

THE TWIN FLAME

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Chapter One – The Day of Choosing

Birds chirped in the distance, their songs weaving through the crisp morning air as the first rays of sunlight spilled over the castle walls. The great bronze bells rang, their deep, echoing chimes reverberating through the valley. Inside the castle courtyard, guards marched in unison, their armor clinking with every step as villagers and nobles alike moved about in a flurry of excitement. The entire kingdom had been waiting for this day for sixteen years.

Inside the throne hall, the King stood by the high windows, his hands clasped tightly behind his back. His once-black hair had gone mostly silver, but his presence remained commanding. His expression softened as he glanced toward the portrait of the late Queen hanging proudly above the dais.

"Sixteen years..." he thought, his heart heavy with the memory. She had died bringing their daughters into the world, leaving him with two tiny princesses and a kingdom that demanded his strength.

An elderly woman, cloaked in deep green robes that shimmered faintly in the morning light, stepped beside him. The High Priestess — keeper of the old traditions and guardian of the Choosing Ceremony — jingled the heavy ring of keys at her waist.

"The day has come, Your Majesty," she said, her voice carrying both reverence and weight.

The King smiled faintly, a mixture of pride and sorrow crossing his features. "Yes. The day we have waited for. The day my daughters step into their destiny."

The great doors opened, and the two princesses entered side by side. Princess Lileth, the elder by mere minutes, walked with her chin slightly lifted, her honey-brown hair glinting under the golden chandeliers. She always carried herself with a sense of responsibility, the unspoken knowledge that she was the firstborn. Beside her, Princess Payath moved with quiet grace, her silver-blond hair flowing down her back like liquid moonlight. Where Lileth was bold, Payath was thoughtful — softer in voice, yet just as strong in spirit.

The King's face broke into a warm smile as he spread his arms. "Happy birthday, my queens."

Both girls ran forward, embracing him. The warmth of their father's embrace was familiar, comforting, but today felt different. The hall seemed to hum with expectation, as though the very stones of the castle were listening.

The High Priestess stepped forward, raising her staff, and the room fell silent.

"It is time," she announced solemnly. Her gaze moved to Lileth first. "Princess Lileth, step forward."

Lileth inhaled sharply, squaring her shoulders. This was the moment she had trained for her entire life.

“Princess Lileth,” the High Priestess intoned, “do you take the Oath of the Crown? Do you swear that upon the completion of the Choosing, you will serve your palace, your kingdom, and its people, in accordance with the laws and traditions of our ancestors?”

“Yes, High Priestess,” Lileth replied, her voice clear and steady.

“Then step forward, and let destiny find you.”

The entire court watched in hushed silence as Lileth walked the ceremonial path toward the inner throne room. The torches flickered as the massive doors closed behind her, leaving the hall tense and quiet.

Minutes turned into half an hour. Whispers began to ripple through the crowd.

“What is taking so long?” the King muttered, his fingers tightening around the hilt of his sword.

Then, the doors opened.

Lileth emerged, her expression unreadable — a storm of emotions flickering across her face. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“She... she was not chosen,” someone whispered.

Gasps spread through the room like wildfire.

Lileth’s jaw tightened. Before anyone could comfort her, Payath stepped forward instinctively, reaching for her sister — but Lileth shoved her hand away.

“You always look at me like I’m weak!” Lileth snapped, her voice cracking. “Like I can never be enough!”

“Lileth...” the King said softly, stepping toward her. But she turned her back, hiding her tears.

Payath’s heart twisted. She wanted to speak, to tell her sister it wasn’t true, but the words stuck in her throat.

“Princess Payath,” the High Priestess said gently, “it is your turn.”

Payath froze. Her feet felt heavy, her throat dry. She didn’t want to hurt Lileth further. *What if I am chosen? How can I look at her again?*

The King caught her eye and gave a small nod of reassurance. With a deep breath, Payath stepped forward.

“I take the oath,” she said quietly.

The path before her glowed faintly as she entered the inner room. Inside, the air felt charged, as if the very walls were breathing. The path split into two glowing trails, one gold, one silver.

“Follow where your heart leads,” a whisper echoed, though no one was there.

She hesitated, then chose the silver path. The wind stirred, swirling around her until she reached a single ancient door. Her hand trembled as she pushed it open.

A blinding light engulfed her.

When it dimmed, she was standing once again in the main hall. Everyone stared.

“Well?” the High Priestess asked.

Payath hesitated. She glanced at Lileth, who sat rigid, eyes red from crying.

“No,” Payath said softly. “I saw nothing. I just... walked in circles until I was back here.”

A murmur of disappointment filled the hall.

That evening, the King gathered his people in the grand dining hall. “Whether chosen or not,” he declared, “my daughters are the heart of this kingdom. Together, they will lead us into a new age of peace.”

The room cheered, but Payath’s mind was elsewhere. She smiled faintly at Lileth across the table.

“We’ll make Mother proud,” Lileth whispered, her tone softer now.

Payath forced a smile. “Yes. We will.”

Later that night, Payath sat in her chambers, staring at her reflection. The ceremony replayed over and over in her mind. *That light... what was it?*

She slipped into her bath, trying to calm herself, but her thoughts only grew louder. By the time she fell asleep, her mind was restless.

Darkness stretched before her. She was running, breathless, through an unknown land. Shadows clawed at her heels, devouring everything she left behind.

“No!” she cried, stumbling. Pain shot through her ankle as she fell. The darkness surged closer.

A sudden beam of light shot from her hand, striking the shadow. It shrieked and vanished into smoke.

Payath gasped awake, heart pounding.

A loud crash echoed through the room — a vase had shattered.

Her hand glowed faintly. A small orb of light hovered above her palm.

“I... I’m the chosen one,” she whispered, fear and wonder mingling in her voice.

Chapter Two – The Prince of Nareen

Morning dawned bright and clear, but Payath did not feel at peace.

She had woken with a start — no glowing hand this time — yet her heart was still heavy. The dream from last night lingered like smoke in her memory. The beam of light she had conjured, the way it scattered the darkness, had felt so real.

She stood at her balcony, clutching the railing as the castle stirred to life. Servants hurried below, carrying linens and banners, polishing silver, sweeping the courtyard.

“What now?” she whispered to herself.

A soft knock came at her chamber door.

“Princess?” called Liana, her maid. “Your father requests you join him in the courtyard. There is an important guest arriving.”

Payath frowned. “Who?”

“The prince of Nareen, my lady. Prince Kaelen.”

Payath’s heart skipped. *Kaelen...*

Memories rose unbidden — a dark-haired boy laughing as he tumbled into the mud after Lileth pushed him, the three of them playing tag in the palace gardens, hiding behind the rose bushes and pretending they were fearsome warriors.

She had not seen him since she was five.

The Arrival

The courtyard bustled with energy as the royal carriage of Nareen rolled in, pulled by four magnificent white horses. The guards saluted as the door opened and a tall young man stepped out.

Kaelen had grown taller, his boyish face now framed by sharp, elegant features. His dark hair brushed just above his storm-gray eyes. He wore a deep green tunic lined with gold, the sigil of Nareen embroidered proudly on his chest, and at his hip hung a curved sword that gleamed in the sunlight.

When his gaze found Payath, he smiled — not the mischievous grin of childhood, but something warmer, older.

“Princess Payath,” he said with a graceful bow. “You’ve grown.”

She inclined her head, suddenly very aware of the way her hair fell over her shoulders. “Prince Kaelen. Welcome back to our castle.”

Lileth appeared at her side, her chin lifted proudly. “You’re taller,” she observed.

“And you are just as bold,” Kaelen replied with a faint grin.

The King embraced him warmly. “Kaelen, you’ve grown into a fine young man. It does my heart well to see you here.”

Kaelen smiled. “My father sends his regards — and his gratitude for the invitation. He hopes this visit will strengthen the bond between our kingdoms.”

The Feast

That evening, the grand dining hall blazed with candles and the scent of roasted meats. Nobles from across the kingdom filled the long tables, eager to meet the visiting prince.

Kaelen sat at the King’s right, with Payath across from him and Lileth just beside her. The air was filled with chatter and laughter.

“You’re quiet, Princess Payath,” Kaelen said softly across the table.

“She is always quiet,” Lileth said with a teasing smirk. “She prefers to hide in the library.”

Payath shot her sister a glare, but Kaelen only chuckled. “Then I imagine she’s learned much more than I have. My tutors never let me sit still.”

The conversation shifted to tales of Nareen, its lush forests and hot springs, its famed dueling tournaments. When one of the nobles asked about the young prince’s training as a Chosen, Kaelen’s expression changed slightly — pride flickering in his eyes.

“I received the flame two years ago,” he said. “Would you like to see?”

Gasps of excitement rippled through the hall.

Kaelen stood, holding out one hand. At first, nothing happened. Then, a small flame flickered to life above his palm, dancing like a living creature. He closed his fingers, and the flame expanded into a swirling sphere of fire that hovered in the air. With a twist of his wrist, he sent it floating in a slow circle above the table, casting a warm glow on the nobles’ faces.

Some applauded. Others murmured in awe.

“That is impressive,” one lord said, nodding approvingly.

“It’s just showing off,” Lileth teased, though her eyes betrayed a spark of admiration.

Kaelen smirked, closing his fist to extinguish the fire. “Perhaps. But sometimes a little spectacle is needed to remind us of the gifts we carry.”

Payath forced a smile, her hands hidden under the table. The memory of her own glowing palm burned in her mind.

A Moment in the Gardens

After the feast, Payath excused herself, needing air. She slipped into the castle gardens, the moon casting silver light on the fountains and flowers.

“Leaving so soon?”

She turned to see Kaelen leaning casually against the marble archway, his gray eyes glinting.

“You startled me,” she said, pulling her cloak tighter.

“Forgive me.” He stepped closer, the faint smell of smoke clinging to him. “I used to find you here when we were children. Do you still come to hide?”

“I am not hiding,” Payath said quickly.

Kaelen chuckled softly. “No? Then why do you look so troubled?”

She hesitated, unable to answer.

He didn’t press further, instead glancing toward the fountain. “It’s strange, being back here. When we were children, this garden felt endless.”

Payath allowed herself a small smile. “You once claimed there was a dragon hiding in the hedge maze.”

“And you believed me.”

“You swore you saw smoke!”

“I did,” he said with mock seriousness. “Or perhaps I was simply destined for fire all along.”

His words made her chest tighten. *Destined for fire... and I am destined for light.* But she said nothing.

Lileth's Watchful Eyes

Their moment was interrupted by the sound of footsteps.

“Payath?” Lileth’s voice called from the path. She stepped into view, her expression unreadable.

“You disappeared,” she said.

“I needed air,” Payath replied softly.

Lileth’s gaze shifted to Kaelen. “And you found him waiting?”

Kaelen grinned. “I was merely keeping your sister company. I wouldn’t want her to be lonely.”

Lileth rolled her eyes. “You haven’t changed.”

“Perhaps not.”

“Father is looking for you both,” Lileth said, brushing past them. “The council wishes to meet tonight. Something about trouble on the borders.”

Payath exchanged a quick glance with Kaelen. Trouble on the borders?

The Council Meeting

The council chamber was filled with tension. Messengers had brought dire news from the northern frontiers: villages destroyed, livestock gone, crops ruined.

“This is no ordinary raid,” one of the lords said gravely. “No footprints. No survivors. Just ashes.”

The King’s face darkened. “Send more scouts. We must know who — or what — is responsible.”

The High Priestess’s voice broke the murmurs. “There are signs, Your Majesty. Shadows moving where no light can reach. This is not the work of men.”

Payath’s heart skipped. *Shadows... just like my dream.*

Lileth noticed her sister’s pale face but said nothing.

“We will increase patrols,” the King declared. “And we will prepare for whatever is coming.”

That night, Payath returned to her chambers, her thoughts spinning. The shadow in her dream. The news from the borders. Kaelen's fire demonstration.

She stared at her hands in the moonlight.

"I can't tell them," she whispered. "Not yet."

She climbed into bed, but sleep was slow to come. When it did, the dream returned — the darkness chasing her, the light bursting from her hand.

Only this time, she heard a voice in the distance, calling her name.

Chapter Three – The Accidental Spark

The next day dawned warm and golden, the sun spilling over the castle courtyard like liquid light. It was one of those rare, quiet mornings when no formal duties pressed upon the princesses, no council meetings were called, and the air itself seemed to hum with possibility.

Payath was grateful for the stillness. She had barely slept — her dreams had been filled with flickering shadows and chasing footsteps. She woke feeling as if she had been running all night.

At breakfast, Lileth was in high spirits.

“You look like a ghost,” she teased, biting into a slice of honeyed bread. “Was the moon keeping you awake again?”

Payath gave a faint shrug, unwilling to explain. “Just a restless night.”

Kaelen, seated across from them, arched an eyebrow. “A restless night is a sign of too much idleness. Perhaps you both need to get out of this hall and into the fresh air.”

Lileth smirked. “And what do you suggest, oh mighty prince? A royal stroll through the gardens?”

“No,” Kaelen said with a mischievous grin. “Something far better. A lesson. You spend your days reading scrolls and being pampered by servants. You should learn how to handle a sword.”

Lileth perked up immediately, setting down her cup. “A challenge? Now that sounds like fun.”

Payath frowned. “You can’t be serious.”

“Completely serious,” Kaelen said, leaning back in his chair. “When danger comes — and it will — you should both know how to defend yourselves.”

Lileth grinned. “Then you’d better be ready, Prince Kaelen. I won’t go easy on you.”

The Evening Training

By sunset, the courtyard had been transformed into a makeshift training arena. Guards had cleared the center, laying out wooden practice swords, shields, and training dummies. Torches burned along the edges of the yard, casting golden light across the stone.

Kaelen stood at the center, spinning a wooden sword with effortless grace. “Who’s first?”

“Me,” Lileth said, stepping forward without hesitation. She rolled her shoulders, her braid swinging behind her as she picked up a sword.

Payath remained near the edge of the courtyard, arms crossed as she watched.

“This is going to be good,” Lileth said, flashing her sister a grin before facing Kaelen.

They circled each other for a moment, then Kaelen lunged first, his movements quick and controlled. Lileth blocked clumsily but recovered, pushing back with a determined cry.

The clash of wood echoed across the courtyard. Lileth was fast, but Kaelen was faster — his strikes fluid, almost playful. Within minutes, he had her disarmed, the tip of his practice sword resting lightly against her shoulder.

“Yield?” Kaelen asked, smirking.

Lileth blew out a frustrated breath but smiled. “Fine. You win.”

The onlookers — a few guards, some curious servants — clapped politely.

“That was a good fight,” Kaelen said, lowering his weapon. “You’re quick. With training, you’d be formidable.”

Lileth tossed her hair and laughed. “You’re still a show-off.”

“Perhaps,” Kaelen said with a shrug. “But it was fun.”

He glanced over his shoulder. Payath was still standing where she had been, silent and still.

“What about you?” Kaelen called to her. “Do you wish to try?”

Payath’s stomach twisted. “No, thank you.”

“Oh, come now,” Kaelen said, walking toward her. “It’s only practice. I’ll go easy.”

“I don’t fight,” she said softly.

“That is exactly why you should try,” Kaelen replied, tossing his sword lightly in one hand. “A princess who never learns to defend herself is a danger to her own kingdom.”

Payath frowned. “I am not a danger.”

Kaelen grinned, teasing now. “Then prove it. Here.”

He tossed a wooden sword toward her feet.

Payath stared at it, then shook her head. “I’d rather not.”

“Afraid?” he asked, arching a brow.

“No!” Payath said sharply.

“Then show me.”

She hesitated. Something in Kaelen’s eyes — not mocking, not cruel, just challenging — made her sigh and step forward. She picked up the wooden sword, its weight strange in her hands.

“Hold it like this,” Kaelen instructed, stepping close and gently adjusting her grip. His fingers brushed hers briefly, sending an odd shiver through her.

“That’s better,” he said, stepping back. “Now, let’s see what you can do.”

The Accidental Spark

Kaelen kept his movements slow, giving her time to react. He tapped her sword lightly, testing her stance. Payath blocked awkwardly, nearly dropping the weapon.

“You’re too stiff,” he said with a chuckle. “Relax your arms. Fighting isn’t about brute strength — it’s about balance.”

She tried again, stepping to the side as he advanced. The clash of wood echoed softly, and for a moment, she almost enjoyed it — until Kaelen feinted suddenly, lunging toward her with a playful grin.

Payath gasped, fear flashing through her.

And then it happened.

A blinding pulse of light burst from her hand, striking Kaelen’s sword with a sharp crack. The wooden blade sparked and smoked, and Kaelen stumbled back, blinking against the flash.

The entire courtyard fell silent.

Payath’s breath came fast and shallow. The sword dropped from her trembling hands, clattering against the stones.

Kaelen looked down at his weapon. The wood was scorched where the light had struck, a faint golden glow still fading along the grain.

He looked back up at her slowly, gray eyes narrowing — not in anger, but in fascination.

“What was that?” he asked softly.

“I—I don’t know,” Payath stammered, taking a step back. “I didn’t mean to—”

She turned and fled the courtyard before anyone could stop her.

Kaelen's Suspicion

Kaelen stood frozen for a moment, staring after her. Then he glanced at the sword again, running his thumb over the blackened mark.

A slow smile curved his lips.

“So,” he murmured to himself, “there is more to you than you let on.”

Payath's Retreat

Payath didn't stop running until she reached the gardens. Her heart pounded as she collapsed by the fountain, pressing her glowing hands into the cold marble until the light finally faded.

Tears pricked her eyes. *What have I done?*

She had tried so hard to keep it hidden — for Lileth's sake, for her father's sake. And now Kaelen had seen it.

Would he tell? Would the whole castle know by morning?

She hugged her knees to her chest, rocking slightly as the torches in the courtyard flickered in the distance.

That night, Payath lay awake long after the candles had burned out, staring at the ceiling. Her secret was no longer entirely her own.

Somewhere else in the castle, Kaelen sat by his window, turning the scorched wooden sword over in his hands.

He smiled faintly to himself.

Tomorrow, he would speak to her.

Chapter Four – Secrets in the Dark

The morning after the courtyard incident arrived with gray clouds that swallowed the sun. The castle felt heavier somehow, quieter, as though it, too, sensed the weight on Payath's heart.

She sat on the edge of her bed, her fingers pressed to her temples. Sleep had come in broken waves, filled with flashes of light and Kaelen's startled expression burned into her mind.

The vase from last night still lay shattered in the corner. Payath hadn't called for the servants to clean it. She couldn't bear for anyone to see.

You have to pull yourself together, she told herself. No one saw except Kaelen. No one has to know.

When breakfast was served, she did not join her father or sister in the great hall. She couldn't stand the thought of Lileth asking questions or teasing her about running away from training. Instead, she asked the maid to leave a tray in her chambers and stayed locked away until nearly midday.

But Kaelen did not stay away.

Kaelen in the Gardens

He found her just after the noon bells. She was sitting in the rose garden, hidden under the carved stone gazebo, her knees drawn to her chest.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said casually as he stepped into the shade.

Payath flinched and looked up sharply. "What do you want?"

Kaelen leaned against one of the gazebo pillars, arms folded across his chest. "To talk."

"There's nothing to talk about," Payath said quickly, lowering her gaze.

Kaelen smirked faintly. "That's not true. Something happened last night, and I know you felt it."

Payath's chest tightened. "You shouldn't have followed me."

"You ran from the courtyard like you'd seen a ghost," Kaelen said. His voice wasn't mocking — it was calm, curious. "You burned my sword with a flash of light from your bare hands. That's not something a person just ignores."

Payath's throat went dry. "It was... an accident."

“Maybe,” Kaelen said. “But accidents don’t leave scorch marks.”

She looked away, hugging her knees tighter. “I didn’t ask for this.”

Kaelen softened his voice. “Neither did I.”

That made her glance back at him, confused.

He stepped closer and slowly lifted one hand. A small flame bloomed in his palm, dancing lazily in the air without burning him. The warm light flickered across Payath’s startled face.

“This is what I am,” Kaelen said quietly. “Fire has been a part of me since I was thirteen. At first, I thought it was a curse. I was afraid to touch anything — afraid I’d burn my own bed in my sleep. But my people trained me. They taught me control.”

He closed his fist, and the flame vanished as if it had never been there.

“You don’t have to be afraid of yourself,” he said.

Payath shook her head. “You don’t understand. If anyone finds out—”

“No one has to know,” Kaelen interrupted gently. “Not yet. But you have to understand what you are. Otherwise, this power will keep breaking out when you least expect it. And next time, it could hurt someone.”

Payath swallowed hard. His words made sense, but the fear still clung to her chest like a vice. “I don’t know how to control it.”

“That’s why I’m offering to help,” Kaelen said. “Let me teach you. Just a little. Enough so you don’t hurt yourself.”

For a long moment, Payath said nothing. Then she slowly shook her head. “I can’t. I can’t face it right now.”

Kaelen exhaled and stepped back. “All right. But running from it won’t make it go away.”

He left her then, the sound of his boots crunching against the gravel path until it faded.

The Feast Preparations

That afternoon, the castle grew lively as preparations for the king’s private feast began. Long tables were carried into the banquet hall, banners polished, goblets arranged. The feast was meant to honor Kaelen’s visit, as well as strengthen the ties between their two kingdoms.

Payath watched from the edge of the hall as servants bustled about. She tried to appear calm, but her hands still trembled faintly.

Lileth found her there and nudged her playfully. “You missed breakfast. Are you feeling ill?”

Payath forced a small smile. “Just tired.”

Lileth didn’t look entirely convinced, but she didn’t press. “Well, you’d better have your energy for tonight. Father has invited several neighboring lords. There will be music, dancing... and probably a lot of talk about Kaelen.”

Payath’s stomach knotted. “Kaelen?”

Lileth grinned. “You must have noticed — he’s been everywhere lately. Training in the courtyard, helping the guards, talking to Father. It’s like he thinks he lives here.”

Payath turned away quickly, hiding her expression. “He’s just being polite.”

“Mm,” Lileth said, eyeing her suspiciously, but let it drop.

The Feast

By evening, the hall glowed with candlelight. Minstrels played soft music as servants brought in roasted meats, warm bread, and spiced wine.

Kaelen sat beside the king, his posture easy but his eyes alert. When he caught Payath’s gaze from across the table, he gave a small nod — not smug, just acknowledging her presence.

It was almost comforting.

Halfway through the feast, one of the lords requested to see Kaelen’s gift again — a spectacle for entertainment.

Kaelen obliged, conjuring a thin spiral of fire that danced through the air, twisting into shapes before fading away.

The hall erupted into applause.

Lileth clapped and leaned toward Payath with a grin. “Show-off,” she whispered.

Kaelen’s eyes flicked briefly toward Payath as though to gauge her reaction. Payath kept her expression carefully neutral, even as her heart pounded.

Late-Night Confrontation

When the feast ended, Payath tried to slip away quietly. But as she turned down the corridor leading to her room, she heard footsteps behind her.

“Running away again?” Kaelen’s voice was soft, not mocking this time.

Payath turned sharply. “You shouldn’t follow me.”

“I’m not following you,” Kaelen said, stepping closer. “I’m making sure you don’t go through this alone.”

Payath’s composure cracked. “Why do you even care?”

Kaelen hesitated, then said simply, “Because I know what it feels like to be terrified of what you are. And I know what happens if you ignore it too long. The power eats you alive.”

Payath froze, his words striking too close to the dreams that had been haunting her.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” she whispered.

“Then let me help you,” Kaelen said.

Payath didn’t answer. She turned and entered her chambers, closing the door between them.

The Dream

That night, the darkness came again.

She was running through the same endless forest, her breath ragged, the shadows closing in behind her.

But this time, she heard a voice — deep and resonant, like the toll of a distant bell.

Let the light through.

Payath stumbled, clutching her chest as the voice repeated it, louder this time.

LET THE LIGHT THROUGH.

Her hands blazed with white fire. The darkness shrieked and recoiled — but before she could release it, she woke with a gasp, sitting upright in bed.

Her hands were glowing faintly in the darkness.

And then she heard it — a knock at her door.

“Payath?”

It was Kaelen’s voice, quiet but urgent.

She froze.

“Are you awake?”

The light in her hands pulsed once, as though answering him.

When she didn’t respond, the door creaked open slowly. Kaelen stepped inside, his expression serious. His eyes went straight to her glowing hands.

“It’s happening again,” he said softly.

Payath stared at him, unable to deny it this time.

And for the first time, she didn’t look away.

Chapter Five – Shadows Beyond the Gate

The High Priestess Wakes

The night was heavy with silence when the High Priestess awoke. Her eyes flew open as if something had shaken her, though the room was still. The air smelled strange, like smoke just after a candle has been snuffed.

She sat upright and reached for the copper bowl by her bed. With quick, practiced motions, she poured water into it and whispered the old words that had been passed down for generations. The water rippled unnaturally, darkening until her own reflection disappeared.

A moment later, a shadow bloomed within the bowl — long, black tendrils reaching out as though to break free. The flame from the nearby oil lamp sputtered, then flared red.

The High Priestess' jaw tightened. *It has begun*, she thought grimly.

Without delay, she threw on her ceremonial cloak and hurried to the temple chamber. She knelt before the altar, whispering prayers until the fire steadied again — but it no longer burned its usual gold. It burned an ominous deep orange, as though warning her.

Payath's Uneasy Morning

Payath woke the next morning with a strange ache in her chest. The dream had been stronger than ever — the shadow closer, the voice louder.

She pressed her palms together. The faintest trace of light lingered between them before fading.

There was a knock at her door.

“Princess?” It was her maid. “Your father requests that you and the Lady Lileth join him in the great hall. We have a guest.”

Payath quickly dressed and hurried downstairs, her heart hammering. She wasn't sure if she was ready to face Kaelen after last night, but she had no choice.

The Arrival of Prince Darien

The great hall was already buzzing when she arrived. Her father sat proudly on his throne, Kaelen to his right. And standing before them was someone Payath had never seen before.

Prince Darien.

He was taller than Kaelen, with sharp cheekbones, dark hair that brushed his collar, and eyes like polished stone. His traveling cloak was still dusted from the road, but even so he carried himself with quiet dignity.

“Ah, my second daughter joins us,” the king said warmly. “Payath, this is Prince Darien of the Mountain Kingdom.”

Darien turned toward her and bowed slightly. “An honor, Princess.”

Payath dipped her head politely, though her curiosity stirred.

Lileth, ever bolder, smiled brightly. “We did not expect visitors. What brings you here, my lord?”

Darien’s mouth quirked in the faintest smile. “Our borders have been... restless. Strange disappearances. My father thought it wise to visit and warn our allies, to see if you have faced the same.”

The king’s brow furrowed. “Our outer patrols have reported no disturbances, though there have been whispers from traders of shadows on the roads.”

Kaelen’s gaze sharpened.

Darien glanced between them, as though weighing his words. “The mountain passes are not safe. We lost three guards last fortnight to something unseen. My father fears it is no ordinary raider band.”

Payath felt a chill creep down her spine.

Feast Hall Tensions

By evening, a small dinner was held for Darien. The long table was laid with venison, bread, and spiced wine. Lileth sat beside Darien, clearly enjoying the conversation, while Kaelen remained more reserved, occasionally glancing at Payath as though checking if she was all right.

Midway through the meal, one of the lords asked Kaelen if the rumors about his “gift” were true.

Kaelen smiled faintly and extended a hand, letting a thin ribbon of flame curl above his palm.

The guests gasped softly, some clapping.

“That’s incredible,” one of the lords said.

Lileth smirked and nudged Darien. “Impressive, is it not?”

Darien's expression was unreadable. "Impressive, yes. But dangerous, if left unchecked."

Kaelen met his gaze, a flicker of challenge passing between them.

"Control is what matters," Kaelen said evenly.

Payath kept her face calm, but her fingers twisted nervously under the table. Every time Kaelen called fire, she felt the faintest spark ripple through her, as if her own light wanted to respond.

Disturbance at the Gate

Just as dessert was being cleared, a guard burst into the hall, panting.

"Your Majesty — the patrols report movement near the eastern woods. Three scouts have not returned. The survivors claim... they claim they saw shadows moving on their own."

The hall fell silent.

The king rose. "Double the guards at the gates. No one enters or leaves the palace grounds tonight without my order."

Darien straightened. "If you wish, I can send one of my own men to investigate at first light."

"That would be wise," the king agreed.

Payath's Fear

Later that night, Payath stood on her balcony, staring at the dark line of trees in the distance. She could almost feel something there, watching, waiting.

"Are you going to keep ignoring it?"

She jumped. Kaelen was standing in the shadows of her balcony, arms crossed.

"Kaelen!" she hissed.

"I told you," he said quietly, stepping closer. "The dreams are warnings. Whatever hunts you there is getting closer here."

Payath's throat went dry. "I can't just tell my father—"

"I'm not asking you to tell him," Kaelen said. "I'm asking you to be ready. If it comes here, you won't have time to think."

He knelt and drew a practice circle on the stone floor with a piece of chalk. “Just one exercise. Focus. Call the light on purpose instead of waiting for it to strike by accident.”

Payath hesitated — then stepped into the circle.

First Training Attempt

Kaelen guided her breathing, telling her to close her eyes and imagine the warmth of the sun filling her chest.

At first, nothing happened. Then, slowly, a faint glow built under her skin.

“Good,” Kaelen said softly. “Now let it out — gently.”

A small sphere of light formed in her palm before fizzling out.

Payath gasped. “I did it.”

Kaelen smiled faintly. “Yes. And you’ll do it again. Tomorrow. And the next day. Until you can call it without fear.”

Before Payath could reply, a sudden, icy wind swept across the courtyard. The torches along the walls guttered and went out one by one.

Payath’s light flared instinctively, bathing the stones in pale gold.

Kaelen’s eyes widened — not at her, but at what stood at the far end of the courtyard.

A figure cloaked in shifting shadows.

The Shadow Messenger

It did not move forward, but its presence was suffocating.

Kaelen stepped in front of Payath, his sword drawn, fire blooming in his other hand.

“Show yourself,” he growled.

The shadow tilted its head. A voice, low and cold, filled the courtyard though its mouth never moved.

“The light bearer is waking. Soon, she must choose. Or we will come and choose for her.”

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the shadow dissolved into mist and vanished into the night.

Ending Scene

The courtyard fell silent again.

Payath clutched Kaelen's arm, breathing hard. "What did it mean?"

Kaelen sheathed his sword slowly. "It means we don't have as much time as I thought."

He turned toward her, firelight still flickering in his palm.

"We train tomorrow. At dawn."

Payath nodded silently, her heart hammering.

Somewhere beyond the walls, the forest seemed to whisper — as though the darkness was laughing.

Chapter Six – Shadows on the Road

The sun had barely risen when Payath was shaken awake.

“Get up,” Kaelen said, his voice low but firm. “We train. Now.”

Payath blinked, still half-asleep. “Kaelen, it’s dawn—”

“Exactly,” he interrupted, already handing her her boots. “No one will be awake yet to ask questions. Come.”

Still groggy, she followed him out of the palace, moving through the servants’ corridors until they reached a secluded courtyard. The stone floor was damp with morning dew, and the air was crisp enough to make her shiver.

Kaelen knelt, drew a circle in the dirt with the tip of his dagger, and motioned her to step inside. “Breathe,” he instructed. “Feel it in your chest. Don’t fight it. Invite it.”

Payath closed her eyes, inhaled slowly, and imagined the warmth of sunlight spreading through her body. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, her palms began to glow faintly, as though a candle was being lit from within her.

“Yes,” Kaelen murmured. “Good. Hold it steady.”

The light grew stronger until a small orb floated above her hand. It flickered like a lantern in the wind before vanishing with a soft pop.

Payath exhaled shakily. “I... did it.”

Kaelen smiled, pride flashing in his eyes. “Better than last night. Again.”

They repeated the exercise until Payath managed to sustain the orb for nearly a full minute. When she finally collapsed onto the grass, Kaelen offered her a hand and pulled her up.

“Every day we do this,” he said. “Until you can call it without thinking.”

Before Payath could reply, a voice called from across the courtyard. “So this is where you sneak off to.”

Both of them turned. Prince Darien was leaning casually against a column, his cloak still fastened at his shoulders, though his eyes were sharp and questioning.

Kaelen straightened, his expression neutral. “Training,” he said shortly. “For the princess’ safety.”

Darien’s gaze lingered on Payath, then on the faint scorch marks left by Kaelen’s practice fire. “Training before sunrise?” he said slowly. “Interesting.”

Payath forced a polite smile. “We should all be ready,” she said carefully. “With everything happening.”

Darien studied her for a moment longer, then nodded and walked away. Kaelen let out a slow breath.

“He suspects,” Payath said quietly.

“Let him suspect,” Kaelen replied. “As long as he doesn’t know.”

The Summons

By midday, the king summoned them all to the great hall. His face was grave. “News has come from the eastern road,” he said. “A merchant caravan was found destroyed. No bodies. No survivors.”

The hall went silent.

“I will send a patrol to investigate,” the king continued. “Kaelen, you will ride with them. Darien, I would have you go as well — your kingdom has been reporting similar attacks.”

Darien inclined his head. “I will ride.”

Payath took a breath. “Father, let me go too.”

The king frowned. “No, Payath. This is not a matter for—”

“She should see what we are facing,” Kaelen interrupted carefully. “If she is to help lead this kingdom one day, she must understand the dangers beyond the walls.”

The king hesitated, then sighed. “Very well. But you stay close to Kaelen. No heroics.”

Payath nodded quickly, heart pounding. This would be her first time leaving the palace grounds since the birthday ceremony.

The Road

The ride was long and tense. Darien rode near the front with Kaelen, while Payath followed on a palfrey, flanked by guards. The road twisted through fields and into the sparse woods, where the light dimmed and the air grew unnervingly still.

They found the remains of the caravan near sunset. The wagons were smashed, wheels broken, goods scattered. But there was no sign of blood, only long claw-like gouges in the earth.

“This was no bandit attack,” Darien said grimly, dismounting. “Whatever did this... dragged them away.”

Kaelen crouched, touching the dirt. “Shadows,” he muttered.

Payath shivered, glancing around. The trees seemed to be watching them.

“Stay alert,” Kaelen said sharply.

The Ambush

It happened quickly. The air grew cold, the horses restless. Then, without warning, black shapes leapt from the treeline — not human, not animal, but something in between, all teeth and claws and smoke.

“Defensive line!” Kaelen shouted.

The guards raised their shields, Darien drew his sword, and Kaelen’s hand erupted in flame. Fire arced across the clearing, cutting down two of the creatures, but more took their place.

One of them broke through the line and lunged straight for Payath.

She stumbled back, heart racing, and for a split second saw nothing but darkness closing around her — just like in her dreams. Her fear ignited something inside her.

Light exploded from her hands.

The blast was so bright it blinded everyone for a moment. When it faded, the creature that had been about to strike her was gone, reduced to ash.

Silence followed, broken only by the hiss of Kaelen’s flames as he drove off the last of the attackers.

Aftermath

Everyone stared at Payath. The light still glowed faintly around her fingers, flickering like a dying star.

Darien was the first to speak. “What was that?”

Kaelen stepped forward before Payath could answer. “A reflection of my fire,” he said smoothly. “I must have startled it close to her.”

Darien's brow furrowed. "That was no fire I've seen."

"Magic behaves strangely around shadows," Kaelen said sharply. "We should return before more come."

Payath stayed silent, her heart still pounding.

The Ride Back

On the way back, Darien kept glancing at her as though trying to puzzle her out. Kaelen rode close, murmuring under his breath so only she could hear.

"You did well," he said. "But next time, focus. Don't let fear control it."

"I didn't mean to—" she began.

"I know. That's why we keep training. You're stronger than you think, Payath. But if anyone finds out too soon, you'll be in danger — not just from the shadows, but from those who would use you."

She nodded silently, gripping the reins until her knuckles turned white.

Lileth's Suspicion

When they arrived at the palace, Lileth was waiting at the gates. She rushed to Payath's side, looking her over for injuries.

"I'm fine," Payath said quickly.

But she could feel Lileth's eyes on her, sharp and curious. "The guards said there was a... flash," Lileth said slowly. "A light that saved you."

Payath's mouth went dry. "It was Kaelen's fire," she said quickly. "That's all."

Lileth's eyes narrowed, but she said nothing more, only turned and walked back toward the palace.

Nightfall

That night, Payath couldn't sleep. She stood at her balcony, staring at the dark forest beyond the walls.

Somewhere out there, the shadows were waiting. And now, they knew she was ready to fight.

A faint glow appeared around her hands again — small, trembling, but real.

She closed her fists, snuffing it out.

“Tomorrow,” she whispered. “I’ll be ready.”

Chapter Seven – Shadows at the Gate

(Approx. 3,500 words)

The sun rose late the next morning, as if reluctant to shine its warmth over a palace still shaken by the attack. The courtyard smelled of scorched earth where Kaelen's fire had burned, and the soldiers' boots left muddy trails as they hurried to repair the outer walls. The clang of hammers and the shouting of work crews filled the air.

From her balcony, Princess Payath watched them work. Her fingers were still trembling as she gripped the railing. Every time she blinked, she could see the flash of light from the night before — that fierce, brilliant flare that had poured from her hands without warning. She had no idea how she had done it.

Her chamber door creaked open behind her.

“Good morning, Payath.”

Kaelen's voice was soft, but steady. The prince stepped inside, dressed not in his formal court clothes but in training leathers, his dark hair tied back. There was soot still clinging to his boots from the night before.

“You didn't have to cover for me,” she said quietly without turning.

“Yes, I did.” He walked over, leaning on the railing next to her. “If anyone had seen that light clearly, they would be asking questions right now. Questions we don't have answers for yet.”

Payath turned to face him, her eyes worried. “How much longer can we hide it? What if it happens again and I can't control it?”

“Then we teach you to control it.”

She blinked. “Teach me?”

Kaelen smiled faintly. “You think fire is my only weapon? I've been training with elemental wielders since I was old enough to hold a blade. Light and fire are closer than you think — both burn, both illuminate. If you want, I can help.”

Her heart skipped. It felt dangerous, even rebellious, but she nodded. “Yes... I want that.”

“Good,” Kaelen said. “But not here. Too many ears in the palace. Meet me in the eastern training yard after midday meal. We'll keep it quiet.”

Before Payath could answer, a knock sounded at the door.

“Payath? Are you awake?”

It was Lileth. Kaelen gave Payath one last glance and slipped out through the side door that led toward the servant's hallway. Payath quickly brushed her hair and tried to school her face into something resembling calm.

"Come in," she called.

Lileth entered, still in her silk morning robe, her golden hair braided down her back. Her eyes were soft with concern.

"You look pale," Lileth said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "I wanted to check on you after last night."

Payath sat beside her sister, forcing a small smile. "I'm fine, really. Just... tired."

Lileth reached for her hand and squeezed it gently. "You don't have to be brave all the time. No one expected you to fight off those creatures — you were scared. That's normal."

Payath's throat tightened. She wished she could tell Lileth everything — how the light had come from her own hands, how terrified she was of what it meant. Instead, she just nodded.

"I'm glad you're safe," Lileth said softly. "That's what matters."

They sat together for a while in comfortable silence, the bond between them as strong as ever, though guilt gnawed at Payath's heart like a restless fox.

The Secret Lesson

That afternoon, Payath slipped away as planned, her guards believing she had gone to the library. The eastern training yard was quieter than usual, shielded from the main courtyard by high hedges and old stone walls.

Kaelen was already there, leaning against a post with two wooden practice swords resting nearby.

"Relax," he said when he saw her nervous expression. "I didn't bring you here to fight. Not yet."

"What do we do then?"

"Focus." Kaelen stepped closer. "Close your eyes. Think about what you felt last night just before the light appeared."

Payath obeyed, her lashes fluttering shut. She remembered the terror, the darkness closing in, the desperate wish to make it stop.

“Now,” Kaelen said, “instead of fear, think of something that gives you strength.”

Images of her mother’s smile floated into her mind, then the sound of Lileth’s laughter, the warm glow of the castle halls during their birthdays. Something stirred in her chest.

When she opened her eyes, a tiny bead of light hovered above her palm.

She gasped.

“That’s it,” Kaelen said, grinning. “Hold it steady.”

The orb flickered but stayed. Payath stared, wonder and fear mingling in her chest.

“You’re doing better than I expected,” he said. “Most wielders take weeks to summon on command. You’re... gifted.”

Payath let the light fade and swallowed hard. “I don’t feel gifted. I feel like I’m about to be found out.”

“Then we keep this between us. For now.” Kaelen’s expression grew serious. “When the time is right, we’ll tell them. But not yet. If the wrong people hear of this before you’re ready, they might try to use you — or destroy you.”

The thought sent a chill down her spine.

A Growing Threat

That evening, as the princesses joined their father for supper, the atmosphere was tense. Darien stood near the king’s chair, speaking in a low, urgent voice.

“We can’t keep patching the outer walls every time they strike,” Darien said. “The enemy is testing us, searching for weak points.”

“We’ve doubled the watch,” the king replied, his brow furrowed. “But we cannot guard everywhere at once.”

“The eastern borders are still vulnerable,” Darien pressed. “I suggest moving more troops there before the next moon.”

The High Priestess, seated at the king’s right, spoke for the first time. “Be cautious, my king. The enemy seeks to divide your strength. If you thin the western line too much, they will strike from the shadows where we least expect.”

It was a tense dinner. Payath barely touched her food, her mind replaying Kaelen's warning: *not yet*.

The Midnight Skirmish

Deep in the night, the palace woke to the sound of alarm bells. Guards shouted, boots thudded against the stone floors.

"Stay here," Lileth ordered Payath as she grabbed a sword from the wall.

But Payath's legs moved before she could think, carrying her toward the courtyard where fire already blazed against the night sky. Kaelen was there, his hands wreathed in flame, hurling fireballs that lit up the darkness. The creatures hissed and recoiled, their shadowy forms melting in the glow.

Payath's breath caught — she wanted to help, but fear rooted her in place. Her palms itched with energy, the same power as before threatening to spill over. She clenched her fists until her nails dug into her skin. *Not here. Not now.*

The battle was short but fierce. With Kaelen's fire and Darien's blade, the creatures were driven back beyond the gates.

When it was over, the courtyard was littered with ash and the acrid smell of burnt air.

Kaelen approached Payath, brushing soot from his hands. "You did well," he said quietly.

"I didn't do anything," she replied.

"You stayed hidden," he said firmly. "That's what matters."

She looked away, ashamed, but said nothing.

Sisterly Comfort

Later, back in their shared chambers, Lileth found Payath sitting on her bed, knees drawn to her chest.

"Are you hurt?" Lileth asked, sitting beside her.

Payath shook her head.

Lileth sighed softly. "You were so brave tonight, even if you didn't fight. Just being there took courage."

Payath smiled weakly. “You always know what to say.”

“That’s because I know you,” Lileth said, tucking a strand of hair behind Payath’s ear. “No matter what happens, we’ll face it together. Always.”

When Lileth left, Payath lay awake staring at her hands. Slowly, a tiny light appeared in her palm, flickering like a small star. She closed her fingers over it and whispered to herself:

“I hope you never have to know.”

Closing Scene

Far away, in the high tower of the temple, the High Priestess stood before the sacred fire, her eyes closed.

“The darkness grows bolder,” she murmured. “And soon, the Chosen will no longer be able to hide.”

Her words drifted into the wind, carrying a warning that no one yet understood.

~3500+ words draft

The night air was thick with expectation. From the highest tower to the farthest gate, the palace glowed with torchlight and lanterns. The moon had just begun to rise, enormous and silver, hanging like a watchful eye over the kingdom.

The High Priestess moved through the courtyard with silent purpose, her staff clicking softly against the polished stones. A group of priestesses followed her, sprinkling consecrated water across the temple steps and marking runes in white chalk. It was the night of the Sacred Moon Ritual — the most powerful rite performed in the kingdom since the twins were born.

Princess Payath stood near one of the great columns, watching the preparations with a knot in her stomach. Her sister Lileth stood beside her, practically buzzing with energy.

“Look at them,” Lileth whispered, her tone somewhere between wonder and impatience. “It feels like something out of the old songs. You think it’ll be like Mother’s ceremony?”

Payath swallowed hard. She hadn’t thought about that night in years — the night their mother had given her life bringing them into the world. This night was supposed to be one of protection, a celebration of their bloodline, but all Payath could think about was what would happen if her secret came to light.

“I don’t know,” she said softly.

Lileth turned to her with that familiar mischievous glint in her eyes. “Don’t look so grim. It’s supposed to be a blessing, remember? Besides, you should see your face — you look like you’re about to be executed.”

Payath forced a laugh. “I’m fine.”

“You are *never* fine when you say it like that.” Lileth hooked her arm through her sister’s and tugged her toward the balcony. The sky stretched wide and star-filled, the moon casting pale light over the hills.

For a moment, the weight in Payath’s chest loosened.

“You ever wonder,” Lileth said, resting her chin on the railing, “if she can see us? Mother, I mean. If she’s proud of us?”

Payath’s throat tightened. She didn’t trust herself to speak right away. “I think she can,” she said at last. “And yes — I think she is.”

Lileth smiled softly. “Then we better give her a good show tonight.”

Before Payath could respond, a trumpet sounded from the temple steps. It was time.

The Ritual Begins

The courtyard filled quickly — nobles, guards, servants, and priests all gathered in neat formation. The King stood tall in his ceremonial cloak, his crown gleaming. Kaelen and Prince Darien stood just behind the twins, both dressed in formal attire.

The High Priestess raised her staff, and silence fell like a blanket over the courtyard.

“On this sacred night,” she intoned, her voice carrying easily across the crowd, “we call upon the light of the moon, the keeper of balance, the shield of this kingdom. We ask for her blessing to protect these walls and all who dwell within.”

The air grew heavy. Even the torches seemed to burn more brightly. Payath’s palms prickled with heat, a familiar warning. Not now. Not here. She curled her hands into fists, forcing her breath to stay even.

The chanting began — low, rhythmic, powerful. Priestesses knelt in a circle, scattering white petals, and the runes on the stone began to glow faintly.

Beside her, Lileth’s face was alight with awe. “This is incredible,” she whispered.

But Payath barely heard her. Her body felt like it was vibrating, as though something deep within her was answering the chant. A faint shimmer began to form around her hands. She clasped them behind her back, heart hammering.

Kaelen’s hand brushed against her elbow — subtle, steady. She looked at him, and he nodded slightly. *Breathe.*

She tried. She really did. But the ritual’s power was building, and something about it called to her like a voice she couldn’t quite hear.

And then, suddenly —

The Shadow Breach

The wind shifted.

At first it was a faint breeze, a welcome coolness against the night’s heat. Then it grew stronger, whipping through the courtyard, extinguishing torches, scattering petals.

The moonlight dimmed.

It was subtle at first, but then the courtyard plunged into a strange, pale twilight. Gasps rippled through the crowd.

The High Priestess stopped chanting, her eyes widening. “No...” she breathed.

A sound rose — low, guttural, like the growl of something ancient and hungry.

And then the shadows moved.

From the edges of the courtyard, from beneath the archways, even from the dark spaces between the stones — the shadows peeled themselves free and took form.

They were creatures, black as pitch, their bodies like smoke and claws of solid night.

Chaos erupted. Guards drew swords, shouting orders. Kaelen stepped forward, fire blazing from his hands. With a roar, he sent a wave of flame across the nearest creatures, turning them into ash.

“Get the princesses inside!” Darien shouted, drawing his sword.

But the creatures were too many, pouring in from every side.

Lileth is Taken

One of the beasts leapt, soaring over the guards and landing right in front of the sisters.

“Run!” Payath screamed, grabbing Lileth’s hand — but before she could drag her away, the beast lashed out. Its claw wrapped around Lileth’s waist and yanked her backward.

“NO!” Payath lunged, trying to grab her sister, but the creature was already retreating, melting back into the shadows with Lileth clutched in its grip.

“PAYATH!” Lileth’s scream echoed through the courtyard as she vanished.

Payath tried to chase her, light sparking in her palms — but Kaelen grabbed her, pulling her back just as another shadow lunged at them.

“You can’t!” he shouted. “Not here — they’ll see!”

Tears blurred Payath’s vision. She wanted to scream, to burn every last shadow to ash. But she couldn’t. She couldn’t reveal herself now, not with half the kingdom watching.

The fight raged on. Kaelen and Darien cut down as many creatures as they could, but the shadows began to retreat once they had their prize. Within minutes, the courtyard was eerily still again.

Aftermath

The King stood in the center of the courtyard, his cloak torn, his face pale with fury.

“They have taken my daughter,” he said, voice low but shaking with anger. “They dare lay hands on the royal bloodline.”

The High Priestess’s face was grim. “This is more than an attack. This was a message. They know the wards are weak — and they intend to break them fully before the next moon rises.”

Search parties were organized at once. Soldiers fanned out across the palace grounds, checking every road, every path, every shadow.

But there was no sign of Lileth.

Payath’s Guilt

Later, long after the courtyard had been cleared and the dead counted, Payath sat alone in the moonlit hallway, her hands shaking.

She could still hear Lileth’s scream.

Kaelen found her there, sitting with her back against the cold stone wall.

“She’s gone,” Payath whispered. “Because of me.”

“No,” Kaelen said firmly, crouching down in front of her. “Because of them. You didn’t do this.”

“I could have stopped it.”

“You would have revealed yourself. They would have taken you too — or worse. Payath...” He took her hands, forcing her to look at him. “You can’t save her if you’re gone.”

Tears slid silently down her cheeks.

“We’ll find her,” Kaelen said. “I swear it.”

The Priestess's Warning

Before dawn, the High Priestess came to the King's chambers. Payath was summoned as well.

"Your Majesty," the Priestess said gravely, "the enemy has made their move. If we do not recover Princess Lileth before the next full moon, the wards protecting this kingdom will fail completely. The shadows will not stop until every soul in this palace is theirs."

The King's face was carved from stone. "Then we will bring her home," he said.

Payath stood silent beside him, her jaw tight, her fists clenched.

I will find you, Lileth, she vowed silently. No matter what it takes.

Chapter 9 – Into the Dark

~3500+ words

The moon hung heavy over the palace, a pale, watchful eye that seemed to judge Payath's every step as she crept through the shadowed corridors. Her heart hammered against her ribs. She knew if anyone caught her leaving, her father would have her locked in her chambers until Lileth was found — or worse, until the next moon rose and the wards fell completely.

She couldn't wait that long.

Clutching the moonstone talisman the High Priestess had pressed into her hand, she made her way to the stables where Kaelen was already waiting, a dark cloak over his shoulders, his expression grim.

“You're sure about this?” he asked quietly as she approached.

Payath nodded. “If we wait, we lose her. I can feel it.”

He didn't argue, just offered her his hand and helped her onto her horse.

But before they could ride out, a shadow detached itself from the stable wall.

“Going somewhere?” Darien's voice came from the darkness, sharp and suspicious.

Payath's heart lurched. “Darien—”

“You were going to leave without telling anyone?” He stepped forward, his expression caught between anger and concern.

Kaelen scowled. “We don't have time to explain—”

“Then don't,” Darien said, crossing his arms. “Because I'm coming with you.”

Payath blinked. “What?”

“You think I'm going to let the future queens ride into danger alone? My men are already alert — I'll send word for a backup patrol to follow behind us. If we're walking into a trap, you'll need every sword you can get.”

Kaelen muttered something under his breath but didn't object.

Payath exhaled, tension leaving her shoulders. “Fine. But we ride now.”

Through the Forbidden Forest

The three of them rode hard through the night, the hooves of their horses muffled against the damp earth. The forest was alive with unsettling noises — the crack of branches, the distant howl of wolves, and somewhere deeper in, the whisper of something that wasn't entirely animal.

The moonstone in Payath's pocket pulsed faintly, guiding them eastward.

They encountered the first shadow pack just before dawn.

Five creatures, black and twisted, slipped from the treeline and surrounded the path.

Darien was off his horse in a heartbeat, spear in hand. "Stay back," he said, planting his feet.

Kaelen stepped forward, fire sparking to life in his palms. "I've got this."

The creatures hissed, but before they could lunge, Kaelen sent a wave of flame across the clearing. Two of the beasts disintegrated immediately; the others scattered, hissing.

Darien finished the job with quick, precise thrusts of his spear, driving the last creature back into the shadows.

When the fight was over, Kaelen glanced at Payath. "You okay?"

She nodded, though her hands still trembled. The light inside her had surged at the sight of the creatures, begging to be released.

Not yet, she told herself. Not unless you have to.

The Fortress of Shadows

By the time the moon rose again, they had reached the ruins.

The temple was ancient, its stone walls crumbling, overgrown with ivy. Yet a strange dark energy pulsed through it, making the hair on Payath's arms stand on end.

"This is it," she whispered.

They tied the horses to a tree and entered cautiously.

Inside, the air was thick with shadow magic. The central chamber glowed with an eerie, pulsating light — and there, in the middle of the room, Lileth knelt inside a circle of dark energy, her hands bound with black tendrils.

“Lileth!” Payath cried, rushing forward.

“Stop!” Kaelen grabbed her arm before she could cross the threshold. “That circle will tear you apart.”

Lileth lifted her head weakly, her eyes widening. “Payath?”

Before Payath could respond, a chorus of hisses rose from the dark corners of the chamber.

The shadow guards attacked.

The Battle

Kaelen unleashed fire, casting bright orange light across the chamber. Darien moved with deadly precision, his spear flashing as he struck down creature after creature.

But for every shadow they destroyed, two more seemed to take its place.

“We can’t keep this up forever!” Darien shouted over the roar of fire.

“We don’t have to!” Kaelen gritted his teeth. “We just need to break the circle!”

But no weapon touched it — every strike bounced off harmlessly, and Kaelen’s fire sputtered against it like sparks on wet stone.

A low rumble shook the ground.

From the far end of the chamber, a massive shadow beast emerged, taller than a man, with glowing white eyes and claws like swords.

It lunged.

Kaelen barely had time to throw up a wall of fire, but the beast crashed through it, swinging one claw toward Darien.

Payath’s breath caught.

Darien stumbled back, his spear knocked from his grip. The beast reared back for the killing blow — and something inside Payath snapped.

The Power Unleashed

Light erupted from her hands, so bright it turned the entire chamber white.

The blast struck the beast in the chest, hurling it back against the wall with a deafening crack. The circle around Lileth shattered, the dark tendrils dissolving into smoke.

For a heartbeat, there was silence.

Then the remaining shadow creatures shrieked and fled, melting back into the cracks and corners of the temple.

Payath fell to her knees, her chest heaving, her whole body trembling. The light around her hands flickered and died, leaving only faint motes of gold that drifted to the ground.

Lileth's Reaction

“Payath...”

Her sister's voice was soft, trembling.

Payath lifted her head to see Lileth standing just outside the broken circle, her eyes wide with a mixture of fear and awe.

“You—” Lileth's voice cracked. “You had this power all along?”

“I was trying to—” Payath's voice failed her as exhaustion dragged her down.

“You didn't tell me,” Lileth whispered, her face crumpling. “All this time, you didn't trust me enough to tell me.”

“It wasn't about trust,” Kaelen said sharply, stepping forward. “She was protecting you.”

But Lileth didn't seem to hear him. She backed away, shaking her head, her expression raw.

The Escape

The ruins began to shake, stones falling from the ceiling as the magic holding the place together unraveled.

Darien grabbed his spear and moved to Lileth's side. “We need to go — now!”

Kaelen scooped Payath into his arms, her body limp. “I've got her. Move!”

Together, they fled through the collapsing halls, dodging falling debris and the last few shrieking shadowlings that tried to block their path.

Outside, Darien signaled with a whistle, and the backup guards emerged from the trees, surrounding them in a protective formation as they retreated into the forest.

Aftermath

They didn't stop until they reached the temporary camp the guards had set up near the river.

Kaelen laid Payath down by the fire, brushing her hair back from her pale, sweat-damp forehead.

"She'll be fine," he said, more to himself than anyone else. "She just burned through too much energy."

Darien crouched beside him, his expression troubled. "What was that?"

Kaelen met his gaze. "What saved your life," he said evenly.

Darien nodded slowly, but his eyes lingered on Payath's glowing fingertips.

Lileth sat a little apart from them, her arms wrapped around herself, staring into the fire.

She should have felt relief — her sister was alive, they were together again.

But all she could feel was the hollow ache in her chest.

The chapter ends with Payath's breathing evening out in sleep, Kaelen keeping watch by her side, and Lileth whispering softly to herself:

"You should have told me..."

Chapter 10 – Twin Flames

The morning mist hung low over the forest as the camp slowly stirred awake. Payath felt the cold air against her skin before she opened her eyes. Her body ached from exhaustion, her magic still a faint, warm hum under her skin. The world was quieter now — no whispers of shadow, no distant howls — only the faint rustle of leaves and the crackling of the dying campfire.

Kaelen sat nearby, leaning against a fallen log, his sword across his lap. His shirt was stained with dirt and ash, his hair wild from battle, but his eyes lit up the moment he saw her stirring.

“You’re awake,” he said softly, his voice carrying that rare mix of relief and reprimand.

Payath swallowed, her throat dry. “How long...?”

“Half a day. You collapsed after we got out of the ruins. Darien and I stood guard all night.”

She blinked, taking in the surroundings. Darien was nearby, quietly cleaning his sword. Two palace guards stood watch at the perimeter. There was no sign of danger now. For the first time in days, Payath could breathe.

Kaelen shifted closer, his voice dropping to a low, almost tentative murmur.

“You scared me, Payath.”

Her heart twisted at the naked fear in his tone.

“You burned yourself out for all of us — for Lileth.” His jaw clenched. “And I realized something last night. I can’t keep watching you throw yourself into danger like this, not knowing if I’ll lose you.”

Her lips parted, startled by the intensity in his expression.

“I’ve loved you since we were children,” he said, the words finally breaking free. “Every visit to this castle, every stolen moment in the gardens, every silly game we played when we were too young to know better — they were the best parts of my life. And now... I don’t want to wait anymore.”

Payath’s heart pounded in her chest. She wanted to speak, to tell him that her heart had secretly always leaned toward him, but her body felt heavy. She reached for his hand instead, squeezing it weakly, her lips curving into a faint smile.

Kaelen returned the smile, but his eyes were still shadowed with worry. “Rest a little longer,” he said softly. “We’ll be home soon.”

Back to the Palace

At dawn, after a night of healing and rest, the small party rode back toward the palace. The road was quiet, the morning mist still clinging to the forest — as though the land itself was holding its breath for what came next.

By the time they reached the palace gates, the sun was fully risen. The bells rang in relief as the guards saw the princesses return alive. Servants rushed to meet them, helping Payath down from her horse, carrying her straight into the royal healers' wing.

The King was already there, his stern face cracking as he hurried to his daughters.

“My girls,” he said, pulling them both into a rough embrace. Lileth clung to him, still shaken, while Payath could barely keep her eyes open.

“You are safe now,” he murmured into their hair. “That is all that matters.”

The King's Support

Later that afternoon, when Payath was finally awake and sitting upright, the King came to her bedside again.

“You've grown into your mother's strength,” he said softly. “She would have been proud of the way you fought for your sister.”

Payath's throat tightened. “I... I wasn't ready to be what the prophecy wanted me to be. I was scared, Father.”

The King reached over and brushed a strand of hair from her face. “Courage is not the absence of fear, my dear girl. It is what you do despite that fear. And today, you proved yourself to be the truest kind of brave.”

The Sisters' Reconciliation

Lileth stood by the door, quiet and pale.

“Come here, Lileth,” the King said gently, before excusing himself to give them privacy.

For a moment, the silence between them was heavy. Payath swallowed, forcing the words past her lips. “I should have told you.”

Lileth's fists clenched at her sides. “You think?”

Payath's voice cracked. "I didn't want you to feel like your whole life was just the prophecy. I wanted you to be free."

Tears filled Lileth's eyes. "I thought you didn't trust me. I thought you saw me as weak."

Payath reached for her hand. "You are the strongest person I know. I wasn't trying to shut you out — I was trying to protect you."

That broke the last of Lileth's anger. She stepped forward and hugged her sister tightly. "Don't ever hide from me again," she whispered.

"Never again," Payath promised, her own tears falling freely.

The High Priestess' Revelation

The door opened, and the High Priestess entered, her staff glowing faintly as though responding to the moment.

"It is time you both understand," she said. "The prophecy never called for a single chosen warrior. It spoke of *two flames* — two souls who, when united, could banish the shadow."

Payath and Lileth exchanged stunned glances.

"Lileth, you were never meant to fight alone," the Priestess continued. "You are the heart that steadies the light. Without you, Payath's power would consume her. Together, you are whole."

Everything clicked into place. The prophecy had never been about one of them — it had been about both of them all along.

The Final Attack

Before they could absorb this, a deep tremor shook the palace, rattling the windows. A dark wind howled through the halls.

"They've come," Kaelen said grimly, drawing his sword.

The King immediately called the guards to arms. "Protect the princesses!"

"No," Payath said, rising to her feet despite her weakness. "This ends now."

Lileth stepped to her side, gripping her hand. "Then we end it together."

The Climactic Battle

The courtyard was chaos — shadow beasts pouring in through every crack, claws raking the stone. The sky had turned black again, clouds roiling as if the night had fallen too soon.

Kaelen unleashed a wall of fire, driving back the first wave. Darien and the guards struck down the creatures that slipped through.

Payath felt the light within her ignite again, brighter this time, almost blinding.

“Lileth!” she shouted.

Her sister ran to her, clasping her hand. At once, the power steadied, flowing like a river rather than a storm. The two sisters turned as one toward the largest shadow — a massive beast that roared and charged.

Together, they unleashed their power. Light erupted from their joined hands, so bright it split the darkness apart. The blast consumed the beast and every shadow creature, washing over the courtyard and spilling into the forest beyond.

When it was over, the sky cleared. Dawn broke again, as though the world itself had been reborn.

Aftermath and Joy

The High Priestess lifted her staff, her voice ringing over the silent courtyard. “The prophecy is fulfilled. The twin flames have burned away the darkness.”

Cheers erupted from the guards and servants. The King stepped forward and wrapped his daughters in a proud embrace. “You have brought honor back to this palace — and to your mother’s memory.”

Kaelen’s Request

As the crowd dispersed, Kaelen knelt before the King, his head bowed.

“My lord,” he said formally. “I ask for permission to take Princess Payath with me to my kingdom — not as a political bargain, but as the woman I have loved since childhood.”

The King smiled, his eyes soft. “You have fought for her life and stood by her side when she needed you most. You have my blessing — but remember, she is as much a queen as her sister. Treat her as such.”

Kaelen’s face broke into a rare, genuine smile. “Always.”

Closing Moments

Later, as the courtyard quieted and preparations were made for Kaelen's departure, Payath and Lileth stood alone together.

"You're really going," Lileth said softly.

"Not forever," Payath promised. "But I think it's time I see what the world has for me — beyond the palace walls."

Lileth smiled, though her eyes shone with tears. "Just make sure you come back. No more secrets between us."

"No more secrets," Payath swore.

When the time came, Payath mounted her horse beside Kaelen, turning back to see her sister standing with Darien and the King, waving.

For the first time in years, she felt free — not from responsibility, but free to live her own life, knowing Lileth would never stand alone again.

As they rode out of the palace gates, the morning sun bathed the land in gold. The last traces of shadow were gone. The kingdom was safe, and the twin flames burned bright — together, always.

Twin Flame
By Sharon Just

Epilogue – One Year Later

The palace bells rang joyfully as a small royal procession approached the gates. The people gathered quickly, whispering excitedly when they saw the familiar banner of Kaelen's kingdom fluttering in the breeze.

Lileth stood at the top of the steps, her gown a deep royal blue, the crown glinting on her head. Beside her stood Darien, no longer just a guest but now her most trusted captain — and, if the smiles between them were any hint, perhaps something more.

The gates opened, and Payath rode in first, her hair caught in the wind, her face radiant. Kaelen followed close behind, his hand resting proudly on his sword.

The moment she dismounted, Lileth ran to her, pulling her into a fierce hug.

“You came back,” Lileth whispered, laughing through her tears.

“I promised I would,” Payath said softly.

Kaelen approached the King and bowed. “Your Majesty. The princess has seen my kingdom, met my people, and even taught half my guard a thing or two about swordplay. I thought it was only fair to return her before she conquers us completely.”

The King chuckled, embracing them both. “You are both always welcome here.”

As the sun set over the palace, Payath and Lileth stood together on the balcony, watching the light fade.

“The kingdom feels different now,” Payath murmured.

“It is,” Lileth replied. “But so are we. We are stronger now — because we faced the darkness together.”

Payath smiled, resting her head on her sister's shoulder. “Twin flames,” she said softly.

“Always,” Lileth answered.

And for the first time in a long time, everything felt right.

