

Chapter One: Guardians Of The Sansa'laa - Part One

Children's laughter cut through the serene afternoon air.

A flock of small birds flew across the field, chirping their happy songs. They wound around a great fellowbrook tree before cresting a low hill, towards the pointed tips of the Obbiwood. Watching their energetic flight, their collective mass changing shape against the clear cream sky, Evan Goodheart tilted his head towards the warm sun, smiling. He knew this calm moment would not last long, and neither did he really want it to. After all, there was more to this sunny afternoon than the lull of solitude. He had honour to win.

Ahead, Nat and Reisa chased a playful spira spark. The brightly coloured bug fluttered away from their pursuit, its stubby transparent wings unable to carry it too fast. How long had they been playing in the field for now? Several hours? Time seemed to have frozen out here.

Evan would be the one to catch the rare bug, he was sure of it. It had shown itself today for him alone. He would keep it in his blessed jar and wait for the Sky Father to favour the bug and turn it into a Wind Stalker, bringing good fortune to his household for a hundred years. His mother and father would be so pleased with him. Everyone would be.

Farther up the field, alongside the gleaming waters of Lake Maeda, walked King and Queen Goodheart, enjoying one of their rare strolls beyond the castle grounds. A Serenity Guard followed the proper ten paces behind the King and Queen. It pleased Evan to see his parents out in the real world, like normal people. Away from the pressures of the castle. It made him feel normal, too, even if several other Serenity Guards were stationed around the field, along with the invisible protective ward that was supposedly over them at that moment.

Evan broke into a run, heading for his friends and the flustered bug.

"His Highness joins the fray," Nat called out heartily. "But the King of Summer looks favourably on the House of Aiylnas this day; mark my words!"

The overly competitive Nat would surely dive for the bug as soon as he was close enough, even if it meant colliding with Evan. He was one of the few children that did not care about roughing with the Prince—and his competitiveness meant he would especially want to win the spark with Reisa present. He would look for any excuse to best Evan.

Nat launched into the air, spreading his large arms out wide for effect. Evan cared not for such displays and aimed lower. The bug evaded Nat's grasp and dove downwards, towards Evan's reaching hands. The glittery wings of the spark tickled Evan's palms just as Nat crashed into him, flattening him to the ground. Reisa's hands joined the pile as she fell with them, grasping Evan's fingers in a tight lock.

With Nat piled on top of him, Evan locked eyes with Reisa—her beautiful, heavy-lidded eyes—and his heart momentarily stopped.

The joy of holding hands with Reisa was replaced by a horrifying fear as a thought struck him. Both their hands were clasped together with the spark somewhere within, and Evan was sure they had crushed it. The thought almost made him cry. How would he tell his parents what they had done? Evan was meant to show them what a blessed future king he was.

Nat guffawed in his over-excited, snorty way as he climbed off Evan's back, playfully pushing his weight down before rising.

The motion caused a stir within Evan's hand. Something *moved*. Reisa's head shot up also, her eyes widening. Evan was sure he felt a flutter. The spira spark was alive!

"So who won?" Nat asked. He wiped blades of grass from his long shorts and vest, and bent down to study the scene.

"One way to find out," Evan said.

He and Reisa kept their eyes on each other. The delicate tips of her pointed ears reached out from the dark hair that framed her pale face. They slowly rose onto their knees before fully standing, keeping their hands together. This was the most time Evan had ever spent holding hands with Reisa, and he felt a longing stir deep within him. He wanted to caress her hands, to feel her fingers more.

Some would say he was too young to think such thoughts, but they were in their late forties, almost out of their Prime adolescence. They were still children, for sure - too young even for practical sorcery training - and yet Evan was sure of how he felt about her. He had never felt such a strong desire for anything before.

Reisa was watching him carefully. He considered trying to read her, but did not dare even attempt such a thing right then, especially with his parents in the area.

"What do you think?" Reisa asked, giggling slightly.

"Let us see." Evan said.

Slowly, carefully, they inched their palms apart, keeping their fingers close like a cage.

The three of them burst into laughter. The spira was held inside Evan and Reisa's clasped hands.

They had both caught it.

"Oh, oh, oh." Nat spun around, relishing the situation.

"Well, Your Highness," Reisa said. She shrugged and pushed her hand to Evan.

"No, no. Do not give it to me due to my status." Evan shook his head with a playful frown. "You will give it to me because it was I who rightfully caught it first. Before your meaty paw intercepted."

"Oh, is that right?" Reisa asked, raising a thick eyebrow. "Well then how do I have it in my hand?"

"Due to the previously mentioned intercepting meaty paw, I believe," Evan said with a smile.

Reisa's next retort was stopped by the sound of softly clanking metal behind them. A Serenity Guard.

"My, My." It was Evan's mother's soft voice, using her mock surprised tone. "What a sight."

The King and Queen came to a stop on either side of them. Their silver armoured guard remained back.

"Indeed," King Alden said with a distracted air, his mouth a thin line under his short beard. The tails of his shiny green robe billowed in the soft breeze.

Queen Leolea wore a light-blue gown with silver flower embellishments—the one she had chosen from the House Couturier's new selection the other day. Such a fine dress for a stroll in the fields. She had even dusted some colour onto her cheeks and around her curved eyes. It was the way Evan liked to think of her.

The queen curled a golden lock behind her pointed ear. "It appears, children, that the spira spark has chosen its guardian,. Or in this case, its *guardians*."

"But it cannot have two," Evan protested. "The spira spark blesses the household of its guardian. If there are two—"

"That is well, Evan-ol," his mother cut in soothingly. "Although it is not unheard of for one to choose two carers. If the two are its best match."

Evan looked to Reisa. She no longer made eye contact with him, and although she remained smiling, her eyes were sad—almost wistful. Evan frowned, having hoped for a better reaction from her.

After a moment Reisa asked, "So what do we do?"

"Willhem, sir," the queen said, nodding towards the short Serenity Guard. "Your Great Matron caught a spira with her late husband, did she not?"

Willhem stepped forward, his long green hair flowing in his wake. "Correct, ma'am. It is told they did not even care for each other beforehand, but it was the spira that brought them together."

Evan perked up at the obvious comparison between him and Reisa, but she had reddened, looking away. His shoulders sagged at her obvious embarrassment. All he had wanted, for years now, was for her to feel something for him.

"That does not always have to be the case," Queen Leolea told them. "Merely that you are both blessed, whether it be together or separately. But high blessings, nonetheless."

"Very high blessings," Nat said cheerily. "One big lovey blessing." His face appeared paler in the sunlight, slick with sweat. Was he coming down with an illness?

"The Queen speaks true," Willhem said sternly, missing the humour. "There are many interpretations for two people being chosen by a spira."

Evan studied Willhem. He was handsome, in a somewhat effeminate way, and was a most gifted soldier for his one hundred and ninety years. He did not seem to mind the thick trickle of blood that ran down his temple.

Reisa's hand stirred. She wanted their sweaty fingers to part. Evan realised, with a lump in his throat, that she must have hated the idea of the two of them being blessed together. Why else would she no longer meet his eyes?

Willhem reached into his satchel and brought out Evan's crystal jar. "If you will permit me, Your Highness."

Evan resisted an eye twitch. Willhem was fairly new to the King and Queen's side, and did not know that Evan cared not for the title of *Your Highness*. He had been teased with the title by other children or jealous adults for almost his entire life. He only accepted it from his closest friends, as he knew it was in pure jest from them.

"Yes," Evan mumbled.

With great care, he and Reisa adjusted their hands over the open jar and released their hold to allow the spark to enter the container. The normally jittery bug settled with little fuss, as if trained to do so. Willhem sealed the top and handed it to Evan.

Evan held the jar up to Reisa. "You have it," he said, trying to sound casual and diplomatic. "For now." If he could, he would give her the spark in a heartbeat, if it meant blessing her. He was glad his parents could not read his thoughts.

"Oh, I could not," Reisa said uncomfortably, taking a step back. Evan knew the tone. She was embarrassed in front of his royal parents, and at her lower station.

"No, it is fine," Evan assured her, holding out the jar.

Nat threw out his hand. "Okay fine, I will have it. Give it here."

"Compromise and sharing is a must," King Alden said. He was squinting in the dying sun, his eyes hidden within dark bruises. "You will find your settlement... in time and with trust."

Nat bent down to pick something out of the grass, no longer interested in the guardians of the Sansa'laa.

"The sun wanes," Willhem announced, turning to the king. "The horizon retreats, my lord."