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Thorns in Bloom

by Dominick Frederick.

Chapter One.

The Little Queen.

On the day of her ascension, Princess Saphina wore a once-elegant tattered dress with a silk scarf, both stained with blood, ash, and grime. Her disheveled blonde hair clung to her damp forehead, stirred by a cold, despair-laden wind.

From the crest of the cliff where Saphina stood, smoke billowed from her kingdom's village in the distance, curling skyward like desperate hands reaching for the ashen horizon. Below the cliff's edge, the crash of waves filled her ears, as her terrified caramel eyes darted between the six silent figures of the Chthonic Order, known as the Dread Lords. Their grim forms stood motionless, awaiting their superior, the Inquisitor.

Draped in flowing, ghostly robes over segmented armor, the Dread Lords' faces were concealed behind death masks, their hollow stares void of life. One of the Dread Lords held Saphina tightly by the hair, the sigil of their order etched across the back of his hand, just between his thumb and his cutoff index finger.

Saphina could feel her captor's grip tighten as he pressed her against his body. He leaned in, inhaling deeply.

"Just ripe," he whispered, his breath hot against her ear. "I bet you taste sweet like a honeysuckle."

A shudder of disgust wracked Saphina's body as she felt his free hand slither over her skin, a claim disguised as admiration, a cruelty masked as desire.

Closest to the precipice, her father, the Bound King, slumped over in defeat, a coarse burlap sack obscuring his face, while her mother, the Queen, faced their captors with unflinching resolve, ready to meet her end.

An old tree leaned precariously overlooking the cliff's edge, its fire-blackened trunk smoldering at the base. A heavy branch stretched out over the abyss, casting a shadow across the grim scene.

The oppressive silence broke with the sharp, rhythmic clatter of hooves, the sound slicing through the cold and sending a shiver down Saphina's spine. Squinting against the wind, her heart pounded as the figure of the Inquisitor emerged from the mist, mounted on a towering black steed. The horse's breath swirled into pale clouds, blending with the smoke that spiraled upward from the village, an eerie testament to the devastation left in his wake.

As he dismounted, the crunch of his boots through the brittle grass was sharp and deliberate, each step drawing him closer to her mother. Saphina's hands trembled as one gripped the arm of her captor, searching for any chance of escape.

The hiss of steel cutting through the air froze Saphina in place. Her chest tightened as her mother, unflinching, raised her chin to meet the Inquisitor's blade.

The Queen's voice, calm and steady, sliced through the tension like the weapon poised to strike. "Know this," she said, her words sharp with defiance. "I am not merely a queen; I am resilience eternal. It does not wither. It takes root, blooms in the shadows, and rises with the dawn."

The Inquisitor's blade struck the neck of the Queen with a wet, sickening slice, followed by the heavy thud of her mother's body hitting the ground.

Saphina's breath hitched as blood splattered across her face, hot against the chill of her tear-streaked skin. She didn't flinch. Her wide eyes, brimming with tears, were locked on her mother's still form in horror. No scream came, no sound escaped her parted lips, as though the weight of death had stolen the air from her lungs.

Crunch. Crunch.

Each step through the tall grass echoed louder, the sound growing heavier and more ominous as it drew closer to where Saphina stood. A bloodstained blade entered her vision, her mother's blood dripping from the dagger onto the dry earth below.

The Inquisitor's presence was commanding. When he spoke, his voice carried an authoritative weight that demanded attention.

"The rules and culture of this land intrigue me," he said, the taunting edge unmistakable. "As your customs dictate," he continued, turning to face the Princess with a sharp, cutting glare, "the death of your mother makes you Queen, does it not?"

The weight of his words settled over Saphina, undeniable and unshakable, rooted in the traditions she had always known. She knew he spoke the truth—this was the way of her people. Yet her thoughts were consumed by something far more immediate, a chilling awareness of the peril that surrounded her.

"Fetch a rope," the Inquisitor commanded, his voice low and almost intimate, as if meant only for her.

One of the Dread Lords stationed by the horses gave a curt nod before swiftly mounting his steed. With a sharp spur, he disappeared into the distance, the fading hoofbeats swallowed by the howl of the wind.

The Inquisitor's eyes never left her as his gloved hand reached for her scarf, unwrapping it from her slender neck. The fabric slipped free, hanging limp in his grip. With her neck exposed, he raised his dagger.

Saphina felt a sharp yank on her hair, forcing her chin upward. Each second stretched heavy with unspoken menace. The Inquisitor tested her resolve, watching for any sign of weakness.

With deliberate care, he lowered the dagger to the scarf, wiping it clean before sliding it into its sheath with a muted *shink*. With the scarf in his hands, he folded it carefully, searching for a clean section. Methodically, he blotted the blood from her eyes and lips with unsettling gentleness. Saphina teetered between fear and confusion. Once satisfied, he cast the scarf to the ground, its fabric crumpling in disregard.

"Now, as you are the reigning Queen," the Inquisitor addressed Saphina, his voice carrying an unsettling calm, "I urge you to pay close attention. This matter will concern you greatly."

Without waiting for a response, he gestured sharply toward his men. "Bring me the bound king."

They seized the bound king with ironclad grips and swiftly dragged him forward. The king's bindings pulled taut as he was shoved to his knees with such force that it knocked the breath from his lungs, collapsing before the Inquisitor and his daughter.

The bag was yanked from the king's head, revealing his battered, dirt-streaked face. A gag silenced his mouth, and weary, bloodshot eyes stared out, dulled by exhaustion and pain. The broken man knelt in silence, his shame laid bare for all to witness.

The Inquisitor crouched before the bound king, his towering presence now an unsettling eye level with his captive. Slowly, he pulled off his gloves, revealing a dark tattoo that snaked across his skin like a living shadow. Reaching forward, he grasped the edge of the gag and removed the fabric, revealing the king's cracked lips and trembling jaw.

The Inquisitor paused, his intense stare locking onto the man's weary eyes, daring him to speak. When the king remained silent, the leader's lips twisted into a grim smirk.

"You'll have to forgive the lack of a proper introduction," he said, his tone mockingly polite. "War, after all, is not a place for pleasantries."

The bound king's voice was hoarse but laced with defiance. "Spare me your courtesy. Demonkind deserves no introduction."

The Inquisitor emitted a low, guttural grunt before leaning closer. "Nor is a bound king on his knees worthy of living."

He rose to his full height, turning his back to the broken man. His men closed in, forming a menacing circle around the bound king, their weapons at the ready.

“Father!” Saphina’s voice cut through the tension, trembling with desperation.

The bound king lifted his head, his eyes softening as they met his daughter’s terrified stare. His shoulders sagged, a small sigh escaping him before he straightened slightly, gathering what remained of his dignity.

Turning back to the Inquisitor, the king spoke with steady determination. “You are members of the Chthonic Order. The sigil on your left hand, it’s a mark of demonic servitude.”

The king’s attention shifted to the insignia pinned on the Inquisitor’s chest, its sinister design unmistakable. He had seen it described in reports from fallen kingdoms, each bearing grim tales of conquest and despair.

"Your rank is one of Inquisitor," he said, his voice heavy with contempt. "Regional enforcers of their malevolent will, spreading the Order’s shadow across the land."

“Well, it seems our reputation precedes us,” he said, his tone laced with satisfaction as he looked around at his men. “And tell me, bound king, what will now become of your reputation?”

“My reputation matters not,” the king replied. “Only how I serve as king will define me.”

The Inquisitor chuckled darkly. “Ah, yes. The failed duties of a bound king.”

The king’s eyes flickered with resignation as he surveyed the devastation around him. He let out another sigh, his voice heavy with regret. “My people and land are lost, my queen has fallen, and my daughter is held captive by your men. That is the truth of my reign.”

The Inquisitor inclined his head slightly, his voice cold and measured. “Well said, bound king. It takes courage to admit when one has failed. But your failure runs deep, and even kings are not immune to the weight of their own ruin.”

Through the thinning mist, a hooded rider returned, his black horse pacing with restless energy. A heavy rope hung from the saddle, swaying with the beast’s movements. He dismounted, took the rope, and approached the Inquisitor. With a slight bow, he set it down and retreated quietly.

The Inquisitor’s eyes lingered briefly on the rope before returning to the bound king, his attention unwavering. “And tell me, bound king, in this wretched land, what is the role of the queen?”

The king hesitated, his eyes shifting to his daughter, scared and helpless in the grip of one of the Dread Lords. Saphina's lips pressed together in a silent plea for her father to speak, to do whatever the Inquisitor demanded and end their torment.

The king felt the weight of the moment pressing against him. "In this sacred land, the queen is one who holds the highest role," he said, his voice low but steady.

The Inquisitor tilted his head, his tone almost coaxing. "And what does that mean, exactly? What authority does she hold?"

The king looked back to his daughter, his posture sinking under the weight of his response. His voice wavered, barely above a whisper. "She is the ultimate ruler. All decisions, all decrees, by law, rest with the queen."

The Inquisitor's satisfaction gleamed in his dark eyes. "Fascinating," he murmured, glancing between the king and the princess.

The ground shifted under his boots as he approached Saphina. "Now, as you are the reigning queen, I must insist that your first decree be to pass final judgment on the king, for his failure to protect the land, his people, and his queen." He paused, savoring the moment as his words hung heavy in the air. "Such treachery cannot go unanswered, and the only fitting punishment for his crimes is death."

Saphina's voice rang out, trembling and desperate. "Please, leave us!" she cried, struggling against the Dread Lord's grip as she turned toward the Inquisitor. Her captor's hold tightened, forcing her to still, but her words lingered in the charged air, only to fall on deaf ears.

The Inquisitor reached up and unfastened his mask, his movements deliberate and slow, ensuring all eyes were on him. As he pulled it away, Saphina's struggles faltered, her wide eyes fixed on the sight before her.

His face shifted and rippled, an unholy vision unable to hold a single form. Jagged horns erupted briefly from his forehead and brow, his skin blackened and cracked like scorched earth, and his eyes gleamed with a predatory light, as if drawing power from the fear surrounding him. Then, just as quickly, the grotesque visage melted away, replaced by a human face, ordinary and pale, yet no less unsettling. His sharp, angular features carried no warmth, as his lips curled into a smile that held only menace.

Satisfied with the silence that followed, he spoke with a commanding authority that filled the air.

"The Chthonic Order now governs this land," he declared, his tone sharp and resolute. "Its laws, its people, its Spirit—all fall under our dominion. Those who submit will find their lives spared. Those who resist will not."

The Inquisitor's words carried an icy finality as he continued, turning his attention to the Bound King.

"It has come to our attention—an act of defiance that demanded retribution." His piercing eyes locked onto the king. "You and your kingdom, in your arrogance, sought to twist the power of Spirit to your will."

His towering form exuded authority. "For generations, your kingdom stayed quiet, unnoticed, abiding by the unspoken truth: The Spirit is an energy that can only be wielded by those within the Chthonic Order. The kingdom knew the cost of using it, yet still, you broke the balance. The surge you unleashed rang out like a signal, exposing your defiance."

His tone shifted, growing quieter but no less commanding.

"Now, Bound King," the Inquisitor said, his words low and measured. "Your fate is sealed. One way or another, you're going over that edge. But your daughter's life need not end here."

He shifted his attention briefly to Saphina, her eyes filled with tears as she stared back at him in terror.

"You see, I am not without mercy, " he turned back to the King. "Obedience has its rewards. Calm your daughter. Persuade her to listen and let me proceed with my investigation."

"If you comply, I give you my word: her life will not be taken by the Order today, not by my hand, nor by my men. But first, I must continue with my inquiry."

He leaned in slightly, his tone sharpening. "The surge was unmistakable. Somewhere, someone in this kingdom has invoked the Spirit. Perhaps the princess has inherited more than a crown."

The Inquisitor's focus pressed heavily on both father and daughter.

"Let us find out, shall we?"

"She has no powers," the king said quickly, his voice firm despite the tension. "She knows nothing of your magic."

The Inquisitor's smile widened, cruelty flashing in his expression. "If true, that's unfortunate for you," he replied smoothly, his tone dripping with mock pity.

With a flick of his hand, the Inquisitor summoned ancient energies, making the rope slither through the air like a living serpent. It coiled tightly around a stretched branch that jutted over the abyss, its fibers creaking as they pulled taut. Below, smoke curled from the smoldering fire at the tree's base, the charred wood splitting softly, whispering its distress to the wind. The rope swayed over the void, where the mist churned like a starving beast.

With another flick, the hanging end of the rope snapped back into his grasp. He knotted it with practiced ease, cinching it tightly around the bound king's bruised wrists. Satisfied, the Inquisitor backed away, inspecting his work before finally turning to the king. His voice was sharp, cutting through the heavy air.

"Cooperate, allow me to continue my investigation unheeded, and your daughter's life will be spared by The Chthonic Order on this day. I will test her capabilities one way or another." He raised his voice, letting the words ring out.

"Fail to comply, and the consequences for you both will be more than you can bear."

"You may speak to your daughter now."

The bound king lifted his head, his battered face calm despite the strain.

"Saphina," he began, his tone gentle yet firm, as though guiding her through her fear. "Do you remember the fable I told you as a child? The tale of the brave Dragon who protected the Forest?"

Saphina's trembling slowed, as she raised her eyes toward him. Recognition flickered faintly in her expression, though she remained silent.

The king's tone softened further, as though sharing a cherished memory.

"Do you remember the name of the dragon? Colburn," he said, the name slipping from his lips like a faint echo. "Do you remember, Saphina?"

To the Inquisitor, the words seemed like a father's final attempt to soothe his daughter, a distraction spun from old bedtime stories. His pale eyes lingered on the king, amusement flickering faintly as he saw no threat in the moment.

To Saphina, the Dragon Hero had never been called Colburn. That name belonged to the coal river that flowed from the high cliffs beyond the forest. But as she listened, the truth beneath her father's words dawning on her. As a child, she had never heard him dismiss the stories as mere fables. Every tale had been told as though it were fact, as though the Dragon Hero had truly existed. His deliberate phrasing now was a signal, a reminder that the legends she had clung to in her youth were more than just bedtime stories.

"Yes," Saphina whispered, her voice steady despite the storm within. "The Dragon who protected Bluffwood... I will follow Colburn's bravery."

Her father's eyes softened, a glimpse of relief passing through them. He knew she understood.

A sharp creak echoed as the stretched branch shifted under the strain, its voice hollow and brittle, like a warning chime. Saphina froze, her father's message layered with the tree's quiet reminder of the danger looming over them. The king's steady look held hers for a moment longer, and in his expression, she read the unspoken message: a path disguised as memory.

The Inquisitor's voice broke the stillness, smooth and measured. "A father's comforts," he said lightly, his tone almost soothing. "A tale to steady a frightened child. How fitting."

The Inquisitor gave a nod of reassurance to the bound king, a subtle acknowledgment of the understanding they had reached earlier, as the king had lived up to his end of the bargain.

With a sharp nod to his men, the silent command was given. Two Dread Lords moved swiftly, approaching the Bound King. One forced a coarse gag back between his lips, silencing him once more, while the other pulled the burlap sack over his head, erasing his features from the light.

The king's strength faded under their control, but he found solace knowing his message to his daughter was received.

Another Dread Lord approached the end of the rope that lay coiled in the dirt and grass like a waiting serpent. He bent down to retrieve it, the fibers rough in his gloved hands, as he worked methodically to secure the end to the pommel of a waiting horse's saddle. The animal stood steady, its muscles tense, as though aware of the grim task it was bound to.

The Inquisitor leaned over the edge of the cliff, his expression empty as he looked down. Below, jagged rocks jutted from the turbulent waters, their edges glinting like blades in the daylight. The sea crashed violently against the cliffs, each wave a thunderous roar that sent freezing mist spiraling upward. The abyss yawned hungrily, a pitiless void ready to swallow all who fell into its reach.

With a sudden, calculated motion, he turned back to the king. Without a word, the Inquisitor raised his boot and struck the king in the chest.

The Bound King staggered backward, his balance teetering on the cliff's edge for a single, breathless moment before he fell. The rope snapped taut, groaning under the strain as it held fast. The branch shuddered, creaking beneath the strain, but it held firm.

Just below the cliff's edge, the Bound King swung helplessly, his arms stretched high above his head, the rope digging into his bound wrists. The burlap sack masked his face, but the pain and exhaustion in his body were unmistakable. He hung like a pendulum, suspended between life and death, held aloft only by the strength of the branch and the rope tethered to the horse above.

The Inquisitor turned away from the edge, his attention shifting to the Princess, her fear palpable as her wide eyes fixed on her father's dangling form.

He ran his fingers through the tip of his moustache and addressed her with a voice that dripped with mock civility. "I believe we've arrived at a most pivotal moment," he said, his tone almost playful. "Now, little queen, what will you do to save your father?"

The Inquisitor approached Saphina slowly. "Release your grip," he ordered the Dread Lord. "She's not going anywhere."

The Inquisitor grasped Saphina's hands, turning them over as he inspected them. His touch was unnervingly gentle, his fingers brushing lightly against her skin as if searching for something unseen. After a tense silence, he released her hands, fixed her with a cold stare, and said, "You have the delicate hands of a Princess. Your father's fate now rests in these hands."

Saphina shuddered as she looked up at him, a faint look of curiosity in his eyes.

"I feel the energy of your spirit, raw and untamed, waiting to surface. If you truly want to save your father, this is your moment to prove it." He gestured toward the rope, taut and trembling where it stretched over the cliff's edge. "Pull your father up, and I will set you both free. Show me what lies within you."

Saphina's arms felt heavy as she glanced at the rope, then back to her father, barely visible beyond the cliff's edge.

The Inquisitor's tone cut through her hesitation. "Or let him fall," he said simply, his voice cold. "The choice is yours." Turning to the horse, the Inquisitor extended one bare hand toward the rope, bending it to his will. The line moved unnaturally, snaking free from the saddle's pommel as though obeying his silent command. It coiled loosely in the air, while staying taut around the branch, keeping the king suspended over the abyss.

The rope slithered upward into the Inquisitor's palm, where his magic held it lightly, his movements deliberate and unhurried.

"Here," he said, his tone almost kind. "Let's make sure you have every opportunity." He inched closer and offered her the rope. As she hesitated, the fibers writhed slightly in his hand, moving like a living thing. He placed it firmly into her grasp, and the sensation stilled, the rough texture biting into her palms.

The Inquisitor's focus sharpened as his fingers hovered over the rope. Slowly, almost gently, he eased his magic away. The weight on the rope grew gradually, the strain spreading through Saphina's arms and shoulders like creeping fire. Her muscles burned as the full burden of her father's hanging body finally settled onto her, the sharp intensity forcing her knees to buckle slightly before she steadied herself.

“Feel it,” the Inquisitor said, his voice low and commanding. “The power within you. Draw on it, or let him fall. Either way, we’ll see what you’re truly capable of.”

Saphina’s arms quivered under the relentless pull of the rope. Her muscles burned with a fire that seemed to spread through her entire body, searing her resolve. She clenched her jaw, refusing to let the strain force her to give up. Her father’s life depended on her, and she would not fail him, not like this.

The rope further bit into her hands, its coarse strands tearing at her skin with every tremor. Blood welled where the burns began, staining the rope red as she adjusted her grip. Her heels dug into the dirt as she slid forward slightly, the force threatening to drag her closer to the cliff’s edge.

“Now,” the Inquisitor murmured from behind her, his voice low and taunting. “Show me the strength I sensed in you.”

Saphina ignored him, her focus consumed by the weight pulling against her hands. Tears streamed down her face as her shoulders screamed in torment. Her feet planted firmly against the ground, desperate for traction, but the rope grew slick with her blood, and her grip began to slip. The branch above groaned under the strain, cracking in protest as smoke spiraled upward from the fire at the tree’s base, dark tendrils twisting like a warning.

Saphina glanced up, her face pale with realization as the sound of splintering wood echoed in her ears.

Behind her, the Inquisitor's dark eyes narrowed. His fingers twitched subtly at his side, and the energy around him shifted. The fire at the tree’s base flared, its heat surging upward, licking hungrily at the blackened bark. The stretched branch creaked louder, its brittle frame trembling under the weight it could no longer bear.

Saphina gritted her teeth, her hands slick with blood as she dug deep for strength she didn’t know she possessed. Her arms shook violently as the rope began to slide through her fingers, the friction burning her skin raw. She cried out in agony, her voice hoarse as she refused to let go.

Her father began to shift his weight from side to side, adding even more pressure to the already strangled branch. His struggle was all he could do to help end his daughter's suffering.

And then, with a final, piercing crack, the branch gave way. The sudden weight on the rope jolted Saphina forward, as she refused to let go. The rope whipped violently from her grasp, leaving her no choice in the matter, searing through her hands and leaving trails of torn flesh and open wounds. She landed hard, her hands bloodied and useless as the rope disappeared over the edge.

Time seemed to slow as she scrambled to her knees, her eyes locked on the falling figure of her father. The burlap sack obscured his face, but his body twisted helplessly as he plummeted into the mist. The jagged rocks below waited ravenously, like rows of sharp teeth eager for their prey.

“No!” she screamed, her voice breaking as her father vanished into the abyss. The sound of his impact was lost beneath the crashing waves, but the echo of his fall lingered in her mind, a deafening silence that consumed her.

The Inquisitor’s pale features were impassive as he looked upon the empty space where the Bound King had hung moments ago. A heavy sigh escaped his lips, laden with frustration. His voice was cold and detached as he remarked, “Your failure is my disappointment.”

The Inquisitor's cold stare lingered on Saphina, who knelt trembling on the ground, her bloodied hands cradled against her chest.

“I had hoped for more,” he said, “a sign of the power that flows through you.” The smirk vanished from his face. “It seems I was mistaken.”

Saphina didn’t respond, her chest heaving with quiet sobs as her head tilted downward.

"It seems my investigation has come to an end," the Inquisitor said, his expression hardening.

"An agreement was made, and it shall be upheld. You both allowed me to complete my investigations without interference, and so, you shall live—for now. However, there is no room for weakness. Not in this world."

He unbuckled the bladed sheath and tossed it behind her, the sound of it hitting the dirt echoing in the silence.

“Your mother died by this weapon,” he said, his voice as cold as the steel itself. “You can choose the same fate, or you can meet the abyss as your father did. One last choice to make, little queen.”

Saphina’s ears twitched in the direction of where the sheath knife struck against the ground. Her trembling hands remained against her chest, as the weight of his words pressed down on her.

The Inquisitor turned to his men, his voice cold and absolute. “From this day forward, you are the Six Dread Lords of this land. Return to your new stronghold at once and take command of the remaining Dread Marcher Army. The ideals of the Chthonic Order will spread across this land. Any use of spirit power will be severely prosecuted. No mercy will be shown to those who defy the Order. Any man without a trade will be conscripted to serve our cause. Those with a trade may continue their work, but they will still owe their service to the Order. Those who refuse, along with any woman or child who does not serve, will face enslavement or death.”

He paused, his voice hardening. "My duty now takes me to the capital, where I will relay the events of this day and ensure the Order's will is carried out. Now, my Lords, go and revel in the spoils of your victory."

The Dreadlords bowed their heads in solemn silence before mounting their horses. Without a word, they turned and rode back toward the kingdom, their robes fluttering behind them, like ghostly shadows drifting into the distance.

The Inquisitor straightened, fixing Saphina with an unyielding stare from behind. "Know my name, girl," his voice crept like a shadow. "For it will linger in your soul until your last breath, Varethis."

Without another word, the Inquisitor swung onto his steed, his dark robes settling around him like a veil of darkness. Without a backward glance, he spurred his horse forward and rode off, vanishing into the distance.

Through her blurry, tear-filled vision, Saphina saw the knife glinting in its sheath, lying in the grass as if calling to her. It was a cruel and beautiful object, offering a way out of the storm raging inside her. Her stomach twisted as she crawled toward it, her trembling hands brushing against the hard earth. She reached out, her fingers closing around the cold hilt, offering a brief relief to her torn hands. Her thoughts churned with doubt and desperation, as if this blade might be her only way forward.

She closed her eyes, the world around her fading. Her breath grew shallow, her mind spinning with the knife's promise, a single, definitive end to all the pain and chaos.

Suddenly, a sharp gust of wind swept through the grass, its rustling breaking through her thoughts. Her eyes opened, drawn by the sound, and settled on a hand lying motionless amid the tall grass. Recognition hit her like a wave. It was her mother's hand.

In that moment, her mother's final words echoed in her mind, as clear as if they were being spoken now: "Resilience does not wither, it takes root, blooms in the shadows, and rises with the dawn." The memory gripped her, the force of her mother's defiance pulling her from the knife's promise. The blade no longer felt like escape; it was a reminder, a tool to shape her future, not end it. Saphina's thoughts steadied as the weight of her mother's words settled deep within her.

Kneeling beside her mother's lifeless body, grief consumed her. Her fingers gently brushed over the hem of the dress, struggling to hold back the overwhelming tide of sorrow. With the knife still in hand, she steadied herself and sliced clean strips from the fabric, the blade cutting effortlessly through the cloth.

She wrapped the strips carefully around her torn hands, tying them tightly. The makeshift bandages pressed into her wounds, stinging sharply but providing a sense of focus. Once her

hands were bound, she turned back to the knife and drove it into the hard earth, scraping away at the soil to create a shallow grave. When the hole was deep enough, she gently placed her mother's body inside. Rocks were then gathered and carefully arranged to mark her mother's final resting place. Her hands shook as she placed the final stone, sealing the grave.

"Mother," she whispered, her voice fragile, "your strength will guide me, and your love will stay with me always."

The sun dipped lower, bathing the horizon in hues of orange and gold. Saphina stood at the edge of the cliff, as the wind whisked away her tears. Her heart ached as the memory of her father's final moments surfaced, his body consumed by the abyss. For a moment, she moved closer to the edge, her toes brushing the crumbling dirt.

The wind pressed against her, whispering a quiet reminder of all that had been lost, while the ground steadied beneath her feet.

Her father's face came to her mind, not as he had fallen, but as she had known him in life: steady, wise, and full of love.

She closed her eyes, her voice soft but steady. "Father, your love, wisdom, and spirit will live on."

The words hung in the air, carried away in the breeze, yet they felt anchored deep within her. A single tear traced down her cheek, but this time the wind made no effort to whisk it away. For a long moment, she stayed there, letting the grief flow freely, not as a weight but as a quiet honoring of all that he had been.

When she rose again, she turned her back to the sea. Her gaze fell to her mother's grave, where the knife rested, a silent reminder of all that had been lost and the battles yet to come.

Though the ache in her heart lingered, her attention fell to the knife, now resting beside her mother's grave. Picking it up, she wiped the blade clean, slid it into its sheath, and secured the strap tightly around her waist.

The weight of the weapon pressed against her side, grounding her as her tattered dress fluttered in the breeze. The fading sunlight reflected in her eyes, now alight with fury.

Without turning back to the sorrow left behind, she pressed forward, her path clear. She was returning to her Kingdom, not for refuge, but for revenge.