

You Are Not Alone

Pan'Dale Hold

Kai'Vari

Dan'Ruok, 9 Alba, 1021

Sterling held her breath, praying Engram would not find her. The blood rushing in her ears couldn't drown out the rapping of boot heels against the wood floor.

"Come out, Sterling. I know you're hiding." Engram's singsong voice was muffled by the floorboards lying inches from the tip of her nose. "If you come out and tell me what I want to know, your family would still be alive."

Sterling's jaw tightened as her anger exploded. Engram—the head of the Severon snake—had killed Hemi and everyone else at the Lady of the Vale Orphanage.

He is a monster. She bit her lip to keep from screaming the words.

Sterling squeezed her eyes shut in a desperate attempt to calm herself. When the light filtering through the floorboards suddenly dimmed, Sterling opened her eyes, only to be met with Engram's eye staring at her through the crack.

"Found you, little Devian."

"No!" Sterling yelled, jolting awake. Her breath was ragged in her chest as she sat up in bed, pressing her hand to her chest in an attempt to still her racing heart. Disoriented at first, she squinted when a beam of morning light pierced Brom's darkened room. Sterling remembered climbing into his bed in the night, seeking comfort after waking from another terrible nightmare. She fell back into the soft mattress that all but swallowed her. Brom never rejected her when she crawled beneath the warm covers and would wrap his arm around her while she shivered from the aftereffects of her nightmares.

“Brom,” Sterling said aloud, then rolled over and planted her face in the hollow of the pillow where he had lain. His scent of earth and leather filled her nostrils, sending a shiver down her spine. With his tanak-covered body, Brom was an imposing man, but Sterling found him intriguing.

Sterling had run into Brom after fleeing from Duenin across the border into Kai’Vari. Anticipation at finding her family had fueled Sterling’s escape. However, her hopes were dashed when she discovered the king of Kai’Vari had disbanded the Rin’Ovana Tohm twenty years ago after the death of her parents. He had grown impatient and angry because of the infighting over who would become the next heir. With nowhere else to go, Moira and Orrven Pan’Dale—Brom’s sister and brother-in-law—had welcomed Sterling into their home.

Sterling took another deep breath, inhaling Brom’s scent once more before rolling over onto her back. She threw the covers off and stood. The room was dark, save for a single spear of light that forced its way past the heavy curtains. She walked across the room to the window and peeled back the fabric. Below the window were the Pan’Dale training fields where Orrven presided over the warriors, who seemed to be constantly sparring. Orrven was an imposing figure who towered over his men in stature and presence. It was by his good graces that Sterling could remain at Pan’Dale.

The sparring halted when a bell rang, announcing the morning meal. Orrven’s men placed their weapons on their racks and lined up to enter the great hall. Sterling turned away and opened the door to her adjoining room. At first, she’d thought it odd that her and Brom’s rooms were connected until she learned that they were originally used by Orrven’s parents. Moira had abandoned the separate rooms for a single one for her and Orrven.

Sterling wandered into her room, the polar opposite of Brom’s. While his was dark and brooding, hers was light and airy, with pale blue walls and white trim that reminded her of the clear blue skies framed by the Isanami Mountains. Sterling took a deep breath and ran her hands through her pixie-length hair. She missed her long hair, but despite the trauma of having it hacked off by Moira’s long-time maid, Gilda, Sterling liked its low maintenance.

“Sterling?” A small, muffled voice called out from the hall.

“Come in, Lirit,” Sterling responded.

Moira’s seven-year-old daughter pushed the door open. “Momma said it’s time to eat,” Lirit said, closing the door behind her.

Sterling's heart ached as Lirit climbed onto her bed. One of the orphans murdered by Engram, Brigit, had an uncanny resemblance to Lirit. They were so similar that when she had first arrived, Sterling had mistakenly thought she was being haunted by Brigit, who, in Sterling's nightmares had blamed Sterling for her death. It had been an unfortunate coincidence when Lirit had appeared before her with a similar red stain to Brigit's blood-soaked gown. Sterling had panicked and ran away, only to be followed by Brom. She'd begged him to kill her to ease her suffering, but Brom had convinced her that it was not Brigit haunting her. Since then, Lirit had come to visit her every day.

"Did you have another bad dream?" Lirit asked.

Sterling brushed an errant curl out of Lirit's face. "It is nothing to be concerned about."

"Uncle Brom doesn't like it when you have bad dreams," Lirit said, fumbling with a ribbon on her dress.

"How do you know that?" Her curiosity was piqued at how Lirit would know the inner workings of her uncle's mind.

"He punched the wall yesterday when he came down for the morning meal." Lirit sat up on her knees and wrapped her arms around Sterling's waist. "He said he should have killed that man when he had the chance."

Sterling's breath caught in her throat as her thoughts turned to Engram. *I'll be the one to drive a stake through his black heart.* Sterling pushed the man who'd destroyed her life to the back of her mind and changed the subject. "You look pretty today."

"Uncle Brom said I'm the prettiest bug in Kai'Vari," Lirit proudly declared.

"You *are* the prettiest. Now, do you want to help me get dressed?"

"Aye!" Lirit answered as she slipped off the bed. She yanked the doors to the wardrobe open and pulled out a pair of trousers. "Why don't you wear dresses?" Lirit asked as she handed them to Sterling.

"They're uncomfortable, and my legs get all twisted up in the mounds of fabric."

"I want to wear boy clothes too," Lirit pouted.

"I doubt your momma would allow it," Sterling said, pulling her nightshirt over her head. *I had to fight to wear them myself.* Sterling thought of the disagreement she and Moira had over Sterling's choice of clothing. Moira had eventually given in, feeling guilty after the villagers of Menarik had thrown food at Sterling for being a Devian.

“Why do you have so many scars on your back?” Lirit asked.

Sterling froze as she tried to find an appropriate answer for a seven-year-old, “Some evil men did this to me.” She stepped into her short braise, adding, “Your Uncle Brom found me in the woods and brought me here.”

“Like a princess in a fairy tale.”

A princess? Hardly. Sterling scoffed to herself as she donned the supple leather trousers that fit her like a glove. The feel of the leather was like water against her skin. She pulled on a cotton undershirt and added the fitted leather vest that laced on the side. Sterling admired the well-stitched clothes in the mirror. Satisfied, she turned to leave but stopped when Lirit giggled and covered her mouth with her hand.

“Uncle Brom likes it when you wear boy clothes.”

“Did he say that to you?” Sterling laughed.

“Uh-uh.” Lirit shook her head. “I was hiding under the table when he said it, but he was alone. He said Bennet’s handiwork looked perfect on you.” Lirit’s voice deepened to mimic Brom, and Sterling laughed again. Her cheeks darkened as she examined herself in the mirror. Sterling quickly pulled on her boots before asking, “Ready to eat?”

Lirit curtsied in front of the mirror. “Yep!”

Sterling pulled the hood over her head and stepped into the hallway. Until recently, guards had been stationed outside her door. When Sterling first arrived in Pan’Dale, she was terrified and distrusted her new caretakers. To make matters worse, Gilda, a servant of Orrven’s wife Moira, had been assigned to clean her up. When Sterling had put up a fight, Gilda had reacted harshly, binding and gagging her, chopping off her hair, and locking her in a wardrobe. When she was freed, Sterling attacked Moira. Orrven had ordered guards to be on Sterling at all times to ensure nothing of the kind ever happened again. But after a month, he had finally rescinded the order.

As they descended the stairs together, the laughing and yelling of Orrven’s men in the great hall grew louder, and Sterling’s heart rate increased with each step. It had been a little over two weeks since Moira and Orrven had insisted that Sterling take her breakfast in the great hall instead of her room. Her legs stiffened, and she was unable to move.

What am I afraid of? She reached for the handle, her fingers trembling.

“I’m hungry!” Lirit declared before pushing the door open.

A chill raced down Sterling's spine, and a sheen of sweat dampened her brow. She expected the eyes of Orrven's men to turn and stare at her as they had the first time she had appeared for the morning meal. She wanted to sink into the floor, but they paid her no mind and continued to shovel food into their mouths.

"Come on, Sterling." Lirit pulled her across the hall to the table that sat atop the dais overlooking the rest of the room. "Sit next to me," she chirped as she struggled to drag the oversized chair from the table. The arl and his family sat on one side of a long table on a raised dais that overlooked the rest of the great hall.

Sterling helped Lirit pull the chair out and started to sit beside her when the glint of candlelight on metal caught her attention. She faced the enormous fireplace occupying the wall behind the arl's table. Mounted on a broad beam was her father's Veillen bloodsword, Faren. Until recently, the black sword had been swathed in fabric and hidden in Brom's wardrobe. Sterling had found it by mistake when she'd tripped over her skirts and fallen into the wardrobe, knocking the sword onto the floor. When she picked up the blade, she proved she was a Rin'Ovana. A Veillen's sword could only be wielded by those of the same bloodline. When Brom had reached for the hilt, the sword rejected him with sharp, red spikes, but when Sterling handled it, her father's memories flooded her mind. She saw her mother before Sterling was born.

"It looks lovely mounted there, doesn't it?" Sterling jumped when Moira appeared beside her. "Orrven suggested we mount it there." Moira smiled gently up at the sword.

Sterling couldn't help the pang of jealousy that tightened in her chest. Raised by Sterling's parents, Brom and Moira knew more of her father than Sterling ever would. She longed for the same connection, but her parents had been killed by a graekull on the day of her birth.

"Come sit. Breakfast is served." Moira took her place next to Orrven.

Sterling's stomach growled when platters of food were placed on the long table. The smell of meat, toast and scrambled eggs caused her mouth to water. Enticed by the aroma of breakfast, Sterling quickly sat, piled her plate with sausages and fluffy scrambled eggs, and gobbled them down, only pausing for a moment to take a sip of water. She started to wipe the food away with the back of her hand but stopped when Moira leaned forward and cleared her throat. Sterling picked up the napkin next to her plate and wiped her mouth.

Moira shook her head and asked, "Did Hemi ever teach you any manners?"

Images of Hemi entered Sterling's mind. As an ex-soldier, he was gruff and abrupt in most things, and Sterling tended to pick up on his bad habits. Memories of his failed attempts made her chuckle. "He tried," Sterling responded around another bite of eggs.

"I see he needed to try harder," Moira remarked.

"Who needed to try harder?"

"Uncle Brom!" Lirit squealed when Brom sat beside her.

"Good morning, little bug." Brom ruffled Lirit's brown hair. Then, looking over Lirit's head, he said, "Good morning, Sterling."

Sterling felt her cheeks blush at Brom's attention. "Good morning, Brom."

"Where are your students this morning?" Orrven, who sat next to Brom, asked.

"I left them arguing in the barracks," Brom said, taking a sip of a'kel one of the maids placed in front of him.

"A little early for a'kel, isn't it?" Orrven asked.

"It dulls the pain of dealing with those three," Brom responded.

As if on cue, the three boys in question walked through the front doors of the keep laughing about something. Tibal, Gavin, and Oramek—Brom's Veillen students—were fifteen years old and had an odd mix of personalities. When Sterling had first crossed the border in her escape from Duenin, she'd tried to take Gavin hostage to protect herself. Little had she known that he was the second prince of Kai'Vari. He'd never held that against her. He was an inquisitive boy and had bombarded her with questions since she came to Kai'Vari. He exhausted her. She'd met Oramek and Tibal shortly after being brought to Pan'Dale Hold. Oramek had been quiet and was eager to learn from Brom. He listened and rarely spoke unless he had something important to say. Tibal, on the other hand, had taken delight in revealing to her that her Tohm, the Rin'Ovanas, had been disbanded. Sterling didn't care for Tibal and often fought the urge to punch him.

Orrven said, placing his fork down next to his plate. "You sound as if you dislike your students."

"Not so much dislike." Brom sighed. "They wear on my patience."

"Oh, look," Tibal said in an exaggerated voice, "it's the Devian Rin Brom picked up off the side of the road. Twice cursed, that one."

"Tibal, come here." Brom's voice was icy cold as he called to his student. Tibal smirked as he approached the dais, sneering at Sterling before looking at Brom. "Must I tell you again to

be respectful? If you don't rid yourself of that arrogance, you will be going back to Berk's farm to plow another field—this time alone.”

Tibal's smile disappeared as he glanced at Sterling before saying, “Aye, tarkain.”

“Go sit with the others and eat.” Brom waved the boy away.

Having been raised away from Kai'Vari, Sterling didn't understand the culture yet but had learned that using just the prefix or suffix of one's Tohm name was an insult. Tibal had called her a Rin the first time they'd met.

The room had gone silent during the exchange. All eyes watched Tibal as he returned, sulking, to where Oramek and Gavin were waiting. Gavin punched Tibal lightly in the shoulder before saying something Sterling could not hear.

“Uncle Brom.” Lirit pulled on Brom's arm.

“What is it, bug?” Brom asked.

“What is wrong with being a Devian?” Lirit's question was full of curiosity.

“There is nothing wrong with her being a Devian,” Brom said, loud enough for everyone to hear. “In fact, we are privileged to be in her presence.”

Sterling flinched at the attention directed toward her. The warriors in the great hall stared at Sterling as if waiting for her to perform some miracle. She pulled her hood farther over her face to hide her embarrassment and tried to make herself smaller so the men would forget she was there.

“Sterling, where are the other Devians?” Lirit asked.

The question caught Sterling by surprise. “Lirit's right,” she said, looking at Brom. “I haven't seen any other Devians around. I'd like to talk to someone about my mother's people and learn more about controlling my powers.”

“Good luck finding another Devian,” Orrven said, leaning past Brom to respond to Sterling.

“What do you mean?” Sterling asked.

“After Wrenkin's attack on Fin'Varrar, there were plenty of Devians to be found. However, with the Severon hunting them and Kai'Varians smuggling them across the border for rewards, Devians started to disappear. The last Devian I recall seeing was your mother.”

Sterling's world seemed to tilt on its side at Orrven's words. Bitterness filled her mouth, and her heart pounded in her ears. Her father's family had been disbanded, and her mother's people were nowhere to be found. Sterling had settled in Kai'Vari full of hope in starting a new life; now, the hope she had held close to her chest was being torn away.

“Sterling, you are not alone,” Brom said softly.

“Brom is absolutely correct,” Moira stated as she pushed away from the table and came to stand behind Sterling. “You’re not alone; you have all of us.” Moira put her hand on Sterling’s shoulder and leaned over so no one else could hear. “The Rin’Ovanas aren’t gone completely. They are just spread out. If we petition King Norden, perhaps he’ll reconsider the ban now that you’ve returned.”

“Perhaps,” she said before returning to her meal. A glimmer of hope sparked anew in her chest as she thought about her family and one day meeting them. Bennet, the tailor, was formerly a Rin’Ovana. He took the Pan’Dale name after the dissolution of their Tohm, but he had mentioned having the Rin’Ovanas written back into the Book of Tohms.

“Is it difficult to add a Tohm back to the book?” Sterling asked.

“It’s hard to say,” Orrven said, rubbing his chin. “There have been many Tohms stricken from the book over the centuries, and most were because they were absorbed by larger Tohms. I cannot think of an instance where a Tohm was disbanded for the same circumstances as the Rin’Ovanas.”

“Great,” Sterling said, unable to hide her disappointment.

“Let’s not worry about that right now,” Moira said, tapping Sterling on the shoulder. “Sterling, would you like to help me in the garden?”

“I would love to,” Sterling said eagerly. She was tired of being cooped up in her room.

“I’m going too!” Lirit declared, jumping up from the table.

“Nope.” Moira stopped Lirit with a hand on her head. “The tutor is waiting to give you lessons in the library.”

“But Momma.” Lirit moaned her displeasure.

“The sooner you finish your lessons, the sooner you can join us,” Sterling said without thinking.

“Okay!” Lirit hurried off toward the library.

“Why doesn’t she do that for me?” Moira laughed as Lirit disappeared. “Come along.” Moira led Sterling toward a door in the back of the room that led to the kitchens.

Harvest

Pan'Dale Hold

Kai'Vari

Dan'Ruok, 9 Alba, 1021

“I must apologize for speaking out of turn with Lirit.” Sterling stopped Moira. “I would often say the same thing to the girls at the orphanage.”

“No need to apologize. It works, so I may need to steal it from you.” Moira continued into the kitchen. The room was enormous and befitted a castle of Pan'Dale's size. Four fireplaces lined the wall with spits and cauldrons set aside for the cooks. Baskets piled high with potatoes and other root vegetables stood in the corner. The room's center was occupied by a large table laden with wooden bowls filled with ingredients. It was a symphony of organized chaos as the kitchen staff prepared for the day. Sterling and Moira stood there momentarily before everyone was aware of their presence. The chattering slowly stopped until they were all staring at Sterling. Moira cleared her throat. “Is there a problem?”

A young girl stepped forward, her face blazing. Sterling was unsure if it was from the kitchen's heat or embarrassment. “We heard you like peaches,” she said, holding out a small plate

with a hot pastry on display. “We made this peach pie for you this morning. We wanted to apologize for what happened in Menarik and for you to feel welcome here at Pan’Dale.”

Unsure of what to do, Sterling glanced at Moira. “Well,” Moira said, smiling, “go on and take it.”

Sterling took the proffered pastry, “Th– thank you,” she managed past the lump in her throat. She raised the pie to her lips, and the sweet smell of peaches tickled her nose. She took a small bite and couldn’t help but sigh at the fruit’s delicate flavor. “It’s delicious,” Sterling said to the men and women staring at her with smiles.

“That was very nice of you all,” Moira said to the kitchen staff.

Sterling gobbled down the rest of the pastry and handed the plate back. The maid took it and returned to the side of the older woman who appeared to be leading the chaos.

“Come along, Sterling,” Moira said, picking up two baskets from a stack in the corner. “Vita,” Moira said to the head cook, “we’ll be in the garden if you need anything.”

“Very well, milady,” Vita said before ushering everyone back to work.

“I told you they would come around,” Moira said as Sterling followed her out of the kitchen door and into the bright morning sunshine.

“Only because your husband threatened to banish them if they didn’t.”

“Pssh!” Moira waved her hand. “Do you actually think they listen to my husband?”

“It would be snowing back at the orphanage by now,” Sterling said, changing the topic as she stared at the clear blue sky.

“I’ve never seen snow,” Moira said. “I think it would be lovely.”

“It’s miserable. I prefer this weather to the harsh winters of northern Duenin.” Sterling never liked the cold temperatures growing up. She wondered if it was because she was from Kai’Vari, where the weather was warmer.

They continued around the corner to where a garden was laid out in neat rows. A pang of nostalgia crept into Sterling’s chest as she surveyed Moira’s garden.

“Here.” Moira handed Sterling one of the large baskets and a well-worn knife. “We have quite the variety,” Moira said, pointing to the different rows. “There is cauliflower, parsnips, leeks, squash, and brussels sprouts.”

“Hemi hated brussels sprouts,” Sterling said absently.

“I’ve tried to get Orrven to eat them, but he refuses. Sometimes he’s more of a child than Lirit!” Moira quipped. She pointed to a row of leafy greens poking out of the raised soil. “I’ll take care of the cauliflower if you want to do the parsnips.”

Sterling headed toward the row of parsnips, pulled the long white vegetables from the soil, and shook the dirt from the roots before placing them in the waiting basket. She missed the everyday chores of a simple life, the routine of feeding the horses and chickens, the barn’s aroma, and the cows’ low mooing.

I wonder what became of Barda. Sterling thought of the milk cow who used to torment her.

“I find tending the garden relaxing.” Moira kneeled next to a row of cauliflower, pulling a small blade from a sheath at her waist. Intricate metalwork was interlaid into the bone of the hilt. Moira must have noticed Sterling’s attention on the knife. “Orrven gave this to me on our wedding day.”

“It’s beautiful,” Sterling said, recognizing the blade Moira had worn on her waist when the arless and arl had found Sterling bound and gagged in the wardrobe. When Moira released Sterling’s bonds, she had taken the knife and threatened Moira. Sterling pushed the mishap to the back of her mind and continued pulling parsnips from the softened earth. The work was tedious, and her back ached from leaning over the rows of vegetables.

“You’ve done this before,” Moira commented on Sterling’s deft hands.

“I helped the sisters tend the garden at the orphanage.” Sterling stood and propped the heavy basket on her hip. “It wasn’t unlike this garden,” she added, moving to a row of leeks. The pungent aroma tickled Sterling’s nose.

“You loved them very much, didn’t you?” Moira’s question caught Sterling off guard.

“Yes, I loved all of them,” Sterling responded, her chest tightening at the memories of the girls and Mother Anwell. The two fell into a comfortable silence while harvesting more of the winter garden. “My father’s sword looks good mounted over the fireplace.” The words were out before Sterling realized it.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Moira agreed. “I was only four and Brom six when our parents were killed. King Norden, our uncle, was devastated and would often take his grief and anger out on Brom. We lived in Sela’Char, the capital, for over a year before Khort took us away.”

Sterling paused before slicing into the next leek. “What were they like?”

“Sylvie was kind and loved Brom and me,” Moira explained. “She always had this stillness about her that could calm the wildest beasts.” Moira grew somber when she spoke of Sterling’s father. “Khort was larger than life, stern and tough on Brom, but he cared for us and loved your mother dearly.” Moira’s words trailed off, but a sad smile remained.

They were quiet for a while—the usual sounds of tending the garden occupied the silence between them. Sterling continued to think about Moira’s words and wondered what her life would have been like had her parents not died.

As if reading Sterling’s thoughts, Moira said, “The day your parents died, Brom was one of the first to find them.” Moira moved to the next row of vegetables and began pulling radishes from the soft earth. “Hemi was also there, but he disappeared, as did you.” After a moment, she said, “I remember Hemi as a harsh taskmaster; what was he like with you?”

“He was a stoic hero who watched over the girls like a big bear,” Sterling said, remembering Hemi’s broad back that cast a protective shadow over the orphanage. “He was my rock and constantly tested and trained me to defend myself. I was a bit of a troublemaker, and Hemi never put up with any of my antics.”

“I can’t imagine,” Moira said, her words dripping with sarcasm.

“It’s true,” Sterling said. Sterling found herself relaying stories from her childhood. There was one in particular where she’d punched a girl in the nose when Sterling was fed up with her constant bullying.

“What did Hemi do?” Moira asked.

“He tanned my rear so bad, I couldn’t sit down for almost a week,” Sterling said, causing Moira to laugh loudly.

“Moraug’s blue balls,” Moira hissed.

Sterling looked up in surprise at Moira’s curse. “What happened,” Sterling asked, standing to help the arless.

“I cut myself,” Moira said, wincing as she put pressure against the cut on her hand, but blood continued to seep from the wound, staining her yellow dress. Moira stood but wobbled on her feet and reached out for Sterling.

“Are you all right?” Sterling asked, steadying Moira.

“I’m feeling a bit faint.” Moira’s eyes rolled back as she collapsed.

“Moira!” Sterling eased her to the ground. *Damn it*, Sterling cursed silently. She looked around but saw no one to help. Then the distant clank of metal on metal made its way past the pounding in her ears. “Orrven,” she said to herself and jumped up and ran toward the training fields.

3

The Arl’s Edict

Pan’Dale Hold

Kai’Vari

Dan’Ruok, 9 Alba, 1021

“Have you seen the new Veillen?” Percio asked as he and Huxley walked from the archery range toward the main training field.

“They seem weaker than others Brom has trained,” Huxley responded.

“Well, if anyone can get them in shape, it’s Brom.”

“Who is that?” Huxley stopped when a girl ran out of the garden. “Isn’t that the Devian who took the prince hostage?”

“What’s she up to?” Percio hurried his steps and looked over the fence into the garden. His heart stopped when he noticed the arless lying in the middle of the rows of vegetables with her dress stained with blood. “Stop her!” he yelled at Huxley as he hurried into the garden to check on the arless. Thankfully, she was still breathing.

Leaving the arless, Percio chased after Huxley and could see he'd pinned the girl to the ground. "Get off me," the Devian yelled before bucking Huxley off to the side. She scrambled to her feet and continued her escape.

"Stop running, Devian!" Percio called, giving chase, but Huxley was already on her heels. When Huxley caught up, she kicked him in the knee, causing his leg to bend at an odd angle.

He collapsed, screaming and holding his leg. "She broke my leg!"

Her attack on Huxley slowed her escape, allowing Percio to catch up and grab her by the arm, pulling her to the ground. "You're not going anywhere." Percio held her firmly. "Are you all right?" Percio asked Huxley.

"Ogan's flames, it hurts!" Huxley moaned.

"Moira, she's—"

"What in Orla's name is going on?" Orrven shouted, cutting off the Devian's excuse. "I could hear you yelling from the training grounds." The arl scanned the scene, his eyes moving from Percio to Huxley, then stopping on the girl who lay under Percio.

"She attacked the arless!" Huxley said from where he still lay, clutching his knee.

"I did no such thing!" the Devian glared at Huxley, pulling herself free from Percio's grasp. "She cut—"

"You be quiet," Percio said, grabbing her by the arm again and yanking her to her feet. "We saw her fleeing the garden where we found the arless unconscious and bleeding." Orrven looked at the girl and then ran toward the garden, leaving Percio to watch over the prisoner.

"Let me go," she said as she tried to pull free of Percio's hold. She was fierce for someone of her small size. "I didn't do anything."

"The arl and arless gave you refuge, and this is the thanks you give them?" Percio was not shocked that a Devian had betrayed the Pan'Dales.

"I didn't do anything." She growled and stomped on his foot with the heel of her boot. Pain shot up Percio's leg, and she pulled free from his grasp. Angered that she had gotten the better of him, Percio charged and launched himself at her. They fell to the ground with an *oomph*. Percio held her down by pressing his knee into her back and wrapped his hand around one of her wrists, bringing it up behind her back.

"Get off," she shouted.

“There is no way I’m letting you go,” Percio said, then he found himself tumbling backward, the ground above and the sky below. When he finally stopped rolling, his vision blurred, and his brain felt like it was in a fog. Percio turned his head, squinted, and found Brom leaning over the girl.

“Sterling, are you all right?” Brom asked. “Are you hurt?”

“She—” Percio righted himself, “she attacked the arless!”

Sterling turned over, coughing. “That is a lie,” she said. “You didn’t let me explain.” Brom helped her sit up and shot a look at Percio that he felt to his core.

“Orrven, you stubborn man, put me down. I can walk on my own.”

Percio stood when Orrven emerged from the garden carrying the arless.

“Be still, woman.” The arl sounded angry as he walked toward them. Percio gathered his wits and stood at attention, awaiting his arl’s orders. Orrven glanced first at Percio and then at Huxley, who was still on the ground holding his knee.

“Sir,” Percio said, swallowing his nerves when the arl raised his eyebrow, “we saw the Devian running from the garden and found the arless unconscious. We thought she attacked her.”

“You did well to protect your arless.” Orrven glanced at Sterling, who had finally gotten back to her feet. “Do you think so little of your arl that I would invite someone dangerous into my home?”

“No, sir.”

“In the future, I suggest you have more faith in my decision and exercise more caution before tackling a woman nearly half your size.” After scolding Percio, the arl turned his attention to Huxley. “Take him to the barracks and have that knee looked at, then come to my office. I want a report on what happened from the both of you.” Percio noticed the pointed look Arl Orrven threw at the Devian.

“As you command, arl.” *Does the arl have any idea how strong this girl is?* Percio thought, giving a side glance at the woman in question. “Come on,” Percio said, helping Huxley stand and start toward the barracks.

Percio felt a small amount of guilt for mistreating the Devian. Still, if the arless’ life were in danger, he’d do anything to protect her.

Sterling's heart pounded in her chest as Orrven paced back and forth behind his massive oak desk while mumbling to himself. *He will throw me out*, Sterling thought. She could tell he was upset that Moira was injured, but it was not as severe as she had first thought. Moira stood beside Orrven's desk, watching him. Sterling sat in one of the two leather chairs that faced Orrven's desk while Brom and Percio stood against the wall off to the side. Sterling glared at Percio, and he shifted uncomfortably when their eyes met. She wanted to kick him in the shin for shoving his knee into her back.

"Husband," Moira said, her hands on her hips, "would you please stop pacing and get on with what you have to say?"

Orrven paused and looked at Moira, then grunted in response.

"Don't grunt at me." Moira poked Orrven in the arm. "Give your wife a proper answer."

When Orrven glared at Sterling, she expected him to berate her, but instead, he said, "It is best if I do not respond at this moment for fear I may hurt your tender feelings."

"Why are you so upset with Sterling?" Moira questioned Orrven. "It was my careless mistake that started this whole mess. Sterling was just trying to get help. Percio and Huxley mistook her urgency for trying to escape."

"Aye, I suppose you are correct, dear," Orrven said as he addressed Percio. "Your intuition was spot on. Had the threat been real, and Moira attacked, the situation would have been resolved quickly."

"Thank you, my arl." Percio bowed. When he stood upright, he said to Sterling, "My apologies for my rough handling of you. I hope you are not injured."

Sterling acknowledged his apology with a shake of her head.

"You are dismissed," Orrven said to Percio.

He bowed again and left, closing the door behind him.

When Orrven came to stand in front of Sterling, she felt like a bug under a boot. "It is good that you are not hurt; otherwise, I'd have Brom's anger to contend with." Orrven turned away and rounded the desk to sit in his oversized chair. "Still, I have to ask myself how trouble finds you so easily." Orrven leaned forward, placing his elbows on the desk and steepling his fingers. "Do you know that the Severon have not stepped foot into Kai'Vari in over fifty years? Now that you are

here, I have a small army of them stalking the border, trying to find a way to take you back. I have a servant who is practically insane with grief,” he said of Gilda, Moira and Brom’s lifelong maid, “and now I have a man with a broken leg.”

“You’re blaming all that on me?” Sterling asked in disbelief.

“Orrven, dear,” Moira stepped forward, “you surely cannot blame Sterling for this. She is innocent.”

“She always is, isn’t she?” Orrven sighed, then leaned back in his chair. “No, I do not blame her. However, I cannot just let her run freely about the keep. If I let her loose, there is no telling what other misunderstandings may arise.”

Brom, who stood silently with his arms crossed, shifted. “What are you proposing then? You cannot think of keeping her locked in her room all day.”

“I should lock her up in the dungeon,” Orrven mumbled.

Sterling felt the blood drain from her face at the thought of being locked away alone in the dark again.

“Orrven Cathal Rian Pan’Dale!” Moira scolded Orrven. “How could you even think such a thing?”

“Relax, woman! Even I’m not that cruel.” Orrven looked at Sterling and sighed. “I see my ill-conceived humor has upset you. You have my apologies.”

Sterling breathed a sigh of relief, thankful she was surrounded by caring people. Despite her momentary shock, she could not help but smile when Orrven said, “Don’t ever use my full name again, wife.”

“Only if you don’t do anything stupid, husband,” Moira said.

“Throwing you in the dungeon would be too cruel a punishment and make me no better than the Severon,” Orrven said.

Sterling glanced at Brom and found him staring at the ground, a smile touching the corner of his lip as he listened to Orrven and Moira bicker with one another.

“Orrven, you have a terrible sense of humor,” Brom said. “I would suggest that, in the future, you squelch any humorous thought that niggles its way into that head of yours.”

“You’re one to talk.” Orrven turned from Moira and pointed a finger at Brom. “You’re about as funny as a rock. You don’t think I have a sense of humor; well, here is something I’m sure you’ll find hilarious. From now on, this one,” Orrven pointed at Sterling, “will be joined with

you at the hip. You brought her to Pan'Dale. She is your responsibility." Orrven turned his attention to Sterling. "When you're not in your room, you must remain by Brom's side. Is that clear?"

Sterling's heart rate doubled. She was excited that she would no longer be confined to her room, plus she would get to stay by Brom. "Yes, it is very clear," Sterling said, standing up and nodding. She glanced at Brom, and her excitement waned at the expression on his face.

"Orrven." Brom's voice was deep and held no patience. He did not look at Sterling when he said, "I am here to train my students before we leave for Var'Khundi, and I cannot keep watch over Sterling while training them."

"Not my problem." Orrven waved a dismissive hand at Brom.

Sterling sat back down, her mood plummeting at Brom's dismissal.

Moira came to stand beside her and whispered, "Don't worry, dear." She stepped forward, clearing her throat. "It is no matter, brother. Just train Sterling. We already know Hemi gave her some lessons with the blade. Why not continue where he left off?" Moira brushed her hands together and said, "Problem solved."

Orrven and Brom looked at one another and said in unison, "Problem solved?"

"Come along, Sterling." Moira linked her arm with Sterling's and pulled her out the door. Moira's face was red as she let go of Sterling's arm and covered her mouth to shield her laughter. "Did you see the looks on their faces?"

Sterling could not help herself and laughed right along with Moira. "You have them wrapped around your finger, don't you?"

"Shh." Moira held her finger in front of her lips. "They'll hear you, and then all the magic will be gone."

Sterling covered her mouth in response.

"Let's go to the bathing chamber; we could both use a good soak." Moira pulled Sterling toward the lower chambers of Pan'Dale.

"Did we just get played?" Brom asked his brother-in-law. His head was still spinning after falling victim to Moira.

“She’s your sister; you know how she is.” Orrven sighed. “She bests me at every turn, no matter what I do.” Orrven cleared his throat. “She does have a point, though. You should continue Sterling’s training while working with your students.”

Brom rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Having her underfoot will hinder the nors’ training. I don’t mind training her, but Gavin, Tibal, and Oramek come first. We’re already delayed because Streegar left for Var’Khundi for reinforcements.”

“I understand, but I also have warriors to train.” Orrven flipped through a stack of papers on his desk. “Not to mention an army of Severon sitting across the border trying their damndest to sneak across. I’ll give it to you straight, Brom; you either watch over her, or I’ll have no choice but to send her to Sela’Char and let King Norden deal with her.”

Sending her to the capital was the last thing Brom wanted. Being a Rin’Ovana made her a target, but the fact that she was the heir made it even worse. Either she would lose the Rin’Ovana name and be handed over to one of the three Tohms the disbanded Rin’Ovanas had been forced to relocate to, or the Rin’Ovana Tohm would be reinstated. The Ar’Bethnots would do anything to stop that from happening, or else they would lose their power as one of the largest and most influential Tohms

Brom sighed. “No, we can’t send her to the capital. I’ll keep an eye on her.”
“Good choice,” Orrven said.