

CHAPTER 4: SISSEL CHALLENGES THE REALM

*A troubled heart softens when worries are shared.
But beware what you may receive in turn.
--Haakor, The Tome, 932 AD*

In the Stage 12 sleeping hall Sissel lay awake, thinking about the clash between the boys. It was the first real fight in the caverns. What was going on? First Anders had those strange dreams, then he skidded down the climbing wall. And now this. Something wasn't right.

Everything seemed different this spring. Normally they all felt lighter-hearted when winter passed. Although they couldn't see above ground, they could sense it. Even the stale air seemed fresher. The crystals shone brighter, and the planting season always held promise in everyone's eyes. But not this year . . . Sissel wondered about the sense of dissatisfaction she noticed in the other children. And according to Anders, problems existed amongst the Mothers as well. He had told her all about their argument.

Sissel thought about the Stage 16 children. They were lucky. They got to have their load adjusted due to their maturity and their increased interest in their surroundings. They

always seemed a little more satisfied. Could it be because they were a bigger part of things? Sometimes they were even included in meetings with the adults. True, the Stage 16 inhabitants were all sixteen and older. They had reached the Age of Independence. Or they would have, if they still lived above ground . . . Sissel closed her eyes as she felt her jealousy rise.

She lay still as an idea grew in her mind. Idin, the unapproachable Idin, had acted a bit kindly toward her brother. A crack in her armor. Could it be that Idin would listen to her ideas for the caverns? It was possible. She had nothing to lose. She would talk to Idin tonight before things got any worse.

Impulsively she jumped out of bed and dressed in the dark, hastily crossing the leather straps of her slippers over her leggings. Without a further thought, she ran lightly to Idin's chambers, her hair flying.

Idin sat at her desk, writing by the light of a violet crystal. Its eerie glow spread across the rough scroll. At the sound of Sissel's intruding steps, Idin raised her eyes and laid down her pen.

"Well, this certainly is a surprise. No child has ever come to my rooms unannounced."

Sissel stood, silent.

Idin rolled up the scroll with a sigh. "What could possibly be on your mind at this late hour, Sissel, Stage 12?"

Sissel rubbed her hands nervously on her tunic. "Mother Elder, would you please sit down?" She ignored Idin's look of surprise and gestured to the darkened seating area she recognized from the map Anders had drawn her of Idin's rooms. "Over here would be fine."

Idin gave her a sidelong glance, then rose. The soft sound of her robes followed her as she brushed past Sissel and took her seat. Sissel sat on the bear skin which had frightened Anders, remembering how he had explained that it wasn't alive.

Sissel glanced hungrily at the stack of stale cakes on Idin's desk, then turned her thoughts to her task. "Mother Elder, I've been thinking. There's a strange feeling in the caverns lately. I think—well, I think we should change the way we do things around here." Sissel sat, jiggling her leg.

"Really," Idin said. "You think so."

"Yes, I do." She leaned forward. "I know the success of our life here depends on our system of responsibilities and cooperation. Solveig explained it to me, and I know we have you to thank for it. I'm very grateful, so please don't think I'm complaining. But really, we're much older now, and we don't get to decide anything!"

Idin smiled. "I don't think that's quite true."

"I do! Our entire year is completely mapped out. I know in ten months I'll be working in cookery. Every season has its own type of exercise. Most of the time I even know what I'm going to eat for the entire month." Sissel lowered her gaze. "I'm sorry to say this, but it isn't very fun here, you know."

"It's not supposed to be fun."

Sissel startled. "It's this way on purpose?"

"There are many things you do not know. There are dangers, Sissel."

She picked at the embroidered trim of her tunic. "I want to know why we're here. Anders said wolves forced us underground. Tomas told him. He heard some of the Mothers talking once. But you said it was disease."

Idin sat in silence, then rose and circled the room. “You raise many good points,” Idin said in a tired voice. “I, too, have noticed the restlessness. Something is happening, I agree.” Lines of fatigue etched her face. “I will think about it overnight. What is left of it, that is.”

Sissel squeezed her lips together, trying not to feel guilty.

“You are a bold child, Sissel, I’ll give you that,” Idin said. “I shall see you tomorrow.”

The meeting was obviously adjourned. Sissel felt deeply tired after the encounter.

“Mother Elder?”

“Yes, Sissel,” Idin said, turning back. “What now?”

“Why did you lie to us?”