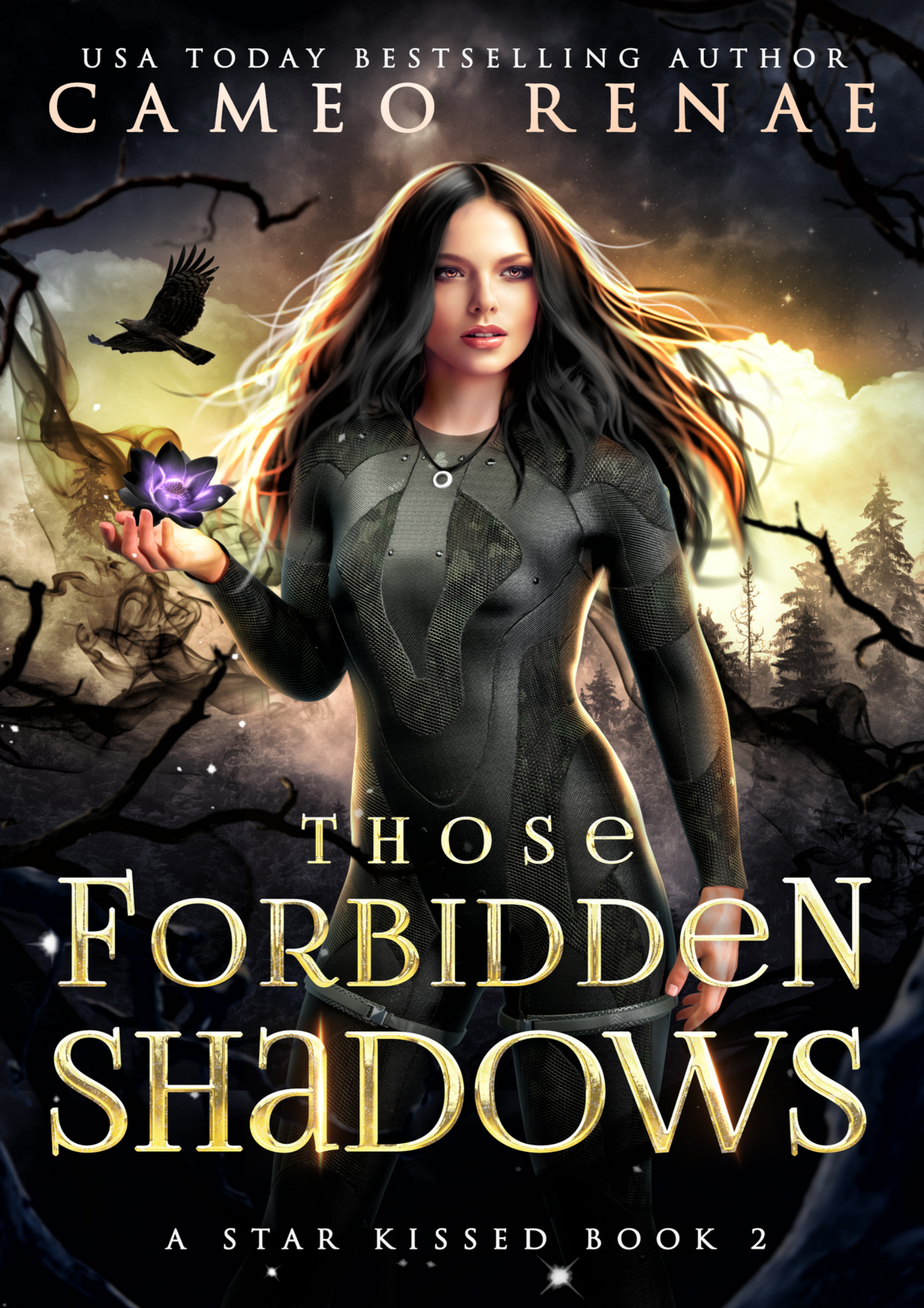


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
CAMEO RENAE



THOSE  
FORBIDDEN  
SHADOWS

A STAR KISSED BOOK 2



# THOSE FORBIDDEN SHADOWS

# STAR KISSED: BOOK 2

CAMEO RENAE

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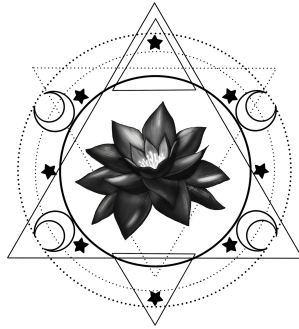
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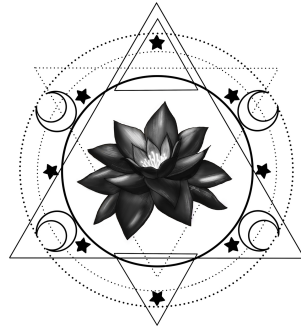


## TRIGGER WARNINGS

Those Forbidden Shadows is a New Adult Dark Fantasy Romance, which includes some sexually explicit content and language that the author has deemed inappropriate for those under the age of 18. We have included a list of trigger warnings below.

Please be aware that this book contains scenes of bullying, physical and emotional violence, profanity, attempted murder, sexual scenes, and death. Please read with care.





## NAME PRONOUNCIATIONS

Kage: cage

Elara: el-are-uh

Remington: exactly how it's spelled. :)

Alena: ah-lee-nah

Helena: heh-lehn-uh

Oren: oh-rehn

Valr: valor

Acacius Terrowin: uh-kay-shus Terr-oh-win

Kyran: key-ran

Kason: kay-son

Naida: nai-duh

Nahla: nah-la

Vaara: vah-rah

*(The names below are both in different languages. I have included the links to Google Translate that have the correct*

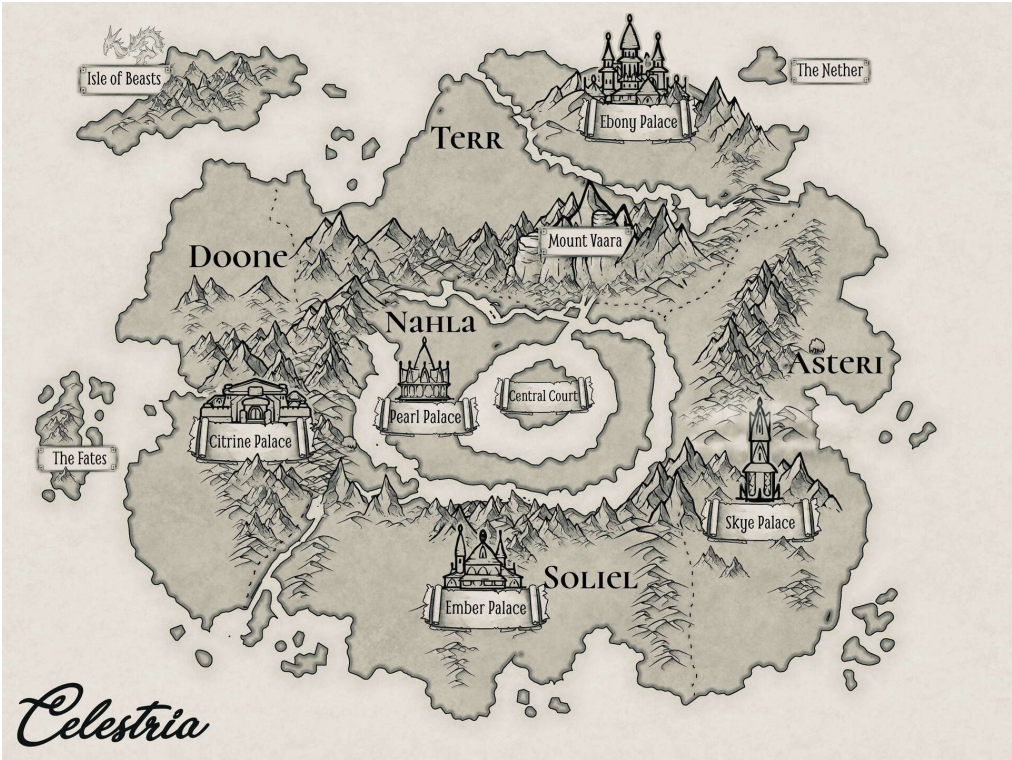
*sound for each word.)*

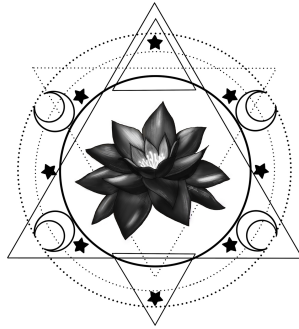
Min Vesmír:

[min \(Danish\)](#),

[vesmír \(Czech\)](#),

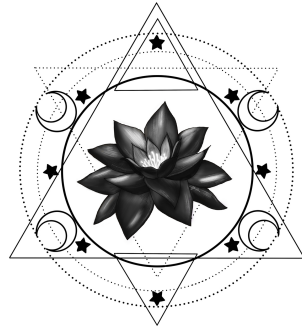
Māza ēna: (Latvian) [mah-zah eh-nah](#)





## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the readers who have taken this journey with me... from my young adult books, to this.



# CHAPTER ONE

## ELARA

Exiting the cave, a bitter wind engulfs me, causing my bravery to waver as I head into the forest alone. Massive, ancient trees surround me, their branches stretching towards a darkening sky.

The air is noticeably sweeter here than it was on Avka, but as I step further away from the cave, there is a palpable heaviness that tightens my chest. The thought of getting lost and the fear of never finding my way back terrifies me.

The Crowned Prince of Terr is lying alone and unconscious in a cave with a bullet lodged in his chest because, despite the danger, the repercussions, and his position, he came to Avka to save me. Injured amidst the chaos, he transported us through a portal to this unknown place.

We must be somewhere in Celestria. Kage said this was a place he and Remington used to come to and play as children, so I am assuming it must be in or near Terr. Then again... they are portal jumpers, so this place could be anywhere in Celestria.

For now, I only have his words to serve as my compass. Hushed words he spoke in my mind with his power.

*There is a cave down the river.*



*Inside are magical flowers, black lotus, but a witch guards them.*

*You must be careful.*

*Head to the river. Follow the sun.*

Kage's words are vague as hell, but they're the only thing I have to go on. I'm hoping, praying, for his sake that there is a magical flower that can cure him, and his words weren't just a result of his condition.

Gazing upward, I spot the sun dappling through gaps in the leafy canopy above me. It's on my left, but I don't see or hear a river nearby.

My best option is to follow the sun, which is already sinking desperately low in the sky. If it sets while I'm in the middle of this gods-forsaken forest, I'm screwed. There is a dark and foreboding magic in this place, and even now, I can feel it brushing against my skin.

As I turn back toward the cave, where the Prince is lying, I cling to the vow I made him. *"I will be back. I will save you."*

I turn around and head deeper into the forest, knowing I'm in a foreign place, with no sense of direction and no familiar landmarks to guide me. The setting sun casts a warm, golden glow through the forest, reminding me that darkness will soon follow.

Unlike back home, where the darkness feels comforting, here it is unsettling. There is something off about this place, but I can't seem to put my finger on it. Despite my inner turmoil, I push through the massive trees, breaking branches along the way to create a makeshift trail to find my way back to the cave. Back to Kage.

It feels like I've been walking for hours. My chest heaves and despite the chill in the air, sweat coats my skin.

The drugs they gave me in Avka are still strong in my system, and now that my adrenaline is wearing off, the effects are kicking in. On top of that, I haven't slept in days. My head feels heavy and numb, my eyes are weighted, and my limbs are extra sluggish. The injury to my shoulder is throbbing like

hell, and although I should be sleeping, I can't. I have to keep moving and hope that I'll stumble into someone along my path who can help me.

But there are no signs of people in this gods-forsaken place. The air is still, and the silence is eerily daunting. The hush in the woods is unsettling, absent from the usual sounds of birds and critters I'm normally used to. Come to think of it, I haven't seen an insect crawling on the ground or flying in the air, let alone the gleam of a spider's web. This entire area is void of life.

Along with that, there is a constant heaviness settling in my chest. A reminder I need to find my way to the cave and flower before the sun completely sets. I need to find the gods-damned river.

I snap another branch to mark my path, and as I step forward, I feel a powerful impact on my arm. It's so hard it knocks me off balance, but when I whirl around, nobody is there.

Cursing, I glance down at my upper arm, which is now throbbing with pain. There is another gash in my suit and a deep red welt that is beading with blood.

*What the hell?* Something hit me. I felt the weight of the blow.

My head spins, but my body goes rigid as I catch sight of the branch I broke and witness blood streaming from the end of it. *Gods, this isn't normal.*

I freeze as my gaze wanders up the enormous tree to see two eyes snap open near the top of the trunk. A bone-chilling scream escapes my lips as I turn to run, but it's swallowed by a powerful gust of wind that tries to trap me within a mysterious vortex. The tree is alive. Its eyes glower at me with an unsettling intensity, while its mouth opens to display rows of sharp, bark-like teeth.

I turn and run as fast as I can, but my limbs are unsteady, and everything around me is spinning. *Gods, not now.* I have to stay focused. I don't know where I'm running, and the

darkness is making it hard to see anything a few yards ahead of me.

I finally dive into the center of a tightly knit grove of trees and roll into some thick brush, covering my face to avoid scratches. The scent of moss and earth fills my nostrils, and soon, the dusk will turn pitch black.

The earth quakes beneath me, alerting me that the creature is lurking nearby. I've never been this scared in my life, and I'm fully aware there is no one who can help or rescue me. I have no weapons and no power, and I'm being chased by a monstrous tree.

The drugs are making my eyes grow heavy, so heavy I can't keep them open.



I suddenly find myself strapped into a chair, back in Avka, surrounded by men dressed in white coats, and King Adhan Merak is standing in front of me.

How the hell is this happening? Why am I here?

The Avkan King leans in, his lips curved into a wicked smile.

"I told you, Pet, you belong to me," he says, running his hand up my thigh.

"Fuck you," I grind out, trying to buck away from his touch. "I'll never be yours!"

The king grips my face, his fingers firmly pressing against my skin. He leans in to kiss me, so I seal my mouth shut as his tongue traces along my lips before he abruptly pushes my face away.

Filled with disgust and defiance, I spit at him, but his wicked laughter sends a shiver down my spine. Suddenly, he turns his attention to one of the men in white coats and gives him a nod. The tall man, devoid of emotion, approaches me, holding a long needle filled with clear fluid.

"No!" I scream, fighting to free myself from the binds. But they are too tight.

The king grabs my chin and forces me to look at him. “I know the dark secrets you keep. No matter where you run, I will find you. You will be mine.”

*Sick, twisted prick.*

I yank my chin out of his grip as the tall man grabs my hair and forces my head to the side. Pain radiates through my head as he raises the syringe and forcefully plunges the needle into my neck.

I wail, and my eyes pop open.

*I'm not in Avka.* I'm surrounded by tree brush.

*What the hell?*

On my right, I sense movement, and when I glance over, I see a man kneeling in the brush, pointing a gun directly at my face. He's wearing a red cloak, like those men who tried to abduct me on Earth.

*They found me.* My heart hammers against my chest as I frantically crawl out of the brush and away from him. He grabs my ankle, and I let out a bellow before flipping over to kick him with my free foot.

But... *no one is there.* My ankle is ensnared in vines.

*What the hell is going on?* It must be the drugs. They're causing me to hallucinate.

My heart is racing too fast, I'm hyperventilating, and my skin is coated with sweat. It's dripping down the sides of my face.

Flipping over to my back, I take a deep breath. *Breathe slowly,* I whisper to myself.

A deep, rumbling growl makes the ground quake. It must be the tree creature.

How the hell do I fight a tree? I would love a freaking chainsaw right now. Or an axe or the ability to conjure fire. Hell, even a flamethrower or lighter would do. But... I have *nothing.*

The sound of snapping branches is nearby. It's getting closer. I have to run. I have to put as much distance between me and that...*that thing*. Whatever it is.

Gathering what strength I have left, I pull myself up and run like hell, but behind me, the creature emits a hair-raising growl. *It found me.*

I involuntarily glance back, and in that split second, branches shoot toward me like loosed arrows. With a scream, I bend backwards, Matrix style, narrowly missing a projectile branch as it passes right over my head, crashing into another tree and shattering it in half.

*Holy shit.*

The effects of the drugs are slowing me down, impairing my ability to concentrate.

I run again, tripping over large roots, but manage to stay on my feet. Spotting an oversized tree, I duck behind it, pressing my back against its rough trunk. I can't go any further without succumbing to exhaustion and losing consciousness. My breath is too fast, and I feel like I'm going to pass the hell out.

Focusing, I notice the silence. The only sound is that of my heavy breathing and hammering heart.

*It's out there.* I know it is.

I wait another few minutes, but there is only silence, so I creep around the tree to see if I can spot it. Maybe I outran it.

A branch breaks behind me. Spinning around, I see nothing, but my heart is about to leap out of my chest, and my legs are trembling.

Suddenly, I feel pressure around my ankles. Looking down, I watch vines wrapping around them.

My legs are suddenly yanked out from under me, and I'm dragged across the forest floor, over rocks and branches and debris I know are causing damage. Within seconds, I find myself suspended twenty feet in the air, dangling upside-down, now face-to-face with the tree creature.

I scream again, both in horror and anger, but the tree creature violently shakes me.

“Stop!” I yell, dizzy as hell. “Put me down!”

To my shock, the branches around my ankles untwine and I’m dropped to the ground, my right shoulder taking the brunt of the fall. It aches like a bastard, and I know my entire godsdamned body is going to be bruised purple tomorrow... if I survive this.

When I finally get my bearings, I find myself caged in by the creature, who is now bent over, its face dangerously close to mine. It opens its enormous mouth, filled with those sharp wooden teeth. *It’s going to eat me.*

My fight-or-flight instincts kick in and I give it a one-two, kicking my legs at the creature’s face.

It cries out in pain, and I jump up to run but get slammed in the chest with a flailing branch. My body flies backward and crashes into another tree, knocking the breath out of my lungs, before I drop to the ground. Shit... that hurt.

The creature comes at me again, but I have nothing to defend myself with. With every ounce of strength I have left, I push myself to my feet and fist my hands, holding them up like a boxer. “I am not fucking food!” I scream at it, faking bravery. But inside, I’m trembling and terrified. One gulp, and I’m tree mulch.

The tree creature stops and glares at me before it sticks out one of its limbs that looks like a hand. In it is a snapped branch that is bleeding.

“You. Break. Me,” it growls.

The deep sound resonating from within this creature is otherworldly. But *holy shit!* That thing just talked. It freaking *talked to me.* And now... *Oh gods.* It’s offering me the broken appendage—the one I snapped—and I don’t want to touch it.

“I—I’m sorry,” I stutter, holding my hands up in front of me. “I never meant to hurt you. I was just trying not to get lost. I need to find a witch and a magical flower,” I throw out, because if it can understand me, maybe it can help.



Or kill me.

*Gods. Will all the other trees I broke branches on come for me?*

Once again, limbs wrap around my ankles and yank my legs out from under me. I'm suddenly thrown up into the air, at least fifty feet up, and all I can think is... this is it. I'm going to hit the ground and splat... I'm dead.

I end up at the top of the tree, about thirty feet up, the branches scraping my exposed skin. Limbs tightly wrap around my wrists and midsection, keeping me from moving. Struggling only makes them tighten.

The tree sways back and forth, and it takes me a moment to realize it's moving. Peering through the leaves and branches below, I am struck by the sight of the creature's roots slithering across the ground, resembling gnarled appendages. *Gods above.*

"Where are you taking me?" I demand, and, of course, it doesn't answer.

I have to get away. I have to find the magical flower and get it back to Kage before anything bad happens to him.

As the sun slips below the horizon, a bone-chilling cold settles over the darkened forest. I struggle against the branches holding me, but they don't budge. They're like iron shackles.

"Let me go!" I demand. "Where are you taking me?"

Again, there is no reply.

I finally sigh and give in. There is no use struggling. It's causing more damage to my wrists and ankles that are already burning with pain.

That's when I barely hear rushing water. *The river.*

Finally releasing my tense, aching muscles, I save my strength for one last attempt to free myself. I must get to the magic flower to save Kage and am determined to fight until the very end... if that's what it takes.

As the tree continues to move through the forest, the sound of rushing water grows louder. Then I spot a flicker of light ahead of me. And another. And another. Soon, there are tiny balls of light weaving and bobbing throughout the branches of the tree, holding me captive.

A deep, reverberating growl rumbles within the creature. It sounds pissed as it tries to swat the tiny lights away with its branch limbs. But those lights dodge every attempt and are soon circling around me, by the hundreds. One tiny light lands on one of my fingers and I get a closer look. It's a moth. But not just any moth. It's the most beautiful moth I have ever seen. The creature's wings gently fold open, revealing intricate patterns that look like stars and moons pulsating with ethereal light. The back of its fluffy head has black designs that appear like a skull.

I'm entranced by this insect when the tree abruptly stops and the branches holding me suddenly loosen their grip. I fall, but jolt to an abrupt halt right before I hit the ground. The creature has wrapped its branch-like appendages around my legs.

Dangling upside down, I strain to see where I am.

I'm just outside a cave that is dimly lit with candles that burn with magic. Tendrils of red smoke curl upward, creating a haze near the ceiling. My nose burns as I inhale the smoky scent, along with the stench of decay mixed with hints of earth and mold.

"Oren, you brought me another gift?" a female speaks.

My eyes quickly scan the area and see nothing but the looming darkness.

The tree grunts in affirmation, dropping me the last few inches onto the rocky ground below. When I stand, it shoves me, and I fly forward into the cave. My body screams in pain as it skids across the hard ground. Bracing my hands against a few stones, I glance down and realize...these are not stones. I am lying on a pile of bones. Countless human skulls and limbs piled on top of each other, creating a bone floor.

Bile rises in my throat as I quickly stumble to my feet to see a woman step out of an alcove hidden within the shadows. She's young—early-thirties—beautiful, tall, and slender, with flawless, alabaster skin. Long, black hair cascades down her shoulders and falls below her waist. She's dressed in black, with a black, feathery cloak drawn over her shoulders.

The moths suddenly encircle me, creating a vortex of light, which allows me to see the inside of the cave more clearly.

“Curious,” the woman says, her almond-shaped eyes studying me as she slides long, spindly fingers down her jaw. Fingers that look like they've been dipped in black ink.

“Who are you?” I breathe, although I have an inkling. She must be the witch Kage mentioned. My eyes sweep the area, but there seems to be no life in this place either, let alone a magical flower.

“You already know who I am. Don't you, Little Star?” she says, taking a step forward.

She continues to stalk toward me, like a hunter circling its prey.

I ready myself, balling my hands into fists, but realize the futility of fighting against magic. This woman—this witch—has it exuding from her. It's dark and heavy in this place, constricting my chest, making it hard to breathe.

*Death.* The closer she gets, the more I feel it circling me.

“Why are you here?” she hisses.

She seems like the type that feeds off fear, so I tamper mine down and reply, “Don't you already know?”

A wicked laugh escapes her. “You are a clever one, but ignorant to speak to me in such a way.”

Darkness seems to swirl around her as an eerie smile creeps on her blackened lips. Goosebumps rise on my arms as she takes another step toward me. As she does, the moths tighten their circle, as if they are protecting me. The witch halts a few feet away, her features still as stone as she observes the moths, their wings pulsating with energy.

“Looks like you found a special one, Oren. Too bad her power is locked away and cannot be consumed,” she says, those onyx eyes piercing straight through me. “However, she looks quite delectable.”

*Consume?* I gag as fear grips me. She’s a freaking cannibal. All those bones beneath me... *hell no*. No one is eating me today. *Except the Prince*, my mind replies, instantly taking me to the vision of what he did to me on Messis.

*No, Elara! Stay focused.*

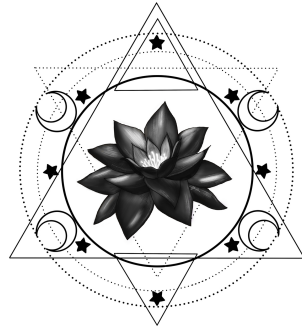
But seriously, after I save his royal ass, I’m going to ask him why I have no memory of this incident. But, back to the witch...

“You ate these people?” I exhale as my thoughts become verbal.

A deep laugh resonates from her, making my skin crawl. Her dark eyes focus on the moths, and she begins to speak in a foreign language I don’t understand. The candles within the cave flicker before a powerful gust of wind sweeps around me, catching the insects within it and carrying them outside the cave. When they try to return, an invisible barrier holds them back.

“I have lived for over a millennium feeding off vegetation and herbs,” the witch says, “but here, I also feed off the power of those who dare trespass. I don’t consume their flesh. However, that is what Oren enjoys the most. Don’t you?” Her dark eyes shift to the large tree creature, who is still outside, and it grunts in approval.

I stay silent, feeling an uneasy churn in my gut. I need to be careful. With no power, my life is at their mercy. I need to stay alive to return to Kage. I have to save him.



# CHAPTER TWO

## ELARA

“Now, Little Star,” the witch says, slowly circling me. “What are you doing on my island?”

“Why do you call me Little Star?” I ask.

With a menacing growl, she bares her teeth, which are too straight and too white for someone who’s lived over a thousand years. Let alone in a cave.

“I’m the one who asks the questions!” she snaps. “Why are you here?”

*Gods. Her emotions are as unpredictable as the wind.*

I straighten my back and swallow the fear that has lumped inside my throat. “Someone brought me here through a portal. He’s severely injured in a cave, possibly dying, and told me I could find a magical flower here that could save him.” It’s the truth and a plea.

She stops, her eyes widening. Her dark pupils spread like ink in water, gradually consuming every inch of her eyes until they are completely black. Exhaling, she stares into nothingness.

“The Shadow Prince,” she whispers. The look in her eyes, in her expression, sends a shiver down my spine, and it makes me wonder if he made her angry when he was younger.



“Consuming his power would allow me to live another millennium.”

“You will not touch him,” I shout, fisting my hands.

My body instantly freezes. Invisible fingers squeeze my throat, lifting me off the ground until my feet are dangling just above it. I struggle to fight the spell holding me, but there is nothing I can do. I can’t breathe. I cannot release the magic gripping my neck. Struggling, clawing at my throat, darkness slowly creeps into the corners of my eyes. Right before I pass out, the magic releases and I hit the ground, coughing and gasping for air.

Those midnight eyes glare at me.

“You cannot fight me,” she hisses. “Who is the Shadow Prince to you? Why are you here?”

Coughing, I struggle to find the right words because, truthfully, I still don’t know.

“Well?” she roars, her face inches from mine. “Did you come here to kill me?”

“No, of course not. Why would I kill you?”

“Because you wouldn’t be the first,” she bites, aiming a finger at the bones on the ground. “Why are you here?”

“I’m here because the injured man is my Prince and future king. I’ve come here to save him,” I finally say.

Her lips curl into a smirk, and she looks at me as though she can see straight into my soul. “He is here with you, Little Star, but duty has bound him to another.” She pauses, a darkness passing over her expression while she paces in front of me. I feel a chill run down my spine as she raises her hand and presses a dark, stained finger against my chest. “Yet, despite his engagement,” she whispers slowly, “his heart and affections lie with you.”

My heart is thrumming loudly in my chest and echoing in my ears. She must be a Seer, someone who can see the past, present, and future. I’ve read about them in my books back on Earth.

“Please,” I implore, knowing she’s the only one who can help me. “I have to save him.”

“Why?” She tilts her head.

“Because he came for me. He saved me and is now injured because of it.”

She exhales a hum. “That is not the only reason you are here,” she says, her tone oozing mockery, as if she knows I’m hiding something. “You have a strong attachment to him. An attachment that caused you to set out alone, into an unknown forest in search of a witch who guards a magical flower.”

It’s a statement. Not a question.

I can’t respond because she’s right. It’s just that I can’t admit to the strong attachment yet because I’m still confused about whatever is going on between Kage and me.

The witch huffs loudly, her impatience palpable in the air.

“I hope you both realize that you’ll face *fatal* consequences if you continue down this path.” Her eyes narrow. “Does that not frighten you?”

My words freeze in my mouth. How does she know this? And why does she care?

“Answer me!”

Her sudden outburst makes me jump. “Yes. Yes, of course it does.”

She stands directly in front of me, arms crossing over her chest. “Want to know the most valuable lesson I’ve learned through these countless years?”

I nod and she leans in, dangerously close. She smells like the wind, earth, and herbs all melded together.

“Do not fear the shadows. Fear those who hide within them. They are watching and waiting, prepared to trample you underfoot. Jealousy is the cruel captor that has bound and held me these countless years. You must be vigilant, Little Star. Don’t fall prey to it.”

*Jealousy.* I know firsthand what she's talking about. I've already fallen victim to it. Envious eyes *are* fixed on me, anticipating my downfall. They're lurking, ready to strike when I least expect it.

I was drugged and almost raped because of it. My gut also tells me Vera prevented the men on the team from following me in Avka, which led to my injury and capture. I doubt I'll ever prove it, but deep down, I know it was her.

"Tell me what I need to do to gain your help," I plead.

"Nothing is free," the witch responds, her cold eyes sending a shiver down my spine. "If you want to save your Prince, I will need something from you in return. And what I will ask for will come at a high price."

A coldness sweeps through me, raising the hair on my skin. The very reason I am standing here, and not chained and drugged in Avka, is because of Kage and his sacrifice.

I straighten my back and nod. "What's your price?"

She slowly shakes her head. "Only after you agree will I share the details with you. If you are so keen to save him, you must first prove your loyalty."

I am loyal to him. I owe him everything. I owe him my life.

"I agree," I breathe.

A dark and foreboding smile creeps on the corners of the witch's lips. "Once your power is released, you must set me free."

I pause, confused. "Set you free? I don't understand."

Her expression turns hard as she snaps, "This island. This cave. I am here against my will. This place has been my prison for over eight hundred years!"

I shake my head, trying to wrap my head around the time she's spent here. "Why? What happened?" What did she do to deserve such a sentence? What if I release her and she commits heinous crimes?

"I never deserved this!" she hisses. "You know nothing."

And now I believe she can read my mind.

Her gaze becomes distant, peering into the darkness beyond the cave, and there is a long pause before she speaks again. “There were—and still remain—leaders who feared my people for their great power and abilities. All we wanted was to live a quiet, peaceful life. But a corrupt few had other plans.

“Driven by greed, they sought to exploit our abilities for their own wicked gain. When we refused to help them, they secretly hunted us down like vermin and imprisoned us in cramped cages. The relentless starvation and brutal torture quickly took its toll, leaving only a handful of us who survived. After all these years, I still don’t know the fate of the others... or that of my lover. For all I know, I could be the last of my kind.”

The tone of her voice and sadness in her expression makes my heart ache.

“I’m sorry,” I breathe.

Her distant gaze returns to me. “Then honor your oath,” she speaks, her tone filled with a mix of command and desperation. “But before you leave, I will need something from you. Something that will compel you to return and keep your word.” She pins me with a narrowed glare. “The only reason you are leaving this island alive is because I believe you are the one who can release me.”

I shake my head. “I have no power or authority to release you.”

“But you will,” she says with a glint in those onyx eyes.

She knows something I don’t. So, I dig deeper. “How do you know these things?”

She takes a step back. “One of my gifts is that of necromancy. I can communicate with the dead. They are all around me.” Her arms raise in the air, hands reaching out to touch something I cannot see. “The spirits give me visions—glimpses of the past, present, along with the ability to foretell the future. They help me unravel mysteries and uncover hidden truths.

“My kind also possesses the ability to shapeshift, and we are gifted in herbology. We can create poisons and hallucinogens that cannot be detected. All these gifts,” she says, staring at her hands, “became our curse and downfall. They are why we were so heavily sought after.”

My pulse races. Because of all the fantasy stories I read on earth, my favorites were about shifters. “What do you shift into?”

“We never tell because if our enemies found out, it could lead to our demise.”

“Then, I won’t ask again.” Secretly, I would love to see her shift.

She knows things and can talk to the dead, so I have to ask...

“Do you know who I am? Do you know where I come from?”

“No. The spell cast over this island dampens my gifts,” she answers quickly. “Whoever locked your powers also created a powerful barrier to safeguard your origins. But I can see your aura and sense your power. Though tampered, it is still pulsating with great energy. Even now, I can feel the intensity of it resonating throughout this cave.” She holds out a hand toward me, as if she is brushing that energy. “You just might be my redemption,” she says so softly that I almost can’t hear her.

“Does this mean my parents also possess great power?”

“If you have it, of course they do.”

The question remains... if they were so powerful, why did they give me up?

There are so many more questions I want to ask her, but I know I have to return to Kage.

“What do you want in exchange for your help?”

The witch’s eyes travel down to my chest. “I want your Celestial life force.”

That sounds terrifying. “What exactly does that mean?”

“Unless you return and fulfill your pledge to set me free,” she forewarns, “you will slowly wither and meet your end within a year’s time.”

My heart responds with a stutter. This is not a simple payment. This is *my life*. She wants my life.

*Gods*. Is it worth risking?

My heart thumps loudly in my chest, as if begging me to reconsider. “What if my power is not released within a year’s time? What if I cannot free you?”

“Then you will perish,” she replies with no regard. “So, you’d better pray to whatever gods you serve and hope they hear and answer you. However, you can choose not to pay and leave here without the cure for your Prince. The choice is still yours. Your Prince’s life, or yours.”

*His life or mine*.

Kage has a future. He is the Crowned Prince and future King of Terr. Meanwhile, I still don’t know who I really am or where I came from. I have no power...I am nothing.

I slowly extend my hand out to her. “Where is the flower?”

She arches her brow and shakes her head. “Not until payment is made.”

I don’t know if I’m making the right decision, but there is no other choice. Kage needs the magical flower—a flower I have yet to see. But I trust he wouldn’t have sent me here if it wasn’t real.

“How do I pay you?”

“You can’t,” she says. “I must take it.”

I swallow hard, my limbs trembling. “Will it hurt?”

“At first,” she says and shrugs her shoulders. “But the pain will eventually subside.”

I take a deep breath to steady my fraying nerves and answer her before they unravel me. “Alright then, take what you



need.”

The witch’s eyes widen like she didn’t think I would agree. “Your bravery is admirable, Little Star.”

She dips her head and I take a step toward her. I can feel waves of power vibrating from her as she closes her eyes and begins speaking in a foreign tongue. The candles around the cave flicker wildly, their glow increasing. Then, the air in the cave suddenly turns frigid. Wisps of it curl from my lips as I exhale.

Cupping her hands in front of me, the witch’s voice rises, reverberating off the cave walls. Whatever she’s saying is making my head spin and my limbs weak. The world tilts on its axis, and right before my knees buckle, branches wrap around my waist, ankles, and wrists. They’re holding me up and keeping me steady.

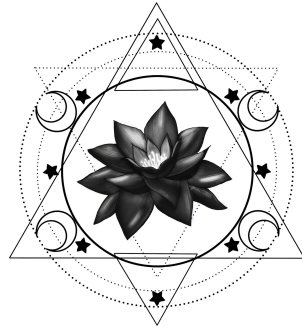
As the witch continues her spell, I feel it. A forceful tug in my center. A pull of something deep inside.

Excruciating pain emanates through my chest, radiating through my entire body. It feels like whatever is being extracted is unwilling to let go and is fighting to stay put.

Sweat drips down my brow and coats my skin, causing my legs to buckle as the pain intensifies. But the witch continues, eyes focused, words commanding.

An agonizing scream bursts from me as a small ball of light exits my chest. I feel as though I’m being torn in two.

And then...everything goes black.



# CHAPTER THREE

## ELARA

“Get up, Little Star,” a soft voice whispers.

My eyes flutter open to see the witch hovering above me.

Her expression is softer, and her eyes have returned to normal. I’m on the ground, but there is a blanket of fur underneath me.

“Is it done?” I breathe.

She nods, then holds out her hand. A flower magically appears within it, hovering above her palm. It’s a lotus, the size of a baseball, which has delicate, velvety-black petals and a center that emits a shimmering, purple glow.

I slowly sit up, entranced by its beauty, and feel an ache in my chest. Extending my arm, I carefully take the flower from her and cradle it in my hands. “What do I have to do?”

“You will need to grind the center of the flower into a liquid and give it to him. At the end of three days, he will be completely healed.”

“That’s it?” I thought it would be a lot more difficult.

She nods and hands me a bag that contains a small, stone mortar and pestle, along with a copper kettle, worn and dented

from years of use. “Brew a tea with the outer leaves. It will help dull the pain as he recovers.”

“Thank you,” I say, even though the payment came at a hefty price. “How do I find my way back to him?”

“Oren can carry you, or the Celestial moths can guide you back.”

“Celestial moths?”

“Yes,” she says, her eyes peering toward the cave’s exit, where the tiny balls of light are still fluttering outside, trying to get in. “For creatures so rare and elusive, they are highly protective of you. This only confirms that you are truly special.”

“My name is Elara,” I say, slowly standing to my feet. My legs are still weak, but they work.

“I know,” the witch replies with a smirk.

Of course, she knew. “Did the spirits tell you?”

She nods in confirmation. “I am Alena Ravenwood. My fate now lies in your hands, Elara.”

“And my life literally lies in yours.”

The sound of Alena’s laughter fills the cave. She looks different now, unlike the hard, intimidating witch I encountered when I first arrived. There is a marked change in her countenance, which now appears much softer and gentler. The weight on her shoulders seems to have lifted and I know it’s because of hope. That one day, unless I die first, she can finally be free.

“When you leave this place, always be on guard. There are poisonous vipers everywhere, ready to strike. Trust no one,” she says, resting a palm on my shoulders. She looks down at my chest and tugs at the cord tied to my neck, revealing the amulet Kage gave me. “A bone marker?” she exhales. “Your Prince must care a great deal for you.”

“A bone marker?” I question, but she disregards me.

“Brace yourself for life-threatening trials and challenges that will come to test your limits and push you to your breaking point and beyond. Resist the temptation to give up, even when you feel you can’t go on. You must find the strength to survive.”

I nod because everything she said is overwhelming and makes my head spin, but her words make my anxiety rise. Life-threatening trials and challenges? Vipers ready to strike? It makes this island seem like a haven. If I had a choice, I might want to stay here with Alena and Oren, away from the drama and danger. But I can’t. The witch holds my life in her hands, and I promised to save her. Besides, I can’t leave Kage with the viper, Vera.

Elwyn had already warned me. She told me there would be arduous and deadly trials I must endure. She also said that my true mate will protect me, and I must also protect him. *Is Kage my true mate? And what does being a true mate mean here in Celestria?*

I could have died in Avka, and who knows what could have happened on Messis. The only reason I am alive, and here, is because of him. What will happen if he isn’t there to save me?

“Our lives are now tied together, Little Star. Just remember, you are much stronger than you think you are,” Alena says, as if she can read my mind. “You have three days before the shadow hawks from Terr arrive. They will search for their Prince, so I suggest the two of you get your priorities in order. Until then, make every moment count.”

My heart is hammering again.

Shadow hawks? Maybe Remington will send them. He must know Kage came to Avka to rescue me, and he’s probably freaking out right now, wondering why he hasn’t returned.

Three days. I need to get back to him as soon as possible.

“Where exactly are we?” I ask.

“They call this place the Nether,” she says. “It’s hundreds of miles from Terr, and my own personal hell. Celestrians were told this island was cursed and home to the wicked *Nether*

*Witch* who would kill and consume anyone who trespasses.” She grins. “It’s not a lie, but it is why no one dared come here. Except those sent by those treacherous imbeciles to murder me.” A soft smile rises on her lips. “Your Prince and his companion were brave to come here when they were younger, and because they were harmless young boys, I left them alone. Watching them play brought me solace.”

I try to imagine a young Kage and Rem playing hide and seek within the trees, and it makes my heart swell. “I’ll do whatever I can to free you.”

Alena nods and gives me a sad smile, as if her own hope is dangling on a thread. And it is. Right now, I am the least powerful person in all Celestria. If I were in her position, I wouldn’t get my hopes too high either.

“So, what will it be?” she asks. “Would you like Oren to return you to your Prince?”

The tree creature kneels and holds out a limb that eerily looks like an arm and an open hand.

“He won’t eat me, will he?” I just want to be sure that when I leave Alena, her pet tree won’t swallow me whole.

“You will *not* eat this one, Oren. Understand?”

The tree grunts in what I hope is a yes. Before I make a move, I stop and face Alena.

“How did you meet Oren?” I’m curious to know more about this creature who will take me back to Kage.

The witch gives me a sad sort of smile. “Oren has been my sole companion here on Nether. He is a Dryad, a mythical creature who not only lives on this island but owns it. I discovered he was once like us, a Celestrian who lived in Doone and was raised in the Citrine Palace over ten thousand years ago. It was during a violent war when his father, the ruler of Doone, was overthrown and everyone from his royal bloodline was mercilessly killed, except for Oren.

“In an act of trust, Oren was taken by his father’s closest friend and brought to this island. That friend’s wife, a powerful witch, performed a ritual, beseeching the gods to

spare the child and protect him from their enemies. The gods answered her plea, placing the spirit of the child into a newly sprouted oak, transforming him into a half-breed known as a Dryad. For centuries, this island has sustained him, but he was alone.

“I first encountered Oren when I was imprisoned here. He was untamed and accustomed to solitude. He tried to kill me, but using the limited power I possessed, I found refuge in this cave and enchanted its entrance. For weeks, he persistently attacked my ward, attempting to gain access. However, I discovered that when I talked to him, he would calm down and anchor his roots into the ground.

“So, day after day, I shared stories about my life and the wonderful place I once called home. A place filled with flourishing trees, vibrant flowers, and enchanting creatures. He sat and listened, and eventually, when I was on the verge of dying of thirst and starvation, I lowered the ward and ventured outside, surprised that he let me live.

“Because of his lack of guidance, Oren developed a taste for meat, which is why this island is devoid of all living beings.” Her narrowed eyes slide to Oren who lets out an aggravated huff. “So, I made a pact with him, promising that if he spared me, I would help and teach him, and we could become friends. Over the years, he has served as my eyes and ears on the island, bringing any trespassers to me. In return, we were both sustained and survived until now.” She pauses and rests a palm on my shoulder. “Rest assured, Little Star, as long as I say you are safe, he will not harm you.”

I take a deep breath and nod. “Thank you,” I say before stepping onto Oren’s outstretched limb. He lifts me carefully into his boughs, where branches are entwined, creating a cozy seat. I sit, keeping the flower safely cradled in my hands.

Branches carefully fold over my legs and around my waist, and I feel a sense of security knowing they’re there, keeping me from falling thirty feet below.

Glancing down, I watch Alena raise her arm. “I will light candles and send prayers to the gods for your safety.”

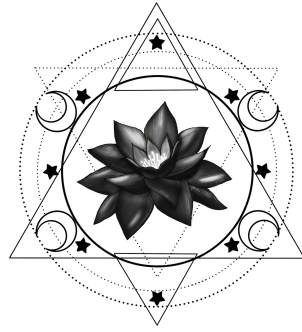
“Thank you,” I respond, aware I have no other option but to return. “Wait!” I call out. “Who is your lover? Maybe I can find out where they are.”

“Her name is Helena Moonfall,” she shouts back. “She will have a tattoo of a Raven on her right wrist.” I then notice the crescent moon tattoo on the wrist she is holding up to me.

I file the name Helena Moonfall away in my mind. “If she is alive, I will find her,” I say, waving.

“Release me from this prison, Little Star, and I will be forever indebted to you,” she says as Oren disappears into the darkness.





# CHAPTER FOUR

## REMINGTON

### THE EBONY PALACE — KINGDOM OF TERR



“Any word on my son?” The King of Terr snarls. The tension in the room is palpable as he paces back and forth across the dais in the throne room.

“None, yet, my King,” I reply. “Our spies in Avka have yet to respond.”

“Insolent,” he hisses under his breath.

I can only imagine the King’s frustration after being held captive, having his powers suppressed, and knowing that his son has willingly returned to the danger he just escaped.

Kage put us all in a predicament.

I can’t believe he would risk everything to save Elara. Then again, I truly couldn’t expect anything less. I should have gone to Avka as soon as I’d heard they captured her, but I knew it would have been reckless and possibly fatal to jump blind, without knowing exactly where she was.

I also knew that as soon as Kage found out, he wouldn’t idly sit by and wait. He would *have* to save her... the girl in his

dreams. The girl he'd never met but has been in love with his entire life.

What makes me furious is that he'd already planned for something like this to happen. He had secretly given Elara a bone marker—a ridiculously huge and important detail he failed to share with me—his best friend and Captain of his guard. *Asshole*.

Creating a bone marker takes a lot of power and drains the one who creates it. I know when he left, he hadn't fully recovered, which makes him vulnerable to the weapons of Avka. Weapons created to kill us.

The bastard should have told me. He should have sent me. I'm the one who is supposed to be protecting him and Elara. Now, in his condition, they could both be in danger, captured, injured, or dead. And there is no way for us to know. All we can do is wait, either for our spies to get back to us, or for Kage to show up.

It's been an agonizing few hours since he departed. The king immediately forbade me from jumping after him, so I'm stuck here, bound to wait until we hear something.

I've known Kage for a very long time, and my gut is telling me something is wrong. If it wasn't, he would have already returned, or I would have heard something from him.

With a firm knock, a guard announces his presence and enters the throne room through the grand doors. "Your Highness," he says, bowing deeply. "The rulers of Asteri, *and the Princess*," he says with warning, "are requesting an audience with you."

The guards of Terr know Vera, and as much as possible, avoid her.

The King's eyes slide to me, frustration knitting his brow. I know we both share the same sentiments regarding the rulers of Asteri, and right now, his reputation and the reputation of his son are in jeopardy. Gods, this is a disaster. Especially if Vera finds out Kage went to Avka to save Elara.

The rulers of Asteri will not let it slide. They want a foothold in Terr and will fiercely cling onto the opportunity for their daughter to sit on the throne.

The King releases another deep, exasperated sigh before making his way to his throne and settles into it. I promptly take my place beside him.

Leaning over to me, he quickly whispers, “Do whatever it takes to ensure my son’s disappearance remains a secret.”

I bow my head in acknowledgement as Vera and her parents—the rulers of Asteri—enter.

The king rises to his feet to greet them. “Have you not seen enough of me today?” he says with a forced laugh. “It’s only been a few hours. Why have you come to Terr?”

“Oh, come now, Kyran. We’re practically family,” the Queen remarks with a snub attitude. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other.”

I can immediately sense the king’s unease.

“We still have our own kingdoms to oversee, so I doubt our time together will exceed what is necessary,” the king retorts, returning to his throne. “Now... why have you come?”

His tone is devoid of friendliness. I know he’s exhausted, forced to tolerate their presence.

“We’ve heard some disturbing news,” the Asteri Queen says. “Where is our future son-in-law? I would like to speak with him. Ask him a few questions.”

Vera remains quiet, standing at her mother’s side with a tight jaw, flaring nostrils, and fire burning in her icy-blue eyes.

Dread coils in my gut. They must know about the bone marker Kage gave Elara. But if they ever find out Kage went to save her... there will be nothing but chaos to follow. As of now, the king and I are the only ones who know.

“I’m sorry, but our healer has given him a tonic, and he is resting,” the king replies.

“I want to see him,” Vera demands, stepping forward.

The king's jaw tenses. "I said he is resting and is not to be disturbed."

"He is my future husband. I demand to see him."

"You have not yet wed," the king declares. "While I was away, my son devoted extensive hours to keep our kingdom running smoothly. He's resting now, and I forbid anyone to disturb him. Including you."

Inwardly smirking, I savor the sight of Vera's defeated expression. But she won't relent.

"I was told he gave a bone marker to that... *that* Changeling." Vera's lips purse, her face twists in disgust. Her hatred for Elara is evident.

The king rises from his throne and steps off the dais to stand in front of them. Both Vera and her mother take a step back. "*That* Changeling saved my life, and your parents' lives as well. If it weren't for her, we would still be prisoners on Avka."

"But why did she possess a bone marker from your son?" the Queen questions, tightening the grip on her daughter's arm.

Meanwhile, the king of Asteri is like a mute, a soundless statue standing behind them with no expression at all.

I move toward my king because this is *my* duty. To protect the rulers of Terr at all costs.

"The Prince did it on my account," I say, turning to Vera. "I've already told you that Elara is with me."

"Your account?" Vera's icy glare cuts straight through me. "I want to hear it from his lips. I want to look into his eyes and see if he is lying to me."

"Why would my son deceive you?" the king growls.

I can sense his growing impatience and know if his power had returned, things would be different. They would be cowering in front of him.

I step further in front of the king and confront Vera. “The bone marker was created because we had reason to believe Elara was in danger. That *someone* had influenced other members of the extraction team to abandon her in Avka.” I cross my arms over my chest. “A thorough investigation will be conducted, and those responsible for sabotaging the mission to rescue the rulers will face heavy consequences.”

The Queen steps forward with her nose up in the air. “Why is this issue being raised? It does not concern my daughter,” she states firmly, dismissing the matter with a wave of her hand.

I can sense Vera’s guilt through her fidgeting and avoidance of eye contact. But I know she would never admit to it.

Annoyed, she lets out an angry huff, her eyes rolling in irritation. “If you claim to be her protector and lover, why is it always *my* fiancé who comes to her rescue?”

She’s redirecting the conversation, displaying her true narcissistic nature.

I shrug my shoulders, expressing my indifference. “It was pure luck that he found himself in the right place at the right time. I am, and always will be, thankful to him for it.”

“I refuse to let a worthless Changeling steal my fiancé!” Vera snaps, her voice resonating through the throne room.

The Queen awkwardly wraps her arm around her daughter’s shoulder and pulls her close. “Don’t worry, darling. The girl was captured on Avka. I doubt she will survive that place.”

Vera’s eyes, filled with seething indignation, turn towards her mother. “Mother, he gave her a bone marker! He knows exactly where she is! I have to see him... *in person*, to know that he hasn’t left Terr to chase after her.”

“Kyran, are you aware of this?” The Queen inquires. “Your son is betrothed to our daughter, and creating a bone marker for another woman is an extremely serious matter.”

“Her name is Elara,” I say firmly. “And she *is* with me. The Prince did these things as a courtesy *to me* because he knows how much I care for her. Besides, she recently arrived from

earth, and is not only a citizen of Terr, but is also under my care and protection.”

The king steps to my side. “If she holds citizenship in Terr, she is also entitled to the throne’s protection,” he adds. “Which is likely the motivating factor for my son’s actions. He would have offered the same help to any citizen.”

“I must confess,” the King of Asteri finally interjects, breaking his prolonged silence. “Her proficiency with a knife is truly exceptional. And you cannot dispute the fact that she saved your life, my dear.”

The Queen scoffs. “She embedded a knife into a man’s eye, and it burst all over me. I’d hardly call that skilled.”

“He was mere inches from you,” the King of Terr proclaims. “I’d say her aim was impeccable. If it had been someone else, it might have been *your* eye that was taken.”

The Queen gasps, her hand flying to her chest as if what he said offended her.

“My son is recuperating,” the King reiterates. “We were informed by our healer that he will need a few days’ rest.”

“I still want to see him, even if it’s just from the doorway. I need to make sure he’s there,” Vera says.

“Are you accusing me of lying?” my King growls.

“Come now, Kyran,” the Queen interjects. “Our daughter’s only intention is to check in on her fiancé and ensure he’s resting well.”

*Lies.* But both the King and I know they won’t leave until Vera makes sure he is in his bedchamber, resting.

The King turns to me and nods his head, his eyes conveying a silent message. I bow in acknowledgement and swiftly exit the throne room, desperate to find Kage’s replacement, Phillippe.

Very few know about Phillippe, and Vera isn’t one of them. He has served as a replacement for Kage on multiple occasions, impersonating him for events the Prince couldn’t attend.

Phillipe and Kage are the same height and build, and when viewed from the back, it is impossible to tell them apart. And with a simple glamour, they are completely indistinguishable. The King hired Phillipe to work in the stables, to help train the shadow hawks and tend to the horses. It's a token job, as every citizen of Terr can portal jump, but it keeps him hidden and close by for times like these.

As I make my way out of the throne room, a few guards also exit and follow closely behind me.

"Find the royal healer and..." I give them a look as I point toward the stables, and they nod in understanding. "Meet me in the Prince's bedchamber, immediately."

"Yes, Captain," they say, rushing off.

I have minutes, knowing Vera saw me leave and will undoubtedly follow. I immediately open a portal and jump to Kage's bedchamber, making sure everything is prepared. I throw back the covers, then gather a glass of water and a few tonics and put them on his bedside table.

Within minutes, a rapt set of knocks tells me my guards are back.

"Enter," I holler.

The door opens, and Phillipe rushes in, sweat coating his brow.

"Vera is here," I say. "You need to strip your shirt and shoes off and get into the bed."

"And the Prince is—?"

"Away. He is under orders to rest for three days," I say, just as Digby, the royal healer, enters.

Digby quickly listens to the instructions, then drags a chair to the Prince's bedside. Meanwhile, Phillipe has removed his shirt, slid into the oversized bed, and is pulling the blanket over him.

Everyone is moving with haste, knowing the outcome will be disastrous if Vera enters to find Phillipe in Kage's bed.



“Stand outside the door,” I instruct the two guards. They bow, then exit, shutting the door behind them.

“We must glamour him,” I tell Digby.

Nodding, he swiftly rummages through his bag and retrieves a small vial.

“Drink,” he urges, handing it to Phillipe.

The healer always has this potion readily prepared for specific situations like this. A potion created by the dark witches of Terr.

Another loud knock at the door causes everyone to freeze.

“Kage? Kage, it’s Vera. I’ve come to check on you,” she shouts.

*Shit.*

Phillipe pours the tonic down his throat and then collapses onto the pillow. In a quick motion, he yanks the blanket back over himself and turns away from the door.

It usually takes a minute for the glamour potion to work, so we’ll have to stall.

Just as Phillipe settles down, the door bursts open, and Vera strides in, her wild eyes landing on me.

“If he is not to be disturbed, why are you here?” She questions, her voice filled with skepticism.

“I came to let him know you’re here, and the healer is here to check on him,” I state matter-of-factly.

Digby leans over and grabs Phillipe’s wrist, checking his vitals. “His pulse is a little high, but the potion I administered will fix that. He will be out for the next few days,” he says, looking at me.

“Thank you, Digby,” I say.

“Of course, Captain. Please notify me if there’s anything else you need.” He stands up and heads towards the door, briefly acknowledging Vera with a nod.

She ignores him, staring at Phillipe’s back.

“Kage, can you hear me? I need to ask you a question,” she says, stepping next to his bed with her arms crossed over her chest. “Kage, do you hear me?”

“He obviously doesn’t,” I scoff. “Didn’t you hear the healer? He will be out for a few days.”

Vera ignores me and sits on the edge of the bed, making the mattress sink. Then, with both hands, she grabs hold of his arm and yanks him to his back.

I watch Phillippe’s—Kage’s—brow furrow, but he keeps his eyes shut and lets out a frustrated moan. Vera stares at his face, studying it like she knows something is wrong.

“What is wrong with him? He was just fine. We all know Kage doesn’t get tired. I don’t understand why he needs days to recover.”

I let out a deep sigh. “The weight of Terr fell on his shoulders while the rulers were imprisoned. He’s been holding our kingdom together, which required many sleepless nights. You, of all people, should understand this. I’m sure your brother, Archer, shared a similar burden with Asteri.”

Her eyes narrow and jaw tightens.

“He just needs rest, and as his fiancé, you of all people should be most concerned for his wellbeing.”

Fortunately, the King of Terr arrives and enters the room, while the rulers of Asteri linger just outside the door. They are like predators, watching and waiting to find a weakness so they can strike.

“This is my son’s private room. Now that you’ve seen him, please grant him some rest,” the King implores. “If you must speak to him, come back in three days’ time when he’s able to speak to you.”

With a deadpan expression, Vera stands and heads for the door.

“See to it they are escorted back to Asteri safely,” the King says to the guards.

“Yes, Your Highness,” the guards say in unison, bowing their heads, while closing the door behind Vera.

We wait a long minute before we hear three quick raps on the door, which means they’re gone.

The King and I exhale while Phillipe flips over with a wide smile on his face. A smile that would instantly give him away. I have never seen Kage smile that wide or bright. In our younger years, but not recently.

“I pity the Prince for marrying someone like her,” Phillipe says. “She’s so rude. I mean, you told her I was given a tonic to rest, but she nearly ripped off my shoulder trying to roll me to my back. I don’t understand why he wants to marry her.”

The King runs his fingers through his jet-black hair in frustration. “I take full blame for this union. They came to me with the promise of strengthening Terr and securing Asteri as an ally. But they also made sure the marriage arrangement was firmly secured in writing. Because I had recently lost my wife, I wasn’t in my right mind. I had faith that their intentions with this proposal would be for the betterment of our people, yet I failed to detect the hidden stipulations they included. Conditions that not only obligate my son to this marriage but would strip him of his power and throne if he cannot follow through. Now, he is trapped in a situation I am powerless to get him out of.”

Our King looks weary. His eyes have dark circles under them. I don’t know how to comfort him, and by the saddened look on Phillipe’s face, he feels the same. There’s no denying this situation is fucked.

“Let me know as soon as you hear anything regarding my son,” the King says in a defeated tone while heading for the door.

“I will,” I say with a bow.

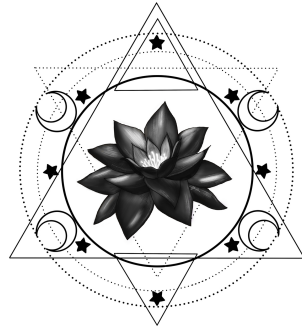
“Also,” he pauses. “I want you to discreetly gather twenty of your best men. If my son is captured on Avka, I will lead the rescue mission myself and ensure the safe return of both him

and the girl,” he declares, not giving me a chance to respond before he swiftly exits the room.

*Stubborn.* That’s where Kage gets it from. Who will lead Terr if they are both captured?

We need to find out what happened... soon.

*Kage. Elara. Where the hell are you?*



# CHAPTER FIVE

## ELARA

The Celestial moths return, encircling us as we make our way back into the dark forest. Having them close by fills me with the warmth my body is craving. Some have drifted ahead, leaving a light trail for Oren to follow, which I highly doubt he needs.

I glance at the enchanted flower cradled in my hands. Its purplish glow captivates me, and I can't help but feel a sense of accomplishment for having just survived an encounter with Alena... the witch who has lived on this island for the past eight centuries by consuming the life force of intruders.

To add to it, I'm hitching a ride on a sentient, carnivorous tree, so I should consider myself incredibly lucky, even though I have to return within a year's time to free her or face certain death.

Gods, it's a tall tale to tell *if* we survive this forsaken island. I wonder if Rem and Maeve would even believe it. Rem might, since he's been here before.

My teeth clatter together, and my limbs shake. Ever since the sun set, a frigid cold has settled over this island, making my exposed limbs feel frozen and stiff. I need to figure out a way to make a fire tonight to keep Kage and me warm. Without it, we'll both freeze to death.

Hearing the river to our left, I realize we need to stop. Alena instructed me to use the outer petals to make tea. I'll need water for that.

"Oren," I call down, hoping he won't be angry at my request. "I need some water from the river. Could we stop for a moment?"

Oren stops, and a limb bends toward me. "Give. Me," he speaks, in that eerily deep voice.

Balancing the flower delicately in one hand, I quickly reach into the pouch and pull out the kettle, hanging it on the outstretched branch. Then watch as it lowers down into the darkness below. In no time, Oren returns the kettle filled with water. I take it and carefully place it back into the pouch, making sure it doesn't spill.

"Thank you," I holler down, glad I didn't have to do it myself.

The tree creature grunts and resumes his steady movement. I smile, thankful I made a friend instead of an enemy, an enemy I know would rather chew on my flesh than collect water.

The constant swaying of the tree is making me drowsy and slowly lulling me to sleep. Shaking my head, I peer through the branches and see that the moths guiding us have disappeared. Looking closer, I see dim lights pulsing within a dark shroud.

Then, I feel it. That familiar buzz and unmistakable energy that permeates the atmosphere whenever *he* is near.

*Kage.* It must be him. The cave must be close by.

I need to put a barrier over my mind, around that area where Alena took my Celestial life force. There has to be a way. I close my eyes and think about that entire conversation, up until I blacked out, and in my mind, I put up an impenetrable wall around it, and seal it tight. I don't know if it will work, but I pray to the gods it does. It has to. Knowing Kage and Rem, I'll never hear the end of it, and I don't want them coming back and ripping Alena apart.

My heart races as Oren stops. The branches holding me in place slowly tighten their grip and begin lowering me from the tree until my feet touch solid ground. Looking upward, I see Oren has one of his limbs pointing behind me.

“There,” Oren speaks.

As I twist my head, I search for any sign of the cave, but all I find is impenetrable darkness.

“The Prince is there?” I ask.

Oren grunts, which I take as a yes.

The Celestial moths gather around me as I reach out and take hold of Oren’s limb, hoping it’s his arm.

“Thank you, Oren,” I say. “I’m sorry for hurting you earlier. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

Oren grunts again. Then I watch as he snaps a small limb from one of his branches and holds it out to me.

I freeze in horror. “I—I can’t take that.”

“Take,” he insists, in a gruff voice, holding it out. “Magic.”

“Magic?” I repeat and he grunts.

I swallow hard, then reach out and take the small branch, which is bleeding at the break, and gently place it in the pouch with the kettle.

“Thank you, Oren. I’ll find a way to come back and release you and Alena.”

“No,” Oren replies. “Nether. Is. Home.”

“Oh,” I whisper. “Then, I guess I’ll see you later.”

Unexpectedly, Oren wraps a few limbs around my back and pulls me flush against his trunk.

I stiffen, then realize he’s hugging me.

As uncomfortable as it seems, I want to stay on Oren’s good side. Holding the flower in my left hand, I wrap my right arm around Oren’s trunk, feeling the rough bark against my skin. I can’t help but inwardly grin and think... it’s official. I’m a bona fide tree hugger.



Oren releases me and without another word, or grunt, he disappears back into the pitch-black forest.

The moths gather in front of me, prompting me to follow them as they enter the dark cloud. I follow, knowing they will guide me to Kage. As I move further, the shadows envelop me, and I feel a gentle pressure around my waist that guides me forward.

“Kage,” I call out into the darkness. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” a voice whispers, causing my stomach to twist.

“Where are you?”

“*Waiting for you, Min Vesmír,*” his velvety voice speaks in my mind.

My heart pounds as I clutch the flower to my chest, the moths illuminating the path ahead of me. Then, I see it—the entrance to the cave. Rushing towards it, I quickly duck inside, feeling the gentle brush of moth wings against my skin as they move ahead of me, lighting my surroundings.

The shadows slowly recede, and the moment I see his face, a mixture of relief and longing washes over me. Dropping beside him, I carefully set the magical flower and pack on the ground and grasp his hand, which feels hot to the touch.

“I’m here,” I breathe, brushing a strand of his hair from his forehead, which is dotted with sweat. My fingers are icy, but I can tell he has a fever.

I lift his shirt to inspect his wound, only to discover that blood has soaked through the dressing and is pooling on the cave floor. *Gods, he’s lost a lot of blood.* I have to work fast.

“Can you hear me?” I whisper. “I brought the magical flower. I’m going to save you.”

When he doesn’t respond, I remove the mortar and pestle from the pouch and balance it on his thigh.

The moths flutter above me, creating a gentle glow that fills the small cave.

Picking up the flower, I carefully pluck the outer leaves and gently place them back into the pouch. I'm left holding the source of its magical energy—a small pod at the flower's core, which is still glowing in a soft shade of purple.

Placing it into the mortar, I take the pestle and crush it. The pod bursts open, and a vibrant purple fluid coats the inside of the mortar, instantly releasing a fragrant aroma into the air. As I continue mixing, I watch the purple fluid transform into a mesmerizing golden hue.

Is it supposed to change color? Am I doing it right?

I have no idea what I'm doing, nor do I have any experience with a mortar and pestle. I have no choice but to give it to him and hope for the best.

“Kage,” I say, softly nudging his shoulder. “Can you hear me?”

*Nothing.* He must be out again.

I slowly slide my left hand under his head and raise it, then place the bowl to his mouth, realizing there is no way he is going to drink this without it spilling everywhere. I can't afford to lose any of it.

Revising the plan, I take a sip of the fluid and hold it in my mouth. Then, I tilt his head back and open his mouth with my free hand. My heart is hammering inside my chest, but I have to do this. There is no other way.

Placing my lips over his, I let the liquid flow from my mouth into his, then quickly raise his head and close his mouth, observing his Adam's apple move to confirm he has swallowed.

Exhaling a sigh of relief, I quickly repeat the process until the last drops of the potion are in my mouth. Pressing my lips firmly against his, I allow the elixir to trickle into his mouth.

A sudden surge of electricity fills the air as Kage's eyes snap open, freezing both the world and my beating heart in place. His warm hand glides tenderly to the nape of my neck, sending shivers down my spine. The sensation of his touch is

electric, and a low, guttural moan escapes his lips as he pulls me closer, his lips pressing against mine.

Our mouths meld together in a dance of passion and desire. His tongue moves with an intensity that ignites a fire within me, each stroke deep and fervent. His kiss exudes dominance with an undeniable hunger as he licks and sucks my tongue, consuming every last trace of the potion.

*“Elara.”* His voice is a whisper in my mind.

The sound of him speaking my name fills me with a pleasurable ache. I’m dizzy and breathless but pull back, gazing into those deep, onyx depths.

“Kage,” I breathe. “We can’t. You’re injured and need time to heal.”

He slowly shakes his head. “I woke up, and you were gone. I was worried something bad might have happened to you.”

I gently place a finger over his lips. “Don’t speak. The witch said that after giving you the potion, you will be completely healed in three days.”

Without warning, Kage sucks my finger into his mouth, his tongue swirling around it.

I quickly yank it away. “My finger is filthy,” I gasp in horror. “You don’t know the things I’ve touched.” My mind flashes back to the pile of bones in that dirty cave, along with everything else in the forest.

A mischievous grin spreads across his lips. “It doesn’t matter where you’ve been or what you’ve touched, Min Vesmír. I’m ready and willing to taste every part of you. Even the filthiest parts.”

*Gods above.* My eyes widen, and a lump forms in my throat, making it hard to swallow.

Leaning back, I try to put a little distance between us, because right now, I can hardly catch my breath. I can’t think. I can’t look at him. Being this close to him is not only intoxicating... it’s suffocating.

*I need to make a fire.*

I quickly gather dry leaves and branches within the cave and form a pile close to the cave's exit.

"What are you doing?" Kage asks, his voice weak.

"Making a fire to boil water for tea, and for warmth, so we don't freeze tonight."

He smiles, his eyes blinking slowly. "You won't freeze tonight with me here."

I fake a cough, as my mind conjures the two of us twisted together. *Nope.*

Kage's melodic laughter fills the air. I glance over to him and gods... His smile instantly warms me. Then I see him wince as he covers his injury in pain.

Quickly abandoning the kindling, I rush to his side. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he breathes, but his heavy, bloodshot eyes tell a much different story.

"No, you're not," I say. "Your wound needs to be cleaned and redressed."

When I try to lift his shirt, he grabs my wrists and pulls me closer, his face inches from mine.

"Don't worry about my wound, Min Vesmír. In three days, it will be healed, anyway."

I sigh at his stubbornness, but he won't let go.

I don't know if I can do this. To be this close to him and not give into temptation. Every part of me wants him. Craves him. Our attraction is like the force between two magnets, impossible to resist or ignore. The only thing holding me back is my conscience, and that he is injured.

This man risked everything to come to Avka and rescue me. Remington had told me he had dreamed of a girl ever since he was a child and confirmed that the girl was me. Would he be treating me any differently if I wasn't in his dreams? I highly doubt he would save a Changeling with whom he had no personal ties. Especially when one almost tried to kill him. But

I cannot deny the connection between us. It makes me believe our paths were destined to cross.

Looking at him, I see nothing but desire swirling in those obsidian eyes. I want to kiss him. To savor the taste of his lips, and the warmth of his mouth. To feel the touch of his bare skin against mine. I want him. I want *all* of him. But... there is a *huge* complication. He is engaged to a princess who has sunk her claws deep into him and won't let go. And that alone makes me pause.

Her accusations against him—and me—could have cost him his throne, and me...my life. I would never forgive myself if he was stripped of his power and title because of my wants or desires. Even at the risk of our happiness.

With another pained smile, I lean away from him, my heart aching. "I'll make you tea with the leaves of the flower," I breathe. "They'll help ease the pain."

He nods then slowly releases me, his weary eyes focusing on the cave's ceiling.

"Where did the Celestial moths come from?" he asks.

I glance up to see that most of them have landed on the roof of the cave, creating a canopy of glowing light.

"They followed me," I say with a shrug. "They tried to protect me against the tree creature and the witch."

His bloodshot eyes widen. "Tree creature?"

I nod. "His name is Oren, and he is a Dryad. Did you ever see him while you played here as a kid?"

"No."

"Well, he scared the hell out of me. I broke one of his branches, trying to leave a trail to follow to come back to you, and... I hurt him. At first, I thought he was going to kill me, but he ended up delivering me to the witch... whose name is Alena Ravenwood."

"You met the witch?" His dark eyes narrow.

“I did. She is incredibly beautiful, and was, for the most part, accommodating.”

*Except for the part where she extracted my Celestial life force.*

“And she gave you the flower, expecting nothing in return?”

“No,” I exhale. “I have to repay her.”

Fear fills his eyes. “What does she want as payment?”

I hesitate, not wanting to reveal the life essence deal.

“Elara,” he growls. “What did you agree to?”

“I promised to return and set her free once my powers are unlocked,” I reply reluctantly.

“Is that all?” he probes further.

I shake my head. “It must be done within a year.”

“And if you can’t fulfill that agreement... what will she do?” His intense gaze makes me nervous. I hope that the shield I put around my conversation with Alena holds. Just in case he tries to find out. I just want him to heal and not have to worry about me.

“Don’t worry about the details,” I say, trying to reassure him. “I’ll make sure the agreement is fulfilled.”

“Elara. Tell me what it is. Let me share your burden.”

I offer him a smile, knowing he already bears an enormous weight on his shoulders. I know fully that his decision to rescue me won’t sit well with many people, and I know that once he heals and we’re back in Terr, there will be harrowing trials waiting for me. There is no need for him to worry about my wellbeing. I’ll handle the arrangement I made one way or another.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about,” I confidently assure him. “I promise, I’ll be fine.”

He pauses, his eyes intently studying me. “I won’t let her harm you.”

“I know. Just trust me, okay?”

“Alright,” he finally relents.

Suddenly, a moth descends from above, gently landing on my arm, its wings shimmering with a mystical, ethereal luminescence. I extend my finger, and the small creature crawls onto it, compelling me to bring it closer for examination. “How do you know about the Celestial moths? The witch said they are rare and very elusive.”

“They are. I’ve only seen them once before in the Empress’s gardens,” he says, his eyes focused intently on me, and the creature perched delicately on my fingertip.

My eyes meet his. “The Empress?”

“Yes, it is said the moths were drawn to her. They crave celestial power, and the Empress’s power was unmatched. She alone could wield every element and was the one who brought balance to our world.”

He attempts to sit up but groans and collapses back down.

“Kage!” I cry, rushing back to his side.

“I’m fine,” he exhales, but I can sense he’s about to pass out again. He’s lost too much blood. I don’t know what else to do, and it pains me to see him in agony.

“Don’t worry about me, Min Vesmír,” he whispers, before his eyes close.

“Kage!” My heart pounds and my stomach instantly knots.

Wide-eyed, I fixate on his chest, watching it rise and fall with steady breaths. *He’s alive.* He’s unconscious, but I pray to the gods it’s because the potion is working.

A single tear glides down my cheek, and as I wipe it away, I realize the effect this is having on me. I’ve been strong my entire life and found it easy to tuck my emotions away. But this—Kage, his injury, engagement, and whatever is happening between us, weighs heavily on me.

Kage groans, snapping me from my thoughts.

*Tea.* I have to make a damned fire and brew the leaves.

I carry the pouch over to the kindling and set it down. Taking out the kettle, I set it aside before carefully gathering the velvety-black petals. Then I spot the branch Oren gave me at the bottom of the pouch and carefully withdraw it. There are intricate carvings running down its length in an ancient writing or runes. As I run my fingers along its surface, I watch the symbols glow.

*Magic.*

Oren said it was magic. But what kind of magic? Maybe it's a wand.

Just for kicks, I point the branch at the kindling, not expecting anything to happen.

"Give me fire!" I say in a dramatic voice.

A surge of electricity jolts through my palm, and I watch sparks shoot from the tip of the wand, igniting the kindling. I'm frozen in place, eyes wide, trying to figure out... *what the hell just happened?*

Twisting the branch in front of me, I notice the symbols still glowing gold. *Good gods.* This is a game changer. I have a magical wand in my possession, and I wonder what else it can do.

*Thank you, Oren.*

Startled by the popping of the flames, I quickly stow the wand back into the bag and gather more sticks to add to the pile of kindling. My fingertips are frozen to the bone, so I hold them over the flames, welcoming the heat.

Next, I carefully search the small cave, hoping to find a suitable stone to place the kettle on. There are none, just tiny pebbles the size of silver dollars, which I guess will have to do. Clearing a spot in the center of the fire, I try to avoid the scorching flames and quickly construct a tower of stones, creating a flat and stable surface for the kettle to sit securely on. Into the kettle, I carefully drop the petals, one-by-one, then position it on the stones and wait.

The saying "*a watched kettle never boils*" is literally the truth right now.

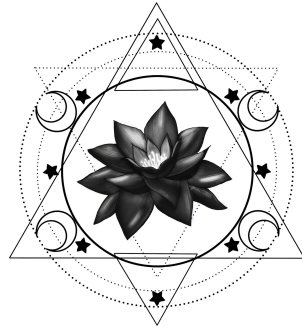


As the minutes tick by, my eyes grow heavier. The lack of sleep is finally catching up with me, so I decide to shut my eyes for a moment and wait. As I do, a familiar warmth surrounds me, like a comforting embrace. Sliding my eyes open, I realize it's not the fire... but shadows flowing from Kage that are spreading throughout the cave.

Kage's eyes are peacefully closed, and his breathing is slow and steady, but his shadows are wide awake. They feel like the soft touch of fingers delicately brushing against my skin while enveloping me like a warm blanket, instantly thawing my icy limbs.

That familiar hum of electricity that happens whenever Kage is near permeates the air, making my eyes heavier, lulling me into a deep sleep. It feels almost enchanting, this magic, and I swear I hear a gentle whisper say, "*Sleep.*"

I have no choice but to surrender.



## CHAPTER SIX

### ELARA

*I blink and suddenly find that I am no longer in the cave, but lying on a large, comfortable bed adorned with black satin sheets. This place feels oddly familiar, like I've been here before. But I can't quite recall because it was in my repressed memories that were shown to me in Avka.*

*"You have been here before," a deep, velvety voice responds.*

*I twist my head to see Kage emerging from the shadows and am instantly captivated by his presence. He's shirtless, wearing black pants, but gods, his upper body is like a masterpiece that the gods themselves have sculpted from stone. And those eyes, those mesmerizing eyes, as haunting as a starless night, are fixed on me with intense desire.*

*"Kage," I whisper, my heart pounding in my chest. "Where are we?"*

*"We are within my dark vision, and this," he says, extending his muscular arms, "is my bedchamber."*

*"How is this possible?" I glance down and notice I'm wearing a black, satin nightgown that dips low in the front, so I instinctively pull the sheet up to cover myself.*

*He grins, leaning against a post at the foot of the bed. “My shadows sometimes act on impulse, usually to protect me, but this is the first time they’ve brought someone else into my dark vision.”*

*I am instantly breathless. “So, this—”*

*“We are in my mind,” he says, “but our physical bodies are still asleep in the cave.”*

*Heavens above. “Are we safe? Our bodies?”*

*He nods. “My shadows will protect us.”*

*I exhale, trying to process the fact that we’re in his mind, alone in his bedchamber, while his shadows are guarding our bodies in the cave. Is there any limit to the weirdness of this day?*

*My fingers glide over the silky sheets, and I sink into the softness of the bed beneath me. “This feels so real.”*

*He offers me a smile that ignites a heat deep in my core. “It’s as real as you want it to be.” He moves to the side of the bed before pausing directly in front of me. “In this place, we have the freedom to do whatever our hearts desire. To be vulnerable. To love and be loved with no reservation. In this place, we are protected from everyone and everything.”*

*I release an unsteady breath, fully aware of what he’s implying. Kage has already proven himself to me. There is no doubt there is some kind of magical connection between us. But... there is an enormous elephant in the room that must be addressed, because it’s something that could ruin us both.*

*“No one else will know, but we will,” I sigh. “And we cannot forget the fact that you are engaged.”*

*He shakes his head, while his hands fist at his sides. “It’s an arranged marriage. I had no say in the matter,” he admits, frustration knitting on his brow. He reaches forward, grabbing hold of my hands. Even here, within his dark vision, I can feel the energy coursing between us. “You have to know, I have never loved Vera. She is a thorn in my side and not someone I want to spend the rest of my life with.”*

*I shake my head, because even if it is true, she will never let him go. Rem already told me her intentions and those of her parents. They want a piece of Terr and it's obvious they will do whatever it takes to put Vera on the throne.*

*Vera already displayed her jealousy. If Rem hadn't intervened and made the chancellors think we were together, things would have ended badly. They would have taken Kage to Central Court for trial, and if found guilty, he could have been stripped of his magic and throne. All because of me. I can't—I won't let that happen.*

*"The witch warned me that there will be dire consequences if we continue down this forbidden path," I say, my thoughts becoming verbal.*

*"What forbidden path?" he asks, those dark eyes pinning me down.*

*My pulse races and breath quickens. "A path we cannot deny. A path of longing for each other but knowing we can never truly be together."*

*Those onyx eyes widen, swirling with emotion. "You long for me?"*

*My heart beats faster. "What I feel for you is... complicated. Apart from being the Crowned Prince of Terr, I still don't know much about you. When we first met, I thought you despised me because I was a Changeling. But then, every time I was in danger, you showed up, selflessly defending me despite the consequences to your reputation and safety." I shake my head and let out a shaky breath. "I can't deny there is a connection between us. Whenever you walk into a room, I know it's you without even looking. There's an electrical charge in the air, letting me know you are close, and your touch makes my entire body tingle.*

*"I can't fully describe what I feel about you because whatever is happening is new. But I cannot deny that there's something there."*

*He lets out a deep breath, a breath I can feel the weight of. "You will never know or understand what I feel for you. Why*

*everything in me yearns to be near you. I want you, Elara," he whispers, his voice filled with longing. "More than anything I've ever wanted or desired."*

*"But you don't know me. Truly know me."*

*Closing his eyes, he pinches the bridge of his nose. "Perhaps the gods placed you in my dreams, thinking it was a twisted joke, or maybe," those emotion-filled eyes open, "it was destiny. You were there during my darkest moments. In my dreams, you were a comforting and familiar presence that I longed for. I memorized every line of your face, your eyes, your smile, your lips. And even though you were in my dreams, you were as real to me as you are now."*

*"I yearned for sleep, just to catch a glimpse of your exquisite face. And night after night, you never failed to appear. Even though you never spoke, your smile kept my heart beating and kept me grounded. Having you, even if it was in a dream, gave me what I needed to endure another day."*

*My heart is on the verge of cracking in two. This is a feeling I've never experienced before. When I look into his eyes, I see both sincerity and a deep longing for someone who lived only in his dreams. Someone he believed was beyond reach.*

*"On Avka, they used a powerful drug to break into my mind. They saw what you did for me at Messis. You saved me from those men, and then..." Even if this isn't real, I can feel my face heat with embarrassment. "I know what happened that night, right here, in your bedchamber."*

*His jaw tenses. "I'll kill them all for touching you," he growls.*

*"You actually did kill most of them," I say with a grin. "But one escaped. He had something in his hand, and I think it held whatever was in my mind. They'll know we are connected, and I have a feeling the Avkan King will use it against us."*

*"You met the Avkan King?" His eyes narrow on me, piercing through my soul.*

*I nod, and without warning, tears well in my eyes.*

*“Did he touch you?”*

*I cannot answer because he not only touched me, but he drugged me, kissed me, and tried to erase my memory. On top of that, he claimed I was his.*

*“You can see for yourself,” I exhale.*

*Kage nods, then gently cradles the sides of my head in his hands before closing his eyes. A minute passes before I hear his breath quicken. His brow furrows, jaw tenses, teeth grind together, and nostrils flare. Then, his eyes snap open. Eyes that have gone completely black.*

*“He’s a dead man,” he roars. “I’ll kill him for touching you.” He then steadies my head, and I gaze into those dark, endless depths. “I promise you this, Min Vesmír. He will never touch you again.”*

*Without another word, his mouth collides with mine.*

*I cannot deny that I want this. That I crave this, but—*

*He breaks the kiss, resting his forehead against mine. “Don’t let your fears cloud what is happening here. Even within my dark vision, we have been gifted this moment. But if you don’t want it, tell me now.”*

*“It’s not that I don’t want it, because I do. It’s just...”*

*“I can always erase your memory,” he says as if he knows exactly what I’m thinking.*

*“Is that what you did during Mesis?” I ask. “I saw what happened but had no memory of it.”*

*He nods. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you, but I had no other choice. With Vera watching, you had to believe that Rem saved you.” There is a hint of sadness in his eyes. “If you want to forget our time here, I can do that for you.”*

*“I don’t want to forget,” I whisper softly, “but once I surrender my heart to you, it won’t easily let go.”*

*A mischievous smirk curls on those beautiful, full lips. “Once you offer your heart to me, Min Vesmír, it becomes*

*mine. And it will remain mine, fiercely guarded and cherished, for the rest of my existence.”*

*His words leave me breathless. There’s no denying that this man is everything I’ve ever wanted and needed. However, with the marriage arrangement, I’m certain that we are, and will remain, star-crossed, just like Romeo and Juliet. Their love was forbidden, as she was promised to another man, but they found a way, as love often does. They loved intensely and passionately, making stolen moments count, even if it was short-lived.*

*Perhaps that’s what he meant. Maybe this is our stolen moment. But will it also become a tragic love story?*

*I wasn’t brought to Celestria to steal the heart of the Prince of Terr. I was a Changeling, returning home to a place I never knew existed. All I want is to survive and find my place, and to be honest, love is the last thing on my mind, except when I’m around him.*

*I can’t ignore that undeniable pull. That unexplainable buzz in the air, the way he looks at me, and the way he smells. Everything about him is alluring.*

*But the biggest question is, do I want this? Am I ready for the repercussions and the loss that will come after we leave this place?*

*Stolen moments.*

*“I want this,” I exhale. “But on one condition.”*

*He tilts his head. “Anything.”*

*“Whatever happens between us, I want it to be real. I don’t want it to happen within your dark vision. But I also want to make sure you’re healed first.”*

*“And your memory?”*

*“I want to keep it.”*

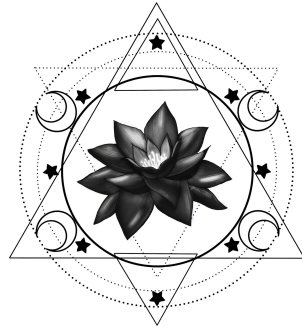
*There is a spark in those beautiful, dark eyes. Eyes I could get lost in. “Are you sure this is what you want?”*

*“Yes.”*



*“Then you should know this... when the time comes, and I claim you, you will be mine, and mine alone. There is no turning back.”*

*I nod because deep inside, I know that despite what my conscience or my mind says, my heart wants to be his. And after all these years, I realize that my guarded heart knows best.*



# CHAPTER SEVEN

## REMINGTON

### EBONY PALACE – KINGDOM OF TERR



A day has passed, and I still haven't heard a damn thing from our spies in Avka.

Given Kage's nature, he would have immediately jumped to Elara, rescued her, and made a quick escape. However, I also know Kage's temper. Knowing they'd harmed her, he wouldn't have let it slide. I have a gut feeling—call it intuition—that tells me there was a massacre wherever he jumped to, which is probably why we haven't heard anything yet.

Not hearing from him only makes me think they've somehow been captured, or one of them is injured. We are helpless to do anything until we know exactly where they are.

Today, the King has me stationed in his study in case I hear anything from Avka. He's been busy with Chancellor Wessex, discussing the kingdom's political bullshit, and I'm standing here, ready to pass the hell out from boredom.

After countless hours, the chancellor leaves, and the King leans back in his chair, rubbing his temples.

"Tomorrow morning, I want you to send out the shadow hawks," the King finally says. "I need to find my son."

“I will, Your Highness,” I say with a nod.

“Remington, when he gets back, you need to keep him grounded. There is too much at stake.

If they managed to escape Avka, Kage’s shadow hawk, Valr, will find him. There is a mysterious connection between the two no one fully understands. I believe Valr has the ability to read Kage’s mind. He understands everything he says and commands him to do. Then again, Kage was the one who raised him.

On Kage’s seventh Celestrian Phase we portal jumped to the top of Mount Vaara on Terr’s southern border during a winter storm. A dare was given to Kage, which he never turned down, and since I knew I would eventually become his guard, I joined him.

On arriving, we found ourselves in a massive shadow hawk nest. An unsettling, but not too surprising leap, as it is known that shadow hawks only inhabit those mountains of Terr. Fortunately, the nest was empty except for one, abandoned egg. There had been one other that had already hatched, but both the new hatchling and its mother were nowhere to be seen. We assumed the mother had left the egg, believing it had no chance of survival. Kage, however, picked up the egg, and we jumped directly back to his bedchamber, where he carefully hid it under a thick, fur blanket inside his closet. Then, we rushed to his Celestrian Phase party. Even with all the treats and gifts, he couldn’t stop whispering about the egg.

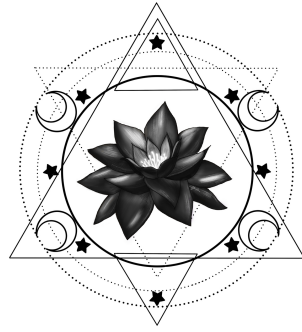
A few weeks later, while he was attending his lessons, the egg hatched and the hatchling tore through his room, tearing his bedding to shreds. The King punished Kage but allowed the shadow hawk to remain in the great barn where he would be trained alongside the others.

Kage named the hatchling Valr and visited him every day without fail. The trainers quickly noticed how strongly they bonded, so Valr became Kage’s, even at such a young age. This hawk, which eventually grew to be the largest in the kingdom, always came whenever his master called him. It’s as if he possesses a built-in sonar, always knowing where his

master is. I just hope Kage is back in Celestria, so Valr can find him.

I'm glad Vera hasn't returned. We still have two days to find him before she does.

May the gods help us.



# CHAPTER EIGHT

## ELARA

Gentle fingertips caress my cheek. My eyes slide open, and I am greeted by a face so mesmerizingly perfect it feels like a dream. Flawless skin, straight nose, sharp, angled jaw, lush lips, and pitch-black eyes ringed in gold.

We're in the cave and the sun has risen, allowing natural light in, but it's cold. Above us, the moths are docile, their lights still pulsing.

I move and my head feels like it's going to explode, and my body aches everywhere. Especially in my shoulder where I was shot. I try to blink away the sleepy haze and sit up, but gentle hands hold me in place.

"I'm sorry I woke you." Kage's smoky voice makes my heart skip a beat.

When I realize I am lying next to him, I freeze. His closeness overwhelms me, and the buzz in the air sends tingles across my skin, making me brutally aware this is not a dream.

He sits up and I notice how much better he looks. "How are you feeling?" I say, my voice weak and raspy.

With a grin, Kage lifts his shirt. The bandage is gone, and all that remains is a red scar on an incredibly sculpted abdomen. I

gasp, my hand instinctively reaching out to touch the scar, but I hesitate.

“It’s okay. You won’t hurt me,” he says.

But I don’t think I can touch him yet. “Does it hurt?”

“No. Not anymore.”

“But it’s only been a day.” Just last night, he was barely conscious, the wound seeping with blood.

“I am not a normal Celestrian,” he says with a smile that makes his face glow and makes him appear younger. “I heal much faster than most.”

“So, I’ve heard,” I say, propping myself up on an elbow. He seems so much more relaxed, and his smile shows a side of him I haven’t seen before. Not with the *unapproachable Dark Prince* mask he wears most of the time. I like it.

His head tilts slightly to the side, eyes narrowing. “What exactly did you hear?”

I can clearly see the gold ring in his eyes, which is swirling, a lot like the potion did last night. It’s mesmerizing and so damn beauti—

Kage clears his throat, and my cheeks instantly heat.

“I’m sorry.” I shake my head, and *hell*, the movement makes it throb even more. I press my palms to my forehead. “What did you say?”

He lets out a laugh that reverberates through my chest. “I want to know what you’ve heard about me.”

“Right,” I exhale. “Well, Rem told me you are the most feared man in all Celestria, even over your father. And that no one can rival your power or gifts.”

Kage lets out a hum, and then nods. “I cannot deny that fact.” He moves to the fire, which has had logs added to it and has been stoked. Then, he picks up the kettle, which was sitting in the middle of it, and pours the steamy drink into the mortar.



“Here, it’ll warm you,” he says, moving back and handing it to me.

“I can’t. This is for you.”

“I don’t need it,” he says, moving closer. “I’m not in any pain, and my body has almost completely healed. This will help relieve your pain.”

I accept it because my entire body, from head to toe, is one big aching mess. As I take the mortar, our fingers touch, and I instantly feel the current flowing between us. Quickly pulling the mortar toward me, I place it to my lips and sip. The liquid is hot and feels amazing running down my throat and instantly warms me inside. Kage watches intently as I finish the drink before he takes the empty vessel back.

“How long have you been up?” I ask. My head and limbs are already tingling, and the pain is subsiding. Gods, the magical potions here are no joke.

“Too long,” he says, before those onyx eyes rimmed in gold shift to me. “Especially with you lying next to me.”

*Heavens above.* My senses have awakened, and it’s suddenly too hot in this small cave. The air is heavy, and I have to close my eyes because his scent, that heavenly, powerful scent that is his alone, is so damn alluring.

“Are you well?” He asks, and my eyes pop back open.

“Yes,” I say, but I’m not. Everything that happened within his dark vision rushes right back into my memory. Was it real? Did we say all those things to each other, or was it just a dream? Right now, with him being so close, I’m incapable of distinguishing dream from reality. Maybe I’m still dreaming.

“You’re not dreaming,” Kage breathes, moving a few feet away from me. The buzz in the air is instantly magnified. “For years, I begged the stars to make you real, and after the marriage arrangement, I hung you on my wall of memories, never thinking you would show up. But, when you did...” he pauses, his eyes brimming with emotion. “When I saw you for the first time with Rem, I didn’t know what to think or how to feel. I had already fallen in love with the girl in my dreams. I

had memorized every line and curve of her face.” His hand reaches out, gently caressing my cheek. “I’ve been waiting for you my entire life, Min Vesmír. I never expected to find you, and now that I have, I would rather watch our world burn to ash than let you go.”

“Kage,” I breathe. My heart is beating against my chest and heat floods straight to my core.

In a split second, he closes the distance between us, his hand slipping around the back of my neck. But he pauses, his breath heavy as he rests his forehead against mine.

“I have wanted you, wanted this, from the first moment I saw you. But before I do anything, I need to know that you want me, too.”

His touch, his scent, the sound of his voice, the look in his eyes... I may not have dreamed of him all these years, but he embodies *everything* I could have ever dreamed of. The Prince is achingly beautiful, and in my darkest moments, when I needed saving, he was the one who showed up. My unwavering hero.

*Stolen moments.*

I won’t let my fears sway me. He’s not married yet. Engaged, yes, but not by choice. I cannot deny that everything inside of me wants this. Wants him. Wants every stolen moment with him. I’ve only known him for a short while, but he has already proven that he would do anything to protect me. For me, there is no greater sacrifice or love.

Without saying a word, I lean forward and press my lips against his.

It’s then that his self-control crumbles.

Kage groans and it reverberates through my entire body. In an instant, his fingers knot in my hair, pulling me closer. His tongue glides over my lips, and I part them to let him in. Taking hold of my chin, he tilts my head, granting him greater access.

His kiss is vulnerable, raw, and honest. It’s a confession, but also a kiss full of hidden secrets and promises.

*“I want you, Min Vesmír. I want to claim you and make you mine.”*

His voice is inside my head, while his mouth is devouring mine. And those few words ignite a flame within my core that makes my thighs clench together. I’m putty in his hands, completely at his mercy.

*“I want you,”* I speak in my mind.

There is a glimmer in those onyx eyes as he skillfully peels me out of my leather suit, and in no time, I find myself naked in front of him. His eyes rake down my body but return to the necklace still around my neck. The necklace he gave me, that I’ll ask about later.

My hands grip the hem of his shirt, and as I pull it up, he grabs hold of my wrists, stopping me.

“Not yet,” he breathes. “Not until I’ve tasted and had my fill of you.” Those beautiful lips, full and enticing, raise in a smirk. “I told you before, when I take you, it will not be a simple thing. I will claim every part of your body and when I’m done, I will own it.”

I swallow hard, never thinking the Prince of Terr, the most powerful being in Celestria, would ever speak or look at me this way. I’ve never felt this wanted, and never felt so connected to someone in all my life. I’m terrified, but not of him. I’m terrified because I want this as much as he does.

“We can stop, right now, or—”

“No,” I say, taking the plunge with eyes wide open, letting fate guide me. “I want this. All of it.”

And those words become his undoing.

Kage’s mouth meets mine with such dominance, such force, that it takes my breath away. His arms fold around me, pulling me against him before he gently lowers me back to the ground, those seductive eyes dragging down my naked flesh.

“There is *nothing* more beautiful,” he whispers, those dark depths drinking me in as if he is dying of thirst.

Feeling embarrassed, I instinctively wrap my arms around myself.

Dark shadows extend from his body, gently curling around my wrists and ankles, pulling them away from me. Then, those shadows slip beneath me, raising me up on a shadowy bed.

“Never be ashamed in front of me. And never cover yourself.” His melodic voice is soothing to my ears. “You are the most exquisite creature I have ever seen, and I want to know every part of you intimately.”

Before I can speak, Kage leans forward, his lips claiming mine. Every fear and anxiety I have melts beneath the warmth of his touch.

His kiss is ravenous, dizzying to the point of insanity.

The heat of his mouth leaves mine, moving lower, and I instantly crave them again. His tongue glides over my neck, and in an instant, his mouth engulfs one breast, his tongue swirling and sucking, while his fingers tend to the other, causing my back to arch as I release a throaty moan.

I am tormented with desire as he slowly slides down my body, kissing, caressing, nipping, tasting... his mouth searing every part of me.

By the time he reaches my legs, I am panting. So desperate for release.

His teeth drag and nip at the soft skin between my thighs, and his warm breath brushes against my sensitive area.

“Kage,” I beg. “Please.”

He moans against my center, and I nearly come undone.

Closing my eyes, I fight against the shadows pinning me down. I want to touch him. I want to feel his naked body against mine.

“Open your eyes. Look at me, Min Vesmír,” he breathes. “I want you to see what I am about to do to you. I want you to watch me claim you.”

His voice alone will be my undoing.

The intense ache between my legs becomes almost unbearable as I watch this beautiful, powerful man—the Crowned Prince of Terr—worship my body with his eyes and mouth. I witness my own unraveling as that sinful mouth reaches my core, consuming me with pleasure as he finds that most sensitive spot. The fierce desire to touch him intensifies as his shadows hold me tighter. Loud whimpers escape my lips as his skilled tongue works, licking and curling, awakening every nerve within my body.

I can't breathe as his deep, deliberate strokes continue to unravel me. Lips and fingers work in unison while his tongue carries me to the brink of rapture.

“Come for me, Elara,” he murmurs against my sensitive center, and I completely shatter.

I cry out as stars explode, skittering across my vision as I ride my first wave of ecstasy. His mouth continues to consume me, each stroke driving me closer and closer toward another edge.

Then he stops.

Kage rises with a groan, closing his eyes. “Fucking delicious,” he growls as he removes his shirt and casually tosses it aside. “Your taste is my new addiction.”

My heart is hammering against my chest as he stands before me. The cave ceiling is a mere inch from his head, but *gods*, he is a sight to behold.

His movement causes the moths to flutter, their lights pulsing as Kage stares down at me. The sight is truly enchanting, like something out of a fairy tale.

“What do you want, Elara?” he says, his fingers tracing down my thighs.

His touch and the sound of my name rolling off his tongue adds fuel to the inferno of desire burning inside me.

“I want you,” I exhale, breathless. “Only you.”

In this cave, at this moment, nothing exists but us. We both desire this, crave this, and have been granted this stolen

moment. If this is my only chance, I want to experience it all with him. No holds barred.

The Prince smiles at me, and everything inside of me melts. He is perfect. Too gods-damned perfect.

I watch as he discards his pants, and gods above, the stiff length of him is unholy.

“Release me,” I breathe, tugging against his shadows. “Please.”

With a devilish grin, the shadows uncoil from my wrists and ankles, allowing me freedom.

The overwhelming desire to worship this man who has already worshiped me compels me to drop to my knees. He stands motionless, intently watching as I grasp his firm length with my hands and start to work him.

Kage lets out a groan that echoes through my body, knotting his fingers in my hair. His eyes darken as he watches me, chest heaving, and without warning, he grabs my wrists, tugging me up and into his arms.

“When I finish, it will be inside of you,” he says against my ear, and I suddenly can’t breathe in enough air.

Shadows extend from his body, but our eyes remain locked, the connection unbroken as he guides me down onto a new bed of shadows. That’s when I notice something...

“Look,” I say, gently brushing a finger across his scar and watch him shudder. His intense gaze doesn’t waver as I move my fingers to touch my own scar—both gunshot wounds inflicted in Avka. “We have both been damaged but can now wear our scars as a reminder of our survival and what we’ve overcome.”

Kage’s eyes, as dark as a starless night, hold my gaze. “I have been caught in a web you’ve unknowingly woven. You have cast a spell and captured me completely. Mind, body, and soul.”

His lips cover mine in an achingly sensual kiss as he positions himself above me. His shadows coil around us,

brushing against my hypersensitive skin, causing surges of tingles to travel through my entire body.

With his solid length between my thighs, a wave of desire consumes me.

I gasp, fingers clutching his shoulders, as he slowly, torturously enters me, allowing my body time to adjust to his size.

Then, he pushes in, claiming me completely, rooted so deeply inside of me it steals my breath. I am consumed by him, by his overwhelming presence.

“You’re mine,” he growls, his voice low and dangerous, his hot breath caressing my ear.

He eases himself out, then drives back in with a deep, animalistic moan that reverberates off the cave walls, straight through my chest.

*“Mine.”*

As our mouths collide in a dizzying kiss, I lose myself in the rhythm of his movements, craving more as he drives into me again and again. Each thrust growing more intense.

Every breath I take turns into a gasp of air.

His shadows encompass us, gently caressing my skin and heightening every sensation.

I’m drowning, drowning in him and everything happening between us, unable to escape the overwhelming emotions consuming me. What will become of us?

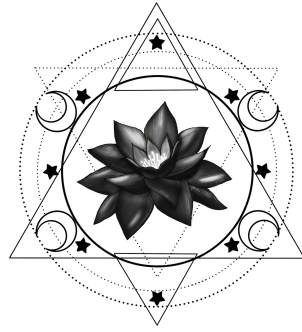
Uncertainty drags me under, but he is there, holding me. Holding my head above the water. My lifeline, my anchor, my air.

*“I’m yours,”* I confess, realizing that my heart has already chosen him.

A groan rises from deep inside his throat, reverberating through my entire body. The feel of his touch against my skin is like a rapidly spreading fire, igniting every nerve in its path, while his lips devour mine.

“I’m yours, Kage,” I say again, as I shatter in his embrace.  
At the same time, he unravels.





# CHAPTER NINE

## KAGE

My name, tumbling from her swollen lips, is my downfall.

I feel her climax and follow directly after, groaning as I thrust and grind my hips into her, completely claiming and marking her inside and out. *She's mine.*

Until she arrived in Terr, she was nothing more than a beautiful dream. An untouchable wish that I had prayed would one day manifest and the stars somehow saw fit. I still cannot believe she is real.

Her lips turn up into an exquisite smile, and I feel it thawing parts of me that have been frozen for far too long. Soaking in her beautiful face, I revel in the fact that she is glowing, and I had something to do with it.

She yawns, her body spent and relaxed, her eyes drooping. The tea she consumed is working and will allow her to rest and heal.

Rolling to her side, I gather her in my arms and press a kiss to her forehead. "Rest, Min Vesmír," I whisper into her ear.

"Just for a while," she says, nestling closer, resting her head in the crook of my neck. Her enchanting scent permeates the area as her beautiful, hazel eyes gently close.

My gaze lingers on her naked form, nestled snugly against mine, and I can't help but notice how perfectly we fit together.

This girl has a fiery nature and a strength I can't help but admire. It's refreshing to know she isn't intimidated by me or afraid to speak her mind. I saw that fire the day she defended me against Vera, and at that moment, something inside me shifted, and I fell even harder for her.

From our very first encounter, I felt that connection between us. I never told her, but that electric buzz in the air and the tingling sensation in my limbs, it is always present whenever she is near.

When I touched her for the first time, and felt that snap of power between us, I knew something profound had occurred. Ever since then, I've had a powerful desire to protect her, and have been struggling to accept the truth of what truly happened that day. The truth that I finally found my true mate.

Whenever she's close, there is a stirring deep within my bones, and it's not just from the transfer of power. There is something within her that calls out to me as if my soul recognizes hers and is longing to connect.

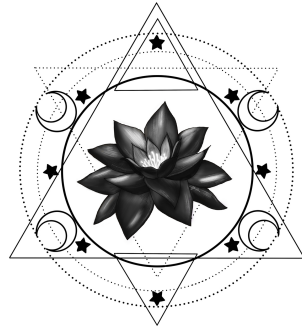
It must be fate. Why would she have been in my dreams for all those years? Why did she suddenly manifest in my kingdom? There is something more than coincidence at work here.

However, that connection will forever be severed unless the sacred ritual between true mates is carried out. That could never happen with her powers suppressed. It would kill her. And until her powers return, everything that has happened in Nether will stay in Nether. There is too much at risk, especially her life.

It will be almost impossible to stay away from her, but I know Vera and those she hired will be watching both mine and Elara's every move. We must play this smart and not give them any sign that we are together.

When I had a glimpse of her memories and witnessed firsthand the terrible upbringing she had endured, I became

determined to save her. That's why I created the bone marker, to shield her at all costs. And if it costs me my life or reputation, so be it. As long as she is protected, and she is mine, I don't give a fuck what anyone thinks.



# CHAPTER TEN

## ELARA

I wake up in the warmth of Kage's embrace. His breath is steady, and his eyes are peacefully closed. I can't help but be in complete awe of this painfully beautiful man lying beside me. A god amongst Celestians.

Words fail me when I attempt to describe what happened between us last night. The experience was beyond words. An unimaginable ecstasy. He transported me to a realm of pure bliss, surpassing every expectation I ever had. He has changed me and wrecked me, in the most incredible way. And while he should be ruling his kingdom right now, this gorgeous prince is right *here* beside *me*.

It felt like a dream, or perhaps a beautiful nightmare, when he arrived in Avka to rescue me. As soon as the portal opened and I sensed his presence, the wave of emotions that hit me was overwhelming, knowing he was the one who had come. I thought all my memories would be wiped away, and that I would be subjected to enslavement and abuse by the Avkan King.

But then, *my knight, my hero*, appeared, and I bore witness to his incredible power. Even now, when I close my eyes, I can still hear that distinct snap in the air and see his shadows pouring out from the portal just before his arrival. And then

came the sounds of guns and the screams of men, silenced instantly in his presence as they dropped to the floor, lifeless.

Overcome with emotions, a stray tear slips down my cheek, and I quickly wipe it away.

“You’re awake,” Kage whispers in his deep, velvety voice.

Uncontrollable tears start flowing, and I suddenly feel his arms tightening around me, pulling me against his firm chest.

His shadows envelop us like a blanket, covering our nakedness, and providing us with warmth and comfort throughout the frigid night.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, his voice filled with concern.

I shake my head because there is too much on my mind. “Aren’t you able to read my thoughts?”

His eyes narrow. “I would never just read your thoughts without your permission. Sometimes, I can hear your thoughts because you project them too loud. Sometimes, you let that mask slip.” His smile warms my heart. “So, tell me Min Vesmír, what’s bothering you?”

I look up into his dark eyes, rimmed in gold, and smile. “Everything that happened in Avka finally caught up with me. Thank you for coming for me.”

His soft lips press against the top of my head. “I’m sorry it took so long for me to arrive. I came as soon as I found out you had been captured.”

“Who told you?” I ask, wondering if it was Talon.

“Rem. And my father,” he replies.

I swallow back my emotions, especially after having met his father. He was the only one of the royals who helped me and showed me any kindness. He even removed his shirt and tore off the bottom to make a tourniquet to wrap my injury. “I’m glad your father made it back to Terr safely.”

His arm moves, and I feel his thumb gently wiping away my tears. “He spoke highly of you. He told me you saved them. But when Rem showed up, and I saw his terrified expression, I

immediately knew something was wrong. As soon as he told me you had been captured and were injured, I left.”

My heart swells inside my chest, and the tears are flowing again. “How did you know where I was?”

He unwraps an arm from around me and leans away, his fingers grazing against the necklace he gave me.

“When we jumped to Avka, Talon gave this to me. He told me it was from you and to keep it on me.” I glance back into his eyes, which are carefully watching. “When I met your father, he noticed it immediately. He said it was a bone marker. What is that?”

“It is an amulet,” he says, his voice holding a hint of mystery. “It’s what led me to you.”

I’m curious and press for more information. “The Avkan drones failed to detect it, which means it doesn’t contain magic. How does it work?”

He pauses, and I can sense the internal struggle to tell me, which only tells me this is more than just a regular amulet.

“What is it?” I ask again, my fingers gently lifting it.

“It’s my bone,” he reveals. I take a moment to truly comprehend what he’s saying.

“Your bone? How did you get it?”

“You don’t need to know how,” he responds gently but guarded, withholding the details.

I have a feeling this necklace holds a lot more significance than that of a mere amulet. If it truly is his bone, I want to know how he got it and where it came from? All I know is it wasn’t from his manhood.

Sitting up, I lock eyes with him, determination etched on my face. “Did you have to cut it out?”

He pauses, and a smile curls at the corners of his lips. “No. There was no cutting involved. It was a simple spell I cast.”

That’s a huge relief, but, “Which part of your body did it come from?”



Another wicked grin. “The spell extracts fragments of bone from my body. It doesn’t come from one specific location.”

Exhaling, I feel a knot in my gut and squeeze his hand. “Did it hurt when it was extracted?”

“I won’t lie to you,” he breathes. “The spell is very painful, but nothing I can’t manage. I am linked to the amulet because it is part of me, and with a few spoken words, I can track it to its exact location.”

“Does it still hurt?”

“No,” he says, but I don’t believe it. He has been protecting me since I’ve arrived, and I have a feeling that includes my heart and me knowing certain things that might upset me.

He doesn’t have to tell me. I’ll ask Rem when I get back.

I notice how much brighter his eyes look today. The tiredness and dark circles are gone. He looks perfect.

“How is your injury?” I ask, wondering if he is in any pain.

“Couldn’t you tell last night?” He says with a glimmer in his eyes and a smirk on those sinful lips. Heat immediately rushes to my face and my core, and I—I cannot find words.

Kage laughs, and the beautiful sound reverberates through my chest. “By tomorrow, I’ll be fully recovered.” His hands gently rub down my arms. “How are *you* feeling?” he asks, his eyes on my shoulder injury, which is also healing a lot faster than I expected. The bullet wound is still there, but it is closing and there is no infection. Maybe it’s because I fed him the potion with my mouth and the residual is helping to heal me too. It still hurts, but not as much.

“I’m feeling a lot better today than yesterday,” I say, but watch his brow furrow.

Kage moves away from me to the kettle, which is sitting inside a circle of hot coals. He pours me another cup of hot tea and brings it back to me. “Drink. This will help with the pain until we can get you back to Terr to see the royal healer.”

“Digby?”

“Yes. Digby. He will also give you a tonic that will keep you from being...” He waves to the shadows covering my stomach. “With child.”

“Thank you,” I exhale. I never even considered having a kid. Having such a terrible childhood and being left alone most of my life, I wouldn’t know the first thing about raising one. It sounds daunting.

He runs his fingers through his disheveled hair. “I still can’t believe you found the witch. Tell me what happened.”

“Have you ever met her?” Alena said she would watch him and Rem play as children, but did she meet them?

“No,” he replies. “I haven’t encountered her, but I’ve heard stories about her during my childhood. One of the palace maids used to tell me bedtime stories about the Nether Witch. According to her, the witch was incredibly beautiful and powerful. She was banished to Nether because someone disliked her. It was rumored that the witch could never be found by those who sought after her. Only she could reveal herself to them if she wanted to.

“The maid also said she lived in a cave near the river and cultivated magical flowers with the power to heal those who were gravely ill or dying.”

“So, you sent me to her not knowing if the stories were real?”

He shakes his head, and his eyes soften. “I had no doubt you would find a way. Even with your powers locked away, you have a strength inside that I admire.” He reaches for my hands and presses them against his lips. “I’m sorry I put you in harm’s way, Min Vesmír. It will never happen again.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m glad you sent me, even though I was chased, beaten, and almost consumed by a tree. But I confronted that tree, and he ended up taking me straight to the witch.” I let out a sigh and laugh, as if those two sentences belonged in a horror movie.

“Tell me more,” he says, his dark eyes locked on me, radiating warmth and curiosity.

I'm seeing a side of him that probably no one else sees except Rem. He seems a lot more relaxed and... normal, and it's making my heart grow even fonder of him.

"Well," I begin. "I found out the tree creature, whose name is Oren, was once a child prince who lived in Doone. During one war, his parents—past rulers—were killed. His father's friend brought him to Nether, where his wife, who was a witch, performed a spell that sent his soul into a seedling, changing him into a Dryad so he could survive." I continue to tell him Oren's story and everything that happened when I met Alena, omitting the part where she extracted my Celestial life force.

I know I'm keeping that one, vital piece of information from him, but it's my way of protecting him. He has the weight of Terr on his shoulders. The last thing I want is for him to worry about me.

I'm sure he also left out some critical details about the creation of the bone marker to keep me from worrying about him, too.

Kage is quiet as I finish my story and I can't tell what he's feeling or thinking by the look on his face. Being a prince, he must be used to wearing a mask to hide his emotions. I would know because believe me, I am also an expert at wearing masks. I lived in a mask my entire childhood.

"By the way," I ask, remembering one of the last things Alena had said. "Do you know anyone named Helena Moonfall?"

He pauses and then shakes his head. "I don't. However, the maid, Lena, told me bedtime stories about a Nether Witch," he says, eyes narrowing. "Why do you ask?"

"Because she is Alena's lover, and I promised I would look for her."

He nods, and I see his mind working. "When we get back to Terr, I'll ask about Lena. She left the palace when I turned fifteen, and I don't know where she lives or if she's still in Terr."

Lena is close to Helena, and the fact she told Kage bedtime stories about the Nether Witch tells me she knows her better than most. We have to find her.

I sigh, but Kage grasps my hands. “Hey, we have Cyrus who can find anyone.”

“Except my parents,” I say sadly.

“We’ll find them, Min Vesmír. I promise.”

His arms wrap around me, pulling me into his chest, and I melt into his warmth, never wanting to let go. Even if the world ended now, I’d die happy in his arms. But I know these moments won’t last.

“Alena had a vision,” I say, acknowledging the inevitable. “Terr’s shadow hawks will arrive in three days. Actually, two.”

He nods as if he expected this. “Rem will send them,” he says, exhaling with concern laced in his voice. “They must be going crazy, not knowing where I am. But them sending the shadow hawks means they know we escaped Avka. I just have to prepare myself for my father’s wrath and Rem giving me a long-ass lecture about leaving without him. He’ll want to take me to the mats to spar and release all his pent-up frustration. Especially now that he’s been dealing with my father.”

I rub my temples, already feeling the insurmountable stress. “People will ask a lot of questions when we get back, and I don’t think I’m ready to answer any of them.”

His firm hands steady my face to look at him. “You don’t have to answer anything, nor anyone. I’ll make sure Rem knows this and directs all questions to me, alone.”

Once again, he’s protecting me and taking on all the burden. “You can’t shoulder this alone,” I sigh. “We’re in this together. I’ll just have to figure out what to say... you know, so our stories match.”

In one quick movement, Kage has me on my back, his lips claiming mine in a kiss that makes my head spin and takes my breath away. I gasp, then moan into his mouth, savoring the taste of his lips and the feeling of his tongue dancing along mine. The shadows that have been surrounding us suddenly

withdraw, exposing our nakedness. I can feel his hard length pressing against my thighs. My heart is pounding, and a fiery heat radiates throughout me, settling in my core.

Pausing, he rests his forehead against mine. “Let’s not worry about anything outside of this cave. This moment is ours, and ours alone, and I want to make up for all the time we will lose once we return.” His smile sends tingles throughout my entire body. “Are you in agreement?”

In response, I fist my fingers into his hair and pull his mouth back to mine. His moan and smile against my lips is exactly the response I was looking for.

“You’re mine, Elara,” he breathes, slowly pushing into me.

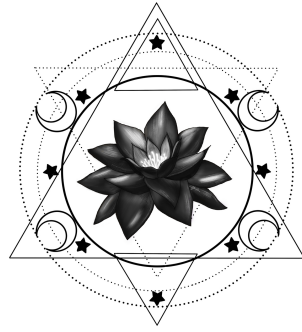
“Kage,” I gasp, back arching, fingers pressing into his back as he fills me entirely.

“Who do you belong to?” he asks, pulling out, his blunt tip pressing against my center, edging me.

“Yours,” I pant, breathlessly. “I’m yours.”

“That’s my good girl,” he says with a powerful thrust, claiming me. “You’re mine.”

For the next few hours, the Prince of Terr worships and wrecks my body, carrying me to places way beyond the stars and back.



# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## KAGE

Asleep in my arms, I realize that my life holds no meaning without her in it. In my dreams, she was always there, providing me with solace and stability, and every night, I eagerly craved sleep just to glimpse her beautiful face.

Now that she's here, I can't bear the thought of being apart from her, knowing she is living in my kingdom, right under my nose. In the brief time she's been here, she's become my lifeline and the purpose of my existence. Not too long ago, I didn't give a shit about my life, whether I lived or died. But now, I have a reason to live. I want to be alive because she's here... *my true mate*. With her powers blocked and the many attempts already made on her life, I have to protect her at all costs. Even if it means keeping my best friend, who also has feelings for her, by her side.

There are so many potentially fatal obstacles in our way keeping us apart.

In a day, we will return to Terr where she and I will have to pretend we are strangers, with no connection between us. Our lives will literally be left to fate.

Initially, I believed Elara was the Empress's daughter. However, Cyrus confirmed that her actual daughter was buried

alongside her, bearing the Empress's signet, a six-sided star, on her forehead. Now, I don't know what to think.

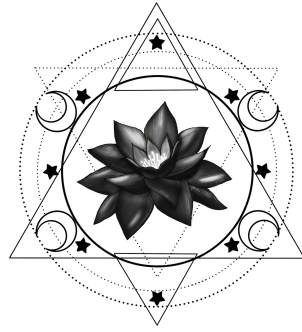
But one thing I'm certain of is that we are connected. I need to uncover the mysteries of her life. There's a larger force at play here, and I am determined to find the truth, no matter what it takes.

I glance down at her sleeping soundly. If I could leave and take her with me, I would. But I have a responsibility, being my father's sole heir. If I left, the wicked would take our kingdom by force, and our people would be left to suffer.

Hugging her tighter to my body, I close my eyes and breathe in her delicious scent.

Only time will tell if this beautiful girl, wrapped in my arms, will be my savior or my downfall.





# CHAPTER TWELVE

## ELARA

I'm startled awake as a Celestial moth lands on my cheek. I smile at the tiny creature as it stares at me, its wings gently opening and closing as if it's saying hello. Running a finger down its fluffy, little head, I watch as the intricate designs on its wings pulse brighter before it takes off to join the others.

The sun has already set, and the moths have come alive, their delicate wings fluttering above us, emitting a soft glow within the cave. Glancing beside me, I catch a glimpse of my stunning Prince, and my heart flutters. Whenever I look at him, I'm captivated by his beauty.

Suddenly, my stomach growls, reminding me it's been a while since I last ate. I would give anything for a crisp, juicy apple, but don't remember seeing any fruit trees outside. Although, most of the time I was outside, I was stumbling around in the darkness and frantically running away from the Dryad chasing me.

Sitting up, I feel the cold. I need water and see the kettle still sitting on a pile of hot embers. I have no idea how he kept them hot. It must be magic.

Maybe the wand Oren gave me can make me food. *Hey, it's worth a shot.*

I slowly crawl out from under Kage's shadows and the warmth of his arms and instantly feel the bite of the frigid air. Grabbing my tattered leather suit, I slip it back on even though it's stiff as hell and feels like I'm wearing an ice cube.

Shivering, I make my way over to the kettle and pour the last of the tea in the mortar. Bringing it to my lips, I take a sip and it instantly warms my insides and takes my lingering pains away. *Gods, this stuff is incredible.*

Digging through the bag, I withdraw the stick Oren gave me. It's about the same size as a chopstick and thicker. The mysterious writing is still there on its side, and I make a mental note to ask Kage if he can read it.

My stomach growls again, so I make a wish.

I wish for an apple, then swish the wand over my head and thrust it down, pointing at the ground in front of me.

A gust of wind erupts from the stick, stirring up a cloud of dust that envelops me. Coughing, I frantically try to fan away the dust with the wand, unknowingly creating even more wind and more dust.

Startled by a throat clearing behind me, I turn to find Kage sitting up, his hair perfectly tousled, looking as handsome as ever. His brow raises and his head tilts to the side.

“What are you doing?”

Coughing again, as I inhale another burst of dust, I quickly throw the wand back into my bag. Glancing back at Kage, I notice an amused grin on his face. His brows rise higher, waiting for an answer.

I clear my throat and wrap my arms around my midsection. “I was trying to conjure an apple because I'm starving.”

His eyes soften as he slowly rises to his feet, his shadows retreating to reveal his perfectly sculpted, naked body. Mesmerized, I watch him effortlessly pull on his pants, throw on his tunic, and find myself rooted to the spot as he approaches me, extending his hand.

“Where are we going?” I utter, slowly reaching out and placing my hand in his.

“I’m taking you to Nahla,” he replies, pulling me up onto my feet. A hint of confusion crosses his brow. “Do you eat seafood?”

“Nahla?”

I recall Rem mentioning it was the central kingdom in Celestria, surrounded by water, which is what their power allows them to manipulate.

“Yes, Nahla,” he chuckles. “And what about seafood?”

Snapping back to reality, I respond, “Yes! I love seafood and I’m so hungry I could devour an entire Celestrian whale.”

“Celestrian whale?” he drawls, amusement dancing across his face.

I swallow hard, my face heating with embarrassment. “There is no such thing as a Celestrian whale, is there?” When he shakes his head, I fall forward with a groan and bury my face in his chest. His laughter echoes throughout the cave as his arms close around me.

“For the record, I think a Celestrian whale would be a wondrous creature to behold.”

I slowly pull away to look at him. “Why are you taking me to Nahla and not to Terr?”

“I’m avoiding us being seen by anyone in Terr right now. Nahla is spread out, and the towns have no interest in the princes of surrounding kingdoms. Visiting there is always enjoyable because the citizens respect privacy and keep to themselves. Whenever I visit, I’m not recognized as a prince, just a normal visitor.”

“That place sounds amazing,” I say.

“So, do you want to go?” he asks expectantly.

“Absolutely,” I say as Kage holds out his hand.

I take it as he opens a portal, and we step through.



As soon as we land, I am greeted by the scent of the salty breeze. Even though I'm a little lightheaded, the nausea that usually comes with jumping isn't there, and I'm sure it's because Kage is holding my hand.

Soaking in my surroundings, I see lots of greenery, lush trees, cobbled streets, and winding staircases that lead to quaint, pastel-colored homes nestled on and around hills near the water's edge. Lights and decorations are strung up throughout the charming, coastal town and on the docks, where fishing boats gently bob up and down on the calm water.

Over on the opposite side, the atmosphere is livelier, with people coming and going from little shops, laughing and talking. One street is filled with the sound of children's laughter as they skillfully manipulate water, creating intricate shapes before throwing them at each other.

I'm in awe and cannot help but smile as I take in the beautiful town of Nahla. The soft music floating on the wind, the aroma of baked goods, the lights, the decorations, and the sweet, gentle breeze make me feel right at home.

"What are they celebrating?" I ask.

His eyes scan the area, and his lips curl up into a smile. "The winter solstice."

"It feels a lot like Christmas back home," I say.

His gaze finds mine. "Earth was not your home. Celestria is your home."

"You're right," I sigh. "But Christmas was my favorite holiday. Not because it was happy, but because I loved walking through the town when it was decorated with glittering lights and beautiful decorations... just like this. It feels magical to me."

He nods with a sad smile on his lips. "Come," Kage says, guiding me across a cobbled street.

We enter a clothing shop filled with soft, neutral-toned garments that look incredibly comfortable. My stomach rebels with a rumble, craving food instead.

“Welcome!” A bronze-skinned woman with short, white hair and shimmering, silver eyes approaches us, extending a warm greeting. She momentarily pauses before a broad smile rises on her lips and radiates through her eyes. She’s stunning and looks to be in her forties, with flawless, tanned skin. “Máza ēna!” she exclaims, enveloping Kage in a heartfelt embrace. “It’s always great to see you. And as handsome as ever.”

“It’s always a pleasure to see you, Naida,” he says with a smile, hugging her back before redirecting his attention to me. “Naida was my mother’s closest friend.”

Relieved, I smile at this beautiful woman whose silvery eyes slide to me.

“Who is your friend, Kage?” she asks, stepping over and taking my hands in hers. They are soft and warm and give me a tingly feeling.

“Elara,” I say. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Elara,” she breathes out, her voice barely a whisper. “A lovely name for a beautiful girl.” Her hands tighten around mine before she closes her eyes. “Are you from Nahla, Elara?”

“No, I’m from Terr,” I reply, glancing over at Kage, who gives me a subtle smile that makes my heart race.

With her eyes still shut, I watch Naida’s brow furrow. “Do you have relatives in Nahla?”

“She was recently brought to Celestria from Earth,” Kage says from my side. “Cyrus is still trying to find out who her birth parents are.”

“Ahhh. She is a mystery waiting to be solved,” she murmurs, gently patting the back of my hand. “What gifts do you possess, child?”

Again, I shake my head, embarrassed I can’t answer any of her questions. “I don’t know.”

Naida's eyes pop open, looking over at Kage for answers, and he responds.

"Whoever left her on Earth suppressed her powers. We're trying to find a way to release them."

"Oh, my dear child," Naida sighs. "Have you considered Acacius Terrowin?"

"Acacius?" Kage's brow crumples.

Naida nods her head. "Yes. He is an odd man, a nomad, and recluse by choice, but has access to incredible power."

"How?" I ask.

She shrugs. "He is a Celestrian and a sorcerer who has traveled to many worlds, gaining knowledge and honing his gifts." She gently places her hand on my abdomen. "If anyone can unfetter your powers, it would be Acacius."

"Where can we find him?" Kage asks with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

"Your guess is as good as mine," she says. "I said he could probably help... I didn't say I knew his whereabouts." She eyes my torn and tattered black leather suit. Raising her hands in front of her, she sighs and shakes her head. "I won't ask questions because it's none of my business, and I'm sure I don't want to know," she chuckles, her expression devoid of judgment. "I think it would be best if you follow me to the back." Naida then turns to Kage and motions for him to leave. "Elara will be under my care for the next hour, Máza ēna, so you'll have to keep yourself occupied."

*An hour?*

I glance at Kage, who nods reassuringly. "Go with her. Naida is someone I trust wholeheartedly. She will take care of you, and I'll be back in an hour and take you to get some food."

I watch Kage leave before I trail behind Naida, who leads me through a set of white gossamer curtains to the back of her shop. The room that opens before us is spacious and smells like sweet flowers and warm spices. It is simple, but luxurious,

with floor-to-ceiling windows that offer a breathtaking view of a large body of water. On one side of the room are rows of shelves with lots of colorful jars and bottles. On the opposite side is a seating area with what looks like a massage table and a raised, circular jacuzzi that looks like it could fit six people comfortably.

As I look out of the windows, I spot a glow in the distance, miles away.

“What’s that place?” I ask, curiosity piqued.

“Oh, that’s Central Court. It’s at the center of Nahla, and the heart of all five kingdoms.” Naida explains.

I’m taken aback, realizing that I’d been to Central Court several times without ever knowing its exact location or the fact that it was surrounded by water.

Naida grabs a basket filled with soap, oils, and loofahs before heading towards the jacuzzi. “You look like you’ve been through a battle, my dear. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

“I have nothing to pay you with,” I confess.

Naida chuckles and presses a button, activating the jets in the tub. “Sweetheart, you don’t owe me a thing. I made a promise to Kage’s mother that if anything happened to her, I would take care of him. And that extends to his friends,” she says, giving me a knowing smile. “You are the first he’s ever brought to me, so you must be special,” she says with a glimmer in those silvery eyes. “Just relax and let me help you shine, alright?”

I return her smile and nod gratefully. “Thank you, Naida.”

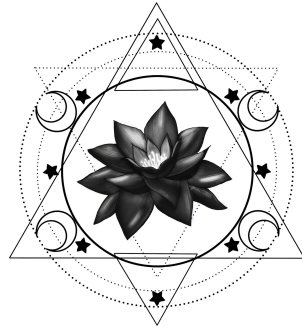
“It’s my pleasure,” she responds, her voice filled with warmth as she places the basket on the edge of the tub. “The towels are here,” she says, gesturing towards another basket filled with neatly rolled towels. “Now undress and get into the tub. Scrub up with these soaps; they’re some of my favorites. I’m going back into the shop to find you something a little more casual to wear around town.” She pauses before she exits. “Don’t worry about anyone peeking. No one can see in from the outside.”



“Thank you,” I repeat, overwhelmed by her kindness.

If Naida and Kage’s mother were best friends, I can only imagine how incredible the Queen of Terr must have been. I can’t help but feel a sharp ache in my heart thinking about Kage’s loss and how he must still feel after losing her.

After letting out a sigh, I quickly strip out of my suit and lower myself into what I had mistakenly thought was a jacuzzi, but is just a huge, jetted tub. The sensation of the steamy water meeting my frigid skin instantly sends goosebumps and shivers throughout my entire body. Relishing the warmth, I take some soap that smells like heavenly florals, squeeze it on a loofah, then rub all the grime from the past few days off me. I repeat with my hair, and when I’m done, I let the jets massage my body.



# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## KAGE

I leave Elara in the capable hands of Naida, knowing she'll be safe and well taken care of. Before returning to Terr, there is someone I want to visit, so I make my way down a dimly lit alleyway and open a portal.

As I step through, I find myself in the Kingdom of Doone, standing directly outside the Citrine Palace. In an instant, I am surrounded by their palace guards, all donning their unappealing brown uniforms. I'm impressed, though, at how efficient they are.

The Citrine Palace received its name because of its unique location, nestled into the side of a massive mountain. It has an earthy appeal with pleasant, earth-toned colors, however, it lacks the extravagant charm of our Ebony Palace, but I must admit that I am biased.

"I'm here to see your Prince. Is Sebastian in?" I ask the head guard.

He recognizes me and instantly slaps a hand to his chest and bows. "Prince Dargan," he says, then the others follow suit. "I didn't know it was you. Please forgive me."

"You're okay," I say, waving him off. "I'm not donning my royal attire."

He nods, his eyes darting up and down, avoiding direct eye contact with me. I grin, knowing the rumors of the feared Shadow Prince have reached Doone.

“I’m sorry. Prince Thorne has retired to his bedchamber,” he says. “However,” he looks at the other men, who shrug. “He is with... company.”

“Ah,” I exhale, raising my brow. “So, he’s screwing the maid?”

“Not quite, Your Highness.” The guard coughs and leans in, placing a hand to the side of his mouth. “It’s the florist.”

I shake my head and make my way up the staircase to the upper floors while the guards stay put, wondering if they should stop me or not. They don’t.

Down the hallway, I can hear Sebastian panting and groaning. The guy has no sense of privacy.

Shaking my head, I push the door open and barge into the room. Sebastian is completely naked with his back to the door, sitting on the edge of his bed. A redhead is on her knees in front of him, head bobbing up and down between his legs, while he firmly grips her hair. They don’t even seem to notice or care that I’m here.

I walk up behind him and slap a hand on his shoulder. “You dog,” I say with a smirk.

He jumps in surprise, and the redhead’s eyes pop wide open as she sees me. She disengages her mouth from him, making Sebastian let out a grunting moan. He turns to me, his face filled with rage.

“Dargan,” he snaps. “I was about to climax, you fucking asshole.”

I burst out laughing. “As always, my timing is impeccable. You can finish. I’ll wait,” I say sarcastically, patting him on the back before strolling over to his desk and plopping down in his chair.

“Fuck you,” he spits at me, then turns to the redhead, who is already gathering her clothes and making a beeline towards the

bathing room. “Aren’t you supposed to be missing?”

“Me?” I say, incredulously pointing at myself.

“Yes, you. Your father showed up and went on a rampage. He wants to attack Avka on your behalf.”

My brows rise in surprise. “And what did your father say?”

In a fit of frustration, he forcefully pulls on his pants, shoving his legs into them. “Of course, he declined. My father won’t attack unless there is absolute confirmation you are there and injured,” he says, shooting me an evil eye, clearly still angry. “You don’t look harmed.” He falls back onto his bed, his hands rubbing his face. “So, why are you here, Dargan?”

Standing up from the chair, I move closer to him. “I just wanted to drop in on an old friend.”

He rolls his head towards me and makes a crude gesture. “You never just drop in unless you want something. So, what do you want?”

I stand in front of him, arms crossed over my chest. “Did you gather any information on the Lure drug?”

He glares up at me. “No, I didn’t. And I have no information, *yet*, on your mother either. It takes time to infiltrate and earn the trust of certain individuals, but there are men in position, and hopefully, we’ll hear something soon.” His eyes soften before he stands up. “Look, I promised I’d help find the person, or people, who murdered your mother. She was the nicest queen in all of Celestria. Even nicer than my own mother which doesn’t say much. But she always treated me well and with respect.” He rolls his eyes and playfully slams a fist into my shoulder. “Too bad her son turned out to be an asshole.”

I smile at him. “Thanks, Seb. I appreciate you.”

“Well, I guess I still owe you. You know, for that time you saved my life. I still can’t believe how stupid I was for sneaking out of the palace during that party and not telling anyone where I was going or what I was doing. If you hadn’t shown up in that alley after my initiation and portal jumped

me to Digby and convinced him to patch me up, who knows if I would be here today.”

“We were younger and stupider then. You were just lucky I was bored that night at the party and followed your drunk ass. But it was worth it,” I note. “It gave you your connection to the underground network.”

Seb points a finger at me. “Although I haven’t heard anything about the Lure drug or your mom, yet, I have heard whisperings around the Underground that the Avkan King is obsessed with Elara and planning to make a move to get her back.”

I pause, reining in my rising anger. That bastard will taste death before he lays another hand on her. But, right now, I have to remain calm. “The Avkan King can kiss my shadow’s ass before he touches a civilian of Terr. Especially the one who risked her life to save our rulers.”

“She is beautiful and badass. It’s no wonder he’s obsessed. Hell, I think everyone fell for her the moment she stood up to you at the Central Court meeting.”

I can’t help but smile, thinking back. “Yeah, well, I’ve got to get going. I’ll be in touch.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I hear anything.”

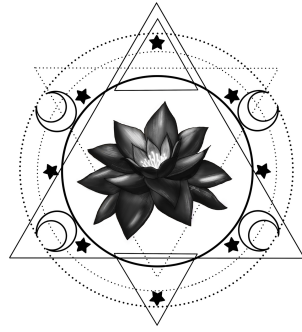
I turn to him and grin. “Don’t tell anyone I was here.”

“No one cares.”

I gesture towards the bathroom. “Hopefully, she can finish you off.”

“Fuck you.”

I throw him a kiss, and he hurls a pillow at me before I step into the portal.



# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## ELARA

I'm finally clean when Naida returns with clothes draped over an arm.

"You feel better?" she asks with a bright smile.

"So much better," I exhale.

"Nothing like a hot tub to wash the stress away, huh?" she chimes, walking over and offering me a hand. I take it and step out of the tub, wrapping a towel around me.

"I'm sorry about the water. It's filthy."

"Oh, honey. Do you forget where you are?" She says with a boisterous laugh.

With the simple press of a button, a small hole opens from the ground beneath one of the windows and I am left in awe as I witness Naida perform a series of hand gestures, causing the water in the bathtub to spiral upwards like a twisted snake. Then, with a swift snap of her fingers, it shoots forward and drops, vanishing into the mysterious hole.

Naida claps her hands together and flashes me a mischievous grin. "That's how we get things done here in Nahla."



I shut my mouth that was hanging open, and ask, “Where did the water go?”

“Back to its source,” she replies, gesturing towards the vast bay outside her window, shimmering in the moonlight.

She hands the clothes to me, and I unfold them. The top and bottom are so soft and matching in cerulean blue. They remind me of boho style clothes on Earth. The bottoms are high-waisted with wide, flowy legs and the top is a slim, crop-top with long sleeves.

“Slip into these and come and sit in my chair,” she instructs.

I hurriedly pull on the clothes, feeling the soft fabric brush against my skin. Although they don’t look like it, they are very warm.

“Thank you,” I say.

“They fit you like a glove,” Naida says, patting a cushioned chair. “I’ll have you ready and back to your Prince in no time.”

*My Prince.*

I love the sound of that, but, “He’s not mine,” I say sadly. “He’s engaged.”

Naida huffs. “I never liked the Princess of Asteri, whatever her name is,” she admits, her face contorting in disdain. “Kage’s mother, Thea, may her soul rest in the Celestial realm, didn’t approve of the girl either. She only tolerated her because her parents are the rulers of Asteri. From the beginning, she opposed the thought of an arranged marriage, and spoke against it to her husband. Thea knew, in her heart, they were only after the throne. But not wanting a war between the kingdoms, she held her tongue, even though I begged her to speak her mind.”

Wow. That is a lot of information to soak in and compartmentalize. I didn’t know Kage’s mom was against his arranged marriage.

Naida lays out brushes and powders, then stands behind me with a comb in her hand. My eyes are fixed on her reflection in the large mirror hanging in front of us, and just when I think

she's about to run the comb through my damp hair, she raises an arm into the air. Moving her fingers, the remaining water in my hair is instantly extracted, and I'm left spellbound by the tiny spheres of water, now suspended in the air around me. I reach out to touch one of the tiny iridescent bubbles with my finger and it moves, floating away from me.

Naida laughs and fists her hand, and the water shoots to the sink and down the drain.

Again, I snap my jaw shut, my eyes wide with wonder. "That's incredible," I breathe, running my fingers through my completely dry hair.

"If you were impressed by that, honey, you have seen nothing yet."

I shake my head in disbelief as Naida brushes my hair, skillfully braiding the top into a crown while leaving the rest to flow down my shoulders. She applies some tinted gloss to my lips and blush on my cheeks, but when she adds powder to my eyelids, she pauses.

"You have the most stunning eyes I have ever seen," she exhales. "It's incredibly rare—almost unheard of—to have hazel eyes in Celestria. Your hair may be a telltale sign you're from Terr, but your eyes..." she leans closer to me, her silvery eyes looking deep into mine. "They have every color swirling within them, and the fact that they are rimmed in gold is extraordinary."

She takes a step back, studying our reflections in the mirror, and continues, "There's something special about you, Elara. I can't quite put my finger on it, but I feel a connection between us, a connection to Nahla. That's why I asked if you have any relatives here. You must hold some importance in this place."

My emotions bubble up, and tears well in my eyes. Her words bring comfort, but they also leave me feeling more confused about my identity.

Naida places her warm palms on my shoulders. "I have known Kage—my Máza ēna, which means little shadow," she winks, "since the day he took his first breath. Throughout his

life, I have witnessed his stubbornness and persistence. If he has set his mind on finding your parents and where you belong, I have no doubt he will succeed.”

I smile, watching Naida make a gentle gesture with her fingers, then witness my tears magically vanish. “We wouldn’t want your Prince to witness your emotional state, now, would we?”

“No,” I reply with a chuckle.

Her eyes slide down to the bone marker nestled around my neck. “You must be someone very dear to him.”

I clear my throat and carefully lift the amulet in my fingers. “Does it hold great significance?”

Naida finishes with a last swipe of the powder brush, then sets it down and turns to face me. “It holds far greater significance than a mere trinket. A bone marker is a treasured possession that is always given with deep intentions. It takes an immense amount of power to craft one, and rumors suggest the process can be excruciatingly painful, leaving the conjurer drained.” She smiles warmly and takes my hand.

“Just a word of advice. I would always keep the bone-marker with you but hidden away from prying eyes. Being so beautiful and close to the Prince makes you an easy target.” She breathes in deeply, then exhales loudly. “I can almost taste the bitterness of envy surrounding you. Lacking powers must be a challenge here in Celestria.”

“It is,” I say sadly, “but I’ve managed to survive until now.”

Leaning back, Naida folds her arms over her chest, a mischievous smirk playing on her lips. “I sense a fire in you. An incredible strength and resilience. It’s understandable why the Prince is drawn to you.” Her eyes widen and I see a twinkle within them. “Wait here,” she says, then hurries out of the room.

Glancing at myself in the mirror, I can’t help but sigh as I see nothing special. It’s the same face I’ve looked at my entire life. The same face I resented for allowing me to be victimized. Maybe it’s dysmorphia, but I feel like every single

Celestrian I've met here is extremely attractive. They possess unearthly beauty and regal countenances and are just too... perfect.

Naida returns and gently takes hold of my hand, sliding a dainty, silver bangle bracelet onto my wrist. Immediately, a tingling sensation washes over me, and the single pearl connected to the bracelet emits a glow. I shift my gaze to Naida, and her eyes fill with surprise.

"This was Thea's," Naida says, her voice trembling with emotion as tears pool in her eyes.

I keep my wrist extended towards her and shake my head. "No. I... I can't accept this." Especially if it belonged to Kage's mom. Having it might bring me more trouble than I'm prepared for.

Naida stops me, taking hold of my hand with a warm smile. "I know Thea would have loved to have met you. I sense a strong connection between you and her son, and know, by the glow of the pearl, she would have wanted you to have this bracelet."

"What does it mean when it glows?"

"The glow means the bracelet is happy with whoever is touching or wearing it. It means it's accepted you."

Overwhelmed with emotion, tears cascade down my face as I twist the bracelet on my wrist, at a loss for words. "Thank you" doesn't seem like enough. She's already done so much for me, and I have given her nothing in return.

She pulls up a chair in front of me and places her wrist next to mine, revealing a twin bracelet to the one I'm wearing. Except hers has an onyx connected to it, instead of a pearl.

"Thea and I were inseparable in our younger years, especially while we were away studying. But when it was time to return to our kingdoms, we promised we would stay in touch, and had these bracelets made for each other. We found a witch who put a powerful spell on them, so that if either of us was in danger, it would transport us directly to the other." Naida chuckles, wiping the tears from her face. "We were

heavily intoxicated when the bracelets were made and failed to remember that Thea could open a portal to anywhere, at any time. We laughed about it, even years later. But the spell is still attached to the bracelets. So, if anything life-threatening ever happens to you, you will get a one-time portal jump directly to me.”

I am again struck speechless, but my tears are enough because Naida leans forward and wraps me in a warm hug.

“Do you know how Queen Thea died?” I sniffle.

Naida pulls away from me and closes her eyes, her face going rigid. “All I know is that she didn’t die in her sleep or of natural causes. Thea was a Celestrian Queen, and they don’t just die in their sleep. Someone killed her. I don’t know who or why. But I will find out.”

“Why would they say she died in her sleep?”

She huffs, her face twisting in disgust. “The coroner is from Central Court, and I believe he was manipulated. Someone either paid him or threatened him to lie about her death. I have my theories, but I also have to hold my tongue until I can confirm it.”

I nod but have already come up with my own theory. But like Naida, I will hold my tongue until it can be confirmed. Like the saying goes: *Let the players play and the haters hate and leave it to Karma to decide their fate.*

I can’t do anything anyway, not until my powers are released and I figure out how to use them.

Tingles shoot down my spine, accompanied by a familiar buzz and a comforting warmth.

Sitting up straight, I notice Naida glance behind me. With a snap of her fingers, our tears instantly vanish before she grabs a brush and adds a few more swipes of blush to my cheeks. As I stand, she pulls me into a warm hug, and I wrap my arms around her, embracing her back. It feels good to be around someone who genuinely cares. Someone who hugs me with no expectations or hidden motives.

“I’m grateful to have met you, Elara,” she says softly. “I truly believe there is so much more to you than meets the eye.”

“I’m the lucky one to have met you,” I return. “Thank you for everything. Your kindness will never be forgotten.”

Kage clears his throat behind us, and we both turn to see a twinkle in his eyes.

“What do you think, Máza ēna?” Naida asks, stepping away from me.

Kage smiles, and my heart melts at the sight of it.

“She is a dream come true,” he says, his voice filled with awe and adoration as his eyes trace down my figure.

Naida’s hand gently presses against the small of my back, pushing me toward him. “She’s ready for a night in Nahla,” she says. “Make it memorable.”

“I will,” Kage says, approaching Naida, wrapping his arms around her. “Thank you, Naida. I owe you.”

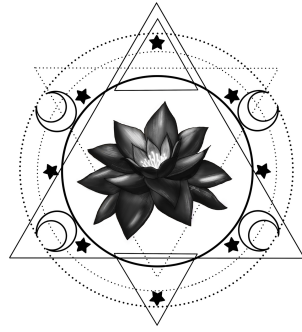
“You owe me nothing,” she insists. “We’re family, and I’ll always be here for you.”

Kage plants a kiss on her cheek, causing her to smile. Then, he takes hold of my hand and leads me out.

“Enjoy yourselves,” Naida calls after us, waving. “Please come back and visit me.”

“We will,” I say.

I might visit her sooner than later, if this bracelet really does what she said.



# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## ELARA

Kage takes my hand and leads me into the town. Among the predominantly silver-haired citizens of Nahla walking around, Kage and I stick out like a sore thumb with our onyx hair. It feels like everyone seems to notice, staring at us, eyes traveling down to our connected hands.

I instantly feel insecure and move closer to him, hoping he finds a place without too many people around.

*“Don’t worry, Min Vesmír. They’re just mesmerized by your beauty.”* Kage says inside my head.

I glance at him, but he doesn’t look, gently pulling me towards a dome-shaped building at the end of the street. The building is fancier than the rest, and is illuminated by hundreds of tiny bluish orb lights that are... floating? As we get closer, I realize the orbs are actual balls of water, and they are, in fact, suspended in air, just like the droplets of water I witnessed with Naida.

“You okay?” Kage asks.

I shake my head and giggle. “I’m still trying to get used to how incredibly magical Celestria is.”

He grins, then guides me inside. The enticing aromas of food and spices immediately hit my nose, making my mouth



water. Inside, this restaurant looks like an underwater fantasy world. The lights are dimmed, and there is a wrap-around aquarium that follows the curvature of the walls, filled with the most beautifully colored fish and other illuminated aquatic creatures. I'm in awe, taking it all in, while Kage leads me to a circular table at the back.

A stunning girl with silver hair and eyes notices us and quickly approaches, carrying utensils and glasses. Kage graciously pulls out my chair, displaying his gentlemanly manners, and I sit while he moves around to the other side of the table.

"Welcome." The girl greets us with a radiant smile. "Can I get you both something to drink?"

Kage looks at me and gives me a nod.

"I'll have a glass of Celestrian wine," I reply, causing Kage to raise an eyebrow.

I shrug, giving him a wide smile. We just survived Avka, and I escaped the crazy asshole king. That calls for a celebration.

"And for you?" the girl asks him, giving him a sweet smile. I see the look in her eyes and the blush on her face. She's taken by his dashing looks, but it's no surprise, considering his irresistible allure. Kage *is* gorgeous.

"Just water," he responds, his gaze fixed on me. "And your Divine Platter."

"Divine Platter?" she repeats. "Are you sure?" He nods and smiles at me.

I glance at the girl, and her smile fades as he continues to ignore her. She turns to me instead with a forced smile and says, "I'll be right back."

"What's the Divine Platter?" I ask, leaning forward on my elbows.

"You'll see," he says with a mischievous grin. "Whenever I'm in Nahla, I come here. It's one of Rem's favorite spots.

Besides, I had to order you food because drinking Celestrian wine on an empty stomach could cause problems.”

Kage’s eyes move to the bracelet on my wrist, and I watch his emotions shift.

I suddenly feel terrible, like I shouldn’t have taken it. “I’m sorry, Kage. I know this belonged to your mother. I didn’t want to take it, but Naida insisted.” Starting to pull it off, he grabs my wrist and pulls it towards him.

“It was a gift. It’s yours now,” he says, those dark, onyx eyes shifting to me. “I saw this once, when I was younger, playing in my mother’s room. She was getting ready for a ball and had her jewelry box open. It caught my eye because when she touched it, the pearl glowed.” He glances at the bracelet and runs his finger over the pearl, a sad smile curled on his lips. “Just like it is now. She told me it was filled with magic. A gift from her very best friend.” His eyes meet mine again. “I’m glad it’s in your possession. If my mother was still here, she would have approved.”

I’m speechless and happy when the server shows up, bringing Kage his water and a fancy glass filled with sparkling Celestrian wine that glows like the ocean on a bright summer day. This time, she doesn’t linger. She heads back through a large archway I assume is the kitchen.

I take my glass and raise it to Kage. “To my hero, the dark knight who always comes to my rescue when I’m in danger.”

He lifts his glass of water, a smile forming on his beautiful lips. “To the magic of wishing upon stars and witnessing your dreams come true,” he says, clinking his glass against mine.

His smile melts me, and with just one sip of Celestrian wine, warmth spreads through my body and tingles fill my head. “Wow, I can’t believe I forgot how strong this is,” I say, before taking another sip.

“Don’t get too intoxicated,” he says, his words laced with playfulness. “I have plans for you later that require you to be fully present.” I swallow hard, placing the glass down,

suddenly feeling a rush of heat throughout my entire body, and not because of the wine.

I take a mental note to ask the server for a glass of *ice* water the next time she comes around. Just as the thought crosses my mind, the server arrives, stepping aside as two waiters bring plates piled high with an assortment of mouthwatering seafood. The sight and smell of the dishes make my mouth water and tummy rumble.

“I hope you’re hungry,” Kage says, his hand gesturing to the plethora of food laid out before us.

I nod, not knowing where to begin. He reaches over and takes my plate, then serves me a little of each dish. When my plate returns, it’s filled.

“Eat up,” he says before taking his plate and serving himself.

“Thank you,” I say, picking up my fork.

Gods, I hope I don’t embarrass myself, but I’m so freaking hungry. I start with the noodles that have some kind of seafood and sauce poured over the top and twirl my fork in it. As soon as the food enters my mouth, it bursts with flavor, making me close my eyes and moan. *Good gods, this stuff is amazing.* I continue to dig in, trying everything on my plate, and it’s all incredible.

I finally take a moment to catch my breath, my plate almost clean, and look up at Kage. His gaze is fixed on me, and I can’t tell whether he’s impressed or appalled by the way I’m eating.

Picking up my napkin, I dab it across my lips, hoping to seem a bit civilized.

“Sorry,” I giggle. “I told you I was hungry enough to eat a Celestrian whale.”

“You did,” he laughs, “and it brings me pleasure to watch you enjoy it.”

Heat rushes to my face, but I quickly place my napkin down and change the subject. “Hey. Since you had a front-seat view

of the complete wreck that was my childhood, tell me something about yours that no one knows about.”

He pauses, pondering, then a smile curls on his lips. “One night, when I was younger, I couldn’t sleep. My mother peeked into my room because she was also wide awake. She told me to get dressed, and then opened a portal that transported us to the enchanted gardens at Central Court.”

“Isn’t that where the Empress and her child are buried?” I ask.

“It is,” he says sadly, his eyes going distant. “The gardens were one of my mother’s favorite places in all Celestria. She and the Empress were close, so she found solace in the gardens.

“I loved the gardens simply because they were captivating. There are so many varieties of flowers that bloom in bright colors year-round, regardless of the season. When you walk the grounds, the grass illuminates under your feet, and the trees give off a soft glow. If you look close enough, you can almost see that the garden is alive, and witness the delicate luminescent veins of life that course from the ground beneath them into everything planted within it. It’s also the first time I saw Celestial moths.”

It sounds like heaven, and something I want to experience. With him. “Will you take me there tonight?”

He pauses, weighing my question.

“Never mind. We don’t have to go,” I quickly reply.

“It’s just...” he pauses again, those dark eyes piercing straight through me. “You know what? Yes, I’ll take you.”

“Are you sure?” I shake my head. “Are we allowed?”

“Royals are always allowed,” he says, leaning back and crossing his arms over his broad chest.

“But I’m not a royal.”

“As long as you’re with me, it won’t matter,” he assures. “Finish eating. After this, I want to take you to a spot in town, then we’ll head to the gardens.”

I can't contain the smile that blooms on my face. "That sounds perfect."

It doesn't take long before I am stuffed. Kage gets up and heads to the server, speaks to her, and then with a nod, heads back to our table. He probably took care of the tab.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"Of course." He holds out his hand to me and I take it. I still feel the electric connection between us, but I've learned to manage it better. "Come, let's walk for a bit."

He leads me out into the bustling street where melodic strains of music reach my ears. He continues to navigate us through a labyrinth of winding streets until we arrive at a grand circular area. This is the heart of the festivities where a large crowd has gathered.

In the center stands a large wooden gazebo adorned with a display of twinkling lights that cast a magical glow on the patrons below. The surrounding pine trees, adding an earthy charm, are delicately wrapped in glittering ribbons, and adorned with pinecones, mistletoe, and candles.

As we step closer, a thin veil of fog blankets the ground, adding to the ambiance.

On one side of the plaza, large tables are lined up, bustling with vendors selling an assortment of drinks and food, the enticing aromas wafting through the air. On the other side, a band plays, filling the air with lively music.

Under the gazebo, people dance and laugh, their bodies moving in time with the music. It is then that I notice most of them are wearing golden masks, and the mysterious allure seems to add to the festivities.

A woman walks up to us and holds out a basket of those same golden masks to us. "Would you like one?" she asks sweetly.

I turn to Kage, who plucks two out from inside the basket. "Thank you," he says with a dashing smile.

She smiles back at him and bows her head. “Enjoy the Yulefest.”

“What do the masks represent?” I question.

“The gold masks represent the rebirth of the sun god and the return of light in winter,” he explains and offers one to me. “It also provides a sense of anonymity.”

“Will you help me put it on?” I ask, then turn my back to him.

“Of course,” he says in his deep, velvety voice.

He places the half-mask in front of me, and I hold it up to cover my eyes and nose. I feel a tingling sensation as his fingers brush against my face, gently taking hold of the golden strings on either side. When he’s done tying it, he rests his hands on my shoulders and turns me around.

His eyes, captivating and intense, lock onto mine before they move down to my lips. He leans in, and just when I think he’s about to kiss me, he whispers...

“Soon, I want those delicious lips on mine.”

His words radiate heat through my body, and he knows it. He smirks, tying on his mask, and I can’t help but also want to taste his sinful lips.

How is it possible for him to look so incredibly gorgeous with a mask on? It’s not fair.

He takes my hand and leads me around the outside of the festival, where all the trees are beautifully decorated. I breathe in the scent of pine, and when I exhale, see the frigid air swirl in front of my mouth. It’s getting cold, but the outfit Naida gave me seems to stave off most of it.

“Does it snow in Celestria?”

He glances at me from the side. “Of course, it does. Celestria is parallel to Earth, so it shares the same seasons and weather patterns.”

I didn’t know that.

The music shifts, becoming almost enchanting, luring everyone to join in and dance. I grab hold of Kage's hand and pull him toward the dance floor, where a multitude of people are already twirling, moving, and swaying to the beat. The rhythm is infectious, and I can feel the energy resonating within my chest and reverberating through my bones.

Kage abruptly stops, twirling me until I am pressed firmly against his warm, solid frame. With one hand holding mine, and the other slipping behind the small of my back, he takes the lead. Clueless about what to do, I place my other hand on his shoulder, praying that I won't accidentally step on his feet.

"I've got you, Min Vesmír," he whispers.

Those onyx eyes, peering through the gold mask, bore into me, captivating me entirely. The golden hues seem to be swirling.

He slowly leans down, my heart pounding in my chest, and his lips delicately meet mine. In that moment, the world around us fades away.

I can feel my feet moving, yet it feels as if we are weightless, gliding effortlessly across the floor. I move without thinking but am fully aware of every sensation between us.

When the song ends, and his lips leave mine, my head is spinning. All eyes seem to be fixed on us, but the smiles on their faces reassure me.

Kage leads me back towards the trees before he pauses.

"Are you ready to go?" he asks.

"Go where?" My head is still cloudy.

"To the gardens."

My mind suddenly snaps back into reality. "Yes!" I exclaim a little too loudly.

Kage opens a portal but turns to me before we step through. "We must stay together. If we get separated, stay where you are, and I'll find you." He places his hand over the bone marker hidden under my shirt.

I look at him, worried. “Are you sure it’s safe for us to go there?”

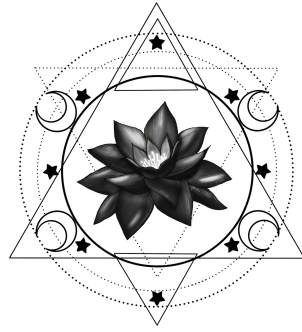
“Yes, but in case any problems arise, we’ll leave immediately.”

“Okay,” I say. “Should we keep our masks on?”

“It would probably be best, just in case.” He leans forward and gently kisses my forehead.

Lacing his fingers tightly through mine, we step into the portal.





# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## KAGE

When we arrive at the gardens, I make sure we land safely on the outer rim. Before entering the gardens, anyone who is not of royal blood must register, as it is the final resting place of the Empress. A few years back, there were some non-royal citizens who tried to break in and steal the gifts left at her burial site. They were also loitering and drinking, leaving behind bottles and trash. Because of that, all regular citizens were banned and now must register in order to visit the gardens. If someone without royal blood enters unlawfully, it will trigger an alarm and alert the guards. That's why I hesitated when Elara asked me to bring her here.

However, it was clear she really wanted to visit. Besides, I am quite curious to see if Elara will indeed set off the alarms. In a way, this will be a test to determine if she possesses royal blood or not. If the alarms are triggered, I will quickly open a portal and transport us back to Nether. If not, well, I suppose that will add another mystery to unravel.

Regardless of the outcome, it doesn't matter to me. She has my heart, and that will never change.

We make our way toward the entrance, and I pause, but Elara's gaze remains fixed. She strides forward, captivated by the enchanting gardens, so I position myself behind her,

ensuring she is within arm's reach in case I need to open a portal and whisk us away.

Holding my breath, I follow closely as she crosses the threshold. I'm aware that it only takes seconds for the Central Court guards to arrive.

I reach out and grasp Elara's hand, and finally, she turns to me.

The sight of her takes my breath away, far beyond what I had envisioned in my dreams. It's probably because I'm getting to know her that I can't help but be amazed by her intelligence, wit, and inner strength. Not just mentally, but physically, too. And the fact that she's from Terr, a Death Dealer, and the way she makes me feel, it's clear she's the one.

"Look," she says, eagerly pulling me towards a grove of pink flowering trees that are illuminated in a soft, glowing light. She moves toward them, and I hear her gasp.

This place is enchanting, even for me, and I can only imagine the emotions and thoughts running through her mind. I wish I could dive into her thoughts, but I promised I wouldn't. I would never invade her mind unless she granted me access.

Even though it's been about five minutes since we arrived, I'm still on full alert, carefully watching her move within the garden. Her eyes are wide, her fingers feathering over sleeping bulbs, watching them awaken and bloom right in front of her.

Despite a terrible upbringing and brutal bullying, she radiates life and compassion for others. There's something about her that draws people in with her magnetic charm. Hell, even my best friend is smitten with her. Rem never forms attachments because of his duty to the throne of Terr, but I've never seen him care for or show genuine interest in someone as much as he does with her. It's understandable that he feels that way.

"You were right," she confesses, a glimmer in her eyes and a bright smile on her lips. "I can see the veins of life within the plants."

I smile, leaning back onto a tree with my arms crossed over my chest, observing her.

Ten minutes have gone by, but I'm not lowering my guard. If the alarm goes off and they're occupied, it could take a while for them to arrive. There are bigger threats these days than an unregistered Celestrian entering the garden.

Elara moves, weaving in and out of the trees and flowers, her fingers feathering over everything she comes across. When we reach another row of vibrant, blooming flowers, she turns to me. "How big is this place?"

"It's about a mile in circumference," I say, and her mouth drops open.

"Where is the Empress's tomb?"

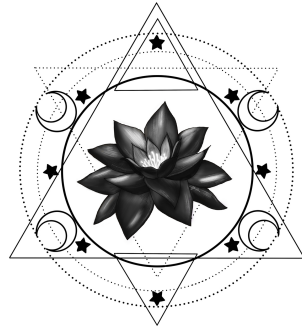
"About a quarter mile that way," I say, pointing northeast, through another grove of trees.

"Can you take me there?"

"Of course."

If she wasn't of royal blood, the guards would have arrived already. I need to inform Cyrus. If it is true, who does Elara inherit her royal blood from? That's the crucial question. A person of royal lineage hid their pregnancy. They bound her powers and delivered her to earth, making it appear as if she was a normal Changeling. I need to find out who and why. There must be a reason.

Glancing at her, my heart fills with emotion. She's both royal and a Death Dealer. Two points in my favor, and one step closer to unraveling her true identity.



# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## ELARA

The gardens are beyond anything I could have imagined. I can feel the power and magic of this place humming through me as I witness its life pulsing through every living thing growing here. The entire garden is self-illuminated with an ethereal glow. It's impossible to describe the feeling of walking in this place. Everything I touch and every step I take seems to fill me with a sense of hope.

“How big is this place?” I ask. The endless path through the trees and flowers seems to stretch on forever.

“It's about a mile in circumference,” he says, and my jaw goes slack.

There's one place I have to see before we leave. “Where is the Empress's tomb?”

“About a quarter mile that way,” he replies, his finger aimed toward a glow of light in the distance.

“Can you take me there?”

“Of course.”

Kage has remained quiet, allowing me to explore this enchanting place, but I sense something is weighing heavily on his mind. Perhaps he is worried about us being discovered by the guards. However, nobody has shown up yet. Maybe

there's a shift change happening, or maybe the guards just don't care. If they can detect someone as ordinary as me, then they can surely detect royalty, so they might have chosen to leave us alone.

Following his direction, I gently graze my fingertips along a row of delicate flower buds. I am instantly enchanted as the petals unfurl, emitting a soft glow, yawning and stretching as if they are awakening from a deep slumber. Breathing in deeply, I am captivated by the heavenly aroma they release.

I turn to Kage, my face breaking into a wide, crazed grin. He shakes his head, his bright smile matching mine, spreading warmth between us. He appears godlike while standing in this enchanted garden, and the sight of him causes my heartbeat to quicken. I suddenly feel that undeniable connection between us and am dangerously drawn to him. More than anything else, I want him, and his darkening eyes reflect that same desire.

I reach out and grasp his hand, and he swiftly tugs me against him, holding me firmly against his muscular frame. With no warning, his hand tangles in my hair, delicately pulling my head back as his warm lips meet mine. I let his tongue slide across my lips, willingly opening up for him as he strokes deep.

*"Elara,"* a female voice calls.

I pause, pulling away to glance around, but there's no one else in the gardens.

"What is it?" Kage asks.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" With a focused gaze, he scans the area, searching for any signs of movement.

"Someone called me."

He stops, resting his hands on my shoulders. "What did they say?"

"They called my name."

Visibly shaken, he exhales and rakes his fingers through his thick hair. "Maybe we should leave," he says, but I don't want

to go. I'm not ready yet.

"Take me to where the Empress is buried," I press.

He remains silent, but scans our surroundings, evaluating.

"Please," I beg.

Kage's eyes soften as he turns to me. With a nod, he takes hold of my hand and guides me ahead. "Stay close to me," he urges.

"I will," I promise, tightening my grip.

Our leisurely stroll through the gardens transforms into a full-on power walk, as the light in the distance grows brighter, guiding us to the Empress's burial site. Kage doesn't speak a word, but his eyes are constantly scanning the surroundings. There is no doubt the most powerful man in all Celestria will defend me if someone is here to harm me.

We finally reach a small gate surrounding another garden area, and I know that the Empress is resting inside. As Kage opens a portal, I hesitate.

"Trust me. I'll take us in," he says confidently.

Hand-in-hand, we enter and find ourselves in front of a grand mausoleum. The building is crafted from white stone, gilded with gold, and tall columns that encompass the entire structure. There are no functioning lights in this location. The golden glow we witnessed is coming from the stone itself. Everything here glows.

As we ascend the stairs, there is a noticeable shift of energy in the air. With every step, it grows greater, so much so that my entire body trembles.

As we reach the top step, I pause in front of a majestic statue intricately carved from white granite. A woman with a face of unrivaled beauty is embracing a newborn child with utmost tenderness. The statue's portrayal of a mother's love is so powerful that you can feel the emotion just looking at it. A single tear escapes my eye, and I find myself instinctively drawn to touch the statue, to reach out and connect with it.



Kage calls my name from behind me, urging me to stop, but I can't.

The moment my finger grazes the mother's face, my body fills with energy and I'm encompassed by a bright light.

I blink and am no longer standing outside the mausoleum or with Kage. I don't even think I'm in Celestria anymore. I exist in a mysterious dimension, where shimmering stars and vivid auroras create a breathtaking spectacle in the vastness of space surrounding me. Maybe this is a galaxy or another realm, and while I should feel terrified, I am filled with an overpowering sense of calmness.

"Elara," a voice calls out to me. The same one I heard in the gardens.

"Who are you?" My voice carries through the stillness, magnified by the open space.

A radiant orb of light shoots toward me, stopping directly in front of me. I'm spellbound, watching it transform into the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on. Her face is like delicate porcelain, and her features are exquisitely flawless. Her hair is liquid gold, cascading like waves around her, while the radiant, white gown she's wearing shimmers like the stars surrounding us.

A powerful and vibrant golden aura surrounds her, pulsating with energy.

"You're the Empress," I say, breathless.

A luminous smile graces her full lips. "I am," she says, and even her voice has a honeyed sweetness to it. "I've been expecting your arrival, Elara."

My stomach twists with butterflies, and my heart pounds against my chest. "You know me?" I inquire, with tears cascading down my cheeks.

She nods, her delicate fingers brushing away my tears, leaving tingles in their wake.

"How are we here?"

“Magic,” she says softly. “From a spell I had cast ahead of my untimely death, which would bring you here, to this Celestial plane, where I could finally meet you.”

I shake my head, my emotions undulating.

“You were murdered,” I say, my voice catching inside my throat.

She gives me a single nod and my heart cracks in two.

One question has been lingering in my mind, begging to be asked.

“Am I your daughter?” I need to hear her say it.

Despite her brilliant smile, she shakes her head slowly. “No, darling. You are not.”

I am in a state of utter confusion.

“Then who am I, if I’m not your daughter—” I pause, finally realizing the truth. “Elwyn is your daughter.”

With affection in her eyes, the Empress nods. “I sent Elwyn’s spirit to be with you. To help guide you on your journey.”

“Were you the one who sent me to Earth?” I’m not sure if I’m ready for the response.

When she nods, my heart feels like it’s going to shatter into a million pieces.

“Who am I?” I cry, my voice trembling, while tears pour down my face. “If you’re not my mother, then who is?”

Moving closer, she reaches out and holds my hand. It’s filled with warmth and vibrant energy.

“You, my darling, are—”

A shooting pain has me screaming and doubling over. Somewhere in the distance, I can hear Kage’s voice calling out to me, begging me to wake up.

“Elara,” the Empress urges as I’m torn away from her grasp, yanked backward, propelling through time and space. “You must be strong. You must survive.”



My entire body aches and I feel nauseous. I quickly rise and race to the exit of the cave, where I retch and expel the contents of my stomach.

“Elara.” Kage’s voice is laced with worry. He gathers my hair and places a cold cloth on my forehead. I wipe my mouth, then turn to him with heavy eyelids. He guides me back inside and helps me sit.

We’re back in the cave in Nether.

“No.” Tears fill my eyes and spill down my cheeks.

“Elara, what’s wrong?” Kage asks, wrapping his arms around me. With a cool hand, he strokes my forehead, bringing relief from the sharp pain.

“I was with her.”

His brow crumples. “With whom?”

“The Empress. She was about to tell me who I was when I was ripped away from her.”

Kage shakes his head. “You saw the Empress?”

I nod, wiping away my tears. Kage closes his eyes and shakes his head. “When you touched the statue, you vanished right in front of my eyes. I felt helpless and panicked and used the bone marker to find you.” It’s clear by the look on his face that the experience shook him. “I had to open a portal and found you inside the mausoleum, lying on the crypt floor beside the Empress’s casket.”

“That can’t be,” I breathe. “We were in another place, somewhere in space, maybe another dimension.”

“A portal?”

“It might have been. It felt like I was in your dark vision,” I say, hoping he doesn’t think I’m crazy. “She was real, and spoke to me, like I’m speaking to you now.”

“What did she say?”

“She told me I’m not her daughter,” I say sadly. “Her daughter’s name is Elwyn, and she’s been with me my entire life. Just as you said I was with you, but solely in your dreams, Elwyn existed as a voice in my head. A voice of reason. It wasn’t until I arrived in Celestria that I met her for the very first time, in a dream.”

Kage is at a loss for words, but I find it amusing that the girl he was supposed to marry—who died with the Empress—was with me on Earth the whole time. Life has a way of connecting things that were always meant to be together.

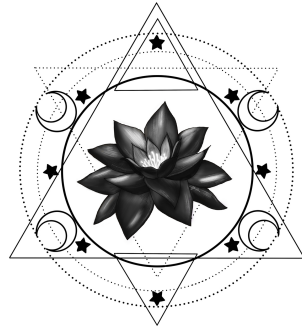
At least now I know I’m not the daughter of the Empress. But who am I to her that she knows me by name, sends me to Earth, and creates a spell for me to visit her in another realm? The answers are there. I just have to uncover them.

Her words are still echoing in my mind. “*You must be strong. You must survive.*”

I know that something bad is coming, and I need to be mentally and physically prepared for it.

Kage holds me tightly in his embrace. My body is still trembling and weak after the encounter with the Empress.

“Sleep, Min Vesmír,” he whispers, kissing the top of my head. “I promise you, we will find the answers.” In his arms, I feel safe and warm, and sleep finds me easily.



# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## REMINGTON

The King sent word. He wants the shadow hawks to be released first thing in the morning, but Valr is restless. He should be sleeping, but he's screeching loudly and flapping his wings like he wants to be set free. That only tells me he must know where Kage is.

I approach his massive aviary, and he flies over to me.

"Do you know where Kage is?" I ask, knowing this creature can somehow understand me.

Valr flaps his wings and lets out an ear-piercing screech.

"If I let you out, will you find him?" I am forced to cover my ears with another deafening screech.

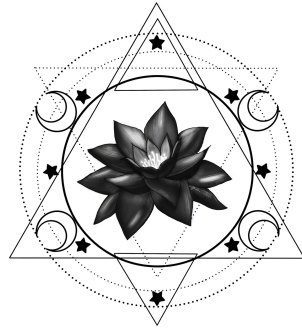
"Alright, then. Find your master and tell him to get his ass back to Terr."

I open his door, and the moment I do, Valr vanishes into the night, leaving behind a gust of wind. Hawks possess remarkable vision, and as a shadow hawk, Valr's keen eyes and connection to Kage will effortlessly locate him, no matter where he is. I just hope he returns before Vera comes back, searching for answers.

I'm Captain of the Guard, not a freaking mediator. I shouldn't be dealing with her or any of this relationship shit.

All I know is I better get a bonus this holiday.

For now, I'll have to find Digby and see if he can give me a tonic to stay up. I have a feeling I'll be making a jump sometime soon.





# CHAPTER NINETEEN

## ELARA

Coldness seeps into my bones, causing me to wake. My eyes flutter open, and I take a moment to figure out where I am. I can still feel the ache in my body and head, but not as much. As I glance towards the exit, I see that it's still dark outside and Kage is crouched in the corner, stoking the fire. The moths are near the roof of the cave, docile and emitting their soft glows.

“Hey.” I breathe, and his dark eyes meet mine. A smile forms, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, his voice heavy with sleep.

“Better.”

“The shadow hawks are on their way,” he says, blowing on the coals, making the fire burst back to life.

I sit up. “How do you know?”

“One of the shadow hawks is mine. His name is Valr, and because we are magically connected, he is able to locate me. Much like how I can find you using the bone marker.”

There is an ache inside my chest, but not from my ailments. “How long before they arrive?”

He turns back to me, a sad look in his eyes. “Within a few hours.”

I nod and pat the ground next to me. “I’m freezing,” I say, shivering.

A beautiful smile graces his lips as he leaves the fire, moving toward me. Positioning himself behind me, his arms fold around me, pulling me between his legs, flush against his chest. I hug his arms, snuggling into his warmth as his shadows envelop us, and feel him press a warm kiss to the top of my head. A deep sigh follows.

Glancing back into his eyes, I see uncertainty swirling within them and know exactly what he’s feeling.

Realization sets in. The unspoken confession damning us both. This... *this* is a love we cannot deny. A love we can never keep. And that knowledge weighs heavily between us.

With Vera and her parents around, he will never be mine. And what we shared here in Nether, Nahla, and even the gardens, was nothing more than a stolen moment. A secret we can never tell. A secret that, if found out, could lead to our end.

He has too much to gain and even more to lose. He is the Prince of Terr and future king. His people depend on him and, because of his loyalty to them, they are loyal in return.

Soon, this beautiful dream will end, and we will both have to wake up and face reality. I’ll have to protect my heart because it’s been hurt too many times and is still very fragile. Even now, I’m feeling the pain of his absence. A coldness that is already seeping deep into my chest and threatening to consume me when we return to Terr and he’ll no longer be by my side.

I turn to him, straddling his thighs, and press my forehead against his.

“I don’t want this to end,” I whisper, tears pooling in my eyes and trailing down my cheeks.

A gentle thumb wipes them away, then his hand slips behind the nape of my neck.

There is an ache swirling in his eyes mirroring my own, and as he presses his lips against mine, I can feel the pain and longing in his kiss. Like a last goodbye.

Pulling away, I stare into those dark depths, wanting him to know exactly how I feel.

“You told me I had your heart,” I say, my voice trembling, “and I promise to keep it safe and hidden away.” Tears roll down my cheeks as I shake my head. “My heart has always been fragile, so I’ve kept it hidden, kept it buried deep within me. I’ve built a strong wall around it to protect it and never thought I’d reveal it to anyone. But *you* showed up, and even though we had a rough start, you were always there. Time and time again, you’ve saved and protected me, sometimes, without me knowing. And you... *you*, without even realizing it, were slowly chipping away at that impenetrable wall.” I smile through my tears, recognizing what has already happened. “You’ve accomplished what I thought no one else could. You’ve broken through the wall and reached my heart, Kage Dargan. And although it might have some cracks in it, and it’s far from perfect, it belongs to you.”

I witness those eyes, those beautiful, dark eyes rimmed in gold, brim with tears. Kage smiles, and it’s filled with so much adoration it takes my breath away. Then, I see a single tear fall and trail down his cheek.

His arms suddenly fold around me, pulling me tight against his strong, warm chest where I not only hear but can feel his quick, deep breaths.

“I warned you before, Min Vesmír,” he says, his voice soft and velvety like a lover’s kiss. “Once you surrender your heart to me, it will forever be mine. But I promise you, I will violently protect and cherish it for the rest of my life.”

“Kage,” I whisper, the sound barely audible. But he hears, and I watch his self-control shatter.

His lips meet mine, hungry and desperate, and I feel his arousal growing beneath me, causing me to grind my hips against his. A primal moan escapes him as his mouth devours mine.

His hands move to my waist, tugging my shirt over my head and carelessly tossing it to the side. And with another few movements, we're both naked.

His fingers graze my cheek before he tugs at the braided-crown Naida made, causing my hair to tumble down over my shoulders and across my back. He runs his fingers through the braids, carefully straightening them out, then he pauses. His heated gaze, ardent and filled with lust and yearning, holds me in place.

“Fucking beautiful,” he breathes.

This time, when his lips meet mine, his kiss is slow and tender. A kiss that numbs my mind and makes everything else fade away.

There is a difference between need and want, but with him, I feel both. I need his strength, his ardor, and his constancy. But I also *want* him. I want to feel his hand slip into mine, feel the gentle brush of his fingers across my cheek, and the warmth of his lips pressing against my forehead. I also know that when we leave this place, even those basic desires will not, and cannot, be shared between us.

Our kiss breaks, and for a fleeting moment, our eyes meet. Passion, craving, and hunger are all suspended in time between us. He looks at me like the entire world could fall apart around us, and he wouldn't look away.

With hands on my waist, he slowly lifts me, situating me above himself. With a growl, he slowly and torturously guides me down on top of his solid length.

My head falls back, and a deep moan escapes my lips as he fills me completely. His warm lips and expert tongue caress one of my breasts, while his fingers expertly massage and tease the other, leaving me in blissful ecstasy. I start to move on my own accord, and he responds with a groan, his fingers gripping my skin firmly in approval.

Shadows emerge and brush against me. Their touch is electric, heightening my arousal, and making my body hypersensitive to every stroke and caress.

In a split second, I'm on my back, lying on his bed of shadows.

"You're mine, Min Vesmír," Kage whispers against my lips as he lines himself up at my center and pushes into me. My back arches and my fingers fist within his silky shadows. He lowers his head, his lips pressing against the center of my chest. "Mine."

He pulls out of me, and within seconds, my legs are wrapped around his shoulders, and his face is between my thighs. His mouth, hot and erotic, devours me, his tongue flicking, biting, and licking.

Every sensation overwhelms me, rendering me unable to think or breathe as he carries me to the edge of rapture. I cry out as stars burst and auroras dance before my eyes. With my back arched and toes curled, I ride out the wave of ecstasy that washes over me.

Kage flips me over onto my hands and knees, and before I can catch my breath, he thrusts into me, claiming me repeatedly, until he finally grinds into me with a moan of pleasure.

His shadows envelop us as he lies down beside me, pulling me into his arms. Our faces are inches apart, gazing into each other's eyes, fully aware that our time together is slipping away.

His eyes dart to the cave's exit, then back at me with a worried look as he pulls me flush against him.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Valr is here." He exhales, raking his fingers through his hair.

"Where?" I shoot up to a sitting position, my eyes shifting toward the exit.

"He's reached the island. It's only a matter of time before he finds me." He gets up and tugs on his clothes. "Once he does, jumpers will come for us, because the Shadow Hawks have trackers on them."

“Oh, gods!” I exclaim, hopping to my feet. He hands me my clothes, and I quickly slip into them. I’m breathless, but for an entirely different reason, knowing we’ll have to pretend none of this happened.

“What will happen when they come?”

“I’ll jump back to Terr,” he says, stepping in front of me, running his palms down the length of my arms. “I know Rem will come, and when he does, you’ll return with him.”

I shake my head, my emotions brimming and spilling down my cheeks. “I miss you already,” I confess, falling into his embrace. He holds me tight, and I inhale his alluring scent, never wanting to let go.

Soon, he’ll be gone, and our lives will change. I know for certain that trials will await me, challenges that will push me to my limits. But I have to persevere. One day at a time. One breath at a time. I won’t let Elwyn, Alena, or the Empress down. They’ve already endured unimaginable trials, and I’m no different. I’ll fight as long as I can.

Kage’s powerful hands tenderly caress my face, keeping my gaze fixed on his.

“The only thing I want you to remember when we return to Terr is this. No matter what you witness, or what transpires between us, you’ve *always* been and will *forever* remain the keeper of my heart.”

We are a living fantasy story. Forbidden, star-crossed lovers who have to depend on fate to right the wrongs. I hate it, but I’ll have to deal with it until something changes. *If* it ever does.

Time stands still as we hold each other, like it’s our last moments, and then we hear a loud screech across the sky.

Kage gives me one last breath-stealing kiss, then guides me outside, where the moths follow, fluttering around us. Glancing up, I see a dark figure soar across the sky, wings spread wide.

Kage whistles and the bird slowly descends and lands twenty yards ahead of us.

“Stay behind me,” he instructs. “He doesn’t like strangers.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. I slide behind Kage, and he laughs, stepping forward to meet the beastly creature.

This is not a normal bird. This predator is massive, towering at least eight-feet tall, with a large, curved beak and sharp, taloned feet. His wings resemble black silk, and his fierce, dark eyes are fixed on Kage.

Hawks are known as birds of prey. On Earth, even though they are relatively small, they are skilled hunters and killers. I can only imagine what an eight-foot shadow hawk can do.

“Valr,” Kage calls out, his arm extended, and fingers spread wide.

The bird obediently moves toward him, his large, taloned feet gripping the ground. When Valr reaches Kage, he leans forward, nuzzling his head against Kage’s palm.

“Hey, boy,” Kage says, motioning for me to stay put.

I’m not going anywhere. My feet are rooted to the ground and my body has gone rigid with fear.

“Valr, you found me,” he says playfully, and the bird responds with a screech. “Good boy.” The bird presses his massive head against Kage’s, rubbing affectionately while Kage lovingly pets it. I’m in awe, witnessing this enchanting moment, but also completely terrified.

“Valr, I want you to meet someone *very* special to me,” Kage says calmly. He turns and looks at me, and so does the massive bird.

*Dear gods.*

Valr’s head tilts back and forth, his dark eyes are fixated on me. It’s hard to tell if he’s angry, because hawks always appear to carry a perpetual chip on their shoulders.

I gape at his large talons that could shred me to ribbons with one swipe and swallow down the lump in my throat. Valr dances around, unfurling his massive onyx wings that shimmer in the pale moonlight. Those dark wings flap, stirring the calm, icy air around us while he lets out a screech that sends a shiver

down my spine and causes me to take a step back. My fight-or-flight adrenaline kicks in and my heart, hammering against my chest, begs me to run.

“Easy, boy,” Kage coos, pressing his hand against Valr’s chest, but the bird won’t settle. His eyes are fixed on me. *I’m hawk food.*

“Don’t be afraid, Elara,” Kage says inside my head. “They sense fear.”

My eyes narrow at him. “Well, that’s impossible,” I breathe out loud.

Kage turns his attention to me, and in that split second, the hawk lunges forward. I let out a blood-curdling scream as Valr reaches me and his beak bunts me. Flying backward, I hit the ground and...

He’s on me.

I’m still screaming, eyes pinned shut, my life flashing before my eyes.

There is a pressure on my chest and palms, which are held out in front of my face. I heard somewhere that before you die, you don’t feel pain. Maybe that’s true.

“Elara,” Kage calls out. “Open your eyes.”

“Help!”

“Open your eyes.”

I stop screaming and slowly open one, tear-filled eye.

The bird is perched above me, those large, sharp talons gripping the earth on either side of me. His head is on my chest, but he’s nuzzling me, *not* eating me.

Kage comes up behind me and gently brings me to a sitting position, but I’m as stiff as a board.

Valr raises his legs, like he’s dancing, and my eyes go wide, looking at those sharp talons inches from my thighs. Kage pulls me to my feet, and comes to stand at my side, then takes hold of my hand, lacing his fingers in mine.



Valr's eyes snap to the motion of our hands connecting. His head moves between us and then... he pushes Kage away.

I gasp as the huge bird steps in front of me, bunting his head against my chest.

Kage laughs and I turn to him with a crazed look.

"He likes you," Kage says, holding out his arms. "Apparently more than me at the moment."

My body is stiffer than a steel rod when I finally notice what's happening.

"He likes me?"

Kage nods.

I slowly relax, letting the air out of my lungs, knowing Valr approves of me.

I slowly raise my hand, my fingers gently grazing over the top of his head. Valr stops, then nuzzles his cheek into my palm. My fingers run through his feathers that feel like soft velvet. After a few moments, and feeling a little braver, I bring up my other hand to pet him. Valr grunts, tilting and turning his head, making sure I get all the right spots.

The feeling is... exhilarating, but still a little terrifying.

The moths start to flutter around me, and Valr perks up, his beak snapping at them.

I gasp and point a finger at his nose.

"No!" I scold as nicely as I can. "No eating the Celestial moths. Okay?"

Valr drops his head like a scolded child. "Good boy," I say, rubbing my fingers under his chin. He moves back to me, nudging my chest and nuzzling my shoulder.

I burst out in laughter, and when I turn, Kage is smiling, his eyes brewing with warmth.

There is a snap in the air, and suddenly Rem is there, standing behind Kage. When his wide eyes spot me with the bird, he dashes forward. "Elara!"

Kage puts a hand to his chest, stopping him.

“I wouldn’t interfere,” he says, his voice laced with warning. “Valr pushed me out of the way so he could bond with her.”

“Hi, Rem,” I say, turning and smiling at the dashing captain, who looks like he hasn’t slept in days.

“What the hell happened to you two?” he questions, brow furrowed. “Do you know how fucking worried I was... how worried we *all* were?”

“I’m sorry,” Kage apologizes. “I promise I’ll give you all the details when we return.”

“Kage,” Rem says with urgency. “Vera.” His eyes then meet mine and they are swirling with concern. “How are we going to explain this?”

“We’ll go back to Terr separately,” I say, still petting Valr, who can’t seem to get enough. “Don’t worry about me. I know how to wear a mask and play my part.”

Glancing at Kage, I smile, and he offers me a sad smile in return.

“I’ll return to the palace,” he says, his eyes pinned on me. “*Remember what I told you.*”

Nodding, my eyes sting as fresh tears fill them. Kage blinks and turns away, his eyes reflecting a mixture of emotions. He slaps a hand on Rem’s shoulder. “You’ll take her back to her room. I want you to remain by her side, Rem. She’s a target now.”

Rem knowingly nods in return.

“What’s he doing?” I ask, and both Kage and Rem turn to see Valr raising one of his talons to me.

“How is this possible?” Rem’s eyes are wide, his mouth slack.

Kage shakes his head, looking at me with adoration in his eyes. “He is offering you a ride.”

My eyes widen. “Ride? On him?”

Kage nods.

“He’s only ever offered Kage a ride,” Rem blurts. “What the hell is going on?” He looks at Kage for answers, but Kage shakes his head, his eyes glimmering with pride.

“She’s special, Rem, and even Valr knows it.”

My heart swells, knowing that this magical bird is offering me something he’s only offered Kage.

“I’m going to jump her back to Terr, Valr,” Rem announces to the bird.

Valr’s head snaps at him. He screeches, his talons pawing at the ground.

“Does he understand you?” I ask, and they both nod. “Is it safe to ride him?”

“You can’t be considering it,” Rem says firmly. “It’s dangerous.”

Kage’s eyes soften. “If he is offering you a ride, he won’t let you fall.”

“Kage, are you serious? Are you going to let her ride him?”

Kage shrugs with a smile, his eyes still fixed on me. “It’s up to Elara.”

Rem lets out a frustrated huff.

I turn to Valr, whose head tilts to the side. His talon still offered to me.

If I’m going to do this, I have to do it now before I chicken out. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime chance to do something few have ever done, and I’m not one to back down from a challenge. When I glance at Kage, he is radiating trust. While Remington is on the verge of having a mental breakdown.

I suck in a deep breath and raise my leg, placing it on Valr’s talon. Grabbing onto the side of his neck, he raises me up, and I mount him like I would a horse. Except he’s not a horse and his feathers are incredibly slick. Straddling him, I feel awkward and start to slip.

With a yelp, shadows suddenly unfurl from Valr's wings and coil around my thighs and midsection, pushing me upright and acting as a secure seat.

A smile grows on my face as I glance down at Kage, who's still wearing a look of pride.

"I don't know if this is a good idea," Rem states behind him, shaking his head.

Kage steps forward, coming to stand in front of the shadow hawk. He rubs Valr's curved beak and pins him with a serious gaze.

"I will allow you to take her for a quick ride," he instructs, "but you must bring her *right* back."

Valr screeches and unfurls his powerful wings. In seconds, we take flight, soaring skyward. I struggle to catch my breath as the icy wind hits my face and bites at my exposed skin. When we break through the tree line, Valr flaps again, picking up speed.

It's exhilarating. My heart races, breath quickens, and adrenaline rushes through my entire body. Leaning forward, I wrap my arms around his neck.

Valr screeches, evening out, and I glance down to see we are gliding high above Nether. Bathed in the soft moonlight, the island resembles a silver-hued painting and knowing that Kage is down there, somewhere, brings a smile to my face that I cannot contain.

Above me, the endless star-dusted sky seems to call to us, beckoning for us to fly deeper into its mysterious depths. I crave the stillness and silence it offers and will go as far as Valr will carry me.

Darkness has always been my friend. It whispers secrets, but only if you're listening. And through the years, it has offered me a place to escape, welcoming me into its shadowy embrace.

I straighten my back and hold my hands out to the sides, closing my eyes and pretending like I'm flying. This must be what true freedom feels like.

I let out a shout, and Valr screeches, but the vast, indigo sky swallows our voices.

The shadow hawk tilts his head, peeking an eye back at me before he lets out another resounding screech. He banks left and then... he dives, his wings folding into his sides.

I let out a scream as my stomach becomes weightless, and the stars blur as the wind thrashes against my face.

Teeth chattering. Breath catching. Hair whipping in ribbons behind me. It's a high I've never experienced but could definitely get used to.

Valr finally flaps his powerful wings and glides over a haunting, black sea. The moon and starlight glint off tiny crests and there is a hint of saltiness in the breeze. I soak it all in, leaning back over and hugging the hawk's neck. "Thank you, Valr. This is amazing," I say, hopefully near his ear. The bird screeches in return, making me smile.

A shrill whistle sounds in the distance, and Valr responds, flapping upward and soaring toward Nether.

Kage must be calling him back.



When Valr lands, there are two others there in Terr's uniform. I suddenly feel nauseous, knowing that once we leave this place, everything will change. It already has with the two witnesses present.

Kage moves toward me, but Rem grabs his arm, holding him back. "Allow me, Your Highness," he says.

*"It's okay,"* I say to him, alone. *"Go. I'll see you later."*

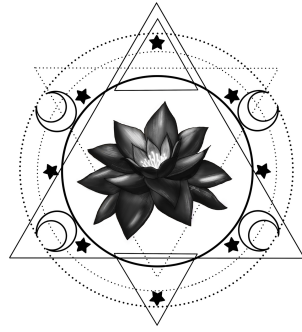
He nods, but in his tortured gaze, I see guilt and anguish. So much so that my heart seizes, and I have to turn away. There is a sudden snap in the air, and I immediately feel his absence. The electricity, the buzzing, the life that courses through me when he is near... is no longer there.

My heart is shattering, so I carefully tie on my mask to conceal my true emotions. But Rem is there, with his dashing smile.

Valr bows his head as the Captain reaches up and carefully lifts me off the massive bird. With one glance, he pulls me into his arms, and I bury my face in his chest.

“Valr. Fly home,” he says. The shadow hawk screeches, and I feel the wind on my back as he takes off.

Then, Rem opens a portal and whispers into my ear, “Let’s go home, Spitfire.”



# CHAPTER TWENTY

## ELARA

Overwhelmed with emotions, I tell Rem to return tomorrow. I can't deal with anyone right now, and still have to sort out everything that has happened over the past week. From the mission, to getting captured, rescued, and then... our time in Nether.

Seeing Kage before he left, I honestly don't know if I can face him again without revealing my true emotions. They are too raw and too fragile, and whatever is happening between us is much too strong. So, the only option is to stay away from him. Especially with Vera lurking around, waiting for any opportunity to strike. I won't allow that to happen.

After a long shower, I put on my comfortable bedgown and slip under the sheets. I've forgotten how amazing it feels to sleep on a soft mattress. Glancing at my nightstand, I notice a couple vials and a note from Remington.



The healer insisted I deliver these  
to you.

One is for your pain, and he  
wouldn't tell me  
what the other was for, only that  
it was imperative you take it.

Sleep well, Spitfire.

*Rem*

After our time in Nether, I think the second vial is something to prevent pregnancy. I quickly down both vials, turn off the light, and lie on my pillow, waiting for the medications to kick in.

Soon, my eyes and head feel heavy, and I'm relieved. I don't want to think or feel. I just want to shut everything off and sleep.



Stretching, I wake as a ray of warm sunshine peeks through a crack in my window and kisses my cheek. There are no aches in either my body or head, but there is a sharp pain radiating in my chest, a pain the healer can't relieve with a vial.

I know I can't sit around and sulk all morning. There are things I have to do, like find Cyrus and tell him what happened in the gardens. It's imperative I find answers, having only a year to release my powers and rescue Alena or die.

Heading to the bathroom, I quickly dress into my uniform and boots and tie my hair up into a ponytail. Shortly after, I hear Rem's voice outside the door.

"Good morning! I brought coffee and pastries," he cheerfully announces.

Smiling, I open the door and watch him place the items on the small dining table. Rem gives me a bright smile and motions for me to sit. "How did you sleep last night?"

I shrug. "Like a log."

He laughs, his face scrunching. “A log? Earth has the strangest expressions.”

“It’s an idiom.”

“Whatever.” He puts a napkin down and places a pastry filled with cream and fruit on it. I sit and immediately pick it up and take a bite, closing my eyes and moaning as the flavors hit my tongue.

Rem’s laughter fills the room and when I open my eyes, he’s smiling and shaking his head. “I’ll never grow old of watching how much you enjoy food.”

“I can’t help it. I’ve never had food that tastes this good.” I wipe the sides of my mouth. “On Earth, we call it a foodgasm.”

“I don’t even want to know,” he says, sitting and placing his elbows on the table, giving me an intense gaze.

I hold up a hand in front of his face. “Nope. Not until I’ve finished my coffee,” I say, knowing he is going to drill me for answers.

I’m curious if he already spoke with Kage and what he told him. Would he tell him about our intimate times? I doubt it. And I sure as hell won’t speak about it. Those stolen moments were ours and ours alone, and they will remain that way. At least on my part.

“Fine,” he says, raising both hands up in the air. “How about you tell me when you’re ready to talk?”

I take a sip of hot coffee, savoring the nutty flavor, and tilt my head. “What if I don’t want to talk today?”

He lets out a loud sigh. “Then you don’t have to. But being Captain of the Guard, I need to write a report about what happened in Avka.”

Taking another sip, I nod. “I have no problem sharing everything that happened there.”

His eyes narrow. “But you won’t tell me what happened between you and Kage in Nether?”

I shake my head. “If he wants to tell you, that’s fine, but I never kiss and tell.”

“So you kissed?”

It’s my turn to sigh. “It’s an Earth expression,” I explain. “It means I don’t discuss my private matters.” It usually involves a romantic relationship, but I won’t tell him that. However, I know he’s digging because he probably knows something already happened between us.

“Fair enough.” He relents, a wicked grin growing on his lips.

“What?” I ask, taking another bite of my pastry.

“It seems like you have a lot of things pent up inside, so today, we’re going to the mats to work it out.”

“I’m fine with that,” I say, moving my shoulder.

“They said you were shot on Avka. Was it in your shoulder?”

“Yes, but I’m fine now.”

“How?”

I finish my coffee and set the empty cup on the table, deciding that telling him about Kage’s arrival, his injury, us jumping to Nether, and me searching for the Nether Witch is safe. So, I share that entire story from the beginning of the mission. By the time I’m done, he’s shaking his head and running his fingers through his raven hair.

“So that’s why you’re both fine. You found the witch, and she actually had a magical flower,” he breathes in disbelief.

I nod, standing up. “It’s true. I wouldn’t be standing here if it wasn’t.” I give him my saddest puppy-dog eyes. “I’m done telling stories and answering questions for today. Can we go workout?”

He offers me a wide, knowing smile. “Sure. But since you’re healthy, don’t think we’ll go easy on you.”

“We?” I smirk at him.

He pushes his chair back before standing. “Talon has been waiting for your return. He wants a fair shot on the mats.”

“As long as he keeps his shirt on,” I snicker.

Rem’s right behind me, reaching forward and turning the nob. “That’s something you can negotiate. He’s been training for,” he pulls the antique watch from his pocket, “about an hour, now.”

“Ew. Man sweat,” I whine, knowing full well that Celestrians never smell bad. Even sweaty.

Rem laughs and leads me out. “It’s good to have you back, Spitfire.”

“It’s good to be back,” I half lie.

Arriving at the training center, I see four guys on mats and about a dozen huddled around the weights. Someone is lifting a large amount of weight, and they all seem to be betting on whether he can press it.

“Come on,” Rem says, grabbing my hand and pulling me across the mats.

“Elara?” A voice calls out.

I turn to see a tall, shirtless, muscled man drenched in sweat. His dark hair is tied back behind his neck, and his chocolate eyes are wide and fixed on me. He moves toward us and stops directly in front of me.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” he breathes. I’m suddenly wrapped in wet, sweaty arms and pressed against a massive, sweaty chest.

“Talon!” Rem snaps, pulling us apart. My mouth and left eye are cinched shut, not wanting his sweat to enter either.

“Oh, shit. Here,” Talon says, handing me a towel.

I wipe the sweat off my face and hand it back to him. “Thanks. It’s good to see you, too.”

He shakes his head. “I’ve had recurring nightmares since the jump. Every time I close my eyes, I see you, wounded, but still fighting.” He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his

nose. "I'm sorry I couldn't save you. There hasn't been a moment I regretted not going after you."

"No," I say, standing in front of him. "You did the right thing. You saved the rulers, and that's what the entire mission was for." I give him a smile, holding out my arms. "Look, I'm fine, and not that easy to kill."

"Yeah, you are a superhero. The way you were injured, but still sliced through those guards' kneecaps." He turns to Rem, his finger pointing at me. "One of the Avkan guards pointed a gun at us, but our girl here jump kicked him before he could get a shot off and snapped his neck."

*Our girl.* I guess I've proven myself to Talon, at least.

Talon places a large, calloused hand on my arm. "I'm sorry I left you. I still feel like shit for doing it, but I'm glad you're back. You've definitely earned a spot here." He holds out his hand to me, and I grab it with a smirk. With a tug and a swipe of my leg, Talon is on his back, and I'm above him with a grin.

"Thanks," I say.

A Cheshire cat grin rises on his full lips. "That wasn't fair."

"Have you ever heard the saying, *all is fair in love and war?*"

Talon grins. "Are we in love or at war?" he asks.

I hop off him and stand. "Neither." I grin. "It's an idiom that means in a situation like this, anything goes."

"What's an idiom?" Talon asks.

"It's a term only non-idiots can understand," I say with a deadpan face. I turn to Rem and wink.

Talon furrows his brow, puzzled by what I just said, while Rem stands to the side, arms crossed over his chest, laughing and shaking his head.

I wasn't paying attention to the fact that the other men had surrounded us.

Talon, still on his back, sighs and holds his hand out to me. "Truce?" he asks. But I'm not buying it.

Ready for anything, I grab his hand, and as suspected, Talon grips it tightly. He rolls sideways, pulling me down, and moves to come up to straddle me.

But I'm smaller and a lot faster.

Before he can catch his balance, I use my legs for leverage and push him over, then spin behind him, wrapping my arm around his neck, burying it deep. I squeeze while my legs wrap around his middle, locking me in place.

The men standing around us go wild, hollering and cheering, then I let go. Talon leans forward, coughing. Then turns to me with a wicked smile.

"You're good, Princess."

"Princess?" I chuckle. "Nope. That's not going to happen."

"Why not? The Captain has Spitfire, so why can't I have Princess?"

I sigh as the rest of the guards surround me, most of them towering over six-feet, muscular, and all quite attractive. Each one holds out a hand, introducing themselves and welcoming me to the Guard. I can see they're sincere, and this just isn't some fake initiation.

"We heard how you kicked ass in Avka, even after taking a bullet to the shoulder," a bronze-skinned, tall, handsome guy says. "I'm Griffin. Welcome to the clan, Princess."

"Griff," Talon interjects. "That's *my* pet name for her!"

"She's one of us now," Griffin replies, throwing an arm over my shoulder. "That means we all get to use the nickname."

Rem finally moves forward and claps his hands. "Alright, now that you've met Elara, get back to training."

I give him a side-eyed glare. "Did you know about this?"

He shrugs. "You're now the reigning Princess of our guards, and will be treated with the utmost respect," Rem says, loud enough for the others to hear. "Am I right?"

"Right!" They all shout in unison.

“Welcome to the clan,” Rem says with a smile. “You now have the entire guard of Terr behind you, watching your back.”

“Thank you,” I say, trying not to get too emotional.

Even if it was a strategical move by Rem, I appreciate it. Being here, being accepted by these trained warriors—guardians of Terr—it really means something to me. I’ve always been the outcast, but now I feel like I’m finally finding my place here.

Even if I can’t be by Kage’s side, at least I can help to protect his kingdom.

While the others head off to continue their training, Rem steps next to my side, and in a low voice asks, “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“There will be a Winter Ball at the palace in two days. It’s a big deal, and I’ll have to attend with Kage.”

“Two days? That’s awfully fast.” I let out a deep sigh. “Did he tell you to bring me?”

“No,” he says, but I give him a stern look. “Okay, maybe he mentioned it, but it’s because I’m still in charge of your protection, and we have to maintain pretenses that we are a couple.”

I furrow my brow. “I don’t need protection.”

He pins me with a serious stare. “You barely escaped from Avka, and I was told that the Avkan King himself said you belong to him. On top of that, you still don’t have powers, and there are more than—”

I hold up a hand, stopping him. “Alright. I get it. But I don’t think being around him so soon is a good idea.”

He sighs, then takes my hand. “Hiding away and evading him will only make matters worse. To Vera, it will seem like something happened between the two of you, and that you are avoiding him because you don’t want to be caught.”

“Well, that’s what I was planning on doing.” I let out a sad laugh. “How much did he tell you?”

“Not much, and he didn’t give me any details, but I know Kage. He’s been my best friend for most of our lives, and being close to him, I’m pretty good at reading him and piecing things together.”

“I don’t know if I can face him, Rem,” I say honestly, tears welling in my eyes. “I don’t know if I can look at him like there is nothing going on between us.”

“But you have to,” he says with urgency in his voice. “Vera wants you to disappear, and now that her parents are back, you’ll have to make them believe that there is nothing going on. The Queen of Asteri already knows he gave you the bone marker.”

My breath halts. “How?”

“Someone told them. We don’t know who yet, but we’ll find out.” He takes hold of both of my hands. “The Queen has eyes everywhere, and because you are a threat, those eyes will be focused on you and Kage. We have to make sure they find nothing wrong.”

I nod because I won’t let those vipers win. Like I said, I never back down from a challenge. And this will be my biggest challenge yet.

“Also, Maeve will be there, and she can’t wait to see you.”

I can’t help but smile. “Then, I’m in. Tell her I can’t wait to see her, too.”

“Oh, you’ll get to tell her yourself soon.” He pulls out his watch. “She wants us to meet her at the Evergreen for lunch.”

I give Rem a huge, toothy grin. “Astral puffs?”

“Of course,” he laughs, holding out his hand to me. “Let’s get out of here.”

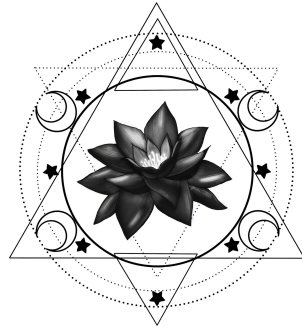
“What about practice?”

“Do you really think I’d let you practice after all the shit you went through? The guys wanted to meet you, and I know how



you like to avoid crowds, so training was my way of getting you out here.”

“Well played, Captain,” I say, and he winks at me.



# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

## KAGE

Standing in my bedchamber, my mind is a twisted mess. There are no words strong enough to capture the depth of my emotions after leaving Elara in Nether.

Anguish? Heartache? Hopelessness? None of these even come close.

I should have been the one to bring her back to Terr, to be by her side, protecting her. But I can't. Circumstances have forced me to keep my distance and pretend as though the three days we spent in the cave never happened.

If it were just me, I would have no problem breaking rules or snapping necks. But because she's involved, my hands are tied. Going after her alone, to Avka, was already breaking the rules, but Rem and my father managed to cover for me.

Apparently, Vera was here with her parents, and they know about the bone marker. Rem said they were adamant to see me, to ask questions, but I don't owe them anything. The bone marker was created by me. To whom and why is none of their fucking business.

Soon, my father will call for me and inquire about my jump to Avka and everything that happened afterward. I'll give him all the right answers, concealing the fact I was shot and on the

brink of death, or that Elara risked her life to save mine. Rem is the only one who knows. He and the two guards who jumped to Nether to “rescue” us. However, once the other guards returned to Terr, I made sure they visited me so I could erase their memory.

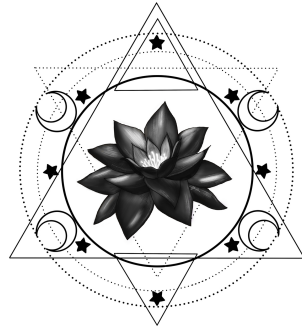
I don't know what the hell is wrong with me. I'm Kage Dargan, shadow wielder and Death Dealer. I never allow my feelings to dictate how I rule. I am straightforward, rarely showing emotion, unless absolutely necessary. As the feared Prince of Terr, I have a reputation to uphold.

But then she appeared. *She*, who is like the sea, her waves ebbing and flowing across the shore of my heart, smoothing out my sharp edges. Edges I crafted myself, meant to keep everyone at a distance.

But now, she's become a target for those who want to hurt and take advantage of her. Without her gifts, she cannot protect herself.

I'll have to keep her safe.

Regardless of the cost.



# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

## ELARA

We arrive at the Evergreen, and I breathe in the mouthwatering scents wafting from within. Rem leads me inside and the restaurant is teeming with people. At the back corner, something catches my eye. An arm extended, waving back and forth.

Maeve's bright red lips are curled up in a wide smile. Her light brown eyes are glimmering, and shoulder-length chestnut hair is curled under her chin. Before we reach the table, she hops up, hurrying toward us, and when she reaches us, she throws her arms around my neck.

"Elara!" she squeals, squeezing me, then pushing me back to look me over. "I heard you were injured and taken prisoner on Avka. How are you? Where were you? Rem was worried sick. I've never seen him so unhinged, and it made me terrified that something terrible happened."

Rem shushes her and grabs her elbow, leading the both of us to the table.

"I'm fine," I say, murmuring into her ear.

We're seated at a square table where Maeve is on my right and Rem is on my left. Maeve leans over and grabs my wrist, pulling me toward her. "I'm sorry for shooting off questions. I

got so excited when Rem told me he'd brought you back last night. Since you left, I lit candles to the gods and prayed for your safe return."

"Thank you," I say, truly touched by her kindness. "They worked."

Maeve's smile brightens. "Good. So, are you going to tell me what happened?"

I nod as our server comes up. He looks around my age, with short, black hair and alabaster eyes, with piercings in his right ear, lip, and nose. He also has tattoos going around his neck.

"Would you like anything to drink?" he asks.

"Celestrian wine for me," Maeve chimes.

I smile at her as her eyes slide to me. "I'll have a black lotus, and water with lemon in it, please." He writes it down, then his eyes move to Rem.

"Just water," he says, and Maeve whispers, "*Boring*," under her breath, making the server chuckle.

"I'll be right back," he says.

Maeve leans over. "So? Tell me what happened during the mission. I'm a visual girl, so give me lots of details."

I really didn't want to talk about the incident over lunch, but Maeve has become a trustworthy friend. She's been there for me when I needed her.

"Well, as soon as we jumped, we were in an open space. I noticed lights in the distance and quickly realized they were Avkan drones, headed our way..." I continue to tell the story, all the way until I was obviously set up to be captured by Seven and the others.

I turn to Rem. "What happened to the rest of the team?"

"Freya is fine," he says, "but Seven, Callas, and Roman were immediately sent back to their kingdoms. Those bastards will never see the light of day."

I nod, not knowing what to feel. They left me to fight the Avkan guards alone, but I know they were desperate and

probably offered something greater than being released and getting their magic back. I don't know what greater prize there could be, but they took it. Which meant they chose to stand back and let me die.

"Assholes! They deserve to rot in dark cells filled with vermin," Maeve spits, reaching for her drink on the tray the server just brought.

She hands me mine and slides Rem his water. Raising her glass in her perfectly manicured fingers, she says, "To Elara. Who got shot, escaped from Avka, and survived unimaginable odds. She's the most badass girl I know." She gives me a wide smile. "I know you feel you don't have any family here, but you're part of ours. And I am verbally adopting you as my soul sister, right here and now." She clears her throat. "And although Rem can't be romantically connected to anyone until he serves his guardship, I know you're very special to him." Her face looks sad as she shakes her head, but she continues. "He wishes it could be more. Maybe a friend-with-benefits?" She winks at me and then turns to Rem, who has a, *what-the-hell-are-you-saying-right-now?*, look on his face. Before he can respond, she clinks her glass against mine. "Cheers," she says, and I'm both giggling and tearing up.

"Cheers," I say, taking a sip.

"Maeve," Rem says, pinning her with a glare. "Did you drink before you arrived?"

She smiles and takes another sip of her Celestrian wine. "I might have had a drink." Her eyes roll upward. "Or two. But who's counting, right, sister?" she says, turning to me and lifting her glass.

I burst out laughing. "Right," I say, clinking her glass, then turning to Rem with a shrug.

He shakes his head and raises his arm, alerting the server, who immediately comes to our table. "I'd like to order three astral puffs." He holds out some money to the server. "Please make it quick."

"*Don't worry,*" I say in his mind. "*I know she's tipsy.*"



*“She talks way too much when she’s had a drink. Don’t take what she said about me to heart.”*

*“About being a friend-with benefits? I’m not worried.”*

*“Good,”* he replies and gives me a wink.

I laugh and hold up a glass to him. “To my guardian.”

He rolls his eyes and raises his glass. Maeve shoves her glass against ours. “He’s the best gods-damned guardian in all Celestria!”

I hear a commotion behind me and see a man stand and grab our server by the throat. He’s obviously intoxicated or on something because his pupils are dilated.

“You’re a freak! Who puts that many holes in their face? I saw you outside with another boy. It’s vile. I don’t want you serving me or touching my food,” he snaps.

The server is choking, the whites of his eyes turning red.

The man cocks his other arm back like he’s going to hit the server. I rush toward them, and somehow catch the man’s fist before it hits the boy. Grabbing his wrist, I twist his arm behind his back and kick out his knees, so he hits the floor. He releases the server, who falls to the ground and crawls away.

“What the fuck?” he snaps. “You bitch! I’ll file against this place.”

He reaches back with his other hand to grab my face, but I grab that wrist, too, yanking it behind his back and push him over. Pressing my knee into his back, I flatten his face into the ground.

“Don’t be a dick,” I growl into his ear.

The bastard is thrashing under me, but Rem is suddenly there, his shadows unfurl and restrain the man for me.

“You’re fast,” he says, glancing at me with a grin, helping me up to my feet.

The man is lifted to his feet, shadows encompassing him, making him unable to move. He pins me a wicked glare.

“You’ll pay dearly,” he hisses. “You don’t know who you’re messing with.”

I shrug nonchalantly as four guards enter and Rem hands the man over. “Get rid of him,” he says, and they immediately escort him out.

I turn around to silence, watching the other patrons in the restaurant stare at me. I swallow the lump in my throat when they begin to clap. Maeve lets out a whistle before bellowing, “That’s my sister!”

My face heats and has probably turned beet red. I hurry back to our table and slide into my seat, shaking my head at her. Then, the server shows up with a tray of astral puffs.

“Thank you,” he says, bowing his head to me. “No one has ever stood up for me before.”

I give him a smile and squeeze his hand. “I know what that feels like, and I wasn’t about to let you be victimized in front of me.”

He nods, those dark eyes brimming with tears. “I really appreciate it.”

I lean over toward him. “And just for the record, you aren’t a freak. I think your piercings are awesome.”

“Thanks.” His broad smile makes my heart warm.

When he leaves, I twist back to Rem and Maeve, who are both wearing shit-eating grins.

“What?” I say, digging into my astral puff.

“Just when I think I got you pegged, you never cease to amaze me,” Rem says.

“A total friend-with-benefits response,” Maeve chimes from across the table, raising her glass.

I laugh and shake my head, while Rem pins her with another deadly glare.



Lunch was fun, but I'm drained and relieved to be back in the comfort of my room, away from everyone. Rem and Maeve kept me entertained with their lively banter, and I love the close relationship they have.

Before I left, Maeve promised to come and help me prepare for the Winter Ball. I'm incredibly grateful for her offer because I have no clue what to wear for a grand event in the palace.

Just the mere thought of it sends butterflies racing through my tummy.

I better make sure that if I run into Kage, my mask is tightly secure. Knowing Vera and her parents will probably be there, I can't screw this up. I have to be able to stand in front of him, look him in the eye, and not show any emotion.

I let out a breath and face plant into my pillow. "Impossible!" I scream into it, then beat it with my fist. Rolling over to my back, I glance at the ceiling. "How the hell am I going to face him?"

A knock has my head whipping toward the door. "Spitfire, can I come in?"

"Yes!" I holler.

Rem snaps into existence in front of me, making me yelp and roll off the bed. He hurries to the side and lifts me up. "You said I could come in."

"Yes, but you knocked. I assumed you'd walk in, not just appear and scare the hell out of me."

"Your door is locked."

"You own this facility. Don't you have a key to every door?"

"Yes, but those keys are secured. I don't carry them with me."

I nod and plop down on the side of the bed. "What's up?"

He rubs his hands together, which tells me he's nervous to tell me. I sigh and widen my eyes at him. "Spit it out. It can't be that bad." Or can it?

“I just received word that Seven escaped his cell. It had to have been someone on the inside, but he’s out.”

“Okay, that’s bad, but how does this pertain to me?” He’s the one who let me down. I did nothing to him.

“Apparently, he blames you for not getting released or getting his magic back. His cell wall had your name etched into it and a huge X crossing it out.”

I shrug. “Does that mean he wants to kill me, though?”

He slowly shifts from one foot to the other. “There were also the words, ‘die mutt’.”

Mutt?

Okay, that’s personal. That’s what he called Freya because her father was from Earth, and she was born with no magic. He also referred to me as *mutt* when Rem wouldn’t tell him anything about my powers.

I would be more infuriated, but my brain is exhausted. Falling back onto my bed, I let out a loud huff. “So, what does that mean? Do I have to move? Change my name? My hair color?”

“No,” he laughs. “It means that until he is captured, someone will have to be with you at all times.”

“Can’t you just give me a weapon? Seven doesn’t have powers, but if someone helped him escape, I’m sure they gave him a weapon to ‘kill the mutt’,” I say, using air quotes. “I know he can’t throw a knife to save his life, but I can. He’d be down before he could reach me. Throat, chest, or even the eye seems to work well.” I roll my head toward him, giving him an evil grin.

“You’re in a grim mood,” he chuckles.

“I’m exhausted, and sick and tired of people coming after me.” I close my eyes. “Will there ever be a day when I can go anywhere, without having to look over my shoulder?”

“I don’t know, Spitfire. But we’re working on it.”

I smile, knowing who he's referring to. "Fair enough," I sigh. "So, when does the babysitting begin?"

"Right now," he answers.

Remington walks out of the room, over to the front door and opens it, and Talon comes striding in with a pillow, blanket, and duffle slung over his shoulder.

I pop up, walk to the bedroom door, and raise my hands in front of me. "Hold on! I never agreed to a sleepover."

"Think of it more as a slumber party, Princess," Talon replies with a grin.

"Don't call me Princess," I growl.

"Sure, Princess."

"That's infuriating. Do you know what people will think if they hear all of you calling me that? I'm not a princess."

Talon throws his pillow and blanket on the couch and sets his duffle down. "You're the Princess of the Guard, and we don't give a shit what anyone else thinks."

I relent, realizing I am fighting a battle I cannot win.

"Sorry," Rem whispers. "I have to be at the palace soon, which is why Talon is here."

Talon rummages through the cupboards and fridge. "Why is there no food in here?"

"Because I haven't had time to shop." I pause, crossing my arms over my chest. "And I don't have any money."

Talon gasps and marches over to Rem, holding out his hand. "Captain, this is unacceptable."

Rem hands him some money and looks at me. "He'll take you shopping. Get whatever you need."

I really didn't want to leave my room again, but getting some needed supplies would be good. "Thanks," I say, grabbing a sweater draped over a chair. "*How is he?*"

"*Could be better, but surviving,*" he replies.

I grimace, knowing I'm not the only one suffering.

“Alright, have fun. I’ll check in tomorrow morning,” he says, then with a snap, he’s gone.

Talon moves in front of me with puppy-dog eyes.

“What?”

“Is it okay if a couple of others join us?”

“To go shopping?”

He nods. “Griff and Brax asked if they could join us.”

“What about the others?”

“All on duty,” he says. “It’ll be an initiation party. Just the four of us. No funny business, because we know the Captain would—” He runs a finger across his neck.

“Here?” I ask. “There’s nothing to do.”

“No, there’s a place we want to take you. Somewhere only us guards know about.”

“Is it safe?”

“Of course, it is. It’s a place I think you’ll love. Totally befits our Princess.”

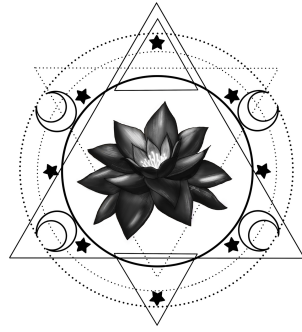
He has piqued my curiosity. I put a hand over my chest, feeling the bone marker under my shirt. “I’m in.”

“And Griff and Brax?”

“Sure, why not,” I exhale.

With that, he walks to the door, opens it and hollers down the hall, “It’s on!”

*Good gods. What did I just commit to?*



# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

## KAGE

Sitting at my desk, I finger through some paperwork left in the corner, and it's nothing I want. Sighing, I slouch back in my chair and close my eyes. I barely slept last night, fighting the urge to portal to Elara or drag her into a dark vision, just to check on her, knowing full well how dangerous those thoughts are. Still, I can't get her out of my head. She's embedded too deep.

I hear the click-clack of high heels and internally groan. I've been avoiding Vera for as long as possible, but she is like a tick that won't stop sucking, sucking, *sucking* the fucking life right out of me. I open my eyes, ready for anything she might conjure or throw at me.

She enters the room with her head held high. As usual, her hair and attire are impeccable, the way all royalty should appear.

"There you are," she says in a snippy voice.

"It's good to see you, too," I say sarcastically.

"Did you rest well enough?" she asks in a sultry voice, sitting on the edge of my desk, running a long, manicured nail down my cheek.



Since I've been with Elara, everything about Vera makes me cringe even more than usual. I tolerated her before. Now, I can barely look at her without seeing her for who she really is.

"There is never enough rest for the wicked," I say, leaning away to grab a paper I don't need. I read it, like it means something.

"The ball is in two days. What are you wearing? I have to make sure we match."

I suck in a deep breath and exhale loudly. "If you want to know, you'll have to ask the tailor."

She shrugs and slides off the desk, ambling over to my books where she runs a finger along their spines.

"What do you want, Vera? I have a lot of work I'm behind on."

Her narrowed eyes glare at me. "I just wanted to come and check on you."

I huff a loud breath and fold my hands on my desk. "Did you really?"

"Yes, because you were asleep for *three* days," she bites. "What's wrong with you? Ever since that *Changeling* came to Terr, you've been acting differently."

I bite my tongue and breathe through the heartless thoughts running through my mind, then turn and glare at her. "I see nothing that has changed in my behavior. But you have changed, Vera. Ever since she showed up, you've turned into a jealous and self-righteous..." I don't finish the sentence because I'm sure she can.

She shoves a finger at me, her lips trembling with rage. "I am better than her! I am royalty."

I shake my head, jaw clenching and blood boiling. "She came to Celestria and was assessed and brought to Terr as a new citizen. She knows nothing about our world, yet she agreed to go on a mission to save the rulers, *your* parents included. She has no power, no family, and it is our duty as rulers of Terr to make sure she is safe and taken care of."

“She is not your responsibility!” Her eyes have gone white, and there is a breeze now, tousling her wild, blonde hair.

I won't have her disrespecting Elara. “Once she stepped into our kingdom, she became our responsibility.”

“Your values are twisted, fiancé.”

Shadows emerge from my palms and curl around my wrists. “I think it's you who has misplaced values, Vera. To look down on someone because they haven't grown up here.”

She lets out an incredulous laugh. “When did you, Kage Dargan, start caring about anyone other than yourself?”

“If you'd have paid attention, maybe you would know.”

Her chest is heaving, white eyes glaring, but she knows she can't do anything to me.

She steps forward, her hands fisted at her side. “I know there is something going on between the two of you, and believe me, I will uncover the truth.” Those wicked eyes narrow. “If *you've* been paying attention, then you know I possess ways of uncovering the truth. And believe me. I *will* find out.” A malevolent smile rises on her lips. “Let me be clear, fiancé,” she hisses. “I will become Queen of Terr by *any* means necessary.”

Baring my teeth in a threatening grin, I motion for her to leave my office.

For a few moments, she doesn't move, just glares at me like some deranged demon. Then she turns and stomps out. She's nothing more than a leech, perfectly planted to suck the fucking life out of me.

With precise timing, Rem walks in and pauses when he sees me.

“Do you want me to come back?” he asks, thumbing at the door.

“No.”

He nods and closes the door. “I just saw Vera leave, so I completely understand if you need a few moments to compose

yourself.”

I fall into my chair and rake my fingers through my hair. “She’s out for blood, Rem. I don’t know how to keep Elara safe with her and her parents wanting her out of the picture.”

“Hey,” Rem says, coming up to me. “She’s part of the Guard now, and we will protect her with our lives.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s safe with Talon.”

I know Talon is one of our best guards, but he is also known for being a flirt.

“Do you trust her to be with him alone?”

“I know Talon has a reputation, but he’s serious about his job. He knows how important she is to us. So, he won’t overstep his boundaries. He knows the repercussions if he does.”

“Good.” If Rem trusts him, I guess I can, too. Besides, I know Elara will have no problem putting anyone in their place if need be. “And the ball?”

“She’s coming, but…” Rem looks at me with concern.

“What?”

“I don’t know if she’ll be able to control her emotions around you.” He steps up to me. “Are you two—”

This isn’t just a simple thing, but I have to tell him, not only because he is my best friend, but because I have entrusted her life to him.

“What is it, Kage?” he asks again.

I glance up at him and give him a sad smile. “She’s my true mate, Rem.”

He lets out an exasperated sigh and drags his fingers through his hair. “I knew it. I knew from the moment you touched her when you were vetting her for the mission. I was close enough to see the bond connect. And since then, well it’s hard not to see that you’ve been bonded.”

“We have to keep it secret. If Vera or her parents ever found out, they would immediately send someone to kill Elara. And they’d get away with it because of that gods-damned marriage contract.”

“I’ve kept every secret you’ve ever told me,” he says, slapping a palm on my shoulder. “I’ll go over the contract myself and see if there are any loopholes. I’m truly happy you’ve found the girl in your dreams, Kage. Now we’ll have to work together to protect her from the real world.”

I nod, hating that things have to be this way.

“I trust you with my life, Rem, and I also trust you with hers. Even if that means I have to give her to you for a while to keep her safe.” I stand and lean over my desk toward him. “I know you care deeply for her, and I am giving you permission to do whatever it takes, regardless of what you think I might feel.”

“Kage.”

“I’d rather lose her for a moment, than lose her forever.”

Rem nods with understanding in his eyes. “Only if necessary,” he says. “And if she’ll go along with it.”

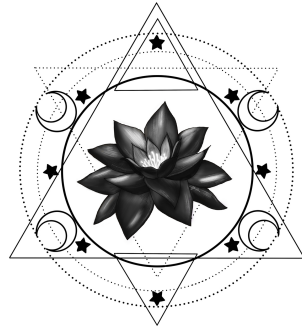
I drop back in my chair. “She will.”

Rem nods. “I know she will. She jumped at the opportunity to save you when Vera found out that you saved her during training.”

I can’t help but smile and think back. She stood up to Vera with no fear and defended me. “I admire that fire in her.”

“She is a spitfire,” Rem laughs.

“That, she is,” I agree, knowing that she’s not only captured my heart, but my best friend’s heart as well.



# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## ELARA

“Can I open my eyes?” I grumble, staggering over something crunching under my boots.

“No! Not yet,” Talon says, slowly guiding me forward by my arm.

We jumped to this place they said only the guards of Terr know about, but they wanted me to keep my eyes closed, and I have no idea why.

“We’re almost there,” Griff’s rough voice says.

“This better be good,” I bite. “It’s freezing out here.” Because it’s winter, the sun has been setting earlier and earlier.

“It’s worth it,” Brax speaks up.

After another twenty steps, Talon stops me and turns me a bit. “Alright,” he breathes. “Open your eyes.”

I gasp, finding myself atop a majestic, snow-capped mountain, embraced by towering pine and evergreen trees that are flocked in white. The sun hangs low in the sky, casting a warm glow across the beautiful scenery. Below us lies a serene, crystal-clear lake in a mesmerizing shade of azure, nestled within a velvety carpet of vibrant green grass. But it’s the flowering trees that captivate me. Their blooms paint the landscape in a breathtaking display of lavenders, golds, and

pinks. As I soak it all in, I feel as though I've stepped right into the pages of one of my fairytales.

"What do you think?" Talon asks, stepping beside me.

"It's incredible."

Warmth embraces me as Griff wraps a blanket around my shoulders.

"Thank you," I say, folding the blanket over my chest.

"Let's set up the table," Brax says, and I turn to see them walk into the surrounding trees, carrying out a wooden table and four chairs.

Returning my gaze back to the enchanting view below, I notice a small curl of smoke rising into the air.

"What's that?" I ask.

Griff walks over and stands next to me. "What?"

"There, see that curl of smoke down there?" I ask, pointing across the lake.

"Talon, come and look at this," Griff says. "Do you think someone's in the cabin?"

"It can't be," Talon replies. "That thing has been abandoned for at least twenty years."

"What cabin?" I ask.

"There is an old, abandoned cabin down there that we renovated years ago."

"It's obviously not abandoned," I point out.

"Should we see who's there?" Brax asks.

I suddenly feel a pull to go down and check it out, and I can't tell if it's a good thing or not.

"I don't know," Talon breathes.

"Let's go," I say, and all three men turn to me. "What if someone is trespassing? Aren't you curious to see who it is?" My mind instantly wonders if it's Seven. But I don't feel like it is.

“She’s right,” Griff says. “We’ll jump to the lake and go the rest of the way on foot.”

Brax and Talon agree.

Talon takes my hand, and opens a portal, while Griff and Brax open their own. In seconds we’re standing in a grove of pink trees. I close my eyes and breathe in the sweet, heavenly scent. It’s warmer down here, and the air is filled with birds singing.

“Do you have a weapon?” I ask.

“We don’t need weapons,” he says, holding out his hand where shadows curl through his fingers.

“You might not need it, but I do.”

“Right.” He reaches under his coat and unsheathes a large, sharp dagger, then hands it to me.

I grin and twirl it in my palm. “This will work.”

“The cabin is about a hundred yards ahead. We’ll move quickly and quietly and will stay in the trees to scout it out for a bit,” Talon says.

We all nod, and then he leads the way. I follow him, while Griff and Brax fall behind me.

The further we walk, the stronger the smell of burning wood gets.

Talon holds up a hand as we reach the tree line and we all duck behind our own trees. I peek from behind mine, seeing a quaint, little structure surrounded by grass and wildflowers.

We wait in silence for about twenty minutes, but there is no movement from inside. However, the constant smoke coming from the chimney confirms someone is inside. I feel unsettled, like I’m drawn to see who’s inside, and have a burning desire to walk up to the door and knock.

As the minutes tick by, the feeling grows stronger until my feet are moving on their own accord, heading toward the cabin.

“Elara!” Talon calls, but I can’t stop.



By the time I reach the door and knock, all three men are standing right behind me. My heart is pounding, my breath is heavy, and the knife in my palm is gripped tightly.

There is a noise behind the door and my body goes into defense mode. A latch on the inside is unlocked and the door slowly opens.

A tall man, wild in appearance, stands at the door looking like we woke him from a deep slumber. He is definitely from Terr with his dark, ebony eyes, and long, dark hair, with a full beard that reaches halfway down his chest.

His eyes scan all four of us, like he doesn't have a care in the world.

“What do you want?” he asks, his eyes moving to the dagger in my hand. A smug grin rises on his lips. “If you've come to rob me, I have nothing of value here.”

“We're here because you are trespassing,” I say. “This cabin belongs to the Guard of Terr.”

He looks behind him, his dark eyes sweeping the inside. “So, it was the Guard who fixed this place up?” He faces us again. “Thank you. It's quite cozy.”

My body feels wired like I could run a marathon. This man is exuding power, and it's affecting my body. “Who are you?”

“I'm the one who built this cabin. I left years ago to travel, but this place has always been my favorite. There is a magical tranquility that blankets the area, don't you think?”

This guy feels oddly familiar, but I know I've never seen him in my life. There is nothing about him that is conventionally Celestrian. Even his clothing is different, layered and mismatched, but somehow it works. He is a vagabond, a traveler, and everything inside me is screaming...

“Acacius?” The name slips from my mouth in a whisper.

His eyes narrow on my face, and his brow crinkles.

“Who are you?” he asks, his face hardening. “How did you find me?”

Good gods. What are the odds that in the entire world of Celestria, this man is here, right now, at the very spot Talon brought me?

It's fate. It has to be.

"My name is Elara," I say. "I was abandoned on Earth nineteen years ago, my powers were bound, and I've just returned." There is a slight tick in his jaw. "I was told by someone recently that you could help me."

He opens the door wider, shadows protectively curling around him.

"That doesn't answer my question, how did you find me? Who sent you?" he growls.

"No one sent us," I say, placing my blade on the ground and raising my hands in front of me. "There is no threat here." I thumb back to the guys who haven't said a word but are so close I can feel their warmth radiating on my back. "They brought me as a welcoming initiation to the Guard, and I saw the smoke rising in the distance. No one sent us," I repeat. "This is purely fate that we're meeting."

His face is stern, his eyes sweeping over us.

"There is nothing I can do to help you," he says, then slams the door in my face.

I stand there in shock.

"Come on, Princess," Talon says gently, laying a palm on my shoulder. "Let's go."

I shake my head. There is no way I am leaving this place without talking to this man. Just like Alena, I'll have to win him over and prove I'm not a threat. Turning back to the guys, I cross my arms over my chest.

"Listen, I need to talk to him... alone."

Talon raises a hand in front of my face. "Out of the question. We are not leaving you."

"You don't have to leave. You can wait right outside for me. If Rem were here, he would understand."

“But he’s not here,” Griff says. “We were told to protect you at all costs, Princess.”

I sigh, then pick up the dagger. Talon notices and unstraps the sheath, handing it to me. “I will give you five minutes, tops.”

Brax and Griff glare at him.

“I trust her, and if this is fate, we shouldn’t step in front of it,” he says.

“Thank you,” I say. “I promise you I’ll be safe.”

They nod, but I can still see the strain on their faces as they move back to the tree line where they post up.

I stand at the door, and just before I raise my hand to knock, it opens. Acacius glares at me. “Why are you still here? I told you I can’t help you.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “I just want to talk. Give me five minutes of your time, and then I’ll leave.”

Dammit, Talon. Five minutes is barely enough time to get my words straight.

Just when I think he’s about to slam the door in my face, he swings it open and steps aside. I turn back to Talon and the others and nod, then cross the threshold and head into the warmth of the cabin.

It’s a lot bigger than it looks from the outside and seems very cozy. The room is open except for one doorway that probably leads to the bathroom. Other than that, it has the same appearance of a log cabin as I would envision it on Earth—inviting, with warm tones and understated furnishings. On one wall, a comforting fire burns in a stone fireplace, radiating heat. I walk over to stand in front of it and stretch out my icy fingers to warm them up.

Time is ticking. I have five minutes to ask questions and see if I can get any answers. Five minutes before Talon comes knocking on that wooden door.

I turn to face Acacius, and he’s right behind me, handing me a cup filled with steaming liquid.

“Coffee?” he asks.

Not wanting to be rude, I take it. “Thank you,” I say, taking a sip, and as soon as it hits my tongue, wow. It’s the best damn coffee I have ever tasted.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

“Have a seat,” he says, pointing to a large chair. I make my way over and sink down into the soft seat while he pulls up a wooden chair to sit across from me. He holds out his hand, inviting me to start.

I clear my throat and hug the hot mug between my palms. “Ever since I’ve come to Celestria, I’ve been targeted. During my assessment, they couldn’t find out who my real parents were, or why my powers had been blocked. All they said was that whoever did it was very powerful. Cyrus has been trying to find a way to release my powers and has been searching for my lineage, but so far, he’s come up short.”

“And why do you think I can help you?” he asks, head tilted to the side.

“While I was in Nahla, someone mentioned your name. They said you could help, but that you are a traveler and there was no way of really knowing how to find you.” I can see he is still not buying anything I’m saying or he’s getting bored. “A friend took me to the gardens at Central Court, and while we were visiting the burial site of the Empress, something happened to me.”

His eyes, which were previously on his mug, suddenly move to me with curiosity.

“I was compelled to touch the statue of the Empress and her child. And when I did, I was instantly transported to a magical realm somewhere in space. That’s where I met her, the Empress.”

Acacius’ brows lower and knit together. “How did she look?”

“She’s the most beautiful woman I have ever seen and reminded me of an angel,” I say, and he nods with a sad smile

on his face. “She explained she had enchanted the statue so that when the time was right, I would come to her.”

Acacius is silent, and his expression has changed. His eyes, now fastened on me, are wide and his posture has gone stiff. Even his mouth is slightly ajar, and his complexion has paled. He places the cup on the table next to him and stands, walking toward me.

When he reaches me, he takes a knee and reaches for my hand, his eyes brimming with tears. “You’re her,” he breathes. “The child.”

“You know who I am?” I ask, tears filling my own eyes.

Acacius shakes his head and, in a blink, I watch him slip on a mask to hide his emotions. But whatever I said has affected him. I can see it in his trembling hands and hear it in his voice. I even saw affection in his eyes.

“What did the Empress say to you?” he asks, his eyes wide.

“She told me I wasn’t her daughter, but that she sent her daughter’s spirit to be with me while I was on Earth. She was going to tell me who I was, but before she could, I was pulled away from her.”

“She didn’t tell you?” The skin around his eyes crumples.

“No,” I sigh. “She didn’t. Who am I, Acacius?” I ask, setting the mug on the chair arm, grabbing hold of both of his large, warm hands. “Can you release my powers?”

He closes his eyes. “I cannot,” he says with so much sadness it breaks my heart. “No one can release your powers.”

“Why?” I beg him to tell me.

He shakes his head. “The Empress herself cast the spell and there is no one in Celestria strong enough to break it.”

“How did you know the Empress?”

“She was my friend,” he whispers.

“And how do you know about me?”

He shuts his eyes, his chest heavily rising and falling. “I was with her the day before she was murdered. I saw you cradled in her arms.”

“Who am I? Why would she bind my powers and send me to Earth?”

Acacius places a calloused hand on my cheek. “I’m sorry, child. I wish I could ease your suffering, but I cannot. I don’t truly understand how you came to her, but I know if you’ve already seen the Empress, it won’t be long before you find out.”

“Can’t you tell me anything that makes sense? Help me understand,” I beg.

“I can assure you,” he says, “that your powers will be released, but the only one who knows how it can be done is the Empress. She cast the spell and set the trigger that will break the bind.” His lips are turned downward. “If I knew what the trigger was, I would tell you.” He sighs. “I can only imagine what it must feel like to be a Celestrian without access to power.”

Another dead end. I hate that every road I’ve taken in search of the truth keeps leading me to another impasse.

I break down sobbing, and Acacius awkwardly pulls me toward him, gently patting my back.

“There, there,” he says. “In time, everything will be made clear.”

I sit up, eyes narrowing, tears blurring my vision. “Everyone keeps telling me to wait patiently. Meanwhile, there are people who want to hurt me, one being a psycho Avkan King who thinks I belong to him.”

“Avkan King?”

I nod, wiping my tears. “I was captured during a mission to save the rulers of Celestria. The King was furious because I killed a lot of his men, so he tied me down, shot me up with drugs, and tried to erase my memory.”

His eyes go wide. “How did you escape?”

“I didn’t escape,” I say. “I was rescued.”

There is a knock on the door and both our heads snap toward it.

“Elara!” Talon calls. “Elara are you alright?”

I wipe my eyes. “Yes, I’m fine,” I call back. “Give me a few more minutes. I’ll be right out.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine!”

“Okay. Call me if you need me!”

“I will!”

“Who else wants to hurt you?” Acacius asks.

“Just some jealous women. I was drugged and set up to be raped by one of them, and the other wants me to disappear.”

There is genuine concern in his crinkled brow and dark eyes. “I cannot unlock your powers, but I can give you something to help.” He takes my arm and turns it, so my palm is facing up. “This will hurt a bit, but the outcome will give you added protection. Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” Naida gave us his name because she trusted him.

Acacius closes his eyes and shadows unfurl from his being. Power buzzes through the entire room, making my ears ring. Then, I watch as the shadows start to bury under my skin. My eyes slam shut, and teeth grit together. I hold in a scream that wants to burst free, knowing Talon will rush in if he thinks I’m in danger.

It feels like a thousand hot needles are piercing my skin and flaying it open.

The agonizing pain continues, but I keep choking my screams down.

“Almost done,” Acacius whispers.

My teeth are clenched so tight I think they will break, but I want to see what’s happening. Opening my eyes, I witness

Acacius's shadows entering the skin on my forearm, moving in and out, leaving a mark. It's a tattoo. A shadow tattoo.

Sweat drips down my brow and right before I feel like I can't take it anymore, it stops. The shadows recede and Acacius holds my arm steady, studying the new tattoo they made.

"That's a dragon," I say, leaning forward to get a better look.

"It is, and because it's my familiar, I can wield its protection."

I gape at him, running his words through my mind. "Wait. Wait. Wait. Did you say you have a *dragon* as a familiar?"

He nods, like it's nothing, but my brain is about to explode.

"There are dragons here?" I say, breathlessly.

"Not here," he says. "They live on the Isle of Beasts."

*What?!*

"You mean to tell me that there are real, living dragons that live in Celestria?"

His eyes crinkle with a smile. "Yes. They are real, amongst other beasts that dwell on the island. Creatures that are bred and belong to the royals of Celestria."

I blow out a laugh. "Like, what kinds of other creatures?"

His eyes narrow. "The island is also home to the creatures for each kingdom: phoenixes, winged lions, leviathans, and the pegasus.

It clicks. Five kingdoms. Five Beasts.

I gasp. "I saw five statues when I first arrived, outside of the assessment center that represented the five kingdoms. Those creatures are real?" I ask, one more time, because I have to make sure I'm hearing it right.

Acacius laughs. "They are all real."

Does that mean Kage also has a freaking dragon?

Wait. "You said the creatures belong to the royals of Celestria."



“I did.”

“Then how do you have one?”

He smiles. “The beasts haven’t been called for centuries. They once existed within the kingdoms, however...”

“They started eating people?”

He laughs. “Yes. Because only those of royal blood can control them. But those who were corrupt slaughtered many innocents. The kingdoms came together and created an island to house their creatures. It’s almost as if they don’t exist because they are bound to the island.”

I glance down at the tattoo. “So, what will this do?” I ask, running my finger over the tattoo.

“When in danger, the tattoo will come to life, shielding you from harm. It will give you enough time to flee.”

“How many times can I use this?”

He shrugs. “I honestly don’t know. This is the first time I’ve ever cast this spell.”

“So, you don’t know if it will work?”

“It’ll work,” he assures me. “It is an ancient spell I learned from an elder who no longer lives in the kingdoms but on a small, remote island off Asteri. I don’t even think the current rulers know about this practice because using their beasts to channel power has become a dead art.”

Another bang on the door. “Elara! Are you still in there?”

“Yes,” I holler back. “I’m coming.”

Acacius helps me to my feet and walks me to the door. He leans forward and wraps me in his arms. “I’m glad to have met you, Elara. I hope you find the answers you are looking for soon.”

“Thank you,” I say. “I hope we meet again.”

“I think our paths will cross in the future,” he says, then opens the door.

All three guards are standing there like they're about to bust the door down. When they see me, they all exhale.

"Gods, what took you so long?" Talon huffs.

"We were talking about my past and it seems I am still a mystery," I say, shrugging.

"That's what makes you interesting, Princess," Talon says, offering me his hand.

"Princess?" Acacius' brow rises.

"It's her nickname," Talon answers.

"It's befitting." Acacius dips his head to me. "It's been a pleasure to meet you."

"And you," I say, then shake my covered forearm. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Be safe. I am sure we will see each other soon."

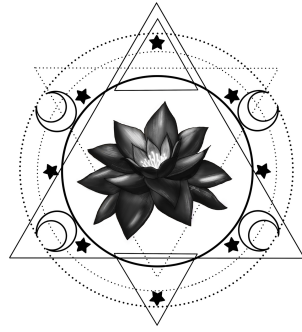
"I will, and I hope so," I say, trusting Acacius that we will meet again.

The guards decide to jump me back to the training center, wanting to work out the stress I put them through. For the next few hours, I sit and watch them pummel each other on the mats, rubbing the tattoo on my arm, wondering when the hell I'll get some solid answers. I thought meeting Acacius would change everything, but I was wrong. It only gave me more unanswered questions.

I wish I could run to the palace and tell Kage. He's the one I want to share all of this with. I want to ask him about Acacius, who skillfully deflected my question about how he owns a dragon. He has to be royalty, but how? Kage didn't seem to know who he was when Naida told us about him. Ugh. I need to shut my brain off and get some sleep.

But ho—ly shit... An Isle of Beasts?

*That* is something I need to see with my own eyes.



# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

## ELARA

I'm rudely awakened by Talon's snoring. He sounds like a freaking bulldog in heat. Gods. I have to talk to Rem. I need my privacy and quiet space back. Even though my bedroom door is closed, the dude is rattling the shingles.

I wish I could open a portal and roll Talon into it. Griff and Brax were here all night and left just a few hours ago, and while I truly appreciate them for wanting to protect me... there is a line. I'm tired and grouchy, and Rem will be sure to hear all about it when he gets here in a few hours.

Now that I'm awake, my mind is spinning, thinking about the Winter Ball at the palace. Knowing I'll probably run into Kage sometime during the night has those butterflies slam dancing in my stomach.

I'm curious to see what Maeve will bring me to wear or how she'll fix my hair. I have no doubt it will be spectacular. She does have the best taste and always dresses impeccably. I'm too exhausted to get out of bed, but my mind is wired. I roll over and spot a vial on my dresser. It's the left-over painkiller from the healer. That stuff knocks me on my ass, but I sleep like a baby.

Reaching over, I grab the vial with a wide smile on my face, pop the top, and throw it down my throat. Maybe I can get a

few, good hours of sleep in before the sun rises.



“Elara!”

I’m dreaming I’m on a ship that is rocking back and forth and it’s making me nauseous.

“Elara, wake up!”

I groan and squint my eyes open, trying to figure out what is going on and realize Talon is gently shoving my shoulder, trying to wake me.

Swatting his hands away, I growl. “What do you want?”

“It’s noon. We have to train.”

I slowly blink my eyes open and see sunlight streaming in from my window. Talon is shirtless, his six-pack hovering next to my face.

I throw an arm over my eyes. “Go ahead. I’ll be out in thirty.”

“I can’t leave you.”

My eyes pop open, dry as hell. “Do you really think someone is going to walk through Terr’s training center, filled with guards, and find my room out of the dozens here, and kidnap me?”

He shrugs. “Anything is possible.”

I growl in response. “I promise, I’ll get into the shower and meet you there afterwards.”

“Shower?” he pipes.

“Go!” I say, pointing to the exit.

“I will let the others know our Princess is not a morning person.” He quickly ducks out of my room. “The door is locked!” he shouts. “And there is coffee and a pastry here from the Captain.” I hear a snap and it’s quiet. He’s gone.

Sitting up, my head is a little heavy. Those painkillers pack a wicked punch, and I don’t even remember closing my eyes. At least I slept half the day away, which erased half of my anxiety

about tonight. Now, I just have to make it through the next few hours.



I felt sluggish during training but made it through and survived. Now, with only three hours remaining before the ball, I'm feeling restless.

After showering, I sit on my couch and gaze at the intricately-detailed dragon tattoo, gently tracing my finger along its outline. The dragon appears to be soaring through the night sky with a moon and stars in the background. It looks fierce, with large horns on its head, sharp teeth, and a long, powerful tail. The claws and talons on the tips of its wings are incredibly sharp, making it even more intimidating.

I wonder how it activates.

I try flinging my arm out like Spiderman. And nothing happens. I press it with a finger on its snout, wings, belly... still nothing. What kind of power does this tattoo have? Acacius said that if I was in danger, the tattoo would come to life and shield me from harm. Maybe fear is the activator.

Placing my hand over the tattoo, I feel a slight vibration, so I press my palm flat against it. Power. I feel it tingling through my palm and up my arm. Closing my eyes, I relish the sensation, envisioning Acacius' powerful dragon soaring through the sky and hearing its roar. Gods, to witness one in person... I'm still reeling that they exist. But most fairytales and mythical things I've only read about on Earth are real here in Celestria.

There is so much I still need to learn about this place.

"Knock-knock!" A cheery voice calls from outside my door.

I hop off the couch and jog to the door, yanking it open. Maeve sees me and throws her arms out and comes in for a hug. "How is my sis doing?" she asks.

"I will be better once you get your cute ass in here," I say. "Where's all your stuff?"

She twists her head and calls, "Rem! Where are you?"

A few seconds later, he rounds the corner with an oversized bag slung over one shoulder, dresses draped over the other, and two more satchels, one in each hand.

I grin at him, and he shakes his head. “Where do you want these?”

“Just set them on the couch, favorite cousin,” she says sweetly.

Rem does as she says and heads back over to us. “How are you doing, Spitfire?”

“As good as the circumstances allow me to be,” I reply.

“Good. I guess I’ll leave you two to do whatever it is you need to do. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“Thanks, Rem.”

“No problem, Spitfire.”

Maeve leans over to me with a hand cupped to the side of her mouth and whispers, “Friend-with-benefits.” I laugh and Rem immediately leaves.

“Alright, this feels like *déjà vu*,” Maeve says, laying out the dresses. They all look gorgeous, but the one that catches my eye is a white, floor-length gown that is see-through. Except, it’s not really. The entire top part of the dress, down to the thighs, is a delicate nude material. Small shoulder straps are attached to gathered material that comes down to a low V in the front, and it cinches at the waist. The back is open, and from the waist down, the dress flows with a soft, tulle-like material. It’s stunning, with tiny, glittery gems shaped like crescent moons and stars sewn into the top and halfway down the bottom that shimmer.

“I knew you’d pick this one!” Maeve squeals. “I just picked it up.”

“You didn’t want to wear it?”

“No,” she says with a sly grin. “I like to make a bold statement.”

She plucks a sexy, red gown out of the pile.

“Nice,” I say.

After a few hours of primping, Maeve puts a few finishing touches on my eyelids and gloss on my lips, making them shimmer.

“Another masterpiece,” she says dramatically. She gazes at me longingly in the mirror, batting her long eyelashes. “You look like a goddess.”

I smile at myself in the mirror, inspecting her handiwork. She truly outdid herself this time. The makeup is flawless, making me almost appear ethereal, and she left my long hair down, curling the bottom half.

“And so do you,” I say, standing and grabbing hold of her hand, then twisting her around. She’s wearing a blood-red, fitted gown that hugs her every curve. Her makeup is sultrier, with dark red lips and tall, black heels. “You’re bold and bewitching, sister,” I say, winking at her.

“We will be the goddesses of the ball,” she says, packing up her things. I help, knowing Rem will be here any minute to collect us. The butterflies in my stomach have awakened and are racing in full gear. Because after three days, I will finally see my Dark Prince. Just thinking about him makes my heart race and breath quicken.

“Did you invite anyone to the ball?” I ask her, heading into my room. I open my dresser drawer, slide the bracelet Naida gave me onto my wrist, and tuck Kage’s bone marker into my bra, next to my chest.

Knowing a part of him is with me allows me to breathe a little better.

“I did,” she says, with a broad smile.

“Who?”

“You’ll see,” she winks.

Three quick raps at the door and we know it’s Rem. “Come in!” we both shout.

But Rem doesn’t enter. Talon does, dressed in a black tuxedo, looking rather dashing. “Talon, what are you doing



here?" I ask, wondering if Rem couldn't come.

"You look gorgeous, Princess. But I'm here for Maeve."

I turn to Maeve, who smiles and gives me a quick nod. A smile grows on my face that makes my cheeks hurt. "Are you two an item now?"

"No," Maeve says, walking over to him and sliding her arm in his. "But he looks good on my arm, doesn't he?"

"Too good for words," I say, grinning at Talon. "Why aren't you in your uniform?"

"I'm off duty tonight," he winks.

"Where's Rem?" I ask.

"He said he'll be right over. I think he—" Talon points to the door.

"I'm here," Rem says, stepping in and looking incredibly handsome in his black Terr uniform. But this uniform differs from his usual one. It's more formal.

As soon as his eyes hit me, he pauses and shakes his head.

"She's too beautiful for words, isn't she, cousin?" Maeve teases.

Rem doesn't take his eyes off me. "She truly is," he breathes.

Attached to his lapel is a corsage with white flowers that look like baby's breath but aren't, along with small red flowers, red berries, and green leaves. It looks very festive.

When he reaches me, he takes the back of my hand and presses it to his warm lips. "You are radiant," he says, then slips a matching corsage onto my left wrist.

I hold it up in front of me as Maeve giggles. "Does this mean—"

"Yes, it means you are taken for the night," Rem says with a sly grin. "We don't want anyone else making a move on you tonight."

I nod, knowing that this is necessary, especially if we are going to be in the same room as Vera.

*“Does he know?”* I ask.

*“He does, and tonight we have a big role to play. We have to pretend we are in love.”*

*“Why? What happened?”*

*“Vera. She’s threatened him and claims she will find out the truth, that there is something going on between the two of you.”*

I close my eyes and exhale. Kage’s reputation and throne are on the line, and I won’t let either be taken from him. If it takes playing a part, then I’ll do it.

*“I can do that to keep him safe.”*

Remington smiles. *“I told him you would. Let’s just hope he is just as good at playing his part.”*

Maeve clears her throat. “Not fair if we can’t hear your conversation,” she grumbles.

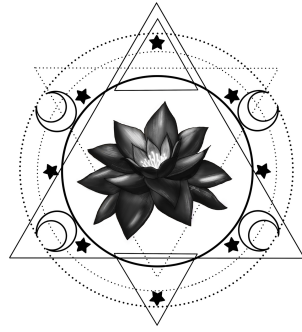
I turn to her and smile, noticing she also has a corsage made of red and black flowers and green foliage. She raises her wrist and twists it. “Look at us, we haven’t even made it to the ball, and we’ve already been snatched up,”

“We’re lucky girls,” I reply.

Rem grabs my hand and gives me a dashing smile. “Ready, Spitfire?”

I thread my fingers through his, thankful he’ll be next to me all night, helping me get through, what I have a feeling will be, an ordeal. But I know he wants this night to be flawless, just as much as I do. He’s the Prince of Terr’s personal guard and best friend.

Maeve moves over and links her arm in mine, connecting all four of us. Then Talon opens a portal, and we all jump to the Ebony Palace together.



# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

## KAGE

I'm dressed in a tailored black suit trimmed with gold, specially made for this occasion. My jacket is long with a stand-up collar. On top of that, I have to wear my crown. It all feels like a very uncomfortable costume.

I haven't seen Vera in a few days, and it's been a welcome relief. I know she'll eventually come. She thrives on events like this—balls and parties she believes will showcase her royalty. She loves it when she's the center of attention.

Pacing my bedchamber, I'm feeling anxious to see *her*. My universe. My Min Vesmír. Since I left her, there has been a gaping hole in my chest that I cannot fill, no matter how hard I try. I haven't even been able to think straight or sleep well.

Rem will ensure her safety tonight, and he's strategically placed Talon with his cousin for added protection. Will I be able to hide my emotions when I see her? I honestly don't know, but I can't wait, even if it's just a glimpse, to know and see for myself that she is doing well.

I hear the clip-clopping of heels echoing down the hall, and it turns my stomach. With my back to the door, I close my eyes and take a deep breath before slowly blowing it out, preparing myself for the role I must play. Rem is adamant about me not screwing this up, so to protect Elara, I'll play

that part. No matter how much it fucking sucks, because I know Vera and her eyes will be watching.

“I’m here,” she says by way of greeting, entering my bedchamber like she owns it. I turn to see her dressed in sparkling gold from head-to-toe. She’s standing in the middle of my room, posing with a hand on her hip, like I’m supposed to gawk and say all the nice, fluffy things she wants to hear.

I give her a half smile and say, “You look nice.”

“Nice? That’s it?” she says, pouting her bottom lip out.

I don’t know how the hell she can threaten me one second, and act like nothing happened the next. She’s fucking crazy.

“What am I supposed to say? You threatened me the other day, and I can’t just forget about it.”

“Well, you should,” she says. “I have, and I don’t want your attitude to ruin this ball. People need to see that we are happily engaged.”

I laugh. I won’t roll over and let her call the shots. That’s bullshit.

“You’ve known from the start that this is only an agreement, not a loving engagement.”

She walks over and stands directly in front of me, and it takes everything in me to not step back. “I’ve wanted you from the very beginning, but you’ve always been guarded. You’ve never opened your heart to me or have even given me a chance to love you.”

I give her an expressionless look. “Tonight, I’ll play the Prince and you’ll play the Princess. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“You’re infuriating, Kage Dargan. You have a hole for a heart! Except when it comes to her.”

“Who?”

“You know who!”

“Your jealousy is making you very unattractive right now.” I say. Her eyes go wide, and lips tighten.

“The girl is with Rem, my best friend, and what you’re suggesting would pit us against each other, and our bond is as strong as ever.”

She sneers. “I wouldn’t doubt you’re both sharing her.”

Shadows pour from my body and my eyes go black. “Never threaten my loyalty or speak of things you know nothing about,” I growl.

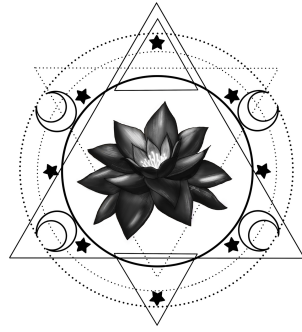
Fear swirls in Vera’s eyes as she steps back. “Get yourself together,” she hisses. “I’ll meet you at the ball.” She turns and walks out.

I take off my crown and throw it on the bed, then rake my fingers through my hair. I can’t be around her. She triggers me and brings out my dark side.

How the hell am I going to survive tonight? To pretend like Vera, my fiancé, isn’t the bane of my existence?

For Elara.

I’ll only do it for her.



# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

## ELARA

As soon as we enter the Ebony Palace, warmth surrounds us along with the scents of warm spices and pine. My eyes widen, sweeping all around us, soaking it all in. The palace is decorated from ceiling-to-floor and it's the most beautiful sight I have ever witnessed. The lights are low, showcasing the thousands of glittering lights, decorated pine trees, and lots and lots of shimmering decorations. This place is magical. An enchanted wonderland that my eyes can't seem to get enough of.

“What do you think?” Rem whispers into my ear.

“There are no words. I've never seen anything more grand.” I'm in awe, mesmerized by the sights around me. “They do this every year?”

“They do. It's the palace's most extravagant event.”

“It's incredible.”

“Wait till you see the ballroom,” he says, and my eyes pop even wider.

Talon and Maeve are walking just ahead of us, laughing and talking. They are beautiful together. In the air, soft music wafts, adding to the experience, and I tighten my grip on



Rem's hand as we reach a set of large doors that I assume is the entrance to the ballroom.

There is a line of people in front of us, dressed in their finest.

"Why is there a line?" I ask.

"Before we enter, we first greet the King and Prince of Terr," he says, giving me an, *are you ready?* Look.

I nod, but my heart is now jackhammering inside my chest, and my breath is coming too fast.

"Just breathe, Spitfire. I'm right here and won't let go," he says, reassuring me.

*"Will Vera be there?"* I ask inside his head.

*"I'm almost certain she will be. And she'll be watching you and how you interact with him. Be short and civil. Remembering this is just to get through tonight."*

"Short and civil. I can do that," I say, blowing out a heavy breath.

Rem chuckles. *"Relax, Spitfire. The greeting will be over quickly. You don't even have to touch him, just bow."*

I start a mantra—Don't touch him. Just bow. Don't touch him. Just bow.

*"Do I have to make eye contact?"*

*"Just watch what everyone ahead of you does and copy them."*

I nod, knowing I'm hyping myself up for something that will be over in seconds. The line slowly moves, and then I watch Talon and Maeve enter the doors. Rem places his hand on the small of my back and guides me behind them.

"I'll be right behind you," he whispers, and I'm glad but still so freaking nervous.

"Your Highness," Talon says, placing a fist to his chest and bowing to the King, who is first in line.

Then he moves and suddenly, the air grows heavy, almost too heavy. That unmistakable hum in the air surrounds me, making me dizzy, and I don't know if I can do this.

I feel an ache in my head, one I've not felt before. It feels like there is something in it that shouldn't be. I close my eyes and envision that diamond wall and slam it tightly around my thoughts. I don't want anyone poking around in my mind, especially one of Vera's spies, and have them knowing what my thoughts are.

"Elara?" The King says, snapping me from the fog that has clouded my mind.

He extends his hand to me, so I take it and curtsy. "Your Highness," I say with a smile. "It's good to see you're well and back in Terr."

"I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you and your bravery," he says, his eyes filled with warmth and gratitude. "I've had nightmares about that day, wondering how you were faring. I'm relieved to see that you are also well," he pats my hand, "And I must say... you are absolutely dazzling, my dear."

*No.* I shake my head as my face burns with heat because everyone standing around us is now staring. At us. At *me*.

I'm so close to Kage. I can feel his presence wrapping around me, trying to get my attention. He's standing right next to his father, but I can't look at him. I know my mask will crack if I do.

"Thank you," I say to the King, bowing my head. "Again, it was my duty and my pleasure."

"Spoken like a genuine hero," the King murmurs.

"My King," Rem says behind me, placing a fist over his chest and bowing. His other hand finds the small of my back and pushes me forward.

*Don't touch him. Just bow.*

My heart is pounding. I feel his presence, his intoxicating scent filling my nose.

*Don't touch him. Just bow.*

I'm standing in front of him, but don't look at his face. I keep my eyes forward on his chest, noticing that the black and gold attire he is wearing is truly befitting of his royal stature.

My mind suddenly goes blank for a split second, and I offer my hand to him. *Stupid girl.*

But it's too late to take it back because Kage grasps it.

"Elara," the King says, pulling my attention back to him while my hand is still in Kage's, the flow of energy building between us.

"Come to the palace at noon tomorrow and have tea with me," the King says with a warm smile. "Rem can bring you. I want to hear what happened after we left Avka."

I smile and dip my head. "I will. Thank you."

I'm still in front of Kage, my hand in his.

*Don't look at him. Just bow.*

I keep my head and eyes down and curtsy. "Your Highness," I say.

I can feel his eyes burning a hole straight through me. I want to look. The gods know I want to, but I can't. Even if he tried to make contact in my mind, he couldn't, because my solid, diamond wall is up and in place.

There is too much emotion swirling around us, coursing through our connected hands. The air is heavy, and it's getting awfully hot.

Rem's hand suddenly slides around my waist and gently guides me forward, allowing our hands to drop, breaking the connection, and...

Now I'm standing in front of Vera, who looks absolutely gorgeous like Midas has touched her and turned her to gold. She's decked out, from her golden crown and hair, to her jewelry, gown, and heels.

I quickly glance up at her, but her eyes and expression tell me she wants to shove those pretty red nails into my chest and yank out my heart.

I lower my eyes and curtsey. “Princess,” I say, but she says nothing in return.

A hand suddenly jets out and grabs my wrist, tugging me down the line.

“Come on, sister,” Maeve says, folding her arm in mine and quickly leading me away where I can finally breathe freely.

“Talon, lead us to the drinks!” she says, making me laugh.

“That was pretty intense, huh,” Maeve finally says, fanning herself. “Vera looked like she wanted to eat you alive. I could feel the fires of jealousy raging off her.” She turns to me with a wicked gleam in her eye. “You look way more regal than that cold brick of fool’s gold.”

I shush her. “You’re biased because you are the artist who created my regal look.”

“Truth,” she says with a wink, then pulls me closer. “But you should have seen her face when the King was giving you attention,” she cackles. “I don’t think she’s ever been invited to tea with him.”

My eyes widen, but not only because of what she said. I’ve finally noticed the inside of the ballroom. It’s enormous, and every inch is decorated in light blue sparkling lights, up-lights, down-lights, candles, wintry backdrops, and more pine and spruce trees that have been brought in and decorated. The crystal chandelier looks like a huge snowflake and reflects the blue light to make it appear like it’s snowing, while the ground is covered in a thin white mist that curls at our feet.

All the tables are spread out around the outside of a large, onyx dance floor that looks like the night sky, with glittering stars dusted over the top of it. Rem was right. This place is a dream. A living fairytale.

“Where’s Rem?” I ask, trying to change the subject. She twists her head back. “Heading this way.”

When Rem reaches us, he grabs hold of my hand and leans in. “You did good, Spitfire.”

“Did I?” I whisper. “I couldn’t look him in the eye, Rem.”

“I know. But it’s over.” He stops and turns me to face him. “There’s something I forgot to tell you.”

Oh, no. “What?”

“Because I’m his personal guard, we will be sharing a table with him and the other royals coming for dinner.”

“Rem,” I groan, shaking my head.

“I know. I’m so sorry. But I talked to the planner, and they added two more spaces near us for Talon and Maeve.”

“That’s good,” I sigh. Having them near us will help.

“After we eat, I’ll take you out to the dance floor. I’ll try to keep you occupied for the rest of the night.”

“You dance?” I ask with a raised brow.

“I was raised in the palace. Of course, I dance.”

“I’m giving you fair warning,” I tease. “I’m not that great a dancer.”

“Well, I’m a great leader,” he says, nudging me gently in my side with his elbow. “So, you won’t have to worry.”

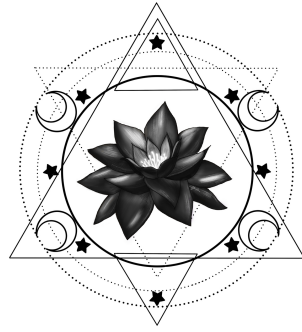
My chest aches thinking that less than a week ago, Kage and I were dancing in Nahla at their Yule Festival. It sucks how much I miss him, and yet he’s here, standing in the same room.

Maeve returns with two drinks in her hands and offers me the Black Lotus. I love this drink for two reasons. Because it tastes great, and because it was the magical flower that saved Kage’s life. Meanwhile, she has Celestrian wine, sparkling in a festive gradient from red to green.

“Thank you,” I say, taking it and downing it in one gulp.

Rem takes the glass from my hand. “Go easy, Spitfire. There’s a long night ahead of us.”

“Which is exactly why I’ll need more.”



# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

## KAGE

I could feel her before I saw her. Her power within my veins was stirring, as if it knew she was near.

Seeing her was like being in the presence of a goddess. Even my father noticed, saying she was dazzling. And she was. She is the most beautiful creature I have ever laid eyes on. A shining star in a vast sea of darkness.

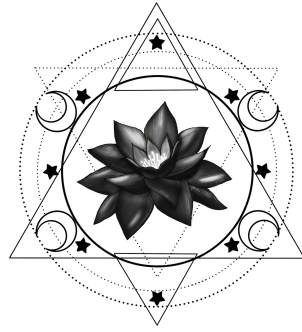
I knew she was trying to play the part of not showing any interest in me, but I could tell she felt otherwise. I wanted to reach out and pull her into my arms as soon as she stepped in front of me. She avoided eye contact, and I could feel her anxiety pulse between us. I know this because my own feelings mirrored hers.

I tried to speak to her in her mind, but hers was locked up tight, and rightfully so. I was proud she knew to protect her thoughts, especially in a place like this, where anyone from Terr could invade them.

After Maeve took Elara away, Vera stormed off. It was obvious she was pissed, but I really don't know why. It could be a number of things like my father not only complimented Elara, but also invited her to lunch. That Elara and I were holding hands for a period longer than she liked, or that Elara outshined her in every way and remained humble about it.

I know Vera is up to something. I just hope Elara stays safe.





# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

## ELARA

There is a table at one end of the ballroom that is elevated, and the only way to get there is to climb a dozen black stairs that have white mist cascading down them like a waterfall. All I can think is that someone is going to break their neck going up or down tonight.

The table is set against a celestial backdrop, featuring a night sky adorned with sparkling stars and galaxies, with two majestic moons suspended in the air, illuminating the royal table.

At the base of the stairs, I spot a group of princes who were present at Central Court the day Kage vetted me for the mission. And among them is Archer, Vera's brother.

Maeve returned to the drink table, where she and Talon are hanging out. A flash of gold moves toward Archer, catching my attention and causing me to grab Rem's hand and pull him to the opposite side of the room. There, I find a small, curved bridge over a river of mist that is enveloped by trees.

I plod up the bridge, still holding Rem's hand, and stop when we reach the middle. "What's wrong?" Rem asks.

"I'm avoiding Vera," I say.

He gives me a pointed stare. “You can’t avoid her all night. If you keep running away, she will think you’re afraid of her.”

“I have no power, Rem. She can throw air that slices through tables and desks. You know what that would do to my flesh?”

Chuckling, he taps my nose. “Every Terr guard is present tonight, and they all have powers. You don’t have to worry. They have already been warned to watch and protect you.”

Rem glances around the ballroom, his finger pointing at each guard he sees. As he does, each one of them waves like they are and have been watching out for me.

“They won’t let anything happen to you.”

I let out a deep sigh, feeling a little embarrassed that I ran. I never run, but I’m a little lightheaded after that one drink. I’ll have to slow down so I’m not inebriated.

Lights slowly illuminate a corner of the ballroom where there are at least a dozen musicians. When they start to play, emotions bubble up inside me. The music is magical, flowing through the room and straight through my chest, warming my insides and making me feel happy.

There are harps, violins, flutes, stringed instruments, and others I have never seen. They, combined with the ambiance of the ballroom, make this event even more enchanting.

A prince walks by and stops at the bottom of the bridge. He’s the one with brown hair and green eyes, which I believe means he’s from the Kingdom of Doone—the manipulators of earth.

“Captain, you lucky dog,” he says loudly. “You locked down the celebrity of Terr?”

“Hey, Sebastian,” Rem says, failing to use his title, which means they must be close.

His emerald eyes fix on mine. “Do you know you’re the talk of Celestria, Elara? The most coveted female within the kingdoms?”

He remembers my name. Oh, lucky me. Now I have a beacon aimed at me. Why don't they just put a huge red dot on my forehead? Or chest?

I glance over to Rem, who shrugs. "Every ruler of Celestria was there, in Avka, the day you saved them. You are their savior."

I let out a groan.

"You didn't hear this from me," Sebastian says, leaning in, but he still has to yell above the music. "But the other day, all the royals had a meeting, and within the discussion, your name came up. The King of Terr was quick to remind them all that their *hero* came from his kingdom."

Rem smiles as if he's proud.

"Don't forget to kiss the girl, Captain," Sebastian says, pointing above us. We both glance upward to see a bunch of mistletoe hanging down from a branch.

"Wait," I exhale. "Celestria does the kiss under the mistletoe tradition?"

"Where do you think Earth got it from?" Rem grins. "Most of their traditions come from us. Their fairytales are our truth."

Sebastian, who is obviously intoxicated, starts to chant, "Kiss the girl. Kiss the girl." Others around him begin to crowd below the bridge, joining in his chant.

*Good gods.*

I spot Kage heading toward the tables, but he stops and turns toward the unruly crowd.

Wanting to get the crowd to shut up, I pull Rem's face to mine and give him a quick peck on the lips.

Sebastian makes a face. "You call that a kiss? Come on now!" he whines. "Captain, I know you can do better than that."

I look out into the ballroom, and everyone seems to be looking our way, including Vera. But it's Kage's tall, dark figure that stands out, and it's making me want to run away.

“We have to make them believe it,” Rem whispers.

“Is Zarah here?” Gods, that’s all I need is to be tag-teamed.

“No. Her family travels south, to a private island for the winter.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

“Captain, there is nothing to discuss. Just fucking kiss her already!” Sebastian hollers.

*Play the role. Make Vera believe.*

“You good?” he whispers, and I nod, my stomach twisting in knots.

Rem leans in and I close my eyes as one of his hands reaches up to cup my face. Then, his warm lips press against mine. His kiss is slow and achingly tender, his mouth moving against mine, but his tongue only slides over my lips. He tastes like winter green.

When he pulls away, I’m a little lightheaded, and Sebastian and the others seem to approve. They clap and cheer, then quickly disperse.

Grabbing Rem’s hand, I tug him off the bridge, looking above us to make sure there is no more gods-damned mistletoe hanging anywhere nearby.

“Hey,” he says, stopping and pulling me around to face him.

I realize he just kissed me, and I stormed away.

“I’m sorry,” I say, swiping my thumb across his bottom lip, which has some gloss on it. “I didn’t mean to kiss and run.”

“You don’t have to be sorry.”

“Yes, I do,” I breathe, placing my hand in the middle of his chest, knowing Vera is probably watching. “You are an incredible man, Rem, and any woman would be lucky to have you. I just want you to know that since I’ve come here, you’ve become one of my best friends. I haven’t had any friends before, so I might be bad at my role, but I appreciate you keeping me safe and bringing me coffee and pastries and

medicine. I would be lost without you, and I am glad that you're here with me."

Rem gives me one of his dashing, dimpled grins. "You didn't need to give a speech, Spitfire," he says, placing his hand over mine. "But it was cool. You already know how I feel about you, and I appreciate that you still choose to be my friend."

"Do you think a hug would be appropriate right now?" I ask.

Rem pulls me in his arms and presses me against his muscular chest. I breathe in his scent of citrus, leather, and spice, and it's comforting, just like he is.

"You ready for the dreaded dinner table?" He whispers.

"As long as you're dreading it with me."

We're both laughing when we break away. He grabs my hand, and we make our way toward the imposing, dark and misty stairway to hell.

"You're going to have to hold on to me," I tell Rem. "I can't see the steps and am afraid I'll fall."

Glancing up, I see Maeve waving and I wonder how she made it up there after having at least two glasses of Celestrian wine.

If she made it, I can.

As we take the first step, Rem slides his arm around my waist and presses me against his side. We make the climb, slow and steady, and when we reach the top, I turn and give him a high five.

I can feel Kage's stare. I know he's already seated, but so is Vera, so I have to keep my eyes averted, even though they desperately want to slide toward him.

Sebastian comes up behind us and grabs my wrist. "Elara, save me a dance tonight," he says, his breath smelling of alcohol. "Maybe we can take a stroll over the bridge afterward," he says, wiggling his brows.

“Get the fuck out of here, Sebastian,” Rem growls, pulling me away.

“Elara, remember me?” The blond-haired, blue-eyed Prince calls from down the table, raising a hand.

“Prince Archer,” I say, bowing my head, knowing he is Vera’s brother.

“She’s not only kick-ass, she’s bright,” he says, elbowing the red-haired, amber-eyed Prince sitting next to him. They laugh, but I keep moving, wanting to get to my seat and sit down.

I follow Rem, eyes down, as he heads further down the table. This must be the side where the princes and princesses are sitting.

He finally stops and pulls out a chair, so I smile and thank him before sitting down. Maeve is sitting directly across from me. Next to her is Talon and next to him is...

My breath halts as I sense him. The air stills, tension coiling between us, when I finally meet those intense, obsidian eyes rimmed in gold. *My gods*. He looks like heaven wrapped in sin.

His eyes are pinned on me, drinking me in as if he were dying of thirst.

I blink and catch a glimpse of Vera next to him before I pull my eyes away. The way she looks at me makes my skin crawl.

“Want something to drink?” Rem asks.

I want to say Celestrian wine to numb myself, but that would make me vulnerable. I can’t be dull when danger is lurking nearby.

“Water, please, with lemon,” I answer.

Rem raises his hand, and a server moves toward us. As he gets closer, I recognize him. He’s the same server from the Evergreen, except he isn’t wearing his piercings.

I wave and smile at him, and he waves back.

“How are you?” he asks, leaning over to me.

“I’m good. How are you?”

“I’m serving at the palace, so I’m doing great!”

“I’m happy for you,” I say.

He pulls out a pad and pen. “What can I get you?”

Rem gives him our order and Maeve raises her hand from across the table.

“I’d like a Celestrian wine,” she says, and he nods. I hear her gasp and watch her finger point across the table. “You’re the guy Elara saved the other day at the restaurant,” she announces too loudly.

I turn to her and shake my head. “Maeve, no,” I scold.

“Wait,” Talon interjects. “Elara saved him? I want to hear about this.”

“It’s really nothing,” I say under my breath.

The waiter turns to Talon and smiles. “No, she was incredible. She defended me against a bully at the restaurant. He had me by the throat and was about to hit me, but she moved in and twisted his arm behind his back and had him pressed to the ground in seconds.” The server turns to me with admiration. “I’ve never seen anyone move so fast. She’s my hero.”

I hear Vera audibly sneer.

Shaking my head, I feel my face flush with heat. “I’m not a hero,” I say.

“You are to me,” the server breathes. “You came and helped me when no one else did.”

Talon leans across the table and grabs my wrist. “Our Princess is not only the savior of the rulers but a hero to the common folk, too.”

“Princess?” Vera spits. “She’s not a princess.”

“She’s the Princess of Terr’s guard,” Talon replies, and I want to die.



The server bends down to my ear. “I’m sorry if I embarrassed you.”

I shake my head. “You’re fine.”

“I’ll be right back with your drinks.”

I turn to Rem, who is sitting across from Talon, and whisper, “Did you request for him to serve here?”

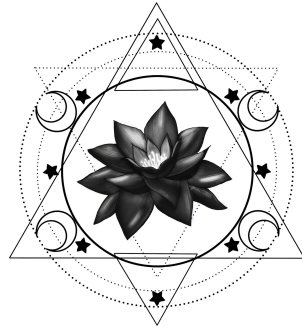
He glances at me and shrugs. I nod knowingly and smile back at him, then place my hand on his shoulder. “Thank you.”

“It’s something I knew you would have wanted.”

Maeve throws her hands over her heart. “You two are my new friends-with-benefits goals.”

I shake my head, then glance up at the huge, double moons above us and make a wish.

*Please, let tonight end quickly.*



# CHAPTER THIRTY

## ELARA

Dinner starts, and a line of servers come out with trays of food and sets them before each one of us. Rem lifts my lid and hot steam rises from the most beautifully presented seafood dish. I breathe in the scent, and it smells very familiar. Then it hits me. It's my favorite dish from that restaurant in Nahla. The one Kage took me to.

While everyone else is taking the lids off their trays, I steal a glance at Kage. He catches it and returns it with a slight grin and subtle nod. It was him. He somehow had this food brought here, just for me. My heart is bursting as I turn back to my plate with a wide smile on my lips.

“Why are you smiling?” Talon asks.

“Because I love food,” I say.

“Hey, how come you get seafood and I get chicken?” Maeve questions, glancing at my plate with a wide-eyed expression.

“I got sausage,” Talon says. “Want to switch?”

“No,” she huffs. “I don't want your sausage.” A sly grin rises on her dark red lips. “Well, maybe later.”

“Maeve,” Rem whisper scolds, making me laugh.

She shrugs and digs in, taking a bite. “This is actually fantastic.”

I take a bite of mine, and the flavors hit my tongue, causing my eyes to close and a moan to escape my lips.

When I open my eyes again, Maeve’s wide eyes are pinned on me. “Not fair. Next time I’m requesting the seafood.”

I’ve kept the shield up over my mind all night, but my brain is hurting. While everyone is eating, I let it slip and send Kage a message.

“*Thank you,*” I say, and his fork pauses. He places it down and takes a sip of water.

“*There you are,*” he purrs. “*And you’re welcome.*”

“*I didn’t want anyone rummaging around in my head, so I put a barrier up.*”

He dabs his lips with his napkin. “*You’re painfully breathtaking tonight.*”

“*I miss you,*” I say, my thoughts becoming verbal.

“*You don’t know what I’ve had to deal with. I wish I could leave the bullshit and run away with you.*”

“*You know I would go, but we weren’t made to run. We’re fighters and survivors. Running isn’t an option for us.*”

“*I’m sorry Vera is treating you terribly.*”

“*It’s expected.*”

“*It makes me fucking furious. I want you, Min Vesmír. So badly, my entire body aches.*”

“*Kage.*”

I feel a brush against my foot, under the table, and when I glance down see dark shadows curling up my calf. His shadows.

“*Kage,*” I breathe. “*Everyone is here, and Vera is next to you.*”

“*I don’t give a fuck about anyone, including Vera.*”

I quickly glance over and see him staring blankly at the band below, but his eyes have darkened.

His shadows are feathering against my inner thighs, causing pleasurable sensations. They feel like fingers, pressing, kneading, creating an ache between my legs.

“*Can I touch you?*” he asks, his voice like honey.

The gods know I want him to touch me. To relieve that growing ache. But here?

Rem is right next to me, and Maeve is directly across. But his shadows are nearly at my center, and I want this. I want him.

“*Answer me.*” His voice is a yearning whisper.

“*Yes,*” I say, toeing the line between what I know is right and what feels right. Fuck it. I’ll gladly go to hell, as long as he’s there with me.

The shadows reach my center and *holy fuck*... I slam my eyes shut and grip the edge of the chair. It feels as if his mouth and tongue are there. In my mind, I envision Kage on his knees, devouring me. I’m trying to be discreet, but my chest is heaving, and my fingers are growing numb.

“*Come for me, Min Vesmír,*” he says, and it feels as if his voice is humming where it aches. Those forbidden shadows push into me, and I break. Stars shatter across the back of my lids, and my back arches. Rem leans over and whispers in my ear, but I don’t hear what he’s saying. I grab hold of his neck and pull him into a hug, pressing my face into his shoulder as I savor the ecstasy Kage is giving me.

“What’s the matter?” Rem asks, patting me on the back.

I pretend to sniffle. “Nothing,” I breathe. “Can you escort me to the bathroom?”

“Of course,” he says, slowly helping me to my feet.

“Where are you guys going?” Maeve asks.

“To the bathroom,” I reply. “Do you want to come?”

“Yes, give me a minute,” she says, shoveling the last of the food into her mouth.

“Take your time,” I giggle. “We’ll wait.”

“*Thank you,*” I whisper to Kage. “*I can’t believe that just happened. It was... incredible, but now I feel like your dirty little secret.*”

“*You are spotless and so damn perfect,*” he purrs. “*If it’s a sin to pleasure my true mate, then I am a sinner. But doing so has given me the greatest pleasure in return.*”

My heart is shattering. “Kage,” I breathe.

“*You’re mine, Min Vesmír, and I don’t enjoy watching you kiss other men, especially my best friend.*”

“Yeah,” I sigh, “*Well, someone should have warned me about the mistletoe.*”

He chuckles. “*You have my heart, Min Vesmír. Don’t break it.*”

“*And you have mine. It will never belong to anyone else.*” I steal one more glance to see a grin rise on those sinful lips.

Maeve stands from her chair, quickly finishing whatever is left in her wineglass.

“Okay, I’m done,” she chimes, making her way around the table and grabbing my hand. “Are you okay? You looked like you were in pain.”

I lean over to whisper into her ear and lie. “Menstrual cramps.”

“Oh, that freaking sucks. Do you need something?”

I shake my head. “I’m okay. Thank you.”



We return to find the tables are cleared, and Kage and Vera are gone. The music changes from soft to something a little livelier, so Rem holds out his hand to me. “Want to dance?”

I nod, wanting to do anything other than sit around. Moving will help keep my mind off Kage and Vera.

As we make our way to the dance floor, I notice there are less than a dozen couples on it, but Rem leads me out to the center just as the current song ends. He pulls me flush against his front and holds my hand, then places his other at the small of my back.

“Just follow my lead,” he says as the next song starts. He moves and I follow and I’m not stepping on his toes.

“Not so bad, huh?” He smiles, and it’s infectious.

“Not bad at all. You’re an excellent dancer, Captain.”

The music builds and Rem sweeps me across the floor. He twirls and dips and spins us, making me dizzy. By the time the song has ended, we’re both laughing and winded. As a new song begins, I wrap my arms around his neck and hug him. “Thanks for being here with me tonight, Rem. You’re exactly what I needed.”

He presses a soft kiss on my cheek. “You know I’m more than happy to oblige, Spitfire.” The look he gives makes us both burst into laughter.

“Hey friends-with-benefits,” Maeve calls out, dragging Talon across the dance floor. “You guys look like you’re having too much fun, so we, well *I*, decided to join in.”

“The more the merrier,” I say.

Maeve squeals and runs to me, throwing her arms around my neck. “You two seem to be the center of attention,” she whispers in my ear.

Beyond the lights of the dance floor, I see people crowded around, watching.

“If they want to watch,” Rem says, “let them. Let’s show them what a good time really looks like.”

“Cousin, you are right,” Maeve says, poking him in the chest.

I nod and smile, and for the next hour, we dance and laugh without care.

After the last song, Maeve heads off the floor and straight to a server off to the side who offers her the last glass of wine on his tray. She downs it in one gulp and hands it back to him.

The music finally dies down and a slow song plays, one that seems undanceable. We leave the floor and head to an area where there are benches in between a forest of decorated trees.

“I need some water,” Maeve says. “I’m feeling a little parched.”

“I’ll go get us some drinks,” Talon tells her.

“Are you thirsty?” Rem asks, and I nod.

“Black Lotus.”

“I guess you deserve it,” he says. “You two wait right here. We’ll be right back.”

Maeve and I sit on one bench, and I take in the wintery scent of pine.

Maeve suddenly shoots up next to me and covers her mouth. “I think I’m going to be sick,” she mumbles.

I stand and throw an arm around her waist. “Let’s get you to the bathroom.”

We quickly hurry across the ballroom to the opposite side, where the lights are all dim. As soon as we make it to the bathroom, Maeve bursts into one of the open stalls and heaves.

The other few women in the restroom glare at me, and I shrug.

I push open the stall door to see Maeve bent over, so I rub her back. “Are you okay?” I whisper.

Waving an arm, she shoos me out. “I don’t want you to see this,” she says. “Go tell Rem and Talon that I’d like to go home.”

“I’m not leaving you in this condition,” I say.

“I’ll be fine,” she says, then heaves again. “Go. Please. They’re probably waiting for us.”

“Maeve.”



“I need Rem to take me home. I think someone slipped something into that last drink.”

“Stay here. I’ll be right back,” I urge.

She nods, her head still hovering over the toilet.

Exiting the restroom, I see the bench where we left, but Rem and Talon aren’t there yet.

I move forward toward the area when I’m jolted by a forceful bump on my right side. Turning, I see a dark-hooded figure dash away toward the exit. I can tell it’s a man by his muscular build and towering height.

There’s a sudden, shooting pain in my lower abdomen and I glance down to see blood blooming on my white gown. Fear floods through me.

I’ve been stabbed.

Griff appears out of nowhere and grabs my arm. His eyes move down to the blood. “What happened, Princess?” His deep voice is filled with concern.

“I was bumped into by a man wearing a dark hood,” I breathe, motioning towards the exit.

Two additional guards come rushing towards us, their faces turning pale as they see the blood. It’s flowing heavily, so I press a palm against it as Griff gives them instructions to find the hooded man.

They rush toward the exit as my legs give way and buckle.

Griff’s strong arms embrace me and carefully place me on the floor. He quickly removes his jacket and places it under my head.

The pain. It’s throbbing, and my head feels heavy. Even my eyes are blurring.

“Get the Captain,” he shouts to another guard rushing toward us.

“*I think I’ve been stabbed,*” I say, sending the words to Kage, not knowing if he can hear them.

*“Where are you?”* His voice is frantic.

*“With Griff. Somewhere near the bathrooms.”*

*“Is the bone marker on you?”*

*“Yes.”*

Within seconds, Kage portals directly to me, dropping to my side. He lifts me, cradling me in his arms just as Rem and Talon reach us. Rem drops the drinks in his hand as he spots the blood flowing from my side.

“What the fuck happened?” he snaps.

“A man in a black hood ran into her. He stabbed her when she came out of the bathroom,” Griff replies.

“Where’s Maeve?” Talon asks.

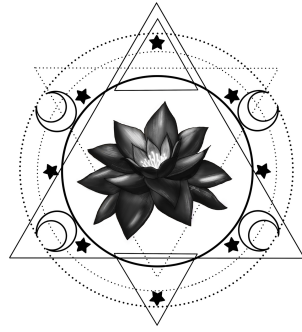
“Bathroom. I think she’s been poisoned,” I slur. My tongue feels thick.

My head is throbbing, but I open my thoughts to Kage. *“Something is wrong. It hurts and I’m so tired.”* My body goes limp and eyes close, my head rolling against his muscular chest.

*“Elara,”* Kage’s voice rings through my head, but I’m too exhausted to answer. *“Elara!”*

Kage rattles off words to the others, but they are muffled and I’m fading. I hear a snap, and suddenly, there is silence. There are no scents except Kage’s, which fills me with warmth.

I’m heavy. I can’t move or speak. I can’t even open my eyes. And my last thought is that if I die now, I’m glad it will be in his arms.



# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

## KAGE

*“If I die now, I’m glad it will be in his arms.”*

No. *“Elara!”* Her words crack my heart in two.

*Fuck.* She’s not responding. Her body has gone limp in my arms.

“Digby!” I holler, kicking his door.

After a few seconds, the door opens and the healer peeks out.

“Help her. She’s been stabbed,” I say, urgently pushing past him to get inside.

He follows right behind. “On the bed. Place her on the bed,” he instructs.

Tenderly, I lay Elara’s lifeless form on Digby’s small bed, my hands trembling as I see her exquisite, white gown saturated with blood.

*“Don’t die on me,”* I beg her inside her mind, gently brushing stray hairs from her face, but she doesn’t respond.

“Hurry!” I growl. Digby dashes over with his bag. “Heal her!” I demand.

“Please sit,” he says, his eyes scanning her. He finds the source of the blood, and with a rip, tears the dress to reveal her flawless skin marred with a deep and oozing wound.

The healer takes a vial and pours it onto the laceration, and it seems to slow the bleeding.

Driven by a need for answers, I take a step towards Elara and carefully place my hand on her forehead, hoping to find what I need. Closing my eyes, I scan through her memories, but pause when reaching a recent one. My eyes pop open, and I reach down, raising her left arm. Under smears of blood, I see a dragon tattoo on her forearm.

Who the fuck was the man who put it on her? She seemed to trust him, and even gave him a hug when she left. I’ve never seen a tattoo like this, but I can feel a dark, ancient power emanating from it.

I quickly place my palm back on her forehead and scan ahead, finding the moment she was stabbed. She didn’t see the bastard’s face because he had a black hood pulled over his head. But he was tall and slouched over.

Rem arrives and rushes into the room, but I can’t think straight.

“How is she?” he asks, but I can’t answer.

“I’m trying to save her,” Digby responds. “Whatever she was stabbed with was laced with poison. See?”

Rem and I both lean over to see black-webbed veins around the stab wound, slowly crawling outward.

“Can you heal her?” I ask, needing to know.

“I can slow the bleeding but cannot offer a remedy unless I know which poison it is.” Digby turns to us with fear in his eyes. “Once the poison reaches her heart, I’m afraid it will be too late.”

Someone wants to kill her. Someone came into *my* fucking palace and entered the ballroom, intending to stab my true mate.

Merciless, unforgiving shadows burst from me, curling around my limbs, wanting nothing more than to seek death and revenge.

I grab Digby by his collar. “Don’t you let her die until I get back,” I threaten, then face Rem. “Stay with her,” I demand.

“Where are you going?” Rem asks.

I open a portal. “Hunting.”

“Don’t kill him, Kage. We need to know who is behind this,” Rem hollers. “It looks like it was setup.”

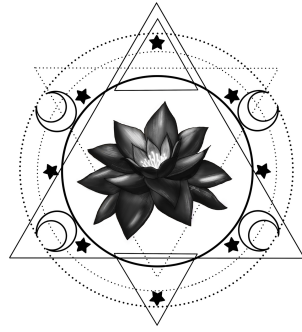
I pause.

“Maeve was poisoned, too. Once Elara realized it, she left the bathroom to come find us. But when she exited, that guy was there waiting for her.” He paces back and forth. “We need to find out who’s behind this. It could be several people. The Avkan King, Seven, or Vera.”

My blood is raging. *A fucking setup? Right under our noses?*

I step into the portal.

I won’t return until I’ve found him.



# CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

## ELARA

I'm floating in a sea of darkness, but there is no fear here, just restfulness and freedom from worry and stress. Closing my eyes, I extend my arms. My limbs are weightless, floating within this burdenless abyss.

Am I dead? Is this purgatory where I wait for the gods to judge me?

The darkness flickers, and a vision slowly comes to life above me. I see a grand palace made of white stone, bathing in calm moonlight. The vision shifts to a bedchamber where I'm looking at the back of a woman in a long, white bedgown. She turns and reveals a newborn child cradled in her embrace, but her belly is swollen.

My heart pulses as I realize who this woman is. *The Empress.*

Tears are streaming down her porcelain face as she tenderly presses a kiss to the sleeping child's forehead. The sorrow and misery she carries can be seen vividly in her golden eyes and etched in her expression.

As a man enters the room, she looks up at him. The intensity of her agony grips me, piercing straight through the vision and



into my soul. He moves to her with a tortured expression, shaking his head.

“Why?” he cries. I can’t hear his words, but I feel them.

The man embraces her and the child she carries in her arms, the two of them wailing.

Hot tears stream down my own face as I watch the vision unfold.

They share a long kiss, and when it ends, the Empress offers the child to the man, but he backs away, shaking his head.

I focus on the Empress’s lips, “Acacius, please,” she pleads.

*Acacius?* I look closer and see it. In the vision, Acacius is younger and clean shaven, his raven-colored hair is shorter and drawn back. He’s incredibly handsome.

Then, the vision shifts.

Now, I’m looking down at the child’s face from above as it stirs and finally opens its eyes. My chest comes to a shattering halt as I gaze at the child, who has wide, hazel eyes rimmed in gold. Black hair frames her tiny face, and she has the brightest pink lips.

She’s... *me*.

The vision continues as the Empress presses the child against Acacius’ chest. He refuses, but she continues to beg. I cannot see her face, nor can I hear her words, but I know what she’s saying is heavily affecting him.

With tears streaming down his cheeks, Acacius finally folds the child in his arms. The Empress embraces his face with her hands and presses a tender kiss to his lips. He leans into her kiss, deepening it.

It’s a kiss filled with love and suffering. It’s a lament. A farewell.

When they pull apart, their foreheads are touching as they gaze at the child. The Empress leans down and presses one last kiss on the child’s cheek before turning away, unable to bear the pain of watching them leave.

Acacius opens a portal, and with a heavy look of longing and sorrow, he and the child step through and disappear.

When they are gone, the Empress falls to the floor, her chest heaving. Her hands go to her swollen belly, cradling it, rocking back and forth as the vision dissolves.

Deep sobs resonate through the dark space I'm floating in. A space now filled with even more questions.

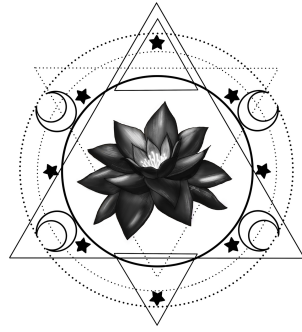
The Empress said I wasn't her daughter, but why was she holding me? And why was she in so much agony? It looks like Acacius was her lover. But does that mean he is my father? Is that why he felt compelled to give me the dragon tattoo?

I'm witnessing things that look like answers but only result in more questions.

This dark space that once felt peaceful is now filled with anxiety.

I have to get out of here. I have to find a way out.

"Kage," I cry out into the darkness that has swallowed me whole. "Please, find me."



# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

## KAGE

I return to the ballroom and talk to the guards. They've searched the entire palace, inside and out, with no trace of him. He doesn't know it yet, but he's already a dead man. I *will* find him. Being a Death Dealer has its benefits.

As I exit the ballroom, Vera grabs my arm. "There you are," she says. "Where have you been?"

I glare at her, keeping my shadows tucked in tight, worried they'll act on their own. "Did you have anything to do with it?" I seethe.

She crosses her arms over her chest. "With what? I heard someone got hurt."

"Elara was stabbed," I say carefully. "Did you have anything to do with it?"

Her expression falters, but she puts on a smug face. "No, I didn't, but she had it coming. Flaunting herself like she's royalty, it was bound to happen." She scoffs, and I want to rip that fucking sneer right off her painted lips.

I push past her, walking away because my shadows want to shred her to pieces. But the bitch won't let it go. She runs in front of me and shoves me in the chest.

I lean down toward her and grit my teeth. "Don't touch me."

“What the fuck?” she snaps, looking down at her blood-covered fingers.

An evil grin rises on my lips. “Looks like her blood is on your hands.” I turn and walk away and hear her yelling behind me.

“You have no idea what’s coming, Kage Dargan. You are going to pay. Pay dearly!”

I shake my head and walk out of the ballroom. I don’t give a fuck what she does. My entire focus is on finding the man who stabbed Elara. Time is ticking. I need to get the answers Digby needs to find the antidote.

Walking through the empty palace, I open a portal and jump straight to my bedchamber and quickly lock the door. Pulling open my desk, I grab a relic Cyrus had given me and open a portal to his residence.

I land in his office, dimly lit with a few candle sconces on the walls. Walking toward his desk, I see it’s still piled with countless volumes on and around it.

“Cyrus!” I call out, walking toward the shelves housing countless ancient tomes and scrolls. In front of me, I notice the fading chalk outline of a pentacle on the floor, accompanied by five smaller circles that house various symbols. Despite the gravity of the situation, I find myself with a small smile, remembering that this was the place where Elara and I performed the transfer of power. It was the first time I held her close to me and where we had our first kiss. We need more firsts. She has to survive this.

“Cyrus,” I bellow. “Where are you?”

“Prince Dargan?” His voice sounds distant.

“I desperately need your help!”

He must be in another room, but I soon hear the shuffle of his feet coming from behind the bookshelves.

“There you are Old Man!” I reach to shake his shoulder, and he mistakes me, leaning in for a hug. I quickly pat him on the back, eager to get through the pleasantries.

“When you reach my age, Prince Dargan, there is not much to do but read and sleep. It’s been quite nice.” He places a book he has in his hand on one of the shelves. “What brings you this far north?”

“Elara was stabbed by a poison blade,” I say and his expression pales.

“Is she—”

“She’s alive, but the healer said that he cannot give her an antidote unless he knows what type of poison was used.”

“Dear gods,” he breathes. “Who did it?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t found him yet, but the person involved was a hooded man, who intentionally collided with her and then disappeared. She didn’t even notice she’d been stabbed until afterwards.”

“How can I help?” Cyrus asks.

“We have to find him, at any cost,” I say.

“I’m assuming you don’t have anything from the perpetrator?”

“No,” I say, shaking my head.

Cyrus moves towards the shelves and goes through stacks of books until he finds the one he is looking for.

“Here it is,” he says, hurrying toward his desk. He moves a pile of books, replacing them with the one he discovered, then sits down and puts on his glasses. With a single snap of his fingers, the candles around his desk burst into flame as he flips through the pages. I lean over, hoping he finds what he’s looking for.

“Aha!” he finally shouts, bringing a candle closer.

I see the location spell, but its words are written in an unfamiliar language. Cyrus heads to his shelves and grabs a few items before heading toward the area where he had drawn the pentacle.

He sets six black candles on the ground, still holding a piece of black chalk in his hand. Using the chalk, he traces over the

pentacle, replacing the white outline with black. He then draws one large circle at the tip of the star.

Collecting the candles, he puts one on each of the six points. Then he hurries back to the shelves and vanishes for a short while. He returns, holding a skull in his arms, and places it in the lone circle.

“Whose skull is that?” I ask.

“Oh,” he says, glancing up at me. “He’s an ancient wizard, a Seer, who could see past, present, and future. This skull is a remnant of him, but I think that channeling through it might give us access to find the offender.” He slaps his palms together like a prayer. “Hopefully.”

“It’s not guaranteed?”

“I’ve never performed this spell before,” he says. “I’ve never needed it until today.” He pauses and looks up at me with a strained smile. “Elara is lucky to have you, Prince of Terr. I have seen no one fight as hard to preserve a life as you.” He turns back to his work, drawing symbols around the skull. “It must be burdensome to have your true mate in your grasp, and not be able to perform the sacred ritual.”

My eyes dart to him. “How do you know?”

“Prince Dargan, I have more time on my hands these days than I know what to do with.” He glances up at me and shrugs.

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Cyrus has been around for a long time and knows more than most. Discovering Elara’s past and learning how to unlock her powers has now become his goal.

“Done,” he finally says, standing to his feet. “Go ahead. Step into the middle of the pentacle.”

I do as he says.

“I must warn you. This spell gives you what you want, but it will also take something in return. A possession of yours.”

“As long as it’s not Elara’s life, it can have anything,” I say.

Cyrus gives a sad smile. “When I start to read from the book, you should release your shadows while repeating the words after me. When I’m done, you will voice exactly what you want to find. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

Standing outside of the pentacle, Cyrus snaps his fingers, and the wicks of the black candles ignite. I release my shadows as he reads from the book, then close my eyes, and repeat the words he speaks after him. Then he stops and I say, “Find the man who stabbed Elara in the ballroom.”

My shadows twist around me like a cyclone. The skull, once sitting within the circle, rises from the ground and hovers in front of my face. At once, it emits a blinding light, and I suddenly see scenes flash before me—

*A forest. A cabin hidden deep within it. Black boots trudging on dampened earth. A man in a black hood. He enters the cabin, takes off his coat, and stokes the fire.*

*I only see his back but notice his long, white hair and tattoos. Then, he finally turns around, revealing silver eyes.*

*I’ve seen this man before. He was at Central Court. He was one of the members of the team who went to Avka with Elara. The same man who abandoned her, who left her to defend the rulers alone. Following the mission, his release and return of powers were denied, and he was returned to his cell in Nahla. But we recently received word that he had escaped.*

*There is another flash, and a woman enters the cabin, but everything about her is blurred. It’s likely because she wasn’t the one who stabbed Elara. She hands the man a bag of coins, and he accepts it, bowing his head. Then, he hands her a dagger coated in blood.*

*My fists tighten at my side and my shadows lash out, recognizing that it’s the weapon that wounded our true mate.*

That blinding light dims and then dissipates, and when I blink, I’m standing back in the pentacle, and the skull has returned to the circle like it never left.



“Did you find the answers you were seeking?” Cyrus asks, folding his book shut.

“Yes,” I say, heading over and giving him a hug. “Thank you, Cyrus.”

“It’s my pleasure. Go, quickly then,” he says with a hopeful grin. “Save your woman.”

“I’ll see you soon,” I say, opening a portal to my bedchamber. “And let me know if you find anything.”

He gives me a nod, and I jump.

Time is running out to save Elara, but I have a plan. I saw the bastard’s face, know who he is, and how to track him down. This time, I won’t inform Rem. There are answers I need from this asshole. Methods I’ll use that Rem won’t approve of.

Being a Death Dealer, I possess a powerful spell that allows me to teleport to those who require my lethal services. As long as I know what they look like, and they are within the boundaries of the five kingdoms, I can jump directly to them. However, this spell, much like the bone marker, will drain me.

I already know this criminal has been stripped of his power, so this jump should be relatively easy. Nevertheless, I grab a dagger from my drawer and discreetly conceal it in my coat.

Reciting the spell, I feel it draining my power, using it to create a portal to the bastard as I focus on his face. My shadows emerge from my body and draw towards the portal, awaiting the confirmation of his location. In moments, it is done, and my shadows pour through the portal, and I follow after.

I land inside the cabin, and my furious shadows encircle me, protecting me from harm.

The man spots me and runs for the door, but my shadows strike out and wrap around his legs, yanking him down, and dragging him back to me. He screams, clawing at the wooden floor, thrashing and trying to get away.

“Who are you?” he wails.

My shadows force him into a chair and tightly wrap around him, squeezing his chest so it's hard for him to breathe. The I hear a crack, and another, and know it's his ribs. He lets out a painful wail, his head falling forward, but I don't want him to pass out.

It's taking everything inside me not to siphon the life out of him, knowing what he did. My true mate is dying, poisoned and bleeding out because this bastard fucking stabbed her. Killing him quick would be too easy, but I have to get back to her as soon as possible.

His silver eyes are wide with fear. I can taste his dread. Feel it pulsing through the air around us.

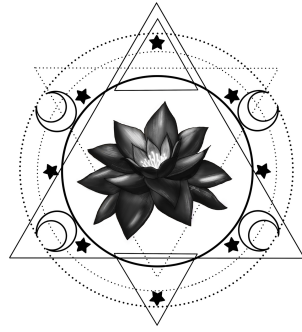
“Who are you?” he whimpers again.

A vicious grin rises on my lips as I lean down, inches away from his face, and whisper...

“I am pain.”

“I am torture.”

“I. Am. Death.”



# CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

## REMINGTON

The poison is spreading across her abdomen and moving toward her chest. Digby is frantically trying to slow it down, but nothing seems to be working.

“How much time do we have?” I ask him.

He looks up at me, worry dripping from his brow. “It’s hard to tell. Every potion I’ve used only slows it down for a short period. It’s like there is powerful magic attached to it.”

“Magic?”

“Normally, the potions I give would stop the spread of any poison for at least an hour. But this, I’ve seen nothing like this. The same potions wear off in minutes.”

*Where the hell is Kage?* He left a while ago, and I’ve heard nothing since. Griff left ten minutes ago, and said Kage was at the ballroom, but got into a fight with Vera, and stormed off.

If I knew where he went, I would have gone to him already. But he could be anywhere.

Minutes pass and I’m getting anxious, watching those black veins spread closer and closer toward her heart. Her breathing is shallow and skin pale.

I take her limp and clammy hand in mine and gently squeeze it.

“Hold on, Elara,” I beg. “Don’t give up.”

Digby slams his fist on his desk and turns to me. “I have nothing left. I’ve tried everything and none of it works.”

“There has to be something.”

There is a snap in the air, and Kage finally runs in.

“Where the hell have you been?” I shout.

His face is distraught, and his brows are pulled together.

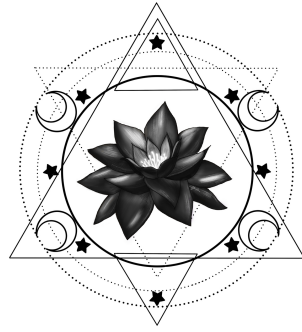
“It wasn’t poison,” he says. “Someone cast a spell on the blade—whoever it pierces will taste a quick death.”

Elara starts gasping, her back arching, pain knitting her brow.

“What do we do?” I yell, panicking.

Digby shakes his head, his eyes welling with tears. “I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“No!” Kage bellows, his pain rattling the room.



# CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

## KAGE

She's dying. I'm watching her life slip away and there is nothing I can do. I couldn't save my mother, and now I can't save the only girl I have ever loved.

I bend over her body, my forehead resting against hers. "Elara, don't leave me. If you do my heart will leave with you."

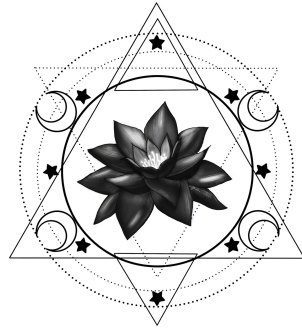
"Kage," Rem breathes, placing his hand on my shoulder.

"Leave!" I snap, my chest heaving. Hot tears burn my eyes and fall down my cheeks.

Cupping my hand against her pale cheek, I beg her. "How do I save you? I don't know how to save you this time."

Elara groans. Her limbs stiffen, and her brow crumples in pain as the spidery veins finally reach her chest.

"No," I breathe, my body trembling. "No. *You're not allowed to fucking die. Do you hear me? You fight, Elara. Fight!*"





# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

## ELARA

I feel the darkness shrinking in on me. The air is getting heavy, and it's much harder to breathe. I'm dying. I know I am. I can feel my end coming. How will it happen? Will the darkness swallow me until I cease to exist?

I try to find that peacefulness—that comfort in the darkness that I hope will embrace me as I enter my eternal slumber.

*“You're not allowed to fucking die. Do you hear me?”*

It's Kage. His voice is desperate, begging in the darkness.

*“You fight, Elara. Fight!”*

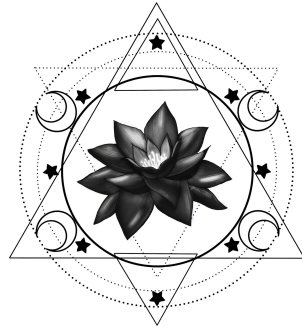
His voice is loud and clear.

*“Kage!”* I scream. *“Kage, I'm here!”* Uncontrollable tears fall down my face, knowing he's so close, but I don't know how to get to him. *“You've always found a way to save me. I need you to find me. Please!”*

I won't give up easily, not when he's out there, begging me to live.

I will fight for every breath. And every heartbeat.

Until he finds me.



# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

## KAGE

Her life is slipping through my fingers, and I feel the power she transferred to me pulsing under my skin. It feels like it's clawing to get out of me and return to her, knowing she's dying.

Without my control, my hand suddenly moves and hovers above Elara's wound.

"Kage, what are you doing?" Rem asks, stepping to my side.

"It's not me," I say. "It's Elara's power."

Digby moves to the other side of me, his eyes enlarging. "Maybe it's possible," he mumbles to himself.

All three of us watch in awe as my shadows begin to flow from my palm and into Elara's wound. I feel her power softly brushing under my skin, making it tingle as if it's saying goodbye.

"What is that?" Digby asks, pointing at the glittering particles within the shadows.

I smile, a stray tear trickling down my face. "That's hers."

My shadows continue to escort her power, returning it back to her, to where it belongs.

“Look!” Digby aims his finger at her chest where the black veins are slowly receding. “It’s working.”

Rem squeezes my shoulder. “It’s working, Kage,” he echoes, and hope fills me.

All three of us don’t move. We stand still and silent, watching this magical event unfold before us, until the last drop of her power is delivered safely, and my shadows return to me.

Elara was dying, and I didn’t realize the cure was literally in my hands all along.

As the veins continue to withdraw, Digby checks her vitals and shakes his head. “I don’t know how you did it, but you saved her,” he exhales.

“*Again*. You saved her *again*.” Rem slaps a hand on my shoulder.

“Her wound is already healing. I’ve given her something for the pain, so she will probably be asleep for the next few hours.”

“Thank you, Digby,” I say.

He throws his hands up in the air. “I had nothing to do with this.”

“I’ll take her back to her room,” I say, carefully gathering her in my arms and facing Rem. “Get Maeve so she can help clean and change her.”

He shakes his head. “Maeve is also with a healer. They poisoned her, too.” Rem reaches out to take Elara, but I shake my head. “No. I’ll do it.”

“Kage, are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“I know exactly what I’m doing. I won’t just stand idly by while they injure or try to take what belongs to me. They have no say. Not anymore.”

Rem nods, knowing that once I’ve made up my mind, there’s no changing it.

“I’ll be right across the hallway. Call me if you need me,” he says.

“Thanks, Rem.” I open a portal and jump to her place.

We enter a pitch-black room, and it takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust. Making my way towards her bathing room, I use my elbow to click on a light switch and carefully carry her to the tub. Gently laying her down, I place a towel behind her head for support. Then I swiftly remove the remaining gown from her body.

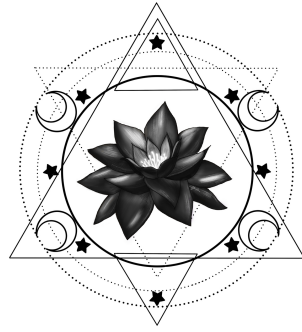
Taking another towel and a bowl of warm water, I carefully wash the blood from her skin, and once she is clean and dry, I carry her to her bed, dress her in a bedgown, and tuck her in.

Exhaustion suddenly overwhelms me, and I’m not sure if it’s from the strain of the location spell or Elara’s powers leaving me. Perhaps it’s both. I’m still not sure what the spell Cyrus cast has taken or will take from me. Right now, I’m too tired to care.

Yawning, I discard my blood-stained shirt, tossing it onto the ground, and lay down beside her. For the next few minutes, I watch the gentle rise and fall of her chest, grateful that she is alive and by my side. Leaning over, I place a tender kiss on her cheek and entwine my fingers with hers.

“Thank you for living,” I whisper softly into her ear. “I know I can conquer the world as long as I have you by my side.”

My eyes, heavy with sleep, finally surrender and close.



# CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

## ELARA

I awake and gasp for air. Sitting up, I blink as my eyes adjust to the darkness, and spot a nightlight in the room's corner. I'm back. I'm not dead.

Turning, I see a body lying next to me and scream. Kage's eyes spring open. He reaches over and clicks on the lamp.

"Elara?" he whispers. "Are you okay?"

I swallow, my throat dry like sandpaper. "You—you just startled me," I say, slowly reaching out to him and running my fingers against his stubbled cheek. "Is this real? Are you really here?"

His warm hand encloses around mine. "I'm here," he says, his velvety voice cutting straight through me.

A deep sob rips from my chest as I fall into his arms. "You found me."

"Of course, I did," he breathes into my hair. "Don't you remember what I told you? No matter where you are, Min Vesmír, I will always come for you."

My chest aches and breath heaves. He is here. He saved me, again. Against all odds, he found me just when the darkness was about to swallow me up.

“What happened?” I ask, gazing into his heavy eyes.

“I promise to tell you everything tomorrow. Right now, you need to sleep and heal, okay?”

“Okay,” I breathe, sinking deeper into his embrace, inhaling his wonderful scent.

Safe in his arms, I know I can rest without a care. Here is where my peace is. Where I feel complete and protected. I know that soon I’ll have to leave this haven and face the demons and trials that await me. But I’m not afraid anymore. Because he is here. My savior. My hero.

The first trial is over, and I barely survived. But I did survive. Because of him.



Rays of sunlight kiss my face, waking me. I stretch my tired and achy limbs and turn to see that Kage is gone and wonder if last night was just a dream.

I pull his pillow up to my nose and inhale, smiling when I find his alluring scent still lingering there. As much as I wanted to wake with him still here, I knew he had to return to the palace.

There is a tug on my side, so I pull up my bedgown to inspect the wound. Instead of a deep gash, I find a tiny scar, all healed over. Running my fingers over it, I feel it tingle.

*What happened?*

The last thing I remember was taking Maeve to the bathroom because she was sick. Then, I walked out to tell Rem and Talon and the hooded man ran into me, and I realized I was stabbed. After that, everything is blank. Except while I was lost in that dark place when I saw the visions of the Empress and Acacius and heard Kage’s voice. My dark angel.

I hop out of bed and grab a uniform from my closet, then head for the bathroom. I have to find Rem and ask him how Maeve is doing. Quickly dressing, I see the bone marker, bracelet from Naida, and wand from Oren on my counter. I braid my hair and twist it into a bun, pushing Oren’s branch



into it, slide on the bracelet, and put the bone marker around my neck, tucking it into my uniform. Exiting the bathroom, I slam into a massive frame.

“Talon.” I scream, slapping his arm. “Stop coming into my room unannounced,” I scold. “I just cheated death. Are you trying to kill me again?”

He grabs my hands. “I’m sorry, Princess, I didn’t mean to scare you. I promise to announce myself the next time I visit. It’s Rem’s fault. He told me to come and check on you.”

“What if I was naked?”

A wide smile slowly creeps over his face.

“Never mind,” I growl. “Get out.” I point to the door, then remember I have something to ask him. “Wait,” I say, grabbing his wrist.

His eyes narrow. “Do you want me to leave or not?”

“I just want to know how Maeve is doing.”

His posture sags. “She’s better than she was last night,” he exhales, obviously shaken. “You were right. She was drugged, and ended up sick all night, but finally got over the worst of it and is sleeping now.”

“You were with her all night?”

He nods. “I felt bad that I went to the ball with her and wasn’t by her side to protect her from getting poisoned.”

“You’re a good man, Talon,” I say, nudging the arm I slapped earlier. “Just remember to let me know when you’re here next time. I’m still not used to people portal jumping and suddenly appearing in front of me. On Earth, we knock on doors.”

“Fair enough,” he says, then pauses. “Oh, before I leave, Rem left you coffee and a pastry on your counter and told me to tell you to meet him on the mats. He also said to reassure you that you won’t be training today because you were, you know... stabbed.”

“Thanks. Tell Rem, I’ll be right out.”

He heads toward the door, then hesitates, twisting back. “It’s good to see that you’re well, Princess. We were all really worried about you last night.”

I smile at him. “I was too, but I’m tougher than you think.”

“Oh, I know you’re tough. I’ve witnessed it firsthand,” he chuckles. “Alright, see you out there, Princess.”



As soon as I make it to the mats, all the guards stand and face me, Rem standing in front of them. The guards behind him slap their fists to their chests and bow their heads.

“Princess,” they all say in unison.

Rem rushes forward, emotions swirling in his eyes as he wraps me in his arms. I smile when he pulls back and scans me from head-to-toe.

“Holy shit, Spitfire. Do you know how worried I was about you last night?”

“I know,” I breathe. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it wasn’t your fault, I just... I wasn’t sure if you were going to make it.”

I nudge his arm and give him a grin. “Did you cry?”

He sighs and holds up his thumb and finger, spreading them an inch apart. “Maybe a little.”

I laugh as he pulls me back in for another hug, and this time, I hug him back. “I’m sorry I scared you. I really thought I wasn’t going to make it either.”

“You were dying,” he says, his voice shaky. “I was watching you die and there was nothing any of us could do to save you.”

“Then, how am I here?”

He pulls back and wipes his eyes. “Didn’t *he* tell you?”

I shake my head. “He said he would talk to me today.”

Rem rakes his fingers through his hair. “It was incredible to witness, but I’m not going to give the details. That is his story to tell.”

“Alright,” I say. “So, what is the plan today?”

“The plan is to keep you safe.”

I laugh. “That is a very heavy task these days.”

“They all feel terrible that they didn’t see it coming.”

“How could they? Even I didn’t see it, and I was there. I didn’t even know I’d been stabbed until after he was gone, and I felt a stinging on my side.”

Rem grabs hold of my arms. “Did he tell you who it was?”

“You found the man who did it?”

He leans in. “Kage did.” His brows pull together, and his lips tighten. “It was Seven, Elara. He was the one who stabbed you with a poison-spelled blade.”

A shiver runs down my spine.

“Where is he?” I whisper.

“I don’t know. That is also something only Kage can tell you.”

I have a sinking feeling I know what happened to him, especially if Kage was the one who found him.

“Have you seen him today?” I ask.

“No, not yet. He told me last night that he had a meeting at Central Court.”

“This early?”

He shrugs his broad shoulders. “Ruling a kingdom comes with heavy responsibilities.”

“Why aren’t you with him?”

“Because he insisted I stay back and watch you.” He taps his finger on my nose. “Enough with the interrogation, Spitfire. Come,” he says, leading me over to the other guards.

They all gather around me, apologizing and welcoming me back, and my heart swells, feeling their genuine concern. Rem set up a comfortable armchair off to the side, at the edge of the mats, so I can sit and watch them practice. I guess after what

happened last night, they want to keep me close. I appreciate it. Besides what girl wouldn't want to sit back and watch handsome, muscular, sweaty men pummel each other?

I do.

Halfway through their practice, I get up to get a drink when I hear a commotion behind me. I turn to see a stout man with gray hair and a long beard hurrying toward us.

It's the Chancellor. I thought he was on vacation.

"Captain!" the Chancellor bellows, holding a hand up in the air. His posture is hunched, his brow is furrowed, and there is a noticeable frown on his lips.

"Chancellor Wessex," Rem says, heading to meet him. "I thought you were down south with the family on vacation."

"I was until I was urgently summoned back," he wheezes.

Rem shakes his head. "By whom?"

"The King."

My stomach sours sensing something isn't right.

The Chancellor rubs the back of his neck, visibly disturbed. "The Prince has been taken into custody. They are holding him at Central Court."

*No.*

I freeze, staring at Rem and the Chancellor as dread sinks deep into my chest. My limbs tremble, and my heart thumps. My worst nightmare is unfolding right before my eyes.

"For what purpose?" Rem's voice booms, echoing through the training center, his hands fisted at his side.

The Chancellor's eyes meet mine, and that dread now feels like a dagger pressing into my heart.

"They say there is evidence that he broke the marriage arrangement contract with the Princess of Asteri, and illegally jumped a non-royal into the Chamber of the Empress."

"That's not what happened," I say, moving toward them.

The air in the room is heavy. It's suffocating.

“That’s not all,” he exhales. “He is also accused of using his magic to kill a citizen of Nahla.”

“You mean the man who escaped prison and snuck into Terr, to the Winter Ball, and stabbed her last night? She almost died!” Rem roars.

“I’m not saying I don’t agree with what he did,” Wessex says. “I’m just stating what I heard.”

My heart is pounding, and my breath quickens as I slide my hand into Rem’s.

Wessex sighs and looks Rem directly in the eyes. “They are coming for her.”

My heart pauses.

“Who?” Rem asks, pulling me flush to his side.

“The Central Court guards. I rushed here to arrive before them, to warn you.”

Rem raises his hand to open a portal, but I grab his wrist and stop him.

“No.” I give him a sad smile, shaking my head. “This is my fate,” I breathe. “If I run, Kage will be punished. He’ll lose everything, and I won’t allow that to happen to him. I won’t run, Rem. Not now. Not ever.”

Rem’s eyes close as he tugs me into his embrace.

Wessex’s eyes soften. “They want blood,” he says. “Be prepared, my dear, for an arduous battle.”

I knew trials awaited me when I returned to Terr. I was already forewarned of my fate by Elwyn, Alena, and the Empress herself. Cautioned that these trials will break me down to the point of giving up. But I won’t surrender. I’ve defied death before, and only the future knows how many more lives I have left in me.

Wessex takes hold of my hand. “While in Central Court, it’s best not to speak. I will act as your liaison, so they won’t push you too hard.”

“Thank you,” I say, hot tears filling my eyes.

“We owe you, Chancellor,” Rem says, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“We’ll have to beg the gods to deliver us from this one,” he says.

There is a heavy energy crackling in the air. Another wave of dread slams into me—trepidation coating my skin, as a dozen Central Court guards arrive, wearing all-white uniforms.

Terr’s guard moves in to surround me, and Rem’s hand tightens around mine.

Wessex heads toward the guards, acting as defense, when I spot Asteri’s Chancellor, Faust, stepping out from behind one of the Court guards.

“Fuck,” Rem curses under his breath.

This is bad. Shit is about to go down, and I can’t let Terr’s guard suffer.

Wessex and Faust start a heated discussion, and for a moment, everyone stays put. Until Faust waves a paper at Wessex’s face, and shoves him to the side, heading toward us with the Central Court guards behind him.

“What’s all the fuss?” Talon says, stepping ahead of Terr’s guard, with his arms folded over his bare, muscular chest.

“We’ve come to take Elara into custody,” Faust announces.

“On what charges?” Talon asks, taking another step toward him.

Faust raises the paper and begins to read.

“Illegally entering the inner chamber of the Empress’s mausoleum. Pursuing a relationship with the Prince of Terr, fully aware he is in an arranged marriage. And the unlawful transfer of power between her and the Prince of Terr.”

Rem moves forward, standing in front of me but keeping our hands connected.

“And it takes twelve Central Court guards to take a girl with no power into custody?” Rem says with too much bite. “I’d say that’s a bit excessive, Chancellor.”

Faust smirks. “Is it, Captain? It seems we’ll need to go through your guard to get to her.”

The Central Court guards hold their hands out in front of them, summoning their powers. I feel a haunting breeze swirl around us, and my gaze becomes fixed on the air, water, terra, and fire weapons forming within the Central Court guards’ palms. Everyone is wielding their gifts, except the black-haired guards from Terr who are just standing at attention.

Shadows burst from Terr’s guard surrounding me and protectively coil around us.

This can’t be happening. They’re going to start a war because of me, and someone could get hurt or killed.

“No!” I shout, releasing Rem’s hand and pushing my way past him and through the shadows.

“Elara!” Rem hollers. “Don’t!”

But I don’t stop, not until I reach Faust. Then I slowly turn around to face my new guard family.

“I won’t allow any of you to get hurt or to be punished because of me,” I say. “Thank you, for wanting to protect me.”

Talon slaps a hand to his chest, and all the others follow, bowing their heads. “Princess,” they say in unison, and my heart shatters.

*“You can’t protect me this time,”* I say to Rem alone, my eyes sliding toward him. *“Whatever happens at Central Court, just know that I hold Kage’s best interests in my heart. I won’t let anything happen to him. I promise.”*

*“Not if it costs you,”* he urges.

*“Even if it costs me,”* I say, then slam that wall of diamond over my mind. There is nothing more that needs to be said. I have to leave before anyone gets hurt. This is *my* fate. My journey.

Rem shakes his head, eyes narrowing and brow furrowing, but he knows he can’t fight Central Court. Not without repercussions that could be fatal to his guard.

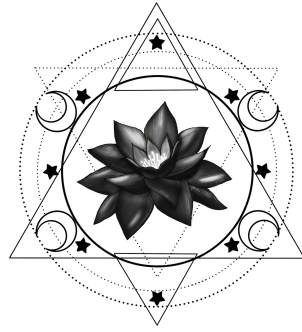
I finally turn to face Faust and his smug expression. “I’ll come with you as long as you leave Terr peacefully.”

“Ah, there’s the brave girl we’ve all come to know,” he jests. “However, you are in no position to negotiate.”

*Pompous prick.*

He motions to one of the Central Court guards and a man with blond hair and blue eyes steps forward and cuffs my wrists, then leads me toward the other guards. The Central Court guards from Terr open portals, and my heart races. I nod at Rem, my eyes welling with tears, and in seconds, we’re gone.





# CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

## KAGE

I'm cuffed like a fucking criminal, sitting in a holding room, waiting until the court officials gather. Chancellor Wessex just left for Terr to warn Rem and Elara about what happened. I know Rem will want to run and hide Elara away. But I also know Elara, and she won't let him.

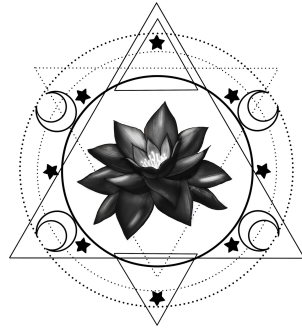
I knew Vera was up to something. I just didn't know her plan would be this meticulously executed. There's no way she could've done this alone. Her wicked mother is probably the mastermind behind this whole setup. The Queen of Asteri is known to be ruthless, and this proves it. She's had her eye on Terr for a long time and is finally making her move, using Elara as a stepping stool.

They're only going after her because she's the greatest threat to Vera claiming the throne. They say they have evidence of our visit to the Empress's mausoleum, and although Elara was magically transported into the inner chamber, there is no way for us to prove it. They also allege to have another witness of the power transfer. However, because Elara's power was returned to her last night, I can refute their claim and prove I don't possess any of her power.

According to Wessex, Central Court guards are on their way to Terr to bring Elara in. Vera and her mother want to make

her disappear, so they'll force her to talk. Their goal will be to catch her in a lie, giving them solid proof to justify her execution. That will not happen. I'd rather deal death to the entire Central Court first. However, the cuffs dampen my power.

I'll have to think up a plan and trust that Elara will go along with it.



# CHAPTER FORTY

## ELARA

I won't deny it... This is the first time since my arrival that I truly feel alone and hopeless in the world I was born into, but never truly belonged. The only thing I know for sure is that I'm being held for charges relating to my relationship with Kage, and it's undoubtedly clear who placed them.

I have no one to tell me what I should prepare for, and despite Chancellor Wessex's promise to help, I haven't seen him since we jumped from Terr.

Knowing Kage is here somewhere gives me a bit of hope, but I don't even know if he's in the same building or being kept somewhere else.

I'm sitting in a small, square room with stark-white walls and a white-tiled floor. The only furniture is two chairs and a wooden desk pushed up against one wall. A lone window overlooks a hallway, where guards and officials move back and forth.

I feel like a caged animal with no privacy. Anyone walking by can look in and see what I'm doing. That's annoying, so I stand and push my chair over to the table and rest my head on my arm. I'll rest here and wait until someone comes for me.

Just about to close my eyes, there is a quick rapping at the door. I sit up to see two faces peek in with wide smiles. They have sharp features and light-brown hair, but one of them has forest-green eyes and the other jade.

“Do you remember us?” one of them asks.

“I do,” I say, sitting up straight. They’re the first familiar faces I’ve seen since I arrived here. “You’re the brothers who were with Remington the night he kidnapped me.”

They both laugh and nod. The one with forest-green eyes steps in and holds out a hand. “I’m Evander and he’s Emery,” he says, thumbing over his shoulder. “To this day I still can’t get over you kicking the Captain in the face and breaking his nose.”

I chuckle, thinking back to that night. It seems like that incident happened such a long time ago, but it’s really only been a few months.

“We just heard the news and had to come visit you.”

Evander leans in. “I think it’s bullshit.”

“I do too,” Emery adds. “Even if you did those things they’re accusing you of, you should be allowed a pass for going to Avka and helping save our rulers.”

“It won’t happen,” I sigh. “Especially when the ones who want me in here are royals themselves.”

Evander leans in and whispers. “For what it’s worth, I never thought the marriage arrangement was fair. No one does that anymore. The Prince of Terr was blindsided once the papers were signed.”

“Do you know where Prince Kage is?” I ask hopefully.

He shakes his head. “They’ve probably got him in the wing where they hold the royals.”

I sigh, feeling completely clueless about anything happening outside these four, small walls. “Thank you.”

“Hey, you two shouldn’t be in there,” a female voice snaps. She looks in, her sea-blue eyes shooting daggers at me, just as

they did when I first arrived. She was the receptionist at the building where I had my assessment done. If I remember correctly, her name is Aurora, and she was very flirty with Rem. She gives me a wicked grin that makes my skin crawl. “Leave, before I turn you both in,” she says, then throws her nose up in the air and walks away.

Evander holds up his hand. “Good luck,” he says, and his brother echoes him before he shuts the door behind them.

My mind goes to Kage, hoping they’re treating him well. He’s done nothing wrong. He wouldn’t be in this mess if it weren’t for me, but if I hadn’t come, he would have to marry that viper and would be stuck in misery for the rest of his life... a puppet to the rulers of Asteri.

There are voices outside, but I can’t make out what they’re saying. Then, Chancellor Wessex walks by the window, knocks twice, and enters the room, frustration knitting his brow.

“Elara, my dear,” he says, walking up to the desk and placing a folder with paperwork on it. “We’re leaving soon for the hearing. They’ll ask you questions, but I’ll try to answer most of them for you. Don’t speak unless absolutely necessary.” I nod as he closes his eyes and shakes his head. “They know you’re a threat. They’ll try to twist the truth. If you are unsure of anything, don’t answer, okay?”

“Okay,” I say, my pulse racing and breath quickening. I reach out with my cuffed hands and hold his. “Thank you, Chancellor, for defending me when you should be on vacation.”

“It’s not your fault, my dear. I’ll do my best.”

There is another knock on the door. The Chancellor grabs his folder and steps aside as two Central Court guards enter. One is from Terr with dark hair and eyes, and the other is from Sol with red hair and amber eyes.

“Stand,” the red-haired guard says, but the dark-haired one takes my arm and helps me to my feet.

“Thank you,” I say, and he gives me a nod. It seems like Central Court guards from Terr are still loyal to Terr.

The Chancellor takes the lead as we head into the stark-white hallway, and I can’t help but notice the expressions of those passing by. Some greet me with a smile, a few cast disdainful sneers, while others simply stare with genuine curiosity.

We proceed through a pair of double doors and enter a room where the rulers are seated in a half circle. Behind them, on a raised platform, officials from each kingdom sit. Rows of chairs are lined up, facing them, and are filled with random people I have never seen before. Probably here because they heard the gossip.

I keep my gaze fixed on the floor ahead, intentionally avoiding eye contact with anyone, and am guided to a row of chairs at the front, facing the rulers and officials.

“Please, have a seat,” the guard from Terr tells me before he and the other guard depart to position themselves against the wall. The Chancellor settles down beside me, his knee bouncing up and down with nervousness.

The entire white room emits a coldness, and not only in temperature. I know that the King of Terr is seated somewhere before me, but I dare not glance in his direction. What does he think of me now? He’d extended me an invitation to join him for lunch at the palace, and now we find ourselves in a hearing regarding my alleged forbidden relationship with his son.

There is a sudden change in the atmosphere. That familiar buzz of power brushes against my skin and hums through my bones. Kage is here. I desperately want to turn around and catch a glimpse of him, but keep my eyes trained on my hands twisting anxiously around each other.

Wessex leans over and places his large, clammy hand over mine. “Don’t worry, my dear. We’ll make it through this,” he tries to assure me, and I nod and give him a sad smile in return.



The entire room stands, except for the royals, as a tall man donning a white robe and gold sash enters from a small door on the right of the room and heads front and center to the stand. He's got blond hair and blue eyes, and my stomach twists with nausea, realizing this is the judge. He's no doubt from Asteri, and I wonder if the Queen bought him, too.

The judge begins to speak in a bunch of legal jargon, describing the proceedings, and most of it goes right over my head. He then reads the list of supposed evidence that is incriminating both me and Kage.

"Prince Kage Dargan, please proceed to the front," he says, and my heart thunders in my chest, so loud it's reverberating in my ears. My stomach twists and breath quickens as I hear him behind me, moving toward the front.

Then, there is silence and a heaviness in the air. I glance to the side of me, where he's stopped. Those alluring, dark depths rimmed in gold are pinned on me, a smile adorning those sinful lips. He gives me a nod before he looks away and moves to the front where he stands.

Why did he do that? Does he want people to believe that we're together? Because the way he was looking at me is not the way a man looks at a woman he's not involved with.

The door in the back bursts open and I turn to see Cyrus trudging in.

"I'm sorry," he exhales, waving a hand in the air. "Please proceed," he says, making his way toward the front. He shoos Chancellor Wessex out of the seat next to me, then plops down and leans over.

"I came as soon as the Captain told me," he whispers and pats my knee. "I'll make sure they don't take advantage of you."

I sigh in relief. "Thank you," I say, wanting to hug him. Having him here, knowing that he once oversaw Central Court, gives me the needed support I was lacking.

The Asteri judge clears his throat, his narrowed gaze on Cyrus. "You no longer run Central Court, Cyrus. Why are you

here?”

Cyrus stands. “Am I not allowed, Magistrate?”

“Of course. But being a previous member of the court, you should remain nonpartisan.”

“Since her arrival, I have been tasked with finding Elara’s true origin. Should the need arise, I am prepared to provide impartial and honest feedback to the court.”

The Magistrate nods.

“Prince Dargan, you have been brought here because of several claims made against you. We’ll address the first. You are charged with the murder of a citizen of Nahla.”

Kage shakes his head and grins. “The man is, in fact, alive and in one of our cells in Terr.”

I glance up for the first time to see the rulers. The King of Terr’s face is hard and stern, while the Queen of Asteri’s eyes widen slightly with the news.

“I’ll gladly return him to Nahla, but fair warning, he’s a bit damaged,” Kage says with a chuckle.

“Do you think that’s funny?” The Magistrate booms.

Kage’s eyes go completely black. “That wanted criminal entered our kingdom with one intention. To murder Elara. He stabbed her with a blade spelled to kill.” His eyes slide to me. “We were lucky to have found a cure.”

The Queen’s eyes gleam with malevolence and the Magistrate quickly moves on.

“You are also charged with engaging in an illicit affair with Elara, and it is said she transferred power to you. Do you deny it?”

Cyrus interrupts before Kage can respond. “I was the one responsible for overseeing the power transfer,” he says. A few gasps escape from those in the room behind us. “Elara was chosen to lead the mission to rescue the rulers on Avka. Her powers were suppressed as an infant before being abandoned on Earth, and during her assessment, I felt that residual power

seeping through the barrier. In order for her to lead this mission successfully, we had to transfer that residual power. As we all know, making a request to Central Court can take forever. Waiting was not an option with the mission approaching in days.

“Prince Dargan was the only one who I believed possessed the strength to absorb the residual power. So, I proposed he carry out the transfer, and he agreed. I was present to supervise the procedure which was performed in my office.” He pauses and slides his eyes to every ruler. “I accept full responsibility for this accusation, but the mission’s success depended on our action, and you’re all here because of what we did.” Cyrus raises his hands and shrugs like he rests his case.

“I agree with Cyrus,” one ruler speaks, who has shoulder-length, light brown hair, a full beard, and the brightest green eyes I have ever seen. He must be the King of Doone, Sebastian’s father. “Prince Dargan should not be punished for aiding in the mission to save us.”

“I also agree,” the silver-haired King of Nahla speaks. “As for the criminal who entered Terr—” He turns to the King of Terr. “If you return him to me, there will be no charges against your son. I will also ensure that the man faces the consequences for his crimes.”

The King of Terr nods. “You will have him in your custody by the end of the day.”

Two charges have been seemingly overturned, and I’m feeling that heavy burden on my chest slowly lift.

The Magistrate looks at Kage. “What remains is the contract that has been signed by two kingdoms, sealing the arrangement for your marriage with the Princess of Asteri. This contract also seals your fidelity.”

“How can fidelity be upheld when there is clearly *no* love present in the relationship?” Cyrus bursts out, standing to his feet.

The judge pins him with a glare. “One more outburst, Cyrus, and you will be removed from this room.”

“Respectfully, Magistrate, it appears that *someone* is making baseless attempts to overthrow the Prince of Terr in order to claim his throne and kingdom.” He again throws his hands up and then sits.

If I could wrap my arms around this man right now, I would.

“Prince Dargan,” the Magistrate speaks, ignoring Cyrus. “Do you reject the claim of having an illicit affair with the charged?” His finger aims at me.

The entire room holds its breath.

Kage turns to me with the smile of a lover and speaks three words that change our world. Three words that shatter it to pieces.

“I. Do. Not.”

The room goes wild with gasps and whispers.

“Oh no,” Cyrus sighs, and Chancellor Wessex drops his head in defeat.

My eyes burn with fresh tears as I shake my head at him. Why? Why is he doing this? He will lose everything.

“I knew it!” The Queen of Asteri slams her hand on the table and stands. Her outburst confirms she was the one behind this all along. “This is grounds for execution!”

And there is her ultimate goal.

“She pursued the Prince, knowing he was in a committed arrangement.”

My eyes snap to her wicked glare. Her finger, sharp and accusatory, is pointed directly at me.

“She saved you, and this is how you want to repay her? By executing her?” Cyrus shouts.

Kage stands to his feet. “There will be no execution,” he says and the noise in the room quiets.

“You have no say of what can or cannot be done here, Prince Dargan. This is my domain,” the Magistrate says.

Kage's eyes find mine again. "I have reason to believe that Elara is the daughter of the late Empress... the one I was arranged to marry before the contract with Asteri was signed."

Again, the room bursts with gasps and whispers.

*Kage.*

"Why is he doing this?" I breathe, my chest aching.

"To save you." Cyrus's voice is barely audible as he cautions me. "If you deny his claim, there will be grave consequences for lying to the court, especially regarding the Empress."

"Silence!" The Magistrate's voice thunders loudly in a burst of air. Quiet falls, except for the deafening thuds of my racing heart.

"Prince Dargan. To assert such a claim is heresy. It has long been verified that the Empress's child is laid to rest in the tomb with her, and that child carries the Empress's signet on her forehead." He directs a finger at me. "A signet she does not possess."

The room comes alive with inaudible murmurs.

"The girl *is* connected to the Empress," a voice from the back announces, capturing everyone's attention. My breath catches when I turn to see a man standing in the back row.

*Acacius.*

"Acacius Terrowin," the Magistrate speaks. "You have no grounds to speak in this court."

"I think I am more than qualified, as I am the one who delivered Elara to Earth."

Kage's eyes widen, as does everyone else's at the royal table and above.

Kage looks at me with an expression I cannot read. I want to speak to him in his mind, but I can't. There must be magic blocking it.

Acacius moves to the center of the aisle. "Before the Empress died, she bound Elara's powers and instructed me to

take her to Earth.”

“For what reason?” the Magistrate asks.

“That, I do not know.”

“If she is somehow connected to the Empress, she cannot be executed,” the King of Terr states.

“This is all hearsay,” the Queen growls. “How do we know this is the truth, or if they are spouting lies?”

“Acacius lived and worked with the Empress,” Cyrus says assertively.

Acacius grins and crosses his arms over his chest. “Also, I have no interest in engaging in pointless debates unless absolutely necessary.” Acacius moves to stand in front of me, taking my hands in his. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, Elara.” I nod, my emotions running down my cheeks.

“Are you telling us she is royalty?” the Queen of Asteri snips.

Acacius smiles at me, then turns to face the Queen. “I am,” he replies, and the world around me stops spinning. I reach over and grab Cyrus’s hand for support. He tenderly squeezes my hand in return.

“Are you claiming she is the daughter of the Empress?” the Magistrate questions with a hardness in his voice.

“I cannot confirm nor deny this claim, but know she belongs to someone closely related to the Empress,” Acacius replies.

“Hearsay,” the Queen spits again, pinning the Magistrate with a glare.

The Magistrate pauses, then looks our way. “If Elara is indeed directly related to the Empress, and it is claimed she is royalty, then she must prove it.” He looks at me, and I can see evil intentions behind what he is about to say. “Elara will be taken to The Fates, where she will compete with five others to prove her worth, as did every ruler here. Should she survive, she will be transported to the Isle of Beasts, where—if she is indeed a royal—will find her familiar. If she is not of royal

blood, then the island itself will judge her and see to her execution.”

The room bursts with too many voices, but they are all muffled. I don't know what The Fates are, but Acacius told me about the Isle of Beasts. I wanted to go there, but only to visit. Not to become food for a dragon or leviathan.

“Are you fucking insane?” Kage bellows. “Every ruler here survived The Fates because they possess powers. Elara has none! Besides, even if she survives that place, no one has been to the Isle of Beasts for centuries. Even if she had a familiar beast, it may not recognize her because they've lived in the wild for too long.”

The air is stifling. I can't breathe. I can't focus. The murmurs in the room are deafening.

“Silence!” the Magistrate bellows on another burst of wind, causing everyone to cover their ears. “I have spoken. One more outburst and everyone in this room will be removed!”

Acacius moves to stand in front of me, pointing at the rulers. “I know most of the royals here have never been to the Isle of Beasts to claim their familiars.”

The Magistrate's eyes narrow on Acacius. “That is beside the point. No one here can prove she is a royal, or that she is connected to the Empress. She also doesn't have access to her powers. For what she has done, we have grounds to execute her right now.

“However, if she can prove—what you all claim she is—then she will survive The Fates and The Isle of Beasts.” He slams his fist down on the stand. “Prince Dargan will be released to return to his kingdom. If anyone tries to rescue her, she will be immediately executed. In three days, Elara will be delivered to The Fates to undergo her trial. Until then, she will be held here at Central Court. My word is final,” he says, then leaves the room.

I'm numb. Everything he said makes no sense to me. I've lived on Earth. I don't know the first thing about their trials or rituals.

The guards move toward me.

Acacius turns to me with wild eyes and grabs my tattooed arm, covered by my uniform. He recites a spell and I feel the tattoo burn before he wraps me in his arms and whispers into my ear. "I've hidden it. It will help you when necessary." He then pulls away, his dark eyes pinning on mine. "I believe in you, Elara. I believe you can survive."

I shake my head. "What are The Fates?"

"An island off the Western Realm. A place created to test the strength, intelligence, loyalty, adaptability, and integrity of those taken there. It's filled with dangerous obstacles and dark magic."

My entire body trembles and tears flow down my face.

"Elara," Kage yells, fighting the guards that have surrounded him, keeping him from me. My eyes snap to him.

"Come back to me," he begs. "Promise me you'll return."

"I love you," I mouth the words, and his eyes close, his chest heaving.

"Fuck!" he roars.

"Elara, I'll do what I can to overturn this," Cyrus says as the guards push him away.

"Stay strong, my dear," Chancellor Wessex adds.

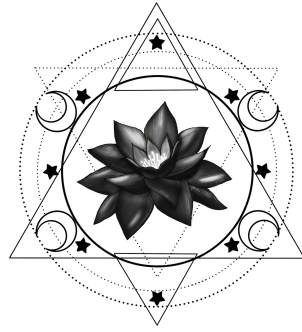
"Min Vesmír," Kage cries out. I fight the guards to turn and see his anguished expression. "I'm sorry."

I shake my head. "Don't be," I sob.

"Come back to me," he pleads. He points to his chest, tapping it with a finger.

He must mean the bone marker. I'll need to conceal it and find a way to bring it with me.





# CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

## ELARA

My room is about the same size as the holding cell, only now there is a small bathroom with a toilet and sink attached. Dinner was some kind of stew with a roll, and even though I felt nauseous, I forced it down, knowing I have three days to keep up my energy and stay healthy.

I was given sweatpants and a shirt, but I begged the guard to let me keep my uniform for the journey to The Fates. The uncertainty surrounding this competition and trial has every part of me twisted in knots. I'm at a complete disadvantage here and they know it.

According to the Magistrate, there are five other competitors, and if I survive, I'll be taken to the Isle of Beasts. These assholes really want me dead.

Thanks to Acacius's spell, the dragon tattoo on my forearm is no longer visible. I wish he could have done the same to Kage's bone marker and the bracelet, but I'm thinking they'll allow me to keep Oren's branch if I use it as a hairpin. Hopefully, they'll see it as an accessory and not a weapon.

I lay on the cot and close my eyes. I hear a key slide into my door, and Rem enters when it opens.

"Rem?" I exhale, and he presses a finger to his lips.

“I can’t stay. I’m not supposed to be here, but I’ve called in a favor from a friend.”

I leap off the bed, flinging myself into his arms. My sobs echo in the room. “How is he?”

“Oh, I see how it is,” he chuckles. “You’re not the least bit concerned about me?”

I giggle and lean back, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. “Of course, I am. Where were you today?”

“I’m sorry, Spitfire. With the King and Kage gone, it is my duty to stay back and protect the kingdom.” His saddened eyes meet mine. “I heard everything that happened, and I’m so sorry.”

I fall back into his arms, happy he’s here. “They want me dead, Rem, and it looks like they’ll finally get their wish.”

“Hey,” he says, pulling me back so he can look directly into my eyes. “Even without your power, you can beat them. You possess every quality to make it through this trial.”

“I don’t know what to expect.”

“No one does. The island adapts and sets challenges to test each individual.”

He turns to the door. “Kage wanted me to give you this,” he says, slipping a vial into my palm. “It’s from the healer. It will help you sleep.”

“And him?” I ask.

“You know he’ll be a complete wreck until you return,” he says. “So please, return to him. To *us*. We need you.” He pauses as if trying to remember something. “Oh. Very important. In your uniform, there is a secret pocket in the chest on the inside. Put the bone marker in it. It will be undetectable.”

“Okay,” I breathe, nodding.

There is a soft knock on the door. “My time’s up. I had to come to let you know we will be expecting your safe return.”

He places his hands on my shoulders. “Kage also wanted me to give you this.”

He removes an envelope from his pocket and offers it to me.

“There is a spell on it, so once you open it, you will have ten minutes to read it before it disintegrates.”

“Thank you, Rem. I’m glad you’re here, even if it is for a few minutes.”

He leans forward and presses a kiss to my forehead before wrapping me back in his arms. “You’re a survivor, Elara. A warrior. Everything you’ve been through in your life has sharpened you just for this. Just keep breathing. Keep moving, and before you know it, you’ll be back in Terr where you belong.” He pulls back. “You’re never alone. You’ll be taking all of us with you.”

I nod, hot tears brimming in my eyes. “Please tell Kage to take care of himself. Tell him I will return to him.”

“I will,” Rem says, nudging my shoulder and heading for the door. “I’ll treat you to an Astral Puff when you come back.”

“That offer might just make me cheat death,” I chuckle. I notice he’s using the door. “Why can’t you jump out of here?”

“The cells here are spelled. No one can use their powers here.” He opens the door. “See you soon, Spitfire.” He winks and then leaves, taking a part of me with him.

I quickly retrieve the bone marker from its hiding spot under the mattress and conceal it in the hidden pocket of my uniform. It’s completely hidden from view. Without wasting time, I fold my uniform back up and push it under my bed, then take the note from Kage and sit cross-legged on my cot. I bring the paper up to my nose and inhale, catching a subtle trace of his scent. My stomach twists as I carefully unfold it.

Inside is the most beautiful handwriting I have ever seen, and I have ten minutes to absorb it all.

Min Vesmír ,

Since I left you, a constant, heavy ache has settled in my heart. One that refuses to lift.

I'm helpless to save you this time. Doing so will only force their hands and I will not be the cause of your untimely death. They want you gone, but you are not allowed to leave because the thought of a life without you is unbearable to me.

You are mine, and as we have proven, not even death can claim you, so I beg you to return to me soon. The kingdom is shrouded in darkness, a gloom that refuses to dissipate until your light returns. My heart longs for you, a relentless yearning that consumes my very being. My soul, and my shadows, thirst for your presence, craving the warmth and comfort only you can provide.

When you return... when you survive *The Fates and Isle of Beasts*, I will bring you to the sacred valley, where we will perform the ancient ritual that will bind our fates and hearts together, forever.

Come back to me, Min Vesmír. I'll be waiting, fiercely guarding your heart.

*Kage*

—Always keep the bone marker on you. Should anything happen, I will come for you and face the fires of hell to rescue you, even if it means sacrificing my soul.

*I love you, Elara.*

“Kage,” I breathe, pressing the letter against my chest.

I read it again. His beautiful letters blurring with fresh tears. Every word he wrote has crashed upon me like the relentless waves of the ocean, leaving me utterly breathless. He will be the reason for my survival—the oxygen in my lungs helping me breathe, the motivation in my legs to keep moving, and the magnetic force in my chest guiding me forward towards *him*. My *home*.

I reread the letter over and over until the spell is triggered and it finally disintegrates in my fingers. Eventually, I fall asleep to the sounds of my sobs.



It's the third day in this gods-forsaken cell. All I've done is exercise and stretch as much as I can to stay strong and limber for whatever the trials will entail. At night, I lie down and listen to my own annoying thoughts. I miss Elwyn. I wish she was here to give me advice or even a pep talk to help me get through this.

I've had a lot of time to think about who I am, and even from the visions I had, I'm still coming up short. There is no way I can be the daughter of the Empress. I saw her belly, swollen with Elwyn.

Is Acacius my father? He claims I am a royal, but is that true, or was he also trying to save me?

My brain hurts more and more with every crazy scenario it's trying to muster. But those things are slowly dissipating, and a new stress has crept in.

Within hours, I will be taken to an island off the Western Realm I know nothing about. An island called The Fates, where men's grit is tested.

Is this the trial that Alena said will push me to my breaking point and beyond? I'm not sure if I'll ever be ready for something like that. I'll just have to handle each obstacle as it comes and try to make it out of there alive.

There's a knock on the door, and a guard I've never met enters. He has jet-black hair and sky-blue eyes. "Please follow me," he says. "Someone would like to speak to you."

My heart races, thinking it's Kage or Rem. But I would gladly take Maeve or Talon. I agree and follow him out of the room and down the hall to another cell on the right.

I sense something is off, and when I enter the room, I realize why. I'm about to walk out when she speaks up.

“Thank you, Ric. You can go,” Vera tells the guard and I’m instantly put on edge. “Are you afraid, Changeling?” she scoffs, and I pause. “I hope you are, and you should rightfully be so for what is about to happen to you.”

She’s baiting me, and it’s taking everything within me not to bite. How the hell did she get in here? Where are the other guards? The only thing I can think of is that she paid them off.

It’s obvious she’s pulling the strings here, but I won’t cower. That part of my life is over.

With a determined look, I pivot to face her and fold my arms across my chest. “Why are you here, Princess? You already got what you wanted.”

“Not really,” Vera says, looking at her bright-red, manicured nails. “What I really want is for you to die.”

I laugh at her, this mean girl of Celestria. “Do you really think Kage will ever love you?”

Her eyes shoot up to me. “He will eventually learn to love me once you are gone.” Vera slowly rises from the table she’s sitting behind and ambles over to me. I stand my ground, even though I know she could kill me with one swipe of her hand. “You will never return from The Fates, and if you do somehow survive, the Isle of Beasts will devour you alive.”

“And what if I survive that?” *Keep your mouth shut, Elara.*

“Oh, believe me. You won’t. If you ever return to Terr... it will be in shreds.”

I’ve had enough of this bitch and her bullshit.

“Why don’t you just kill me now?”

She gives me a wicked smile. “Oh, believe me. I’ve rolled that idea over in my mind too many times. But I would be charged, and that death would be too easy. This way is a lot more exciting. Everyone in Celestria will watch as you fail at The Fates. I will watch, only to see you suffer.”

“Watch?”

She leans back on the desk. “Yes, watch. The trials of The Fates are broadcast through all Celestria. Your death will be witnessed by all five kingdoms.” Her smile widens. “I’ve never been a fan, but this time, I will eagerly watch and cast my bets.”

I shake my head and turn to walk out. “You should be dead, Changeling, but somehow you keep coming back to fucking life.” She shoots daggers at me with her eyes. “You should have never come to Celestria.”

Again, I should bite my tongue and walk away, but my stupid mouth never knows when to shut up. And if I’m going to die, I might as well go without regret. I turn and walk up to her, looking her directly in the eye.

“I had no choice. I was forced to come here against my will. But this is my home, just as much as it is yours. You were born with a silver spoon shoved up your ass. You’re a wicked bitch, Vera, who doesn’t deserve your title.”

She moves, standing directly in front of me, and without a word, swipes her red nail across the top of my hand. It slices deep and blood flows. Then she throws me a token bandage and walks past me.

When she reaches the door, she pauses and looks at me with disgust.

“It’s a slow-moving poison that will take days to reach your heart. The dagger should have killed you last night, and I’m pretty pissed it didn’t. This time, you’ll be on your own, and will have no one to save you.” She twiddles her fingers at me. “See you in the next life, Changeling.”

The dark-haired, blue-eyed guard, Ric, is back. He gives her a knowing nod and she smiles at him. I should have realized he was with her when she greeted him by name. He grabs my arm roughly and escorts me back to my room, shutting the door behind me.

I immediately make a beeline to the bathroom and begin sucking on my hand and spitting out blood. If she did poison me, I want to get rid of as much of it as I can. I know it’s been



done and works for snake bites on Earth, and this viper left a deep mark. I suck and spit blood until I'm feeling woozy. Rushing to the bed, I rip off a piece of the sheet and wrap it tightly around the wound, then plop down on the mattress and stare up at the stark-white ceiling.

Gods, I'm already at a disadvantage going into the trials. I have no power, and now I'm injured. How the hell am I supposed to survive?

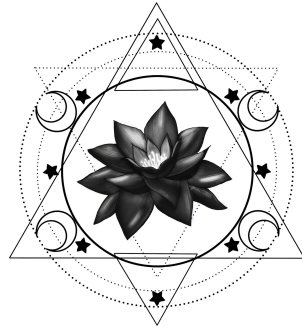
*Return to me.*

Kage's voice in my head will be my new mantra.

I'll keep pushing, keep fighting, keep breathing, until I have no breath left.

Now, my motivation will not only be to return to Kage, but it will be to beat Vera. She wants to watch me suffer and die. But I'll prove her wrong.

Let the trials begin...



# CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

## ELARA

There is a knock at the door, and one guard walks in while the other posts outside. I must have fallen asleep.

“Wake up, Elara. You have to get dressed.” Glancing up, I stare into Evander’s emerald eyes. I grin and stretch, reaching under the bed to grab my uniform, then shuffle off to the bathroom.

My body aches and I feel exhausted, hoping it’s only because I lost a lot of blood, and not because of the poison Vera claims to have given me.

After slipping on my uniform, I do my hair, twisting it up into a knot, then place Oren’s branch into it, acting as a hairpin. It looks legit. I hope they let me keep it.

As soon as I step out of the bathroom, Evander notices my hand. He takes my wrist and raises it so he can inspect it.

“What happened?” he asks.

I’m in no mood to lie and feel I can trust him.

“I had a visit from my archenemy a few hours ago, and she left me with a gift,” I murmur.

“What?” Worry tightly knits his brow. “She’s not allowed in here. Especially not near you.”

I shrug. “Well, someone dropped the ball, probably the guard Ric, because she came and not only threatened me, but sliced my hand and said it was poisoned.”

“Ric? There aren’t any guards named Ric here,” Evander says with a crumpled brow. “I’ll report it. But first, I’ll get a healer. Hold on.”

Evander rushes out of the room and returns a few minutes later with a healer. The man is older, with silver hair and eyes, and moves like a snail. He inspects my hand, puts a salve on it, and wraps it with a bandage.

“Will she be okay?” Evander asks.

“Yes,” he replies. “It will hurt for a few days, but she will be fine.”

I breathe out a sigh of relief. “Thank you, sir.”

He gathers his things, tips his head to me, and walks out.

“It’s time to go,” Evander says. “I have to pat you down and take any jewelry on your person.”

My pulse is racing, but I agree knowing this is his job, and hold my arms out to my sides.

“I’ll need the bracelet,” he says sadly.

Nodding, I reluctantly slide it off my wrist and hand it to him, asking if he can make sure it gets back to Kage because it was his mother’s. Jumping to Nahla would put Naida in danger, anyway, so it’s probably for the best I avoid the escape it would bring. Next, he looks at my hairpin.

“It’s a hair accessory, a piece of wood I found while hiking,” I lie.

He reaches up to touch it and shrugs. “That should be fine,” he says, and inside, I’m cheering.

He pats me down and I hold my breath, hoping he won’t find the bone marker. “Alright, you’re good to go,” he says. Inside, I’m thrilled, knowing I’ll be taking a piece of Kage with me.

I follow Evander and the other red-headed guard down the hall and continue until we reach a large room. I remember this room. It's the one where Talon jumped us to Avka.

The room is bustling with people, and I spot Faust, Asteri's Chancellor, just ahead of us.

"Why is she not cuffed?" he asks.

Evander steps to my side. "Her hand is injured."

Faust looks down, a smirk playing on the corners of his lips. The bastard must know about Vera's visit.

"Come," Evander says, taking my arm and guiding me to the front of the room where five others are standing. There are three men among them, all of them towering and muscular, while two are women. One of the women resembles a potential contender among the men, and the other has a slender, runner-like appearance. As they all glare at me, I notice their hair and eye colors are different. They're bi-racial.

"Hello," I say in an attempt to introduce myself. None of them reply, except the muscular female who has tanned-skin, short brown hair, and green eyes.

"We don't talk to the dead," she says.

They are all looking at me like I'm shit they just stepped in. I get it. I'm new here, but not by choice. This is my sentence... my punishment for falling for the Prince of Terr.

"Why are they participating?" I whisper to Evander.

He leans over to me. "Each one of them possesses some royal blood, but as you can see, they are products of mixed marriages between the kingdoms. They are here to prove their worth so they can claim their royalty. They'll never rule a kingdom, but the title of *royal* is a coveted benefit within Celestria. This event is a big deal in Celestria. Only five participants are selected every fifth year. You just happened to be thrown into the mix at the last moment, so they aren't too happy about it."

"Why? Everyone who passes the tests and survives will be deemed a royal, right?"

“No, Elara.” His face crumples, and he slowly shakes his head. “There will only be one survivor of The Fates. One champion who will take the title.”

“That can’t be,” I exhale, shaking my head, and suddenly feel the world shifting under my feet. “I thought The Fates is a place created to test each individual’s strengths.”

“It is, but it is also a competition. You will not only be trying to survive the island, but your opponents as well.”

Why didn’t anyone explain this clearly to me? No wonder Vera was so convinced I would fail. And now, I understand why my opponents are looking at me like they want to eat me.

“Will they be able to use their powers?”

Evander nods, and all the wind of hope in my sails deflates. I am at a complete disadvantage here.

“This isn’t fair. I’ll be taken out as soon as we jump.”

Evander shakes his head. “Each of you will be taken to a separate location on the island. He’ll explain the rules now.”

He points to a man in a navy-blue suit who enters and stands before the six of us. Everyone in the crowd quiets and gathers around.

“Welcome, participants,” he greets. He’s an older gentleman, possibly seventies by Earth standards, with graying red hair and piercing green eyes. “Over the next seven days, your strength and worth will be put to the ultimate test. However, only one of you will survive. Across the island, there are *now* six challenges that you must conquer. Completing each one will lead you to the next, and with every victory, you will obtain a magical tattoo as proof.

“During these trials, you will be tested for strength, intelligence, loyalty, adaptability, and integrity. Once you have successfully passed all five tests, survived the elements, and remain alive, you will advance to the heart of the island. There, the surviving participants will engage in a fight to the death, until one champion remains.”

*Good gods.* This is the Celestria edition of the Hunger Games. As a devoted fan, I cherished the series and checked them out repeatedly from the library. But bloody hell, this is no longer a fictional tale. This is reality, and I am about to enter a competition—alone—where powerful Celestrians, possessing elemental powers, will attempt to end my life.

“Evander, I can’t do this.” I’m grasping onto his arms, wanting him to take me away. Anywhere but here. “I don’t know the first thing about this competition. I’m new here, remember?”

He steadies me. “I’ve watched a few competitions, and no participant knows what their trials are until they get there.”

“Why do they hold it during the winter?”

“Because that is the nature of the competition. In order to survive, you must not only overcome the trials, and the other competitors, but also the weather.”

I’m drowning in dread and despair. They know I have no power. They know I am new to Celestria and know nothing about these trials. Vera’s wicked team is making a final, desperate move to end my life, and I’m terrified that this time they might succeed.

“Breathe,” Evander whispers. It’s then I realize how quick my breaths are, I’m on the verge of hyperventilating. “Listen,” he says, grabbing my shoulders and steadying me. “Your competition has also never been to The Fates. They know just as much as you do. The only advantage they have over you is their power. You put up a fight on Earth that impressed all of us. Find that same fire, hold on to it, and I know you will do well.”

“Doing well won’t be enough to survive against power.”

He grins at me. “You have the smarts and the skills to outmaneuver them. The Captain calls you Spitfire for a reason.” I sigh and feel something brush against my arm. Both Evander and I twist our heads to see a man with spiked green hair and bright green eyes, holding a funky-looking camera aimed at us.

“This is our underdog,” he says, facing the camera back at himself. “The Changeling from Terr, whose power is unfortunately bound inside of her. She led the team to Avka who safely returned our rulers, and word is, she is related to our late Empress.” He points the camera back at me. “Would you like to say something to Celestria, Elara?”

*Good gods.* My enemies are all watching, probably laughing their asses off, thinking they’ve finally won. Fuck them.

I straighten my back and feel Evander stand at attention right behind me. His closeness provides me with some confidence, knowing I am not completely alone here. Not yet.

Gazing directly into the camera, I slip on my mask and hide my fear.

“When I survive The Fates, and prove my worth, I *will* return to Terr... to that sacred valley and claim what is mine.” I place my blood-stained, bandaged hand over my heart, smile, and bow my head.

“Okay! A few, but powerful and cryptic words. I love your confidence,” the man holding the camera says before moving away.

It was a strategic move, not only showing I am injured, but it was also a message to Kage—deliberately placing my hand over my chest, where his bone marker hides, letting him know that I read his letter and I also claim him. I wonder if he is even watching this? I didn’t see any screens in the palace. None of the bedrooms have them either.

I may enter as the underdog here, but like Rem said, I’ve been groomed for this. I have skills they don’t possess.

Six Central Guards, hailing from Terr, come forward until there is one standing in front of each of us. I smile at my jumper, the dark-haired, dark-eyed boy who led me from the holding room the other day, and he smiles back.

“Good luck, Elara. I look forward to seeing you again.” Evander says, then winks before moving away.

“What’s your name?” I whisper to my jumper.



“Kason,” he replies.

“It’s good to see a familiar face, Kason. I’m, Elara.”

“I know,” he says, giving me a dimpled grin. “I was there at the court meeting.”

“You mean that shit show?”

“Yes,” he chuckles.

Gentle music suddenly plays as a beautiful woman in red walks down toward us, carrying six red envelopes. She hands one to each jumper.

“Within these six envelopes is the location where you will take your participant,” the navy-blue suit explains. “These locations include: The Bluff, The Gorge, The Bogs, The Blades, The Nine Stones, and because there is a sixth participant in this event, we have added a new location!” He raises his arms in the air, for a dramatic effect, and everyone in the room gasps. “The Tower of Gods.”

The room starts clapping and cheering.

“Once the jumpers deliver their participants, they will have one minute to return. Jumpers, you may now open your envelopes.”

Kason turns away from the others and tears open the top of our envelope and discreetly shows me my location.

TOWER OF GODS
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Shit. It sounds imposing. I’m going in completely blind, so I’ll have to adapt and weather the storms as they come.

*Return to me.*

I hear Kage’s voice echoing in my mind, and it motivates me.

Suspenseful music picks up, and cheers erupt around the room. I see the dude with the camera walking around, hyping everyone up.

This feels like a twisted horror story. A nightmare I can't wake up from. When will it end? I hope not when I'm buried six feet under.

"Are you ready?" Kason asks, holding out his hand to me.

"No," I exhale, taking his hand. "But the Tower of Gods is ready for me."

"I believe in you," he whispers.

"Thank you."

There is a clock on a big screen, ticking down.

"Ten. Nine. Eight," everyone in the room chants.

All six jumpers open portals to their destinations.

"Seven." Pulse racing. "Six." Heart hammering. "Five." Breath quickening.

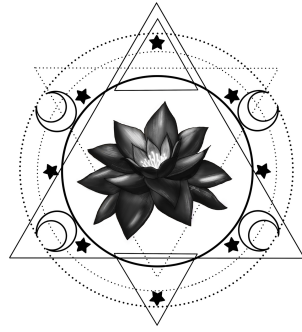
I place my free hand over my heart, over the bone marker. Rubbing my fingers over the place it's supposed to be, but... *no*. I don't feel it. *It's gone*.

"Four." Kason looks at me.

"Three." I shake my head as dread coils around my gut and chest.

"Two." Fear suffocates me.

"One." We jump.



# EPILOGUE

## VERA

With a wide smile on my face, I confidently stroll into the Magistrate's office. My mother is already there, sitting on a plush chair with a cup of tea in her hand. She glances up at me with a gleam in her eye.

"Did you get what you needed?" she asks.

"I did," I say, my eyes sliding to Ric, my cousin, who reaches into his pocket and pulls out the bone marker Kage had given the Changeling. Holding out my hand, he places it in my palm.

As a favor to my mother, the Magistrate hired Alaric as a Central Court guard for a day. He also had the posting guards in the Changeling's wing leave to attend a very important meeting so we could slip in and visit that whore.

"It was right where you told me it would be," Ric smirks.

We have a few Terr guards at Central Court who are loyal to the Magistrate. Being threatened with one's life is a wonderful tool that can get even the bravest guard talking.

"Good," my mother says, placing her cup down, crossing one leg over the other. "Sometimes we have to take matters into our own hands, to ensure it's done right. And what about the poison?" Her icy-blue eyes narrow on me.

I lift my finger—the one that has a miniscule blade concealed at the tip, laced with a poison that cannot be detected. “Done,” I say with pride. “The bitch didn’t see it coming.”

A wicked smile rises on my mother’s lips. “What about you, Magistrate?” she asks. My mother stands from her chair and saunters over to him.

He’s sitting at his desk, leaning back as if he doesn’t have a care in the world, and rightfully so. He is a god at Central Court, and my mother has not only bought his loyalty, she’s slipped into his sheets occasionally, ensuring his allegiance.

“Everything has been set up at the Tower of Gods as well,” he says.

My mother runs her palms down his shoulders and over his chest. He groans, his eyes darkening as they slide up to her face. I want to vomit. This stupid, ignorant dick is so easily manipulated.

He glances at me with a smirk. “Your threat to the throne will be eliminated soon, Princess.”

I cannot help but gloat. A triple threat.

With the bone marker gone, Kage won’t be able to rescue her. The Magistrate also set up a deadly obstacle, one he assures will end her, at The Fates trial. Should either of those fail, for any reason, the poison I slashed into her hand will eventually do the job. The witch we procured it from said just a drop into a wound would start the deadly process.

I cannot wait to watch that bitch suffer and die. Kage is mine, but ever since she arrived, his loyalties have been misplaced. She’s put a spell on him, but I’m no longer worried.

“The throne of Terr will soon be yours, my love,” my mother says with a confident smile.

My chest fills with pleasure and satisfaction that soon, everything will be as it should be.

Kage has forced my hand, and even though I know he'll be furious at first, he will eventually have to give in. He *will* learn to love me, and in the future, I will give him an heir.

He has no choice, especially with the contract my mother ensured was precisely and tightly written. With the Magistrate on our side, he will have to comply, or he will lose everything.

I turn toward the exit.

"Where are you going?" my mother asks.

"To visit *my* fiancé," I boast with a saucy grin.

"Give him my regards." She laughs as I head to the Central Court portal jumpers.

My victory is coming. I can already taste its sweetness and can't wait to see the look on Kage's face when he finds out the bone marker he gave her is in my possession.

Tucking it in my pocket, I head out the door.



I can hear the broadcast of The Fates through the hall as I approach his chambers.

The Ebony palace sets up a massive screen in the covered inner courtyard, where citizens can gather and watch the events of The Fates unfold. Kage's balcony overlooks the inner courtyard, and I know he's out there, watching.

"This is our underdog. The Changeling from Terr, whose power is unfortunately bound inside of her. She led the team to Avka who safely returned our rulers, and word is, she is related to our late Empress. Would you like to say something to Celestria, Elara?"

I can just imagine *my* Prince's face, staring at the screen with his attention glued to that Changeling, and my good mood starts to sour. I wait to hear her response before making my presence known.

"When I survive The Fates, and prove my worth, I *will* return to Terr... to that sacred valley and claim what is mine."

I seethe, knowing what she's implying. But that stupid little slut is wrong. Kage is *mine*. She's bewitched him somehow, and I'll prove it one way or another. I've heard enough and am ready to let Kage know he needs to start planning a funeral.

"Kage?" I call as I push through his chamber doors. "There you are," I say, approaching him from behind. He's sitting on the balcony, arms crossed over his chest, ignoring me. I glance at the screen and see her bleeding hand clutched to her heart, and I can't help but grin.

"Watching The Fates competition?" I needle, trying to get him to take his eyes off his whore and look at me.

When he doesn't respond, I huff, losing my patience as he refuses to look away from the screen. "I know you have an infatuation with her, but if she never showed up, we could have had something special. We could have ruled our kingdoms together."

He narrows his eyes at me, finally looking my way. "*She* is not an infatuation."

"Then what is she?" I snap. "Do you think she's your one true love?"

He shakes his head and pins me with an angry glare. "She is a cherished dream and the very essence of my existence. She is the air I breathe and every beat of my heart. She is all the things *you* will never be."

I slam my fists on the table, my limbs visibly shaking. Frustrated tears well in my eyes, but they don't fall. "I know you gave the bone marker to her," I accuse. "And I know you saved her in Avka. But this time, no one will be able to save her."

I tuck my hand in my pocket and pull out the necklace. Opening my palm, Kage's vision goes feral. His chest heaves and his jaw tightens as his shadows burst out and coil around him.

"Where did you get that?" he snaps, reaching for the bone marker.

I close my fist and hide it behind my back. Cackling, a victorious smile rises on my lips as I feel my own power surge through me. “It doesn’t belong to that bitch. I’m your fiancé. The bone marker should belong to me!” I snap back, quickly placing it over my head.

“It may be on your neck,” he says with a coldness that makes me shiver, “but it belongs to her, and her alone.”

He lurches forward, his hand pausing at my throat. I can tell he is holding back the desire to use his Death Dealer powers on me, and I smirk.

“You can’t touch me, Kage Dargan. If you do, you will be placed in a deep, dark cell, where you won’t be able to watch that Changeling die in the challenge.”

“Get out!” he growls, pointing at the door.

My face contorts with hatred as I forcefully remove the bone marker from my neck and throw it onto the ground. I crush it under my foot, shattering it into pieces. Then storm away.

I stop at the sliding door, then turn to face him and laugh. “Just so you know, the injury on her hand is from me. A gift tipped in poison that the dagger should have taken care of. She’ll be dead before the seven days are up.”

His shadows lash out and grab me by the throat, but I look at him and laugh.

“Do it, Kage. Do it,” I push, goading him.

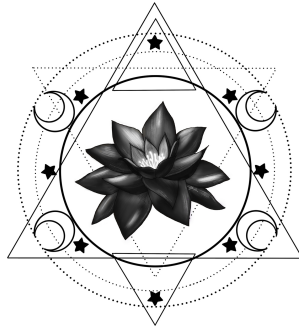
He uses his shadows to haul me through his room and throw me out the door. I collapse in a heap in the hallway and hear his lock engage as I hold my throat, gasping for air. He might hate me now, but once that bitch is out of the way, he’ll see I was just doing him a favor. She’s nothing but a powerless dud, playing damsel in distress. And my fiancé is buying into it. *I* am the only one worthy of Kage Dargan. *I* am the future Queen of Terr. And if he can’t see reason, we will get rid of him, too.



End of Book 2



The story will continue in Book 3!



## NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Hello Dear Reader,

I just wanted to say *THANK YOU SO MUCH* for reading the next book in the Star Kissed Series. I hope you loved this story as much as I loved writing it. Kage and Elara's story has become one of my favorites and can't wait to continue it.

This is set to be a trilogy, but with the numerous things that need to be wrapped up, it might turn into four books.... or not. I'll try to wrap it up in three, however, it might be a lot bigger. But hey, we like big books, right?

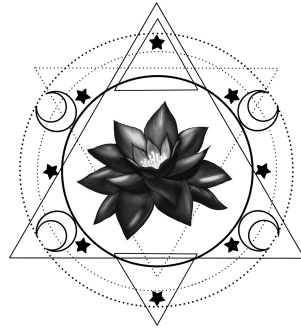
I am shooting to have Book 3 out by late spring/early summer. Follow me for updates on the title, cover, and eventually... the pre-order link.

[Instagram](#) / [TikTok](#) / [Facebook](#) / [Website](#)

I appreciate you for taking the time out of your schedule to read *Those Forbidden Shadows*. If you loved the story and feel inclined, I would love a review. They help so much with the algorithm and get the book seen. But just know, there is absolutely NO pressure to do so. All reviews will be read and appreciated by me.

Thank you, again. I hope to see you around for Book 3!  
xoxo,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. R. R. Tolkien". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small heart symbol at the end.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, as always, I want to thank my husband and family for picking up the slack. There were a lot of long days and nights where I was gone, writing in my cave, and they were so patient, bringing me food, caffeine, and even restocking my peppermints. I am where I am today because of them.

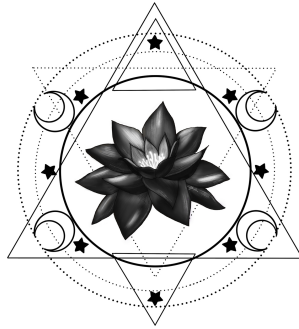
I also want to thank my Alpha/Beta team for reading the early chapters of this story and providing me with wonderful feedback. You all are my Dream Team. Thank you, Halee Harris, Ewelina Rutyna, Karla Bostic, Bernice Brown, Cheree Castellanos, Kimberly Belden, Shawanda Davis and my PA, Amber Garcia, who makes sure I'm on track and gets all my bookish things done.

I want to thank my new editor, Brittany of BookishB Editing, who helped fix some plot holes, gave me wonderful ideas, and polished up the manuscript. I look forward to working with you in the future!

Another thank you to Echo Navarro, who is in my reader group, for naming Valr (It's Old Norse and means hawk). Also, to Kason, the guy who works at Smith's, who my

husband bragged to about my books. I liked his name, so I told him I'd put it in one of my books. I had to keep my word. :)

I also want to thank you, *dear reader*, for taking this journey with me. You don't know how much I appreciate you breathing life into the pages and bringing my characters to life. It's an author's dream come true.



## MORE BOOKS BY CAMEO RENAE

If you liked *Those Forbidden Shadows*, I think you will like  
the **Heir of Blood and Fire Series**.

It is a complete series of four books and starts with  
[Of the Blood](#), *Of Fire and Water*, *Of Earth and Air*, *Of  
Kingdoms and Crowns*

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