor dropped slightly from her face. “If only she were safely home with us, he would be so relieved he wouldn’t mind who she chose.”

“Don’t worry, Soph,” I said, squeezing her hand. “She’s out there somewhere, and she’ll come home. We have to believe it. Just don’t lose faith.”