

The Map Across Time

(Book 2 in the “Sacred Sites” Collection)

A Fairy Tale by Susanne Lakin

Part One

Ne'buah

(Prophecy)

☪ ☪ ☪

Chapter One

Their footsteps echoed off the cavernous stone walls as they walked in solemn procession across the great hall. There would be no more banquets here for a long while, Reya thought bitterly as she gripped the twins' hands even tighter. Adin snuffled as he trailed reluctantly behind his old nurse-maid, making Reya's heart clench in her chest. She glanced to her left. Aletha wore a stoic face; only her red puffy eyes gave away her ruse. Reya gave their small, soft hands a reassuring squeeze, although she knew it was at best an empty gesture.

As they climbed the massive staircase, hewn from the porous gray stone used for centuries to build palace and city, Aletha reached into her tunic pocket and handed her brother a rag for his dripping nose. He caught her eye for a moment, then stared back at his feet, careful not to trip on the irregular steps.

Reya instinctively adjusted her pace to Adin's faltering one, listening almost unconsciously to the uneven rhythm of his soft shoes as they marked a music characteristically his own. She knew what effort it had taken the young prince to give up his cane and stand erect. Each time he fell, stabs of pain coursed through her own gut. Yet Adin was, if anything, a determined ten-year-old boy, and heaven bless him—no one could stop him once he set his mind to something.

Aletha, Reya mused, was just like her brother in so many ways—they both had their mother’s coppery, wavy hair and green eyes, but had also inherited the King’s olive complexion and stubbornness to boot. Yet, it was nature’s cruel joke that Aletha embodied perfection in every way—an angelic face, strong stature, and graceful posture—all gifts Adin had been denied. Not that the young prince ever resented Aletha or wished his miseries on his sister, for he doted on her, even more so in the recent months of the Queen’s illness and subsequent seclusion. No, Adin carried the full weight of his infirmities on his own delicate shoulders, adding to the already unbearable strain of his defect.

Cresting the stairs, they walked to the end of the long hall across a balustrade that spanned the banquet room. Sunlight spilled through the long row of beveled-glass windows—huge windows that reached up two stories and ran the entire length of the hall below. Aletha’s skirts swished along the floor. Smells of meat pies cooking in the kitchen wafted in the air, mingling with the sooty, stale aroma of the smoldering fireplace below. Reya ignored the grumblings in her empty stomach.

Now that spring had come in all its bluster and warmth, the fires were left to smolder instead of being stoked all day. By mid-afternoon, windows thrown open would welcome a cleansing breeze that scrubbed away at the winter’s accumulation of odors. This afternoon was unexpectedly balmy and Reya realized she had overdressed. Of course, coming to court always required a bit of dressing—layering the proper tunics and cloaks, even if she was practically family. And although this effort was more for the benefit of observers than for royalty, she had no desire to provide cause to rouse the King’s irritation.

Down below, Reya caught glimpses of the servants as they went about their tasks quietly, their occasional whisper drifting up to her ears. Scissors snipped, and cut flowers from early blooms overflowed from gold vases. Diligent hands rubbed silver urns with soft cloths. Reya recognized the palpable tension and worry as servants dusted and mopped distractedly. Eyes filled with sadness dared a fleeting look up at the twins as they approached the latched door.

Reya turned and knelt before the children, taking a deep breath and fumbling with their clothing. Usually the twins wore loose, simple garments made for play. But today Reya had helped them dress, picking out what she deemed suitable—nothing austere and depressing, but elegant and cheerful, wanting to give the Queen any chance to smile.

She chided herself for stalling, and steeled her emotions. Althea, mirroring Reya, lifted her chin in an attempt at bravery, more for Adin's benefit than her own. Reya stroked their heads with her weathered fingers, luxuriating in the softness of their hair, neatening them up. The huge oak door opened behind her, and a servant dressed in the court blues and browns ushered them in, then retreated silently into a corner.

A warm wave of humidity and pungent odor drenched them; the twins made a sour face, but Reya was all too familiar with the scent of impending death. Overhead, the bedchamber ceiling arched in a spire of painted window panes. Filtered sunlight illuminated the wisps of candle smoke as they swirled slowly like hovering ghosts, waiting. Reya shuddered.

The pallor of death stretched like a gauze over the Queen's features. Afternoon sun baked through the ceiling panes, streaking dark colors across the floor like blood. Reya sent the twins a reproving look, and they closed their gaping mouths and retreated

cautiously behind her. She climbed the stair to the cumbersome bed and ushered the children to her side, where they gazed down at the face of their mother.

With her eyes closed, the Queen looked small and lost under mountains of blankets. Adin's hand gingerly touched his mother's clammy face, as if she were as brittle as glass. Framing that face, bronze hair spilled across the pillow, lit up by the dozens of tapers glowing on the sideboard. Aletha stood beside Adin, clenching her brother's hand, unusually quiet.

The Queen forced her lids open and looked at her children, her expression of one whose heart has given up its futile grasp on hope. Aletha and Adin reflected back that same look. Reya sensed her own grip slipping as well, but while the Queen still had breath in her she would not succumb to despair.

Why had she not been able to produce a cure? In all her many seasons she had treated every known illness, and handily counteracted poisons from noxious plants mistakenly ingested or, on rare occasion, purposely administered. There was no plant she could fail to identify, cite its uses for seed, leaf, and root, and prepare at least a half dozen tinctures, salves, or infusions to treat every known ailment in this kingdom.

But this! For months this nemesis had been unreadable. It acted like fenweed poison, but had the fever and chills of harrowbane. Nothing Reya tried elicited a positive reaction. She could almost sense a magical binding, but could not suss it out. There were none of the obvious markers, and yet when she laid her palm on the Queen's neck she met with an odd sensation, a resonance that was both strange and chillingly familiar. If magic was the culprit, then it was masterfully masked. Reya had not wanted to admit the possibility, but seeing the Queen now in her final hours—the horrible reality of

something evil at work, something beyond her wisdom to cure or even name—sent a shiver up her spine.

Reaching into the pouch slung across her chest, she extracted a small lidded jar. She gently placed her hand under the Queen's head.

The Queen stiffly turned her face toward Reya, her eyes searching for focus. "Reya." Her gaze lighted on the twins and then back to the gray-haired nurse-maid, her most trusted friend. "You brought . . . the children." Her words came on papery breath, fragile and faint.

"Majesty, I am going to help you sit up. I have something for you to drink."

The Queen frailly struggled to comply, all the time shaking her head in a slow motion of dismissal. "No more, please. Too many . . . tired."

Reya ignored her protests as the twins nervously shifted beside her. How she longed to spare them this pain, but she was at her wick's end—just like the candles pooling in their trays before her. She had little faith this tonic, as the others, would stay the inevitable. She needed more time!

Carefully, she helped the Queen sip the bitter tea and watched as she made a half-hearted attempt to smile. "You don't ever . . . stop brewing these . . . *sha'arurah* . . ."

Reya took the jar from her and set it down on the step. Of course it tasted horrible, but there was nothing to be done for that.

Reya found it odd that the Queen had taken to using the ancient speech more and more as she grew weaker. The old tongue was nearly extinct; few words had survived through the centuries to become integrated in daily conversation. Reya knew many more than most, handed down to her through family herbal lore, and from reading old decaying

texts to gather and prepare herbs. Even then, the words had been translated and reshaped from their original form. Apparently, the Queen's illness was unleashing her mind, causing her to dredge up half-buried words and images.

"Here children, come close to your mother so she can see you." Reya stepped away from the bed and watched as Aletha helped Adin maneuver from the stair to the mattress. Once she got him settled, she sidled up next to him, where they drew close to hear their mother's fluttering words.

Reya fretted in the dim light as she waited in an overstuffed, ornately upholstered chair. Huge velvet drapes were drawn across the large windows that looked out on the orchard, barricading the room from the sunlight that recklessly shined everywhere else in Sherbourne. She searched her mind for the ancient word, one she had not used in a very long time. What was it? *Cha'mas*. A cruelty, an injustice with the overlay of violence. Like most of the many-layered words of the ancient tongue, no modern word captured the gist of *cha'mas*. But at this moment in time, in this room, no other word would suffice.

As the Queen spoke haltingly, Reya could make out snatches of sentences as they hung in the still, heavy air. She saw the twins cry as the Queen weakly gathered their hands in hers. From time to time Aletha wiped her face, and Adin's too—Adin so intent on his mother that he took no notice. Reya sighed; she found it hard to tell where one child ended and the other began.

The Queen recounted the story of their birth, a story told countless times until it had almost become a tale from a picture book. How Aletha had been born first, feet first, as if ready to stand and take on the world.

Reya remembered that night, and turned up the palms of her hands as if she could stretch time and still see the perfect little body cradled there. The smell of birth, that sweet, sickly smell of fluids and sweat. Her own legs shaking with exhaustion, from hours of worry over a difficult delivery. Watching Aletha as she emerged out of a warm sea, first feet, then belly, then head, the cord trailing alongside her wet face, up along her upraised arms, and then—stopped. Reya had tugged gently, mystified by the sudden halt of birth, wondering what the cord may have caught on or what *yo'shana* was at work. But as Reya had pondered the mystery, she had been interrupted by the Queen's sharp and sudden cry.

Once more, contractions had racked the Queen and she howled. Reya had noticed Aletha's hands grasping tightly to something. With a ferocious push, the Queen expelled a second child—an unexpected son—who gripped his sister's hands in his tiny ones. Reya had quickly gathered the twins up and gently disengaged their fingers, but not without much effort. Who knows how long they had been that way, floating peacefully, undisturbed together until the violence of birth meant to rip them apart? Adin had clearly been cramped in the womb, for whereas Aletha had emerged robust and energetic, kicking and sprawling in Reya's arms, Adin was small and fragile, hunched over, breathing weakly, his skin a pale gray. Upon further exploration Reya's heart had sunk. Adin's right foot and leg were twisted a quarter-turn, and his face had brought tears to Reya's eyes. She had not allowed herself to think of the King's predictable disappointment, only the realization of what a hard road lay ahead for this unfortunate babe.

And now that hard road was going to be even harder, Reya thought, watching Adin's heart break as he drank in every word his mother spoke to him. With the Queen gone, Adin would have no one but Aletha to cushion him from the cruelty of the King. A King who had every reason to be proud of this sweet, kind-hearted boy, but who made no attempt at hiding his disgust—a disgust that had grown into contempt after the Queen's birth to a beautiful stillborn son two summers ago.

Reya sighed heavily, feeling despair enter her like a flood of water, lifting and carrying her to an unknown shore. She raised herself up, ignoring an old pain in her hip that shot down her leg as she approached the bed. The Queen looked over and pointed to a small pouch on the side table. Reya brought it to her.

“Here,” the Queen whispered, her breath nearly gone, “wear it and remember . . .” With shaking hands she slowly drew out two silver locket on chains, simple, plain, with a tiny latch on the face of each circle. The twins turned them in their hands, puzzled. Aletha popped open the locket door and found inside a single strand of copper hair. Adin traced his finger over the tiny engraved marks on the back. Reya leaned over Adin's shoulder, and on closer scrutiny, could see the scribbles and curves of the ancient language—the *law'az*—but no one, not even she, knew how to read it.

The Queen fell back on her pillow; the exertion from talking with her children had emptied her. Reya gathered the twins to her as she so often had, like a concerned hen protecting her chicks under the safety of her wings. Adin reluctantly released his grip on the Queen's gown and Reya was stung anew by the poignancy of the repetitious gesture. Adin always grasping, trying to hang on to a life being wrenched away from him.

Reya leaned over and gave the Queen a gentle kiss on her clammy forehead. As she turned and took the children in hand, the Queen tugged on Reya's sleeve. Her words, like the rustle of a leaf, lingered in the stillness of the room. Reya was not sure she heard them correctly until the Queen repeated herself, with an almost steady voice and a look, almost peaceful, spreading over her face.

“Ahabah ’az ma’veth.”

The words stabbed Reya's heart, words that had not been uttered for centuries. Words that came welling up through her memory like a spring pushing its way through softened soil. *Ahabah ’az ma’veth.*

Love is strong as death.

#

☪ ☪ ☪

Chapter Two

In the darkened dining hall, the King slumped down in his chair, unnoticed by the servant tiptoeing across the polished floor. Only when he coughed did his startled attendant spin around, then fumble to catch the slipping tray, muttering under his breath. The King's head lifted, eyes squinting in scrutiny at the cowering man who kept his head low and his gaze just far enough ahead to see the table. Vacantly, he watched the servant place the covered dishes, warm in their silver containers, on the inlaid wooden table in front of him. Slowly, and with meticulous attention, the flustered man lined up silver utensils with precision, and poured wine from the decanter into the chalice. When the servant leaned over to light the tapers, the King spoke, his voice puncturing the oppressive mood of despair.

“No candles.”

The servant set down the flint box and waited.

The King waved his hand across the food before him. “Why do you keep bringing me food?” He sighed in exasperation, then abruptly raised his voice in anger.

“No more food. No more candles. Go!”

The young man scurried toward the door, bowing profusely, and then turned and fumbled with the door latch. Once the door was secure the King gritted his teeth. A low growl filled his throat and in a rage he let his arm fly across the table, sending dishes

crashing to the floor. He grew still, listening to the spin of silver on stone as plates wobbled to a stop. He clenched his fists.

Never before in his life had he felt this fury. This complete powerlessness. He was a King used to getting what he wanted, when he wanted it. Did he not have a palace filled with everything his heart desired? Did he not have a legion of men at his ready, to fight and even die for him if need be? Did he not rule a kingdom where his every word was law and his every whim fulfilled? Then why, for heaven's sake, with all his power and influence, could he not save his wife?

The King jumped out of his chair, spurred by frustration. He tossed off his robe and mopped his forehead with a dinner napkin, and began pacing the floor like a caged beast. Guilt stabbed at him; he should be by the Queen's side, but he did not want to endure one more moment of that sheer agony. What more could he do? The question ate at his heart.

For months he had sent riders out to the far reaches of the land, summoning healers to his court—worthless, useless idiots who wasted his time and money on impotent remedies. He should have thrown the lot of them into the dungeon to rot! He watched miserably as day after day the Queen wasted away before his eyes, his beautiful Queen suffering in silence, the carefully masked look of pain and fear only evident to him. How he suffered with her!

Lately he had been thinking back to earlier days, to when he first married her. A cloud draped over his mind; he picked at images that failed to inspire a feeling. He knew a time existed, long ago, when he seemed happy. When he was content, not driven by this insatiable need for something else, something more. Was there a time, even briefly,

when he ever just sat with her, looking out at the gardens, holding her hand and just happy in the thought of that simple pleasure? If that moment had ever existed, it was lost to him now. Contentment was a specter that constantly eluded him, teased and taunted him, and now jeered fearlessly in his face.

He threw down the napkin and stormed out the door. Servants backed quickly out of his way, dropping to their knees, as he strode across room after room until he reached the library doors. Flinging them open like a drowning man gasping for air, he stood on the threshold of the courtyard and caught his breath. A slight breeze cooled his neck and forehead. He composed himself, straightened his clothing, and ran a sweaty hand through his shoulder-length hair. He knew he smelled dank and his thick dark hair matted to his head. It had been days since he had taken a proper bath.

Across the yard, the spring in the fountain bubbled softly. The orchard bloomed profusely with snowy bunches of flowers, giving off a thick perfume. There was something about the perfect beauty of the courtyard—the planters overflowing with hyacinth and narcissus; the sprawling, manicured lawn of deep green that flowed down the hill like a carpet; the fruit trees in their neat little rows, trimmed and bursting with life—that broke him utterly. The King fell to his knees and wept.

He had no idea how long he had been hunched over, sobbing. Numbly, he stumbled over to the fountain, his legs weak and unresponsive. He sat down on the smooth rock ledge that encircled the pool and stared at the water as it spilled from the crevice in the black obsidian rock. Long ago, centuries ago, this spring flowed freely down the knoll, unbound by castle walls. He knew the city of Sherbourne started here—built around this spring of life-giving water. And for strategic reasons, the first rulers had

built the palace on the same knoll, for here was the highest point in the kingdom as far as the eye could see, providing an unmatched vantage point.

He lifted his eyes and looked out upon his kingdom. The high walls of the courtyard had once held a row of thick wooden doors, arching to peaks ten feet tall, latched from the inside. Now, the old wood long rotted away, gaping vistas opened to the world outside. From where he sat he could see the sprawl of the city below. Cottages and shops lay choked together, randomly intersected by winding cobbled streets. Smoke from hundreds of chimneys lingered over rooftops. Horses and carriages crossed the bridge over the great river Heresh at the edge of the city. People as small as crickets bustled, busy with their daily tasks. And ringing the entire city for many miles were the remains of the great wall.

Parts of it were still intact, but in most places rubble littered the boundary of the city, huge boulders in piles where the wall had been attacked and breached in the battle centuries ago. Most of the turret towers remained, forming arched gateways below them, providing entrances to the city. The wooden portcullises had long ago rotted; after the great battle they served no need. The wall rose up thirty feet, with a parapet on the inside, designed for soldiers to be able to stand without being hit by arrows. The King could imagine a night of battle—the smoke and yelling, the towers with their signaling fires, skirmishes running up the ramparts and attacking the walls with men and weapons.

But now, straining his ears, all the King could hear was the clang of a bell, faint and soft. He was too far away to hear voices, too removed to hear conversation. This was his kingdom, yet he rarely entered into that throng of humanity. For most of the

year, the only reminder the peasants had of royalty was the looming presence of the palace atop the knoll.

A melancholy smile inched up his face, recalling the rare occasions he and his Queen would attend an important function, making a necessary but brief appearance, reminding his subjects of his authoritative presence. He tried to imagine himself in the token procession with all its fanfare—palace guards riding horses in neat formation, dressed in livery; trumpeters marching behind, sounding clear brass tones that brought excited children pushing through the crowds to listen; he and the Queen atop the magnificent carriage, pulled by a team of six white horses decked in silver trappings, waving to the bystanders as they passed. A trembling sigh escaped his throat at the thought of his beautiful Queen, never to sit beside him like that again.

So intent was his gaze over the city, he did not hear or see the councilors approach.

“Sire.” The tall, lean man, robed in dark brown, spoke in a deep flat voice. He waited, hands clasped in front of him, his head cocked slightly. A shock of straight black hair fell over one gray eye; the rest of his head lay buried under the hood. His face, pale and wrinkled, held eyes like glass beads set above the hook of his nose. Flanking him were two others in the same garb, their faces hooded in shadow.

The King stood up and looked in Rasha’s face. It held the same expression it always had, one the King could never read. Even in rare moments when the councilor’s words were encouraging, the King sensed cynicism and condescension. Maybe his imagination misled him, for the bony old man never gave anything away in his features, but there was something about the eyes, as if they laughed at him.

The King sighed. He would wave them away if he could, but he knew better. Rasha had served his father and was most skilled in advising. He was the head of the Council, an institution as old and established as the monarchy itself. One could not exist without the other. The Council took care of all the tedious details of running a kingdom; the King could not be bothered with the grumblings, disputes, and demands of the commoners. Especially not now.

He inherited this odd group at a young age when his father died. His mother, having no desire to rule, rode off one day in a carriage to a faraway territory that was rugged and unsettled. Being an only child, the King had no siblings to confer with, or defer to. So he had relied heavily on the Council, which showed no hesitation in lifting the burden of rule off the new regent's shoulders. As he grew older, he needed finesse and diplomacy to mold the will of the Council to his own, and he often gave up in frustration when his agenda was thwarted. However, it mattered little to him—they seemed to keep the country in one piece and avoided weighing him down with menial problems.

The King mustered an air of authority, trying to focus. But as Rasha spoke he found it difficult to listen; his eyes kept veering to the second floor window, where drapes blocked his view of the Queen.

Rasha tilted his head and followed the King's gaze. "The children are with their mother."

The King muffled a sound in his throat. The councilors stood like silent sentinels, their eyes fixed on the King.

“Sire, we apologize for the intrusion. There are pressing legal matters that have come before the throne.” Rasha paused until the King wrested his eyes from the window. “Your subjects grow tired of delays in funding and there have been some riots in the streets . . .”

The King spun around, wiping his face. “Why do you trouble me with these senseless problems? If the sewers need fixing, then fix them! If the jail is full, then build another!”

Rasha kept his voice even. “Sire, you know we only have so much jurisdiction. If you would like to see to it that the Council takes these particular matters—”

“Yes. Take care of these matters.” His voice barely reined in his fury. He worked at calming down, breathing deeply. “Please.” After a moment of silence, the King adjusted his attire and walked toward the palace doors as the councilors stood and watched, unmoving.

#

Rasha strolled along the courtyard wall, away from the palace, his two associates on either side. He kept his head low and glanced around, his eyes drawing the others to come closer. He stopped at the far end of the courtyard, at the last row of apple trees, and spoke in a raspy whisper.

“So, things are better than I had predicted.”

The tall, wiry figure on his right nodded. “The city is in disarray m’lord.”

A smile inched up Rasha’s face. “The King is distracted.” He snorted in disgust. “The Queen will be dead by morning.” He walked a few steps over to one of the archways and leaned against the wall. His eyes surveyed the city.

The other man—the smaller one—spoke, still hidden under his hood. “You were wise to slow the *ro’osh*. Dragging out the illness has proved beneficial. Look how the King has steadily fallen apart.”

Rasha spat and cocked his head. His hair fell once more into his eyes. “The King is a fool. Humans are such weaklings. They are obsessed with love; it blinds them to everything else. He does not know what he is fighting. There is no cure, no *ga’haw*, for this *na’kash*. No potion in this world has the power to undo it.”

The others joined him at the archway. Rasha pointed to the world spread out below him. “See. The King is tumbling toward ruin. His Queen will die and he will be consumed by it. Little by little, his precious city will suffer from neglect. Heavy taxes will be levied; there will be more revolts. Famine, disease, and unrest will plague Sherbourne. This ‘Crown of the East’ will tarnish and decay. And, true to prophecy, will one day only exist in memory. If it exists at all. The *ne’buah* cannot fail.”

The taller associate leaned into his commander. “M’lord, what about the prince?”

Rasha laughed deeply. “That *na’baal*? In time the King will grow to believe his son plots against his life.”

“But he is only a child.”

“We will bide our time. You see how the King detests his son. And that . . . unfortunate incident with the stillborn child . . .”

The small man chuckled. “A work of genius, m’lord. There is no greater bitterness than losing what could have been.”

“Yes,” Rasha muttered. “Yes.”

He turned sharply, squeezing his gray eyes in thought, rubbing his hands together. “And in time, slowly, the King will suspect his son, and the son’s anger and humiliation will fester. It is . . . inevitable.”

“Then you need not do more than put the knife in his hand.”

Rasha met the eyes of his associates. With a nod the two joined him as he walked back to the palace in a confident, easy stride.

With their backs turned, they had not noticed the cloaked man standing outside the courtyard wall, leaning his face against the warmth of stone. They did not know he had been there, just steps away, hiding behind a shrub, as they held their private discussion. They did not hear him, because he had been careful not to utter a sound, or even think a thought that might attract their regard. He had been very careful not to be detected, for he knew his detection would mean the end of his kingdom.

#