

The Crownless King

Kara Linaburg



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*To each person fighting the voices in their head. May this book echo our battles, and may it remind us
that we are never fighting alone.
You are stronger than you think.*

*And to Amber. You will never know how much your support meant to me when you read “The Broken
Prince” and believed in my writing.*

List of Main Characters

Derek—Son of Varsha and Knight of Norcir

Enid—Sorceress and dark Gifted who was killed by Elston after she attempted to end Milosh's life

Elston—Possessed the Gifting to make stories come alive and brother to Nick and Noll. He died saving Serena

Hunter—Friend to Milosh, brother to Serena, and guardian of Sindaleer

Milosh—King of Sindaleer. Once on the side of his father, he now strives to rebuild Sindaleer up from the ashes

Nick—Guardian over Sindaleer, brother to Noll and Elston

Noll—Younger brother to Nick and Elston, guardian over Sindaleer

Serena—Possesses the Gift of fire, elder sister to Hunter, and the lass who holds Milosh's heart

Sabriel—Knight of Norcir, warrior, Marked, and Gifted

Thayer—Former hated king of Sindaleer who took over twenty years prior

Tirich—Leader of the Knights of Norcir

Varsha—Knight of Norcir, father to Derek

Prologue

“Why did you abandon me?”

“Because I knew I needed to make my choice.”

“What choice was that?”

“To choose between the lesser of two evils.” She gazed into the face of her captor, his dark eyes probing deep into her soul, seeking to devour her sanity.

“You realize the consequences of your actions, do you not?”

Her hands curled into fists so tightly her knuckles popped. “Death.”

“You speak as though the idea holds little power.”

“I do not fear death, only the pain of it.”

Admiration flickered in his brown eyes. “Few maidens could say the same.”

“Few maidens have experienced death as closely as I.” She wanted to close her eyes from the moment, vanish to a time where beauty collided with her world and the black stood far away. “I have seen the darkness. I fear nothing but the pain now, and even that will not stop me.”

“You had a place with us. You should not have left.”

“I was a puppet to your lusts for power.”

“You were my warrior.”

“I was an assassin.”

“I was fair to you.”

“You were never fair.”

Her captor rose, pain rising in his eyes. “You betrayed us—all of us.”

His voice held heartfelt emotion that she longed to believe.

But she had played his game long enough. She knew his intentions and the thoughts of his heart. He would have the folk eat his words without question, digest them, and allow them to consume their sanity. The Manipulator spoke and they believed his poison.

And she prepared for death to swallow the breath from her lungs.



Sindaleer, near the capital of Bron

When she was a lass, her refuge had been the hills and caves behind her village. Those high places, near the mountains, where the wind blew her red hair free and the sunshine turned her skin brown. She would scale the rock walls, climbing higher and higher until she felt sure she could taste freedom.

Freedom from the king who had stolen everything from her folk, who forced lads to become soldiers. Freedom from her Marked wrists, those Xs marring her skin because Giftings such as hers were illegal.

She could not help being ten summers and able to do things most lads and lasses never could. Mam called her “special like Da,” but Sabriel just felt different. She possessed her Mam’s foreign freckles, the hair like a red sunset, and eyes green like the sea, the marks of a lass not native to Sindaleer. However, it was the Gift that flowed through her body, passed on to her from Da, that made her every bit an outcast. The village children, afraid to befriend her, teased and ignored her.

Every one of them except Nick.

Nick, the skinny, brown-skinned lad in her village, who didn’t care that she could talk to animals or that tattoos tainted her wrists, the Marks speaking without words that she was not accepted in Sindaleer. He followed her into the hills in the early mornings when dew glistened on the flowers and tall grasses, their mutts chasing at their heels as they ran for the mountains. There they could be themselves—friends.

And Sabriel had never had a friend before.

Many times the two would be gone all day, and Nick’s elder brother would come for them with his youngest brother Noll, calling their names into the wind. Sometimes Nick and Sabriel would hear, but other times they wandered too far. Then Elston would hike wee Noll on his shoulders, and darkness would fall before the lad and lass could be found and dragged home.

Today was one of those days.

Sabriel loved talking with Elston, who was three and ten summers. Elston too bore the Marks on his skin, and his Gift fascinated her young mind.

He could make stories come alive.

Elston and Noll had found the two sitting on the edge of a cliff overlooking their village of Dabria. Dirt and grime was caked under Sabriel’s nails, her knuckles scraped and bleeding. They had climbed higher today, but she felt every moment worth the pain.

“Lad and lass, time to go home. You’ll find no food in the pots for your empty bellies after climbing so far,” Elston admonished. He swung Noll off his shoulders and pulled Nick to his feet from where he sat over the edge. “Come, you two.”

“Wait. The sun is about to go down.”

Elston sighed. “Sabriel, come on. The dogs have already returned. You know your Mam and Da are going to be sick with worry.”

“They care not.” Sabriel shrugged her thin shoulders. “They know I’m safer up here than down in the village anyway.” She knew he would understand; he always did. “Tell us a story before we go back.” Sabriel tucked her bare feet underneath her deerskin skirt, the last rays of sun warming her seat on the large rock.

Nick rolled his eyes. “Nay, let’s just go back. Elston never tells us good ones of battles and glory. They’re only for lasses like you.”

Elston ruffled his brother’s short brown hair. “Oi, you like my stories, little brother.”

“Aye, a story!” Noll joined with Sabriel.

Elston’s stories remained forbidden in the village of Dabria upon punishment of death. King Thayer feared any folk with special Giftings—feared his power being taken from his iron fist. However, Sabriel found the idea silly. Talking to animals and making stories come alive seemed like harmless pastimes. How could they crumble a kingdom?

Elston glanced between his brothers and Sabriel. “Fine,” he said. “One story and then we *have* to go home.” Noll plopped down beside Sabriel, his soft hair brushing against her arm as he leaned his head against her.

The setting sun began to dip behind the Northern Mountains, the shadows claiming the space once occupied by the light. A white eagle flew overhead, swooping lower towards the stream full of fish below the cliffs.

“A long time ago,” Elston began, “Before our das and mams were born, a lass wished to find her purpose because her Gift was small and the world an evil place. She could only make Light, and light could not do much. She could do nothing but shine light, and that felt very small while her country was at war.”

The sounds of battle and death and rage and pain echoed in the still of dusk. Sabriel closed her eyes, her heartbeat thudding in her chest.

“The folk never realized that her light was pure and no darkness could touch it... her light could heal,” Elston said. “And they didn’t realize that the lass could penetrate the darkest of hearts, if only they let her in.” A white ball of light floated before the children, glistening in the dusk.

Noll reached out his hand, the glow illuminating his skin. “It’s warm,” he whispered to Sabriel.

“And one night,” Elston said. “The evil lords of the land tore through the village and drove her and the folk away, leaving the lass Ardara an outcast, poor and alone in a cold forest with no folk around her.” White powder cold to the touch fell around Sabriel, melting as they landed on her open palm. Snowflakes.

“And she began a battle for good, to heal the land with her light, the end.” Sarcasm and jest bit Nick’s words. “As I thought, a boring tale, brother.”

Elston sent Nick a look of warning. “And the lady passed on to legend, and she lives in the memory of the Marked and Gifted as they wait for good to win again.” He gave a grand bow before swinging Noll onto his shoulders. “A tale that is as exciting and brilliant as any, little brother. Come on lads...and lass,” he smiled down at Sabriel. “You’ve had one of my rousing tales. Let us head back to the village before they send a party out for us.”

Noll bounced up and down as Elston walked. “Tell us one about dragons.”

Nick sighed loudly beside Sabriel. “We’ve heard that one too many times.”

“Nay.” Sabriel shot Nick a dirty look. “I want to hear about the dragon. Tell us, Elston.”

Elston smiled. "Alrighty." He paused, picking his way carefully down the rocks, balancing Noll as he walked. "Years ago, a mountain man was said to have been in these very mountains here in Sindaleer where a dragon roamed."

"A dragon?" Sabriel slid in the gravel, grabbing a hold of a small trunk for support. "Here?"
"Here."

Sabriel felt the heat of fire fan her face and a low growl surrounded the four. She shivered in the dusk, gazing around before remembering Elston's power to make stories come alive.

"Yes, a dragon with scales like a fish and hard as rocks, and breath like the bonfires. The mountain man nearly ran in fear when he saw the dragon, until he realized the dragon was just a wee thing hatched from an egg. The size of a horse, it was still quite small for its kind."

"The mountain man trained the dragon, didn't he?" Noll interrupted.

"Aye lad," Elston laughed. "He trained the dragon, naming him Draco, and they became friends. However, he knew the folk wouldn't trust Draco, even though the dragon wouldn't harm the village, so he kept the dragon a secret, hiding him deep in the caves of the Northern Mountains, near the cliffs where no one would roam."

"Except us," Sabriel added.

"Except you. And one day, the mountain man realized that the folk were getting too close to his dragon who, by this time, had grown too big to hide, and he released Draco, sending him away so he wouldn't be killed." A flap of wings surrounded Sabriel, louder and louder before fading into nothing.

They became quiet as they walked, the sun sinking deeper in the sky, fading behind pink clouds. Sabriel's muscles strained as she slid along the steep terrain, and no one spoke as they climbed down from the cliffs. At the bottom, as the village came into view and she could hear the mutts barking, Sabriel turned to Elston. "Do you think I could talk to the dragon?"

Noll begged to be put on the ground, and scampered off, he and Nick disappearing around the huts and cottages. Elston gazed down at her, his eyes sparkling. "Aye, I think so. Dragons are animals. Would you want to talk to a dragon, Sabby?"

"Mayhap...I wouldn't mind a dragon for a friend. I think we might get along."

"Nick not good enough for you?" Elston teased, ruffling her hair and continuing towards home.

Yet the story of the dragon remained in the back of her mind, haunting her, returning in her dreams. Sometimes when horses would go missing from the fields, or when mystic smoke rose from the mountain, she pretended the dragon of myth was near.

And in the days that followed, when she climbed barefoot onto the cliffs, perched on top of the world with the wildlands below her, she would spread her arms and pretend she could fly.

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As night fell, Sabriel lay on her cot, watching the flames flicker in the circular fireplace in the one room cottage. Her mutt, Charcoal, lay with her back against Sabriel, the creature's black fur tickling Sabriel's nose. Weariness tugged at her eyelids, but sleep continued to evade her.

Charcoal, come.

Slipping like a wraith past Mam and Da snoring in the opposite corner of their cottage, she pulled back the cloth hanging in front of the door. Into the cold of night she went, bare feet slipping in the wet grass.

The village slept in a heavy quiet. Evading the guards of the village, Sabriel knew where she

wanted to go. Digging her hands deeper into Charcoal's fur, they stopped in front of a small thatched cottage. Raising up on tiptoe at the window, she gazed in.

Nick lay on the floor, surrounded by his six brothers and sisters and their Mam and Da. They looked peaceful.

Like home.

When she woke him, they did what they did every night when sleep abandoned them—they watched the stars. Nick's hand slipped into hers, his eyes glazed from sleep, but he didn't complain as they sat on the woodpile behind his cottage. "What's wrong, Sabby?" he whispered.

Sabriel scooted closer to him, her eyes scanning the velvet blackness. "Do you think I can change the world like Ardara?"

"That's just a story Elston told ya, Sab. It don't mean nothing."

"So you think me worthless?" Sabriel jabbed him playfully in the ribs.

"Course not. You're my friend. You'll always be worth something to me. I was just jestin'. You're going to change the world all right, and all folk will know the name of Sabriel."

"Then do you think one day the Gifteds can mean something? That we'll have a purpose and folk won't fear us because we're different?"

"Aye...mayhap one day..." Nick's hand squeezed hers. "But even if they don't, I promise you'll always be my friend. Mayhap one day we can run far, far away. We can fight on ships and sleep on beaches and never see Sindaleer again."

Sabriel smiled. "Aye, that'd be nice."

They stayed silent for a long moment. Charcoal pushed against her legs, her soft fur warming Sabriel's skin against the cold. Glowbugs blinked and played in the velvet darkness. Like stars dancing in the field, they hovered in the tall grasses, their white light breaking through the night.

Sabriel focused on the Glowbugs, willing them to come. Through the black, the twinkling creatures hovered around her and Nick, softly landing on her arms and in her hair. Nick reached out, allowing one to sit on the tip of his finger.

The tiny Glowbug illuminated his face. "We're like Glowbugs, Sabby." Nick blew, the Glowbug disappearing in the night. "We're small, but our light is powerful."

Sabriel nestled into his side, his body heat shielding her from the night cold. He sounded like his brother Elston, wise beyond his years and speaking things that made her feel worth something beyond the outcast of the village. "Promise we'll be friends forever?"

"Promise."

"And you'll stay with me when I'm old and dying?"

"Nay."

"Nay?" Sabriel stuck her tongue out at him. "You're mean."

"Nay. Because I'm planning on us dying together. Life would be pretty dull without ya, Sab."

Sabriel leaned her head against Nick's shoulder and together, the lad and lass counted stars until sleep took them both captive, neither realizing everything was about to change.

Everything.



The disease came without warning.

One day Mam just didn't wake up.

Sabriel remembered even the small details about that morning, how the sky was blue with tinges of red. She remembered a haze lying over the mountains, promising midday heat; how the mutts were uncommonly restless.

Da had been working in the fields before the sun, Sabriel fishing with Nick in the stream by the village. On these mornings, she would come home after dawn and Mam would have tea with milk and soft bread waiting for her. Mam had told her the night before that they would travel to market in Bron afterwards to trade their yarn for candles and cloth.

But when Sabriel arrived in their cottage at dawn, Mam had not yet risen. She lay so still. So quiet.

No one knew what caused the deaths in the village that morning or the days after. Many speculated the meat hunted from the mountains was tainted, striking the weaker. Some said a curse had fallen over the land, a darkness coming that would not be stopped.

This mattered not to young Sabriel, only that breath no longer flowed through her Mam, and that Da had left, his eyes void of emotion. "He is going to mourn in his own way," the elders told Sabriel. "He'll be back."

Three nights after the disease began, the mourning and burials took place in the fields outside the village. Sabriel remembered sitting with Nick at the table in her home, too numb to cry, only to stare listlessly at the wall, counting the cracks in the slats of the cottage.

Outside in the heavy dusk, the mourners continued to keen. The wailing and singing rose with the moon, the stamp of drums echoing the beat of her heart.

"We're leaving, Sabby. Elston says it's not safe here," Nick said.

Sabriel's chest tightened. She closed her eyes, her body closing off from emotions, exhaustion stealing any protest from her lips. She laid her head down on the rough wood of the table, wanting a never ending sleep that would steal the life from her veins like it had with Mam. "Where?" She whispered.

"Elston won't say. But...he's afraid the disease will take me and Noll like it did our family." Nick laid his head by hers so their noses almost touched. "I don't wanna go, Sabby."

"I don't want you to go."

Fear kept her awake that night after Nick returned to his own cottage, the keeners and mourners echoing in her head. She tossed and turned in the darkness, wishing for death.

She remembered waking up that morning before the white light of dawn touched the sky and running to the cottage to say farewell to Nick, but she found their home empty. Betrayal and hurt swirled in her belly.

"They left but an hour hence."

Sabriel turned to meet the gaze of a white-haired woman, a neighbor to Nick's family. "He left without me...without goodbye."

His leaving cut like a knife, twisting into her heart over and over on lonely nights when sleep evaded her, and in the long days when lads and lasses taunted and ignored her during celebrations and evening storytellings.

Joining the Knights with Da when she turned twelve summers had been salve on an open wound, promising relief. Tirich soon became a leader of the Knights and told her the time of the Gifted was upon them, that she had a purpose and a place.

No one but Nick had told her that before. There in the cave during days of rigorous training, her Marks and Gift were not feared but rejoiced. She trained with the sons of the Knights, sneaking to the hideout miles from their village late into the night, only to return at dawn.

She vowed with every stroke of her sword, every month and year that passed, that Thayer would die for what he had done to those she loved, for failing to come to their aid as they struggled to draw breath. Her folk and the Marked's pain would be avenged, and that of the old ways would be returned.

The time of the Gifteds had come, and she was ready for the royal blood of Thayer to be spilled upon the land.

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Eight Years Later

The Fading of the Winter Months

The sun cast its golden glow over bare trees, branches reaching for a cloudless sky. Five figures slipped as quiet as the dark shadows themselves, their black cloaks concealing them in the growing dusk. One figure took the lead, red hair streaming out from under a long hood. A hand pushed away the strands, shouldering her bow higher on her shoulder.

Sabriel glanced behind, scanning the forest below the hill from whence they'd come. In but three miles the capital of Sindaleer would be in sight, the scouting mission complete. Her leather fingerless gloves concealed the Marks on her wrists, but as they neared Bron, the tattoos began to burn, the reminder of the pain and shame she had felt as a young lass, being branded like a criminal.

The time of the Gifteds had come, and she stood ready to fight for her freedom at whatever the cost.

"The time has come for all those loyal to the former King Thayer to end," her master's voice echoed in her head, and Tirich never failed to speak truth.

Thayer had been murdered by rioters in the city, his son now claiming the throne. He swore he was not his father, that he had changed and would bring change, but Milosh stood far from deserving the throne. Deed meant everything and who your parents were meant nothing. Royal blood may have flowed through Milosh's veins, but he was no king; he had proven that time and time again.

Evening began to blanket the land. Sabriel stood at the ridge of the hill, waiting for her comrades. Their bows and spears glistened in the dying sun.

War stood on the edge of Sindaleer, and hell was about to break loose. Milosh better hope Destiny was on his side.

Sabriel turned back towards the path. High walls wrapped around the capital city housing hundreds of Sindaleer folk loyal to her master, and there, the castle behind it all. Like a dark nightmare,

the stone fortress stood, black pillars and fogged windows. Sabriel smiled. Excitement tingled through her limbs.

A cool breeze brushed her cheeks. Streaks of pink colored the sky, mingling with the night. The first star of the evening blinked above her.

She signaled for her men to stop, motioning them deeper into the wood. King Milosh kept his own scouts around Bron, locking the city at dusk. The rioting of the folk had grown worse since his reign of a hundred and eighty two days.

She'd kept count. One hundred and eighty two days too many. One hundred and eighty two days of her own folk planning their attack, of feeding the folk of Sindaleer with the knowledge that King Milosh did not have to be their only option.

Tirich knew of the folk's pain. He would willingly put his life down for their sake. He loved the people, was one with them. They did not need Milosh or his faltering ways. He had all too willingly followed his father until Thayer's death.

Mutts from the surrounding villages barked in the distance. Sabriel's hand wrapped around her bow as she fitted an arrow to the string. Her trademark red feather flashed in the dim light.

Following the outskirts of the trees, the castle in the distance, she and her men headed towards the back of the city where they could find a better view of the barracks. Her goal: to scout the city's weak spots, and to better understand the layout of the place Milosh called home and safety. But he had yet to witness the power of the Knights of Norcir. Milosh's men were of little match for the fury of the one who would conquer him.

Leaves from last winter crackled under booted feet. Dew dampened the hem of her long tunic. The sharp scent of smoke from cottage fires played on the spring breeze.

She motioned two of her scouts ahead to follow the edge of the capital of Bron. The city stood bravely against the dusky sky of evening. Milosh's soldiers patrolled the land, but Sabriel had tracked when and where days before, every move planned. Her eyes scanned the forest and surrounding hills.

Nodding to two scouts, she ordered them in the opposite direction, leaving her with three remaining Knights. The gates of the city would soon close, keeping the folk in and traitors out. The last time Sabriel had set foot in Bron had been years before, before she had pledged herself as a Knight, before she had promised to stand up against tyranny even at the cost of her own life.

One of the Knights stepped to her side. "We should draw back further," he said. "We shall be spotted any closer."

"Nay, this may be our last chance to bring back good reports to Tirich for the battle. I've scouted this side for weeks. We will be safe for now."

"For *now*." A younger Knight, Derek, breathed a laugh. "Be brave, not foolish, Sabriel."

An arrow shot past Sabriel's cheek, landing in the tree above her head.

"You are a fool, Sabriel!" Derek drew his sword. "We're too close to the castle."

Sabriel cursed, ducking. Another arrow landed at her feet, sticking in the hard dirt. Pulling herself behind the large trunk of an oak, she watched as the Knights found cover around her.

Destiny be hanged.

"Ready yourselves," she hissed. Rough bark scraped against her back. Silence fell over her. She sucked in a breath, her heart thumping against her chest.

"I told you," Derek said. "Listen to those who know better."

Sabriel ignored him, straining to hear movement.

One. Two. Three.

Quiet, too quiet.

Tirich gave her one mission and she was already going to fail him.

Four. Five. Six.

Nay, of course not. In the eyes of her Da, she would never be good enough. Why would Tirich be any different?

Seven. Eight. Nine.

How long before the soldiers were upon them? Surely not long now.

Sweat slickened her palms and trickled down her back. A bat flew low overhead.

Ten.

“Now!” Her voice bounced off the hills. Arrows zinged around her in answer. Below them came Milosh’s men, the scouts she had been praying they would avoid. She let her own arrow free, watching the red feather miss its mark and land in a large tree.

Hang it.

Throwing her bow down, she drew her sword. The soldiers blocked her men’s retreat. Behind them stood the castle. They could do nothing but fight.

Her men followed her lead as they ran at the king’s men, metal against metal echoing around her. Her foot slipped on the wet grass. The closer they drew to the soldiers, she realized her mistake.

Guardians, not soldiers. Curses upon curses, Guardians knew the woods like she knew her own mind. Even if they attempted to retreat, the Guardians would find them. Their only chance would be to kill or be killed.

She went for the man up front first, aiming her blow for his shoulder. The man ducked, his green hood falling away. No more than her twenty years, his eyes met hers. His sword fell for her legs, but she jumped, missing the blow, their weapons colliding. Behind her, she heard the chant of Varsha, the elemental Knight. Thunder boomed above her and rain fell in thick sheets. Fog rolled in like a heavy cloak.

Sabriel and her party began to back away, and she prayed they could slip through, the storm hindering the enemy from following. Water dripped from the face of her opponent, his eyes dark. His sword fell faster than hers, ripping at the sleeve of her tunic, tearing the soft flesh of her arm. She gasped, falling away.

Pulling an arrow from her quiver, she ducked from another blow, aiming again for the man’s shoulder. With her free hand, she plunged the tip through the jerkin and beyond, colliding with bone. Victory flowed through her sticky sweat as he cursed, slipping in the mud, her red feather shining in the darkness.

Thunder pounded overhead, the ground underneath Sabriel’s feet trembling. She turned and pulled her blade from its sheath. Another Guardian held her gaze, his sword blocking her every attempt to disarm him. *Hang you.*

Sabriel’s teeth crashed over her lip as she slipped in the mud. She ignored the bitter taste of blood and sweat, struggling to find her footing.

Lightning danced across the darkening sky. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Varsha whirl around as a sword crashed near his head. The storm faltered, sun breaking through the clouds as the elemental dodged the blow.

Heavy breaths and screams circled around her. Sabriel drew in a sharp breath, the gaze of the Guardian behind her. She raised her elbow and turned, bone hitting bone as she collided with the chin of a

Guardian. His head jerked back, blood spewing from his mouth. Using her free hand, she knocked the weapon from his grasp.

With a cry, men burst through the foliage ahead. Raising her head, she let out a gasp. The scouts she had sent ahead now appeared. The Guardians began to retreat as her Knights fought harder. She watched as Derek plunged his spear in the back of one of their enemies, the man hitting the earth slick from Varsha's rain.

One by one the Guardians disappeared into the forest. However, they were no cowards. In time, they would regroup and be back.

She turned, raising a hand. "Retreat back," she called. "To the cave!"

Varsha stepped forwards, blood mixed with the mud on his face. "We had a mission, Sabriel." "We obtained some of the information we sought. The risk was worth it." Sabriel turned back, urging her men to do the same.

Varsha cursed. "They will be expecting us next time. Do not play the fool."

"Oi! Sabriel, Da, look who failed to escape."

Derek stepped forwards with a young Guardian in his grasp. The lad looked to be no more than five and ten summers, his long hair coming free from its leather thong. Too young for war and blood.

"Tie and gag him. We have no use for him."

"Lady...it would be easier to kill him," Varsha said, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

The Guardian's eyes remained on her, fear lurking behind the courage in his face. She had been trained to kill with no regrets, had hunted her foes with no mercy, and had watched animals bleed to death. But they were not boys who had no chance to truly live.

"Let Tirich decide."

"We all know what he'll say." Derek raised his spear and before Sabriel could scream, the blade pierced the captive's chest.

The lad gasped, his face going pale. Derek raised his weapon again, blood dripping from the blade, staining the wet grass crimson.

"Stop!"

But Derek speared the man again like one would spear a fish in the river. The lad's face turned a sickly shade of white, the last breath escaping from him.

He was gone.

Sabriel sucked in a breath, spots clouding her vision.

Blood pooled from his mouth, his hands clenched into tight fists.

Varsha turned to Sabriel, a sneer crossing his mouth that she wished she could smash. "I told Tirich that ladies have no backbone. You will have to do more than keep a pretty face to be a true Knight. Come, men," he called out. "The Guardians will be back any moment."

"Varsha," she yelled, following on the heels of the warrior. "He was harmless, a boy. Your son had no right to kill him."

"He was a Guardian."

"That did not make him evil."

"He attacked us."

"He was a lad." Sabriel grabbed Varsha's arm. "We had a mission and I failed, but that did not mean we could kill retreating children."

"You are a Knight." Varsha turned on her, his hot breath on her face. "Act like it."

"A Knight that fights for freedom."

“There is freedom in death.”

The face of the dying lad flitted back through her mind, the blood, the pain in his eyes when all courage was gone and defeat set in.

“There was no freedom,” Sabriel said, her voice low, almost a growl. “None.”