

BOOK 1
OF
ALL THAT MATTERS

TRUTH
IN
BLUE

MIRAI
AMELL

Truth in Blue

All that Matters, Volume 1

Mirai Amell

Published by Shadow Spark Publishing, 2023.

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

TRUTH IN BLUE

First edition. March 20, 2023.

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ISBN: 979-8215834039

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To the Burning Man
(the cocktail, not the festival)

Author's Notes

Truth in Blue is the story of my life, the one I have lived and the one I had hoped to live. Yes, it is fictionalized, and of course, any similarity to any person, dead or living, place, or event is **TOTALLY** coincidental. But it is still my truth. Dressed in magic and swords, hidden in metaphors and allusions, I offer you the person I used to be.

And the person I have become.





Map with Una's Notes

Chapter 1

No place like home

••••

THE PALACE WAS TOO quiet.

It should have been abuzz with many familiar noises: gardeners tending the plants, cooks clanging the utensils, and servants running errands. Instead, the rhythmic clip-clop of the hooves from Ciaran's horse was the only sound echoing across the palace courtyard. The perfectly manicured shrubs and flowers blooming during peak summer looked exhausted, having to keep the facade of their expected sunny disposition. In contrast, barricaded in a garden corner, rooted yet lifeless, the prana plants glinted cunningly. With the sunlight bouncing off their amber-colored crystalline form, it was as if they were watching him.

As if they knew something he didn't.

The trained senses of a King's Knight warned him, but Ciaran dismounted, nevertheless. How could he be wary of a place he had called home for so long? After a few moments of deliberation, Ciaran decided to tie his horse to one of the pillars near the doorway, just in case.

He had practically grown up at the palace, having arrived there at thirteen to live and train as an apprentice knight. His father, Oswald—a Bender and the Lord of Korbridge—had still been alive then to watch with pride when Ciaran had received the royal crest that declared him a King's Knight five years later. The metal emblem, carved with a golden sun rising from behind a jeweled dagger, was pinned to the chest of Ciaran's black coat when Oswald passed away a few months after the ceremony. That had been six years ago. Malakai had stayed by his side through the ups and downs, the triumphs and losses. He was a friend, a rival, a comrade, and the closest thing to a family Ciaran had left.

He would gladly walk into a raging fire if it were for Malakai.

Now, Ciaran walked into the decidedly frosty palace.

No one greeted him in the main hall. The throne room, offices, and foyer were all eerily deserted. He could sense people around, hear their hushed whispers and the echoes of their footsteps, yet it seemed they were deliberately avoiding him. Ignoring the strange stillness in the air, he resolutely walked toward his sleeping chambers in the north wing. Of all the knights in the country, only ten were chosen to be King's Knights, the ones who lived in the palace, attending to the ruling King of Castellon.

Halfway to his destination, he stopped at the edge of the winding stairs. The stairs diverged here: one set of steps went up to the royal residence, and the other went down to the palace dungeons, a place that brought back haunting memories for him. He tried to shake them off and turned to take the stairs going upwards.

"I see you're back already." The hostility in the voice of General Atkins standing before him startled Ciaran. The five knights, who had crept up behind him in the meantime, didn't appear any friendlier. Reva, Lucia, Feris, Goran, and Jahir all held weapons. To make things worse, they knew each other too well.

"General, where is he?" Ciaran could not stop panic from rising in his heart. The aging General had gray in his hair, but his height and breadth made him a mountain of a man. The formidable presence of this experienced warrior was enough to make grown men wet themselves (most grown men). Still, Ciaran did not break eye contact with his mentor, his emerald eyes demanding answers.

The General winced almost imperceptibly before replying, "The king sent him to Lasceraz."

Ciaran's blood froze in his veins; he was too late for his friend.

"They'd such a shouting match that the stewards had to call me from my home in the city," Atkins said. "I found Malakai unconscious on the floor, and the only thing I got from the king was the order to transport him to the dungeons

in Lasceraz. In chains. Ciaran, what's going on?" The General implored him for some explanation.

"How long ago?" Ciaran ignored the General's question to ask his own.

"Nearly three days now. What are you guys keeping from us? Answer me!"

Ciaran didn't reply, his mind already calculating his next steps. Lasceraz, the infamous prison, was in the southernmost corner of the country. It would take several months to reach it on horseback unless he secured the service of a space-Bender mage—like the General, for sure, had. Fortunately, he knew one who used to work for his father, but Bender Farley lived in Ciaran's hometown Korbridge, and it would take a few days to reach there from Castle. The longer he delayed, the more time Malakai would rot in Lasceraz.

Just as Ciaran turned around to leave, the knights readied their weapons: two sets of daunting daggers, two shining swords, and one menacing mace pointed straight at him. The General himself did not carry anything, standing with his arms crossed in front of him. Not to mention that Ciaran was not a mage, but two of the knights and the General were. Taking a deep breath, he brushed his sandy hair back with his right hand; a few locks strayed back over his green eyes. "You truly believe you can stop me from leaving?" he asked, smiling for the first time since entering the palace grounds.

The knights looked highly uncomfortable, for they were well aware of who they were up against. People in the kingdom might not know his name, but every knight in the country knew of Ciaran's reputation.

"No. I don't believe we can manage that..." The General replied truthfully, "But I need to say that we tried our best regardless."

Ciaran gave his mentor a quick nod, steadied his sword, and took his stance. "I understand."

••••

HE COULDN'T UNDERSTAND how he was still alive.

His entire being ached; his muscles and even his bones were sore.

Malakai tried to turn on his bed to find an angle where it would hurt slightly less, and a pained yelp escaped his mouth. The cold iron bit his wrists, sinking its unyielding teeth into his joints. He opened his eyes to find himself chained to the walls.

Lascera. A wave of despair overtook him, making it hard to breathe. Was the air always so stale and thick here? Malakai had toured the prison many times but never noticed how dark it was. The cells were made of thick granite, without even a tiny window to allow light to peek through. With some effort, he turned his head upwards and regretted it immediately. Everything swam before his eyes, and a sharp pain made him retch, only to realize he had nothing left to vomit apart from his blood.

After his body stopped shaking from the shock, Malakai felt a strange emptiness inside him; the warmth and comfort of his magic were barely there anymore. The panic that rose through him was worse than the bile he tasted in his mouth. He tried his best to calm himself, to convince himself that it could not be gone, for magic was made of prana: the life energy coursing through every living being. It had to be somewhere if he was here. But the more he searched, the more it became evident that it was dying.

And he was dying with it.

Malakai's eyes blurred once more. Were they tears of sadness, knowing he had lost everything he held dear, or tears from the burning torment his body experienced with the slightest movement? He couldn't tell them apart.

As his eyes focused again, Malakai remembered there used to be a window in every cell once upon a time. The first king of Castellon knew light was a beacon of hope; it kept the fight alive in people. His descendant, the current king, also understood what it meant to the prisoners. So, five years ago, he ordered all the windows to be boarded up. Malakai was the one who had supervised the project and seen the dejected

looks on their faces, caked with dirt and grime, yet he never fully comprehended. Until now.

Many of them were murderers, kidnappers, and swindlers, but there were others who couldn't pay the ever-increasing taxes; people who had no reason to be in the infamous jail of Lasceraz.

Yet, they were.

So was he.

“Get ‘im to eat somethin’.” The metallic tinkle of keys alerted him as the room door opened. A guard dressed in red and yellow placed a bowl of soup in front of him while another held a lantern in his hand. Malakai wondered how many days had passed since he was sent here and if Ciaran knew his fate yet. It was no coincidence that he was incarcerated when each of his allies within the King's Knights happened to be out of the capital.

“Three days. You've eaten nothin’.” The guard brought a spoon with the soup near his mouth. “Please!” the man nearly pleaded and added, “Yer Highness.”

The other guard looked equally awkward. Malakai understood how disturbing it must be to treat the second prince of their kingdom as a mere prisoner—torn between their absolute loyalty to the orders issued by the king and their instinct to protect a member of the royal family. His older brother might be the ruler of Castellon (and he made sure to remind people of that constantly!), but Malakai was a soldier, first and foremost. He had spent time with guards, trained them, and inspected prisons as part of his duties, something the pampered king never bothered himself with.

He opened his mouth to let the guard feed him. Under no circumstance was he allowed to be free of his manacles. Such was the rule in Lasceraz, where every prisoner was kept in maximum-security solitary confinement. Sip by sip, he finished the bowl of soup, and the guards released simultaneous breaths of gratitude, likely because they had half-expected him to protest, or worse. Malakai didn't want to make it any harder on them than necessary, considering they

would have a tough enough time when he escaped. His weak stomach rebelled despite his noble intentions not to trouble the guards; a dull ache radiated from his core, spreading out like a volcano spewing lava, and Malakai keeled over in pain.

After they helped him throw up everything he had just ingested in the chamber pot, one of the guards tried to say something but couldn't. Ignoring the grip of fatigue threatening to suffocate him, Malakai smiled and said, "It's not your fault." He meant it, but they hung their heads in shame and left the room without checking the chains, forgetting that they'd loosened the shackles slightly to let him clean up earlier.

He didn't doubt that Ciaran would find a way to get him out of here.

But maybe Malakai could beat him to it.

••••

BEING BEATEN IN A BATTLE wasn't something Ciaran ever worried about.

However, victory always comes with a price.

As he rode his tired horse away from Castle, the capital city of Castellon, Ciaran had to admit that while he'd managed to get out of the palace in one piece, thankfully without killing any of them, it hadn't been easy. Every hesitation, every indecision from one side was used by the other. It was a wonder he'd made it this far.

He looked down at the crest on his coat, slightly bloody now, and took it off to stash it in one of his pockets. With sadness, he remembered that he'd left his family emblem in his room at the palace. Ruling families of each province were honored with their own crests to recognize their contributions over the centuries; a crescent moon and a saber crossing each other were carved on his. His house badge announced to the world that he belonged to a family of high achievers, while his royal crest demonstrated that he'd achieved something for himself.

He was proud of both.

From this moment on, he could wear neither.

As the horse's gallop slowed to a trot, he reached the nearest village, hoping the General hadn't recovered enough to send patrols out after him. He could see a cluster of thatched huts interspersed with small vegetable and herb gardens at some distance. Late in the evening, some folks must be finishing up dinner, some getting ready to sleep, and some playing cards with their family (and how wonderful did that sound). People tried not to be out at night, believing the Shades roamed free after the sun went down.

They were not entirely wrong, but they weren't quite right either.

Shades didn't *need* the darkness; they simply preferred it.

"Poor pony!" A child's voice floated up, but the gravel path before him was empty; no child was in sight. "Are you a bad man?" The disembodied voice spoke again. *Oh, Angels... don't ask me that!* Before Ciaran could start questioning his sanity, a young boy came into view at the horse's side. He barely reached up to the belly of the horse, his unruly hair flying with the breeze as he jogged beside the large animal.

"Romy, where'd you go?" A woman called out from a distance. The village was not as deserted as it initially seemed to be. *Damn.* Ciaran quietly cursed his bad luck; he'd planned to pass through unnoticed.

Paying no attention to the woman's (most likely, his mother) shouts to return home, the brown-haired boy admired the majestic animal, however muddy and messy it might be. "Do I look like a bad man?" Ciaran asked. Considering his blood-soaked clothes, the answer seemed obvious.

This time, the boy ignored him and pointed at his horse thoughtfully, "He looks tired. And sad."

"Romy!" The woman (definitely, the mother) had caught up to them. She took one arm of the boy in her hand and stepped away from Ciaran's horse in fear.

"Who's there?" Three more village men came out to investigate. Realizing it was too late to run without raising

more suspicions, Ciaran dismounted and faced the slowly gathering crowd. Wary of a bleeding stranger, the men looked ready for a fight, making him suppress a peal of hysterical laughter roiling inside him. Everyone seemed to be out for his blood today, from his fellow knights to fellow citizens.

“Don’t y’all start poundin’ on the poor man,” an older voice cut through the tense air like a serrated bread knife. “You were attacked by Reapers, weren’t you?” *That’d make a lot of sense, yes.* Ciaran turned around, grateful for the intervention, as an old lady, thin but sturdy, walked closer. Her once pale complexion, characteristic of people living in these northern parts of the country, was tanned by the years of working outdoors.

Lowering his head as a sign of respect, he replied softly, “Yes, Ma’am. A gang of Reapers outside the capital...but I got away.” Lies rolled off his tongue so quickly that Ciaran wondered if he could even remember how to speak the truth anymore. The men visibly relaxed with the revelation. While the mother of the horse-enthusiast still had traces of worry in her eyes, Ciaran could tell it had shifted from their safety to his well-being.

“Ah, they stole yer stuff too.” The older woman seemed to have created an entire backstory on his behalf. “Take ‘im to the bath, Travis,” she ordered one of the men. By this time, almost the whole village had gathered at their respective porch or courtyard, trying to ascertain the source of commotion in their rather sleepy habitat.

The middle-aged Travis motioned Ciaran to follow him without argument. “She’s the chief?” Ciaran surmised. Nodding in assent, the quiet man showed him the communal bath on the outskirts of their village, and steadfastly refusing Ciaran’s help, he carried a few pails of water from the well to fill the tub. Modest accommodations for a noble, yet it felt like heaven to Ciaran, for the dried blood had started to itch in places.

“Ma sent a fresh shirt and pair of trousers. She said they’d fit.” A young woman approached them with a bundle of

clothes in her arms, making him suddenly feel awful about taking gifts from the poor villagers.

“It’s okay.” He raised his arms to protest. “I don’t need...”

The woman gave him a long appraising look before thrusting the clothes into his hands.

“Let’s go, Livie.” Travis pulled the reluctant girl away, allowing Ciaran to close the bamboo fence behind him. With a hissed sigh, he sank his weary body into the tub of water, wishing that washing the blood off his body and scrubbing the dirt out of his skin could erase this day when he’d lost everything.

It was cold and stung his open wounds, but Ciaran felt rejuvenated, nonetheless. However, the instant his body eased a little, his mind flooded with concern for Malakai. He couldn’t waste any more time for rest, let alone for pleasure. Malakai was the person who would flirt with Livie; he was the one who thrived on attention. Ciaran was never very comfortable with these trysts; it felt oddly dishonorable to have brief sexual encounters, even when the women didn’t think so or when they were the ones to propose the dalliance.

He let out a humorless chuckle. Considering what he had become now—homeless, jobless, hunted by his friends, declared traitor to his nation—these moral hang-ups seem so meaningless. Once a King’s Knight and a Lord of Castellon, Ciaran had nowhere to return, no honor to defend.

Saving Malakai was the best thing he could do for this country and these villagers.

The undefeated knight refused to fail there.

Chapter 2

Catch me if you can

••••

MOST OF THE TIME, LIFE simply happened.

It flowed like a gentle cascade of mind-numbing peace.

Then one day, out of nowhere, without any warning, a tornado had sucked you in, and before you knew it, life had spat you out. Stirred and shaken. Shattered and forsaken.

Ciaran certainly felt as if he had been put through a rice grinder as Bender Farley dropped him off in the town of Zephir. However efficient it was, the experience of traveling through space over thousands of miles was not fun, especially for a non-mage passenger like him, but he had no other choice. Even though the news of him and Malakai being fugitives had not been made public yet, Ciaran knew it was only a matter of time before the king abandoned the pretense. He didn't dare visit his mansion; instead, he decided to meet his chief-of-staff at a clandestine location to avoid involving his people in the mess he had gotten himself into. Ciaran could only pray that the villagers who had unwittingly helped him were not punished for their generosity.

The only straw to grab in this quagmire of a situation was that the king was inept.

A strange combination of vengeful, arrogant, and lazy, King Malville would order General Atkins to take care of his deserter knight, and the General would try to delay the inevitable as much as possible because he actually cared for him. With a heart as heavy as lead and a spinning head, the renegade warrior tried to find his bearings. Zephir was the closest town to the prison of Lascera. Before figuring out a game plan to break Malakai out of jail, he needed supplies and a place to stay.

How did it turn out this bad? Malakai was convinced that his brother could be reasoned with, but Ciaran had been unsure. And apparently, he was right. Another concern

lingered at the back of his mind since Atkins mentioned that Malakai had been unconscious when he'd been deported to Lasceraz. This information itself felt disturbingly wrong to Ciaran, even more than the king imprisoning his own younger brother, because someone as powerful a mage as Malakai couldn't have been so easy to subdue (and Ciaran could testify to that). Suddenly, a stark realization, something that should have been obvious much earlier, hit him. There was only one way it could have happened. *Oh...please, don't let it be true.*

“Ouch.” His attention drifting somewhere else, Ciaran didn't notice that he'd already reached the inn he was aiming for. Being taller than the average, he had walked into a head-first collision with the granite nose of a gargoyle perching on the column at the entrance. Meant to keep out evil, some people believed they'd alert the household when Shades attempted to cross the threshold. For a fraction of a second, Ciaran feared it would start screeching.

However, the stone creature stayed silent.

The inn, the only option available in the town, was the home of a lady who rented out rooms to travelers. Meals were served to the regular patrons in a slightly larger area in the front. A boy of about fourteen or fifteen was scrambling around, simultaneously busy and bored. Ciaran did not blame him.

“It's twenty coppers a night,” the olive-skinned boy with spiky black hair informed him.

He decided to haggle a little to avoid standing out. It was customary in a small place; not arguing over money would look suspicious. “That's way too expensive. How 'bout fifteen?”

The boy shook his head. “Eighteen.”

Ciaran nodded.

“Meals and drinks ain't included.” He offered Ciaran the key to his room.

“Thanks. What's your name?”

The boy looked up in surprise, and though Ciaran was taller than him, their eyes met. “Dom,” he replied with a shy smile. It seemed like most people didn’t bother to ask his name, making Ciaran want to curse himself for drawing attention to himself. *Please don’t remember me when they come looking.*

The room was small, with nothing but a narrow bed and a table. The landlady had compensated for its austerity by adding a beautiful hand-crafted vase with fresh flowers on the table, and Ciaran felt at ease with the simplicity of this place; grandeur would have seemed mocking right now. It looked perfect to him as a fragment of sunlight peeked at him through the drawn curtains. With a lot to do yet no energy to do any of it, Ciaran lay down on the bed. Only for a moment... To rest his back.

“Lunch in five!” Dom’s piping voice woke him up with a sharp knock on the door. Rubbing his tired eyes that always seemed to be hoping to stay closed for a little longer, Ciaran stood up and stretched his body. Time to get some food. Then, he’d have to figure out how to infiltrate the maximum-security prison he and Malakai helped secure in the first place.

If only they’d known they might end up there one day, they would’ve left an escape hatch ready.

Oh, wait...

••••

AMARYLLIS WAS TIRED of waiting.

She listened to the Fae Council drone on and on, pondering over every minute detail and blaming one another for most of the time. The ancient relic entrusted to them a millennium ago by the Guardians themselves dropped through a crack in the Rift between the realms, and all the ruling body of the fae had accomplished over the last year was to establish that it had to be someone’s fault.

“Somebody left the Sa’ore out of the crystal.” A shrill voice rang in her ears as the leader of the Shifters, Indaco,

pointed her thin fingers at Midorika, the queen of the Healers. “It was Midorika’s turn to check up on it.”

The queen of Healers opened her mouth to protest, “I did my part. Ruadh was supposed to take over its safekeeping.”

Ruadh, the ruler of Destroyers, banged his fists on the oak table and yelled, “I was there on time. It was already too late!” His words reverberated through the round chamber, and suddenly, the hundred-year-old fae was ejected from his throne to land on his behind. Before Amaryllis could wipe the grin off her face, solid tremors jolted through the room, making her feel slightly queasy and moderately ashamed. The giant oak was highly displeased with Ruadh’s actions; the green pallor shadowing everybody’s faces showed that they got his message loud and clear. The King of Destroyers stood up shakily and returned to his throne around the table. “Quercus, that was uncalled for,” he grumbled. Another tremor rose through the ancient oak, not enough to throw him, but not mild either.

“Ruadh, please stop making Quercus mad. He’ll eject us all if you disrespect him again,” the deep voice of Azul, the representative of the Movers, warned the Destroyer.

Amaryllis surreptitiously caressed the armrest of her throne to calm the tree down, for the furniture was also part of the enormous tree; they were bent out of his body during the Council meetings in a chamber within him. Over the last two centuries, he had experienced enough banging and shouting. However, it didn’t mean that he liked it.

“Where were we?” Jaune asked as he tried his best to hide an amused smile.

Ruadh’s pointed ears turned red in annoyance. His ally, Kahtom, the leader of Imitators, gritted his teeth in response and said, “It was supposed to be checked for cracks and then placed back inside the containment crystal. Who’s the newbie here? This has to be her fault.” He pointed at Amaryllis.

Amaryllis would remain a “newbie” until her blond hair turned gray, which wasn’t happening any time soon. She had won the crown of Murasaki, the official title for the Queen of

Mesmers, after the previous ruler passed away a few years back—of old age, she might add. However, as each throne was for life, most fae here had been in their respective positions for decades or even centuries, and they were senior enough that she didn't know their real names, even of those like Jaune or Azul, who were friendly to her. Their titles had become their identities after all these years. Amaryllis wondered if she would forget her name someday, for no one in the entire fae realm, including her family, called her anything but Murasaki. Waving away these stray thoughts, instead of deigning to acknowledge the pointless accusation with a response, Amaryllis said, "Is there a point in discussing whose mistake it is? We need to retrieve it."

No sooner had the words left her lips than the room erupted into a chaos of arguments. Amaryllis sighed and rested her head on the cold surface of the wooden table, wondering how badly poor Quercus must want to throw them out into the woods? She certainly would have.

The air was crackling with rainbow-colored magic sprinkling out of the agitated fae rulers, their prana responding to their moods. The blue of Movers was serene, with Azul doing his best to calm the rest down. Ruadh's red, Kahtom's orange, and Indaco's indigo magic were the most vibrant hues as their respective fae's voices rose, mostly screaming at her for her naivety and ignorance of having suggested the idea of crossing into the human realm.

The fae had limitless prana and centuries of lifespan. Compared to the Angels and Shades, it might be a drop in the ocean; still, they should have been ruling Amonderan when balanced in the scale against humans. Instead, they'd had to flee the realm for their lives. It wasn't like she was particularly interested in conquering humans either (being the Murasaki of Mesmers was painful enough). The point was that most of the fae didn't have the mindset to take any definitive action, no matter how serious the situation might be. Even when their entire existence was in peril, it had taken a human to get them to stop discussing and do something about it, and however they might try denying this truth, the whole fae kind carried a life debt to a human. Now, hundreds of years later, at another

moment of crisis, they were again busy arguing without devising a single plan to resolve it.

Why did she even bother? At this moment, Amaryllis wanted to snuggle into her quilt with a warm mug of herbal tea. In exchange for reminding her of a particular night, she'd recently acquired one made of mullein leaves from a dryad, and Amaryllis had to dig through centuries (upon centuries) of random memories to find it for her. She hoped it was worth it for the aging dryad to relive her sexual prime, for it was an excellent bargain for Amaryllis—mullein leaves were the softest and very difficult to knit.

“You can't possibly drive everyone in a tizzy and fall asleep yourself.” Jaune's smooth voice woke her up from the guilty daydream. The king of Benders lounged on the throne next to her, making no attempt to join or dissuade the fellow rulers.

“What did I say that was so illogical?”

“Well, you asked them to ‘act,’” Jaune laughed, “as a fae, that's pretty much heresy.” The older fae looked into her blue eyes, “We are cowards, Murasaki. Didn't you already know that?”

Ignoring the painfully obvious, Amaryllis asked instead, “Jaune, this amber relic, Sa'ore...What is it exactly? I've only seen it once or twice since my coronation. It's more than a relic, isn't it? It felt alive.”

A burst of red magic thrashed around the room as Ruadh got angrier in the middle of whatever he was arguing about in the background with Midorika, making Quercus shake violently.

“We'll get kicked out of here very soon,” Jaune mused. “To answer your question, my young Murasaki, Sa'ore Verite is far more ancient than all our time put together. I don't know what it is, only that it has a will of its own.” As he continued, an involuntary shiver passed through the king of Benders' body. “Sa'ore means ‘empty’ in Mayaderan's language; it's the name the Angels used when they handed it to our ancestors about a millennium ago.” Jaune's voice turned low and soft as

he leaned in closer, almost as if he didn't want even Quercus to know what he was talking about. "It draws prana away from everything; anything that has life would be susceptible to its touch, and don't ask me why it's named Sa'ore Verite, the relic of Truth. I'd asked the elders once, and they had no clue. Unless they were lying outright, which would be funny to do about the relic of Truth."

"Draws prana away? But it never harmed anyone here... Are we immune to it?" she asked, hoping the answer would be yes.

Jaune shook his head in reply. "The Angels devised the crystal cage to keep it inert. Once outside that protection, it starts leeching off life energy from everything. It's only deadly with prolonged exposure or..." Jaune paused before finishing the sentence, "if someone touches it with their bare skin." Thoughtfully, he tapped on the table and added, "It must've escaped when someone forgot it outside the cage during the annual check. I, too, don't see how it helps to find out who made the mistake, as you've so disastrously pointed out—the relic happens to be sneakier and smarter than us."

Amaryllis stared at him with abject horror as she realized something awful. "The humans don't know that..."

"And we should care for their safety; why? We should leave it there and let it devour the entire realm. Once they are all dead, we can break the Rift and be done with the separation. We can retrieve the Sa'ore then." Jaune shrugged. "All we have to do is wait." His hazel eyes turned vivid yellow. "The one thing we are very good at doing... is waiting." The coldness in the usually good-humored fae's tone made Amaryllis feel sick.

Yes, humans were despicable. What they did to their ancestors was not something any fae could forget or forgive. Amaryllis was raised with the only lesson about the human realm: stay away. However, this paralyzing fear, this ominous foreboding, wouldn't leave her alone, and a voice kept whispering inside the mind of the Mesmer queen. *Get it back. Bring it back.*

Unable to brush her instincts off any longer, the Murasaki of Mesmers made up her mind.

After five centuries, it was time to return to the human realm and take back what they'd lost.

••••

“THIS IS RIDICULOUS!”

Ciaran could hear the commotion before he stepped into the dining room.

“Price nearly doubled in a week. That’s gotta be illegal!” Murmurs of agreement followed the gruff man’s declaration, with some banging on the wooden tables. Ciaran didn’t want to get into a conflict at this point, but he couldn’t let an angry mob assault the defenseless innkeeper. He hurried forward just as a thump and a yelp sounded from inside.

“Stop bellyaching about the cost, you fool!” The landlady tightened her loosened bun and waved the broom at the man’s face.

“But I—” The guy abruptly stopped talking and stared at Ciaran entering through the door, creating an awkward silence that stilled the previously agitated room. It couldn’t be helped. With his green eyes and sandy hair, rare even in the northernmost parts of Castellon, Ciaran stood out like a thumb as sore as his body felt.

“When’s the last time you even paid for your lunch?” *Thump.* The broom landed on the unfortunate man’s backside with astounding precision, diverting his attention from Ciaran.

“Just sayin’ Gram.” The rest of the room turned toward the battle between the broom and the bum, sparing him only occasional glances.

Grateful to the broom, Ciaran quietly chose a table at the farthest end of the room.

“We’ve got crawfish today. Would you like bread or corn with it?” Dom asked him, utterly calm to the drama unfolding behind them.

“Will he be alright?” Ciaran inquired, somewhat concerned.

The boy shrugged. “He’s used to being yelled at. So, bread or corn?”

But he is being beaten with a broom. “Umm, corn, please.”

As he sipped the tomato juice served before lunch, which tasted more like water than fruit extract, Ciaran listened to Gram shout at the poor man, just as Dom had predicted. “They don’t even have rice anymore in the market. Every week, every freaking week, the prices go up! And most things are half-rotten.” The broomstick whooshed in the air, and the men backed up a few paces to be out of its range.

There were a handful of women in the dining hall too. None paid heed to the quarrel; two even finished their lunch, placed coins on the table, and left. It appeared the women were the ones who kept the saner part of the kingdom running. Ciaran smiled into his glass. CirrahDion, the first king of the united Castellon, had envisioned this day, and it had arrived in spades.

The people having lunch were from the working class, mostly in their thirties and above. Apart from Dom, the only other person in the inn who looked younger than him was a girl (or rather a young woman) sitting alone in the corner opposite him. Flickers of agreement and exasperation in her eyes made it obvious she was following the back-and-forth of the discussion intently while trying her best not to get involved. He didn’t mean to stare at her any longer than was appropriate, but Ciaran caught himself watching her every now and then. Not once did she pay him any attention.

“It’s true,” another guy with crooked teeth said, scratching his head nervously. “I came back from Colasia yesterday. Things are looking bad ‘ere too. Not one fire lamp left to buy.”

A stout man, silent so far, decided to cut in. “C’mon, that’s not the end of the world, Kevin. You can make a fire by yerself.” He made a rubbing motion with his hands. “Who needs a bloody fire mage’s lamp?”

“For Guardians’ sake, Jeff, one fire-Bender’s lamp keeps a household warm for a month, and you can use the same lamp for cooking and lighting.” The thin woman sitting next to him didn’t attempt to hide her annoyance. “It’s safe and doesn’t burn yer house down like you’re planning to with *that*,” she snickered, making a show of rubbing two invisible sticks.

Jeff glowered at her comment, but the rest of the people nodded in agreement with her. “Okay, fine, Kate! But them mages are gettin’ out of hand.” He apparently didn’t want to give in so easily and glanced in Ciaran’s direction as if expecting his support. “We need to get the Lords to rein ‘em in.”

Caught by surprise, Ciaran tried to look anywhere but at the man. *Nope, not going there.*

“Most mages aren’t workin’ for no Lords these days.” Instead of the woman named Kate, it was Kevin from earlier who retorted back at Jeff, “They’re such precious things that they don’t wanna listen to no one.”

The lunches were getting devoured as fast as they came, Gram having extricated herself from the ongoing debate about the country’s poor condition of magical and non-magical supplies. Most had started to experience the steady loss of magic that inevitably affected the economy of a kingdom heavily relying on mages.

Now, that was something CirrahDion hadn’t considered.

Malakai, a descendant worthy of the founding king, had a plan for this country to survive, while King Malville, who wore the crown simply by being born earlier, was poised to raze the kingdom.

Tuning out the people around him, Ciaran tried to focus on the warm meal of crawfish and spiced corn. If only they knew how bad things were about to get, they wouldn’t be sitting here, munching on crustaceans and corn, discussing the pros and cons of a Bender lamp.

“Did y’all know mages are being killed up north?” Ciaran choked on a bite of corn. Crooked teeth-Kevin, having

traveled to Colasia recently, appeared to be a treasure trove of news and couldn't be contained. Everyone in the room turned to him in eager anticipation.

“Reapers?” Jeff asked.

“Maybe. Those bandits abduct a lot, but why'd they kill mages? Seems like bad business.” Kevin sounded confused. “Mages are awfully rare nowadays. My nephew just 'bout died waiting for a Healer to show up. Most likely, they got killed because they pissed too many folks!”

“Possibly.” Kate pitched in; her snicker now replaced by concern. “But I heard mages die if they use too much magic. My old cousin's brother-in-law's friend is a Shifter. Maybe they go white and stone-ish like those creepy plants. Were they white and stone-ish, those dead mages?”

“Prana plants are amber-ish, Kate. Not white. And they're beautiful, not creepy.”

“They creep ME out.”

Ciaran couldn't hear anything anymore; the words were not registering in his mind. The screams of mages writhing on the stone floor—begging for mercy, pleading for their lives—rang in his ears, overwhelming every other sound. His knees wobbled as he tried to stand up, beads of cold sweat forming on his brow, and he had barely taken a step or two forward when everything turned dark. Ciaran knew he would crash into the hard floor, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

A split second later, the darkness cleared from his eyes. But instead of hitting the floor, he found himself hovering in midair and then pushed up to stand. A trace of blue magic around him disappeared so fast that he was not sure if it'd been there. Baffled, Ciaran looked around; no one seemed to have noticed anything odd, including his momentary predicament as they were all chatting with each other, the topic now having shifted to something far more mundane like crops, cattle, and kids.

From the other end of the room, the young woman met his eyes; at that moment, he knew: she saved him from falling.

Without moving an inch.

Chapter 3

Carpe Diem

••••

“THANK YOU.”

Ciaran found her standing by the miniature fountain beneath the stone gargoyle.

He'd spent the entire day collecting provisions and tools from the market. The dining room was closed now, and the patrons had gone home; this girl appeared to be lodging at the inn like him. The crescent moon hanging in the sky didn't offer much light. However, with the top of her head reaching up to his chin, which made her fairly tall, and the topaz blue dress complimenting her curves, she was hard to miss. Her caramel skin and raven hair suggested she was from this part of Castellon, but it was her big brown eyes that captured attention. They drew people in and demanded they stay.

Taken aback by her sudden thanks, the seasoned knight fumbled. “I am the one who should be saying that.”

“My thanks was for not outing me there.” She grinned. “Too many job requests would've followed. I'm not in the mood to fix people's roofs and move stuff they could do themselves. Would you believe that once they hired me to work a freaking rollercoaster for a festival or something? Really, people?!”

He was unsure how old she was, but her way of speaking was endearingly honest. “As a Mover mage, I'm sure you get better requests than that,” he said. Movers were an indispensable part of the country's infrastructure, their magic necessary for moving heavy construction materials to heights that are difficult to reach or, in other words... to fix roofs. Ciaran stifled a laugh.

The girl replied, “In my village, not much else. Oh, wait! I can also move five plows at the same time. And slap sense into a man from a distance.”

He couldn't stop a chortle. It surprised him that he could feel like laughing with so much worry strangling his thoughts. As the fragrance of jasmine wafted in with the night breeze, Ciaran realized he was strangely comfortable. A conversation without any agenda, with someone so sure of her ability to slap sense into any man from a distance that she barely noticed he was one and that they were alone in a deserted place.

Against his better judgment, he sat down by the gurgling fountain, making sure not to hit his head against the gargoyle's nose again. "How many have you slapped so far?"

She followed his suit without hesitation and made a show of counting on her fingertips. "Lemme see. Nine in my nineteen years." Then, she added, "Ah, which also happens to be the number of 'eligible' bachelors in the village I am from. And the next two."

Ciaran chuckled. "I'm certain you'd find more to slap here in Zephir."

Nineteen, she was just nineteen. Yes, by social standards, she was an adult. Yet, at twenty-four, having seen a world far bigger than a young woman from a small village, he suddenly felt old.

She shivered a little as the night got colder and said, "Oh, thank you. I'm not staying much longer here, though." Ciaran looked at her curiously, raising a brow in question.

"I'm going to Castle." She declared proudly. "I want to be a knight."

Just like that, the air around him weighed a thousand pounds. He needed to leave, pack his bag, and get his friend out of prison. Why was he sitting here chatting with a stranger? Ciaran knew what he was supposed to be doing, but he wanted to spend a little more time with her.

No matter how much his brain scolded him, Ciaran's heart said otherwise.

••••

THEY SAY THERE IS A light at the end of every tunnel.

Every tunnel was supposed to have an end, if not light.

Yet, this one defied logic and preconceived expectations while toying with Malakai's sanity with each passing hour. He was sure he'd passed this exact tunnel before, almost felt the fresh air on his face, almost glimpsed a dim light. But it was just another turn, mocking him, taunting him, and making him wish he hadn't escaped from his cell. That was precisely the point of this labyrinth under the jail—to make prison look more tempting than the alternative.

His claustrophobia threatened to suffocate him, robbing him of even the stale and damp air, making the tiny prison cell look far bigger compared to this place. With no choice other than to keep moving, he pulled himself up. It had taken him every ounce of courage he could muster to enter this nightmare of a maze, especially after how sick he was the first time.

Funny how this tunnel system was never meant to be a prison but an underground route to the island nation of Vaneda for trade. During CirrahDion's era, a couple of earth and space-Benders were commissioned to create this passage between the two countries. But something went terribly wrong when they used their magic simultaneously: an explosion killed everyone present, and this hostile maze of tunnels emerged out of that carnage. They'd been left uncharted and mostly forgotten until a few years back when Ciaran and Malakai toured LasceraZ for a routine visit. During their inspection, Ciaran discovered one entrance to these tunnels dangerously close to the northern end of the mountain where the prison was located. The entrance, obscured behind an abandoned kitchen chimney, seemed to have been left out of the floor plans. At Ciaran's insistence, Malakai had ventured into the tunnels, wading through the soot and decaying weeds of the semi-bricked-in chimney, only to realize that the magic still infused in the walls changed the space within the labyrinth, reconfiguring itself every time someone passed through.

Forty-eight hours later, the two exceedingly exhausted knights had managed to find their way out of the maze, and

Malakai had fallen ill for a couple of days.

“We should seal it up,” Malakai had proposed as soon as he recovered.

“No, let’s make this the best possible way to escape, the easiest way to escape,” Ciaran offered in response.

“So that they die trying?”

“So, they are grateful when we rescue them.”

“And how shall we rescue them when we barely survived the first time?” Malakai didn’t ever want to return to this dark void.

In the present, standing knee-deep in a puddle of mud at a difficult narrow turn, hyperventilating in undisguised fear, Malakai could hear his best friend’s laugh. “Because I’ve crossed it three times since then.” He’d been very proud of his accomplishment, as always. “I think the maze remembers you. It deters a new entrant but assists someone it knows.”

So, the tunnels stayed open, with the rest of the exits around the prison further fortified. It had been easy to implement as King Malville was not remotely interested in their military decisions, and the General trusted them both not even to read the report.

Now, it was time to test Ciaran’s theory.

It’d taken Malakai about two weeks to gather his lost strength enough to get out of the manacles holding him down in the dungeons, and it was only because Ciaran had shown him how to do it once; it felt so long ago. Malakai had mocked him that a royal would never have to learn such maneuvers, and like always, his best friend had proved him wrong. Somewhere between the guards’ daily rotation and their growing ease with him, Malakai had found a small window of opportunity to run for the maze. They must have realized he was gone within a few minutes, which the ringing alarms confirmed, but the regular guards were not privy to the tunnels’ secret to avoid its potential leak. Instead, they were supposed to contact a knight, letting the prisoner stew inside the maze.

Over the last several hours, Malakai had slipped on and crashed into enough skeletons of the previous escapees who'd attempted to traverse the labyrinth to know that Ciaran's seemingly humanitarian plan had failed miserably. The dark maze boasted its prowess, adorned in bones and painted in dried blood. The grimy wall had miles of claw marks of the doomed trying to make their way out.

In desperation, he prayed to the Angels in Mayaderan, even to the Devil of Tarderan (whichever worked), that his friend had told him the truth. *Trust the maze.*

So, Malakai decided to trust Ciaran; he closed his eyes and kept placing one foot in front of the other.

Soon, in his fatigue, his body sore and stiff from being shackled for weeks, Malakai drifted off into a labyrinth inside his mind. The travels in the course of their duties, the sparring matches in the palace courtyard, the riotous happy meals, drinks with his knight-brothers, and even the short meetings he used to have with his blood-brother burst into colorful bubbles and dissolved away into a tranquil pool of nothingness.

Eyes shut tight, he ran into far fewer walls or stumbled into anything than when he was trying to pay attention, almost as if the tunnel took his scarred hands and guided him to the end.

As a gust of clean air caressed his stubbled cheeks in welcome, the cold tip of a sword touched the side of his neck.

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AN HOUR HAD PASSED.

Or it could have been two.

Ciaran had tried to leave for his room a few times and found himself standing for a while, only to sit down again. Talking to her, or rather listening to her, distracted him from the noise clamoring in his brain—it was such a relief that he could not bring himself to move away from her.

She was curious and bright, eager to take on the world. He'd already learned that her father (also a Mover) was a

village chief under the employment of Lord Pellin of Zephir and had taught his daughter more than enough about battle, geopolitics, and economy. She had questions, many questions, and for some reason, seemed to have decided Ciaran ought to have the answers. He was riding a tornado of curiosity that made him forget tomorrow's problems, she herself being a fascinating danger.

One wrong answer and his past could come unraveled.

“Why on Amon would you intervene in a fistfight between two brutes over pigs?” Ciaran started laughing after she finished one of her stories.

With a completely straight face, she summoned her blue magic to dance on her palm like a flash of delighted lightning. “Because I can.”

“Aghhh!!” The strangled sound made them jump out of their skins. This late at night, both had assumed they were utterly alone. However, Dom stood there holding a pair of home-knit blankets; his mouth hung open as he watched the magic flicker from her hand.

“Umm.” She raised her hands in surrender, making an ‘oops’ face. “Dom, please don’t tell anyone,” she begged the boy. “Please.”

Dom nodded vigorously before finding his voice again. “Blue’s for Movers.”

She clapped her hands together to cheer the boy and said, “Yesss!”

“I won’t,” the boy assured her. “You might be missing out on a lot of earnin’, though. We ain’t gotten a Mover around here for some time now,” Dom said, handing a blanket to each of them.

“No worries. Lord Pellin has already sent out for my father. He should be here within a week.” She winked at Ciaran and declared, “I’d flee to Castle before that.”

“You runnin’ away?” Before Ciaran could, Dom asked the obvious question.

She scrunched her face in discontent and replied, “I’m an adult, ain’t I? Why should I’ve to run away from home?” Twisting a couple of stray strands of her long hair nervously, she added, “Technically, I left after a small disagreement.”

“A small disagreement?” Ciaran was amused.

“Okay, a major fight,” she groaned. “My father didn’t approve of me going to Castle. Then he never likes anythin’ that involves actual moving! Which is ironic, seeing that he’s a Mover!”

Wise man, Ciaran thought to himself, but he probably stood no chance against a daughter like her.

“So, you ran away?” Dom wanted to confirm.

“I most certainly DID NOT RUN AWAY.”

Both Ciaran and Dom started laughing at her indignant reply. She pouted at them for a moment and then asked, “Dom, is it okay if we sit here a little longer?” She seemed to have taken for granted that Ciaran had no other plans for the night.

“No one else stayin’ at the inn,” Dom replied with a smile. “And Gram’s already asleep.”

“Great.” She rubbed her hands to warm them. “It’s getting late, though. You should go to sleep too. Night, Dom.”

The disappointment on the boy’s freckled face was so blatant that Ciaran felt bad for him. He appeared to have fallen under the spell of her enchanting babble. Dragging his feet reluctantly, Dom went back inside.

“What were we talking ‘bout?” She covered herself up from chin to toe with her patchwork blanket. Only her face bobbed at the top of the very colorful fluffy quilt. Ciaran couldn’t fathom why he felt so drawn to her; she might be pretty, but he’d been with women far more attractive than her. Was it because she was a mage? No, he could easily count a few gorgeous and talented female mages he knew closely, including his fellow knights. Yet, he wished to be around her and wanted to keep her safe—the two being mutually exclusive at this stage, for the path he and Malakai had laid for themselves did not, could not, involve an innocent like her.

I've got to warn her.

"I should go."

He suddenly stood up, hitting his head against the damn gargoyle once more. This had to be an omen of some sort.

"What?" She looked up, confused at his abrupt behavior. "What's wrong? Was it something I said?"

Trying his best to settle his frazzled nerves, Ciaran mumbled. "No, I just remembered I've got an early and long day tomorrow." Without meeting her eyes, he started walking away. If he didn't force himself to leave now, he might want to stay at this inn, listening to her talk—

"Wait!" She ran up behind him, discarding the blanket on the ground. "I must've offended you. I'm sorry. I can be obnoxious sometimes with my 'me, me, me', but I don't mean to."

Ciaran stopped in his tracks. "It wasn't you." *It was you, but not for the reasons you think.* "I apologize for being rude and...wish you the best for the future." *Please don't go to Castle.*

"Thanks," she said, without sounding convinced at all. "I'll be traveling onwards to Colasia from here. It's going to be a long journey from there to Castle. Maybe our paths will cross again?"

I pray not. "What's your name?" He needed to know. While she'd told him her life's story and ambitions and ferreted many anecdotal tales out of him, neither had introduced themselves. They simply kept enjoying the company of one another without stopping for trivial details like names.

She looked surprised when it dawned on her as well. "Una." With a smile, she extended her right hand for a shake. "And you are?"

"Ciaran." He shook her offered hand. "Goodbye, Una."

At that instant, a blindingly bright yellow avalanche crashed into them; the surging wave engulfed everything

around them and swept all away.

The world stopped for two heartbeats.

Then, it started spinning again.

Chapter 4

The End of the Beginning

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A DAGGER WAS BURIED deep in her chest.

Three red rubies glared from the pommel of the golden dagger while the citrines studded around the hilt stared at her with detached curiosity.

Come back. Please, don't leave!

A plea echoed through her mind making her gasp in pain, and she sat straight in her chair. Frantic for a moment, Una looked down, expecting to see the dagger, but her blue dress was pristine, with no murderous weapon sticking out of it, nor was there any trace of the tell-tale bloodstain. She must've fallen asleep at some point. A plate of half-finished corn and crawfish was sitting in front of her, still warm. Yet, she felt so cold. Una placed her hands around the bowl and glanced at the sun outside, burning hot and bright with summer strutting around in its full glory. While her teeth were still chattering, the warmth from the sun and the bowl slowly seeped into her body, thawing her from the inside out.

“This is ridiculous!”

A man was arguing with the inn lady who went by ‘Gram.’ Apparently, she was Gram to all and grandmotherly to none. She was waving a particularly nasty-looking broom at the guy. “Price nearly doubled in a week. That’s gotta be illegal!”

Una took another bite of the crawfish flesh and looked around the room. She had rented a room upstairs last night. It was a lovely little inn with flowerpots hanging from the windowsills; morning glories in red, white, pink, and yellow snaked down and clung to the wooden columns. A small fountain gurgled cheerfully by the side of the entrance while a grumpy gargoyle sat perched atop one of the columns, disapproving of anyone who entered. As the sunlight streamed inside through the open door and windows, Una started to feel more comfortable (it'd been a bad dream, after all). Una was

half-mystified and half-mortified at her behavior. How could she fall asleep in the middle of a meal in a room full of random strangers?

There were wooden tables and chairs placed at regular intervals in the large room, some smaller for couples and some larger for families or groups. No one apart from her was sitting alone. Yes, it might be boring to travel all by herself, but still, it was better than sitting at home. “More tea?” the server boy asked. He was a few years younger than her, with black hair sticking out like an alarmed porcupine’s unquailing quills and a splatter of freckles shining in the light.

“Oh, thanks.” Una definitely needed more warmth inside her; that odd cold sensation hadn’t left her entirely. Her bones felt frosted over.

“Are you okay?” He watched her with concern.

Do I look sick as well? “I’m fine. My name’s Una. What’s yours?”

He grinned widely and replied, “Dom. You know, no one ever asks my name here. Only other—” Dom turned around and checked the room. “Huh, he’ll miss lunch. I should go and knock.” Flashing her another smile, he scuttled away.

“Did y’all know mages are being killed up north?”

Her ears perked up like a cat as the discussion near the counter became more entertaining than the cost of living.

“Reapers?” The man, who was trying to argue against the fire-Benders’ lamp before, asked.

Una was wondering the same. Her father had used the same excuse to deter her from leaving home. *Too dangerous these days, Una; you will get yourself killed or worse.* No one knew much about it, including her father and Lord Pellin. Or if they knew, neither was inclined to share with her.

“Maybe. Those bandits abduct a lot, but why’d they kill mages? Seems like bad business,” the nervous man with crooked teeth (his name was Kevin or... Kelvin?) said.

Good point. Una thought to herself, absently chewing on the cob of corn.

Unfortunately, Kevin didn't stop his opinions there and continued at full throttle. "Mages are awfully rare nowadays. My nephew just 'bout died waiting for a Healer to show up. Most likely, they got killed because they pissed too many folks!"

It took her all the patience in the realm not to yell out, 'Oh, please!' Did these people even know how overworked mages were? Una alone had to help in construction and farming for five villages for two months straight during harvest season—it was exhausting, her prana was nearly depleted each time, and the villagers would keep asking for more. Why hire ten workers when a single Mover could do it in half the time? *Because the Mover would die if their core broke, you assholes!*

Una was so engrossed in arguing with the imaginary people in her head that the rest of the conversation mostly went unheard. Suddenly, a wayward wind reached out through the window, fluttering her hair, and from the corner of her eyes, she saw a man about to fall.

Her blue magic flared up out of sheer reflex to help him, only to have a jarring pain shoot through her core.

But it was merely a trick of the light.

There was no one for her to catch.

••••

MALAKAI COULDN'T HOLD on to hope any longer.

Maybe hope never wanted to be held for this long anyway.

He had this strange sensation that he'd reached the end once and somehow got thrown back inside. Maybe it was another of its tricks. At this point, Malakai would gladly welcome the sharp edge of a weapon slicing through his skin, something he could fight and had an iota of control over. Subconsciously, he touched his neck almost as if he could feel the bite of a blade (why did that feel so real!). His sanity was losing its grip on reality, and Malakai couldn't stop himself

from thinking that this was all his fault; he let the tunnels stay open to make prisoners think they could outrun their fates. Now, he would die in them.

A bitter taste swelled in his mouth; it might have been from the lack of sustenance and rest or disappointment in his friend. However, it was replaced with a niggling worry. Had Ciaran been captured as well? Even Malville was smart enough not to put them in the same jail. The thought of Ciaran rotting in the palace dungeons was enough to spark a fire inside him; he couldn't afford to wallow in self-pity and die here. It was up to him to save Ciaran—there was a first time for everything, he supposed.

Once more, Malakai found himself trudging through the bones and muck of the underground path.

Soon, he felt the cool breeze beckoning him, but he couldn't take a step forward. He could not go through it anymore, terrified of taking the next turn and finding out it was again a false ending, knowing there would be no escape.

A taunting light peeked at the corner, illuminating the gory interior decoration at its full glory and the skeleton sitting dejectedly next to him. Someone had given up precisely at this spot, handing the maze its victory on a platter. Slowly, he sank to the ground as his knees buckled, for his mind had surrendered before his body did. Ciaran could've defeated this labyrinth; he actually had done so a few times—just to have fun, while Malakai had ridden on his coattails the last time they got out and now couldn't do it again, even to save his damn life. Why was he even trying to escape? His brother had the might of a royal crown behind him when Malakai had lost the only thing that used to make him stronger than Malville: his magic.

He could hear footsteps approaching the tunnels. They grew stronger and then faded away.

A small, sane part of his brain tried to argue it had to be the end of the maze; chances were that those were the footsteps of a patrolling guard, unaware of the exit there, with centuries of brambles and bushes obscuring it.

Malakai rested his aching back against the slimy walls and closed his eyes. The water leaching from the ground made his already soiled and torn clothes dirtier, if even possible, which served him fine. Born the second prince of Castellon, he was trained as a King's Knight to work for his buffoon of a brother after their royal mother's demise, and now he would die a criminal, drowning in the filth of his failure. An end befitting his tale.

Who knew if Ciaran or any of their friends were even alive...

You win. I give up.

There was no sound, no smell, no color anywhere anymore. Just when a cushion of soft darkness was very nearly successful in smothering him, a familiar aroma knocked at the doors of his mind: melted butter with a touch of cinnamon, it was a bouquet of freshly baked bread, and memories suddenly crashed through, breaking the closing shutters of his awareness.

A woman with violet eyes was staring at him, and she asked, "Are you alright?"

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SOMETHING WAS NOT RIGHT, and Una couldn't figure it out.

A sliver of moon was doing its best to lighten the darkness, but she was far too preoccupied to appreciate its efforts. The gargoyle watched her pace to and fro, its eyes following her. Then again, it could be Dom, who was perched beneath the stone creature, bearing a striking resemblance to its pose, though displaying more curiosity than displeasure.

"Did you lose somethin'?" the boy asked.

Feels like I did.

"I don't think so." Una placed her hands under the small fountain, letting the water wash away the unease. "Why aren't you in bed?" she asked.

Dom looked a little guilty as he replied, "Cos I saw you."

“Saw me what?” She had no idea what Dom was talking about.

“Saw you do magic.”

Oops!

When no one in the dining hall had reacted or rushed her for requests, Una had been relieved that her use of magic had gone unnoticed, for she had no intention of getting stuck in this town, especially when her father was already on his way. She could see the proud grin on her father’s face if he caught her doing Mover’s jobs here—the prodigal daughter stays.

No way would she let him have that satisfaction.

She’d become a knight and travel the world.

“Dom, please don’t tell anyone,” she begged, “I’ll owe you big.”

“Okay,” he said, pausing as if he wanted to ask something but couldn’t gather the courage. Una sat down by the fountain, waiting for him to continue. Another surge of déjà vu hit her out of the blue but dissipated before she could focus on it.

“You’re a Mover, right? Blue magic.”

The cat was already out of the bag; there was not much reason to lie. “Yep, you’re correct; blue prana is for Movers. Like the poem says.”

Dom’s eyes brightened as he faithfully parroted the old children’s poem.

*“Movers hold the blue sky when Healers mend the green
Indigo clouds hide Shifters in many forms unseen
Benders fold their yellow, and the red of Destroyers fade
Two colors will never mix again, for a Cirrah can’t be
made”*

Una laughed at his unbridled enthusiasm and clapped. “Have you met many mages here?” she asked.

“Some stay here when the Lord sent ‘em for jobs. Not exactly met—they don’t speak to me.”

“Ah, sorry!” Between the steady reduction in the number of mages and the increasing costs of the ones that were available (whether indentured to the Lords or independent), most citizens turned against the magic users. At the same time, they were too dependent on this lifestyle to boycott mages altogether, resorting to a routine of whining and complaining, then complaining and whining a little more.

“You’re nice,” Dom said hesitantly, “can I ask you somethin’?”

Una beamed at him. “Sure.”

Before she could say another word, a poof of indigo smoke erupted, and a brown cat sat beneath the gargoyle, diligently scratching its ears.

“You’re a Shifter!” She couldn’t believe her eyes. While they were not super rare, they were rarer than Movers, and Una had never personally met one before.

“That’s very cool, Dom. But what did you wanna ask me?” Una watched him with amusement for a little while as the cat meowed and thumped his tail on the floor.

Quickly, she realized the problem; he didn’t know how to control it, at least not well enough to shift back at will.

She knelt to cat-Dom. “Breathe in. Breathe out. Relax. Now, reach inside to touch your core.” She patted the little cat gently. “Then push your prana slowly back in. Don’t rush it. Slowly.” Una guided the young mage through the process, helping him revert to the spiky-haired, freckled boy. He looked as proud of the achievement as Una felt. She’d offered freaking wisdom to someone—it didn’t happen often (well, it didn’t happen at all).

Dom took another deep breath, and a frog with indigo stripes hopped around for a couple of minutes before Una abandoned her patience. A blue rope jumped from her hands and caught the leaping frog-Dom, putting him on the side of the fountain where the boy reappeared with another indigo spark, promptly losing his balance, and toppling onto the water collected in the stone basin.

“Huh. It was fun.” Shaking the water from his hair like a drenched dog, Dom laughed aloud. “Thanks. I got stuck as a cockroach for hours one time. *That* was not fun.”

Una couldn't help but join in the boy's merriment.

“Please take me to Castle with you,” he begged, “I wanna learn more. Please.”

She was not expecting this request. However, as the boy wrung his hands and looked at her with desperate eyes, Una had to admit he was far better company than many she knew. Also, he should apprentice under an experienced Shifter; working at a countryside inn wasn't the life suited for a mage. Unfortunately, magic was not taught in regular schools. Her father had trained her, and while there were rumors of an abbey far north where one could learn more about prana and magic, it was mainly for the Healers. “If Gram's fine with it, sure.”

The glow on Dom's face overshadowed the crescent moon's feeble light as they walked back inside together.

Come back. Please, don't leave!

Una stopped abruptly and turned around only to find an empty courtyard—unless one counted the grouchy gargoyle, relieved to be left alone. Dom cocked his head questioningly at her sudden halt, but she could not explain the sense of something still being out of place: someone was supposed to be there.

This felt like a goodbye...

Who was she leaving behind?

Chapter 5

The less we know

••••

SHE WALKED AND WALKED to reach nowhere.

She searched and searched to find no one.

In that swirling light and dark, when despair nearly drove her to the brink so she could neither swim nor sink, someone called her name.

Someone knew her name.

“Una! Wake up. Wake up!” Dom was shaking her, his eyes frantic in worry. Drenched in a cold sweat, she sat up, her eyes and face damp with tears.

The almost-awake sun was sprinkling copper traces at the edge of the sky, yet in her mind, Una was still wandering alone in the dark. “You were crying. And so cold...” Dom mumbled.

She tried to catch her breath and said, “It was just a nightmare. Sorry.”

He didn’t look convinced at all. How could she persuade him of her well-being when she was sure something was wrong with her?

They had left Zephir a few days back. Though worried and reluctant, Gram had permitted her grandson to go to the big city. “May the Guardians be with you!” She repeated the blessing a dozen times. “Take care of each other,” the older lady had said, “I hear terrible stories of mages bein’ killed out there.” Una had done her best to assure Gram that the killings had stopped about a month ago: she did have solid intel—she knew this from her father, who’d heard it from Lord Pellin, who was told by a knight who had recently been to Castle. The knights must have found and executed whoever was behind the murders, with these rumors now only circulating in taverns, inns, markets, and homes of unruly children.

No, Una was not worried about random killings. She was more concerned about her magic. Since the day of that awful

dream of a dagger impaled in her chest, she hadn't managed to sleep properly, and her core was acting strangely whenever she summoned magic, almost as if a heavy weight was blocking her prana from responding.

"I'm fine, Dom," she repeated once again after they had a quick breakfast and started walking. Having him around helped her in more ways than she cared to admit. She had never really craved company before, but in the last week, Una realized how lonely this trip would have been without him. After getting lost multiple times during a single day, the shy boy had stepped up as the designated navigator, effectively telling her to stop trying to follow the map she couldn't read. More importantly, he could tell the north from the south (which was more difficult than the left and the right). In return, Una was teaching the fledgling mage whatever she could until they found a trained Shifter in the city.

"So, the basic idea is that prana manifests in mages into five classes. As the poem goes: Movers, Healers, Shifters, Benders, and Destroyers," she said, "they say the fae have two more classes. But who knows! People can see the prana of a mage because it's life energy or somethin'. Those like us can use it to do stuff, but as you know, most can't."

Another cluster of huts and stone houses came into view at the end of this patch of woods. These parts mainly were small, nameless villages interspersed with miles of forest. There were no towns between Zephir and Colasia. Though technically both were called "towns," Colasia was far larger and more populated than Zephir and famous for having the biggest marketplace in the southern part of the country.

"Una, what's a Cirrah?"

Dom's voice startled her as she was busy making a list of things she would buy in Colasia. The packs they were carrying might not be enough; maybe they should get a horse. Thankfully, money wasn't a problem for her, and they could always earn more (someone somewhere always needed their roofs fixed). It took Una a moment to retrieve her wandering thoughts from the market she'd only heard in tales from her

father and focus on the boy beside her before she could reply. “A Cirrah is a mage who manifests two prana.”

“But the poem says two colors can never mix...?”

“It has to do with somethin’ about incompatibility. When someone’s born with two different prana from their parents, they ‘fight,’ and only the winner activates. That’s why there can’t be a Cirrah, I think.” This was a sore point for Una. Her father had always been more interested in the practical aspect of magic. The source of Una’s information about the history of magic, the prana plants—were the old storytellers who passed through the village. She was not sure if she could believe half of what those drunken bats said, considering most of those stories involved “the treachery of the fae.”

“Wasn’t our first king a Cirrah, the one they call CirrahDion?”

“I’ve got no clue. I guess there are exceptions to every rule. So, it looks like anything can happen,” Una said as she walked into the village with Dom following closely behind.

“Anythin’ can happen,” he repeated happily, making her smile.

....

“THIS CANNOT BE HAPPENING!”

Tristen was pouring another cup of coffee when the Devil’s sudden exclamation made him almost spill the drink. Getting startled at loud noises was hardly befitting the reputation of the Assassin of Tarderan, considering he was supposed to be one of the many reasons why mortals feared the so-called Hell.

As was the dreadful master of Tarderan, who at this moment had his nose pressed against the surface of a crystal case kept next to his Shadow Throne. In the throne room decorated with bone candelabras and an obsidian chandelier, three fireplaces blazed with the same reddish-black fire that burned in the pits of Hell, yet none helped much. One could light a thousand lamps, and it would still be dark, devoured by the shadows that made the Devil’s Keep. Ruler of this terrifying realm, the Devil was muttering curses at a fossil-like

relic that had been sitting inside the crystal cage for as long as Tristen could remember. About the size of a melon, amber in color and oddly misshapen—it reminded him of the petrified prana plants rotting in Amon.

Unsure why his master was suddenly concerned about the old relic, Tristen walked up to him. “What’s the problem?”

The Devil was now glaring at the relic, which did not give a damn about his discontent. It sat there casually with a black mist dancing inside, churning and twisting to create strange patterns.

“Problem?” The Devil replied with a huff, “See these cracks on the Sa’ore Morte?”

Curious, Tristen scrutinized it and noticed the thin spidery webs of fissures; they were difficult to discern as the entire thing was uneven. He knew Sa’ore Morte, the relic of Death, was very important, but in his four centuries, he’d never actually heard the Devil tell its story to any of them. Tristen had assumed the other two Shades, his after-life brothers, might already know it, for they were far older than him; however, Althrus and Melodus looked equally perplexed, though seemingly less curious than him.

“Someone did something to bang it up bad, but it is not broken yet,” the Devil said. Then, he turned to the Shade sitting on the couch at a distance. “Melodus, go and find out ‘the who.’ Then we will get to the how and the why.” Melodus waited a little longer for further explanation, but when the Devil offered him none, the taciturn Spy gave up and disappeared inside a shadow to do his master’s bidding.

“This thing is so old; maybe it simply cracked. How can someone break something locked by the Devil himself? We can’t even touch it.” Althrus pointed out from the opposite corner of the room as he leafed through the list of deals mortals had made with the Devil for his next assignment. He was also drinking coffee, a beverage both Tristen and he favored. The Devil didn’t care for coffee much; he was a tea person.

Tristen was glad that the Thief voiced the question he was planning on asking himself because the Devil looked positively peeved by the inquiry. “Althrus, you know it’s not an ordinary relic, right? We didn’t simply pick up a random stone and decide to name it ‘Sa’ore Morte’ out of affection. This relic is the embodiment of death. If it truly breaks apart, if all three ever shatter, we would be praying for our deaths. And it won’t be nearly fast enough.”

His ominous words made Althrus’ usual brusque demeanor crease into a frown of worry. “Three? There are two more?”

The Devil remained silent for so long that Tristen wondered if he would refuse to answer altogether. “Yes. Each was sealed with a specific taboo: something that could never occur. Apparently, it has.”

Tristen had another question (actually, he had several, but if he had to pick one—). “Mortals die because they are alive. What’s the purpose of death magic? We have never used it.”

The Devil shifted on his throne in discomfort. Though it could be because it *was* an uncomfortable piece of furniture, Tristen knew he was close to something the master didn’t want to say. So, against his better judgment, the Assassin pushed further. “Three relics. If this is called Sa’ore Morte, what are the other two?”

Instead of replying, the Devil conjured a steaming cup of chamomile, then carefully laced it with a dollop of sticky honey and took a very slow sip as if he was having a secret debate with the beverage itself whether or not to blast his Shade out of the room.

Tristen did not dare press any further and returned to his chair when Althrus stood up with a piece of paper. “Enough of this relic business. Melodus will find out who is responsible, and we can take care of the problem. I am off to Amon now.”

“Found a deal you liked?” the Devil asked with half-hearted interest.

“Two noble families in Vaneda are trying to get something from the safe of the other.” Althrus grinned. “I think it’s time

to grant their wish.”

The Devil chuckled. “Ah. Those two. Who did you plan to make a deal with?”

“The Montagues.”

The master of Tarderan raised an eyebrow. “Hmm, this could start a feud to last us a century.”

Althrus laughed in response and winked at Tristen. “I know! Things will get busy for you soon, Tristen.”

Tristen said nothing. As much as he wished mortals would stop praying for each other’s demise, so he didn’t have to keep on killing, none of his wishes had been fulfilled in life.

He didn’t expect it to change in death.

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SHE WAS IN MORE DANGER with him than she would be alone.

Every now and then, a scuttle of rabbits or deer in the woods made Malakai worry that someone had caught up to him. The warrior of a month ago had not doubted his battle skills, but he was experienced enough to admit if the knights found him now, the fugitive in his condition wouldn’t stand a chance.

Malakai had to find time to heal, and he was not sure if he could do it alone, constantly looking over his shoulder—ashamed though he was to admit it, Malakai needed help. So, he couldn’t let go of the one person who’d lent him a hand, even if she was a stranger who happened to be taking a stroll near the tunnels of Lascera, a remote mountain where no one lived.

Malakai was no fool; he knew she was suspicious, to say the very least.

Since the time she had helped him get up and hobble away from Lascera, the only thing she had offered was her name: Amaryllis—the red flower that bloomed in the snow—her name seemed perfect to him. Yet, he only dared give her Kai

as his. He'd considered giving a false name, but she had saved his life. It felt wrong, even if she was a foreign spy or had some ulterior motive. Kai was not a lie, not the whole truth; for now, that's the best Malakai could do.

However, that had been the extent of their interaction. Something about her was very intriguing; Malakai couldn't put his fingers on it, but the entire trip, while keeping his eyes and ears peeled for pursuers, he had to struggle not to stare at her.

It could be because he didn't know if Amaryllis was trustworthy.

More likely than not, it might be because she was gorgeous. Tresses of blond hair curled around her face, and the rest made waves down to her waist. Her almond-shaped azure eyes, delicate features, perfect nose and lips, the white dress accentuating her petite frame; everything about her was so ethereal that he was still not entirely sure if she was real. Malakai remembered her eyes were violet when they first saw one another, but it turned out to be a product of his exhaustion-fueled delirium.

He decided it was time for a conversation. "Thank you for helping me. I couldn't have reached here by myself."

She gave him a sidelong glance, her blue eyes touching his dark, before turning away to the forest around her, making Malakai a tad jealous of the trees for being more attractive to her than he seemed to be.

"You are welcome, but I didn't do much. You should see a Healer for those injuries," she said, pointing at his body and arms, where she had bandaged him with torn pieces of her dress. One side of her long white dress was currently much shorter than the other.

The lilt in her voice made her pronunciation sound exotic, yet he couldn't place where she was from. Neither Vaneda nor Aldoria had such an accent, they shared similar language roots as Castellon, and he spoke all three.

Just like that, another blanket of silence draped over them. Malakai wondered if she had questions about him. *How could she not?*

After they passed through the town of Zephir and found themselves inside yet another wood, Malakai had to take some rest. They found a good place under the shade of a big apple tree. The woman watched him strangely when he shook the tree, almost as if she thought it was rude of him to take its fruits that way. Was he supposed to ask permission first?

“How are you feeling?” she asked, nibbling on the fruit.

“Much better. Thanks again, and so sorry to have dragged you along to help me out.” Malakai felt dreadful, for she must have had other plans and had no reason to stick around now that he was doing well. “Where were you headed? Before stumbling on me, I mean.” *Where are you from?* That’s what he wanted to know, but then she could ask him the same.

“I am here to find...” Amaryllis trailed off as if uncertain whether to share it with him or not.

You don't trust me either, huh?

A few leaves were stuck in her long hair, along with some apple blossoms. She absently pulled them out, pushing a lock behind her right ear, and murmured to herself, “Even the air here feels different.”

Suddenly, Malakai’s brain exploded in a flurry of confusion and shock.

Her pointed ear. A fae!

He could more easily believe that he had died at Lascera and met an Angel of Mayaderan than what he was seeing in front of him. Why was she here? The fae had left the realm of humans, Amonderan, five centuries ago and retreated into their own separate dimension.

Oh, I know why...

“Are you in trouble, Kai? You look beat up, and I’m guessing you are being chased?” Amaryllis either didn’t realize that he had seen her tell-tale ears or chose to ignore it.

Malakai fumbled with a coherent reply while trying to digest the world-shattering revelation of her identity, making him miss the obvious signs of being surrounded, something he would have noticed otherwise. The sharp swishing sound alerted him, but a fraction of a second too late as a dart pierced the skin at the side of his neck.

The last thing he saw was Amaryllis collapsing on the ground before the darkness claimed him.

Chapter 6

Choices you make

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“WHY’RE WE LURKIN’?” Dom whispered.

They had been crouching behind a large oak for about ten minutes.

“Do they look like Reapers to you?” Una replied in a hushed tone as she inspected the wagons stationed inside the forest clearing.

Dom peeked around the tree. Patches of bushes and shrubs grew between the oaks and maples, with clusters of fossilized prana plants scattered here and there. Amid the green and brown vegetation, the amber of the living-dead flora was as unnatural as unnatural could be. They might not realize why (technically, Dom didn’t know either), but even the animals instinctively avoided them.

Pulling his attention away from the dangerously irresistible allure of the prana plants, Dom focused on the group of people they were snooping on.

What’re Reapers supposed to look like?! These people looked pretty normal to him. Admittedly all eight men—feeding their horses, chopping woods, and making a ruckus in general—were big and scary, but then almost every adult (and most times, kids his age) seemed that way to him. Three women sat around a newly-lit fire, talking and preparing dinner. “Do women become Reapers?” Dom inquired.

Una looked at him with reproach. “Are you sayin’ that women can’t be violent criminals?”

Dom swallowed hard. An annoyed Una made him believe it was a definite possibility.

“Think ‘bout this, if they ain’t Reapers, we could ask for a lift to Colasia.” Una looked down at her feet. They were dirty and blistered. The Mover hadn’t walked this much in her

nineteen years of life and, more than once, had declared how much she loathed walking, to him and the woodland creatures.

“How’d we know for sure?” Dom had a feeling he was not going to like the answer to his question.

The sparkle in Una’s brown eyes confirmed his suspicion.

“You’ll spy on ‘em.”

Spiraling into utter panic, Dom tried to refuse vehemently, as much as whispering would allow. “I can’t shift when scared, and I’m terrified right now.” He didn’t have enough fingers to count all the horrible times his prana had betrayed him during a pinch. “O-once, I turned into a rat for a hide and seek. No one found me, and I got too spooked to shift back the whole night. Other times, I couldn’t hold onto a form. Una, I can’t do this!”

Una considered him for a few seconds before saying, “Okay.” Then, she stood up from her crouched position and brushed the twigs off her dress. Dresses and skirts were not the most suitable clothes to trek through the woods.

“Okay?” Dom hadn’t expected her to agree with him. For some reason, he felt sorely disappointed.

“You’re right. You are not ready for this.” She picked up her pack and said, “Let’s go. We’ll take another path. They might be travelers, or they could be Reapers; since we’ve no way to know, we gotta walk the whole way.”

Dom’s lips pouted slightly. “You don’t think I can?”

“Doesn’t matter what I think. What do *you* think?”

Dom saw the trap the moment he replied, but he rolled right into it. “I wanna try.”

The Mover’s satisfied grin stretched from ear to ear. “And we have a spy.”

••••

THE SPY HAD BEEN HOVERING over Amon.

A Mesmer in life, Melodus had been granted shadow abilities by the Devil after his death, allowing his senses to cast a net over the human realm while he floated far above the sky. The Angels and Furies were reincarnated to serve Mayaderan as the agents of heaven and light, and the Shades were brought back to life in Tarderan to spread darkness amongst the mortals.

Right now, however, he was detecting the darkest aura he had ever encountered.

Melodus oversaw the punishments in six of the eighteen circles of Tarderan. Even then, this thick miasma emanating from the human mage made him sick to his stomach, and he was not even sure if he could puke.

Zooming in closer, he spotted the pair of mages sneaking through the woods.

The girl appeared so excited she could barely stay still. On the other hand, the younger boy looked more terrified than a mouse facing a nest of vipers, yet somehow steeled himself at her encouragement before shifting with a soft pop of indigo prana. At first, Melodus couldn't even see him. Impressed, the Spy refocused his senses to locate the little bug, who adjusted his tiny wings and resolutely flew into the camp they had been observing before.

Melodus watched the Shifter fly into one of the wagons through a slightly ajar door and come out within a moment or two, repeating the same with the second, this time finding a tiny gap in the closed window. The third wagon, however, gave him a pause. Windows boarded shut with wooden bars, and the door barred tight; it was either meant to keep people out or keep something in (or maybe both).

Even the bug could not find a hole big enough to slide in; instead, he heard something...that made him stagger and fly away as fast as his miniature wings would allow.

Melodus was curious to see what the girl would decide to do with the intel the Shifter had to offer, for she was undoubtedly the leader of this party of two. Would they flee from the danger or make the harder choice? Humans were

rarely known for the second. The Spy wished he could wait and watch, but his presence in Amon would have alerted Mayaderan already. The moment a Shade set foot in one of the mortal realms, the so-called Heaven dispatched one of the Furies to intercept and apprehend them, making this cat-and-mouse chase as eternal as the foundation of Tarderan and Mayaderan.

Reluctantly, he chose to stifle his interest rather than risk obliteration.

He had to inform his master about the human who might have damaged the relic of Death.

••••

UNA HAD MADE HER DECISION.

“Dom, I won’t ask you to do this. You’ve done enough. No, you’ve done more than enough!” She was genuinely proud of the boy. Not only had he confirmed that these were Reapers but also that they had one or more kidnapped people in the boarded wagon. Dom had heard them struggling and groaning inside.

Shifted back to human, he was still shaking a little. “Una, there’s eleven of ‘em. I dunno if the women fight...” He quickly amended before Una smacked him on his head, “Not sayin’ that women can’t or don’t fight. Just wonderin’ if *these* women do. Even then, that’s eight men out there. You sure you can do it alone?”

“No worries,” she assured him. “Contrary to what most people believe, I ain’t reckless. Well, not *that* reckless.” Una added, noticing Dom’s incredulous expression. “We’ll wait ‘til night to sneak in there. I can easily move those wooden bars from the windows, rescue whoever is in there, and we’ll run away before the Reapers are even awake. Ta-da!”

Dom didn’t look convinced with the plan, but he didn’t seem to have a better one to offer. Instead, he asked, “Are we sure whoever’s inside the wagon should be rescued?”

That question hadn’t even occurred to Una. “Is there anyone who doesn’t deserve to be helped?”

Dom didn't argue with her, though he looked as if he believed otherwise. While Una knew she didn't need to convince him to help because regardless of how Dom felt, he would do it for her, she still wanted him to understand why it was important to her. It pained her to think he could have experienced something to feel this way at such a young age.

"It's my dream to be a knight, Dom. Someone once told me being a knight isn't about a position or a job. It is about the choices one makes each and every day."

The moment Una said those words, a fragment of memory hit her like a blacksmith's hammer, making her convulse in pain. Emerald eyes gazed back at her, his smile seemed to reach them and wrinkled their corners, and before she could remember who he was, they disappeared.

Dom managed to catch her from falling as the ache seared through her mind. "You aren't well, Una." He sounded exasperated and concerned at the same time. "You're not a knight either. At least, not yet. Those codes of honor, duty, and whatnot don't apply to you!" Helping her sit down while she recovered from the sudden bout of nausea roiling through her, the boy asked, "Why'd you have to do this?"

Una looked up at the blue sky, playing peek-a-boo through the canopy of green leaves, where a faint white outline of the moon was visible even during the day. The sun made it difficult to find, but it was there.

Steadying herself, she stood up.

"Because I can."

Chapter 7

So shall you Reap

••••

MALAKAI COULDN'T REMEMBER the last time when he was not in chains.

The prince of Castellon lay awake on the wooden floor of a wagon, unable to stop the unwanted memories ricocheting in his mind, accusing him of wrong decisions and stupid convictions. Malakai could hear Ciaran's voice, urgent and worried, the same as it was that day.

"Malakai, you won't get anywhere by talking to him. I know your brother almost as well as you do."

Malakai was busy reading the journal he had been obsessed with for months and didn't reply immediately, so Ciaran pressed on. "He has never listened to a word anyone ever said. Neither you nor his knights, not even his Generals. Why should this time be any different?!"

"Did you hear him at the meeting today?" Malakai asked, his dark eyes turning hard as he closed the leather-bound journal. Even after five centuries, the gold engraving saying "Dion" had not tarnished.

"Malville has managed to antagonize a neighbor who had been Castellon's friend since its conception." Malakai glared at the desk. "First, with his idiotic stubbornness about that construction plan with King Arden a few years ago. Since then, he's been burning one bridge after another with Aldoria. Now he wants to close our borders unless they pay an extra levy for trade!" Malakai punched the desk with his fist. "I'm actually surprised that they have not charged their army against us already. And that's only because King Arden is a genuinely good person. Doesn't mean he won't do what is right for his kingdom."

Ciaran said quietly, "Malville's not well, Malakai. He always had a weak constitution—a failing heart. And the more ill he gets, the more adamant he becomes."

“All to appease his ego,” Malakai sighed, picking up the journal again. “He will destroy this country, Ciaran, to prove he’s better than me. What I’m trying might resolve this crisis without waging war. Something that could stop the war before it begins.”

“Are you sure this would work? What if—”

The doubt in Ciaran’s voice worried him, but he replied, “It has to. We need the two kings to stop threatening each other long enough to listen to reason. This could be our only option to make them both back off.”

The past would never let go of him—he could have done things differently; he should have listened. Like Ciaran had predicted, Malville flew into a rage the moment Malakai tried to explain his plans to him, and everything went downhill.

The disastrous descent had not stopped.

From the shackles of Lascera, Malakai had ended up in the hands of the Reapers.

To make matters worse, they had figured out chemical poisons did not affect fae the same as humans, for the sleeping draft they had used to knock them out worked only for a few minutes on Amaryllis. Since then, the Reapers had been experimenting with different natural poisons with increasing potency and lethality. Malakai could not even lift his finger to protect her. He hated himself for being so helpless (well, he hated Malville more for making him so helpless).

“Amaryllis, can you hear me? Please wake up,” Malakai pleaded.

To his surprise and hope, she began stirring slightly. “Kai...?” She tried to speak but could not. Her blue eyes were dazed, and her lips so dry that they cracked.

The wagon door opened with a sharp screech and a hawk-eyed woman with a jagged scar stretching from the side of her right eye to her jaw stepped inside, closely followed by a pasty-skinned young man who looked like the sun had decided never to pay him any attention. While the man had some water

and food for them, the woman held a syringe full of dreadful greenish-blue liquid.

“Stop! You don’t need to keep her under like this!” Malakai screamed.

“Lamia, I gag this one ‘gain?” the younger guy inquired.

The woman, Lamia, shook her head. Malakai now realized that she might be the leader of this gang. “Nah, Lucas, let ‘im be. What’s the point? He keeps spitting it out, and no one’s around for miles to hear ‘em anyway.”

She knelt to face them. “A fae in Amon. How amazing! I bet there’ll be a bidding war for a live fae in them underground markets in Castle.”

Lucas grinned, two of his teeth rotten at the sides. “Oh, there’ll be enough buyers for a dead one—or even bits and pieces of one.”

Malakai twisted in his chains. His wrists were dislocated from when he had broken out of the manacles at Lascera, and he could not bend them quite well enough to get out of these. Using his slowly-healing hands was difficult enough, and after what he’d experienced with the draining of his prana, it wasn’t even that painful—but it would be impossible to use the same trick twice. *Ciaran could’ve done it.* A mocking voice reminded him that he’d always be the second best...

“You, on the other hand, are pretty useless to me. Our Healer, Mari, says you’ve barely any prana left. Yer core’s kinda broken. What’s a good reason to keep you alive?” She pointed the syringe at him.

The poison had drugged Amaryllis into a comatose sleep, but a human stood no chance. Malakai was sure that a single drop of the concoction would kill him instantly. He knew his identity might save his life, immediately turning him into a precious commodity to ransom his brother, and he couldn’t decide which fate was worse.

There was nothing he could do when Lamia leaned forward and pressed the syringe against his arm.

Suddenly, a faint violet crown appeared over the heads of both Reapers. Malakai watched in surprise as Lamia dropped the syringe and scrambled away from him while Lucas whimpered, his eyes glazing over in a panic.

Someone had invaded their minds, a primal fear pushing the ruthless killers to run away.

What on Amon...? Malakai followed the prana to its source and almost had a heart attack. Apparently, not something of Amon. Though paralyzed, Amaryllis was now conscious, and a violet lasso was streaming out of her bound hands. Violet! The color of Mesmers, a class of mages only found in Fenderan—something he had read about in old books but never thought he'd see with his own eyes. It felt like he was living a beautiful nightmare...the prince would've considered this an epic adventure, but the fugitive was not so sure.

Lamia somehow managed to pick up the syringe of venom and dragged herself closer to the chained fae to plunge it into her pale arm, letting the greenish-blue poison course through her veins.

“No, no, no!” Malakai struggled against his shackles: his arms and feet were raw, dripping blood on the floor and painting his tattered shirt with another fresh coating of red.

Lamia stood up, leaving Amaryllis to succumb to the poison again, her breathing ragged from the effort. “Guess you're valuable as leverage 'gainst her. You get to stay alive 'til we sell her off.”

“I will gut every one of you.” Malakai's anger burned like wildfire.

Lamia smirked at him and left the wagon with the guy, barring the door behind her.

It was a dark night, and the rest of the Reapers seemed to have gone to sleep. Despite all his training, Malakai couldn't see any way out of this predicament.

Then, a wooden plank noiselessly slipped away from the window, followed by one more and then another, while a blue prana made its way through.

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UNA FOUND HERSELF IN front of two people locked in a wagon.

Unfortunately, the plan looked far more complicated than she had anticipated and as problematic as Dom had predicted.

They were wrapped up in chains and couldn't move by themselves, making her brilliant tactic of sneak and rescue through the now-open window quite impossible. She had left Dom outside to warn her if any Reapers came near the wagon, which was the only part of the strategy that seemed smart right now.

The man was tall, lean, and sinewy. Even battered and bruised, Una could not deny that he was very good-looking, albeit in a dangerous way. His shirt was threadbare, stained red in places and crusted maroon in others. There was nothing soft about him. From his slightly curled dark hair to his dark eyes to his entire muscular body that would have been perfect if not marred by the white scars tracing his pale skin—he looked like a very sharp sword, heated and hammered, over and over again.

The girl on the floor was, however, his polar opposite. She had a perfectly symmetrical soft face with high cheekbones, as beautiful as a snowbell in early winter. Her dress might have been white at some point, but currently, it was sodden and dirty. Her eyes were closed as she slept on without any response, long lashes touching her cheeks.

And under the tresses of her wavy blond hair, she had pointed ears.

“Fae! That’s a fae,” Una spluttered. She could faint from the shock but also had to resist an overwhelming urge to poke at the ears. Could they be some Shifter trick? But, no, something about her was distinctly foreign. This girl was certainly not a human with or without those fairytale ears.

“Yes, she is. Who are you, and what are you doing here?” The man exuded more authority in chains than anyone would imagine possible.

“I’m here to save you guys,” Una declared emphatically.

The man looked highly doubtful. “Could you get me out of these restraints?” he asked. Una puckered her face while she tried to disentangle the chains around him from his wrists to his feet; it was not easy to do so without unlocking them. Even though using her magic was getting less painful after the last few days of an oddity, neither she nor her prana could break locks.

“Umm, I can’t unlock them,” she admitted reluctantly.

The man exhaled and asked, “Do you have something I can use to pick the lock?”

Una thought for a brief moment and took out the small metal hairpin she used to hold her hair. “This?”

He nodded and took it. “Thank you.” However, he couldn’t reach the lock between his feet. After nearly breaking his back trying, he gave up and lay down in despair. “Run away while you’ve got a chance. You can’t free us, and we can’t move anywhere with these on.”

“I’m not leavin’ you behind. Not even her.” Una racked her brain to find another way to break the chains.

“You don’t even know me.” The guy sounded surprised.

“Good point. What’s your name? Mine’s Una.” She fiddled with the hairpin, inserted it in the lock, and turned it around. Nothing happened.

“Kai.” He tried to give her some directions, but lock-picking seemed more of a hands-on skill, and mere verbal instructions were not enough to teach someone.

Una tried to force the chains apart with her prana. That inevitably failed.

As she tried to find another angle, her hand brushed against the sleeping fae, and a spark leapt from the fae’s body onto her hand. An interlocking design of violet prana tattooed on Una’s wrist became visible for a fraction of a second before fading away without even her noticing it.

Suddenly, Una's mind raced in multiple directions, her hands moving of their own accord. As if in a trance, she stretched the hairpin and created a small loop that fitted into the lock. Then, she jiggled the makeshift pick carefully inside the lock, feeling for the pins and the grooves. With a soft click, the lock opened.

Both Una and Kai stared at the open lock before he managed to close his jaw. "How on Amon? You didn't know how to do that a minute ago."

Una sensed another queasiness arising from her core. A fleeting memory escaped her mind like sand falling through her fingers—however hard she tried, they refused to stay with her.

A sudden hoot of an owl from the woods outside brought her back from the reverie.

It was Dom. Someone was coming.

Kai got out of his chains and picked the lock of the fae girl's manacles. Una recognized that he used the same technique as hers (which she had no idea who she'd learned from). Then he collected the unconscious girl in his arms, and they jumped out of the wagon into the night's fresh air.

It was almost over.

....

ONLY IT WAS NOT.

As Dom's hooting became more insistent, Una realized the warning was moot at that point. Men with weapons surrounded her and Kai before they could take a step away from the wagon.

He slowly put the fae down from his arms and propped her up against the tree's trunk next to the wagon. Then he turned to Una and asked, "Can you fight?"

Una gave him a toothy grin in response and readied her prana. Even the magic knew when it was the end of the road. This time, it was more willing to help.

It was an unfair fight, with eight pitted against two. But it lasted far longer than what Una would've expected, judging from the odds stacked against them. She flung the three men lunging at her; two landed on the wagons behind with a thud, and while the third staggered to get back up with his club, she noticed Kai.

He was handling five at once and holding his own against them.

His reflexes were incredible, and he was insanely strong. However, it didn't help that they were armed, and he was not. New angry slashes were appearing everywhere on his body.

Una flicked her fingers at one of the daggers abandoned on the ground by the men she'd just thrown away and shouted, "Catch!"

Her prana responded, and the dagger flew up from the ground through the air to Kai. He caught it by its hilt and briefly gave her a nod of gratitude before returning his focus to the men circling him like vultures ready to peck.

Una kept the men attacking her pinned down on the ground with her prana and debated what to pound them with while watching Kai almost dance around in front of her, completely subjugating the five men. They were nothing but bar brawlers when compared to his skills and agility. Slowly, it dawned on her that Kai might be as mysterious as a fae in Amon.

Either he was a criminal far more dangerous than the Reapers, or he was a knight.

He finished the fight by bashing two men's heads with each other and then thrusting his palm sideways at the windpipe of the second. His single dagger blocked the remaining three's strikes every time and sliced through their clumsy defenses with ease. In minutes, he had five men on their knees around him. Kai's style was not bad, though not as elegant as— *Who?*

At some point, Una had to tear her eyes away from Kai's display to concentrate on her job. She moved the club from the

hand of one of the men she had been keeping immobile. The man desperately tried to snatch it back, but Una's prana was stronger. She jerked it out of his hand. The floating club went on to bang them on their heads, knocking their lights out. They went limp, and Una released the prana holding them.

Before she could react, a sharp metal blade bit her back, piercing through the fabric of her dress.

The nightmare of a dagger reaching her heart touched reality.

••••

THE FRESH AIR HELPED clear her head and cleanse some of the venoms.

Slowly, Amaryllis opened her eyes, but everything was somewhat hazy. She was sitting against a tree; the rough bark felt soothing after the smooth wagon floor. A boy came running from behind a copse of trees. He was shining with a pale indigo light—a Shifter getting his prana ready. *Why?*

Her dazed eyes now noticed the scene unfolding before her eyes. A young woman was held at knifepoint by the same woman who had repeatedly poisoned her and then tried to murder Kai in cold blood. The girl could not move a muscle. Kai stood at a distance like a statue; his dark eyes promised death, but he did not dare take a step forward.

Amaryllis had had enough of these Reapers.

It was time they knew what they were dealing with.

The air of Amon was pungent and stagnant; pollution had seeped into every molecule of every life form, tainting the prana inside her with every breath. Nevertheless, she was still the strongest mage any human would ever meet.

The Shifter jumped out of her path in terror as the Mesmer Queen burst into violet flames. Her blue eyes turned into amethysts, and a fragment of her prana detached from her body, floating to the Reaper behind the girl. It coalesced into a purple crown that gripped onto the Reaper's head and planted its thorns deep into her mind.

Lamia let out a strangled gasp, and her knife fell to the ground.

Amaryllis did not pay the girl any attention, focusing entirely on the woman, who stood there with her eyes open yet not seeing anything before her. The Mesmer's magic searched the crevices and corners of her memories and found the place of worst pain to trap her in.

A moment of crushing sorrow the Reaper had long ago suppressed resurfaced and played in a loop. With tears running down her hawk-like eyes, she stared at her arms—cradling nothing. The rest of the world ceased to exist for the woman while the violet prana kept her captive inside her own mind in the memory of her biggest loss.

The prana around Amaryllis was growing, steadily increasing in size. Pieces of it were flying off and landing on the Reapers scattered around, like angry embers from a howling fire. They moaned and twitched, lost in the darkest trenches of their memories. One of the other two women in the wagon crashed into the floor much further away. They had not even joined the fight. The second one was the sole mage among the Reapers: a Healer. Her light green prana flared up once to try and battle the Mesmer, but within a second, the violet hammer crushed hers and rendered her unconscious.

Amaryllis knew her prana was out of control, but she had no intention of reining it in.

Fae were supposed to be non-violent by nature; it was the reason why (apart from their inability to take action) they'd lost to humans centuries back. If that was true, then why was she enjoying herself this much? The more she used her prana, the more she had to replenish it with the life energy from Amon. She knew she was deliberately contaminating herself. Yet, Amaryllis did not care.

“Kai, run!” the girl pleaded.

Amaryllis' prana was now inching closer and closer to them, with her intended victims all incapacitated. Amid the darkness engulfing her rationality, she briefly considered if they deserved her wrath. They had done nothing wrong to her.

Done nothing wrong yet—sooner or later, they will; they were humans.

Kai was walking toward her, mesmerized, maybe quite literally. A laugh tickled at the back of Amaryllis' throat. The Mover was ready to flee, her blue magic trying to protect her from the onslaught, and the Shifter kid, who was nearly fainting in abject terror, also had his prana active to push back the foreign one. On the other hand, Kai had so little prana left in his core that it was impossible to detect his class anymore, let alone shield him. What did he think he could do to stop her?

Run away. You should run away.

Instead, he steeled himself and started crossing the vortex of her unrestrained prana; his eyes fought to maintain focus and his mind battled her magic. Well, he was trying...and failing. But he didn't stop. His fists clenched so hard that his fingernails dug into his palms while his face reflected the agony her mind magic was causing him. Her powers forced him to endure the memories that threatened to cripple him from within.

He managed to reach her a second before he collapsed, and to her surprise, her magic faltered, hesitating to hurt him any further.

That brief moment of wavering reluctance allowed him to pull himself up. With no protection of any magic, armored with sheer willpower, the human pulled Amaryllis closer.

A sudden gasp pierced the air; it could have been from her or the two human mages as Kai hugged her tight and whispered, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I couldn't stop them from hurting you." With a simple apology, he dissipated the amethyst storm, returning her eyes to their natural blue.

Her prana trapping the Reapers' minds faded as well.

Their insanity did not.

Chapter 8

When the past comes knocking

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THE PEWTERED SKY REFLECTED Malakai's state of mind.

After the cries and chaos of the night before, the birds chirping on the trees, the wild creatures murmuring behind the bushes, and the twigs crunching underfoot seemed akin to somber contemplation.

They had left the Reapers mumbling and crying on the ground a few hours ago. During his captivity, Malakai had wanted to kill those people with his bare hands, but after watching a Mesmer scramble their brains, he realized that sometimes, being alive was far worse than death.

Killing them would be mercy now—a mercy they had not earned.

They were each riding one of the horses they'd commandeered from the Reaper's wagons. Malakai took a deep breath, trying to figure out what to say. Amaryllis was not only a fae but also a Mesmer; a wielder of the class of prana humans could not even manifest.

However, before he could open his mouth, Una was the one who spoke up. "You're a fae." She sounded as if she was vacillating between indomitable curiosity and immeasurable anxiety. Malakai could relate.

Amaryllis turned toward the Mover with her startling blue eyes. "I am," she replied, the strain evident in her voice.

Una bit her lower lip for a moment and then blurted out, "Before last night, I didn't even believe that the fae really existed, and now here you are, in Amon. Why? How'd we know you ain't the enemy?"

Malakai was astonished at her audacity. A diplomat, she was not.

At Una's words, the blue of Amaryllis's eyes once more turned vivid violet. Considering how rare it was for a human mage to focus prana in their eyes, Malakai wondered if every fae could do it or if this was a testament to her prowess as a mage.

She stared at Una with a combination of anger and surprise. "As soon as I set foot on Amon, the first thing I did was to help a human." Malakai hung his head at her response, but Amaryllis didn't even look at him. "Then, those humans attacked me with no provocation and poisoned me every day! Can you imagine how it feels when the stabbing in your heart never stops, the fire under your skin never cools down? You dare ask me if I came here as an enemy to humans?"

As the volume of her voice rose with the last question, a cloud of purple prana hovered over her.

Without taking his eyes off her, Malakai checked the depths of his pocket. In the confusion that followed the fight, he'd rummaged through Lamia's wagon and found what he was looking for. That vial of poison could be their only protection against her. Barely. After witnessing the scale of Amaryllis' prana and experiencing her power first-hand, he would be a fool not to take precautions. Caution was a knight's best defense. *Ciaran would disagree...*

Where was he? Malakai felt miserable and worried for him. Whatever delayed Ciaran, he might have heard the hushed whispers of a prison break and decided it was best to wait for Malakai at their designated meeting place in case of emergencies. The only option now was to keep moving forward and hope Ciaran had the same idea.

"And two humans went into the Reaper's den to save you when they could've simply left!" Una yelled to match Amaryllis. "You also saved a human from gettin' skewered. That human now promises to hear you out before jumpin' to conclusions."

Malakai and the boy, whose name he had yet to ask, exchanged glances. Neither had said a word since the ladies started sparring verbally.

A flicker of surprise passed over Amaryllis' beautiful face before she replied, "Who are *you* to hear me out? I do not owe you any explanation." She paused as if debating whether to say anything further. Malakai could see her battle with conflicting choices. Finally, she continued, "But I'll tell you regardless. I am here to retrieve something that was lost from Fenderan. All that matters is finding it and returning to where we both belong. Do you believe me?"

Una watched Amaryllis for several seconds. "I don't know. I want to," she said, "but if I were to believe any of them stories, the fae have hurt us in the past. They stole prana fruits from Amon. Why should we trust you?"

Uh-oh. Malakai thought.

Right on cue, Amaryllis' magic exploded in rage.

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RAGE WAS NOT AN EMOTION she experienced often.

In nearly half a century of life, she'd rarely lost her temper with others. Even before winning the crown of Murasaki, when she was a commoner, Amaryllis always attempted to behave impeccably. After all, manners maketh fae (though some Council members proved otherwise). It shocked her to hear herself shout at the human. "We stole?? You have no idea what you are talking about!"

It was tempting to push her magic through the impudent human's mind and let her experience the horrors from centuries ago. It might have been a long-forgotten history for Amon, where five hundred years were about twenty generations away, but not for the fae; to them, the trauma was still as fresh in their memories as if it were yesterday. Amaryllis knew many fae who had lived through it.

She'd had no idea how much she hated humans for that pain.

Until this moment.

Kai stepped between them; his hands raised in a gesture of surrender. "Please calm down, Amaryllis. I apologize on her

behalf.”

The Mover looked perplexed. She exclaimed, almost enraged at his behavior, “Why’re you apologizing? Her prana’s stronger than a hundred mages put together, and you know why!! They took the prana plants from Amon and fled, leaving just fossils behind—they let us fade o’er the years.” Una was so angry she was practically huffing, but she tried to collect herself before adding, “Don’t you see the country now, Kai? Soon, okay, maybe in sixty years or somethin’, there’ll be no mages left. How’re things gonna work then?” The girl pointed her finger to the fae behind him and said, “She’s the one who should be sayin’ sorry for what her ancestors did!”

Amaryllis was utterly bewildered. *What was she talking about?* This human was not just ignorant but had it completely backwards.

Kai shook his head. “Una, you don’t know the truth. Most humans don’t. CirrahDion decided to keep the real story behind the fae departure hidden from the common people.” He hesitated a little and met Amaryllis’ eyes with guilt teeming in his. “You must understand. Humans had lost a lot at that time; more than a hundred thousand had died already. They needed to stop blaming and fighting each other. They needed to unite,” he paused, traces of shame replacing the guilt. “Against a common villain.”

“Us?” Amaryllis asked incredulously. She had no clue that humans had been blaming them for the separation for this long. *Do any of the fae know about this?*

Una looked as if someone had slapped her. “Which truth is that? What don’t we know?”

They had almost reached the edge of the woods. Amaryllis could see the paved road leading further away. She had tried to learn as much as possible about Amon before crossing the Rift, but since she had no idea which human nation she would find herself in, trying to remember the names of the towns or cities had felt entirely pointless. Not to mention weird. Villages, towns, and cities were foreign notions to the fae; they preferred the concept of each to their own tree.

The trees sometimes congregated to form groves, woodlands, and forests; the fae did not.

Amaryllis heaved a sigh. “This is going to take a while. We should find someplace to rest. The young Shifter looks like he might faint from hunger.”

Una immediately turned to check on the boy riding behind her, her face becoming softer. Amaryllis found her concern very tender. *Why can't I ever make a friend like that?* She knew she was distant (however badly she didn't want to accept that), even with her family and colleagues.

I yelled at a stranger!

Kai got down from his horse and helped the boy dismount. Una and Amaryllis walked behind them to the shade of a chestnut tree. As the humans arranged a picnic with Una's supplies and some food they'd taken from the Reapers, the sky that had been overcast since the dawn finally let the sun in, and Amaryllis realized something odd.

Even under the circumstances, she was happy to be here.

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UNA WAS TORN BETWEEN so many emotions that she didn't know which one to focus on.

A part of her wanted to dance around in glee—she'd met a fae, a real fae she could talk to and ask so many questions; another part of her wanted to run home, tell her mother and run back to ask a dozen more questions. At the same time, she was also angry at the fae for what they'd done to humans while wishing she could curl up into a ball and sleep for hours.

And, in the background, one fraction of her mind was always restless, searching for something... or someone.

With Amaryllis' reaction and Kai's revelation, another feeling arose. Something she despised more than any other: confusion.

Una cleared her throat. “So?”

Amaryllis hesitated and looked at Kai. “Do you know what happened back then?”

He nodded but said nothing more.

As it happened, patience was not a virtue Una was blessed with. “This is killin’ me. Someone tell me the story!”

Amaryllis twirled a strand of her hair (hesitating or planning, Una couldn’t tell). Did she *have* to be both this pretty and powerful? Una found it very unfair; nevertheless, her non-pointy ears perked up when the fae started to speak.

“From the beginning of time, the mortals lived together in the realm of Amonderan,” Amaryllis spoke not like a storyteller trading folklore for coins but someone who was freely offering their shared history. Una had to suppress a chill of excitement before she could pay attention to the rest. “However, the fae and humans were different in many ways, so they kept to themselves. Although not forbidden, most preferred not to venture into the other’s territories. It was so for many millennia. Until one day...”

Kai had finished eating already and was resting his back against the slightly-cracked gray trunk of the tall chestnut tree. Dappled sunlight peered through the matted green crown, providing a perfect balance of light and shade. “Until one day, someone betrayed the biggest fae secret. No one ever found out who was responsible, but a fae gave a prana fruit to a human, creating the first human mage. That was five and a half centuries ago,” he supplied.

Una cocked her head in surprise. “Humans couldn’t use prana before that? I thought we always did. That prana fruits only helped to...I dunno, somethin’ like...boost it.”

Kai and Amaryllis both shook their heads in unison. “No, you did not,” Amaryllis said. “Humans had life energy as much as any living thing, but it was too limited to access or manifest. The fae could because they ate the fruit as part of their diet, which enhanced their magic and lifespan. Those plants used to grow in fae lands, and no human knew their properties.”

Dom had been silent most of the morning. Now he said, “Una and I—we’re both mages. It was a good thin’ that the old fae gave the fruit to us. Right?” As soon as he finished, the boy retreated into his shell, obviously afraid he might have enraged the scary fae lady.

Instead of getting annoyed at the interruption, Amaryllis smiled kindly at him and asked, “Was it?”

Timidly, he nodded in response.

“Child, there was a reason why the fae had chosen to keep the fruit hidden from humans. We were not doing it just out of selfishness.” She sighed. “It’s a concentrated source of prana. The fae can digest it and process the energy, adding it to their cores. But most humans couldn’t.”

Una tried to think what could possibly have been wrong about eating them, but then, Amaryllis continued, and it turned out worse than her imagination (as things usually were).

“When they ate it, they died a horrible death—twisting, frothing, and screaming—until their bones broke from the convulsions and they choked on their own blood. Some stories say if someone tried to end their sufferings, the magic resisted. As if it wanted their agony to last until there was nothing left of them, just guts, bones, and blood.”

Dom pressed his palm over his mouth in horror.

“How many survived?” Una asked in a small voice.

“One in a hundred, more or less.” It was Kai who replied, startling Una. *How does he know so much more than me?*

“The fae hoped that once the humans saw the effects of prana fruits on their bodies, they would understand and give up. And everything would go back to normal,” Amaryllis said.

Even Una knew that could never be the case. She had no delusions about the extent of human greed and depravity. So, the rest came as no surprise.

“They didn’t stop. The fae tried to resist, but despite being strong mages, they were and are... mostly... not fighters by nature. The humans were several hundred times more in

number. They would break into fae lands in the middle of the night and attack them in their sleep. Like cowards. To rob the prana fruits. The rulers of the three kingdoms then forced their people to try the fruits, each determined to create more mages than the other two. Men, women, and children—” She looked incredibly sad. “To make one mage, hundreds gave their lives. From both sides.”

Una didn’t know when she had started to tremble. It was as if her prana was responding to the tale. It remembered the atrocities her ancestors must have faced. Were they those who wanted power at any cost? Or were they the victims who had to watch their family and friends die while they survived the trial?

Shame was not an emotion Una experienced often. Speechless for the first time in her life, she didn’t know how to process this story.

“So that’s what made the fae leave?” Dom asked.

Amaryllis scoffed, “That would mean the fae could decide something on their own. No, they mostly begged and bickered. Some did try to fight back and got overrun, for humans always outnumbered the fae.” Unwilling to say anything further against her kind, the Mesmer went silent.

Kai finished the story for her. “This went on for about fifty years, some years better and some worse. The fae tried to hide, fight, and arrange for parleys. In the meantime, humans started abducting them to experiment upon... to understand how prana worked. Finally, one human intervened,” he said. “That man persuaded the fae rulers to meet him, made them reach an agreement within the Council. Then, he and his friends fought armies from several clans of Castellon to give the fae enough time to perform the ritual needed to separate Fenderan in time and space. He saved both the races of mortals: the humans and the fae.”

Amaryllis was drawing doodles on the forest ground, shame brimming in her eyes.

“Who?” Dom asked, his gaze shifting between Kai and Amaryllis. Una could guess, but her mind was reeling in

shock; so many tales and myths surrounding this one man, and no history book ever mentioned his most outstanding achievement.

“CirrahDion,” Amaryllis answered sadly, “the man who knew the truth and chose to erase it from human history.”

Una chewed on the twisted tale of their past. Somewhere deep inside, she knew it was true. Many inconsistencies that had bothered her in the stories she had grown up with now made sense. However, there was one more thing left. “How’s it that we learned the wrong history, and you knew the real one?” She turned to face Kai.

He looked like he was struggling to decide whether to answer. “I’ve read CirrahDion’s journals,” he said in a voice so soft that it could have been a whisper.

Una gaped at him. So did Dom and Amaryllis. “CirrahDion’s personal diaries? How’d you get to read ‘em?”

“At the palace,” he admitted. “I used to be a King’s Knight.”

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UNA’S HEART KEPT COUNTING the seconds in its tick and tocks.

King’s Knight. King’s Knight. The words echoed in her ears. She dreamed of meeting one of the legendary warriors, the chosen ones among the knights, responsible for representing and protecting the king of Castellon. This was not how she imagined that encounter would be.

Amaryllis was watching Kai intently. Una wondered why. “It’s in the palace, isn’t it?” the fae asked.

Una could sense she wasn’t talking about the journals, and Kai seemed to have understood her cryptic inquiry. “Yes. It is.”

“Did it eat away your prana?” Amaryllis sounded remorseful. “I am sorry. I wish we had done something sooner...”

“It was simply the tool, Amaryllis.” Kai avoided her eyes.

Dom noticed the expression on Una’s face and whispered into her ears, “Let it go, Una. Ain’t our business.”

Una wished she could stop herself before her mouth formed the words, but that was harder than you’d expect. “What’s this ‘it’ Ama—Guardians, your name’s a mouthful—mentioned?”

Kai’s dark eyes went darker. “If I told you, would you be able to keep a secret?”

Una considered for one second and replied, “Would my word be enough, or are you askin’ for a Prana Oath?”

“Are you willing to give one?” he challenged.

She took a deep breath and exhaled heavily. “I’m not a tattletale. But if that’s what you need, I swear on my prana to keep your secret.” Her blue prana flared once to acknowledge the promise and subsided. “There. Do you need one from Dom too?”

Kai looked surprised. “No. I didn’t even expect you to do it.”

Amaryllis had been watching their interaction and her unhesitant oath with interest.

Instead of Kai, she replied to Una. “It’s our lost treasure I mentioned earlier, an ancient fae relic that fell through a crack in the Rift between our realms by accident. It landed in Amon a few months ago and appears to have been brought to the royal palace.” She considered her following words carefully and said, “It’s called Sa’ore Verite. The relic of Truth.”

“What does it do? Make people admit the truth?” Una was confused.

“I...” Amaryllis looked uncertain. “Don’t think so. At least, it never showed any such ability back in Fenderan. All I know is it has powers opposite to living prana plants. Where the plants and their fruits bestow life magic, the Sa’ore draws it away.” Amaryllis looked at Kai, almost in fascinated admiration. “I am surprised you survived.”

The former knight said nothing, his silence conveying more than his words could.

Una had started connecting a few dots: the missing mages, drained of magic and life, the broken cores. “Someone’s been using this truth thingy to remove prana from mages? Who?”

Kai tiredly rubbed his right index over his forehead as if trying to ease an ache.

“King Malville of Castellon.”

Chapter 9

The path that leads to you

....

UNA STOOD SMACK IN the middle of a busy street.

It was paved with mottled cobblestones; tall lamps interspersed the edges at regular intervals.

She had no clue where she was. It was an excellent time to panic. However, Una was so puzzled about her whereabouts that even fear retreated into the background of curiosity. She clearly remembered falling asleep next to Dom, with Kai and Amaryllis a little further away, in the woods outside Colasia. They were all too tired to venture further into the town at night.

Now she was somewhere in some town with no idea how she reached there.

“Una!” The sheer joy in the voice startled her, although she couldn’t recognize it.

Then she saw him.

He was tall, maybe even slightly taller than Kai. Una couldn’t tell why she immediately compared them, considering this man looked nothing like the knight she knew (former knight, whatever). Kai had a sense of danger and restraint about him like a forest fire contained by cinder blocks, while the guy approaching her had a smile so warm that it made her feel safe, reminded her of the hearth fire waiting back home. He was pale-skinned, though not unhealthy (quite the opposite); a few locks of his golden-blond hair strayed over his eyes, which were stunningly green...like meadows in the spring. His dark blue shirt perfectly fitted his toned body: lithe yet muscular. Once again, Kai floated back to the forefront of her mind, for the same casual confidence exuded from this guy. Una was aware that she was gawking at a stranger, but then, he seemed to know who she was. *Who on Amon’s he?*

The man, however, did not stop in front of her.

“I didn’t expect you to still be here.” Instead, he crossed Una and spoke to someone behind her. Simultaneously disappointed and surprised that she felt so, Una had started walking away when she heard the other person reply, and her feet rooted to their spot.

It was unmistakably the sound of her own voice.

“Hello! Fancy meetin’ you here,” the other person who sounded like her said. “Yes, I ‘move’ at a snail’s speed. Don’t I?”

She turned around to face herself talking to the man. Neither of them seemed to notice her standing a few steps apart. *I’m a single child... I’ve no twin. Do I have a twin?*

“It’s okay to move like a snail, Mover, as long as you know where you want to reach.” With those words, he waved her goodbye and said, “It was nice seeing you again, Una.”

Her doppelganger (who apparently bore the same name as her!) frowned slightly and complained, “Oh, c’mon! Why’re you always in such a hurry?”

The man laughed out loud. “No, I suppose I’m not in any hurry.” Then, he watched her with some amusement and asked, “How about a cup of tea?” She beamed in reply and followed him.

As if dragged by an invisible thread, Una realized she had no choice but to follow them. Her head had started to spin, and she was getting nauseous again. It was only then she noticed her prana was active. The blue prana of a Mover was somehow tainted with a tinge of yellow. Try as she might, Una couldn’t turn her magic off. *Curiouser and curiouser!* Everything was so bizarre that she began to wonder if she was losing her mind or whether this was a very long and elaborate dream. Possibly both.

He picked up two cups of tea from the cafe and ushered her (or rather, them) to a less crowded area of the town. It was a small, pebbled open-air plaza with a few stone benches, and

a marble statue of CirrahDion stood at the center—oddly reminding her of the gargoyle from Gram’s inn.

The guy handed her the warm cup of hibiscus tea when they sat on a stone bench next to the gargoylesque-Dion statue.

Una stood a few steps behind them, feeling like a creepy stalker eavesdropping on their conversation, yet she couldn’t move away—literally. Her magic kept pulling her back every time she tried to leave.

A soft breeze brushed past them, ruffling the other-Una’s long dark hair and his golden locks. “How long ago did you get here?” the man asked curiously.

Her other-self calculated in her mind before replying, “Umm, ‘bout a week or so. I’ve been waitin’ to find a group of merchants or travelers going north. Siremann’s Trail isn’t something even I’m stupid enough to cross alone.” She tapped her chin thoughtfully and added, “Somethin’s up with the Aldorians, though.”

The man was about to take a sip from his cup, but he placed it down and inquired, “What do you mean?”

“They’ve been rushin’ back home,” she informed him. “A couple of days ago, some knights raided their stores in the market. I dunno what it was ‘bout, but there’s been odd fights here and there. Not that I know much, but Castellon’s got good relations with ‘em, right?”

The man quietly sipped his tea before replying, “We used to.”

Her brown eyes sparkling with curiosity, the other-Una immediately faced him squarely and asked the same thing Una wondered, “What d’you mean?” The man, however, shook his head, refusing to reveal anything further, much to her (and the other-her) annoyance.

At this point, Una decided to take a risk. She tried to get the attention of a few random passers-by, but no one appeared to notice or bump into her. Then, she marched in front of the man and her weird counterpart. They did not see her either.

Instead, he outstretched his legs and folded his hands lightly behind his head, resting against the back of the bench. “Ahhh, it’s been a while since I could relax this way. The sun feels so good.” Lazily, he turned his face toward her other-self, sunlight reflecting in his eyes, and said, “I’m glad I ran into you again.”

A butterfly had been hovering over them. Other-Una stretched her hand for the pale blue insect to land on her palm for a moment before flying away. “You are?”

“Of course.” He smiled and teased, “Aren’t you?”

“Hmmm, lemme think ‘bout that,” she grinned back.

Una suddenly gasped in pain, and a gust of wind blew out of nowhere to push her away, slamming a door behind her. She was in too much agony to wonder why there was a door in the middle of a park—

Next instant, she found herself sitting in the woods, a few paces away from the rest of her group. It was almost dawn, and the moon had disappeared. Dom, Amaryllis, and Kai were all fast asleep. Una’s tears dampened the ground as she hugged herself to stop her body from shaking.

She didn’t know who she was crying for.

She didn’t know why she was crying, either.

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AGONIZED CRIES WOULD’VE pierced the sky if there were a sky to pierce.

Tarderan, though a realm of its own, was concentrated in a singular infinite space: the Devil’s Keep. Once upon a time, it had nine circles, spiraling upwards until one reached the Lair. Over the centuries, the Devil had to keep adding levels to accommodate the increasing list of mortal depravities, bringing the current number to eighteen. Instead of assigning the incoming souls to one of them according to their primary sin, as was common practice for a few millennia, it was now revamped—the souls shuffled between multiple circles

randomly. The Devil enjoyed mixing things up a little every now and then.

Each circle had its own theme: the tenth had shadow vultures pecking at the phantom hearts of its denizens trapped in a hopeless cycle of regenerating and ravaging while their screams and pleas reverberated through the walls. Tristen often wondered why the condemned even felt any physical pain when they had no body.

It was almost as if the perception of pain was ingrained in their souls. They forgot they were long dead.

Melodus and Althrus attended the sixth and fifteenth circles while he finished up at the tenth. The sixth was designed to “relive” failures, and the fifteenth boiled half of their bodies, while the other half froze. The weirdest was the eighteenth that the Devil came up with recently: a white room. Tristen didn’t have the heart to tell his master that most people might not find being bored to be a torture.

They had shadow creatures assigned to each level to monitor the souls daily and shepherd the new arrivals. Unfortunately, these shadows were merely extensions of their psyches with no ability to think or make decisions, making the Shades do regular check-ins to ensure Hell was delivering its punishments as the balance decreed.

Tristen walked back to the Lair and poured himself a cup of hot coffee where the Devil was lounging on the couch with a book in one hand and a cup of tea in the other. At Tristen’s arrival, he looked up and asked, “How did it go?”

Tristen shrugged. “Same old, same old. They keep insisting they don’t deserve the damnation. That there had to be a mistake in the records somewhere.”

The Devil tsked. “Nothing ever changes with the mortals, huh? It has been so long since I met someone who would surprise me...” The Devil trailed off as he remembered the one human who had. “Dion. Now that was a human worth knowing.”

Tristen nodded in assent. He had many reasons to hate the man when he was alive, but even he couldn't deny that CirrahDion, the first King of Castellon, had been a human worth knowing.

But there was one more: a young human, a non-mage, whose uncanny resolve had utterly defeated the Assassin of Tarderan twelve years ago. Tristen wondered how Ciaran was doing. *Maybe I will visit him one of these days.*

The Devil rose reluctantly, and the shadow couch vanished into thin air. "I need to check up on the Corridor. The Guardians informed me that something might be afoot there. They sensed someone passing through it."

This was news to Tristen. The Corridor existed in its own dimension; it didn't belong to any of the four realms, yet all the realms belonged to it.

"If it wasn't you or the Guardians, who else could it be? Neither we Shades nor the Furies can reach there. Shadows and the rest of the Angels are out of the question."

The Devil tugged at his earlobes thoughtfully. "No freaking clue! First, the Sa'ore Morte nearly breaks, and now, someone is crossing the Corridor. I can't make up my mind if I should be curious or worried."

Tristen chuckled. "Knowing you, I'm sure you'll find a way to get entertained regardless."

The Devil gave him a broad grin and disappeared with an impressive display of yellow fireworks mixed with black.

Show-off. Tristen thought to himself with a gentle smile. As eccentric as he was, the Devil was still one of the two most powerful entities in existence; nine Guardians of Mayaderan were there to balance against a sole Devil.

If there were something to truly worry him, it would mean the world's end as any of them knew it.

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THIS JOURNEY HAD BEEN most exciting for Dom.

He usually did his best to avoid any kind of excitement back home. But then, most of the time, “adventure” involved him getting beaten up by someone. Things were changing, and he couldn’t imagine returning to what he had been merely a month ago.

While Dom would agree that Kai might be the coolest man he’d met and Amaryllis was possibly the most beautiful woman he had laid eyes on, the one thing he could say with utmost conviction was that Una was the bravest person he would ever know. She was more than a man or a woman; she was more than a mage or a knight; she was the blazing sun to Dom. The other two dignitaries were close behind her in glory as far as he was concerned.

Together, they rode into Colasia, and Dom reached a conclusion in his bedazzled mind: he was the luckiest boy alive. Having depleted his meager vocabulary of superlatives, the Shifter decided to hurry and catch up to the three adults riding slightly ahead.

Colasia was a big and prosperous town with traders, travelers, and tourists. Kolki Mountains and Siremann’s Trail separated the two halves of the kingdom; a hub of goods, meetings, fresh news, and old gossip—Colasia was the center of everything important in the south.

The streets were paved with mottled cobblestones of different sizes, with the sidewalks interspersed with lamp posts not yet lit during the daytime. The houses, made of either stones or concrete, were a few stories high and gray. *Why didn’t no one paint ‘em?* However, the shops and the inns were brightly colored, making them easily recognizable (*suppose that’s why?*).

Dom noticed Amaryllis looking around with interest, too. When their eyes met briefly, she smiled, her blue eyes shining brightly. *Are there towns in Fenderan?* Dom would’ve liked to ask her, but he was still afraid to address her directly.

She’d kept her blond hair down to hide her pointed ears at Kai’s insistence. The humans weren’t ready to greet a fae into their homes just yet—if ever. Dom could see Kai getting

irritated with every male (and several females) in the vicinity turning around to catch another glimpse of her. The boy tried but failed to suppress a laugh as the reason for Kai's annoyance became blatantly apparent to him.

"What?" the knight asked, startled at the sudden spurt of a giggle from his side.

Dom pressed his lips together. "Nothin'. Have you been to Colasia before?"

Kai steered them toward another turn and replied, "Yes. I've stayed here many times. Is this the first time for you?"

Dom nodded. "I'd never left Zephir before. Una?"

Una didn't answer. It didn't seem like she had even heard Dom. She had been a little down since they woke up this morning, but the Mover appeared outright sick right now. Dom cursed himself for not paying attention to her earlier. However strong and brave she was, and as much as she tried to pretend otherwise, he knew Una was suffering from an illness of some sort. Since they'd left Gram's inn, the Mover hadn't slept through an entire night. Though she insisted it would pass on its own, Dom was becoming more concerned.

"She's not well, y'know," he whispered to the knight. It felt like he was telling on Una, but sometimes betrayal was the only way to help a loved one who didn't want to be protected.

Kai lowered his voice to match his. "She fought like a beast the other night. What do you mean she is not well?"

"She keeps havin' terrible nightmares. Gets sick all of a sudden! Sometimes, she's pale and cold to the touch. She won't listen to me, but Una needs a Healer."

Kai listened to him in silence. Dom wasn't sure if the knight believed him; no one ever took him seriously. However, the man replied after considering it for a moment. "Thank you for telling me, Dom. A friend of mine's a Healer. I'm hoping to meet him soon. If you can convince Una to stick around, I will ask him to check her out."

Convince Una. Hmm, that sounds totally doable.

Dom prayed to the nine Guardians to grant him a miracle—just this once.

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TO SAY UNA WAS SURPRISED would be a massive understatement.

Once more, she found herself in the same town on the same street, staring at the same streetlamps; only this time, she was riding a horse beside Amaryllis, Kai, and Dom. Was she awake, or had she fallen asleep again? Was the dream from last night a premonition? Una desperately wanted the world to make some sense. Since she left home, things had gotten weirder and weirder with every passing day.

She waited for the man from her vision to show up when they crossed the same section of the town from earlier. But he did not, and neither did her doppelganger. Maybe there were multiple cities in Castellon designed similarly, and she'd mixed up a memory from her father's old stories with a strange guy she might have seen somewhere.

Una's mouth hung open when they reached a small, pebbled open-air plaza with stone benches and a marble statue of CirrahDion (still gargoylesque) at the center. *Too similar, too similar...*

"Una," someone called her. For a heartbeat, her entire being prayed for the voice to be his—she needed answers.

But it was Kai.

"Yes?" she said, suppressing the dismay that welled up inside her.

"What are you planning to do next?" he asked.

It was a question Una was trying not to think about. A month ago, she knew exactly what she wanted from life; where to go and how to get it. Now, everything was messed up.

Because apparently, the king's a terrible person and no one in the country is aware of it. He's been doing horrendous things to mages, who are either already dead or locked up in

the palace dungeons to feed prana to that fae relic. Una didn't know what she was going to do about it, if she was supposed to do anything, or whether she could pretend to have never heard a thing.

What should she believe? *Who* should she believe?

Without answering Kai, Una climbed down from her horse, handed Dom the reins, and sat on a stone bench. It was surprisingly comfortable for something made of stone. *Not a carver, but a stone-Bender's work.* The others dismounted, as well, and walked closer, waiting for her to reach a decision. Una wasn't paying them attention, for suddenly, she was sure it was the same bench she'd sat on with the mysterious sandy-haired man from her...dream? It was simply too much to deal with. So, the Mover did something she never thought she would.

Admitted to herself that she was lost. In more ways than one.

"I don't know."

Kai hesitated before speaking again, "Listen, we all have many things to sort out, to decide what to do. We are in the same boat. Stay with us for a few days. Maybe we'll find a way to help each other and not get capsized in the storm."

Una turned to Dom. The boy was watching her closely; worry etched on his young face.

"Would you like to stay with 'em?" she asked him.

Surprised at being consulted, Dom glanced at Kai and then Amaryllis. The knight (not former—he *was* one) and the fae both smiled encouragingly at the Shifter, and he nodded yes.

Una stood up and wrapped her arms around the little brother she'd never had. "Then we'll stay with 'em for a few days." She sighed and added, "Dom, I don't know what I wanna do about the king or the kingdom. But it doesn't matter. First, I'll take you to Castellon Abbey. Away from all this... I promise you that."

Dom chuckled softly. "Even if you don't, Una, I know what you'd do about the king and the kingdom." The spiky-

haired Shifter looked straight into her soul and said, “You don’t need a king to be a knight. Go and be one.”

Una knew in her heart that her first task as a knight was to keep him safe.

Chapter 10

Mea Culpa

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REVA STARED OUTSIDE the window.

The gardeners kept the palace garden in perfect shape; everything was neatly spaced, and nothing was out of place. Yet, her world had turned upside-down.

Only five of them were left at the palace. Though the unwavering loyalty of the King's Knights should be with the king himself, they had always known there to be an implicit division between the ten. That disparity turned into a chasm when the other four knights closest to Malakai also chose to follow in his footsteps and become fugitives. Reva sighed and massaged her forehead as she tried to focus on the reports lying haphazardly before her.

“M'lady, the General would like to speak to you.”

She looked up to see a page hesitantly hovering at her office door and replied, “On my way.”

It was rare for General Atkins to stick around at the capital for so long. He was usually touring the country, inspecting the scores of outposts to coordinate the nearly hundred knights stationed all over the kingdom. This last month had been exceptional in many ways: the king's falling out with his brother, Malakai's imprisonment, losing five King's Knights in one stroke, the Aldorian crisis...The General's hands were so full that Reva almost pitied the aging legend.

“Reva, did you hear the Aldorian delegation is supposed to visit in a week?” Feris, Lucia, and Goran crossed her at the stairs.

She paused at the news. “No, I didn't. This is their third visit in six months. Negotiations are still not going anywhere?”

Aldoria was becoming angrier and angrier over the recent taxes imposed on their traders. Reva would be lying if she

claimed this unfortunate situation with their neighbor was nothing to worry about. She'd heard rumors that Aldorian scientists were working on explosive devices that could decimate entire villages but apparently were no bigger than an apple.

We have Destroyers, Benders, and Movers with enough offensive abilities of our own. The sentimental part of her mind argued.

Not enough. Not anymore. Her rational side countered regretfully.

“Do we have any reports on the whereabouts of the others?” she asked the other knights. Malakai had not been apprehended yet, and Ciaran had gone underground since he defeated them singlehandedly in that utterly humiliating battle a month ago. Sanar, Hunter, and Vid never even returned to the palace from their respective assignments (Ciaran must have warned them).

Feris hesitated to answer her and avoided her eyes. “We just submitted our reports to the General. I’m sorry, Reva. Looks like you’ve drawn the shortest straw.” Lucia and Goran tried to look anywhere but at her.

Reva’s heart sank at his words, her feet dragging her to the throne chamber.

“You wanted to see me, General?” Her voice shook a little as she searched the room for the king. Since the fiasco with Malakai, he’d barely left his room—king Malville had had a heart condition since childhood, and the fight with his brother had nearly thrown him off the cliff. Reva had no idea what the argument, which affected all their lives, was actually about. He hadn’t explained anything to his knights. The only commands the king gave them were to clean up the dungeons and secure a strange, amber-colored stone without touching it under any circumstances. Reva shuddered, remembering what they found there. *What was going on?* They were ordered to keep this discovery to themselves, so she didn’t know if the General was aware of it or if he, too, was kept in the dark—was he still in the dark? All equally disturbing to consider.

Atkins' desk was fortified with more documents than she had on hers. It appeared that he had lost years of his life in the last few weeks. "The knights we sent to Lasceraz have failed to locate Malakai. A King's Knight needs to join the search."

Reva wanted to wail, "Why me?" However, her voice betrayed no sign of her agonized state of mind when she spoke. "I'll contact the space-Bender at once. Where should I ask Merryl to send me?"

The General silently consulted a few reports before saying, "Go to Zephir first. Both Ciaran and Malakai were last seen in the vicinity at one point or the other. Start tracking them from there."

She mutely nodded, her heart growing numb.

The General's usual baritone was kinder than ever as he observed the pale face of the King's Knight. "Reva, I chose you because I need to keep the bloodshed to a minimum. Talk to Malakai; he'll listen to you."

No, he won't. But Reva would bring him back.

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AMARYLLIS GAPPED AT the decidedly seedy tavern.

Kai had guided them across the busy throng of humans in the crowded streets and stopped in front of a run-down bar. The lights emanating from inside the tavern were various red, orange, and pink hues. Through the tinted windows, it looked like an unholy cross between a house of ill-repute and a criminal hangout. Amaryllis had no experience with either; her knowledge about Amon was from books older than the separation.

The sign at the top of the tavern was hanging sideways, with the letters stuck at odd angles. "Is it called The Rouge or The Rogue?" Amaryllis asked, very confused.

"Seein' how the place looks, it could easily mean both." Una laughed. Kai had gone to find a groom for their horses, with Dom following him around like a lost puppy; the young Shifter was highly impressed with the big knight. Recovered

from the earlier sickness, the Mover curiously inspected the suspicious tavern.

Amaryllis hesitated to comment anything further. What did she know about human practices? Maybe she was being too pretentious about this place when no one else appeared to mind it.

Una was watching her with unadulterated amusement. “Welcome to human weirdness. I gotta say Kai seems to have interestin’ tastes.”

Kai and Dom had returned to where they were waiting at the very moment to catch Una’s quip. “To be very clear, I have excellent taste in everything.” His dark eyes swept over Amaryllis so briefly that it might have been her imagination.

“Suuuure!” Una shook her head. “This tavern’s a shinin’ testament to that.”

“Shall we go inside?” He smiled, stretching his arms toward the bar.

When Una and Dom did not complain, Amaryllis swallowed her discomfort and followed them.

She stepped into the room beyond the heavily splintered door, and the entire atmosphere changed in a blink of an eye.

It was an expansive room with a long counter stretching from wall to wall at the furthest end, behind which there were rows of liquor bottles adding to the burst of colors in the room. Several tall chairs were placed in front of the counter for customers to enjoy their drinks closer to the source, while soft couches with small tables spread around the room. A low stage for musicians waited at one corner for the party to start. The room’s simple elegance was calming and inviting, even with a giant crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

“This is—!” Una exclaimed.

“Unexpected,” Amaryllis finished the sentence for her.

“I told you. I’ve excellent taste.” Kai smiled at them. “Please wait for a moment.” He strode up to a back room with the familiarity of a regular.

The bar was not open to patrons yet. Amaryllis looked around her first human tavern with great interest: each table had a decorative lamp or a vase, which seemed quite expensive, but then the human currency system was a mystery to her. She glanced at the knight speaking to the proprietor, too far away to hear what Kai and the owner were talking about. Instead, the way the older man greeted him was very telling.

“They family?” Dom wondered aloud as they watched Kai give the portly older man a warm hug. Amaryllis caught a frown on Una’s face and realized they both had noticed something the young boy had missed.

“Do you bow to a knight, even a King’s Knight here?” Amaryllis asked in a hushed tone.

Una slowly shook her head. “No. We don’t.”

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“DON’T YOU JUST LOVE giving me a rash?”

The Devil narrowed his eyes at the figures in front of him as he vigorously scratched his left arm.

The nine Guardians guffawed in unison, and the lights dimmed a little; it was still needlessly bright, but never mind. “Better?” they asked.

The Devil rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Next time, you visit me. Then I’ll show you what’s better.”

The light of Mayaderan would essentially obliterate any shadow or even a Shade. The Devil, though immune, had to suffer terrible hives for a couple of hours. He liked their lounges, though. Try as he might, none of his furniture ever turned out this comfortable, so despite the light and the itch, the master of Tarderan relaxed a little.

“Any idea about what’s happening in the Corridor?” the Guardians inquired. The Devil had gotten distracted in the meantime. Stuck in the eternally gloomy Tarderan, he had nearly forgotten how flowers smelled, how many colors they came in, and how much he liked them. Mayaderan appeared different to each soul who reached here; to him, it was a

garden brimming with blossoms from the four seasons mortals had and twenty more that they didn't. Maybe he could grab some rose hips for tea on his way back...and some jasmine.

"Sirius? I am asking about your report from..." their voices echoed through the room, rudely interrupting the Devil's tea-reverie.

"Report? You know I'm not your subordinate, right?" he scoffed, increasingly irritated at their superior attitude.

"Yes. Yes. We are aware of that. Would a 'please' suffice?"

The Devil glared at them while resisting an urge to leave in a huff. "Well, you're yet to say a please! Anyway, the Corridor was used recently. I don't know by whom yet. But there is something else I need to tell you." He paused and wished he didn't have to admit his failure. "There are cracks visible on Sa'ore Morte."

The Guardians gasped collectively. "What!? When did that happen?"

"About a month ago," he replied reluctantly. "I've got a lead, though. My Spy detected the presence of a mortal mage with an unprecedentedly strong aura of death. There has to be some connection there."

The Guardians closed their eyes simultaneously and said, "Sirius, don't get involved. You know that this is *them* baiting us."

"Don't get involved? What are you talking about? We have to stop this from escalating any further. We've got to do something..."

They opened their eyes, and the agony in those golden orbs also hit the Devil. The Guardians said, "They have been stirring again. We can all feel them getting restless in their chrysalis. Every second century or so, they try to influence the mortal realms and move their pawns across the board. You know this, Sirius."

"Then, how can you sit here and tell me to do nothing? Mihael, you know better than me what would happen if they

woke up. Do something! Kill these mortals or let me kill them...before it's too late."

The apparitions flickered out as the nine Guardians coalesced into one—the last Guardian.

"What if that's exactly what they want us to do? You and I can't even grasp the extent of their machinations. All this could be part of their convoluted and twisted games. We shouldn't play if we don't know the rules. Best is to not participate," the lone Guardian sighed. "I beg of you; please ignore your instincts. They've led you astray before."

The Devil tried to protest, but Mihael cut him off. "Remember when your one careless comment started a chain of events culminating in the mortal realm being broken into half, making Fenderan? Leaving a pile of mangled bodies and damaged souls in its wake? Oh, and created the Fury of Vengeance! Sirius, do not get involved," the Guardian nearly begged him.

The Devil bristled at the accusations. As his own advocate, he wanted to proclaim that he'd merely given mortals the idea. Their actions caused all the chaos and deaths, not his. He tempted; they succumbed. *Why's that my fault?*

The only thing he truly regretted back then (and now) was the rise of Fury of Vengeance from those ashes. While the Fury of Justice was interested primarily in protecting mortal souls before death and the Fury of Repentance focused on delivering judgment to the souls after death, she made it her mission to eradicate his Shades. The demise of his previous Assassin at her hands haunted him to this day.

As fate would have it, the moment Sirius stepped outside the Guardian's chamber, he ran into *her*.

"Hello, Eve!" He should have stayed quiet, but as predicted earlier by Mihael, his instincts led him astray. "Oh, sorry. I hear you go by Alectina now."

No sooner did he disappear through the shadows than the screaming light inside the Fury of Vengeance raced to engulf him.

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HE WELCOMED THE DARKNESS that engulfed him.

Malakai couldn't tell how long this torture had been going on. Every time it would ease up a little, and he would try to get some air into his dried-out lungs, it would begin its excruciating regimen anew. It was spinning a sadistic saga of catch and release—just enough hope to destroy it all over again, just enough relief to make the pain worse.

His right hand was stuck to the cold surface of the accursed relic. Like a live wire, the amber would not let his hand go. The swirling white fog inside the Sa'ore was turning scarlet as it steadily drained his prana away. Drops of blood dripped from his mouth when he tried to scream, his throat burning from the attempt.

The sensation of pain shifted from dull ache to sharp agony when someone started prying out his nails, deliberately tearing them off the soft flesh underneath. One by one. One by one.

His heart beat harder and harder as if it could flush the pain away. It could not.

If he could think straight for even a fraction of a second, Malakai would've realized that he was not really being mutilated; it was how his mind was rationalizing the torment. But he wouldn't have believed himself.

At some point, the pain started to dim once more, allowing him to hurl violently on the floor.

Then without any warning, it felt like he was being plunged into the icy water. A force far stronger than his ravaged body pushed him down, drowning him, choking him. He tried to hold his breath; however, his body was far too weak. It craved air—precious air that was all around him and yet nowhere to be found.

Malakai gasped like a fish thrashing on a red-hot hook while the heavy ache of suffocation metamorphosed into acute trauma searing through his lungs. He could feel his core

starting to crack; his magic was fading away, robbing him of life and sanity.

His vision blurred, and his eyes tainted red.

In a rare moment of clarity, Malakai knew—he was going to die here. In the place where he was born, spent his life, and now, he would die here. Alone.

“Don’t touch him. This thing might get you too. Fetch a wooden beam. Hurry!” a voice yelled. Did Malakai know this person? What did it matter now? Someone hit his hand with something solid. After the torture he had endured, the blow felt like a gentle caress. However, it separated the Sa’ore from his hand.

Before he passed out, Malakai saw the ancient relic glow in morbid satisfaction; the peculiar smoke inside it turned vivid crimson and then returned to white again.

He drifted away in the fog and void, with nothing but his regrets and loss to keep him company.

“Kai! Can you hear me?”

Malakai opened his eyes to see two drops of topaz staring at him. His heart started pounding again. This time it was not pain that it tried to push away, but something entirely different.

“Dinner is ready downstairs. I’m sorry I disturbed your sleep,” she said hesitantly.

“Thank you.”

For waking me up...

Chapter 11

Where echoes meet

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SHE MISSED HOME.

More than home, she missed green.

Standing alone on the balcony of her room, Amaryllis watched Amonderan begin another day. While the first rays of dawn slowly diluted the dark ink spilled across the sky, the buildings obscured the sun from her view—so many houses, gray and drab. The town was not entirely devoid of green, though. There *were* spruce, cypress, pine, and red maple trees growing along the roadside. Somehow, they all looked listless, as dead as the fossilized prana plants rooted here and there.

Even the densest of the woods and deepest of the forests here had been invaded by humans. They had successfully conquered nature.

Amaryllis mourned the loss of such beauty, yet she could not help being impressed that they could create, organize, and maintain something as efficient and productive as a trading town that never went to sleep. The scraping of the carts, the heavy rumbling of the wagons mixed with the hubbub of the people grated in her ears used to only sounds of birds and wild animals. Apart from occasional disagreements between the fae rulers over important topics, when Amaryllis was alone at her place, she barely experienced discord of any kind. The general populace of Fenderan were quiet folks as if they were part of nature at its most serene.

Amon was anything but serene.

Amaryllis glanced at the closed window of the adjacent room where Kai and Dom were staying. She needed to talk to Kai regarding a possible strategy to retrieve the Sa'ore. Unlike her travel companions, she didn't care to find out or even guess what plot the king of Castellon was hatching; whatever the human ruler intended to do with the relic was trivial. Amaryllis wanted to know where to find a space-Bender at

Colasia who could transport her to the palace. Her magic would take care of the rest.

She fidgeted with her hair as she considered her best options to return to Fenderan. Instead of waiting to find another crack in the Rift, she could pray to one of the Furies. As the Murasaki of Mesmers and one of the seven ruling members of the Council, she was entitled to request Mayaderan for some assistance under exceptional official circumstances. *Was this official business? Yes. Definitely, yes.*

It should be feasible to return home with the recovered relic within a week of human time; she had no reason to procrastinate.

After all, nothing in Amon would make her want to stay longer.

Kai stood from his bed and stretched his body; his tall silhouette was now dimly visible through the glass panes. Amaryllis tried to turn around to get back into her room, but her eyes seemed to have other plans.

“Mornin’,” the Mover yawned a greeting from inside, making her reluctantly close the balcony door. Dark circles were quite prominent under Una’s big brown eyes.

“Did you get any sleep at all?” Amaryllis inquired (not that she was concerned for a talkative human mage).

Una rubbed her eyes and replied sleepily, “In bits and pieces.”

Underneath the balcony, the wheels of the town had started rolling faster and faster.

“This turned out a far better inn than I’d expected,” Una commented, patting the clean white sheets on her bed. “But doesn’t it feel like Kai’s hidin’ something...almost like this place?” the Mover asked as she magically made the hairbrush fly to her from the dresser and started untangling her mane.

This girl uses more prana for day-to-day stuff than the laziest fae.

“Everyone is entitled to some secrets of their own,” Amaryllis replied.

She was unsure if she would ever reveal her true identity as the Murasaki to the humans. Not that it mattered. One fae was the same as another to them—similarly, one human was alike another.

“I’ve none,” Una declared while she fought a fierce battle with a particularly troublesome knot in her raven hair. “I lived in a village further south; my father’s a Mover, and I’m a Mover. Left home to try becomin’ a knight; a dream that seems to be in the drains right now! Oh, I’m sharin’ a room with a fae on a mission from a parallel realm and hangin’ out with a knight on the run from the king himself.” Giving her rebel hair knot a particularly brutal tug, she said, “See? No secrets whatsoever.”

Amaryllis listened to Una’s ramble with a faint smile on her mouth.

Then, she could no longer endure Una ravaging her beautiful dark tresses.

Without comment, she rescued the exhausted brush from Una’s hand and climbed on the bed behind the Mover to carefully disentangle the jumble of hair. Though a momentary flicker of surprise surfaced on Una’s face, she didn’t protest and even relaxed while Amaryllis ran the brush through her hair before tying it neatly with a piece of navy-blue twine. “There. Not everything requires brawn,” Amaryllis admonished her once she was done.

Una grinned. “If I never achieve anythin’ else in my life, I’ll still die happy knowin’ I got a fae to brush my hair.”

Amaryllis rolled her eyes and got off the bed.

“We gotta find a nickname for you.” Una ignored her eye roll and said, “Amaryllis is such a mouthful. If we get into some trouble ‘gain, the trouble might be over by the time we finish callin’ you for help.”

Amaryllis looked at the crazy human in disbelief. No one in Fenderan was even allowed to call her by her given name,

only by the title of her position. Here, this one was complaining about it. She frowned and replied, “If the trouble is over by the time you finish calling me for help, maybe you don’t need to call me for help.”

“Amy!” the human, who didn’t seem to hear a word from her, squealed in delight.

Oh, well.

••••

MALAKAI CAME DOWNSTAIRS with Dom in tow to find the ladies halfway through breakfast.

At the moment, the human and the fae were having a spirited debate about the pros and cons of alcohol consumption with a morning meal. His old friend, Peg, the owner of the Rouge, waited patiently with a colorful pitcher of chilled beverage for them to come to a decision. The two appeared to have sprinted past their initial animosity and awkwardness.

There was a spread of fried pork and beef sausages, crispy bacon strips, scrambled eggs, hard-boiled eggs, pastries, croissants, warm buttered bread, jams, jellies, and cheese arranged on a large table in the corner. A basket of apples and grapes was placed in the center, and some cut pieces of grapefruit and melons were on a platter. On a side table, there were several choices of non-alcoholic beverages, ranging from hot tea to cold, freshly pressed juices.

“How many stayin’ ‘ere?” Dom asked, eyeing the banquet before him.

“Just us,” Malakai replied as he picked up a plate.

Dom looked displeased with the potential food waste but said nothing and joined Una and Amaryllis with his loaded plate. The fae had won the contest and was now enjoying a tall glass of Peg’s signature peacocktail: a way-too-colorful concoction of agave and sugarcane liquors masterfully camouflaged with fruit extracts.

Malakai and Peg quietly moved away from the three chatting with each other.

“You need to tell me what’s going on!” the innkeeper demanded.

Malakai shushed him before he could say anything more. “Peg, call me Kai, please. I haven’t told any of them who I am. Apart from being a knight, that is.”

Peg sighed before continuing. “First, I receive this urgent letter from Ciaran more than a month ago to alert Sanar, Vid, and Hunter. Then, not a single peep from him. Later, I hear the news of a jailbreak at Lascera only because I have contacts there. Now, you show up with three strangers. And one of them doesn’t even look human!”

Malakai stared at him in shock. “How did you...”

“Yeah, hiding those ears isn’t enough to fool me; you should know me better! A fae, isn’t she? What type of a mage?” Peg sounded exasperated.

Malakai’s eyes lingered on the fae plucking a dark purple grape from the basket as she laughed at something Dom said. From here, she appeared human—a mesmerizing one, but a human, nevertheless.

“Mesmer,” he replied.

Peg now looked horrified. “A Mesmer! Why’s she in Amon? Why is she with you?”

“Come on, Peg. You’d read CirrahDion’s journals before me. You know that they were not a danger to us even then. She is not...” Malakai could not finish the sentence, unable to forget the traumatizing experience of her prana trapping him in his worst memory back at the Reapers’ den; his nightmares had been haunting him more frequently ever since.

Peg grimaced. “I *have* read them. You, however, have forgotten the story in CirrahDion’s journal about the fae who’d crossed the Rift in the final years of his reign. Most people don’t know that one fae had managed to find his way into Amon a hundred years AFTER the separation.” Peg recounted the tale from the ancient diaries. “Remember how he butchered and slaughtered nearly fifty mages before getting caught and executed? Cirrah was certain he was acting alone

without the Fae Council's knowledge. What if they'd sent him then to exact revenge on the humans? What if she is an assassin as well?" he demanded.

Malakai shook his head. "But Peg, think about it: she had no reason to help me, yet she did! She could've killed us anytime in the last few days or the least, driven us insane—one trickle of her magic would've been enough. But she didn't." He added with complete conviction, "Believe me! She's not a threat."

"Hmmm..." Peg narrowed his eyes and retorted, "and it has nothing to do with the fact that she's a gorgeously beautiful woman?"

Malakai's face darkened a little at the insinuation. "I have bigger problems to deal with right now. Speaking of which, where are the others? Where's Ciaran?"

A red-haired barmaid crossed them on her way to clean up the breakfast table, and instinctively, she turned around to look at him. Malakai, however, did not feel her gaze linger on him. He was focused on Peg's reply. "Sanar should reach here in a day or two. Vid and Hunter would meet you on the way to the trail. Have you decided what you want to do next?"

Malakai was not happy with Peg's reply. So, he asked again, enunciating each word slowly. "Where. Is. Ciaran?"

The older man visibly paled. He took a deep breath and chewed on his lip, making Malakai even more nervous. Then, he admitted, "I don't know. We don't know. He's nowhere to be found."

Malakai swallowed hard. "Has he been captured?"

His anxiety reflected on the innkeeper's face when he replied hesitantly, "I don't think so. I have it on good authority that Atkins is looking for both of you. Also, if anyone did manage to apprehend someone like him, they would have announced it with a trumpet." Noticing Malakai was still worried sick, Peg quickly added, "This is Ciaran we're talking about. Have some faith."

“I do. I always have. I just...miss him...feels strange to be here and not have him around.”

Peg smiled at the memories of them over the years. “He nearly burnt down my bar on his last visit. Vid, Ciaran, and you together are a handful! I pity poor Sanar and Hunter.”

Malakai managed a weak smile, though his insides churned in distress over his missing friend. With some effort, he gathered his mind back and asked, “How’s Stan doing?”

Peg’s face lit up at the mention of his husband of thirty years, something that always made Malakai happy. Growing up, Peg and Stan had been more of a family to him than his parents and brother.

“He’s well. Healthy as a horse, he is,” the innkeeper said. “Why don’t you come by our place for lunch today? Let the ladies and the kid rest here. We’ll talk more then.” He patted Malakai on his back and went back to the kitchen.

Malakai looked around the room as he finished his tea. There were so many happy memories tucked inside this bar. Instead of the painful moments that Amaryllis witnessed in his mind, Malakai wished he could share those with her someday. *Maybe...*

The teacup suddenly slammed into the plate with a thud, and he sat there, stunned.

Not going to happen...

....

“NOT GOING TO HAPPEN,” Tristen declared firmly.

“I am *the* Assassin. I go to mortal realms to kill. Not to chitchat.” It took him a lot of effort not to yell at them. “Melodus is the Spy. He’s supposed to know how to get information out of someone. Send him!”

Melodus smirked. “The entire point of being the Spy is *to* spy. Not to have a conversation with the target.”

Before either of them could look at Althrus, the booming voice of the Thief interjected, “Don’t even think of asking me.”

I wasn't much of a conversationalist when I was alive. I definitely am not now."

"At least you were a human once. Melodus and I were fae. That makes you far better suited to talk to another human than either of us." Tristen found a solid argument. Melodus nodded vehemently in agreement, sneakily having switched sides.

Althrus started to look pissed. "I was a human centuries ago. You can't use that against me now." His abilities as a Destroyer mage in life had combined with shadow-warping after reincarnation. Any object he touched turned into its shadow, making him the perfect thief. Then again, he used to be a highly prolific Reaper who was caught by one of the clans (yes, he was older than the separation) and beheaded without a trial, as was the norm before CirrahDion took the crown. Althrus would never claim to be a good example of a human. "Good" humans did not end up at Tarderan.

"Tristen, aren't you forgetting something?" The amusement in the Devil's voice chilled the dreaded Assassin to the depth of his shadow core. It was a bad sign when the Devil was having fun. The master of Tarderan ignored the green hue on his Assassin's face and said, "You are the only Shade who has interacted with a living human in the last century. Who among us ever had a human 'friend'?"

Tristen dearly wished he could pass out. "I...umm..."

Melodus and Althrus both started laughing. "Ah, how could we forget? What was that human's name again? Tristen used to visit him nearly every week," Melodus said, scrunching his face in an attempt to remember.

The Devil was watching the distressed Assassin with a huge grin. "I remember. Ciaran. How's he doing, by the way?"

Tristen had had enough of this. He had trained Ciaran for a year or two, on and off. Now he had to endure centuries of teasing for that single lapse in judgment. "I don't keep in touch with him! He was being a pest, showing up at every one of my kills—I still don't know how that boy kept finding me! Training him was the easiest way to get rid of him. Nothing more."

The Devil tapped a finger on his chin thoughtfully. “Be that as it may, you are still the Shade who managed to gain the trust of a human and spend time with him. Tristen, I’ve decided. You’ll find out how the human mage is associated with Sa’ore Morte.”

Tristen looked crestfallen. “How do I do that? Am I supposed to turn up and say, ‘Hello, human; my sources tell me you reek of death. Any idea how you and the relic of Death might be connected? Oh, and are you planning some unspeakably evil deed we should know about?’”

“Perfect!” The Devil clapped his hands.

Melodus and Althrus did not provide any suggestion beyond a chortle. Tristen hung his head at his supposedly after-death brothers’ utterly useless counsel. He had to figure this one out on his own. Somehow the Assassin of Tarderan was roped into seeking answers to the questions he could not comprehend fully.

What could possibly go wrong?

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THERE WERE PLENTY OF things going wrong with her life.

But at this moment, Una couldn’t remember any of them. The hot water tub was soaking away all her troubles, uncertainties, and fatigue.

She was highly impressed by the Rouge’s facilities, like this heating system in the bathrooms that kept the water at the right temperature for as long as someone was in it. This was so much better than carrying buckets of hot water to fill a tub that immediately turned cold. Relishing the warmth of foamy water gently relieving the tension from both her body and mind, she tried to guess how many classes of mages would have to be commissioned to create a contraption like this or how much it could have cost.

Una could’ve easily spent the entire night in the temperature-controlled bath, but the softness of her bed in the

other room was beckoning her like a drunken siren. Reluctantly, she got out of the bath and dressed up.

The mirror above the sink was foggy with the steam. Unbidden, a memory knocked on the door of her mind. Suddenly, her prana flared, displaying both the familiar blue and the foreign yellow, and the bathroom disappeared from her view.

Una found herself inside a corridor. The thick fog obscuring her vision was intermittently interrupted by the hazy lights twinkling from underneath a series of closed doors on both sides. *But I wasn't asleep!*

She had been dragged into this dark, gloomy, inescapable space in her nightmares nearly every second night for weeks. Una hadn't told any of her travel companions about this, especially not Dom. But she was tired of being afraid of this place. Walking up to the closed door, she kicked it hard. To her horror, before her baffled eyes, the formerly solid door broke away like smoke at her touch, only to reform itself. Laughing at her.

"Let me leave!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

"Leave...Leave..." the echoes cheered her on.

Another door was shimmering in front of her, inviting her to open it. She felt like they were mocking her. What was the point in trying?

Una sat down heavily on the cold floor. "I'm not in Amon?" she asked, half to herself.

"Not in Amon...Not in Amon."

Battling an odd feeling that she was having a conversation with the corridor itself, Una asked, "How'd I go back?" She knew it was idiotic, if not insane, to seek help from an inanimate hallway.

"Go back...Go...Back," the corridor suggested.

She sighed. What did she expect exactly? A real piece of advice?

"Una..."

“Amy?” Una jumped up and went closer to the closed door.

“Did you fall asleep in the tub? It’s been a while. Come out now.” Amaryllis’ words were faint, as though they had to cross multiple doors to reach her.

“Lemme return. Please!” Hoping against all hope, she tugged on the glowing doorknob.

This time, the door swung open without any resistance, and when a soft, warm gust of air welcomed Una back into the bathroom, a plea floated from beyond the vanishing door.

“Return...please!”

Chapter 12

To tell you the truth

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AMARYLLIS WAS NOT SURE if she'd heard him correctly.

“There’s currently no space-Bender here in Colasia,” Peg repeated.

Noticing her bewildered look, Kai stepped in. “Amaryllis, there’re barely a couple of space-Benders in the entire kingdom.”

She had not foreseen this problem. “Are you suggesting I travel across Castellon to get the Sa’ore back? Like actually by the roads?” she asked with trepidation.

Una stifled a chuckle and added in a sing-song voice, “By the roads, over the mountains, across the rivers.”

Amaryllis’ jaw fell open, and she looked at Kai, hoping for a different answer. Instead, he gave her an encouraging smile.

“How’re you plannin’ to pay the Bender? Do you have our money?” Dom asked curiously.

Amaryllis licked her lips in dismay. “No,” she tried to explain, “I was going to...” The esteemed Murasaki of Mesmers had begun to realize how ill-prepared she had been. Not only did the crack in the Rift she had managed to find land her on the opposite side of the kingdom, but she also had no practical way to reach her destination fast. At least it was the correct country!

“What’s your plan when you reach Castle?” the innkeeper inquired. Once more, Amaryllis wondered why Peg was invited to this supposedly secret meeting, who he was to Kai, and who Kai truly was.

The knight replied at her behest, “Amaryllis needs to take the relic back, and it would also be best for this realm. I think we sho—” He paused abruptly as Una raised her hand.

“You said he’s killin’ mages to feed it prana, then what?” the Mover asked, “how’s the king gonna use the thingy?”

“Can we please stop calling it the thingy!” Amaryllis snapped. “Sa’ore. It has a name!”

“Okay, fine! What’s His Royal Majesty planning to do with the fearsome Sa’ore Verite of the glorious realm of Fenderan?”

Kai rubbed his forehead with his index finger, which Amaryllis had started to recognize as a sign of his nervousness. “It practically dropped from the sky on a farm close to Castle one day, turning acres of corn field into a dried husk. The farmer was too terrified to touch it; thank the Angels! But the knights who went to investigate didn’t comprehend its true danger until it killed one of them, a non-mage, so fast that they didn’t even realize it was the relic’s doing. Until the mage among them touched it—that lasted for hours...and hours.” Kai went silent as the trauma of his own loss clouded his consciousness. It took him some effort to continue. “They managed to secure it in a metal box and transported it to the palace for safety.”

The irony of that decision was not lost on any of them.

“So, it sucks the life out of anythin’ livin’?” Dom asked.

Amaryllis nodded and confirmed, “If touched directly, yes. We used to keep it encased in crystal. Stone or metal would work, though not as efficiently.”

“Then what happened, Kai?” Una prompted the knight.

“The king thought it could be a way to store prana for later use, to enhance the magic of his chosen few. He ordered us to find mages to experiment on.” Everyone, including Peg, was staring at him in horror. Kai buried his face in his hands to avoid meeting any of their eyes.

“How many?” Amaryllis asked, her voice trembling.

“At least a dozen,” he replied in a stricken voice.

“Yours too?” Una sounded just as tormented; her usual exuberance dampened.

He looked up, his dark eyes betraying volumes of agony and anger. “*That* was a punishment for speaking up.”

The mages in the room glanced at each other. None of them could imagine how it felt to have prana sucked out of oneself. Amaryllis’ core, however, shuddered in fear.

“His plan didn’t work, did it?” she asked sadly, to which he shook his head. Amaryllis then answered everyone’s unspoken question. “It is possible to return prana to the original mage from the relic. But if the bearer is dead, it simply stays inside the Sa’ore Verite. It can’t be used to store or transferred to someone else.”

“Did he stop then?” Dom asked in a faint voice.

Instead of answering Dom, Kai turned to Peg. “Something you don’t know, Peg: Aldoria is going to declare war soon.”

Peg didn’t look surprised, which surprised Amaryllis and, by the look of it, Una as well.

Kai continued his story. “Because of this possibility of invasion, king Malville thought if he could pump the relic full of prana, it could be used as a devastatingly powerful explosive device. He could threaten to break it on the Aldorian soil, releasing its tremendous energy and wiping the nation off the map.” Kai rubbed his forehead again as if trying to wipe the memory off his mind.

Everyone in the room simultaneously turned to Amaryllis. “Would *that* work?” Una piped up.

Amaryllis could not be sure. “Theoretically, it’s possible. But...” she trailed off uncertainly.

“But?” Kai urged, almost frantic.

“Did it change color after drawing in prana?” she asked. He frowned a little and nodded in assent. “Did it keep the color?” the fae insisted.

Kai thought briefly and replied, “For a little while before it returned to white. Why?” There was a steely edge to his voice.

She considered her words carefully not to offend the assembled humans. “I don’t know if all of Amon has enough

magicians to fill it to the brim of explosion. I'm not even sure if it could ever be full." The room went silent enough for only their breathing to be heard.

"But the king doesn't know that," Una finally spoke up.

"So, he might keep tryin'," Dom's voice got caught in his throat.

"And kill how many more?" Una asked no one in particular.

Neither Amaryllis nor Kai had an answer to that.

••••

DOM FELT AT HOME.

He'd always hated working at an inn: serving people food and drinks, making their beds, and cleaning their rooms. However, he hadn't realized how much he'd missed the familiarity of that life until he came to the Rouge.

This tavern was nothing like Gram's bed-and-breakfast back at Zephyr; it drove regular tourists away with its sordid outer appearance, but Dom soon figured out how this place worked. It was catering to a highly elite clientele, only allowed through a reference from a previous patron, making it the perfect haven for the wealthy and renowned to relax and enjoy a drink without having to worry about public scrutiny.

Dom happily fell back into his routine, helping Peg and the two barmaids with the night crowd. The aristocratic ambiance of the room was accentuated by the masterful symphony in the background, a perfect concord of the lute, harp, and flute. However, the highlight was Peg's highly potent and colorful drinks, dubbed "peacocktails." While he helped the cute red-haired barmaid serve them, Dom had fun watching those drinks turn a sophisticated noble into a giddily gibbering fool in just a few sips.

Most couldn't finish a single glass.

Other than one person (or rather a fae) who was already on her fourth.

“Is he seein’ both of them?” Leah, the redhead, asked him.

Dom turned to follow her gaze, which had landed on Kai. “Neither of ‘em...but...” he hesitated.

However, the young woman ignored the “but” and brightened up considerably. “Really? He’s just so...” she trailed off. Dom was getting increasingly uncomfortable.

Trish, a tall brunette, finished Leah’s thought. “Gooooorgeous.”

Dom shuddered and left the two women giggling. *Grown-ups!*

Peg had arranged for Kai and the others to have a private booth to enjoy the night. “I can’t close the bar without raising suspicion. You either stay in this booth or your room upstairs,” the innkeeper told Kai, and the knight complied.

“I want another of these,” Amaryllis declared. “Una, you coming?”

“I’ll come with you. But I...oh my...!” Una got up and tried to stand still. “I think this drink had more alcohol than I can handle.” She noticed Kai was still nursing his first and wondered aloud, “How’re you not even a li’l bit tipsy?”

Amaryllis looked none the worse for wear: a mesmerizing vision in a light mauve dress that kissed the floor; she wore no other adornments, unlike most ladies in the room. Raising her delicate hands in mock victory at Una’s question, she declared, “I am a fae,” as if it explained her suspicious lack of inebriation.

“Shushhhhh...” All three humans hushed her at the same time.

“See? You’re drunker than you care to admit.” Una dragged the slightly abashed fae with her.

The counter was buzzing with patrons. Working on about five orders simultaneously, Peg blended a drink for Amaryllis; it was a medley of pink, orange, and blue liquors (Dom didn’t know their names) and fruit juices (looked like cranberry and something else), topped with a slice of lemon and cherry. Peg

liked to garnish the drinks with miniature umbrellas skewered through the fruits. Dom found it to be pretty but pointless.

From the booth, he could not hear them very well, but sitting behind the reddish-orange sheer curtains, Dom watched a well-groomed man walk up to the two women and extend his right hand after a flourished bow. Amaryllis smiled and accepted the gentleman's offer. Though the fae was very careful with her ears around strangers, she could not hide her beauty. The moment she'd stepped out of the booth, every person had noticed her.

The music changed pace to accommodate her elegant and sensual moves.

Dom surreptitiously glanced at the knight lounging next to him. He didn't appear remotely perturbed, making the boy doubt his former intuition until Dom noticed how white his knuckles gripping the glass had become.

The tempo of the music slowed down, and Amaryllis was swept away by a lady this time. Someone approached Una, who had been munching on a spiced celery stick at the snack counter.

To Dom's surprise, a fleeting cloud of guilt passed over her face. *Did she leave someone behind back home?* He had often seen her sad, though she hid quite well behind her cheerful demeanor.

After a moment of hesitation, the Mover, looking very pretty in her cerulean dress, walked to the floor to join Amaryllis and the rest. Suddenly, Dom found himself alone in an empty booth, for Kai had left the room without a word.

Feeling out of place, the young Shifter cleaned up the table and returned to the kitchen.

Trish was there by herself with no sign of Leah.

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MALAKAI NEEDED A DISTRACTION, and one found him quickly enough.

His life was shrouded with so many lies that he couldn't keep track of them anymore; which ones he told them, and which ones he told himself? He needed to forget his troubled past and his uncertain future. More importantly, Malakai wanted to take his mind off the one person he couldn't have.

Precisely what he was trying to do with the redhead leaning against the wall in front of him, who grabbed his attention as she fervently kissed him. He responded to her attempts, kissing her back so greedily that she had no time to catch her breath. His white shirt had come undone at some point; the scars on his chest and arms were faint under the dim lights.

Eager for more, she grabbed a fistful of his hair, pulling him deeper, but he took his time to undress her. There was an art to prolong the pleasure, to enhance their craving; he teased and tasted every inch of her skin he could access before her rumpled green dress and soaked undergarments were allowed to drop to the floor, exposing her entirely to him. Malakai kept her still with both hands pushing her thighs apart, eliciting moans almost as sweet as the music percolating through the locked back door.

He wanted more, much more from her—to get her to scream in ecstasy loud enough to drown the sounds of laughter from the bar, making him forget that this woman was not her. That she was probably dancing in someone else's arms at this very moment.

By the time they were both exhausted, the orchestra had already stopped, and the tavern had closed. Malakai waited until the red-haired woman (he never got her name) had fallen asleep before carefully extricating himself from her arms; then got dressed in silence.

Walking toward his room, he paused in the quiet hallway.

The door to her room was closed.

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UNA DESPERATELY NEEDED to talk to someone.

Only she couldn't figure out who to talk to.

Dom was already very worried about her health (and, quite possibly, her sanity). Also, he was her responsibility, not the other way around. She didn't feel like dumping her problems on Kai, who had enough on his plate, being a wanted fugitive and all. That left Amaryllis. As a Mesmer specializing in memory magic, she might be the best person to ask for help. However, Una could not bring herself to share her worries with her, either. Nothing against the fae; Una liked her as a person now, but Amaryllis had no reason to care about what was going on with a human.

Overwhelmed, Una sought solace from the one companion she could always rely on. Her prana was curled up like a cat inside her core. At her call, it stretched its blue body and came out like a flame on the top of her palm. It was warm and familiar, relaxing her immediately.

Then, something else raised its head. A yellow prana peeked out, almost shyly, entangled with the blue. Una felt a sudden jolt of terror hit her chest. This was too real to ignore as a figment of her nightmares. She jumped from her bed, desperately trying to shake it off her prana.

How'd this happen? Even if she'd gotten infected with foreign energy (maybe some kind of accidental transfer from something a Bender created), her own magic should've been able to dispel it in no time.

She tried to persuade her prana to devour the other one.

Instead, her magic seemed to protect it, allowing the yellow one to wrap around the blue like a vine around an oak, shielding it from her attempts. In a blind panic, Una tried to disentangle them by force.

Suddenly, the Bender prana flared up, and the room vanished before her eyes. One moment, Una was sitting on her bed; the next moment, someone or something dragged her to the dark corridor, pulling her toward one of the doors that noiselessly opened to let her in.

Not again! She turned around to find that the damn door had conveniently disappeared, leaving her stranded

somewhere. In front of her were two people talking urgently, their expressions a mix of worry and confusion.

The man she couldn't remember, who yet felt so familiar, and the woman she was becoming convinced was herself.

Chapter 13

The point of no return

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SANAR WONDERED HOW Malakai had been holding up.

Worry made his hands grip the reins of his horse, urging the animal to gallop faster.

Vid, Hunter, and Ciaran were away on different assignments when this started. Sanar was supposed to be at the palace, but he'd been asked to take Feris' place at the last minute: the older King's Knight had to stay behind to help the General with the visiting Aldorian delegates. Malakai had also been busy in those negotiations, struggling to keep Malville from enraging the normally stoic Aldorians at every turn.

Then, somehow, things went wrong.

Sanar knew Malakai and Ciaran had planned to confront the king about this accelerating hostility with Aldoria. He was also aware that the strange amber relic uncovered a few months ago was at its center. However, he hadn't been made privy to all their plans and decisions, and it wasn't in his nature to pry. There was a clear hierarchy, even within the King's Knights, whether they wanted to admit it or not.

Now, more than ever, Sanar wished he had been insistent.

He was already in the south when he received the urgent note from Peg conveying Ciaran's warning. Within a few days, Sanar realized how dire the situation was with the knights from the southern outpost hot on his trail, forcing him to take a circuitous route to reach Colasia. He crossed Zephir; instead of taking the shortcut through the forest, he rode through the adjoining villages in a zigzag pattern, so his tracks left no clue where he was headed. This maneuver wasted more time than he had envisioned.

Sanar winced as his tired body shook with the horse's movements, his thoughts moving from Malakai to Ciaran and back. Though he worried about Malakai, it was Ciaran who

caused him more concern—very unlike him to be out of touch for this long: none of them had received a single message from him since that last letter he'd sent to Peg from his hometown of Korbridge. Sanar sincerely prayed to see him with Malakai.

As he neared the gates of Colasia, Sanar's heart drummed in his ears.

It was late in the evening. He could see a detachment of knights camping at the forest's edge. Most likely, they had decided to halt for the night before charging into the town and resuming their search. Sanar could not afford such luxury. He forced his exhausted horse to carry on, careful not to alert them.

A team of twelve knights was problematic enough, but what bothered Sanar was the woman leading them.

Reva...

••••

“I HAVE TO LEAVE!”

He sounded frantic, and his voice made Una's heart ache with a sorrow no one should feel for a stranger.

Since she was transported into this vision, she'd started feeling a sense of nostalgia. This wasn't a dream, for Una was definitely awake when this happened; it couldn't be a memory because she had never visited this town before. Una decided to stop struggling to understand it and concentrated on the man's words instead.

The sun was yet to rise, allowing the dying streetlights to cast long shadows.

“I'm sorry to have asked you out here at this hour. But I needed to say goodbye,” he said. Seeing her other-self look as confused as Una felt was almost a relief.

“What's goin' on? Why're you leavin' so suddenly? I thought I was comin' with you and your friend 'til the Siremann's Trail?” she asked with the same urgency.

The night was nearly silent save for a few vagrants snoring on the stone benches. He looked around as if he was anticipating trouble. “I’ve been hesitating for a while, but it’s crystal clear that it’ll be too dangerous for you to come along. Just forget we ever met.”

“Tell me what’s wrong! Lemme help. Who’re you runnin’ from?” she insisted.

He paused and sighed. “You want to know?”

She nodded.

In a grave voice, he said. “I’m a fugitive, Una. The knights are coming after my friend and me. Do you see why my company is the last place you should be?” He started walking away without waiting for her reply. Una’s mouth had hung open. Both of their mouths. *A fugitive! Another one...*

Her other-self hesitated for a moment before her prana lashed out; dark blue ropes bound him and stopped him from moving. He looked shocked and angry while he struggled to turn and face her. “You are restraining me! Why? To gain the knights’ favor? He told me this would happen—the moment you knew the truth, you’d betray me. I didn’t believe him!” His voice shook with disappointment.

His muscles strained against the magic, and just as Una’s doppelganger reached him, he broke through her Mover magic. Una watched in shock. This man did not use any prana to counter it. *How strong is he?*

“You don’t owe me any explanation,” her other-self said in a strangled voice, “you didn’t promise me nothin’ either. I won’t stand in your way, but...please, tell me how to help you.”

His eyes widened. “Why?”

Before she could reply, he shoved her to the side and lunged forward. With a scream that pierced through the night’s silence, a man holding a sword crumpled behind her; the vagrants woke up and started running away, their yells adding more fuel to the chaos.

But Una wasn't paying attention to that, for the grace with which he moved and disarmed the soldier stunned her. That's who she'd briefly remembered during Reapers'—how!?

Though her other-self missed the fight behind her, which lasted barely a second, Una had witnessed it all. When the man silently crept up behind other-Una, he had pushed her aside to put himself between the two, then crossed his elbow around the other man's stretched arm holding the sword, applied pressure at the joint, twisting it and disarming him—all in one smooth motion. The hapless knight barely managed a scream before he struck the man's jaw with the heel of his palm, rendering him unconscious.

This was not a regular fight. The fluid movements were beyond the skills of anyone Una had seen, and that list included Kai.

However, the danger was not over.

The knight had a partner who leapt up from the darkness and charged toward them.

It was the other-Una who stopped him; not everyone was as inhumanly strong as the stranger to resist a Mover's magic. The knight struggled against her blue magic that pushed him away from them while she used another strand of her prana to pick up a rock from the side of the street to hit him. "Una, be careful!" the green-eyed man alerted her a fraction of a second too late. The knight battling her magic slipped on the cobbled streets, impaling himself with his own sword.

They stood in horror, watching the thick dark blood smear the already colorful street red, becoming redder with every passing moment as the sun started peeking through the clouds.

"Oh no! Nonononono!" her other-self cried out while Una was frozen in shock. She killed—

They could hear the town waking up. Soon they would get overrun by soldiers and knights. He grabbed her hand and said, "Run!"

Una had no choice but to hurry behind them, through alleys, lanes, and corners; she didn't know where she was in

the town anymore and prayed that she'd be back in her room once this bizarre vision was over.

"I killed a man!" She heard herself sink to the ground, unable to run any further.

"You did not." He stopped as well, pulling her into an embrace. "It was an accident. But those homeless men might have seen you; they could identify you." He looked miserable. "This is my fault! Una, we need to leave town immediately. Once out of here, I promise to leave you alone; you'll be safer if I'm not around. But, for now, please trust me."

His green eyes caught the sun, the sandy hair swaying with the morning breeze as he held the sobbing girl in his arms. "I swear on all I am that I won't let anything bad happen to you."

Una's heart clenched and unclenched at his words.

She believed him.

Then, he pulled her other-self from the ground and said, "If those two were in the town, Reva can't be far behind. We must hurry. Let's go inside."

Una turned her gaze to see they were in front of a seedy tavern. The sign at the top of the bar was hanging sideways, with the letters stuck at odd angles. It could be saying: the Rouge or the Rogue.

Her brain had barely begun processing the revelation when the tavern and the two people vanished before Una's eyes.

Then, she was dragged through the foggy corridor and pushed out of a spectral door, only to find herself *inside* the Rouge, where she could hear the others talking and drinking tea downstairs. *Am I still seein' things?*

"Where have you been? I didn't see you when I woke up," Amaryllis waved at her.

Before Una could untangle her vision from reality, the door to the bar opened with a bang, and a disheveled man ran into the room. "Malakai, we've got to go! Reva's here."

••••

TIME STARTED TO MOVE very slowly.

Una turned toward the door, a tiny spark of hope coming to life within her before a darkness more absolute than the night smothered the fleeting light.

The man looked nothing like him.

With shoulder-long unkempt dark hair, warm beige skin, and soft hazel eyes, he looked like a disoriented scholar who had forgotten to comb his hair or tuck in his shirt hurrying to the library. The one thing that marred this image was the enormous broadsword inside a scabbard hanging loosely from his back.

“Sanar!” Peg had run out of the kitchen at the sound of the door banging. “Reva is here already? I’ll fix up the travel provisions. Malakai, get your things and pick up some weapons from my stash.” The room broke into a frenzy of activity with the innkeeper barking orders like a seasoned general, getting packs prepared for them, and waking up the stable boy to ready their horses.

A mortified Kai, however, just stood there. Time lurched forward to catch up with the events unfolding before her. “They called you...” Una recognized the name.

“Who are you?” Amaryllis asked sharply. “Was everything else a lie as well?”

“None of it was a lie,” he nearly begged. “I *was* a King’s Knight by training and profession. And I am currently on the run from the king. Nothing has changed.”

“Nothing’s changed!” Una exclaimed. “You’re the prince of Castellon! How trivial d’you think that is?” She couldn’t stop herself from yelling at the man she should be bowing to.

He did not look offended at her insolence. “Una, I had no choice. How could I give my real name to the people I didn’t know, especially in the circumstances we had met? After that, it was easier to be just Kai.”

“Your brother? He’s your brother?” Amaryllis could not find words. Suddenly, Una’s anger at being misled melted away. Everything he’d been through, all at the hands of his

only living family; she could not imagine the bleak desolation he must be feeling.

Malakai didn't reply. There was nothing more to say.

Peg rushed in with their bags. "Everything's ready. May the Guardians be with you!"

Once more, Una felt like she was spiraling out of her own life, dragged around by a riptide with no straw to grasp.

She knew Kai and Amaryllis had planned to get the Sa'ore away from the king and return it to Fenderan. However, it had seemed far away; nothing would've happened until they reached Castle. Una and Dom had plenty of time to change their minds and the course of their journey before that.

But now, as soon as they ran from the knights, they would essentially align with Malakai and against the king. "I'm not goin' with you. I'm sorry." She felt horrible even to consider abandoning Malakai and Amaryllis to their fates. *Was the vision earlier a premonition? Am I supposed to be helping 'em?*

If she were by herself, like she constantly was growing up, Una wouldn't have hesitated to take on the world. But she was not alone anymore. Watching the terrified face of the young boy next to her, Una knew her priorities had changed. Becoming a knight to save her country or fighting the knights to save her country, whatever it was going to be, she would choose to protect Dom.

However, before Malakai or Amaryllis could say anything, Peg did. "Una...if Reva finds you and Dom here, she'll interrogate you to discover everything you know about Malakai. You're in danger now that he's told you his side of the story. Maybe even more than him. I am sorry, my children; it's not safe for you to stay. And you can't escape Reva alone."

With the harsh reality settling in, Una turned to Dom and took his hands into hers. "We leave with 'em just this once. Dom, I'll keep you safe, okay?" Her words hauntingly echoed the blond man's parting promise.

Dom's face regained some color as he smiled at her.

....

REVA KNEW SHE WAS TOO late the second she entered the Rouge.

She walked up to the lone older man at the counter while the twelve knights accompanying her waited at the back. While the regular knights wore shining chain mail without helmets and carried standard swords on their hips, the King's Knights had no uniforms. In comfortable riding breeches, her long ash-brown hair neatly plaited, Reva was an attractive young woman in her mid-twenties. At first glance, there was nothing formidable about her.

At a second glance, people would suppress a shiver without knowing why.

“Where is he?” she asked in a dangerously low tone.

Peg shrugged and replied, “No one's here but me.”

“Peg, where's he headed?”

The portly innkeeper nonchalantly resumed cleaning his wine glasses. “Hmm...Vaneda sounds like the best bet. The weather there's just perfect for sunbathing right now. Won't you agree?”

Reva had to stop herself from swearing. “Is he returning to Castle?” she insisted. “Or has he stooped low enough to consider betraying his country to Aldoria?”

His ordinarily cheerful face twisted momentarily. Then Peg asked, “Reva, did you know that until ten years ago, King Arden of Aldoria used to visit Castellon with his wife and daughter every winter?”

Reva was a little thrown off by this random question. She shook her head.

Peg sighed. “Princess Eloise used to play with Malakai and Ciaran in the courtyard. Queen Xynthia always hosted the royal family.”

Reva knew he was distracting her in order to give Malakai a better head start, but she couldn't help herself. “What

happened to make things go so bad?"

Peg put the drying cloth away before turning back to her. A deep sorrow clouded the older man's eyes. "The queen passed away." He paused to collect himself, then continued, "Before her death, Queen Xynthia had agreed to help Aldoria build underground transportation to Vaneda through Castellon. The far-reaching benefits of this arrangement were obvious to everyone but Malville." Frustration shook his voice as Peg continued the story. "The relationship Castellon had with Aldoria for centuries, the friendship Xynthia had nurtured for years, was destroyed by one young man's towering ego and bottomless stupidity. He has not stopped since!"

Reva processed the information and inquired, "Is this your way of telling me that Malakai might choose to seek asylum in Aldoria after all?"

Peg smiled. "This is simply an old man telling you a story. We tend to do that."

She had had enough. "Answer me, Peg. By withholding information from a King's Knight, you are committing treason against the kingdom," Reva hissed.

Peg narrowed his eyes. "Have you looked around your kingdom lately, my revered King's Knight? Mages going rogue to avoid being worked to death by their Lords and Ladies? Those leaders who rape and terrorize helpless people in their provinces? Those who have made it impossible for common people to employ a Healer to save their lives without spending their life's savings?" Peg breathed heavily as he tried to rein in the anger he appeared to have suppressed for years. "One single King's Knight would've been enough to drag these despicable nobles to the town square and end their atrocities. Do you know why that never happens?"

"Shut up!" Reva screamed, startling the knights waiting at a distance.

Peg kept pushing regardless. "Did you ever bother to ask these questions? Why does the king let these Lo—?"

She couldn't take it anymore. Her hands glowed yellow as the Bender closed her fist. Peg gasped and doubled over, his hands clutching his throat while his eyes rolled into the back of his head. Struggling for a single breath, Peg's lips started turning blue.

"Give me one answer, Peg. Just a nod. Is he going to the north?" Reva pleaded.

Instead of a nod, Peg tried to smile; his dried lips cracked and bled.

"Damn you!" Reva tightened her grip. The air was not only gone from his vicinity, but it started to get drawn out from his lungs as well, choking him from the inside out. The knights glanced at each other but did not dare interfere.

"Please, Peg...please!" Reva begged the thrashing man to submit and end this torture. His eyes had started to show throbbing red veins, yet he didn't capitulate.

She gave up, and the older man dropped to the floor when she let him loose.

"Is he dead?" one of the knights finally asked.

Reva nearly chuckled. "He is Dempegus, the former General of Castellon. The one who trained our current General—he's tougher than all of us combined." She knelt beside him and gently wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead. "Forgive me, Peg. This is goodbye! I'll miss your peacocktails."

"My doors will never close for any of you, Reva." He opened his reddened eyes. "This is not a goodbye."

Chapter 14

Beyond the shadow of a doubt

....

TRISTEN WAITED FOR her to be alone.

He had been stalking her for a day now as they rode across the gravel roads of Castellon, with fields of golden corn and green beans lining one side of the streets and thick groves of elm, birch, willow, and hickory shadowing the other. Tristen had recognized the woman riding next to the Mover. As shocked as he was to see the reigning Mesmer Queen wandering around in Amon, he was even more stunned to realize that the humans and the fae seemed to be getting along quite well.

They camped for the night, oblivious of the Assassin of Tarderan hovering in and out of the shadows.

The women set up the tents while the men prepared dinner. It looked like the distribution of chores might have reversed in the mortal world since Tristen was alive, or maybe only in this particular group.

“You’ve got four livin’ Cirrah at Fenderan!” the Mover exclaimed.

The prince and his companion were too far away, getting water from the stream, and no one else was around. But Murasaki hushed her, nevertheless. “Una, could you not announce it to the entire Amon? Yes, they happen to be very rare.”

“I think your definition of rare’s a little off. We’ve none!” Una commented, this time more discreetly.

Murasaki chuckled softly. “We are talking about a realm where everyone is a mage. And only four of them are Cirrah. That qualifies as rare.”

Una hesitated, “Amy, d’you know how one becomes a Cirrah?”

Amaryllis frowned. “In Fenderan, one is born a Cirrah. Both cores are usually activated at the same time. Why do you ask?” she inquired suspiciously.

Instead of answering her, Una doled out another question, “But CirrahDion wasn’t born as one. Does that mean someone can be *made* a Cirrah?”

Murasaki looked uncertain. “As far as I know, humans can barely handle access to one prana. CirrahDion was considered to be exceptional for enduring the burden of two. Even though it’s the energy of life, if the vessel is not ready or isn’t enough...it’d overflow and burn the person from within.” She paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. “Also, there’s the matter of incompatibility between human prana. Or so I’ve heard.”

Una turned to the boy, who had returned from the stream, and was listening with rapt attention. “Dom, remember when we talked ‘bout the different prana fightin’ each other?”

Dom nodded and replied eagerly, “If the parents are mages of different classes, the baby gets both but only one’s domi—I can’t remember the word—wins. It counters the weak one and mashes it. Sometimes two are equally strong, and then, n’ther can win. The kid can’t access any and becomes a non-mage.” He looked very pleased with himself.

Tristen couldn’t help but smile at his childish exuberance.

Amaryllis beamed at the boy. “Nice, Dom! That’s why a Cirrah of Amon could not possibly be born or made again.”

Una still did not look convinced. “How’d CirrahDion become one then?”

“You might regret asking this,” Amaryllis warned the Mover. “It is *not* a pretty story.”

Tristen did not want to remember that time. He had lived through it and lost his entire family because of the humans. His hatred overtook his life, and it would have lasted until his death...if he hadn’t met a particular human woman. His violent demise and even more traumatic reincarnation as a Shade resulted in the memories of his previous life being

fragmented, depriving him of the one thing he desperately needed. While Tristen did not forget the blood and gore he'd spilled, he couldn't remember her name or her face—she was stolen from him, and only her sorrow remained.

As much as the Devil denied it, Tristen believed this to be his real punishment.

He was pulled back to the present by Murasaki's voice. "The clan leaders of Castellon, no kings were ruling this land then, drafted two members of every family to eat prana fruit in attempts to create more mages—most died horribly. With the hope of sparing his sister, Dion ate both fruits given to his family. Even though he survived the ordeal somehow, he couldn't access either prana; they blocked each other. He was flailed to near death for his failure." She shivered involuntarily. "Then they made him watch his little sister die as they forced her to try another fruit." She faced the pale humans and continued, "It is said that his grief and rage broke through his inert cores, activating them both! Bound by a shared pain, the two prana decided to accept each other and burned down the entire building with everyone in it. And the Cirrah of Bender and Destroyer was made."

Una's jaws tightened while Dom sighed sadly and said, "Why does every story 'bout our history make me hate us, humans, more?"

Tristen's eyes widened in shock when Murasaki inched closer to the boy and hugged him tightly. "Dom, don't say that! There are a lot of good humans in Amon. I, for one, am thrilled to have met you."

As he watched them from the shadows, the Assassin of Tarderan felt something akin to hope.

Maybe the chains of twisted reality binding the realms to hatred could be broken after all. *Maybe...*

....

MAYBE IT WAS IRRATIONAL.

Yet Una couldn't help but wish that the emerald-eyed stranger would show up again; a specter made of errant winds,

he would appear like he always did and have answers to those questions she didn't know to ask.

It had nearly been a fortnight now. There'd been no sudden bouts of nausea, screaming nightmares, or draining visions. Una should have been relieved—instead, she woke up hoping to see him again every morning, making her increasingly annoyed with herself.

After the surprisingly sumptuous dinner of smoked pork ribs and sauteed vegetables Sanar had cooked up with Peg's never-ending supplies, the rest huddled around the fire. Una, however, needed a walk and some solitude.

They had managed to lose the King's Knight from their trail, with Malakai and Sanar always making sure to obscure their tracks. The more she spent time with Sanar, the more she liked him. The former King's Knight never showed any trace of hatred toward the fae: they animatedly discussed herbs and plants at every chance they got. He was a Healer mage who had spent a few years at the Castellon Abbey before becoming a knight. With Sanar sharing stories of his time at the Abbey with Dom, Una was grateful that someone else was also working toward convincing the boy to leave for a safer place.

The one person who made Una uncomfortable at times was Kai. His frank and pleasant demeanor made it too easy to forget his royal status. But the truth remained: there was no such thing as a former prince. Sometimes Una had a niggling suspicion that he was playing a role, the part of the friendly neighborhood knight.

She wondered if the green-eyed man was connected to all this. Should she ask Malakai and Sanar? She didn't even know his name. How was she supposed to bring up something like this without being considered insane? Una grimaced as her thoughts once more diverted toward him.

Stop thinking about him!

“Hello, Una. We need to talk.”

The sudden voice in the otherwise isolated forest made her jump out of her skin.

In the middle of a dark forest, under the full moon, Una watched as a shadow stretched upwards until it became a man. Tall and lean, clad in all black, she could have convinced herself that he was a human—a beautiful human with deep dark eyes and chiseled features. However, try as she might, she could not unsee the shadows churning around his feet, which barely touched the ground. Claws of terror gripped her heart. *They don't exist! I don't believe in them...*

Her brain had decided it was best for her to scream and run. Before Una could move, the shadows of the trees quivered, and he reappeared in front of her.

“Stop! There’s something I need—” He couldn’t finish his sentence as a sword swung at him. Annoyed, the Shade turned toward the offender who had rudely interrupted him. Malakai stared at his sword, which completely missed its target. Sanar reached them with his broadsword, and Una saw Amy and Dom running toward them.

Malakai and Sanar repeatedly tried to strike the Shade with their swords, and he barely moved to dodge the attacks, most passing smoothly through the shadows around him. A cold shiver rolled through her body. The Shade (the man? the thing? Una’s thoughts were playing hopscotch in her mind) ignored the others; his black eyes focused on Una. “You need to come with me.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you, shadow creature. Who’s made this deal with Tarderan?!” Malakai yelled.

Sanar gave up on trying to harm him with mortal weapons. Green magic rose from his hands, stretched toward the Shade, and tried to insert itself into his chest.

“Are you planning to heal me to death?” The coarse laughter from the agent of Hell chilled Una to her core.

“Assassin? Why are you here?” Amaryllis’ shocked exclamation hit them like lightning. Malakai and Sanar gasped like someone had punched them hard in their stomachs. Escaping the clutches of a random shadow creature or a lesser Shade was improbable enough; this was the Assassin of Tarderan himself. There was no way out.

Una felt numb with a blue-black curtain dropping before her eyes. *I'm going to die tonight. And I don't know why.*

The Assassin turned his black eyes toward Amaryllis now. "Murasaki, I'm not here to kill anyone. The Devil—"

Once more, he was cut off mid-sentence as Malakai stepped in front of Amaryllis, shielding her. "Did my brother make a deal with the Devil?" He seethed in anger. "What does he want with Una?!"

A trace of confusion appeared on the Assassin's face at Malakai's accusation, quickly replaced by irritation. "Stay back, Prince of Castellon. This has nothing to do with you." He turned to grab Una's hand. "We can't talk here with all these people. I need to take you somewhere else."

"I won't let you take her, Assassin." The Mesmer Queen's voice shook as her prana burst into violet flames around her, "She's my friend!"

••••

TRISTEN HAD KNOWN THIS would happen.

No one would ever believe the Assassin of Tarderan could visit the mortal realm with any other intention but to kill. *Did anyone listen to me? No!*

Now he battled the Mesmer Queen, who'd declared a human as her friend. It was not a trivial announcement. With that one sentence, the ruling authority of Fenderan, one of the Seven, had essentially placed the human under her protection. Tristen hated this. *Why's everything so complicated?*

The humans stepped back in a hurry to avoid the range of the Mesmer's magic. Tristen could feel her prana drilling through his shadows. *Memories...!* The Shade remembered the current Murasaki's specific affinity a second too late. As the thorns on the dark violet crown clawed inside his mind, Tristen fought to keep her magic away. Rationally he knew that a mortal, even someone as powerful as her, could barely manage to subdue him for a mere moment, if at all. However, it was his memories that he was more afraid of than the memory mage.

A water-Bender in life, Tristen's ability had morphed into shadow-bending in death. He wished he could have used martial arts to incapacitate her instead, for shadows were poisonous to mortals, but she was not close enough. At his command, a sliver of darkness flew into his hand and bent itself into a dagger. With her violet prana gnawing at his mind, Tristen could not think straight anymore, and though he knew he would regret harming a Queen of Fenderan, he threw it at Amaryllis.

Out of nowhere, a blue magic hit his dagger.

The weapon flew into a nearby tree, rotting the bark where it got embedded, and the Assassin found himself pitted against the Mover as well. Una seemed to have gotten over her initial shock and fear. Now, she stood next to Murasaki, her blue prana cascading like a waterfall to the Mesmer's violet inferno.

Tristen was running out of time.

He could sense his arch-nemesis approaching fast.

With his magic keeping the Mesmer's prana at bay, he tried again. "Una, please listen to me. I might be the Assassin of Tarderan, but my name is Tristen. I just want to talk to you!"

A glimmer of recognition appeared in Una's eyes. "Tristen...why do I know this name?" she asked in a faraway voice.

For a moment, he felt like his words were finally reaching her; perhaps she would allow him to take her somewhere private where they could chat a little. He would bring her back safely to her friends; it's not like he planned to whisk her off Amon.

His hope shattered into pieces as the night sky turned into day.

A blinding silver light struck the ground, and the very Angel he wanted to avoid stepped out of it.

••••

AMARYLLIS RECOGNIZED the new arrival.

She was relieved, considering there was no way she could have kept the Assassin restrained for much longer—a mortal battling an immortal; her chances were slim to none.

Malakai and Sanar stared at the Angel in front of them. Una looked like someone had dropped a hammer on her head. Amaryllis didn't judge them—seeing an Angel in person had that effect on people; she'd had the same face when she first met one. Dom inched closer to Una with his indigo prana shimmering around him.

The Assassin sighed in resignation, making a nagging doubt appear in Amaryllis' mind. *His behavior shows no hostility toward Una. Why Una?*

The Angel of Mayaderan raised her hand, bending the moonlight into a silver sword. Keeping his unwavering eyes on her, the Assassin turned shadows into obsidian daggers; three in each hand, he got ready for what came next.

Then, the opposing celestial forces crashed into each other without a word.

The sword and daggers danced around in concert through light and shadow, anticipating each other's moves and thwarting one another's attacks. At some point, Amaryllis could no longer follow either of them; only flashes of silver and darkness announced their presence in the human realm.

A pair of luminous argent wings unfurled, and the Angel soared up in the air only to land with a perfect stance behind the Assassin, thrusting her magical sword forward. The Shade moved equally fast, dodging her weapon, and blocking her attack with two interlocking daggers. His shadows, however, hissed and dissipated as the light cut through them. The Angel pushed her sword toward his heart in the split second it took the Shade to recreate his decaying body.

Amaryllis couldn't check everyone else's expression, but she knew they were all standing in a trance while a celestial fight, which most mortals had never witnessed, unfolded before them.

The light of Mayaderan was fatal to a Shade.

Even a seemingly immortal could die; permanently the second time.

The slightest hesitation shook the Angel's hand, and the ethereal weapon missed his core. However, a guttural growl of pain escaped the Assassin's tightened lips, for the sword had sliced through his shoulder instead. He didn't bleed, even if the shadows that made his body got ripped apart by that light. Suddenly, he lunged and gripped Una's hand. His black eyes met the Angel's golden ones, and he pleaded, "Phina, I swear. I didn't come here tonight to kill her. But there's no other way anymore!"

Amaryllis and Malakai both ran toward her, but Dom was faster.

The boy shifted into a spotted cheetah and sprinted forward. He pushed Una out of the Shade's grip a fraction of a second before the Assassin melted into the shadow.

"No!!" Una screamed, her hands frantically trying to reach him.

Instead, they grabbed air as Dom stumbled into the pool of shadows and disappeared with it.

"Give him back! Give him back!" Una clawed on the ground that had just swallowed him, and shadows everywhere flickered in response.

Dom's lifeless body floated up as if the ground had melted into the darkness, and soundlessly rested in her arms.

Chapter 15

The lost boy

••••

THE FOREST REMAINED quiet.

The stream stayed silent.

Una sat on the forest floor, clutching his body tightly in her arms while Amaryllis and Malakai knelt next to them—if they shed a single tear, this would become real. And this was not a reality any of them were willing to accept.

Sanar had seen death before, and so had Malakai; even then, this felt worse. In a blink of an eye, Dom was gone forever without a goodbye, and he had no way to comfort them. What good was being a Healer when he could do nothing to help? Sanar couldn't heal the dead, nor could he ease the pain of those left behind.

His eyes landed on the Angel, who had not yet left. Her silver wings had disappeared now, along with her sword. Her dark skin had a warm golden undertone; some of her hair was tied on the top of her head, and the remaining cascaded down her shoulders. She wore a white pleated chiton (which uncannily had managed to stay unstained and untorn after the battle) secured with a broad belt at her waist. She clenched her taloned hands while those upturned gold eyes betrayed her guilt.

Sensing his gaze, she turned toward Sanar and said softly, “I am sorry...for your loss.” Before Sanar could process that an Angel was speaking to him, Malakai pushed himself up and walked toward her.

His heart froze when he saw Malakai's face; it was darker than Sanar had ever seen, rage palpable in his every stride. In a way, he was relieved that Malakai had lost his prana, shuddering to think what the Destroyer would've tried against an agent of Mayaderan right now and with what consequences!

Nonetheless, Sanar braced himself as Malakai glared at the Angel, and even though he didn't raise his voice, the low growl shattered the somber silence of the forest. "Bring. Him. Back!"

His words broke the dam everyone had been holding up.

Amaryllis cried out in grief, but Una's agonized wail drowned them all.

....

"I DIDN'T MEAN TO. I didn't..."

He had been repeating this for hours.

Shadow-traveling, by itself, wouldn't have killed the human; Tristen could have taken him anywhere in Amon. But by the time Tristen realized that the young human had fallen behind him, he'd already reached Tarderan in his hurry to escape the Angel. Before he could do anything to prevent it, Dom had touched the gates of Tarderan, and it'd torn his soul away from his mortal body. No living being passed through those gates unless invited in by the Devil himself; in the last thousand years, only two mortals had been granted this immunity.

"I'm sorry—" he kept mumbling through his fingers as he buried his face in his hands.

The Devil walked up to the Assassin. "It was an accident, Tristen."

Tristen's haunted black eyes looked up. "He was an innocent! He didn't belong here. I...dragged...a pure soul to the circles of Tarderan to suffer for an eternity." He stared at his open palms as if they were drenched in blood and begged, "Can you bend back time and fix this?" He needed to find a way to erase his sin.

At least this one.

The Devil sighed. "It's not 'time,' my dear one. It is Time. Just because a handful of so-called time-Benders, including me, appear every now and then doesn't mean Time can be bent at will."

Althrus frowned and asked, “What do you mean by that? Why should time be any different from other bendable elements?”

“Unlike other elements—including air and space—time does not have a physical form to change. Also, I’ve long felt it has developed a mind of its own. It allows some time-Benders to freeze it for a heartbeat, while it lent some the ability to chart the constellations or create precision clocks. Like the Guardians and me, some can even look into its passage. But no one can alter it.” He let out a groan and added, “I tried once. A millennium ago. So much was lost then—I was willing to do anything to get them back!”

The three Shades watched in horror as the all-powerful, seemingly invincible Devil shook in barely suppressed sorrow. “It won’t let me.” His eyes turned solid black with red glowing pupils. “It refused to yield. I don’t have what it takes to bend Time.”

Then he begrudgingly admitted, “Maybe the temptation of bending Time to change reality is way too much, even for me. We’ll always find reasons to amend our mistakes, return our loved ones, fix what we don’t like, and throw the natural order into pure chaos. Maybe that’s why it is difficult to bend because it is not supposed to be.” He sighed.

No one said anything for a while.

Tristen lost all hope. In the heat of the moment, unable to make anyone listen to him, driven into a corner, he had decided to bring Una back with him. With so many unexplained mysteries surrounding her, he had rationalized that sacrificing her was a necessary evil. And now, he would have to exist with the consequences of that decision.

He, indeed, was the monster everyone saw him as.

Melodus stood up and said hesitantly, “There might be another way to save him from the circles if you are willing to...” He looked at the Devil for permission.

“I’m listening.”

••••

AMARYLLIS LISTENED to the mourning that had seeped into the morning breeze.

If the silence earlier had been agonizing, Una's muffled sobs were now unbearable, and the Mesmer Queen had never felt this helpless. She watched Malakai and Sanar gently remove Dom's body from Una's arms while the Mover's prana, without her conscious will, kept pulling the boy back. Sanar finally begged Amaryllis to intervene, and she realized—it was not her magic that could help Una, but her.

“I gotta take ‘im home,” Una cried out. “I promised Gram—” A fresh bout of tears caught her words in her throat.

Amaryllis held Una in her arms as she wept while Sanar tried to reason as softly as possible. “It's too far, Una. His body would...” He trailed off as well. They had covered Dom with a white sheet for the time being, but even Amaryllis knew he wouldn't last the journey back to Zephir.

“He deserves a real funeral,” Malakai said gravely, “a proper goodbye.”

Una looked up from Amaryllis' shoulders; her eyes reddened from crying. “Why'd this happen? Why'd they kill him? I'll...” Anguish and anger intermingled dangerously in her voice.

“Mover, don't!” A new voice startled them. Amaryllis had thought the Angel had left after Malakai's outburst; apparently not. “Do not pray for vengeance,” the celestial being warned Una.

Amaryllis had to release Una as she squirmed to stand, then the Mover faced the Angel and declared, “I don't need to pray. I can avenge him myself.”

“Una—” Amaryllis tried to caution her, but Una was a tornado that could not be contained.

“Who're you?” she demanded.

To Amaryllis' relief, the Angel replied calmly, “I am Seraphina, the Fury of Justice.”

A sharp intake of breath from the two men made the Mesmer realize they hadn't known who she was. They did recognize her as an Angel (which was painfully obvious), and it had been enough; however, the three Furies were Archangels of Mayaderan, next in the hierarchy only to the Guardians—they were not beings to be trifled with.

The only one who did not react was Una. Her tears were dry now; her eyes were blank as if someone had sucked the life out of her. “Why did Tarderan kill him?” she asked once more. “Why didn't you save him? Ain't it Mayaderan's job to protect people? Good people...he is...he was—You let 'im die!”

Amaryllis shuddered at the repercussion of her words. Seraphina, however, took no offense. Her patience seemed endless; the fae Queen couldn't fathom why she was tolerating a mere mortal's insolence. Not that Amaryllis wasn't grateful, but she also could not help wondering, especially since the Three Furies were not known for their compassion. Legends said they were, at times, far worse than their counterparts from Tarderan.

Instead of incinerating Una, Seraphina answered quietly, “Believe it or not, Tarderan did not kill him. I know you need someone to blame right now. However, the sad truth is that his death was a terrible accident.”

Una's lips trembled, but for once, she didn't interject.

The two women—a mortal human and an immortal Angel—stood silently before each other for a few moments, and then, Una asked faintly, “I'm to blame here, isn't it? I'm the one who was supposed to die. It's my fault he's dead...because I lived.” Her legs caved in.

Seraphina caught her in a flash and gently placed her down.

Then the Fury turned to the rest and requested, “Please let me help you give him a proper farewell.”

••••

SHE ADORNED THE TREES with glittering lights.

Coruscant globes of celestial magic floated from the Angel's hands like silver fireflies of unspoken solace. They rose into the night sky, arranging themselves into constellations that kept shifting into figures of different animals, birds, and insects in Dom's honor: the entire realm of Amon witnessed the Shifter's last goodbye.

Malakai and Sanar dressed Dom in fresh clothes. With his eyes closed and his face calm, Una could almost believe he would wake up any second and laugh at them for being so worried. But then they placed him inside the grave; the illusion she'd desperately trying to keep alive cracked.

She had promised to keep him safe, and she failed.

He'd trusted her with his life, and he died.

Una's cries shook the ground. "Dom...I'm sorry! Please —" she begged him for his forgiveness, but for the first time since they met, the boy didn't listen to her. Though his indigo prana only now flowed from his core back into the earth, finally seeking release hours after its mage's death, he was long gone.

Sanar placed a long-stemmed wild rose on his chest. "Goodbye, Dom. I wish I could have..."

Malakai stood for a whole minute before he could speak. "Goodbye, my friend. I will miss you every day." He placed his sword next to Dom's body. "You are braver than many of the knights. And a knight should never be without his sword."

Tears fell unrestrained as Amaryllis knelt beside the boy's body. Her hand touched his cold cheeks. "I am happy to have met you, Dom." Swallowing a sob, she vowed, "As long as I live, everyone who has ever known you will never forget you."

Amaryllis turned to them, and in a shaking voice, she promised, "I will explain later."

The Mesmer then glanced at the Fury, who nodded in assent and intoned, "I, the Fury of Justice, hereby recognize you, Murasaki, as my equal and share my power freely."

Her eyes blurring with sorrow, Una watched a miracle happen.

First, Amaryllis' violet magic billowed up, growing bigger by the second. Then Seraphina's silver prana turned into a lightning bolt and pierced through the Mesmer's cloud, making mind magic drench the Kingdom of Castellon, propelled by Heaven's blessing.

Somewhere in the small inn, an older woman cried for the little boy she had raised as her own.

In another town, a bartender grieved for the young helper who wanted to learn more; the two barmaids: a redhead and a brunette, stood beside him as they mourned the lost boy.

Chapter 16

What's in a name?

....

“LOST TO A SHADE?”

Seraphina looked up from the book she was reading to see Alectina smirking.

“I did not lose. He simply managed to escape,” she replied grumpily to the Fury of Vengeance.

“Ah! Here I heard that he also happened to steal an innocent soul. Right from under your nose.” Alectina generously rubbed salt into Seraphina’s wound. “It was a beautiful funeral you gave him, though; slightly flashy, but beautiful.”

“Would you give it a rest, Tina? I’m not in the mood.” Seraphina tried to concentrate on her book again, yet the letters floated around, refusing to ease her turmoil. She could have hit his heart with her light; she was so close to vanquishing him. Did she miss on purpose? No, that was unthinkable. Tarderan’s goal was to tempt mortals into committing sins, and a Fury’s whole reason for being was to obliterate them. Why would she ever hesitate? She would never forgive herself if it had truly cost an innocent soul—so, it couldn’t have been.

As the remorse passed through her mind, Moira’s lips quirked up, even though she did not waver from her embroidery or glance up from her sewing. The Fury of Repentance’s needle swiftly embroidered beautiful tapestries, narrating stories of a long-forgotten past. Seraphina hated that Moira could always hear every thought of guilt or regret. However, she was grateful for her soul sister’s discretion.

“What did you think about the human mage Tarderan’s been stalking?” Alectina asked curiously.

“Her name is Una. She’s...an interesting human,” Seraphina replied, “and she indeed reeks of death.”

Alectina scoffed, “Every mortal stink of death. That’s what the term ‘mortal’ entails.”

Seraphina resisted an indelicate urge to harrumph at the esteemed Fury of Vengeance. *She’s so literal.* “Yes, dear sister, I know the definition of a mortal. I’ve been one.” She added, “But trust me. The aura of death around her was much stronger than it should’ve been.”

“The Guardians asked me to recheck the records,” Alectina pouted, “to see if we somehow had a missing soul. As if that could ever happen. Oh, I hate paperwork!”

Seraphina was a little confused. “But it *does* occasionally happen, doesn’t it? Healers can sometimes restart hearts, even after they have stopped for a moment. Those souls return to their bodies.”

Moira finally set her needlework down and joined the discussion. “There is a brief time where a soul is out of its body but has not touched either of the gates. Once it does, it is forfeited to either Mayaderan or Tarderan. There is no going back. Not as yourself anyway.” Her voice was as soft as the feather she used for judgment. “I have spoken to the Guardians. The death that lingers on her can only be explained if this human had touched the gates. Yet her soul remains in her body.”

Seraphina and Alectina were listening to her in silence. “How?” Seraphina voiced the question they both had.

Moira shrugged and went back to her threads.

The Fury of Justice nudged the annoyed Fury of Vengeance. “Go and recheck the records.”

Alectina groaned. “I’ll take your next few summons. Please do this for me.”

Now it was Seraphina’s turn to smirk. “I like my summons; justice is very rewarding. Paperwork is not.”

••••

SHE WALKED ON CARAMEL clouds so soft she floated like the rain; a gate of pearls and lights asked if she wanted to

enter.

She stepped on sable stones so hard she cried out in pain; a gate of bones and shadows asked if she wanted to enter.

Come back—

Traces of the nightmare still etched on her tired eyes, Una woke up in her tent and found herself teetering on the edge of a dark void. The adventures and the intrigues, the running and the chasing, the dreams and the nightmares...She had had enough.

A week had passed since that night—the night Dom passed away. The night Amaryllis confessed to being one of the rulers of Fenderan: Queen of the Mesmers, the current bearer of the title “Murasaki.” While Malakai and Sanar peppered her with questions, Una had none. Why did it matter if Amaryllis had an extra title when Dom was gone forever? All that mattered was Hell stole her little brother, and Heaven couldn’t save a boy...

Over the week, she had considered returning home, but her perception of the world had changed to the point that she was irrevocably transfigured. Una could not bear the thought of inflicting her present self on her loving parents. Amaryllis, Kai (or should she say Murasaki and prince Malakai?), and Sanar (not sure if that was his real name either) offered her comfort and cared for her; however, nothing touched her right now.

Bleak resignation had left her numb.

And she needed to leave.

Una collected her satchel and silently left the tent with everyone deep asleep. She didn’t have a plan. What was the point of the plans? Every time she made one, it seemed destined to be destroyed.

After hours of aimless walking, she was out of the forest, leaving Amaryllis and the others far behind. *I’m sorry...*

However, there was one thing she needed to do before leaving Castellon for good; one person she needed to say goodbye to. It made no sense, and she didn’t even attempt to understand it.

“I dunno who you are, but I need to talk to you,” she said aloud, for some reason, to the half-moon in the sky.

Nothing happened. With the vacuum inside her growing bigger, threatening to implode and collapse her within herself, Una tried one more time. “Please come back...whoever you are!” she cried out.

Suddenly, Una felt her core activating—wait! she thought in dawning horror—Cores, not core.

There was no doubt anymore: a small, delicate Bender core was nestled beside her solid Mover one, entangled like two half-knit balls of yarn. She had considered the other prana a wretched parasite feeding on her own so far, but her magic treated it as a welcome guest visiting their home.

So, Una decided to trust it and whispered to her new companion, “Can you help me?”

The yellow prana eagerly responded; like a laced web, it tugged on the Mover magic, and together they soared, creating a near-solid blue bridge in the air with coruscating yellow railings on its sides. As soon as a stunned Una tentatively took the first step, the forest vanished before her eyes.

The now-familiar corridor greeted her.

It had taken her quite a while, but she had started comprehending that it was not just any corridor. With personality and intention, it was as much of an individual as she was. So, Una gave the “Corridor” a nod and said, “Please take me to him.”

The echo replied, “To him...,” and a door became visible in the fog.

“Thank you.” Una didn’t feel a shred of discomfort in holding a conversation with an inanimate entity anymore.

Without hesitation, she walked through the door.

Into a burning village.

••••

“UNA, WE CAN’T SAVE him. It’s too late!”

Through the smoke and dust amidst the raging inferno, she saw herself trying to get inside a hut engulfed in flames.

He was there, holding her back as the blaze spread from one thatched roof to another, mercilessly devouring everything on its path. Embers flew around like fireworks chasing down the stars, with more than a few of them landing on her, yet her other-self was so focused on reaching the person lying immobile on the hut floor that she didn't even pause to consider how dangerous it was.

"That's enough!" Her feet were suddenly lifted from the ground as he hoisted her up to his shoulders. "We need to leave."

She hit on his back to make him put her down, but he didn't comply, forcing his way through the burning wreck until they were away from the flames.

Having gotten used to being a mere spectator in the play of her non-existent life, Una quietly followed them.

"He asked us for help. And we let 'im die!" she cried as he imprisoned her between his arms. With one arm holding her close, he gently patted her head with the other hand.

"It was too late," he said once more. "The Lord's men had already murdered him before setting everything on fire. The rest of the villagers have all fled. There was no one there for you to save." His broad shoulders muffled her sobs.

"Lord Glenn's a monster!" Her sorrow transmuted into anger. "He oughta be flailed to death. In public."

The green-eyed man released her from his arms, sat on the ground, and pulled her down next to him. "He's a friend of King Malville. They go riding and hunting together every summer," he explained darkly.

Other-Una looked livid. "Your point being?"

The former village in the distance was nearly ashes now. He glanced away and said, "Lord Glenn denies any wrongdoing, and the king believes him without question. Everyone knows what goes on at his manor, but anytime a

witness tries to come forward, they are murdered...” He trailed off.

“And their village is burned to the ground,” other-Una finished his sentence.

“Cole was workin’ at the manor when he saw Glenn force himself on someone,” she mumbled. He nodded sadly while other-Una wiped the tears from her eyes, but they kept falling. “He tried to tell people, to tell the outpost. No one listened. ‘Til he stumbled onto us—”

“Una, we had asked him to stay with us. Cole knew it was not safe to return to the village,” he tried to reason.

“Even then, we should’ve done somethin’. We should’ve...”

“Done what? Storm the manor and kill Lord Glenn by ourselves?” he challenged.

“Yes. Why not?”

“Because then we would be murderers too,” he said in a strangely stricken voice. “That taint never goes away.”

Her face fell. “I’ve already killed someone. Haven’t I? ‘Least, this one would’ve been justified.”

Una stood behind them and remembered how the knight had died when other-Una’s magic made him to fall on his sword. Was it her? Did *she* kill someone?

His green eyes reflected the carnage in the distance as he shook his head and said, “No, Una. It was part self-defense and part accident. Intentions matter! You did not wish the knight’s death. It wasn’t a murder; this one would have been.”

Other-Una didn’t look convinced. “I don’t agree. If you can help someone, then you have to. Whatever the cost!”

He cocked his head to the side, and a bitter smile hovered over his lips. “That’s pretty much your life’s philosophy, isn’t it? Imagine this: you execute Lord Glenn; his son kills you in retaliation. Then someone seeks to avenge you, and this chain of vengeance never ends.”

Una noticed her other-self stare at him as a reluctant realization slowly dispelled the fog of her rage.

“When you do it as an individual, you are seeking revenge. When you do it as a country’s knight,” he smiled forlornly. “You are delivering justice. That’s the difference.”

Without replying to him, her other-self turned around and asked, “When you’re the king, would you clean Castellon of these corruptions?”

Una was shocked to see her looking straight at her for a moment. Then, she figured it was directed to the shadowy figure who had walked up behind her. Thankfully, as usual, no one could see her as if she was an apparition, or maybe they were.

“I am truly sorry for what you had to witness today,” a very familiar voice replied, startling Una to both her cores. “Castellon needs you and Ciaran as its King’s Knights more than it needs me as the king.”

Malakai?? Ciaran...

Suddenly, the phantom door reappeared and swept her away, returning to the tent she had left hours ago. However, Una did not register that, for her mind was blank of everything except one name: Ciaran.

She fainted on the floor as an interlocking design of violet prana glowed on her wrist before fading away. With his name taking its deserved place, a barrier fractured, allowing their shared memories to flood in.

Some might stay with her, but most would disappear through the sieves.

Yet again.

....

MALAKAI SAT ON THE stump of a fallen tree.

He was sharpening a spare sword to replace the one he’d left for Dom when he felt someone approaching. He didn’t even need to turn around to know it was *her*, hating how much

he was attuned to her presence—it muddled his mind and body.

“Mhmm,” she cleared her throat.

“Yes, Murasaki?” He had been using her official title since her confession last week. It was easier to treat her as foreign royalty.

“Kai...umm, Malakai, call me Amaryllis, please. I am not calling you, Your Highness!” she said. When he did not reply, she insisted, “Why does it matter? I’ve no authority here in Amon.”

Malakai rested the sword on the ground and replied gravely, “No, you just happen to have the authority to bring an army of Mesmers to Amon.”

“And you believe I would do that?” she challenged him.

Her blue eyes tugged the strings of his heart so hard he almost lost his train of thought. “My brother might not leave you any choice.” He suppressed a sigh and stood up.

Amaryllis pondered aloud, “I could put him to sleep, along with the entire palace.”

Noticing Malakai’s shocked expression, she quickly clarified, “It was not a euphemism. I meant I could make them all fall asleep.”

He was not convinced about that. The palace occupied about thirty acres of land and had nearly fifty occupants at any given time.

“The memory of sleep is a safe place,” she scrambled to explain. “They would wake up in about eight to nine hours. Maybe ten...”

“The whole palace? At the same time?” he repeated, almost in a bewildered trance.

Amaryllis considered it for a second. “Well, I can do it to the entire city. But the life energy in Amon is too contaminated, and it’s making me weak. Also, my magic becomes difficult to control when I do something on that scale, and it might drag you and your friends in.”

Malakai could not quell the bitterness rising in his chest. “Why do you even need me, then?”

A smile formed on Amaryllis’ lips. “A few reasons come to my mind.” She counted on her fingers. “One, traveling to Castle seems better in a group. Two, I would rather not have to search the entire palace to find the Sa’ore. Three, I would need time for the broad-range sleep magic to take hold; it’s slow to spread. Four, I want to return your prana to you before I leave. Five, I actually like spending time with you.”

Against his better judgment, Malakai’s heart started racing, and he didn’t care what his brain was warning him about anymore; he wanted to kiss her right now.

Spellbound, he leaned in closer.

For a brief moment, he believed she wanted him as well.

Then, with her eyes widened in shock at her own lapse, Amaryllis stepped back, leaving him breathless in a puddle of disappointment and ache.

“Kai,” The awkward silence was broken by Una walking up to them. “Do you—” She noticed the tension in the air, with Amaryllis slowly retreating away from them, and asked, “Everythin’ okay here?”

Almost thankful for Una’s presence, Malakai forced himself back to reality, shaking off the weakness from earlier. “Everything is fine. What were you going to ask?”

Una bit her lip nervously. “D’you know someone called Ciaran?”

Malakai was not expecting this question. Surprised at the mention of his missing friend from someone he’d only met recently, he replied. “Yes, I do! How do *you* know him?”

Una looked uncertain and very uncomfortable. “I think I met ‘im at Zephir. Or Colasia. Maybe...not sure...”

Suddenly, Malakai felt hope rise in his chest. “Most probably, it was when I was still imprisoned at Lasceraz.” He then asked sharply, “Do you know what happened to him? Why didn’t you mention him before?”

Una went pale and mumbled, “I couldn’t remember his name before. I’m not sure...”

Malakai needed to know more. “Did you see him again?”

As she hesitated, Malakai could not suppress his impatience; his worry about Ciaran was the heaviest of his burdens. “Una, did he contact you again?” His voice rose an octave without his consent.

“This is gonna make me sound a total loon. But yes, he did contact me,” Una replied in dismay, “in visions. I think... maybe...not sure!”

That did sound completely lunatic.

Then again, Ciaran had always been drawn to the moon.

Chapter 17

Second chances

••••

AMARYLLIS HAD NEVER fully understood what it meant to be lonely.

The fae were notorious for their indulgence: they met, had fun, and parted ways. That's how it was supposed to be! How can one be lonely if they were always alone, yet never alone?

Then she came to Amon.

Amaryllis had run into Malakai the first day she crossed the Rift, then soon met Una and Dom. Just when she had started believing she could have friends came that awful night and a life so bright was snuffed out in barely a second. The fae lived for several centuries; death was sometimes a celebration, sometimes a dejection, but never a shock. Dom's death broke her heart; it also took Una away. For days, she helplessly watched as the loquacious girl retreated further and further into herself, becoming a hollowed-out shell of herself.

It didn't help that Malakai started to keep his distance from her. Amaryllis knew why—she had seen the longing in his eyes; it mirrored the desire that burned in her. Every innocent remark, every careless touch, every passing glance; everything ignited it. She had to avoid him as well.

Torn between the wish to be around the people she had begun to care about and a desperation to escape the clutches of these new-found emotions suffocating her, Amaryllis had never been lonelier than she was at this moment. Finally, she understood.

“Should I call you Murasaki?”

Startled, she looked up to see Una peeking through the flap of her tent.

“What would you like to call me?” Amaryllis asked sadly.

Una smiled; traces of sorrow were visible on her pretty face, but it was a smile, nevertheless. “Amy!”

All of a sudden, it was easier to breathe.

“How long has it been since you brushed your hair?” She noticed Una’s tangled mass of black hair, looking more like a dozen crows’ nests jumbled together after a particularly stormy night.

Una touched her unruly mane and replied, “You know what, Mesmer, I don’t remember!”

Amaryllis chuckled. “Just come in and sit down.”

They were yet to reach the Siremann’s Trail, and even that would be barely halfway through the country. There was a long journey ahead of them, but she was not alone anymore.

Braiding the pile of dark hair to her satisfaction, Amaryllis declared, “There. All done.”

Una checked out her perfectly done tresses and then randomly snorted with laughter. Unable to decipher the change in mood, Amaryllis raised her eyebrow curiously.

“Not just any fae.” Una was still giggling. “I got their *Queen* to do my hair!”

Amaryllis couldn’t help but join in as the dark cloud overcasting her blue sky slowly rolled away.

“I was afraid I would wake up one day and find you had left,” she confessed quietly.

Una rested her chin on her raised knee. “I did leave,” she admitted in an equally soft tone. “Yesterday mornin’.”

Amaryllis stared at her, devastated.

“But then I came back.”

For some time, neither of them said anything. “Why?” Amaryllis finally asked.

Una looked away; her eyes blurred with unshed tears. “He reminded me why I wanted to become a knight in the first place.”

“He? The one you mentioned to Malakai?”

Una nodded and asked in a small voice, “They don’t believe me, do they?”

Amaryllis didn’t know what to say. The truth was that they had argued for hours, away from Una’s ears, because no mage from any class, whether in Amon or Fenderan, had any ability which could be categorized as visions. While her particular Mesmer ability was memories, a few of her subjects had the affinity to communicate mentally over a distance or hear the thoughts of others. However, this did not sound like any of those, making Amaryllis wonder if they were visions or something else entirely. The discussion had ended without reaching any actual conclusion.

Una entreated, almost afraid, “Do *you* believe me?”

“I do.” Amaryllis didn’t hesitate.

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DAYS DIDN’T HESITATE to surrender to the nights, and in turn, nights willingly returned to the days.

Since they’d started their journey, golden corn and green beans fields were gradually replaced with patches of orange pumpkins, yellow squashes, and red sweet potatoes. The blooming chrysanthemums, marigolds, and asters swayed happily in the breeze to usher autumn into their lives, complementing the red-orange-gold of the maple, birch, and chestnut trees.

Castellon had twenty provinces; Una could never tell when one ended and the next began. It could partly be blamed on her tragic lack of navigational skills and partly on the absence of any physical boundary or road sign. Each was named after the city where the ruling Lords or Ladies resided, which worried Una terribly; it could mean an unfortunate change of the province’s name if they whimsically relocated someday.

Legends said that after CirrahDion abolished Castellon’s clan system following the fae departure, his closest allies in the war came forward to help him govern the newly-united kingdom. Those twenty men and women were the first

generation of human mages, and the first knights of Castellon, who took over the mantle of Lords and Ladies.

Centuries passed, eroding the honor and valor, leaving only the birthrights behind.

They passed through the cluster of thatched huts and a few bigger wooden houses as the group made its way across a small village. Some kids played a game of tag in the dusty streets, and a handful of older ones gathered vegetables from their backyard gardens for the upcoming dinner while the adults were still working in the fields.

They all stopped to watch the passing travelers with wary looks.

“Be careful.” Malakai rode closer to Amy and her. “Carnaby is not a very safe province.”

Una didn’t know this. Surprised, she asked, “Not safe for a Mesmer and a Mover? Really?”

“Una, I mean it.” Malakai looked very serious. “The Lord of Carnaby is a real scoundrel.”

At that moment, one of the older boys stood up with a basket full of plump red radishes, and a jolt of shock passed through Una’s body when their eyes briefly met. Suddenly, the quiet village was replaced with terrified screams, blazing flames, and smoldering embers.

She recognized it now. She recognized the boy.

“What is the Lord’s name?” Amaryllis asked curiously.

Before Malakai could respond, Una sputtered, “Glenn! This is Lord Glenn’s province!”

The charred dead body of the same boy currently walking home with a basket of veggies danced in front of her horrified eyes.

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THIS WOULD OFFICIALLY mark the day when Malakai realized how well he had come to know Una.

The glint in her eyes, the tightening of her lips, and the way her face scrunched up; it was her “I’m planning something reckless” mode. It had only been about four months since they had met at the Reaper’s den outside Zephir, yet somehow it felt like a whole lifetime.

That’s why he followed her in silence when she quietly moved away from the group after dinner.

The Mover floundered around in the dark, struggling to get her bearings. After a point, he couldn’t take it anymore. As soon as he was almost sure she would give up, she’d started counting and etching on the trees to find her way to the village they had passed hours earlier.

“Is it so difficult to ask for help?” he wondered aloud.

Startled, Una jumped with a squeal. “How long you been followin’ me?”

“Since you left the camp,” he replied dryly.

“I need to do somethin’. In that village.”

He nodded and said, “Yes, I understood that part from your battle with the simple concept of directions for the last half an hour. What I don’t know is what you need to do. And why won’t you tell us?”

With an angry scoff, she replied, “Cos you won’t believe me anyway.”

Malakai crossed his arms and challenged, “Try me.”

She glared at the prince of her birth-nation for a few seconds. “Okay. What if I told you that Lord Glenn’s men will murder a kid from the village soon someday and burn it to the ground?”

Malakai exhaled sharply and decided to stop tiptoeing around the topic. “Let me ask you something. Did you ever have these visions before you left home?”

Una shook her head.

“Do they always have Ciaran in them?” he inquired further. She nodded, a deep sorrow clouding her face as if it

was beyond her ability to hide it.

He watched her intently. “And what did he do in this particular vision?”

“He didn’t do anything,” Una replied sadly, “We couldn’t. It was too late.”

Malakai narrowed his eyes. “Then what if that’s how it is supposed to happen?” he demanded, “what if the way to find Ciaran...is to let it play out exactly as you saw it?”

Una gaped at this reasoning, unable to reply for a few minutes.

Then she steadied herself and said, “No. I feel he would want me to make this choice. Being a knight is not ‘bout a position or a job—”

“It is about the choices one makes each and every day,” Malakai interrupted her to finish the sentence, his eyes widening in surprise.

They stared at each other, overwhelmed at the shocking confirmation.

“You do *know* Ciaran,” Malakai said darkly. “That’s something he always says when he’s about to do something crazy.” Even though he was unsure how to handle these revelations, Malakai knew what he had to do now. Thumping Una’s shoulder, he said, “Let’s go.”

Una’s mouth opened in a small “O” before she smiled gratefully. “Thank you!”

They found the hut where the boy Una remembered as Cole lived. It was nearing midnight, and the streets were empty; no one was around to spot them huddled behind the hut. They could hear Cole speak to an older woman through the ajar windows. She lay on a cot and wheezed painfully. “Don’t you go workin’ at the manor! It’s an awful place.” She tried to talk while struggling to suppress an insistent cough. “I’ll get better by m’self, you’ll see.”

The boy shook his head dolefully. “You’ve been sick for a year now, mum. We gotta get you a Healer!” He clasped her

hand and tried to assure her, “I’ll always stay at the stables, never inside the house. Lord Glenn won’t even see me.” He repressed a sigh. “Wish we could leave this place and go somewhere else, but this is all we’ve got.”

“We can’t let ‘im take this job,” Una whispered to Malakai. “It’s where things will go wrong. Very wrong!”

Her voice shook, and he could relate. The boy reminded him of Dom as well. Not only were they the same age, but his soft, earnest voice and unkempt black hair were painfully reminiscent of their friend.

“How’d I convince him? Should I tell ‘im the truth?” Una asked him while nervously fidgeting with her fingers.

“Or I could simply heal his mother.”

Another low voice startled them both.

Malakai was mortified; distracted by Una and her strange connection to Ciaran, the seasoned knight had utterly failed to notice the two people following him.

Sanar and Amaryllis were standing behind them, with the Mesmer looking more than a little peeved and the Healer merely curious.

“Next time, Una,” Amaryllis pouted, “just ask.”

Una gulped and begged all three of them, “Please. Help me save ‘im.”

Sanar smiled at her before turning to Amaryllis. “Could you?”

She nodded, and Malakai could see a tiny fragment of prana detach from her body, take the shape of a poppy flower, then float inside the hut, unnoticed by the occupants. The incorporeal flower opened its cup-shaped petals and sprinkled violet magic on the mother and son, who yawned and promptly fell asleep, the boy still holding his ailing mother’s hand while their minds replayed a pleasant memory of sleep.

Rest was relatively easy, and Malakai didn’t need magic to envision what would happen next.

In the morning, Cole would wake up to find his mother feeling better than she had for a long time. With her lungs healed, her breathing would be nearly normal, and she would be able to sit up. The boy would also find a drawstring full of coins and a note.

Cole, there's a job waiting for you at the Rouge in Colasia. Tell them that Dom wanted you to be there. We pray you take this gift to start a new life for yourself and your mother.

Have a long and happy life,

Your friends.

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THE SHADOWS AROUND him were getting impatient.

But Tristen was not; he wanted to ensure he didn't miss his prey.

Very rarely did he look forward to an assassination, and this was one of those times—a grieving father had sold his soul to kill the Lord, who had brutally raped and murdered his son a few months back. Tristen wondered how Seraphina would feel about it. Would the Fury of Justice admit that no one believed in the farce of justice anymore?

The room was empty, but Lord Glenn's baritone could be heard from a floor below. He was in the middle of assaulting one of the maids; Tristen could hear the poor woman's frantic and hysterical pleas. Lord Glenn's exploits were infamous, the sorts of debauchery that would alarm even the worst criminals, and yet, it had taken a celestial to drop by to deliver him the death he deserved (Dion would've been so ashamed)!

As the Assassin of Tarderan waited for his target to reach the bedroom, he heard a resounding slap echo through the halls.

A part of Tristen wanted to rescue her from the pig, and the other part warned it was none of his business. After the tragedy with the young Shifter, he had decided not to even try being anything else but what he was—a killer.

With a bang, the door opened, and the hulking brute of a man entered the dark room, dragging the sobbing woman behind him.

It was an enormous manor with many family members and servants living in different quarters. Tristen could hear the metallic jangling of weapons from the courtyard and along the long path from the gate to the front door, where at least twenty guards were positioned. Still, there was no one to save this girl.

The Lord did not bother to reach the gigantic bed. Dropping her to the floor like a sack of potatoes, he began undressing her, nearly smothering the woman under his bulk. Her face was marred with a fresh bruise; five fingers etched on it. Under the moon's pale light, several older bruises and whip lashes were visible on her half-naked body.

Noiselessly, a shadow transported Tristen closer to the plague of a human.

In his inebriated and sex-fueled haze, Lord Glenn neither heard nor sensed his end standing right behind him.

The girl could see, though.

However, she did not seem to have any energy to cry out.

Tristen didn't spare her a second glance as he plunged a thin black pick at the base of the Lord's skull as effortlessly as if it was warm butter. The pick melted into shadows that eagerly poured out of the Lord's open mouth and radiated through the veins all over his face, making it a gruesome death mask.

His last scream was denied to him.

Now terrified for her own life, the girl rolled from under the Lord's collapsed body. Tristen, however, paid her no attention because suddenly, his senses started to panic as the air was congested with screams of not one but many.

He opened the balcony door and peeked outside to find blood everywhere, with bodies (and parts of bodies) strewn around the courtyard. The howls and wails were silenced by slashing sounds from downstairs of the manor, and the

Assassin felt fear trickle into his soul for the first time in decades, if not centuries.

Alectina had been summoned.

She was violence personified. She was indiscriminate. Once called to the mortal realms by hundreds praying for revenge and retribution accumulated over the years, the Fury of Vengeance would decimate cities to exact their vengeance. No one ever survived her, for blind wrath did not stop for rationality.

Just my luck!

If he knew Alectina, everyone in this manor apart from this girl was dead already.

So would they be if Tristen did not hurry.

The Fury would reach this room in a few seconds when her light would obliterate any shadow for him to escape. Tristen did not have time to consider his actions; he had to take her somewhere safe in Amon—he needed to save her.

Tristen threw the silk cover from the bed on the girl, and before she could react, the Shade lifted her in his arms, jumping into the nearest shadow he could find.

It was barely dawn when a farmer's wife in a village at the edge of the province found a girl covered in an expensive silk bed sheet outside her cottage. Tristen watched the older woman calm the crying girl and take her inside.

As the night dissipated where the sun's fiery fingertips touched its skin, he felt the invisible blood stain on his hands fade.

Just a little.

Chapter 18

Cause and Consequence

....

THE DEVIL STIFLED A yawn.

For a being who needed no sleep, he desperately wanted to take a nap.

It was challenging enough to create a Shade, and that was when the soul was willing; this one resisted him tooth and nail. Sirius wished he could curl up on his couch with the book he'd recently picked up from Fenderan and enjoy a cup of chamomile—no, maybe some passionflower and mint—while the screams from the circles lulled him into something akin to slumber.

Instead, he was stuck at Mayaderan, waiting for Mihael to pay him an iota of attention. Unfortunately, the Devil seemed to have dropped by in the middle of some internal strife. Since no one, including the Angels, was aware that only one Guardian was left, Mihael couldn't take his true form and was split into nine (one of whom was pacing the room, and the rest were giving Sirius the stink eyes).

He had an equally unproductive time at the Corridor recently, with more doors now that he could neither open nor cross.

Did being the Devil mean nothing to anyone anymore?

“What did you expect the Fury of Vengeance to do?” Moira inquired with her usual nonchalance, “scold the humans for being bad?”

The Fury of Justice stood there silently. Sirius was grateful that Alectina herself was absent.

“The amount of bloodshed... whenever she is summoned!” The pacing Guardian tried his best not to yell at his Furies.

“Phina and I will go to Amon and do a sweep. If there is any lingering animosity or repentance, we will annul them. We always do,” the Fury of Repentance offered.

Bored, the Devil cleared his throat. “Ehmm, I’m still here. And I need to talk to you.”

The Guardians (all of them) glared at him. “Your Assassin succeeded in killing Alectina’s target. Are you here to brag?”

Sirius huffed. “I’m pretty busy ruling a realm to come here to brag. Can I have a quick word now?”

“Fine. What?”

At this point, the Fury of Justice, Seraphina, excused herself and left the room to prepare for the sweep while Moira stayed behind. The Guardians now relaxed into one being as the oldest Fury was the only other entity, apart from the Devil, who was privy to this terrible cosmic secret. She was the one Angel who happened to be dear to both Sirius and Mihael, for they had been through times of great misery together—a bond no celestial rivalry could break.

“What is it about, Sirius?” Mihael sounded displeased. “I am already annoyed at you for going after the mortal mage after I had expressly forbidden you from doing so and for ending up damning another.”

The Devil cocked his head. “YOU have no authority to forbid me from doing anything, my dear Guardian. Nor do I have any qualms about what transpired with the young Shifter.” He noticed the look in Moira’s eyes, knowing she could hear his remorse loud and clear, but the Fury of Repentance didn’t betray his true feelings. She simply gave him a sad smile and looked away.

Sirius swallowed his discomfort and said, “About what I came to ask. I’ve been thinking for a while now. Just before *they* were caged, they’d said something about their return. The taboos to unseal the relics. Do either of you happen to recall what?” He asked them. “I think the clue about how the Sa’ore Morte was damaged could be hidden there.”

The Guardian sighed in resignation. “It was a millennium ago, and that day is a blur in my mind. I don’t remember...I don’t want to remember.”

Moira's calm beauty was tainted with pain at the mere mention of the fateful day a thousand years past.

Crestfallen, the Devil scratched the red blisters on his arm and stared despondently at the ceiling. Then suddenly, he leapt up. "Unless I was hallucinating, and I could very well be hallucinating, considering all that was going on then, I think I saw those words they spoke appear on the Box." He looked at the Guardian eagerly. "Where is it?"

"It's still with me, Sirius," Moira informed him, her quiet voice steeped in grief. "I will bring it."

"Thank you, Pandora."

The Fury of Repentance did not insist on her Angelic name. Not to him.

"Here." She handed him the dreaded Box a few minutes later. It was a beautiful little box studded with jewels of seven colors: one for each living prana. There were three fist-sized oval impressions on them. The one at the top was pearl white, and the other at the bottom was pitch black. The one at the back wall was verdant green. Over a thousand years ago, the prana stored in this box had been sealed into the three Sa'ore. Yet, the malice emanating from it was enough to make the Devil nauseous.

The three stared at the seemingly innocuous object before Sirius shook his head to clear out his painful thoughts and focused on the ancient letters carved onto the black impression.

Sa'ore Morte shall delight in despair

Sealing Reality, Release, and Reason

When Death so sure cannot endure

The Sa'ore shall make its decision

Their absolute evil was evident in their ability to give him a headache through mere riddles. What did "cannot endure" mean? How did this Una-person manage to do whatever it meant? His eyes perused the other two. The one etched on the white impression said:

Sa'ore Verite shall revel in rancor

Sealing Reality, Release, and Reason

When Truth foretold loses its hold

The Sa'ore shall make its decision

The Devil put the Box down on the table, unable to bring himself to read the third one about Sa'ore Vitae, the relic of Life.

He needed more than a few pitchers of tea before dealing with the ancient rhyming malevolence.

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REVA HAD TO DEAL WITH the repercussions of her most recent failure.

Not only did she fail to extract any information out of Peg (not that she had expected much success there), but also Malakai now knew she was right behind him, so there was no point in trying to follow him as he was far better trained than her in covering his tracks. The best strategy would be to get into his mind and wait for him at his intended destination. Then again, when did Reva ever understand what he was thinking? Malakai would always be her biggest failure, after all.

She had gotten even more delayed after having to stop at Carnaby. The massacre at Lord Glenn's manor had paralyzed the entire province in fear; Reva didn't blame them. Until she saw the rotted body of Lord Glenn and the littered body parts of other residents of the manor, she hadn't believed in the stories of celestial retribution her grandma used to tell before bed. But no mortal could've dealt such a vicious punishment—an entire bloodline had been erased, and then some.

As soon as this gory dust settled, the nobles from Lord Glenn's extended family would be coming out from the woodwork and lining up to gain King Malville's favor, making Reva frustrated simply by imagining the spectacle! The answer to all of Peg's questions was simple and sad: Malville was a stubborn and ignorant king whose only qualification was

his descendancy from CirrahDion. Reva was not blind to the truth.

She was also aware that the four fugitive knights steadfastly believed in Malakai; their loyalty to the prince of Castellon superseded their allegiance to the king. Yet, even if it was not a Prana Oath, that pledge meant everything to Reva; she couldn't just throw away centuries of honorable tradition over one rotten king.

Reva considered her options as she sat sprawled on the grassy ground with a map of the country spread before her.

Unfortunately, though she would like to believe otherwise, she did know Malakai too well. Blessed with his mother's intelligence and cursed with his father's ego, there was no way he was giving up. While Malville might have chosen to flee to a neighboring country if they offered him luxury in exchange for information, Malakai would not.

"Sunbathing in Vaneda, indeed!" Reva growled, remembering Peg's offhand comment.

Why do they love him so much? Even without his magic, why do they...?

"Listen up!" she called out. "I want this message sent to the outpost at the northern exit of Siremann's Trail."

The captain of the knight's detachment quickly fetched a parchment and wrote her instructions down. "Tell them to get ten knights and fifty soldiers ready to barricade the exit."

"I'll make sure it is sent out immediately," the captain said.

He was going to leave, but Reva stopped him. "Once it's done, you can take your team and return to your outpost. Thank you for your service."

Confused, the stout man asked hesitantly, "My Lady, are you going to follow them by yourself? Alone?"

The yellow prana pooled near her feet as the air pushed her up, levitating the Bender several feet above the men around her, and she smiled. "I'll be fine."

••••

THE TOWN OF ASPEN WAS nestled at the foothills of the Kolki Mountains.

The mountain had been considered impassable until the fabled Siremann's Trail was created about a hundred years back when the then-king Malazan had commissioned the legendary earth-Bender to make the pass. It had taken six months and several casualties to build this wonder, allowing the north and the south of the nation to be traversed easier. The Kolki Mountains were still treacherous, with frequent earthquakes, landslides, and wild beasts in their forests, but at least it was possible to cross it now.

“The bones of the dead workers were buried in the Trail to protect it from landslides and avalanches for an eternity,” Sanar declared in a dramatically hushed tone.

“Did that actually work?” Una asked curiously. She could never be sure when Sanar was being serious and when he was making fun of her, yet she did not mind. The Mover liked him; his unobtrusive kindness had helped her heal more than he even realized.

He grinned at her question. “We'll just have to see that for ourselves, won't we?”

Una couldn't help but feel sympathy for the hapless workers of a long-gone past, slaving away in the middle of unstable rocks and unforgiving terrain. Siremann himself had not lasted too long, either. He'd died of prana exhaustion within a few months of completing the Trail while his family was awarded an estate and huge compensation on his behalf (much good that did him!).

Unlike Colasia, which thrived as a trading town, Aspen was more like a travel stop for the weary traders crossing the mountain. There were more inns, cafes, and patisseries than in Colasia, with the locals mainly providing supplies for them or working in them for their livelihood.

They needed to gather supplies before entering the Siremann's Trail with autumn at its peak, hoping to reach the

other side before winter set in.

“Looks like a nice town,” Amaryllis commented as she looked around.

“It is better than Carnaby. But the number of cutpurses, thieves, and Reapers here, preying on the travelers, has increased exponentially in recent years,” Malakai replied to the fae, deliberately avoiding looking at her.

Una had been watching them behave oddly for weeks now. A veil of distant politeness had descended upon them, only to be pierced by rather obvious signs of sexual tension, making her want to lock these two up in a room and let them get it over with.

As Una fondly concocted ways to make her friends friendlier to each other, they stopped at an inn by the roadside. Brown-green ivy on the stone walls had almost covered it whole, leaving only the windows on the two floors visible. Amidst the panoply of ivies, canary-yellow jasmine joined hands with orange trumpet vines, releasing their entwined sweet smell into the air.

Amaryllis stopped at the entrance, lifting her face slightly to inhale the perfume. The pure joy lighting up her beautiful eyes, flitting on her parted lips, made Malakai stand there transfixed.

Suddenly, Una felt a little sad.

She hadn't had an encounter with Ciaran for so long that every inch of her soul ached from the worry that Malakai was right—by choosing to alter the last vision, by saving Cole and the village from Glenn, what if she'd closed the door to reach him? What if she'd barred the way for him to return?

At the same time, Una wondered why she missed someone she could barely remember. Why was she even seeing herself in these places she had never visited before, let alone with him and apparently Malakai, who has no idea either?

The more she thought about it, the more this total weirdness made less and less sense.

Once Sanar and Malakai had rented two rooms, they went ahead to groom the horses, and Una could hear Sanar talk urgently with Malakai. “We need to figure out how to convince Vid. You know her reasons. She won’t take this kindly.” It was too far to hear Malakai’s response. However, Sanar sounded anxious. “I’m not saying Vid’s hatred is justified. Just asking you to tread lightly with her.”

Una had no clue what the two ex-King’s Knights were discussing.

She was about to go and ask them when Amaryllis spoke, “Want to take a walk in the town?” grabbing her attention.

With her face slightly flushed and eyes shining bright blue, the Mesmer had a tint of blush on her cheeks. “You look drunk, Amy!” Una started to laugh. “So, you don’t get tipsy by our sorry excuse of alcohol, and a whiff of jasmine gets you high?”

Amaryllis smiled blissfully. “Jasmine’s my third favorite intoxicant.”

Una linked her arm through the fae’s to steady her friend. “Aha! What’re the top two?”

Placing an index finger over her lips, Amaryllis said, “Not telling.”

Una suppressed a chuckle as she followed Amy’s eyes lingering over a certain dark-haired man.

As if he needs any help.

••••

“WE NEED HELP.”

The sun had already set. Distracted by conversations, they had drifted further than intended and now were very lost on the outskirts of the town.

Aspen did not follow the traditional grid style of roads at Colasia. It was quite random and zigzag—a street would come to a dead-end without any indication whatsoever. Several previously closed shops were open, with liquor bars, opium,

hookah dens, and brothels populating the fringe. They appeared to be hidden in the nooks and crannies of the town, invisible during the day.

“They’re gonna be sooooo pissed.” Una could visualize Malakai getting all dark and grim. And the disappointed look on Sanar’s face.

“When did it get this late?!” Amaryllis wrinkled her nose at the smell coming from a pile of garbage behind an alcohol joint while clutching the hood of her cape to prevent it from falling against the wind.

“And where on Amon are we?” Una looked around. “I mean, I know we’re in Aspen—I hope we’re still in Aspen—Are we?”

“Stop talking!”

They tried to get their bearings to return to the inn when a scuffle drew their attention: a man was dragging a little girl in a narrow dark alley. Even if there were people in the dark houses around, no one peeked through their windows, and the streetlamp above was flickering, running out of either fire magic or actual fuel.

Then, a few more men walked into the alley from the other side.

“Good! They will handle the situation,” Amaryllis said, relieved.

That was not the case. The three men did nothing as the first guy raised his huge hand to hit the girl half his size. “This’ll teach ye a lesson, little bitch.”

“What’s goin’ on with this country, seriously!!” Aggravated, Una activated her prana to intervene.

However, the little girl blocked the hit before Una could even take a single step.

With a shield.

Where did she even hide the thing!!

Una stared in disbelief as the girl sprang up and the shield in her hand morphed into a katana which she swung smoothly to slice through his bicep. Even from a distance, it was obvious she had missed his heart on purpose.

The guy was too drunk for a real fight where the victim could fight back, so the rest of his cronies came charging to his aid with daggers in their hands.

Una could no longer stand back and watch; even if the girl seemed capable of defending herself from one, four were too many.

The Mover extended her blue prana, trying to restrain the three at once; it would not hold for long, but her magic slowed them down. As they struggled against Una, Amaryllis activated her prana but hesitated to use it and give her identity away in such a dangerous place.

The girl turned toward Una and Amaryllis in surprise, as if she hadn't realized there were spectators around. At that precise moment, in a series of unfortunate coincidences, the streetlamp that had been flickering for this long decided to turn on for one last time, and a gust of wind blew the hood of Amaryllis' cape back.

Under the lamp's light, the girl saw Amaryllis, resplendent in her violet prana and pointed ears.

Una knew the girl had recognized a fae when her eyes turned wide in surprise, and a shadow of disgust passed over her small child-like face. Her eyebrows knitting in annoyance, she intoned in a voice distinctly *not* of a child. "Release them, Mover! They're mine."

Stunned by the amount of hostility in her tone, Una's prana faltered.

Now free to move, the men looked highly confused about which woman to attack.

Deciding for them, the katana in the girl's hand changed into a three-headed flail in a yellow flash. Each of the three spiked heavy balls struck the three men simultaneously, knocking the lights out of them. They never stood a chance.

Most definitely a grown woman, the girl returned to the first man trembling on the ground, bleeding heavily from his arm.

Her three-headed flail bent into a crooked dagger. “This’ll teach ye a lesson, little bitch.” She pressed the blade to his neck and spoke coldly, “If you try to extort money from the shops here ever again, I’ll make sure it’s your brain splattered on these stones the next time.”

Leaving the four men crumpled on the ground, she walked toward Una and Amaryllis.

Una felt a surge of apprehension in her heart, for this woman did not look friendly, to say the very least, and she was right! With no reason whatsoever, the already deadly dagger in her hand now morphed into an even deadlier halberd; a sharp ax gleamed at the tip of the long shaft and ended in a wicked hook.

While Una considered her following action, Amaryllis’ violet prana flared as it sensed the animosity roiling off the woman toward her.

“What’re you doin’?” the Mover demanded, “we’ve got no reason to fight.”

The Bender pointed her pale index at Amaryllis with her halberd ready in the other hand. “That thing’s not supposed to be here.” Her mouth twisted in disgust.

“How dare you—!” Una spluttered in anger.

Amaryllis tugged at her arm and said, “We are leaving now.”

“Oh no, you’re not!” The tiny Bender blocked their way with her ax. “I’m not about to let a fae walk free in Amon.”

Una had heard enough of this nonsense; even she had the courtesy to stop and talk before deciding to butcher a person simply because they were different. Oh, and because their history books happened to have been written by stupid and selfish people! More importantly, fae or not, Amy was her friend, and it was all that mattered.

Her prana knocked the halberd negligently out of their way as Una took Amaryllis' hand and started walking away.

The woman bellowed in rage, "I'm not done with her!" With her halberd glowing bright yellow, she charged at them.

Before Una could react, a stern voice interfered. "Vid. That's enough!"

Malakai stood between the Mover and the Bender as he spoke directly to the weapon in her hand. "Hunter, shift back."

With a spark of indigo, the halberd turned into a man.

Chapter 19

Believe in me

....

“STOP! PLEASE STOP!”

Una had been sleeping when she got pulled into a vision. It was late evening, and she stood outside of Aspen, closer to the foothills, in a rocky terrain devoid of vegetation save some thorny cacti.

In the middle of another battle.

A wagon was lying half-toppled on the roadside. She saw Malakai and Sanar fighting with two men, and Vid engaged in a swordfight with another. The Bender used a regular sword because her Shifter companion was in his human form, battling an oddly familiar woman.

Ciaran was on the other side of the wagon.

Four men were already on the ground around him. While none of them were bleeding, no one was conscious, either. However, his face stopped Una dead in her tracks; contorted in an unbridled rage, he was nearly unrecognizable. His emerald eyes were dark like a putrefied forest, and blueish veins popped out on his muscled arms as Ciaran choked his victim to death with his bare hands. “Ciaran, stop! You’ll kill him!” She heard herself shout again; it was her other-self running toward him.

A young man was standing further away; he was battered and bruised with marks of chains on his wrists.

Una finally figured out who they were fighting with and recognized the woman—Lamia! She was the Reaper from the same gang that had once kidnapped Malakai and Amaryllis, most of whom were driven insane by Amaryllis’ mind magic a few months ago.

The young man who seemed to have been the Reapers’ captive was looking at his apparent savior with undisguised terror.

Unaware of the eyes on him, Ciaran strangled the unconscious man without mercy, and the man's half-lidded eyes started to bulge out. Una couldn't watch him commit a cold-blooded murder, knowing how he would feel about it later when he calmed down. She had to protect him from himself.

"Ciaran, you don't want to do this. You don't!" Una stepped forward and tried to pry his fingers open. To her dismay, her hands passed through the air. She had known they couldn't see or hear her in these visions, but this made it far worse. He was so close, yet she couldn't even touch him, let alone stop him.

Thankfully, a blue prana took up the task as her other-self flung her prana and restrained him. Ciaran fought her like an enraged beast, but she did not let go; her teeth gritted in determination, other-Una forced him to loosen his grip on the Reaper's throat. The man, barely alive, hit the ground with a thud.

Una watched as light slowly returned to Ciaran's frenzied eyes, which went wide in shock as if he had been in a trance until then. For a few moments, he stared at the red bruises on the fallen man's neck, in the shape of his fingers, then turned and left.

The rest of them had finished with their respective targets, all neatly tied up elsewhere. Malakai came up to the stunned other-Una. "Ciaran has these breakdowns from time to time," he casually informed her. "He loses control during a battle, almost like the bloodlust takes over him entirely. It's best to leave him alone for a while."

Her other-self glanced at Malakai. Then, without saying a word, she went after Ciaran, leaving the prince standing there.

Una heard Vid's comment before she followed herself. "So, finally, someone can stop him in a fight! And that person is not *you*, Malakai."

She found Ciaran sitting on a big chunk of rock jutting out of the ground while the threadbare moon floated forlornly in the night sky. Her other-self sat down behind him, their backs

touching each other. He did not speak for some time. Neither did she.

Then barely audible, he begged, “Don’t hate me.”

“Never,” she assured him.

“Tristen tried to warn me. He said spending time with a Shade might corrupt my soul. What if he was right? What if I become a monster? What if...I already am one?”

“He wasn’t right, and you ain’t one.”

“How can you be so sure? You just saw me out there!” His voice made Una’s heart clench—the way he saw himself was difficult for her to bear, and she didn’t even know him. Or did she...?

“Because I won’t let you.” Other-Una forced him to turn around and meet her eyes. “When I get lost, and I often do, you always come and find me. Ciaran, if you ever lose your way, I’ll find you too. Believe in me!”

They faded away as the phantom door gently pushed her out; her blue and yellow prana dimmed, bringing her back to the courtyard of their inn.

A star torn from the sky, Una felt she would never stop falling; like a dandelion forced to let go of its wishes, she would never get him back.

“Don’t hate me.” His plea echoed in her mind.

••••

AMARYLLIS HAD BELIEVED she knew what it was to be hated.

She was wrong.

It was blatantly evident that Vid hated the entire fae race. With auburn hair cut straight around her head to the jawline and bangs covering her forehead, her small and light stature gave the illusion of a little girl—an illusion that broke every time the young woman spoke.

Amaryllis could hear her argue with Malakai and Sanar in the next room. It had been nearly two days, and that was all they had been doing. She looked at the other occupant of her room; Una had been gloomy since the morning, absentmindedly twirling a strand of her hair between her fingers.

“What’s wrong?” Amaryllis asked.

Una looked up; her brown eyes slightly dazed in thoughts. “Can insane people be healed?”

“You are not insane! Who said that?”

Despite herself, Una chuckled. “Not me. Well, not yet at least.” She tugged her left ear and bit her lower lip as if calculating how much to say. “The Reapers who kept you captive, remember? D’you think they could’ve been completely healed somehow?”

Amaryllis was confused by Una’s query. “Not sure. Why do you ask?”

Una looked lost. “I...saw us fighting ‘em again, outside this town, at the entrance of Siremann’s.” She continued, “We were all there. Ciaran was there.” Then she swallowed hard. “Amy, you were not.”

Amaryllis stared at her, unable to speak.

“If this was one of those premonitions Sanar talked about, I like it,” Vid declared as she stomped into the room.

“Vid!” Malakai admonished in a quiet voice.

Una ignored her. Instead, she turned to the Healer behind the woman and asked, “Could their madness be healed?”

Sanar raised his eyebrows. “How mad, exactly?”

He glanced at Malakai, who replied gravely, “Raving mad.”

Sanar considered for a few seconds and said, “No Healer that I know of can heal a mind. Our prana interacts with a body’s physical energy, whether people, plants, or even

inanimate objects. Since Amon has no Mesmer, we have no Healer with affinity to treat minds, either.”

“In that case, these cannot be visions of the future! They can’t be from the past, considering we never crossed paths with Una before. What *are* they?” Malakai asked somewhat irritably.

“Who cares?” Vid looked annoyed. “It’s been over four months that Ciaran has been missing, and now we are stuck with a fae!”

“Why d’you hate the fae so much?” Una asked, equally irked. “I had the excuse of not knowin’ the real story. You must already know—”

Sanar interrupted the Mover. “Una, don’t—” But he was not fast enough.

Dark storms gathered in Vid’s gray eyes. “You mean the story where a fae dangled the forbidden fruit before a human? What did they expect?” the Bender yelled at her, “did they think that the human would’ve politely refused the offer of magic??” Vid panted in an effort to control herself.

Amaryllis knew it was best to stay quiet.

Vid’s trembling voice cut off Una’s attempt to interject as she looked straight at Amaryllis. “I know it was *our* own greed. But did your kind not have any responsibility for what transpired after that? Whether you wished it on us or not, one of yours started everything. Human mages were made! The damage was done. How could you turn away and abandon us?”

Her voice cracked on the last word, and she ran from the room.

“Abandon?” Startled, Amaryllis turned to the three men in the room. No one spoke for a while.

Malakai finally said, “I’m sorry. We tried to reason with her. But...”

Amaryllis waved away his apology. She caught Hunter watching her in silence; there was no hostility in his gentle

eyes. In his late twenties, he was a sturdy man of medium height with cropped brown hair and a trimmed beard. The Shifter was the opposite of his partner in almost every way possible—where Vid seemed to go from a frosted icicle to a hot poker in a matter of seconds, he was solid and stoic as a rock.

Sanar replied cautiously, “Vid’s parents died of prana exhaustion; their cores broke from over-exertion. She believes if we had access to prana fruits instead of these fossilized plants left behind, it could’ve saved her parents. Could it?”

Amaryllis now began to understand the source of Vid’s loathing. “After so many generations of prana in your blood, it could work. In tiny amounts.” She immediately regretted her words, for she was the fae dangling the forbidden fruit this time. It didn’t escape her attention that Malakai and Sanar’s eyes widened ever so slightly at the possibility; it worried her.

“Vid needed someone to hate, so she could live without hating herself for being unable to save her parents.” Hunter’s heavy voice reached her. “And the fae were unreachable, making it easier to hate them.”

Amaryllis sighed bitterly. “Then I show up.”

••••

MEMORIES HAD A WAY of showing up when you least expected them to.

It was an inn very similar to this one; Vid remembered the day when Ciaran had been teaching them a new trick he had learned. They were on a mission together and had stopped for the night. She could still hear the peals of laughter ringing from the courtyard as if it were happening right now.

“Why are you guys so loud this early?” Malakai had walked down the hallway to find them huddled there.

“Ciaran’s showing us how to pick locks,” she enlightened him.

“Why?” the prince asked grumpily.

“It could come in very handy someday,” Ciaran replied with his usual exuberance.

“For a royal, nobles, and knights here, give me just one instance where this could ‘come in handy,’” Malakai demanded, exasperated.

Vid giggled wickedly. “When the said royal is handcuffed to a woman’s bedpost and doesn’t want to stay for breakfast.”

Slack-jawed, Malakai stared at her, and Vid shrugged nonchalantly. “Reva and I talk. Friends happen to do that from time to time.”

The men desperately tried not to laugh at Malakai’s horrified expression.

Ciaran cleared his throat but could not suppress the note of amusement in his voice. “Now that we are clear on how crucial this skill is, let me show one more way to do this, apart from using the lockpick.” He returned the modified hairpin to Vid and glanced at Hunter. “Cuffs, please.” With a soft chuckle, the Shifter changed into a pair of thick manacles in a poof of indigo.

Vid caught him before he hit the floor and fastened the manacles to Ciaran’s wrists. “How’ll you get out of this if your hands are tied together?” she asked, half-bemused.

Ciaran winked at her and flexed his joints.

He rotated his bound wrists tentatively before suddenly twisting them hard—first one and then the other. The cracks were audible enough for Vid and Sanar to gasp. Malakai looked impressed.

However, Ciaran barely flinched as he extracted his limp wrists from the manacles. “That’s how you do it. It’s less painful when you have something to pick the lock with,” he proclaimed.

Shifting back, Hunter watched Ciaran in disbelief while Vid declared, “You’re insane!”

“But you love me anyway?” Ciaran laughed. Grinning in reply, she slapped the side of his arm, finally making him

wince in pain.

Sanar wrapped his green prana around the broken wrists without a word, setting the dislocated joints back into their respective sockets.

“Where did you even learn this?” Malakai asked curiously.

“Oh, I didn’t tell you guys. There was a burglary at my estate last month,” Ciaran replied, gingerly massaging his wrists in turns.

Malakai’s brows furrowed in annoyance. “At a Lord’s residence! This country is reaching new levels of low. How does that answer my question, though?”

“I was getting to that. My people had caught him, of course. But when I reached there to issue my verdict, the man had already broken out of his chains and escaped. So, I went after him.”

“You caught him and then asked him to teach you before throwing him into the dungeons?” Vid asked.

He flashed her a broad grin. “No. I caught him and then asked him to teach me after I offered him a job at my place.” The four knights now looked at him with dismay, their mouths open to different degrees.

“The Lord of Korbridge invited a burglar into his household?” Sanar found his voice before the rest.

“He had fallen into tough times, that’s all. Suon has been fantastic at his duties,” Ciaran said casually.

This time, Malakai confirmed, “You are insane.”

Ciaran beamed back. “But you love anyway.”

Vid sat alone by the window, looking down at the empty courtyard. These old memories made her heart twist in anguish, dislocating pieces of her soul.

She and Hunter had been searching for Ciaran for months; there was no news of his capture, and no one had seen him since he left his hometown for Zephir—no one but this girl, Una.

Malakai couldn't possibly expect her to accept that.

••••

HE HAD EXPECTED VID'S reaction.

What he didn't anticipate was her crossing paths with Amaryllis like this. He was sure she would have complied if he had explained himself to her beforehand. She might not have been happy about it, but she would see things from his perspective. Instead, everything went into complete disarray.

Right now, Amaryllis and Una were cloistered in their room while Vid refused to leave hers. While Sanar and Hunter refused to play mediator between the three women, Malakai did not have that luxury.

These were the moments when he missed his prana; Malakai could feel his core struggling to respond to his will, trying to help him. The shooting pains that arose every time from the pit of his stomach reminded him of what he had lost.

"Malakai, we need to talk." Before he could decide how to approach her, Vid had taken the lead.

He sighed. "Yes, Vid. We do."

They left the inn for a walk; the last thing he would want was Amaryllis to hear another volley of argument over her. She had heard enough.

A few minutes later, he was happy about that decision when Vid suddenly turned to him and said, "You are sleeping with her, aren't you?"

His patience finally snapped. "That's none of your business," he replied coldly while a burning heat seared through his heart in stark contrast to his tone. Malakai hated the accusation. Yet he hated more that it was not true.

Vid went silent for a second at his response. Then she asked, "You know why the General decided to send Reva after us?"

Malakai grimaced and replied, "Because she would enjoy hurting me."

She looked at him sadly. “You don’t understand anything.”

He was not sure what she meant by that. “Vid, we were only fooling around with each other. Reva herself has said so many times. Not to mention, it was five years ago. I don’t know why she still holds a grudge!”

The Bender said nothing more.

He decided to try and change the topic. “At least, you might be able to talk her down if she catches up. You two are best friends.”

“I chose my side, Malakai. And she chose hers.” Traces of sorrow showed up on Vid’s tiny face. “What did you fight with Malville about? Aldoria?” she asked.

He did not reply.

“Why did you touch the amber relic after warning us to stay away from it? I thought you had locked it away somewhere safe.” Vid suddenly stopped at the side of the street, ignoring the people rushing around them. “Malakai, please! I need some answers. I need something to believe in,” she begged, “Ciaran is missing. There are two strangers here, and I don’t know how to trust them.”

“Do you trust *me*?” he asked calmly.

Vid stilled at his question; her gray eyes fluttered like a bird failing to find an open window.

Malakai waited while she struggled, fully knowing the implications of either option. A long minute passed before she replied, “A Castellon where no kid would have to grow up in the streets, starving and fighting for their lives. A Castellon where no Lord or Lady could force mages to work to death by holding their child hostage. That’s what I want.” Vid raised her head and looked at him. “I don’t have an alternative but to believe in you.”

At that very moment, bells started ringing all over the town. The heavy brass bells’ ominous clamor to alert the knights resonated throughout the country.

They both knew what it meant—a call to return to Castle.
A call to arms.

“Aldoria has formally declared war,” Malakai’s voice
shook in despair.

Chapter 20

Hear my call

••••

UNA TRIED HER BEST to breathe.

Sucking in the thin air did not help much, apart from tearing through her nostrils, throat, and lungs.

The trail was winding up, round and round a peak, with the Kolki mountains looming on both sides. At times, the path was so narrow that only one person could cross it sideways, and then, suddenly, it would open to broad valleys blooming with flowers. As if the sharp gorges and steep cliffs interspersed with the slippery rolling hills weren't enough for the mountains to exert their dominance, the land shifts and earthquakes changed the geography of this unstable place every so often, leaving Una terrified that a single misstep could send her down a cliff or a gorge or any other topographical nightmare.

The Siremann's Trail sometimes cut across the mountain as narrow underground tunnels. They were enough to make anyone uncomfortable and claustrophobic but were particularly hard on Malakai. Una knew they brought back the haunting memories of Lascera, and even though the knight tried to hide any sign of weakness, his tight jaws and clenched fists betrayed him. More than once, Una glanced back to see him frozen at the entrance of a dark winding tunnel, unable to take a step forward.

She wished she could help him, but he wouldn't accept any.

"How long do you think we have before the Aldorian army reaches Castellon?" Vid asked.

"If we are lucky, maybe three months. Aldoria's winter is far more brutal than ours. I doubt they would risk mobilizing their army before the roads thaw," Sanar surmised.

Hunter quietly interjected, “You forget the underground rail-thing that runs under Castellon. We don’t have access to it, but they do.”

While Vid and Sanar gasped at the possibility, Una was utterly clueless. *Rail-thing?*

Malakai, however, shook his head. “No. Firstly, there is no outlet for the underground rail within the borders of Castellon because my brother reneged on the deal my mother had made. It runs directly from Aldoria to Vaneda without any stops in this country. Secondly, King Arden is anything but sneaky! I bet the timing of his declaration was planned on purpose—to give Malville some time to come to his senses and revoke the ridiculous trade laws.”

“You seem to respect him more than your own blood,” Amaryllis observed.

Vid grimaced at her comment, but Malakai smiled sadly. “Aldoria was a friend longer than it has been an enemy. But you are right. I shouldn’t forget they are now.”

“We’ve got a hundred knights and barely five thousand soldiers. Even if the king drafts all the mages in Castellon, would that be enough?” Vid’s voice betrayed a trace of panic.

Una raised her hand.

“Yes, Una?” Malakai asked.

“I’ve heard Aldoria has much fewer mages than us? Why won’t we be enough?” she wondered.

The knights exchanged glances, unwilling to breach the sore subject. Then Malakai replied, “Yes, during the fae massacre, they backed out of the race earlier than us. However, since then, Aldoria has focused on strengthening their knowledge of science and technology.” The bitterness in his voice was evident. He paused to collect himself and gave her a strange look. “Ciaran believed we should start learning science from them, but I never liked the idea of losing our identity as a mage nation.”

“The Aldorian threat will be neutralized at some point. After that, it might be smart to invest resources in that

direction,” Amaryllis suggested seriously.

“Are you implying we are done as mages? That prana in Amon is never going to return to strength?” Una could swear Malakai’s dark eyes flickered crimson for a brief moment (and not for the first time, he scared her a bit).

Amaryllis flinched at his tone but didn’t reply.

“Sorry,” he muttered, his gaze softening immediately.

Noticing that Vid was about to say something snarky, Una barged in. “We can’t think so far ahead. What’re the chances that King Malville realizes Aldoria’s not joking around and agrees to their demands?”

Malakai did not answer.

It was Sanar who did. “Slim to none.”

Una shook her head in frustration. “So, what are we—or rather you, plannin’ to do?” she addressed Malakai.

He tapped his chin thoughtfully. “I would try to go to the Aldorian Abbey.”

“Heh?” That had to be the oddest plan she’d ever heard.

Despite his grim mood, Malakai chuckled. “The abbeys are neutral territories, Una. I will try to arrange a meeting with Arden. Give him my word to restore the regular trade between the countries and proper taxes, whatever it takes.”

“You’re not the king yet,” Una pointed out, “to make any of those promises.”

An uncomfortable silence descended upon them.

“In Fenderan, we win our positions through a series of challenges, for authority should be achieved by talent, not by the accident of birth. It makes for lazy rulers,” Amaryllis said quietly. She looked like she expected Malakai to react harshly again, but this was not a topic she would’ve conceded.

Instead of anger, a wave of chagrin passed over Malakai’s face. None of the humans could argue with that logic, including Vid.

“Power to rule is a burden to bear.” Murasaki of the Mesmers asked him gravely, “Are you ready?”

••••

“ARE YOU READY?”

Ciaran’s eyes twinkled in the sunlight.

“No, I’m not,” other-Una grumbled.

She stood at the edge of a valley. If not for the door disappearing behind and the blue-yellow prana swirling around her, Una wouldn’t have realized she had been swept up again. They were somewhere in the Kolki mountains; she seemed to be following the same route in her reality and whatever-this-was.

“Oh, admit it! You are afraid,” he teased her.

“Can you blame me?” her other-self retorted. “You said learn sword-fighting. I did. We’ve been practicin’ martial arts for months, which is fun now that I can make most of them moves. Why’s this even necessary?” she challenged him.

Una walked closer to check out what her other-self was complaining about.

There was an elaborate series of traps on the patch of land: ropes crisscrossed above the ground, sharp spikes buried at random spots, and a few holes dug around. Not to mention, they were on a rocky valley that ended in a several hundred feet drop to the foggy abyss. “No, no, no! I’m not doing this.” She heard herself protest vehemently, trying to get away from him.

Ciaran held a piece of black cloth in his hand. “Martial arts are all about reflexes,” he insisted. “Your body must take over your mind and react independently. You’ve to stop relying on your eyes and prana.” He waved the cloth in front of her. “I will guide you through this.”

“Ciaran, no—I can’t.” She actually sounded afraid.

He stilled for a moment and then said, “I learned this technique from a Shade, Una. Tristen made me do this

regularly.” In a few steps, he came to stand in front of her, gazing at her face. “I trusted he wouldn’t let me get hurt. You have to decide if you trust me.”

“Gahhhh!” she groaned in frustration and raised her hands in surrender. “You’re an insufferable prick.”

He tied the cloth over her eyes before whispering in her ears, “Thank you!”

Other-Una gritted her teeth and declared, “Ciaran, if I die here today, I’ll haunt you forever.”

“I won’t let you die,” he promised her. “Though I like the sound of ‘forever’...”

Una watched herself with a mixture of surprise and shock as she followed the invisible thread of his voice. He was at the end of the path, waiting for her, and she moved through the ropes, the spikes, the holes, and the rocks—to reach him.

Little by little, he chipped away her fear of losing control.

Little by little, she relinquished her need to retain control.

Her prana repeatedly flared up, trying to move the obstacles out of her way. Forcefully, she willed it down. At times, some rocks managed to strike the sole of her foot; more than once, she tripped on a rope and nearly fell on a stake, but he kept her safe, stopping her precisely at the right moment every time. Soon, she started navigating through the traps like she could sense them.

Una felt an ache rise in her chest and then spread over her body as if her muscles remembered those movements even when her mind could not. In front of her was a girl who could barely ever find her way when her eyes were open wide, and now—

“Yes!” She took off the eye cover, whooping in glee, and his proud beam greeted her.

“I can’t believe you used to do this with the Assassin of Tarderan. What a twelve-year-old!” she exclaimed.

Ciaran laughed out loud. “I was a handful. Also, he might be the Assassin of Tarderan, but his name is Tristen. And he’ll

always be my friend.”

Una stood in stunned silence.

She had heard those exact words before.

Una was dragged back to her present—in a forest of spruce trees outside the cavern where the others were resting for the night, and suddenly, she knew what she had to do for answers. However insane it was, however fatal it might turn out to be, Una needed to do this.

Walking away as far as she could from the cavern, she shouted at the top of her lungs. “Tristen! Tristen! Can you hear me? Tristen!”

Una called for the one who had come to kill her once, who’d killed Dom. The one who Ciaran trusted with his life.

Her voice echoed through the mountains and reverberated through the ground; finally, it crossed the gates of Tarderan and shook the Devil’s Keep.

••••

THE DEVIL PREFERRED suits over doublets.

The country of Vaneda had flourished in fashion and entertainment over the last few decades; their silk and pearls were as famous as their beaches and hot-water springs. Sirius liked to do his own shopping from time to time, and even the Guardian could not begrudge him a visit to Amon once every century.

He was two millennia and a half old, though he maintained the appearance of a young man in his thirties. His favorite hobby was to read every piece of literature written since the dawn of time, and his pet peeve was how misinformed the mortals were. Sirius did not have horns or hooves. He certainly did not have a tail. Of course, he could conjure them all up if he chose to, but why would he ever need them?

He tried to concentrate on the book; it was not easy, as the uncomfortable throne made of solid shadows was not the best seat for a pleasant read. One would think there was no good

reason not to use some pillows, but a cushion capable of making it comfortable did not exist in the four realms.

To sit on the Shadow Throne was the Devil's primary duty.

And he would do it bravely.

For him, an even more tedious job was to hear the prayers of the sinful mortals, lusting for easy and craving for more. He was so used to the cries from every corner of Amonderan and Fenderan that they were nothing but a background hum to him. Only when a prayer reached a certain intensity would his mind register it as a deal. Even then, it was only akin to the buzz of a mosquito.

That's why it nearly knocked him off the throne when her voice reached the Keep.

No sooner had the Devil jerked up in shock than the Assassin ran into the room with both hands pressed over his ears. "What is happening?" Tristen cried out.

Melodus and Althrus followed him closely, looking very confused; they were patrolling the circles when he'd started freaking out.

"Someone is calling you by name?" Sirius could not believe his ears. This was highly irregular: mortals prayed to the Guardians for summons and whined to the Devil for bargains—no one ever yelled for the Shades. Who in their right mind would want to?

The voice reached a crescendo; it was getting difficult for even the Devil to ignore the obstinately powerful call, let alone Tristen, who had no idea how to tune it out.

"Who is calling him?" Melodus asked, rattled to see Tristen's condition, though he couldn't hear anything.

"Should we go and take care of whoever it is?" Althrus offered.

The Devil was not sure who it was; for the first time, it was not him but the Assassin who appeared to be the intended recipient of what sounded more like an angry demand than a prayer.

“Una! It’s Una,” Tristen informed them in between his spasms.

“The Mover?” Simultaneously, they glanced at the locked room further down the hall.

“Why’s she calling you? To exact revenge? She must be crazy,” Melodus concluded.

In the meantime, Una’s calls became more urgent. The Devil caught a glimpse of the Sa’ore Morte—cracked in places but still sealed for now; it was vibrating inside the crystal case as if responding to her voice.

Sirius was beginning to get very wary of this mortal. It was evident she deserved his personal attention.

“What should I do?” Tristen half-asked, half-pleaded.

“Go,” the Devil relented. “I will set up a barrier for the future. This once, Assassin, you can answer the summon of a mortal.”

As the Shade melted into a shadow, Sirius remembered something important. “Tristen, don’t kill her!” the Devil yelled behind him.

••••

DON’T KILL HER!

The words stung, but how could he take offense? After all, that’s what he was best at doing.

Unlike Dom, he had not reached Tarderan by mistake. He belonged there; even when Tristen didn’t want to kill, he always ended up taking lives.

Knelt on the rugged ground where rocks and grass coexisted in peace, Una was coughing heavily. The insistent screaming seemed to have taken a toll on her.

Tristen stared at the human, unsure of what to do next. The last time he had tried to talk to her...it didn’t go so well!

She wiped her lips with the back of her hand and opened her mouth again, but the scream died in her throat when she

noticed him hovering uncertainly.

He wore darkness like a cloak, hoping she would be afraid of him, hoping she would abandon whatever plan she had cooked up. His hopes, however, were dashed when she stood up and started walking toward him instead of running away.

“Una, you there?” Someone was out looking for her.

“Can we go somewhere else?” she urged.

Bewildered, he couldn’t respond immediately. The voice was getting closer.

“Can you take me somewhere else? Without killing me, that is?”

Tristen gulped. “I can.”

The odd human glared at him. “What’re we waitin’ for?”

He didn’t know what else to do but take her hand and move into a shadow.

“Have you lost your damn mind? Or are you suicidal?” he had to ask. Afraid to take her too far away, he decided to stay inside the mountain pass, albeit at a safe distance from her allies.

Una did not answer him. Instead, like a snake striking at its prey, she turned around and executed a near-perfect upright kick. With her body stretched at the correct angle, the right knee straight, her foot would have landed the hit square on his jaws if he were anyone else.

Tristen caught the heel of her foot before it could make contact. *How did she learn to do that?*

“Why were you tryin’ to kill me that night? Why’d you kill Dom? Tell me!” Her hands balled into fists; the human demanded of the Shade.

Tristen’s black eyes turned darker. “I didn’t come to kill you. But no one would listen to anything I tried to say.” Even to his ears, they sounded like pathetic excuses. “Then, Seraphina showed up. I—” He closed his eyes in distress. “I made the wrong choice. I always do.”

He expected her to react angrily, but she didn't respond.

"I was so relieved when I missed my grip on you," he sighed. "I didn't realize he had reached Tarderan behind me...I am sorry. I am so sorry!" It felt hollow to say those words now. Yet, he had wished for so long that someone would hear his apology.

"Can you bring 'im back?" she asked in a broken voice.

He shook his head slowly.

"There's no way to help him?" she pleaded desperately.

"We are doing everything we can to protect him from the circles. He can no longer be revived as a mortal, but I swear we'll keep him safe." He averted his eyes. "Well, you have no reason to believe me, but—"

"I do have one reason." Her voice was so faint that Tristen thought his ears were playing tricks.

"Where did you learn the arts?"

"You taught someone who taught me," she answered.

Tristen did not need to ask who. Una did not need to say his name, either. Only one human was trained in this fighting style, an art designed to incapacitate the target without resorting to shadow weapons, especially when killing was not necessary. Now, there were two.

Her pretty face was worn out; she sank heavily to the grass.

Shadows and moonlight entwined as the Assassin floated closer to her and sat down, keeping his distance.

"How is Ciaran doing?" he asked curiously.

"I don't know!" she suddenly cried out. "He's been missing for months now. Can you find him?"

They talked for hours until Una nodded off halfway through a sentence, becoming the first and hopefully the last mortal to fall asleep next to a Shade.

A terrible thought reared its ugly head in his mind, but Tristen forced it down: Ciaran's sudden disappearance, Una's unusual aura of death, the cracks on Sa'ore Morte...they could not possibly be connected, could they? Yet, there were too many coincidences to be mere chance.

Tristen decided to try and sense Ciaran's presence across the mortal realms. If that did not work, he would ask Melodus for help; the Spy could locate anyone, anywhere.

Una mumbled something in her sleep, making Tristen smile a bit before he carried her into another shadow. Her friends were awake and searching for her in the surrounding forest. As Tristen carefully placed the snoring Mover at the cavern entrance, he felt something he never thought was possible.

Forgiven.

Chapter 21

The Rift between us

••••

HUNTER HATED TO SEE her in pain.

He had tried to bury her worst memories with his love for years. But it was not enough. He was not enough. Losing her parents at eight and being thrown out of the Lord's estate, begging on the streets for scraps, drifting helplessly from one place to another—he hadn't been there for her then.

Scarred and scared, Vid had been nearly eighteen when Hunter met her nine years ago. Working at his parent's tailoring shop, he'd been a normal twenty-year-old living a perfectly normal life. Despite being a Shifter mage, he had no ambition to use his magic, and what good was turning into a random sharp tool in the heap of garments, apart from damaging them and getting an earful from his father? Hunter would have lived his entire life in that placid contentment if he hadn't crossed paths with her.

He remembered their encounter as if it were yesterday.

It had been raining the whole evening, and he was hurrying home. The deliveries had taken longer than expected, so he took a shortcut through an alley he would have otherwise avoided. It was a bad neighborhood; the townspeople complained about it, and a knight would be sent to investigate from time to time. All the troublemakers would disappear, only to show up the moment the knight was gone. With the petitions to post a few regular patrolling soldiers falling on deaf ears of their Lord, there was nothing more to be done.

Hunter was not the type who expected things to change.

But everything changed that night.

There in the alley, a local hooligan was harassing her. Back then, her coppery hair was long, jumbled into knots, and like a cornered wildcat, she hissed and clawed at her attacker. "Shut

up,” the man sneered. “Either you’ve money to spare, or I’ll find ‘nother use for you.” The girl let out a growl in response.

For a Shifter who morphed into weapons, Hunter had never been in a fight before, yet he could not just stand by. So, without any plan, he rushed forward. The ruffian didn’t notice him approaching as he grabbed her thin shoulders and shoved her against the wall.

Hunter knew he would not reach her in time, and even if he did, he wasn’t sure how to win a bare-handed brawl. Desperately, he shifted into a spear, hoping she could use him to save herself when he, as a person, was useless to her.

Her eyes had shown no emotion this entire time: no fear for her life, no cry for help, no plea for mercy. There was nothing but a void in them. But at that moment, when their eyes met just before Hunter turned into the weapon, they widened in wonder.

She suddenly convulsed, startling both her assaulter and him.

A mustard-yellow flame burst out from her hands as her prana activated for the first time in her life, beckoning him closer and tugging at him hard. Without even realizing it, he responded to her call, and in a fierce pull that nearly snapped him in half, the newly-awakened Bender changed his spear-form into a dagger midway in the air.

Then she plunged him into the back of her assaulter, who let out a strangled cry and crumpled on the ground.

Hunter remembered shifting back after she took him out of the injured body, the shock of blood and human flesh clinging to his skin. He remembered how she stared at her own hands, her prana slowly dimming out, and started sobbing, “How? Why now?”

He didn’t know her name yet. He didn’t know they would soon leave together, train together, and against all odds, become knights together...eventually winning the title of King’s Knights; the metal-Bender with an unusual affinity to bend living metal and the Shifter with the rare ability to turn

into metal were complementary in every possible sense of the term.

Back in the present, Hunter stroked her face gently, and Vid sleepily opened her eyes before pulling him into a kiss.

Her eyes looked gray to everyone.

To him, they revealed every color in the world.

••••

THE COLORS OF DAWN were always Malakai's favorite.

The tinge of red and gold spreading across the horizon not only reminded him of his own prana but also motivated him: Castellon's insignia was the rising sun behind the jeweled dagger—the legacy of the Cirrah of Amon, as was he.

Ciaran was also very proud of his house emblem: the crescent moon and the saber. When they were children, they would argue over whose crest was better and end up in fistfights, which Malakai could never win without resorting to his magic—the only advantage he had over Ciaran. The day Ciaran was presented with the royal badge, the newly-ordained King's Knight had winked at him across the throne room and deliberately pinned the national crest slightly above his own. Malakai's heart still swelled at the pride he had felt that day.

But his country would cease to exist if he didn't do something soon.

If he let his bumbling fool of a brother stay on the throne for much longer.

“Uhh, *that* was a crack in the Rift I saw back then?!” He heard Una exclaim. The girl's voice could demolish a mountain on its own; she didn't seem to grasp the concept of a whisper. “But it was too small for anythin' larger than a bug to cross,” she complained.

“Well, you are supposed to push through the gap.” From his tent, he could hear the smile in Amaryllis' voice. Then she added in haste, “Una, do not ever try to do it!”

The curiosity in Una's voice was barely restrained. "Why? You passed through it. In one piece, I might add."

Malakai didn't mean to eavesdrop, but he couldn't stop listening either. How could he? Even CirrahDion didn't explain the principles behind the Rift between the two realms in his journals. Either the legendary king didn't know it himself, or he had chosen to keep the information a secret from his descendants.

Amaryllis replied in her Murasaki tone, "You need to keep your prana activated while you cross the Rift. If your prana depletes before you exit, well...you would die," she informed Una gravely.

"Umm, is the Rift so thick that my prana would exhaust before goin' through?" Una had more questions.

Like always, Malakai smirked to himself.

Amaryllis was silent for a little while. "It is not about thickness," she replied after a bit. "Fenderan exists all around Amon. There might be a forest in this very valley we are currently in, or there could be an ocean here; I don't know. But you can't see, hear, touch, or feel it." Amaryllis paused, and sadness crept into her voice when she spoke again. "Do you understand? We were pulled apart by force; we were kept apart by force. The distance between us is not supposed to be breached."

Malakai's heart wrenched at her declaration.

It felt as if she was talking about them instead.

For once, Una stayed quiet as she listened to the fae talk haltingly, and the Mesmer seemed lost in memories of her ancestors. "It was an awful time. CirrahDion and his knights were fighting the clan armies while the fae time- and space-Benders were trying their best to push Fenderan out. But the pull of Amon was too strong."

"Then what happened?" Una could not keep her mouth clamped shut any longer.

"Someone had to sacrifice themselves. Willingly offer up their life energy to tear the realms asunder." Amaryllis' voice

was very faint. Yet, Malakai could hear her as clear as the approaching day.

Una drew in her breath sharply; at the same time, Amaryllis exhaled heavily. “Her prana suffused at the boundary of the realms and manifested as twelve anchors: six in Fenderan and six in Amonderan, tethering the Rift in place. They can’t be removed or destroyed.”

Una asked in a reverent whisper, “Who was she?”

Malakai did not hear Amaryllis’ reply.

His mind was transported back under the palace, beneath even the dungeons, so far below that most residents didn’t know the place existed.

He remembered a shimmering jade stake lying there, buried deep in the foundation.

••••

IT WAS AWKWARD.

The two tempestuous women were constantly finding reasons to bicker. Either Una’s inexplicable connection to Ciaran or Vid’s inability to stand Amaryllis would ignite their arguments; thankfully, they mostly restricted themselves to waspish comments.

It began the same way almost as soon as they both woke up.

“I knew Movers were mostly simpletons, but you’re an idiot,” Vid snickered at Una. “A Mesmer shows up in Amon, and your memories get scrambled. How’re you not able to connect the dots!!” Her voice rose with unadulterated annoyance.

Amaryllis froze. *Oh...*

“Stop blaming Amy for everythin’ wrong around you!” Una yelled back with equal force.

The knights had resumed their regular training sessions in the mountains: running, climbing, hand-to-hand combat, and weapon training. So, a bit further away, close to a stream,

Malakai and Sanar focused on their sparring practice, ignoring them both. Meanwhile, Hunter silently prepared breakfast in a makeshift kitchen next to the mouth of the cave.

“If she isn’t responsible for your inane memory problems, the only other conclusion is obvious,” Vid retorted furiously.

“And what might that be?” Una’s eyes narrowed.

Vid scoffed, “That you are a liar.”

Uh-oh! Amaryllis saw Malakai wince as well.

Una’s magic erupted like a volcano, spewing sapphire magma, while Vid’s prana shrouded her in violent yellow flames.

“Take. It. Back,” Una seethed.

“No, I won’t. Ciaran’s like a brother to me. You no longer get to use his name to curry favor with us.”

“Vid, stop it,” Malakai yelled out, “don’t make me—” He stopped mid-sentence, but Vid’s angry gray eyes showed sudden traces of fear at his unspoken threat, making Amaryllis wonder how Malakai could incite such a response in someone like Vid (apart from being their prince, but still...).

The Bender recovered fast, though. “Malakai, she’s a fraud!”

Before Malakai could respond, Una spoke, “What can I do to make you believe me?” Her anger was now replaced with a mix of emotions Amaryllis couldn’t fully understand—in Una’s determination, she could see stains of sorrow.

Vid picked up two swords from their cache. “Spar with me. No prana.” She extended one toward Una. “If you knew Ciaran even half as much as you claim, there is no way he didn’t teach you the basics.” She glared at the Mover. “That’s simply who he is. So, prove it!”

Hunter joined the assembled group and said, “That’s not fair, Vid. You know very few people in the villages, or even cities, have held a sword in their lives, let alone could stand against you.”

Sanar shook his head in disapproval as well. Vid didn't reply to Hunter or acknowledge the Healer. She kept her unwavering eyes on Una, who quietly accepted the weapon from her.

Amaryllis was not sure what to do at this point. Was she supposed to watch her friend be humiliated by a vindictive knight? Without her magic, Una was like a blind person without a cane. Amaryllis' prana flexed, itching to resolve the conflict with a single twitch of her finger.

"You don't need to prove anything to us," Malakai pulled Una aside and assured her urgently. Sanar nodded in assent, his soft eyes showing signs of concern.

Una, however, took a deep breath and said, "No, I gotta prove it to myself."

Amaryllis watched in surprise as her friend took a stance like she knew what she was doing and flourished the sword a few times to warm up.

By the look on everyone's faces, it was not what they had expected, either.

....

VID WAS RIGHT.

Most of the time, Una did feel like a fraud.

She remembered him, and yet she did not; she saw him, and yet he never did. More than anyone else, Una wanted to know if any of it was real, so she trusted her body to know what to do.

And it did.

It was as if she was in a vision, watching herself from a distance as she drifted in and out of Vid's range with movements akin to a dance. Her thrusts and feints were measured and balanced; she did not use martial arts, for it was too special to waste on a trivial battle, and not a single time did she use her prana.

Dodging Vid's strikes, she parried her thrusts, lunging at the suitable openings. Vid met her moves with ease; while the knight was not even remotely at a disadvantage, her eyes showed undisguised surprise.

Una didn't have time to notice how astounded the others were.

She paid attention to nothing but the two swords crashing into each other and the sparks that flew at their contact. Her muscles, joints, and senses woke up after a long slumber; they recalled every lesson of his training—it was something he had left behind, for her and her alone.

Vid's sword whizzed over her head with such force that if Una was barely a fraction of second too late in ducking, it could have sliced her head clean off. Someone in the assorted spectators cried out in shock (maybe everyone), but Una didn't get distracted—she knew the next move. Before Vid's swing even came to a stop, Una thrust her sword upwards and caught the hilt of the knight's weapon. Being in motion, Vid couldn't balance it well, and with a clang, the sword fell from her hands.

The stunned hush was only punctured by a sharp exclamation from Sanar, "Whoa!"

Vid stood bewildered for several seconds before raising her hands in a truce; then suddenly, the tiny woman dashed forward and enfolded her in both arms.

Una was so startled by the bizarre ending of their duel that she didn't know how to react.

"You do know him," the Bender declared in a tear-laden voice.

"Yes, and you're breakin' my ribs—" Una managed to say.

"Oh, sorry!" Vid released her from the death embrace and grinned through the tears in her eyes. "It was like seeing him fight. Well, *almost* like him! You need a few more years and a little more crazy."

Then she gave her another quick hug. "Let's find him fast, okay? I need to punch him a few dozen times."

Una's eyes blurred. "So do I."

Chapter 22

One step closer

••••

HEALERS WERE NOT WARRIORS.

They were supposed to nurture and nourish.

Sanar had spent years at Castellon Abbey to study and understand prana. He'd dreamt of becoming a Healer who not only healed bodies but also mended cores; that was his ambition, his purpose. But as it turned out, his dreams were quite impossible: once something affected the core, it was beyond repair—prana itself could not heal prana. Sanar's obsession started taking a toll on his body and mind. To stop his downward spiral, the head of the Castellon Abbey eventually had to forbid the young Healer from wasting more time on this futile quest. Sleep-deprived and exhausted, Sanar had left the Abbey, knowing he had failed.

Liam had watched him leave. He did not stop him or complain; he was simply sad.

That had been nearly seven years ago.

The Lady of Neubasil immediately employed Sanar. A kind and generous woman, Lady Tarni wanted the best for her people, and he was the best Healer she could find. A year passed, treating illnesses throughout the province, saving lives, and helping people...then why did he feel so empty all the time? Sanar was grappling to find his new purpose in life when he ran into them arguing beneath a tree on a summer morning before beginning his monotonous day.

One man, green-eyed and blond, was bleeding from his arm; the deep cuts on his shoulder had to be from the claws of a brown bear. The forest around Neubasil had a few of them, though Sanar couldn't fathom how someone would get into a fight with one, considering they didn't usually attack unprovoked. The other man, dark-eyed with dark hair, could not either. "You had to poke it, didn't you?" He was trying to stymie the bleeding, but Sanar could tell it needed proper

healing, or the green-eyed man might suffer from blood poisoning.

“That bear was bullying those poor creatures,” the blond defended his decision.

The dark-haired man sighed in resignation. “Why did you have to stick your nose in their business?”

The wounded man joked in response, “I have a rather perfect nose. Why shouldn’t I lend it to them?”

Instead of replying, the dark-eyed man tied the tourniquet around his arm more tightly than warranted. It was such a terrible bandage that Sanar couldn’t take it anymore. “Please, allow me.” He had stepped forward.

At the moment, the Healer sat at the edge of the valley, polishing their stash of weapons. These natural caverns formed in the mountains were ideal places to rest; soon, they would also start finding the small huts that the previous travelers had made and then left for others. Each house was unique—each narrated a tale, and each awaited a story.

In one corner of the cavern, Amaryllis and Malakai were preparing lunch. Their longing for each other was evident in every stolen glance and every small gesture; Sanar noticed it all but said nothing.

On the other side of the valley, Vid and Hunter were helping Una train. The Mover was a natural. Her instincts were sharp, and her movements displayed Ciaran’s influence beyond any doubt; that wasn’t what bothered Sanar. Something was already wrong with her when he first met her in Colasia; however, he had let it slide since he couldn’t detect any physical cause for it. Then, Dom passed away, and her melancholy was hard to watch. Once again, there was nothing he could do for her.

Yet even with the meager research Sanar had done at the Abbey, he noticed the strangest thing: her magic was intensifying with each passing day. Mages were born with a certain amount of prana, some more than the others, and while they could gain faster access and more effective use with

practice and effort, that did not change the quantity. At least, there was no known record of this happening.

Sanar could sense that the excessive energy was burning her up from within, and though Una pranced around, she had to be in constant pain. Worst of all, she seemed unaware of her condition, shrugging off her agony by burying herself in more activities.

Sanar hadn't been there for Malakai; he could not save Dom, nor did he know how to find Ciaran yet. But he would be damned if he allowed Una to waste away—for all his failures in life, Sanar refused to fail her.

Healers can be warriors, too.

They can protect and prevent.

••••

UNA SAT ON THE COLD floor.

The darkness numbed her nerves, and the silence soothed her mind.

Though it scared her that she found the Corridor comforting these days, and sometimes she didn't want to leave, the knowledge that her magic would deplete soon enough when she would have no choice but to return to her reality made her incredibly sad. And that terrified her even more.

Leaning back against the wall, Una sighed. As much as she tried to convince herself that she only came here for solitude, like an addict, she could not stop herself from opening a door each visit. How many times did she need to fail before admitting it was only a mirage she was chasing? He was nothing more than a fragmented hope for the answers she was desperate to find, for Ciaran couldn't possibly be the reason for her constant heartache. How could he?

Una had no idea how these phantom doors operated; usually, a door would pop up on its own, as it just had.

Una walked through it to find herself standing behind them. Always so close, yet so far.

“C’mon, admit it! You were starin’ at her as well.” She seemed to be making fun of him.

“I was not!” he objected, though his cheeks heated up.

Crystal-blue waterfall crashed from above the hill onto the stones below, creating a dense white mist to flow into a wistful stream, twisting around the mountain. They were perched on a pair of mossy-green rocks at the sides of the waterfall, a little away from the spray where an ash tree protected them from the midday sun’s glare. Prickly thistle bushes dressed in violet plumes grew around the rocks—patches of bristles and beauty entwined together in a strange harmony.

“She was stunning,” other-Una smirked and said, “don’t tell me you didn’t notice.”

Ciaran’s lips raised slightly to form a half-smile. “Oh, I did notice. But she’s more Malakai’s type than mine,” he remarked.

Other-Una giggled at the mention of the prince. “He couldn’t take his eyes off her. I wonder where she’s from, though. Definitely not from Castellon.” Mischief glinting in her eyes, she poked at Ciaran’s arm. “Golden-blond with blue eyes, those features, and that body...She’s everyone’s type.”

Ciaran was trying to fish in the stream with a handmade pole, and she didn’t appear to understand that fishing was supposed to be a silent endeavor. He, however, didn’t seem to mind her babbling as he shrugged with a light laugh and said, “Well, she is not mine.”

Other-Una gave him a sideways glance with a grin on her lips. “Aha! And what *is* your type?”

He turned around to look at her, half-amused. Then, casually placing his hand on her head, he replied, “About yea high. She has dark hair like a raven, brown eyes like a doe; she is more curious than a cat and braver than a lion.”

A tinge of red crept on her cheeks before she could retort, “She sounds like a walking zoo.”

He chuckled and said, “Yes. But she is *my* walking zoo.”

Ciaran caught a trout and pulled it out of the water as she blushed to the roots of her hair, turning redder when he laughed at her reaction, now more in annoyance. “What if you ain’t *her* type?” she challenged him.

“Ouch. You didn’t just say that!” He dipped the fishing rod into the water again. “What if I said I won’t be able to live without her?” he teased.

“She won’t believe a word.”

“Hmm, I would have to make her believe.” His emerald eyes searched hers. “I wonder how...”

Her vision fogged with unshed tears, and Una was pushed out of the door, sent back to Siremann’s Trail, alone by the side of a different stream—a stream that mournfully murmured his name. She sank to the grass, wondering why it felt like she was dying a little every day, why it felt like she was the one who couldn’t live without him.

Una didn’t know a man was leaning against a cypress tree barely a few feet away, watching her.

He did not need to hide in the shadows to remain unnoticed.

••••

IT DID NOT ESCAPE MALAKAI’S notice that she’d been avoiding him.

A fire was lit at the entrance, safely contained within a ring of pebbles as they relaxed around it, roasting skewers of meat and vegetables. He was next to Sanar, listening to him and Una chat with Vid and Hunter. Amaryllis was far away from him, as always, these days.

Malakai knew there was no point in denying it anymore: he wanted her to be with him; he wanted to be with her. If there was nothing meant to be in his life ahead, or if there was everything he ever desired, did any of that matter if she was not in it? This game of hide-and-seek was killing him.

Malakai could barely pay attention to Sanar talking about how to contact the Aldorian Abbey and set a parley with King

Arden. It was too early for this plan, anyway. Inside Siremann's Trail, they were cut off from the rest of Castellon for at least another month. The last news they'd heard was in Aspen; there had been several skirmishes at the border when groups of Castellonian soldiers attempted to detain the last of the Aldorian merchants returning home on suspicion of being spies. Only the Guardians knew how bad it might have gotten since then, with his brother doling out more idiotic orders to prove he had the power to do so.

Thoughts tumbled around his mind while his eyes followed her as she went to the brook to clean up.

Vid was there washing dishes, making Amaryllis hesitate and take a few steps back. However, she wasn't nearly fast enough. "It's not you, right?" the Bender asked sharply.

Amaryllis didn't seem to have a clue what her inquiry was about. "Not me what?"

Vid hissed, "Una claims it can't be you messing with her mind. She says her memory problems started before she even ran into you. And she trusts you'd never do anything to harm her." She grimaced and added (quite unnecessarily), "I don't!"

Amaryllis stared at the softly flowing water. "It's not me. But I can keep saying it a thousand times, and it won't matter to you. So why bother asking?" she said bitterly. "Vid, it wasn't me who decided to create the Rift. And it was NOT me who took the prana fruits away from Amon." She started washing her hands in the water.

"I don't remember what they looked like," Vid said abruptly.

Amaryllis turned back in surprise. "Who?" she asked.

Vid tried to compose herself. "My parents." Her gray eyes were dry, but her voice shook with tears. "I have no portraits of them either. We'd planned to get one made that summer—" She trembled. "Without active prana, I was always a burden to the Lord who employed my parents. For my sake, to give me a good home, they worked themselves to death. I'm the reason they are dead. Fae are the reason they couldn't be saved."

A heavy silence fell around them.

Vid quietly collected the washed dishes and began to walk away.

Malakai was about to sigh in relief when Amaryllis' voice floated like a gentle breeze. "Would you want to...? I could —" She struggled to find the right words.

"Want what? As fabulous as you are, you can't bring back the dead."

"But I can help you remember them."

Vid stilled at her offer. "Let you trap me in my memories? So, you could make me go crazy as you did the Reapers?" Her voice was now as dry as a raisin forgotten out in the sun.

Malakai forced himself not to interfere. Whether Amaryllis could mend it or not, it was her bridge to cross, and he believed in her, even if she didn't care for his belief.

Her blue eyes turned into hard amethysts when she spoke. "Despite the venom in your words, you have never harmed me. Those Reapers did. They hurt me, and they hurt him!" He sensed her gaze linger on him briefly before pulling away.

"Know this, dear Bender; unlike your human rulers, I was not born the Murasaki of Mesmers." A violent, violet cyclone spun around her in response to her mood. Then at her slightest behest, the twisting whirlwind condensed into a twirling top that landed on her open palm.

She kept it perfectly balanced. "I was chosen."

Malakai trusted her, yet his heart froze in fear at the display of her power and control over prana. He didn't have to check on the others to know that everyone was now watching the two mages face each other. Even the air seemed to have paused to see what would happen next.

Breaking the suffocating stillness, Hunter got up from his seat and walked closer to them. "Could I be with her?" he asked Amaryllis, who nodded in assent.

"It's about time I met your parents, don't you think?" His big hands gently cupped Vid's little face and tilted it toward

him. Malakai wondered if she would still decline.

Instead, Vid touched Hunter's hand on her cheek. "I'd like you to meet them too." Then, she turned to Amaryllis and said, "Thank you!" With a smile that spoke volumes, Amaryllis extended her hands for them to hold on either side.

Malakai watched solemnly as her prana restored the Bender's childhood memories while connecting Vid's mind to Hunter's for him to experience them with her.

And a violet bridge was forged.

••••

SERAPHINA STALKED HIM while he stalked his prey.

So far, he had followed the human from one brothel to the other.

It was almost daybreak, and the man showed no sign of taking a break from his pleasure-seeking activities. The Fury of Justice was appalled, to say the least. In Vaneda, these were not even called brothels, but something along the lines of "entertainment spa!" It had been centuries since she was alive, but she still remembered the difference between them.

With Tristen looking as revolted as her, she decided it was time to spare themselves the parade of this creature's debauchery. A criminal by profession and a philanderer by nature, the man seemed to have incurred the wrath of many people.

"Hello, Assassin." In the twinkling red-pink lights of the street, she had to grin at the look on Tristen's face. He appeared mortified to be caught in such a place, which nearly made up for the disgust she'd had to endure.

The light of the approaching dawn bent into golden-red handcuffs in her hands, ready to capture a Shade. Instead of being afraid, Tristen suddenly chuckled. "Umm, that's a little too appropriate for this location."

Seraphina did not immediately understand the implication, then she did, and if she had blood flowing in her veins, she would've turned red; instead, her golden eyes narrowed in

chagrin. The handcuffs vanished with a sizzle, replaced by a radiant dagger. “Daggers are still your weapons of choice, right?”

Tristen smiled at her. “Yes, they are, Phina. Glad you remember.”

Seraphina bristled at his use of her nickname—in all the four realms, only her sisters called her that.

And him.

“Shouldn’t we find a better place for a battle?”

Seraphina looked around at the waking island nation and asked, “Where do you want to go?”

Two hours later, Tristen was panting as his tattered shadows tried to reform, and with her silver wings torn in places, she bled ichor onto the beach’s golden sand. “Let’s take a break!” Tristen raised his hands in time-out.

“In the middle of a fight?” Seraphina plopped down on the sand, even though she protested. “What will Alectina say?” she wondered aloud.

“Kill them all!” he guessed and stretched his legs at a safe distance from her.

Crepuscular waves caressed the barely awakened sun. At this hour, when day and night shed their tired armor and shared a misty cup of company before parting ways, exhausted in a battle as eternal as they were, was it so wrong if they stopped for a moment?

Seraphina scooped up some sunlight and applied it to her injuries, letting the light absorb into her golden-dark skin, healing them. If one looked closely (which no one ever did), they would see that her wings were made of plumes of ambient light; while it looked silver at nighttime, as the horizon changed colors, so did they.

“Sometimes I wish...” She watched the sunrise, and he watched her. “Why can’t I stop something wrong from happening for once instead of righting it after? Why do I have to wait for a summon to help someone?”

Tristen snorted. “Well, you helped that man just now by stopping me from assassinating him. I’m guessing there was no summon to save him.”

Seraphina rolled her eyes. “No. He was saved purely by chance. I sensed you loitering in Amon, taking your sweet time.”

“I wasn’t loitering! I was surveilling him for the right time.”

She smiled. “And I wish I could’ve waited to let you finish the job.”

“You are an odd Fury.” He chuckled at her comment. “Did your sisters ever tell you that?”

Raising her hands in resignation, Seraphina admitted, “Constantly!”

As he laughed at her declaration, she realized something was off. Even in a dire situation, he seemed distracted. It was none of her business, or maybe it was because if he was in Amon for something more nefarious than an assassination, it was her job to intervene.

“What?” he asked, noticing her glance.

“Are you looking for someone other than your current prey?” Seraphina was unsure if he would reveal his intentions, but she decided to ask.

Tristen looked conflicted before he slowly replied, “Yes, I am. Whenever I get a chance to drop by Amon these days, I try to sense where he might be but still can’t find him. Not a target, though.” A strange emotion crossed his chiseled face. “A missing friend.”

Friend?

Seraphina’s mind could not even process that word. They were celestials; they had masters, maybe a few soul-sisters and brothers, and most importantly, they had duties. A friend was a very odd description of a relationship. She was not sure how to respond to it, so the Fury of Justice chose to say nothing and watched the swelling ocean crash on the shore instead. Push

and pull—they keep yearning to be together, but the waves could never stay.

Unable to resist his presence, shadows had inched closer to Tristen, crowding around him like coal tar pets. Bending them at his will, the Shade created a half-bloomed black rose and offered it to her.

Seraphina stared at the beautiful darkness in her hand, then asked with a sad smile, “Shall we resume our fight?”

“We don’t have a choice, do we?”

She readied her daggers and said, “No, we don’t.”

The rose irrevocably and inevitably dissipated in her light.

Chapter 23

No such thing as an accident

....

THE NIGHTS WERE GETTING colder.

Malakai should have returned to his tent but wanted to stay out a bit longer. The reflection of the crescent moon on the still lake water made him think about Ciaran. Did Ciaran leave because he didn't believe in their cause anymore? Or was he forced to? So many questions, yet Malakai knew he wouldn't ask any of them when they met again.

A twig snapped underfoot, making him turn around to see Una walking up to him. She looked askance, following his gaze on the water.

Malakai let out a small sigh that lingered as a mist in the mountain air. "It looks like his grin," he explained with a sad chuckle. "His family emblem: crescent moon and saber. Most nobles respect their house crest, but Ciaran adored it. To the extent that he was oddly attached to the moon and would waste so much time watching it, randomly stopping in the middle of a journey. Now, I see him in it as well."

They sat next to each other, watching the reflection of the lone moon break and reform with the ripples.

"I don't think I can face the coming storm without him by my side," he confessed quietly. "Please ask him to return; tell Ciaran I need him. Do it for me."

The talkative Mover remained silent this time.

"Una," Amaryllis called out as she approached them. "Umm...I was looking..." She trailed off when she noticed him.

Una patted his shoulder before getting up. "Please talk to her. Tell Amy how you feel. Do it for me!"

As Una's footsteps retreated, Malakai could feel Amaryllis awkwardly standing there. But Una was right—this uncomfortable tension was inconvenient for the whole group.

They needed to talk it out like two responsible adults. How difficult could it possibly be?

Carefully crafting the words of caution, Malakai turned around to face her—standing under the silver moonlight in a pearl-white dress that flowed over her like water, her blond hair swaying in the gentle breeze.

And all the conviction flew out of his mind.

The first time he'd seen her, her beauty had enchanted him. Later, it was her power that had captivated him. However, after months spent together, it was she who had won his heart. Not her appearance, not her abilities; he wanted her for her.

Amaryllis took a tentative step back, eager to leave.

Malakai's body moved on his own, and he grabbed her hand, reluctant to let her go. In that slightest touch, he could feel her entire body tremble. It was not in disgust as he had feared; it was in desire. The warmth from her hand spread through his being, dispelling the cold to make him feel alive.

“Amaryllis, I—” Between his uneven breaths, he tried to speak.

But she did not let him finish. “We can't. Please,” she pleaded.

“Why not?!” he wanted to scream in frustration. Sadly, Malakai knew the answer, for she had mentioned it to Una the other day. It was a truth drawn in the stars before they were even born; forced apart centuries ago, they were fated to stay apart—the distance between them was not supposed to be breached.

His arms fell to his sides, releasing her from the embrace. “It won't happen again,” he muttered and left, feeling dead inside.

While the moon stayed unperturbed, his heart broke into a thousand pieces.

••••

THE GROUND SHUDDERED and groaned.

They were concerned about the earthquakes and land shifts, though, at this moment, Una was more worried for her two friends. Neither of them had joined for dinner last night: Amaryllis returned so late that Una had fallen asleep, and Malakai didn't return until dawn. She tried to ask Amy if they had talked to each other. Distressed and distracted, Amaryllis had responded something along the lines of "Yes...and no." That explained nothing. Malakai was even worse—with his pale face devoid of emotion and vacant eyes, Una didn't dare to ask him anything.

Feeling miserable, for there was nothing she could do to help, Una had to escape the misery in the air. To have the person they yearned for within reach and yet be restrained by some unwritten rule seemed idiotic to her.

Una hated that she envied them.

She also wanted to dodge Sanar's attention; he kept insisting on a checkup for some reason. Once she was wary of the yellow prana residing in her; now, she knew it was her link to Ciaran, and it scared her to think that the Healer might be able to banish it. Una couldn't take that chance.

Lost in her thoughts, she walked up a hill, crossed a valley, and followed a stream—not that her absent mind registered any of the paths she took until a spluttering cough interrupted her despondent daydreams. Una peeked over the shrubs of shining red berries and noticed a man holding a handful of them; face contorted in pain, he gagged and coughed.

"Don't swallow." She ran toward him. "Spit 'em out!"

"I'm trying to." He spewed some more as Una urgently thumped on the small of his back.

"Wow! That was bitter!" He repressed a shudder.

"Bitter? That's not the problem 'ere." Una was very worried about the stranger. "Those were hollyroot berries. They're very poisonous," she informed the clueless traveler. "My friend's a Healer. You should come with me."

The man waved her concern away. "I can digest everything. I just *hate* bitter things."

Una watched him anxiously. Hollyroot acted fast; if he had swallowed any, he'd start getting sick soon. "Why on Amon would you eat 'em?"

"They looked so tasty," he whined.

He was of average height, average looks, and average age. His dark hair was slicked back, but a sprig of hair stubbornly stood out at the top of his head, refusing to yield to gravity.

"Well, how'd temptation work if they didn't look the part?" she replied, stifling a laugh at his complaint.

The man's black eyes reflected the sunlight. "Temptation..." he mused, "they tempted; I succumbed. Huh!" He seemed to have achieved some sort of enlightenment.

Una snorted. "See, it's hardly their fault."

The man looked at her curiously. "You don't think the tempter is to blame?" he asked.

"Nope. The tempter simply offers options. The tempted ain't forced to choose 'em." After considering it for a bit, she answered, wondering why they were even having this weird conversation.

His lips quirked up in amusement. "Interesting!"

The ground rumbled beneath them.

Una needed to return to the camp before others worried about her; it was obvious that he mustn't have ingested the berries, or else he'd have started convulsing by now. Then her own predicament became clear. She had no idea how to retrace her steps.

"Problem?"

"Umm...I seem to have forgotten my way back," she replied, annoyed with herself.

He chuckled. "So, you rushed in to help a stranger while getting yourself lost?"

"I didn't *get* myself lost," she retorted, "it just happens to me a lot."

The sprig of hair wiggled on his head as he laughed delightfully. Then he pointed in one direction and instructed, “Keep the stream to your right, walk past the valley, go down the hill and turn left. You will find your friends there.”

“Oh, thank you!” Una beamed at him and offered an advice in return, “Don’t go eatin’ any more wild berries. Especially stay away from the pretty ones.”

The man nodded and waved her goodbye. “I’ll see you again soon, Una. Be well.”

His words reached her just as she was about to leave. *How’d he know my name?* Puzzled, she looked back to find herself standing alone.

The red hollyroot berries gleamed in the sun, but there was no trace of the man.

The already-wobbling land beneath her feet shook heavily. Then with an earth-shattering rumble, the earth actually shattered into deep fissures, and rocks started falling from the surrounding hills. Both of Una’s prana activated to protect her.

The world before her eyes disappeared just like the stranger had.

••••

AMARYLLIS WISHED SHE could disappear.

She regretted making bonds that were never meant to last.

What was the point of forming attachments if they had to be severed anyway? Why did she get so involved with humans when the whole point of coming here was to leave? Her bleak thoughts were getting interrupted by the intermittent tremors.

Resting on the top of a rolling hill and wedged between two more, the valley was too precarious to stay. They needed to move forward and find a safer place to ride the earthquake out, but Una had gone missing. “Can’t we leave a note for her?” Hunter asked.

Amaryllis shook her head. “Una can barely follow directions when she knows a place,” she replied dejectedly.

“How about I wait for her here while you go ahead?” Malakai offered.

“No, I’ll stay,” Sanar declared.

“Sanar, that’s not necessary,” Malakai tried to dissuade, but the Healer remained resolute.

Vid gave him a hug. “May the Guardians—oh, whatever! Please stay safe, okay?” She then ran to help Hunter and Malakai pack up.

Amaryllis turned to him. “Please take care.” She wanted to ask for more but could not bring herself to.

“I will bring her safely back to you,” Sanar assured her.

They hurried across the treacherous landscape. “What if Una gets buried in a rockslide somewhere?” Vid fretted on their way.

“She’s a Mover,” Hunter reminded her.

“What if Sanar gets buried in a rockslide back there?” The Bender could not stop worrying.

“He’s a King’s Knight,” the Shifter replied with equal confidence.

Amaryllis glanced at Malakai walking silently beside them. With his beautiful passive face wearing an inscrutable expression, he might as well be sculpted in marble.

They had not yet reached the valley’s edge when the earth cracked with a resounding roar, making boulders tumble down the hills. No one had time to react before the ground beneath Amaryllis’ feet shifted like sand and crumbled away.

Vid yelled her name. Hunter tried to grab her hand.

Was this goodbye after all? As Amaryllis crashed through the rocks, she looked up to see Malakai disappearing from her sight.

Then, he jumped after her.

••••

SCREAM AFTER SCREAM echoed through the halls.

Tristen could not take it anymore and stepped outside the room.

Four centuries and counting, he still had to remind himself that he didn't need to breathe as he inhaled and exhaled a few times to calm himself down. "Does it usually take this long?" he asked Althrus, who was waiting outside.

The oldest Shade shrugged. "Yours took nearly as long. Melodus was faster. It depends on how receptive a soul is to his gift."

"Of course, he is not receptive. He's not supposed to be here!"

"You need to stop beating yourself up," the Thief reproached him. His deep bass boomed through the hallway. "There's one thing I have learned in all my time here. What happens is what was supposed to happen." Althrus leaned against the wall. "Reality is the truth no one can outrun; it's the chains no one can break." He closed his eyes.

Tristen frowned. "So, we just give in?"

"You can keep fighting it. Maybe that's what you were meant to do all along."

"Your interpretation is very annoying."

"I bet it has fun watching everyone suffer its whims," Althrus chuckled.

Tristen shook his head. "Althrus, 'Reality' is not a real person we are talking about."

The Thief opened his eyes. A strange emotion flickered through them as he asked gravely, "Are you sure about that? Don't most mortals believe us to be figments of their imagination?"

Before Tristen could respond, the screams stopped abruptly. The silence that followed was even more disturbing.

"Sometimes, I envy the shadow creatures," Althrus commented.

“The soulless, mindless shades who roam about the circles without knowing what to do unless we command them? Those shadow creatures?” Tristen was confused, though he was glad of the distraction of a conversation.

“Yes. I am jealous of their oblivion,” Althrus clarified. “I asked the Devil once why he didn’t erase our memories, emotions, and awareness.”

Tristen felt almost too afraid to ask what his reply was.

Althrus answered on his own. “He said being alive comes with those burdens.”

“But we are *not* alive,” Tristen mumbled as screeching, scratching, and smashing noises replaced the silence.

He couldn’t stop himself from checking what was going on; being the youngest of the three, Tristen had never witnessed the creation of a new Shade.

As soon as he opened the door, the Assassin was immediately attacked by something small and sharp.

“Close that door,” the Devil hissed.

Melodus, who had remained in the room for the entire duration, dashed to shut the door behind him. Tristen, in the meantime, had managed to extricate the creature clawing at him with its sharp nails. To his shock, he could feel the sting penetrating his shadows—nothing but an Angel’s light usually did—or another Shade’s weapon.

The bat flew away from him, flapping its stark black wings with red raised ridges. Terrified, it tried to escape, screeching and clawing, hitting the walls. “Don’t be afraid. We won’t hurt you,” Melodus spoke in his reedy voice. He was uncharacteristically gentle.

Midway in its flight, the bat turned into a hound and dropped to the floor. With shining black fur, glowing, red-rimmed eyes, and sharp teeth bared, it ignored the Devil and the Spy, deliberately sauntering toward Tristen, who had to repress an urge to step back.

Its unblinking eyes demanded answers, and Tristen knew he deserved some. "I'm sorry for what happened to you." He swallowed down another bout of guilt. "Una is okay, I swear."

The hound glared at him for a moment or two. Then a young boy replaced it; his hair was still spiky with tendrils of shadows dancing at their tips, though his olive skin had lost its freckles. He sat on the floor, tired and lost.

"Do you grant him a new name now?" Tristen asked the Devil.

The master of Tarderan shook his head. "You don't remember? It's not me who grants names, nor do the Guardians. Upon reincarnation, it's up to you to retain your old identities or choose a celestial one. Most Angels and Shades prefer to give up who they were and embrace their new selves. We merely serve as the witnesses."

He then knelt in front of the scared boy. "Who are you, little one? What's your name?"

The boy turned his gaze from the floor to the Devil; his previously tender-brown eyes were inky black. "I'm Dom."

"Then so you shall be. For now and forever," the Devil smiled. "Welcome back, Dom."

Chapter 24

Forever and a day

....

HIS WORLD STOOD STILL.

He saw Hunter's hands trying to reach her and failing. Vid's screams barely registered in his mind as the rocks obscured her from Malakai's sight.

And he jumped off the ledge.

The higher momentum let him reach her in time; together, they rolled further and further down, clinging on to each other while he tried to shield her from the rocks pelting at them. Luckily, a cushion of flower bushes met them instead of sharp rocks at the bottom. He should have thanked the Guardians for sparing their lives, but all he could do was lay there, unable to move or think. His arms were wrapped around Amaryllis; her delicate body molded perfectly to his as if it were where she belonged.

"You are hurt," she gasped, trying to get up.

A part of Malakai didn't want to release her, yet he had to. "It's only a scratch." He sat up and inspected the laceration on his arm. Even with him having taken the brunt of it, both had scrapes and gashes from the onslaught of the sharp shards.

"Let me see." Tearing a piece of her dress' linen, she cleaned the wound the best she could and bandaged it with another strip of fabric.

Her lips pressed together, and her eyes focused while she carefully worked on it—the scene was so familiar that he could not help but laugh. "This takes me back," he chuckled after what seemed like ages.

"When?" Amaryllis inquired, a bit surprised by his reaction.

"When we first met near Lascera. Don't you remember? I was bleeding then, too, and you tore pieces of your dress to patch me up. I owe you quite a few dresses by now."

“How about getting me one grand dress after we reach Castle?” Amaryllis smiled back.

In the middle of nowhere, separated from their friends, in a challenging situation, Malakai suddenly felt happy. “Just one? For a Queen, your Majesty’s ambitions are far too tame.” He laughed and pulled himself from the floral bed. “Let’s find a safe place for the night. We have a long road ahead tomorrow.”

She took his offered hand.

••••

MAGIC DIDN’T OFFER a hand unasked.

It was meant to be called upon, coaxed into use, and was mostly considered difficult to get a hold of, yet her dual prana made their own decision when they whisked her off from the landslide. Una certainly didn’t have the time to activate either; more importantly, she didn’t know how to access the newer member.

Currently, the yellow prana was dancing around her like a confetti streamer, glittering in a childlike delight, while the blue one was serious and grave. The Corridor passed in a blink as a door swooped her up and landed her in a forest of wisteria trees.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Ciaran asked.

Clusters of blue, violet, and white flowers drooped from the peduncles, swinging merrily in the mild breeze as if they were happy to see her. With the forest enchanting in its soft colors resplendent under the full moon and sweet fragrances seeping into the air to accentuate their charm, Una couldn’t decide if she was living a dream or dreaming a life. *Did it even matter?*

“It *is* beautiful!”

She was wearing a cerulean dress. In a pang of nostalgia, Una recognized the dress she had worn at the Rouge the night they had spent drinking and dancing.

Without him.

“How’d you even find this place?” other-Una inquired, standing on her toes to touch the flowers.

He gently pulled down a cluster of wisteria so she could reach them. “I was scouting from the top of the hill. Looking out for ambushers.” He smiled at her. “I wanted to show you.”

“Because I’m special?” she teased.

Ciaran’s usually bright green eyes darkened slightly as if debating the reply. After a loaded silence while they walked deeper into the forest, he finally said, “Yes. You are.”

He had stopped under one of the bigger trees, adorned with the rarest of wisteria blooms, displaying different shades of blue; other colors didn’t dare compete.

*“Movers hold the blue sky when Healers mend the green
Indigo clouds hide Shifters in many forms unseen
Benders fold their yellow, and the red of Destroyers fade
Two colors will never mix again, for a Cirrah can’t be
made”*

He repeated the old poem, almost to himself, and said, “Now I know it wasn’t entirely correct.”

“How so?”

“Movers don’t hold the blue sky.” His eyes lingered on her. “The only prana compatible with all others, the only prana not segregated into affinities; untainted, welcoming, and limitless—you *are* the blue sky.”

Something in Ciaran’s voice made her other-self look up, meeting his eyes.

He didn’t avert his gaze when he murmured, “And the moon asks for nothing but a place in the sky.”

“The moon disappears every mornin’, doesn’t it?” she had to retort, if only to hide her embarrassment.

He smiled. “The sun simply blinds you from seeing it. Even on the brightest day, if you look closely...” Ciaran touched her chin gently, pointing toward the night sky. “The

moon is always there. It never leaves. Neither will I if you let me stay.”

Una heard the conversation a few paces back with her heart cracking in so many places and asked sadly, “Then why did you?”

....

IT WAS ALREADY DARK when Amaryllis and Malakai found a wooden hut further ahead.

Some old travelers had left them this gift, their memories imbued in the walls.

“We are just a level below the others. If we keep walking in that general direction, we’ll find them by the end of the day,” Malakai assured her.

They gathered some kindling before settling in for rest, and while Malakai worked to get the fire started, she went inside the hut and opened the window facing the woods behind. As the playful moonlight nudged the night flowers cradled in patches, the sleeping flowers woke up and stretched their little bodies, tenderly opening petals to share a piece of themselves with the breeze. The beautiful sight welcomed her, but it was another of her senses that overwhelmed Amaryllis.

Uh-oh! She shut the window with a thud. As if closing it would help—

This had to be a conspiracy; she could almost hear fate laughing at her discomfort, for the night lavenders were in full bloom, as were red camellias. She felt her face flushing up as the intoxicating perfumes started their assault on her body. “We need to leave.” Amaryllis was rushing out the exact moment Malakai entered the hut, nearly running into him, which heated her up even more.

Brows knitted together in concern, he asked, “Why? What’s wrong? The ground is still unstable. In the dark, we’ll most likely get ourselves killed.”

Amaryllis groaned. *It is more dangerous to stay here!*

However, she could not possibly explain her current predicament to him, of all people.

“Are you feeling alright? You look like you have a fever.” Malakai leaned toward her in worry and placed his palm on her forehead.

She flinched at his touch, unable to control the waves of tension coursing through her.

He jerked his hand back, his dark eyes betraying the hurt. “I will stay outside then.” Malakai turned around to leave.

“No. It’s too cold for you to stay outside the whole night,” Amaryllis objected as she frantically tried to block the sweet smell that was igniting all of her senses.

“You don’t look comfortable with me in here either.” His carefully constructed composure was threatening to crumble.

“It is not you. I am sorry!” Amaryllis didn’t trust herself to look at him, for another strong mountain gust brought in a fresh bouquet of the aphrodisiacs while she tried to cage her heart that was leaping like a frog in a summer rain. She used to love lavender, camellia, and jasmine—the passion they symbolized and the passion they inflamed. Back in Fenderan, they always made her happy.

The same flowers were poised to put her in a lot of trouble.

Malakai looked concerned for her health despite his distress at her reaction.

She could feel his penetrating eyes on her, trying to figure out what was wrong as he watched her closely. Then, as if for the first time, he noted the floral perfume permeating the air and sucked in a sharp breath.

He knows.

Amaryllis was so mortified by her body’s involuntary reflexes that she prayed for the ground to open up once more and swallow her whole this time.

Surprisingly, he didn’t comment on her obvious discomfort (and arousal—but mostly discomfort). His voice was softer

than a silken sigh when he spoke, “I haven’t told you this before. If I don’t say it now, I might never be able to.”

“Not now, please!” she protested. Whatever he was about to confess was not going to make things any easier.

“The day I first saw you,” Malakai ignored her plea, “I was running for my life. I was a prince with no title, a mage with no prana, a knight with no sword, and worst of all, a man with no home.” He rested his chin on his bent knees. “I had lost all hope and would have surrendered. But then, I smelled bread...”

“Bread?” Amaryllis repeated in surprise. This was not where she imagined this conversation would go.

“When Ciaran and I were five or six years old, playing together in the palace, we’d discovered a hidden entrance to the kitchen. We had a lot of fun climbing down the hatch and stealing bread in the morning. It was that freshly baked bread I smelled when you found me.” He smiled fondly at the old memory.

“Were they not feeding the prince enough at the palace?” Amaryllis genuinely wondered.

Malakai laughed. “No, it was more fun to steal it and get yelled at by the head baker. It was that memory: my home, my friends, my country— It reminded me what I wanted to fight for.” He slowly moved closer to her. “Only later did I realize your prana had triggered one of my most cherished memories.”

He took another step toward her, and she didn’t move away. “Lis, you didn’t know me then, and I did not know you. Yet you pulled me out of a deep dark ocean of misery without lifting a finger! You returned my will to live.” Amaryllis gulped as he cupped her face, realizing she didn’t want him to stop now. “There are so many things I need to fight for, but all I want is you.”

His lips found hers.

Every reason she had repeated to herself for months disappeared from her mind; all rationality failed as Amaryllis’

lips parted to let him in. He kissed her deeply and desperately, like a parched desert soaking up raindrops, like a lost wind searching for its home. Their tongues greeted each other, craving the softness of their touch, enjoying the sweetness of their taste while his hands held her close.

Sooner than she wished, they both ran out of air, and his mouth reluctantly left hers as he tried to catch his breath. Amaryllis was not doing any better; her chest heaved up and down, suddenly feeling cold at being separated from him.

When his eyes silently asked her permission, she unbuttoned his shirt in reply.

The rest of their clothes followed suit as they resumed kissing each other in a frantic hurry, unwilling to let a moment drift by. It was more than a hunger that consumed them; it was worse than a wanton need, for once the bough of self-imposed restraint had broken, they couldn't stop themselves any better than a tempest could halt in its trail.

Bare and perfect himself, bathed in the silver light, Malakai drank in her naked form. His tongue traced a line of fire as he knelt before her and took one of her nipples in his mouth while his fingers teased between her legs. Every fiber of her body burst into flames at his ministrations, desire balling inside her, begging to be set free. And when he thrust into her, closing whatever distance remained between them, Amaryllis realized she had known pleasure all her life, but now she felt complete.

Whether he cried out her name or if it was Amaryllis who called out his, it didn't matter. As they flew together and crashed into each other in wave after wave of euphoria, violet sparks erupted from the Mesmer, like unfettered fireworks, and floated away in the air.

Every person within miles around Siremann's Trail had the weirdest sensation of a happy memory awakening in their minds. They stopped in their respective tracks and smiled at the same moment before resuming their lives.

The fire blazed brightly through the night.

Amaryllis and Malakai burned brighter.

••••

“DANCE WITH ME?”

“We’re in the middle of a forest. And there’s no music,” other-Una pointed out, even though she placed her hand on his shoulder, letting him wrap his hand around her waist.

“Do we need one?” Ciaran asked with a faint smile.

In the dark night, lit by nothing but the moonlight, they danced to the melody of their heartbeats under the wisteria blossoms. She laughed in delight when he twirled her around him, pulling her close and matching their steps. They were in their own world—a world where they were the only two people.

Then, as if the music in his mind increased in tempo, Ciaran moved faster and faster, making her nearly fly in the air. Suddenly, on a windless night, blue petals showered on them like pieces of stars raining from the sky.

Startled, he looked up and laughed aloud. “What are you doing?”

Other-Una beamed. “Not me. It kinda took the initiative.”

As this moment unfolded before her tired eyes, Una noticed her prana (or rather, the prana of her other version) shaking the tree. Ciaran held up a hand, and the blue magic dipped slightly to touch his fingers before retreating into Una.

“Does this mean it likes me now?” he grinned.

Other-Una stared at him, understanding slowly dawning in her eyes. “Yes, it does!” Then, she pulled him toward her. “So do I.”

Ciaran’s emerald eyes widened when she pressed her mouth on his. He kissed her back, murmuring, “I love you,” against her lips.

Unrestrained tears veiled them from her vision. Though a small part of Una’s mind still asked how this could possibly be real, she didn’t anymore.

As unsure as she was about all the rest, there was one truth
Una couldn't refute.

She loved him.

Chapter 25

What happens in the mountains

....

VID BEGGED THE SUN to rise.

She had not been able to sleep a wink.

The ground was still trembling from the aftershocks every now and then, as was Vid. Every time she tried to close her eyes, she saw Amaryllis falling and Malakai leaping off after her. It was a rolling hill, not a dead drop—Hunter had said that more than a few times in his clumsy effort to comfort her. Though Vid was aware of it and Malakai had survived worse, knowledge did not always manage to ease worries.

Hunter knew her well and had strictly prohibited her from searching for them at night, leaving Vid with no choice but to fidget.

To release her nervous energy, she had sharpened the already sharp weapons, polished every surface of the hut they'd found, and was in the process of making another mini-hut next to it when Hunter forced her to go to bed. They needed rest after the day they had and what might be waiting ahead.

He was fast asleep now while Vid counted the indentations on the wooden ceiling. She loved him to bits, but there were times when his composure bugged her to no end; this was one of those moments. She wanted to punch him awake. However, she refrained from doing so; knowing him, Vid could predict that it would only hurt her own hands while he would turn over on his other side and continue to snore in peace.

Her mind also reeled from the realization that Malakai was not fooling around. Not this time.

She didn't know how to feel about that. After Amaryllis' gift of memory to her, the hatred Vid had fostered for decades was washed away by the tears she'd not had time to shed after her parents died. She finally got to say goodbye to them, even

if they could not hear her. The pancakes, the carousels, the strolls, and the bedtime stories—the fading memories of her first eight years of life were now brightly vivid in her mind. She was grateful to Amaryllis for that.

Should she hope for them to have happiness together, however short it may be? Or should she wish for their heartbreak, to spare them the agony of an inevitable separation?

Vid could not make up her mind.

So, she waited for Hunter to wake up.

••••

MALAKAI DIDN'T WANT to wake her up.

She was nestled by his side while a wayward strand of her hair caressed his face. Her lips parted a sliver as she murmured something in her dream—he wondered what it was.

With the golden dust of the morning swirling inside through the windows, her eyes fluttered a little, and he bent his head to reclaim her lips in an impulsive kiss. Still half-asleep, she smiled and snuggled closer. Then suddenly, her eyes opened wide; like a lightning bolt, she sat straight and clutched her clothes from the floor.

He propped up on his elbow in consternation while Amaryllis scrambled to get dressed, refusing to look his way. “What’s wrong?” He prayed it was not what he feared. But it was.

She covered her face with both hands and nearly sobbed, “We shouldn’t have...”

His heart tightened at her words. “Lis, look at me.” She did not.

“Please!”

“It was a mistake,” she mumbled.

Malakai couldn’t take it anymore. He had been on this emotional rollercoaster for months; there was no way he was riding it again. “It was perfect.” Pulling himself up from the

floor, still stark naked, he made the fully-clothed Amaryllis turn around to face him. “If it was a mistake, I want to keep making it. We belong together.”

“Malakai, there is no *we*,” she said in a broken voice.

Silently, he got dressed as well.

“Are you truly so ashamed of us?” he asked. The pain was as bad as his magic getting torn away. Worse than waking up shackled in Lascera, knowing he had been reduced to a mere prisoner.

Amaryllis opened and closed her mouth a few times. Then she replied, “I should be...but I am not.”

“So, why can’t we just be happy with each other?” he insisted.

She looked up at him. “I will leave very soon. Are you telling me that having fun for these few weeks is what you need to be happy?” Cold steel replaced the ache in her tone.

His face turned grave in return. “No, Amaryllis. I am telling you that having you in my life for these few weeks is what I need to endure the rest.”

She blanched at his reply. After a few minutes of painful silence, Amaryllis asked quietly, “No strings attached?”

He smiled. “Every string would do its best to stay attached. Whether they succeed or not, that remains to be seen.”

She scowled at his feeble attempt to lighten the mood—an expression he found particularly endearing, even in this situation. “The Rift has a way of snipping at the strings,” she warned.

Malakai cocked his head. “So, was that a yes?”

Her blue eyes peered into his dark; even without using her prana, it was as if her gaze had reached into his soul. Malakai didn’t try to hide it; he wanted her to know how he felt.

After what seemed like forever to him, she said, “Yes.”

Relief washed over Malakai like the sunlight flooding through the clouds. He moved closer, and she let him wrap his

hands around her.

“Thank you.” That’s all he could say, and it was enough.

••••

SANAR FOUND UNA COLLAPSED on the ground.

Both she and the forest floor were covered with fallen wisteria flowers.

He had been searching for her since the previous day, but she was nowhere to be found. Once the land ceased to rumble, he climbed up a peak and looked out from a height. That’s how he managed to locate her: the bright yellow dress showed up like a warning sign in stark contrast to the soft-colored blossoms surrounding her. However, how she ended up there was a mystery to Sanar because it was not only far from where they were but also difficult to reach.

He rushed ahead to check on her. She was burning up with a fever; dried tears had mixed with dirt, making streaks on her beautiful brown skin. “Oh, Una! What’s happening to you?”

She opened her swollen eyes and asked faintly, “Sanar?”

“Yes, I’m here. Are you hurt?” He couldn’t see any bruises or injuries for him to fix.

“I don’t think so,” Una replied, still in a faraway voice.

As he supported her to stay upright, Sanar insisted, “You need to rest and let my magic heal you.” For some reason, her prana was fighting his off. Why would it react this way to a Healer?

“Oath? Is your magic asking me for a Prana Oath?” Sanar was bewildered. “Are you?” he inquired.

Una hesitated and then nodded. “I am. I can’t let you heal me without a Prana Oath. Promise me you’ll keep my secret, whatever you find.”

He was now profoundly offended. “No respectable Healer betrays a patient’s secrets to anyone! Even without a Prana Oath.”

“Promise me, Sanar. Please!” Una insisted.

Sanar gave up. “Fine. On my prana, I promise.” His magic flared up to acknowledge the oath. Breaking a word made on life energy came at a terrible price: some lost access to their cores in retaliation, while some were fortunate and only suffered excruciating pain for days.

Una relaxed, along with her magic, and allowed his green prana to reach out, checking for something to treat. Suddenly, Sanar gasped. *What! How?*

He stared at her, stunned, as Una hung her head. Replying to his unvoiced question, she cried out, “I dunno how this happened; I swear! My father’s a Mover, and my mother is a non-mage. I was born a Mover—I *am* a Mover!” Sanar was not sure whether she was trying to convince him or herself.

He struggled to find the right words; nothing seemed appropriate for such a momentous moment.

“Please say somethin’! What’s wrong with me?” Una urged him.

Two prana responded to her distress—the blue one draped her like a blanket, while the yellow hugged her tight—and Sanar forgot how to breathe. “Two colors would never mix again, for a Cirrah can’t be made!” He repeated in wonder, and somewhere deep down, the magic in him knew what he was supposed to do.

He knelt before her with his green prana bowing reverently.

“Cirrah of Amon,” the Healer intoned. “We welcome you.”

....

MALAKAI WATCHED AMARYLLIS diligently pick wild berries.

No one could beat a fae when it came to surviving in nature: she recognized edible fruits by their smell and knew which tubers would be sweet by (most probably) their smell again. It was almost like following a truffle hog, albeit a stunningly gorgeous one.

Malakai laughed out loud as the stray thought crossed his mind.

“What?” She turned around in surprise.

With a handful of red and violet berries and a few twigs snagged in her hair, Malakai was looking at his walking dream. “Nothing.” He feigned innocence.

Frowning at his grin, she dropped the berries into his bigger palms, already holding the other fruits, and declared, “This should be enough for breakfast.” Then she wondered, “Should we be wasting time here? Wouldn’t it be better if we started moving and found the others?”

Malakai hesitated. His rational mind admitted that they should get a move on, but he also knew as soon as reality caught up, they would go back to being the Prince and the Murasaki, the human and the fae. Right here, right now, they were simply Malakai and Amaryllis. He wanted more time to stay as them. “We need to eat something before the uphill journey ahead.” He believed this reasoning to be true—kind of.

The breakfast was more filling than he would have thought. “Do you miss home?” he asked her while munching on a sweet and crispy jicama root.

“Yes. It has been more than a year now,” Amaryllis replied wistfully, a drop of red berry lingering greedily on her lips.

Malakai couldn’t restrain himself from licking the droplet off them; they tasted even better that way.

“More than a year? I thought we met the very day you set foot on Amon. It was about seven months ago. Did I forget to count months somewhere in between?” He was confused.

Amaryllis laughed. “No. The time you remember in Amon is fine. Fenderan’s time was accelerated during the separation.”

Ah! Malakai did not know that. “And... Do you really live on trees there?” He stretched and lay down on the soft grass, letting the sunshine pour over him. He honestly had no intention or hurry to search for the rest of the group.

Amaryllis scoffed at his ignorance. “We do not live *on* trees. Instead of cutting them down and using their wood to make houses as you do, we simply ask them to let us in,” she explained.

“Are you telling me that you live inside a tree?” He was amazed.

“Yes. Mine is a rather delightful giant Sequoia.” She smiled fondly. “I call him Squeaky.”

“It talks?” Malakai had reached the limits of his imagination.

Amaryllis laughed at his bewildered face. “He squeaks.”

“Huh!” Intrigued, he said, “This is even crazier than what I’d imagined your realm would be. Spirits? Dragons?” Malakai had so many questions that he did not know which one to ask first. *So, that’s how Una feels all the time!?*

“Spirits, yes. There are dryads and naiads you meet quite regularly. They were here in Amon as well when the realms were together. They simply preferred to stay hidden, then,” she replied casually. “Some, like nereids or aurae, still don’t like company. And dragons...I am not sure. Haven’t seen one in a while. But we have acquired a few dinosaurs, somehow, along the way.”

Malakai was gaping at her the entire time. “What’s a dinosaur?” He had no clue what kind of creature it could be.

“Something that’s *not* a dragon,” she elaborated wisely.

“Ha!” Malakai guffawed. “Now that cleared things up!”

She snorted at his remark while popping a few berries into her mouth.

“Lis...” he spoke after a few moments of silence and immediately felt relieved when she didn’t object to his new nickname for her (Malakai never thought Una’s “Amy” suited her!). “It sounds like such a wonderful place. Does anyone there even miss Amon?”

Amaryllis nodded sadly. “Many of the fae do. Fenderan is green and beautiful, yes. But it feels like a sanctuary. Amon is

still home to most, despite the grime, the gray, and the grief.”

“Will you miss it?” He couldn’t voice what he wanted to ask.

Amaryllis met his eyes. “I wish I could say no.”

The air had started to get heavy again, and the sun faded a little.

Malakai shook his head to ease the sudden pressure on his chest. “Did no one ever try to break the Rift?” he probed cautiously.

She frowned but replied, nevertheless. “Of course! Many were unhappy with the separation. They tried to break it in the early years. And then gave up.”

“Hmmm.” That jade spike buried under the palace was the manifestation of a Healer’s prana—if only energy sustained the anchors, another prana, especially a Destroyer’s, should be able to counter it. He wondered why it didn’t work.

“The Rift can’t be broken.” Amaryllis adopted her Murasaki tone that she usually reserved for Una. “The anchors can’t be removed. If the fae there could not, no human mage here is strong enough to do so!” Then she held his face and said, “The separation has kept the two races safe for centuries. It is sacred. Do you understand?”

Malakai touched her hands on his cheeks. Then he brought them together to place a soft kiss on each palm. “Yes, I do.”

“There you are!” Vid yelled out of nowhere. “We’ve been going craaaazy trying to find the two of you!”

Hunter cleared his throat, noticing what they had inadvertently interrupted; Malakai had frozen, holding Amaryllis’ hands to his lips.

Vid’s jaw dropped as she finally paid attention. “Oh, things just got complicated!”

“Or got really simple,” Hunter interjected.

A crimson blush spread on Amaryllis’ cheeks while Malakai casually asked, “Want some breakfast?” Recovered

from the initial shock, he was now annoyed at the untimely intrusion of his supposed friends.

“No, thank you!” Vid snapped. “We need to get moving. Sanar and Una must’ve reached the meeting point by now. We have two hills to trek. The same ones we just climbed down to rescue you!” She looked peeved that they needed no saving—quite the contrary.

“Get up, get up.” Vid poked him. “Daylight’s burning, people!”

Malakai grimaced; resisting the urge to smack the back of the tiny Bender’s head, he stood and helped Amaryllis up.

“Hello, guys. Long time no see!” A familiar voice suddenly petrified him to his core.

“Miss me?” The newcomer smirked at him.

Chapter 26

Crimson curse

....

NO ONE SPOKE A WORD.

As they walked up the hills, the air felt thinner while the silence grew heavier.

Amaryllis was getting anxious about the woman; the concerned looks Vid and Hunter were exchanging with each other did very little to comfort her. She had figured out the new arrival was one of their former colleagues, a King's Knight; however, that did not explain Malakai's reaction. Since she'd shown up, his face had changed several colors: from deathly pale to blushing red to sickening green, and settled on a stony gray. His emotions had never been displayed so obviously before, cracking the barriers of his usually confident demeanor, and Amaryllis could not understand why.

"Reva, where's your backup?" Vid finally broke the awkwardness.

The knight, apparently named Reva, chuckled. "Are you implying that I should've brought some? Here I thought I was meeting up with old friends."

She made Amaryllis feel even more uneasy; everything was said lightly yet felt laden with meaning.

"Seriously, you came to confront us without any support?" Vid looked offended. "How weak d'you think we are?"

"I've missed you, Vid! Where are Sanar and Ciaran?" she grinned, changing the subject. "And wouldn't you introduce me to your new friend here?" Reva turned to Amaryllis, and Malakai flinched for some reason, moving to put himself between them. *Huh?*

Reva seemed to have noticed his protective reaction as well. She taunted, "Important, is she?" Then her piercing hazel gaze moved back and forth between Amaryllis and Malakai, and a knowing smile formed on her lips. "Ahh, I see."

Malakai fumed but said nothing.

Vid stepped forward. “Reva, how long have you been in Siremann’s Trail?” she inquired.

Reva tore her eyes off Malakai and replied, “For a few weeks now. The rest of the troops were slowing me down. So, I sent them home.” She laughed at Vid’s look of utter disbelief. “I know! I’m surprised as well. I honestly didn’t think I could hide trailing you for so long with Ciaran scouting. He has the eyes and the senses of a hawk! Where’s he, by the way?”

Vid narrowed her gray eyes. “He’s been missing for nearly seven months now. So, the knights didn’t capture him?”

Reva blinked in confusion and shook her head vehemently. “Definitely not! The last we saw of him was when he returned from his assignment and found you gone.” She glanced at Malakai and continued, “Five of us, the General himself, and Ciaran still mopped the floor with us.” Her face turned red in humiliation. “We were sure he was heading to Lascera, and that’s how you’d escaped.”

“Well, I could manage by myself. Thanks for the vote of confidence,” he grunted dryly.

Reva ignored his jab, her brows creased with worry, surprising Amaryllis. Even if they were now fighting on opposite sides, she still looked distraught for the missing man. “What could’ve happened to him?”

Vid, Hunter, and Malakai looked at each other. “We don’t know yet, but we will. Malville must be behind whatever happened to him,” Malakai said, his voice heavy with anxiety and anger.

Reva said nothing more, and the group marched to their designated destination while the dark clouds hid the midday sun, and noon felt like dusk. Yet, it was more than that. The forest was thick with oak and maples, their wide canopy resolutely refusing to let the rays in, mimicking the mood of the people entering it.

“What do you want from us, Reva?” Malakai asked when they finally stopped. “You can’t possibly expect me to

surrender.”

“Surrender? I’m just here to talk,” Reva proclaimed.

He scoffed. “You? Talk?”

“Is it so difficult to believe that? As your former lover, can’t I want to chat with you? Or is it too much to ask in front of your latest flame?” she grinned viciously.

Amaryllis deciphered all his changing hues now.

••••

MALAKAI HAD AGREED to have a conversation with Reva.

Vid had been protesting furiously while Hunter quietly rebuked him; Amaryllis, on the other hand, neither showed any outward reaction to Reva’s revelation nor gave any opinion regarding the solitary meeting. A part of Malakai was sorely disappointed. He wanted a chance to explain, but she did not demand any, even when they were alone for a little bit.

Reva behaved as if she had been here with them all along.

She was helping Vid make lunch while chatting casually with Hunter. Or rather chattering at him. Malakai clearly remembered this was what he disliked about her back when they were together. He didn’t know any of her true feelings, be it as a friend or a lover.

Whatever happened, Malakai would not let his past destroy his future.

His fingers touched something cold at the bottom of his pack of clothes, where a glass vial lay forgotten. When he picked it up, the dark bluish-green liquid sloshed in it, and his eyes widened in shock. How could he have forgotten about this? The poison that’d kept Amaryllis imprisoned in her own body, teetering at the edge of unconsciousness—why did he steal it from the Reapers? Malakai knew the answer all too well. He used to be afraid of her, afraid of what she could do. But that was then, and this was now.

He could never harm her in any way. Just as he knew Amaryllis would never hurt him.

As the vial glinted maliciously on his palm, Reva's laughter reached him from a distance. Vid had started to relax, reverting to their old ways. Though not a Mesmer, Reva possessed some sort of mind magic of her own. Malakai's heart started beating faster; it would be so easy—one drop of this venom and his problems would be solved.

His hands closed around the deadly weapon, but he exhaled and put it back in his bag. However brief the time, he had cared for her once. Malakai would make Reva listen to his side of the story; then, he would face whatever decision she made, but he would do it head-on.

Poison was a coward's choice, and Malakai refused to be one.

During lunch, he could barely eat a morsel while Reva requested a second helping. Once the meal was over, Vid glared at her friend. "Reva, we agreed to keep our distance while you talk, but if you lay a finger on him..." She trailed off the warning.

Reva smiled in amusement. "I promise not to *touch* your precious prince."

As if she needed to touch someone to kill. Malakai winced internally.

He could feel Amaryllis' eyes on him as he followed Reva away.

They reached a peak that opened to a green valley with rocks strewn around. A babbling brook flowed at a side and dropped in a cascade several hundred feet down a sharp gorge; its soft murmur was drowned by a roar as the water crashed into the rocks at the bottom. "I see you are still fond of heights," he remarked.

Reva grinned. "Gives me an advantage."

"You levitate while your victims fall to their deaths?"

She flashed an annoyingly beatific smile in response as he sat down on a rock, awaiting his fate.

"So, what now?"

“Give me a reason,” she replied. “And make it count.”

••••

REVA FELT LIKE HER heart might never stop aching.

Though she had successfully concealed all her emotions behind her act, seeing him and Vid after this long made her want to cry.

For a few hours, she got to pretend it was like old times: cooking, chatting, and teasing. The way Malakai looked at that woman might have upset her a little, but the truth was she had long gotten over him. If anything, it amused her that even on the run, he'd still managed to seduce some village woman, a very beautiful one at that, to follow him into the trenches. *That's so Malakai!*

“What’s the point?” His remark invaded her thoughts. “The one sure thing I know about you is your belief in the ‘Follow the King’ code. You stood there the day Malville threw me into the pits of Lascera. I could’ve died there. Did you even care?” he seethed, the facade of cool indifference breaking apart.

Reva resisted an urge to step back. She had to remind herself that he had lost his prana. *Thank the Guardians.*

“He would’ve let you go. If you had only apologized to him—I’m sure he would have forgiven you,” she replied haltingly.

He scowled without a retort.

Then she finally asked what she had wondered for a long time now. “Why did you two fight that day?” She swallowed hard. “Malakai, did it have anything to do with what was happening in the dungeons?”

He looked up sharply. “You found the bodies?”

She nodded, shuddering at the memory of the mangled corpses.

“He did that. My brother. Your king,” he said tiredly.

Reva's heart froze in terror. "That can't be true!! Why would he do something like that?"

"He used the fae relic to suck out their prana." He rubbed his index finger against his forehead.

Reva narrowed her eyes. "To what end?"

"At the beginning, to test the ability of the relic to replenish prana to his chosen mages. When that failed, Malville tried to use the energy stored in the stone as an explosive..." he trailed off, exhaustion seeping into his voice.

"To scare Aldoria off?" she guessed.

"Yes. That was the plan." Without even realizing it, Malakai rubbed his forehead again.

A ball of fear started growing in Reva's chest; she recognized this involuntary gesture from all the years they had spent together, as colleagues, as lovers. She probed further, "So, you defied him at one point, and that's why you argued?"

Malakai nodded.

"Then he stripped your prana with that same relic?" She dug in deeper.

He winced at the memory and replied, "Yes, he did." His index finger swept over his temples.

Reva needed the answer to one more question. "A Destroyer as strong as you was single-handedly overpowered by a weak fire-Bender who can't even light a match?" she asked sharply.

"What are you getting at?" His previously tired tone was now ice-cold.

"Did you know that you rub your forehead when you lie? And not just any lie—a lie so blatant that even you can't stop yourself from reacting to it."

Reva knew she was right when Malakai's eyes flickered crimson before his crippled core retracted, and the world crashed around her.

"It was all you! It was always you!"

••••

MALAKAI WATCHED THE color drain from her face.

He debated if there was any point in denying it. “Reva, listen to me.” He tried to calm her down. “What I did was for —” Suddenly, he choked as her hand, now glowing yellow, closed into a fist.

“Do not dare say for Castellon,” Reva hissed.

Then, she loosened her grip just enough to let him draw a breath, making Malakai gasp like a fish out of water. “Yes. It was. It always is. Everything I do is to protect this kingdom and its people,” he struggled to say.

Malakai was not lying about his motivations. If she knew him enough to see through his lies, she should realize when he was telling the truth!

Reva, however, looked at him with disgust. “To protect this kingdom and its people? You killed innocent people of the same kingdom!” She took in a shuddering breath. “How many? Were those we found all of them?”

Malakai glanced at the edge of the forest, where the others were waiting, and fervently hoped they could not hear a word from this distance; it was not the right time for them to find this out, not this way. “A dozen, I think... We had disposed of a couple of them already.” He hesitated at Reva’s horrified expression.

“You think?? And *we*?” She clutched at her chest. “Oh, please, not Vid. Tell me she wasn’t involved!”

Malakai did not reply. Yes, he had miscalculated the relic’s abilities, but he wouldn’t repeat them the next time. Since then, he did learn a lot from Amaryllis.

Reva didn’t wait for his answer. She spoke to herself, “No, Vid would never agree to cold-blooded murders. Hunter and Sanar, either.” Then her eyes went wide in shocked realization. “Ciaran! He helped you?”

Malakai clenched his jaws at her tone.

She shook her head in distress. “Saddled with you from childhood, even before he moved to the palace, he never really stood a chance, did he? He loves you like a brother, more than your own ever did. And you’ve taken advantage of that his whole life!”

Malakai saw red now. “He is my oldest friend, my best friend, my family! Taken advantage!? Yes, Ciaran would lay down his life for me, but I would do the same for HIM!” His weakened prana responded to his rage and spread out over his body like scarlet serpents as he bit down the pain this effort brought to his core. Then, it dissipated once more, leaving him even more vulnerable.

“How did you lose your prana that day?” she demanded, ignoring his outburst.

He considered not replying, but he did. “We were shouting at each other. Malville had just found out about my plan, and he was not happy. I was trying to show him how the relic could give us an edge with Aldoria and maybe even Vaneda someday. I accidentally touched the amber relic...I don’t know...” He hated to remember the day when everything had fallen apart.

“You were writhing on the floor with your hand stuck on that thing. Malville saved you! He called us in time,” she informed him.

He hated this truth even more. “And then he sent me to Lasceraz.”

Reva looked sad. “So, the only right decision he made as a king was incarcerating his blood,” she sighed.

His boiling rage turned bitterly cold at her words.

She stared at him with the eyes he once knew so well, now the eyes of a stranger. “You’re right; I believe in the ‘Follow the King’ code. But I won’t ever follow you!” Her prana engulfed her and rushed toward him with a thousand clawing arms.

This time Malakai moved back in fear; he had no magic left in him to protect himself from her.

“I can’t let someone like you take over Castellon someday. However weak and arrogant Malville might be, he is not evil. But now I fear...you are!” She deliberately took a slow step forward and intoned, “As a King’s Knight, for the crimes you have committed against this kingdom, I sentence you to death.”

Before he could even react, her prana sucked the air out of him once again. And this time, it did not ease up. Agony seared through his mind and body; gasps only tightened the iron grip crushing his lungs. Malakai knew he would not last long.

“What’re you doing? Stop!” Screams reached his ringing ears.

Through his blurred eyes, he saw the others running toward them.

“Vid, you don’t know what he has done,” Reva tried to say.

However, Vid yelled over her. “Stop it! Stop it! You promised not to hurt him!” She pulled a dagger out from her belt without waiting for Hunter to shift.

Reva groaned in despair and waved her hand. Malakai’s watered eyes saw Vid, Hunter, and Amaryllis stop in their tracks as the air-Bender attacked them all with her prana while continuing to suffocate him at the same time. She was panting a little; it was way too much for her. “Sorry, Vid, Hunter. I am sorry.” They clutched their throats and fell to the ground. Neither Vid nor Hunter had time to activate their magic to counter hers.

But a violet prana burst into flames, negligently dismissing Reva’s magic.

Even with the pain blinding him, Malakai worried about what Amaryllis would see when she broke through Reva’s mind—he needed to do something before she learned his truth from the wrong source, but he didn’t know what.

Reva exclaimed in alarm, “Mesmer! A fae? How?” She immediately expanded her prana to battle Amaryllis’ attack on her mind. The Bender struggled to protect herself while

keeping the other three on the ground as her prana showed signs of the strain she was experiencing.

Amaryllis strode toward her like a lion closing in on a frozen prey; the fury in her lilac eyes flared stronger with each step.

Terrified, Reva tried to move away when a stray rock in her way made her stumble back.

Her exhausted prana released everyone at once, and Vid cried out as Reva toppled down the gorge. Both she and Hunter rushed forward, but Malakai was closer, and out of pure instinct, his hands extended for her to grab onto.

For a single moment, Reva's eyes met his. She did not grasp his hand.

Instead, she desperately tried to activate her prana to bend air; however, flickering and guttering like a burnt candle, it failed her—there was nothing to break her fall.

Malakai, Vid, and Hunter knelt at the rim of the deep gorge, though her broken body was so far below, hidden by the rocks, that they were spared from the gruesome sight.

Reva was gone forever, and she took his past to her fractured grave.

Chapter 27

Forged bonds

••••

WITH THE DAYBREAK, the fight was over.

The Healers had tried their best for days, but his heart finally gave out. As Atkins stepped out of the royal chambers and closed the door behind him, he faced the four King's Knights in residence, their faces darkened in worry. Most of the palace hadn't woken up yet, so only those tending to the king were aware of the loss.

"We can't let anyone know," the General instructed in his deep voice, "Aldoria must not get an inkling of this."

"If they did, they might not even wait for the winter to be over," Jahir remarked.

"We need to find Malakai now more than ever," Feris worried.

"Reva does not know the news either." Atkins had a terrible feeling about this. "Where is she now?" he asked.

"Her last communication was from Aspen. Malakai and the others were a few weeks ahead of her," Jahir supplied.

"Things might not turn out that badly. After months on the run, Malakai might just be ready to surrender. And once he's back, we can sort everything out." Feris looked less hopeful than his words conveyed.

Jahir shook his head. "You think he'd ever forgive us? We let him rot in Lasceraz for weeks, then hunted him halfway across the country for months. Even now, one of us is stalking him! It might be wiser for us to pack our bags before he reaches Castle."

"Let's worry about that when the time comes." Atkins had heard enough. "We carried out orders as our king had decreed then. Malakai knows the burden of the job. Don't forget he was a King's Knight too."

However, he also knew that Jahir was not entirely wrong. Why should Malakai trust any of them? How could Atkins convince him it was not a trap? The General racked his brain for a solution; suddenly, he had his answer. Taking a parchment, Atkins scribbled a note—he felt no shame; desperate times demanded desperate actions. And this man had once taught him to use any and every resource he could get his hands on.

~~General Sir Dempegus Peg,~~

Castellon needs your help. I need your help. I'm sending Merryl for transportation with further news. Please consider my request.

Yours humbly,

Atkins.

He handed the letter to Goran and instructed him to fetch the space-Bender on royal retainer.

“Peg might be able to convince Malakai. The question is, how do we convince Peg?” Feris asked dejectedly.

The General’s shoulders slumped in worry. “Honestly, Feris, I don’t know! There’s so much I don’t know that I’m ashamed to call myself General and face someone who truly was one,” he confessed tiredly. The past seven months had been exhausting. “Malville never spoke a word to me about that day. Aldoria is mobilizing their troops to attack, and without a ruler at the helm, I don’t know how to keep the soldiers’ morale up.”

“There is something else.” Jahir glanced at his fellow knights, who nodded their assent. “The king asked us to keep it a secret, even from you! But now... We can tell you.”

Atkins narrowed his eyes, making Jahir swallow hard before he could continue. “He instructed us to secure the fae relic and clean up the dungeons that night after Malakai was incarcerated.”

Atkins understood the relic part but not the second. “What for? No one has used the palace dungeons for ages.”

Lucia and Feris looked increasingly uncomfortable while Jahir pursed his lips in distaste and said, “Oh, they were most certainly being used!”

••••

IT HAD BEEN A WEEK since Reva died.

Yet, it felt like an eternity.

Una shuddered at the memory of the eerie quiet that had greeted her and Sanar upon their return. Inside the depths of the dark forest, they had not lit a fire; while Amaryllis sat petrified, Vid lay crumpled on the grass, looking exhausted even as she slept restlessly. Hunter was sitting by her side, wiping away the tears from her cheeks. Haunted and haggard, Malakai was alone, away from all of them, staring at nothing.

As they kept moving forward, everyone struggled to act normally, but traces of grief trickled into their attempts. Through broken conversations, Una had figured out what had transpired that day; being attacked by someone they'd considered a friend and forced to fight one of their own was something Una truly wished she would never have to endure.

It ached her to try and sympathize with the knights. Anything she did or thought of doing felt too small a gesture.

“You don't want me to tell anyone?” Sanar's sad voice broke her reverie.

Una knew what he meant. “No, I don't! I'll fix myself before anyone finds out,” she proclaimed with conviction.

Sanar looked at her gravely. “Una, there is no fixing this. It's what you are now. It's who you shall remain.”

Una turned away. “I refuse to accept that!”

He did not protest any further.

Vid and Amaryllis were preparing dinner while Malakai and Hunter set the tents up. Tonight, their meal was a hearty vegetable and rabbit soup with a few pieces of half-dried bread each. The supplies they bought from Aspen were dwindling,

so they'd started hunting whatever quarry they could find in the forest.

“Vid...I am—” Una paused on her way toward the two women talking to each other in the makeshift kitchen area. Amaryllis tried to speak, but Vid interrupted her in an uncharacteristically gentle voice. “I know. But it was not your fault,” she consoled Amaryllis. “I loved her like a sister. She was so dear to me.” Her voice was hoarse, sorrow threatening to boil over. “But she broke her word! Why'd she try to kill Malakai when she promised not to? Why'd she attack us out of nowhere?” Una saw Amaryllis enfold a sobbing Vid in her arms.

She gave them space to heal each other and took a walk into the woods instead.

“What the—?” Una almost stumbled and fell as she stepped onto something in the dark.

It was a pair of feet stretched out on the forest floor.

Startled, Malakai jumped up, then settled down again when he recognized her; leaning against the trunk of a maple tree, like a Shade of Tarderan, he was nearly invisible in its shadows.

With winter hammering on their door, the scarlet autumn leaves scattered around him seemed to have accepted their fate. The look on Malakai's face oddly mimicked the submission.

“I'm sorry for your loss. I truly am,” she offered her condolences. It was a few days too late, but she couldn't say it out loud before.

He drew in a heavy breath and nodded gratefully.

“Why'd she attack you like that?” Una asked. “Fugitive or not, I can't believe she tried to kill a royal. King Malville's not married yet, right? I don't remember hearing 'bout any heir he might've produced so far—village people's gossip! I'd have thought they would want to keep you alive—considering you're technically his only heir. Maybe, in their custody to

make ‘im happy, but breathing!’ It felt like she was missing a crucial piece of the puzzle.

“I don’t know why.” Absentmindedly, he raised his hand toward his forehead. Then his eyes blinked as if he’d suddenly noticed what his hand was doing, and he stopped halfway. “I might be his only blood relative and a direct descendent of CirrahDion, but there are enough nobles from our extended family loitering around for him to adopt. Apparently, it doesn’t take much to crown one as heir-apparent.” He suppressed a sigh. “I am replaceable, more than you think.”

That is so wrong! Una wanted to scream in protest; instead, she sat down beside him.

In silence, she offered him her faith and her fealty.

••••

IT WAS BARELY DAWN.

The darkness was slowly fading at the horizon, but the sun wasn’t fully dressed yet to be out and about.

Amaryllis needed to clear her head. Una was fast asleep in the tent they shared, looking so happy in whatever dream she was having that Amaryllis didn’t want to disturb it, so she left the tent quietly.

Golden-red leaves carpeted the forest floor. A hint of chill permeated the air, not enough to cause Amaryllis discomfort but just enough to invigorate her senses as a wave of nostalgia for Fenderan swept over her.

“You should go back, Murasaki.” A voice dragged her back to reality.

“Hello, Fury of Justice,” she greeted the golden Angel and asked, “to what do I owe this honor?” Though she was not happy about this unannounced visit, her conduct had to be beyond reproach.

Seraphina floated slightly above the ground, keeping the fallen leaves unharmed. “Azul of the Movers prayed to the Guardians to get a message to you,” she informed Amaryllis.

Amaryllis had been worried about that. Since there was no way for any sort of communication between the realms, she was half-afraid the Council might decide to send a celestial after her. *At least it wasn't the Fury of Vengeance!*

“What did he say?” she asked with some trepidation.

“Well, it has been over a year now. The Mesmers must have their ruler back.” The Fury had no judgment in her tone, but Amaryllis felt rebuked regardless.

She needed to defend her decision. “Being here is necessary as well! Sa'ore Verite has already hurt and killed several humans; in the wrong hands, it can harm thousands.”

Seraphina shook her head in disagreement. “Murasaki, your primary duty is to your people. For a year now, the King of the Movers has been bearing the burden of your responsibilities in addition to his own.” Now the Fury was definitely reprimanding her. “The Sa'ore itself will be safe from damage, no matter where it is. And it was a human, not the relic, who caused the deaths of the humans by using it. You, on the other hand, are a clear danger to Amon.”

Amaryllis cringed at the memory of Reva's terrified eyes when she took those fatal steps to escape her. “I am trying my best not to harm any human. I've used next to none of my magic here, let alone full power!” she cried out, forgetting all the supposed decorum of her position.

Seraphina nodded knowingly.

“Is Reva...?” Amaryllis had to ask.

The Fury's lips parted in a sliver of a smile. “I cannot tell you which soul landed where. That's privileged information. Even for one of the Seven.”

They had walked up to the forest's edge; the valley sloped upwards, leading to another peak. The sun, finally ready for a stroll, streamed through the trees, making the dewdrops on the grass and the Fury herself shine in its radiance. Amaryllis could not help but look at her in awe; she needed no wings to be an Angel. Seraphina, however, was not paying any attention to the magnificent morning. Her golden eyes were stern when

she turned to face Amaryllis. “Listen to me carefully, Murasaki.” Her tone was ominous. “Your presence here is dangerous to the Rift itself. You should not have crossed it!”

“No one ever explicitly prohibited it,” Amaryllis insisted.

Seraphina now looked exasperated. “We had reckoned it was quite implicit in the separation of the realms. Humans stay in Amon, and fae stay in Fenderan.” Seraphina emphasized the words ‘stay’ as if speaking to a child.

Age-wise, Amaryllis knew she was an infant to the Angel, but that didn’t make the condescension in Seraphina’s tone annoy her any less. “Could you please stop with these riddles? How can I be a danger to the Rift? Many in Fenderan have tried; no one could break it apart.”

Seraphina bit her lip, an oddly mortal gesture for a celestial being. “I can’t tell you. It’s against the rules.”

Amaryllis felt like banging her head against the nearest tree. “How many rules does Mayaderan have?”

Seraphina suddenly chuckled. “Honestly, I can’t even remember them all.”

“Okay, then. I choose to stay until I get the Sa’ore back.” Amaryllis was sure that it was the right thing to do.

Seraphina sighed. “Free will of a mortal! I have to respect that. Your choices are your own, as are their consequences.”

Amaryllis hesitated and then requested, “Fury, would you tell Azul that I apologize for all the trouble I am causing him?”

The Fury agreed, but not without a remark. “Murasaki, you’ve become way too attached to these humans.” She couldn’t hide the concern in her voice. “It could become your undoing.”

Amaryllis’ face blanched. *Did they know about Malakai? How much?* Thankfully, when the Fury continued, she realized her secret was safe. “Maybe it would be best to distance yourself from the Mover, the one you declared a friend.”

“Do you have a friend?”

Seraphina looked troubled at her question as if this were something weighing on her. “I am a Fury of Mayaderan. We don’t *have* friends.”

Amaryllis shrugged. “Neither did I. In Fenderan, many fear me; there might be some who respect me, and there are definitely more than a few who loathe me, but one thing they have in common.” She suppressed a sigh. “They want something from the Murasaki. This Mover you speak of is the only one who doesn’t care about what I am. All that matters to her is who I am.”

Seraphina looked equally mystified and skeptical. “And is there a difference between what you are and who you are?”

“Yes, there is. There must be someone in the four realms to whom you are nothing more and nothing less than Seraphina.”

An unbidden emotion flew past the Fury’s face, and Amaryllis knew she had made her point.

“Well then, Murasaki. I shall take my leave. Summon me when you are ready to go home.” The Fury gave her a slight wave of goodbye.

Amaryllis couldn’t believe she was doing this, but she wanted to tell her something. “Seraphina, next time, call me Amaryllis!” she yelled at the disappearing Fury.

A smile was the only reply she received.

••••

UNA WOKE UP TO HIS smile.

Lying beside her, Ciaran gently tightened his embrace, pulling her closer, and whispered, “Morning.” His kiss was soft and content as if he had all the time in the world, and he intended to use every moment of it. Una could see her face reflected in his emerald eyes; his happiness mirrored hers.

Then she blinked, and he disappeared, leaving her alone somewhere so dark that Una couldn’t even find herself.

“Una, come back! Please don’t leave!” his pained screams begged her to return to him. But she did not know how—

Shaking, Una woke up again; this time, she was alone. The fragments of the memory masquerading as a dream fell from her hands and vanished, just like he had.

She desperately wanted to see him again. Both of her prana responded to her need; a blue tide with golden eddies swept her away, letting her reach her desired destination. The Corridor was as dark and silent as always, but the fog seemed to have lightened a little with her arrival, and the lights shimmering behind the doors twinkled brighter. Unsure of her remnants of remembrance, she asked the Corridor, “Did we...? Were we together?”

The echo replied, “Together.”

Una waved it goodbye and walked through a door that appeared before her.

They were in a valley where Ciaran and her other-self were sparring. As they flew at each other with their blades glinting in the sun, Ciaran beamed at her proudly, displaying no sign of exhaustion. She, on the other hand, was panting heavily, with beads of sweat shining on her forehead, but she managed to hold on to her sword.

She lunged, and he parried; he thrust, and she blocked. Their swords met and separated, each looking for an opening to subdue the other. After a few strikes, Ciaran lunged only to miss her blade; taking advantage of that brief window, other-Una propelled herself forward and thrust her sword at him.

“That was a mistake,” he proclaimed with a feral grin.

Standing at a distance, watching their mock fight, Una could clearly see how his feint had put her alter-ego in an unstable position where the moment her sword was about to touch Ciaran, he twisted his body around and turned his sword under Una’s. The pressure on her blade’s hilt dislodged it from her hand, forcing her to drop her sword onto the ground. It was similar to how she fought with Vid but more elegantly executed.

Frustrated, her other-self sat on the ground with her legs folded and moved the fallen sword through the air with her

prana. The flying weapon came at him with force far stronger than her hands could have managed, yet he dodged and blocked her attempts, however much she tried.

Dropping the defeated blade, Una pouted, “Quit showin’ off! I hate you sometimes.”

Ciaran knelt before her, cradling her annoyed face between his hands. “But I love you always.” He leaned forward and kissed her.

It was as if he had all the time in the world, and he intended to use every moment of it.

Chapter 28

Home is where you are

••••

TRISTEN WANDERED AROUND Fenderan.

It was so green, lush, and untainted that the Shade almost felt wrong to be walking on its land, and yet, he knew this peaceful appearance was hiding a darkness deep within, festering for centuries. Tristen used to be a part of that evil.

Absentmindedly, he extended his senses to search for Ciaran, though he knew the answer already. Even if the boy had fallen through a crack by some bizarre (really bizarre!) accident, a human here would have been immediately reported to Guardians. However brash and uncouth, humans were more tolerable to a fae presence than a fae would be to a human.

And they had very good reasons. Tristen could attest to that.

Amon was where he was born; it was home, even when they broke it apart and forced everyone into a different realm. As a young fae, he'd dreamed of traveling wherever and whenever he pleased, unrestrained by the Rift's boundaries.

He finally got his wish—it only took his death to fulfill it.

Tristen sat on the soft grass under the shade of a giant oak tree, surrounded by fronds of maidenhair fern, and a dense oleander shrub grew a few feet away with clusters of fully bloomed red and pink flowers. He could not remember where his own tree was anymore. It was an oak, too.

“I could find it for you,” someone said in a lilting voice, “at the modest price of a single kiss.”

The dryad wrapped her hands around him without waiting for an invitation; her tantalizing lips were just within his reach, and her floral breath caressed his mouth. She shimmered in and out of his vision, sometimes in green and sometimes in red. Tristen could smell the fragrance, designed to make him

lose his mind, feel her essence seeping into his as her luscious eyes promised him the pleasure he would never forget.

A guttural laugh escaped his lips. Four hundred years ago, he might have surrendered to the dryad's deadly seduction and died at the touch of her venomous lips.

But he was not alive anymore; she was.

So, the predator, far more dangerous than her, accepted the kiss.

With a smug smile, she waited for her prey to wail in agony, writhe, and wither away; instead, Tristen returned her a toothy grin, wiping the smirk off her face. The shadows swooped inside and strangled her from within; her eyes dripped green tears while she struggled in vain and choked, the oleander shrub shuddering and groaning under his assault, and her burgundy-red flowers paled in pain.

“Forgive me! Please don't—” she managed to utter.

Tristen's body suddenly went rigid as he realized what he was doing: there was no deal, no need, yet he was still killing. An oleander dryad, she acted according to her nature, and he had succumbed to his. Tristen released her from his invisible grip, his shadows retreating into him, allowing the terrified plant spirit to sprint back into her shrub.

He watched the flowers fold away from him while the beetles and butterflies fled, and the sounds of animals that didn't dare approach him reached his ears. At some point, he drifted off, seeking solace in the oblivion of sleep; but even in his dreams, all he saw was death.

His nightmares offered him no chance for reparation, no hope for redemption.

Tristen had been twenty years old, barely an infant by the fae standard, when his family was dragged to the human camps to be torn apart and studied. He couldn't save his family from the raid, even with his water-Bending magic. However powerful they were, the fae didn't comprehend the need to develop offensive abilities until it was too late.

The screams of the loved ones he lost during the fae massacre and the cries of the humans he killed later in vengeance never left him alone. He could not tell them apart anymore. *What was her name again? What was mine?*

“Tristen! Tristen, Wake up. You are having a nightmare. Wake up!” Her concerned voice pulled him away from the bodies and the blood.

Tristen didn’t recognize the person calling his celestial name, but he desperately wanted it to be her: the human who had saved him from the poison of his hate, only to die in the process.

His sobs were muffled as he hugged the stranger before him. “I am sorry. I am sorry I couldn’t save you.” He needed her to forgive him, but she was long gone.

The woman did not embrace him back. Instead, she tried to wrench him free. Not for her sake but to spare *him* because wherever their bare skin touched, the shadows hissed and dissipated, creating gaping wounds in his body.

Her light was slowly destroying him.

The sharp pain finally woke him up, and he scrambled away from the Angel. “Oh, it’s you!” Reeling from the shock of his actions, Tristen tried to smile and failed. “Thank you for not dragging me to Mayaderan while I was indisposed.”

She narrowed her golden eyes, looking slightly worried for him, and retorted, “Who do you think I am? When you are fine and ready, I will defeat you in a fair fight.”

He winced and said, “Thanks, Phina.”

The Fury smiled at the Shade. “Go back home, Tristen.”

....

MALAKAI WAS LOSING his patience.

Reva’s accidental death saved him from having to explain himself and his actions to others. He was ashamed of what had transpired—to fail like that was embarrassing—but to fall prey

to the same device he was experimenting on was beyond mortifying.

He could not let any of the others know. Especially Amaryllis.

However, she was the reason behind his current state of mind. The distance between them was growing again as if the night they'd shared hadn't happened, as if it hadn't meant anything to her.

He had given her some space after the incident as he knew Amaryllis felt guilty about Reva's fate, even though it was nowhere near her fault. Vid and Hunter had assured her of that, yet she kept secluding herself from everyone. All except Una.

Malakai could not suppress a sudden pang of jealousy—Ciaran and Amaryllis were the two people dearest to him, and the Mover was taking them away.

He walked to the hut Vid had insisted on making the previous evening; Amaryllis had picked out the perfect wood, hard and even-grained, though she was not pleased about the next part. Hunter then shifted into a chainsaw that Una moved with her prana to chop the tree. Finally, with Vid shouting instructions like a seasoned general, Malakai, Hunter, and Sanar had built the hut in record time.

He knew Amaryllis would be alone because Una was helping Sanar cook dinner outside. After Vid, Sanar was the best cook they had; cooking was the one thing Ciaran never quite managed to master. He had tried several times—and failed spectacularly—especially that time he attempted to make a stew out of leftover venison offal. Despite his surly mood, Malakai chuckled at the memory of Ciaran's utter dismay.

He considered knocking, but she was asleep on the blanket. The exhaustion of hiking every day for nearly three months had stretched the Mesmer Queen to her limits, but it was almost over; they would reach the northern exit of Siremann's Trail within a day or two.

Even though he was tired, Malakai did not want the journey to end. He cherished this time he had with her, however distant she behaved. At this time of the year, they were the only folks traveling through Siremann's Trail, except for a couple of fur trappers or stragglers. If he was being honest with himself, and he rarely was, the thought of facing the world outside and fighting his brother's army (the same one he helped train and trained with) made him a bit queasy.

He needed his prana back; without it, he stood no chance.

Walking into the hut, careful not to wake her up, he sat down on the floor and waited, watching her delicate shoulders rise and fall with deep breaths. Then, in her sleep, she turned around and faced him. Despite his earlier promise not to insist on her staying with him, Malakai knew he would break his word. He would regret it his whole life if he didn't even try.

As if responding to his silent wish, she opened her eyes and hurriedly sat up when she noticed him. Now worried she could be uncomfortable with him there, though it broke his heart to think that way, Malakai tried to explain himself.

But she did not let him speak.

Before he could open his mouth, Amaryllis sealed it with her lips.

....

“TELL ME YOU MISSED me.”

Ciaran startled her as he wrapped her in his arms from behind.

Una watched them from a distance—so short that she could take a few steps and touch him, so long that she could walk for the rest of her life and never reach him.

These moments only added to her pain; now that she was sure these were memories and not visions or premonitions, Una still didn't understand how these memories could possibly be real or how she witnessed them like a play with her as a character. Several times over the last few months, she had replayed her life since the day she left home and was confident

that she hadn't lost a single day, let alone a whole lifetime. The only thing she could remember to be remotely odd before the crazier weirdness began was the nightmare she had at Gram's inn of the dagger in her chest.

She had seen herself die.

Once they got out of the isolated trenches of Siremann's Trail, Una was determined to solve these mysteries of her non-existent past and her current prana troubles; she had endured them long enough. And she had a plan.

Her other-self had none of her worries, though. She leaned back slightly to let Ciaran rest his head at the nook of her neck and said, "You're an hour late. No, I didn't miss you. But I do feel like kickin' you!"

He laughed and replied, "As long as you don't kick where I think you intend to, go for it."

His warm breath on the side of her neck, just beneath her ear, made her shiver in pleasure. "Stop. Someone might see us," she protested, though she did not move away.

"So what?" He laughed against her skin. "I didn't know we were keeping us a secret."

"Really?" Una turned around to face him, pushing him back this time. "Have you told Malakai 'bout us?"

Ciaran's face got serious. "I have not, but I will."

"He's your best friend and my friend, too. I'll help 'im recover his prana, but Ciaran, after that, we are leavin'. I don't wanna be in the middle of this royal mess of feuding brothers."

Her own declaration shocked Una. *Leaving? Why would I ever say that?*

His eyes widened as well. For a moment, Ciaran seemed to be at a loss for words, but then he collected himself and said, "Leaving sounds good to me, as long as it is with you. Where would you want to go?" His green eyes sparkled at her.

"Vaneda? I've always wanted to see the stars lying on the sand. Did y'know there are some beaches with pink grains?"

She couldn't tone her excitement down.

He grinned and pulled her back into his arms. "Lying on the sand? Watching the stars won't be my activity of choice there!"

Gently yet urgently, Ciaran pushed her down to kiss her and covered her entire body with his.

She broke away from his fervent kiss, barely long enough to ask, "Promise? We're going to Vaneda together?"

"Have I ever broken one?"

••••

AMARYLLIS NOTICED MALAKAI sitting forlornly.

They were about to enter the tunnels. Gloomy cold appeared to have seeped into the murky walls of the paths carved into the mountains, and the stale smell permeating the air was pungent. Lasceraz had scarred him badly, and it pained Amaryllis to see him this way. So, as the others packed the bags before the last leg of their trip on Siremann's Trail, she went to stand beside him.

He gratefully let her embrace him and rested his head against hers.

Amaryllis was aware of Vid and Sanar's eyes on them, but she didn't care anymore.

Seraphina was right about one thing; these bonds were too dangerous. However, she was wrong about something as well because Amaryllis did not fear them any longer. She would leave Amon as she had to and mourn them when she did, but, for now, Amaryllis wanted to have it all.

"I am fine. Don't worry about me," Malakai tried to assure her, even though his voice wavered slightly.

She gently pressed her palm over his shoulder and said, "I am not worried." After some hesitation, she asked, "Malakai, have you thought about how to deal with your brother? My offer to put the palace to sleep still stands."

Malakai stayed silent for a few minutes before he replied, “Lis, I can’t ask you to do that for me. I will walk into the palace and find a way to convince him to end this war with Aldoria. Also, return the Sa’ore.” He paused, wincing in pain. “And you will get to go back home.”

Then, without warning, he turned and pressed his lips against hers, ignoring the audience around them. “Please, don’t go!”

Amaryllis did not know how to respond, for his desperate plea tore her heart into bits.

Thankfully, the other person dearest to her walked up to them, sparing her from answering. “We’re ready to start moving, if you are,” Una said, her brown eyes darting between them.

There was no disapproval in them, only understanding; it made the ache even worse.

As they walked into the tunnel, the beautiful green valleys smiling with wildflowers, the bubbly brooks, and the majestic towering peaks bade them goodbye. With a heavy heart, Amaryllis left the sunshine behind.

A sharp turn here and a dead-end there, it was a maze almost as complicated as Lascera, fortunately not magically enhanced; Sanar and Hunter tried to keep track of their route to avoid going around in circles. The further they went, the darker it became. Vid and Una were chattering initially, but even they quietened down at some point.

A sudden gasp alerted Amaryllis and the others. Hyperventilating, Malakai clutched his chest as his ashen face was drenched in a cold sweat. Without a word, Una moved the packs Amaryllis was carrying on her back, who gave Una a grateful smile before walking to Malakai and taking his freezing hand in hers.

The rest waited as he slowly started breathing normally, and they started pushing forward. He did not let go of her hand.

“How ‘bout my bags? They are heavy too, and something’s poking at my shoulders. Una?” Vid whined and flashed a grin at the Mover.

Una wiggled her tongue at the miniature knight and replied, “You think I’m a mule?”

Vid giggled and said, “Well, a very pretty mule. Does that help?”

Everyone, including the aforementioned mule, laughed out loud, and the darkness dimmed around them.

They were nearly at the northern end, and Hunter and Sanar went ahead to scout for potential dangers. Amaryllis walked with Malakai, their fingers still intertwined, while Una and Vid cheerfully bantered about something when Sanar ran back in panic. “Malakai, at least sixty soldiers are lined up at the exit!”

Malakai’s face steeled, and he squared his shoulders. “If that’s what my brother wants, I will go out fighting.”

He turned and looked at each of them, one by one. “I won’t ask any of you to follow me to my fate, and I release you from any obligation or promise. I am sure Malville will pardon you if you surrender without resistance.”

In response, Vid opened her bag and took out two swords and a mace. Amaryllis and Una activated their prana, a concert of violet and blue. As the Bender handed one sword to Sanar, who accepted it without hesitation, and the other sword to Malakai, she asked, “What were you saying again?”

With a relieved smile, Malakai took the sword from her hand. “Thank you! Let’s show them what real King’s Knights can do.”

He realized his folly as soon as the two non-knight mages in their midst snorted.

Before he could fumble to say something, Amaryllis laughed. “Sorry, but you can’t demote me to a knight, King’s or otherwise. I happen to be a Queen.”

And Una chuckled, “Well, I’ll consider the offer.”

Hunter joined them on the way.

The sunlight at the end of the tunnel threatened to blind them, but no one shielded their eyes. As they walked out with weapons and magic ready for a fight to (quite possibly) their deaths, a familiar voice greeted them.

“All hail the King of Castellon.” Peg marched through the rows of knights and soldiers who dropped to their knees in unison.

Then the older man knelt before Malakai as well. “Welcome home, Your Majesty.”

Chapter 29

Sealed fates

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VID DIDN'T WANT TO pinch herself.

If this were a dream, she'd rather not wake up.

Things were moving so fast that it may very well be one, and her mind could not process everything going around her. Yet, the sight of rows of sixty knights and soldiers kneeling with their weapons on the ground was something she might never be able to forget.

Peg took Malakai away from them to talk. From a distance, they could not hear much; instead, she noticed Malakai's face turning pale.

Hunter's sharp intake of breath distracted her from trying to eavesdrop on them, and following his gaze, she understood his reaction: General Atkins and their former comrades had arrived. While the General joined Peg and Malakai, Feris and Lucia walked up to them.

Reva!

Involuntarily, her feet took a few steps back and bumped into Una. "What's goin' on here? King Malville's dead? How —" the Mover's questions were cut off by the King's Knights hesitantly approaching them.

"Hello, Vid," Lucia greeted. "Hi, Hunter and Sanar." She sounded torn between old familiarity and new awkwardness.

"Hello, Lucia, Feris," Hunter replied on everyone's behalf.

"Ehm, we are glad to see you all well." Lucia was indeed floundering now.

"We managed somehow, thank you." A tinge of sarcasm seeped into Sanar's reply.

Lucia winced and said, "We are sorry for everything, guys. It was never personal. You have to believe us."

It took them some effort not to react badly. Then again, it was hardly the knights' fault. Sides were chosen based on loyalties, and their commitment lay with the king; Vid could hardly blame them.

"Feris, what is going on? How did the king die? When?" Vid's questions bubbled out.

Feris looked oddly relieved when he replied, "King Malville passed away a few nights ago, Vid."

In a completely inappropriate reaction to the news, Vid impulsively hugged the knight, startling both him and the others. "Oh, Feris, I've missed you all so much." Her action swept away the tension and discomfort in the air.

"Was it his heart?" Sanar inquired. As the king's in-house personal Healer for many years, he had more knowledge about Malville's health than anyone in Castle or the country.

"Yes, he'd been nearly bedridden since Malakai's incarceration. Maybe the stress of Aldoria's war declaration finally pushed him off the ledge." Feris glanced at the royalty conversing with the former and current Generals and said, "But I think whatever transpired between the two brothers was what killed him. Something broke in him that day."

For a while, no one said anything. Whether they approved of Malville's way of ruling Castellon, his extravagant lifestyle with the corrupt nobles, or his blatant disregard for diplomatic relationships, he was someone they had known for a long time. He was once their king.

"Did Reva not manage to catch up with you? We were placing bets," Lucia asked with a small smile, trying to lighten the mood.

And Vid froze.

Helplessly, she looked around at Hunter and Sanar, causing Hunter to hang his head while Sanar averted his eyes. Both Feris and Lucia caught on to those signs. In a fearful voice, Lucia asked, "Vid, what happened? Where's Reva?"

Releasing a shaken breath, Vid tried to speak, but no words came out.

Instead, she burst into tears.

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UNA STOOD IN THE MIDDLE of a lot of preparation with nothing to contribute.

Peg insisted Malakai leave with them immediately to smoothen things with Aldoria; the space-Bender accompanying them could easily send three passengers to Castle in no time. He offered an armed convoy to the rest of them as an escort for the remainder of the journey—all very regal and ceremonious.

Malakai tried to refuse, but Peg would have none of it. The old barkeeper (Una got convinced he was anything but) said sternly, “Malakai, it is already almost too late with Aldoria. If you don’t negotiate peace now, there will never be any.” Peg glanced at the General, who nodded assent, looking glad to have temporarily surrendered his mantle.

“But I need to—” Malakai attempted to argue once more.

“They will be fine, my boy. You need to go to Castellon Abbey for the meeting, anyway. Your friends will already be there when you return to Castle.”

The General now interrupted. “But, Sir—I mean, Peg, we need the coronation ceremony to happen before the negotiations. Malakai must be crowned first.”

Now, Malakai very firmly shook his head. Standing straight, as tall as the General and far taller than Peg (Una was very curious to know who the barkeeper truly was), the new king declared, “No, I am not having my coronation without them present. After everything we have been through together, that’s not negotiable!” His tone certainly made it clear that Malakai was ready for the throne.

Peg considered the options and amended, “King Arden knows both him and me very well, Atkins. I’m sure he would take my word that Malakai is the rightful king of Castellon.” He grinned. “After all, Arden wants this war to end before it starts; he simply needs an official excuse.”

Malakai nodded in response, while Una nearly had a stroke. *Did Peg call the King of Aldoria by his name?*

“Fine. I will go ahead with you.” Malakai looked around. “Let me have a word with them.”

The General and Peg left him alone to consult with the lone space-Bender standing far apart from everyone—a wiry man with messy hair and worried eyes; Una could tell the Bender was very powerful.

Malakai walked up to her and asked, “Where are Amaryllis and the others?”

“They’re telling the King’s Knights ‘bout Reva.”

Malakai flinched but said, “Could you ask them to come here, please? I need to leave soon.”

A flurry of protests began and subsided when Malakai explained his reason for going ahead. He also separately spoke to Sanar at length. Una was unsure what it was about, but noticing the lost look in his eyes, she felt miserable for her friend; he was being thrown into an ocean without being taught how to swim. That’s why Una thumped him on his shoulder despite his newly-elevated status and said, “Be safe, ‘kay? I guess touching the king could lead to my execution?”

Malakai grinned in assurance and replied, “Una, I will always be your friend first. I’m still the same Kai you helped escape from the Reapers.”

Then, he strode up to Amaryllis and kissed her without hesitation or preamble. Una noticed Peg’s eyes widen in shock, and then relax in resignation. *Yes, Peg, they did it!*

“I will see you there. Hurry to me?” Malakai said to Amaryllis, who smiled, kissing him back.

Una cleared her throat and raised her hand. “Yes, Una?” Malakai laughed at her oh-so-familiar gesture.

“Can we get rid of the clowns, please?” She waved at the fancily-armored escort waiting for them.

The King of Castellon chuckled and said, “Most definitely.”

••••

MALAKAI WAS THE CENTER of attention, and yet, he felt numb.

His brother was far too young to die, being only a few years older than him, but he'd suffered from this congenital ailment since childhood—Malville was never fit to be a king; he knew it himself, which was one of the reasons why he hated Malakai so much. However, there was no need for a coup to take his ill-gotten power by force anymore; everything was Malakai's now. The throne, the kingdom, and...

A seed of a plan had been germinating in his brain for some time, but he needed to check CirrahDion's journals for it to sprout.

Malakai was barely paying attention to the two old men drone on about Aldoria, though at some point, the General's words percolated through his absent mind, and he refused to go along with it. Resolutely, he said, "No, I am not having my coronation without them present. After everything we have been through together, that's not negotiable." He did not lower his eyes even when Peg attempted a trick from his childhood days: the former general would squint in disappointment, slowly shaking his head which always made Malakai try and gain his approval. It worked every time—until now.

Peg was the first to lower his gaze; he bowed in agreement, and so did Atkins. Once again, Malakai felt the pang of loss and despair over Ciaran. He must be there for his coronation; as his future General, how could Ciaran not attend the most important day of his life?

He worried if Ciaran had fled the country to start a new life somewhere else without Malakai's ambitions and failures disrupting his peaceful existence. Was *he* the reason Ciaran left without saying goodbye? Or was it Una who drove him away? Malakai was increasingly convinced that the cheerful and criminally curious Mover had a hand in Ciaran's disappearance; he could feel there was some secret she was hiding from him, and by the looks of it, from Amaryllis as well.

He needed to talk to Una, but fixing things with Aldoria came first.

“Be safe, ‘kay?” Una hesitated and cautiously thumped on his shoulder. “I guess touching the king could lead to my execution?”

Swatting his dark concerns about her aside, Malakai grinned. “Una, I will always be your friend first. I’m still the same Kai you helped escape from the Reapers.” Brightened, she smiled back.

He gave his King’s Knights instructions on what to prepare when they reached Castle and spoke to Sanar for a while. The Healer listened carefully, his eyes darted in shock a few times, and his mouth fell agape, but he agreed to his order and sealed it with a Prana Oath.

The next goodbye was the shortest and the most difficult of them, though they wouldn’t be parted for long. “I will see you there. Hurry to me?”

She smiled and kissed him back, her touch setting a fire inside him.

It was when Malakai knew that if the day came, he would break the world to be with her.

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TRISTEN HESITATED AT the door.

Even in Tarderan, he didn’t feel welcome anymore.

The rest of them were in the main room that the Devil affectionately called his “Lair.” Tristen could hear them speak; Dom’s voice quivered at the door of adolescence, a threshold the boy would never cross. About a month in Amon (and two in Fenderan) had passed since he was reincarnated, but Tristen had not yet been able to face him. Time didn’t exist the same way in Tarderan; however, being aware of its passage was a mortal trait even immortals couldn’t shed.

He was turning around to leave when the Devil sensed him from the other side of the closed door and called out, “Tristen, come and join us.”

He could not flee now.

As Tristen walked into the room, he tentatively glanced at Dom's face; it remained unperturbed, with only his newly-blackened eyes betraying a glint of fear and hate. Tristen knew he couldn't evade the consequences of his actions, however unintended they might have been—he had no choice but to live with them.

“We were about to figure out Dom's Shade abilities,” Melodus informed him. As the self-appointed mentor of the only fourth Shade in the entire history of creation, Melodus behaved like an over-indulgent parent, boasting and pampering, much to Dom's protests.

The Spy turned to his new apprentice and asked, “What were you able to shift into before?” Both Dom and Tristen involuntarily flinched at the word “before.”

Dom, however, replied quite casually, “Insects, birds, and animals. Not any other human, plants, or objects.”

The Devil smiled. “Now you can turn into anything and anyone when they cast a shadow. Go on and give it a try.”

There was a tall decorative pot from Aldoria in the room that the Devil had recently acquired for some reason Tristen couldn't fathom. The baby Shade walked closer to it and tentatively poked at its shadow. Dom's shadow-Shifter magic responded to his emotion, excited to try out his newly-acquired abilities.

In a flash of indigo and black, the boy turned into a pot—a spiky-haired pot—but a pot, nonetheless.

“Ah, that might take some practice,” Melodus chuckled.

Dom shifted back and asked, his dark eyes shining brighter than black diamonds, “Can I shift into any human I want?”

“Well, it would get a little too confusing. That's why I have added a restraint to your magic: you can only turn into the humans you have seen and only if a deal requires it,” the Devil said.

A pout appeared on the boy's face for a brief second before he selected his next target from the Devil's collection. With a grin, he shifted into a dark-green succulent that hopped around the room like a frog.

Melodus and the Devil laughed while Althrus remarked, "Now, this is something you don't see every day!"

In the middle of this merriment, Tristen felt totally out of place.

Silently, he went to check the deals so he could find an excuse to escape. While others talked among themselves, he flipped through the parchments: kill a rival, kill a betrayer, kill a spouse, kill, kill, kill. *Will this ever end?* A bleak thought bled into his mind: all he had to do was get caught by the Furies. *Seraphina...*

The Devil sharply turned toward him; the jolly laughter wiped from his face. Eyes glowing black and red, he yelled in rage, "Don't you dare!"

Tristen knew his master could hear thoughts, but the Devil so rarely reacted to them that he'd forgotten about it.

Dom, Melodus, and Althrus stopped their conversation as the master of Tarderan strode up to his Assassin. "Tristen, if you ever willingly put me through that pain, I swear I'll find a way to bring you back one more time. And then, you will know! You will know what Tarderan can truly feel like!" With those words, the Devil marched out of the room, leaving the four stunned Shades in his wake.

"What was that about?" Melodus asked, almost afraid.

Tristen did not hear him: his mind reeled in shock from the threat. He tried to catch his breath, only to realize his pointless heart had stopped beating at some point.

"Tristen, speak," Althrus insisted, "I've known him longer than any of you, and never once has he reacted this way."

"Nothing! It was nothing." Before they could stop him, he, too, left the room.

Dom ran after him. "Stop! I wanna talk to you."

Tristen didn't want to, but his feet ignored his wishes.

"Why'd you go to kill Una?" the boy asked with flaming anger in his eyes.

Tristen averted his gaze and replied in defeat for what seemed like the millionth time, "Not to kill her, I went to ask her something." He turned away and murmured, "Why don't you talk to Melodus or the Devil about it?"

Dom blocked his path. At half his height and barely a month old as a Shade, Tristen felt like the boy was looming over him. "I'm talkin' to you. What did you want to ask her?"

Tristen considered the implications of his reveal. He was unsure if this was a good idea, but then he was not sure of anything.

Reluctantly, he replied, "How she died, and why she is not dead now."

Chapter 30

Set me free

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“TELL ME WHY?”

Waiting by the door of a room, Una heard her alter-ego yell at Ciaran, frustration palpable in her voice. He, however, refused to reply and turned around to leave.

“You gotta give me an explanation.” Locking him in one place, she hissed like a trampled snake.

Even though he was forced to stay, Ciaran simply stood there, deliberately facing away from her. Having arrived in the middle of the fight, Una had no idea what the argument was about. Apprehension made her heart throb painfully, drumming on her rib cage and making her want to run away from whatever was happening between them. Yet, she seemed to be as unable to move as he was.

Una knew for sure that he could walk away from her magic. If he was staying, it had nothing to do with her power but his choice. Long ago, at Colasia, she had seen him do it; despite being a non-mage, Ciaran had rigorously trained himself to become stronger than most mages.

“Please. Please tell me why.” Una was now breaking apart, pleading for an answer instead of demanding one.

“I can’t be with you anymore,” Ciaran replied. Though his face displayed no outward emotion, his voice was raw with pain.

Once again, her voice rose as she retorted, “You’ve said that already, and it’s not an explanation! Why can’t we be together? We’ve been for months now. What’s changed? Did you tell Malakai about us? Did *he* say something?”

Ciaran blanched. “No, nothing. It’s me. I don’t feel the same way about you anymore. Isn’t that a reason enough?” He gritted his teeth to force his body to take a step forward, breaking the lock.

A step away from her.

Una blocked his way again, this time by stepping in front of him. “You’re lying!” Her voice had gone dangerously low. “That’s not true. It can’t be true.”

“It is. I was just...It was...Nothing. Between us.” His usual eloquence deserted him as Ciaran held her by her shoulders, moving her gently aside. “Una, I’m not a good person. I thought I could be if I tried. But I failed myself. And I’ve failed you!”

She stared at him speechlessly, both the fury and the fight having left her soul.

“Forgive me.” He sounded desperate, tormented even.

Both her other-self and Una stood frozen until the spectral door pushed her out, and the winds gently placed her back on a wooden bench outside the inn. His promises were all lies, his kisses all sham; she wanted to tear him down, piece by piece, along with the sandcastles they had built together in her mind.

Only he was nowhere to be found.

....

SANAR COULD NOT SLEEP.

He was back in his province and had the pleasure of visiting his previous employer, Lady Tarni of Neubasil. It was a pleasant reunion, meeting old colleagues and spending an afternoon with them, so why was he feeling such unease?

The reason happened to be his current employer: the new King of Castellon.

He couldn’t believe his ears when Malakai informed him of his intentions. On the one hand, he was shocked that his friend and former brother-in-arms could be planning something this radical; on the other, Sanar was stunned to realize he was interested in seeing if it could work. A part of him hated himself for considering such devastation as a possible way to save his country, and the other part berated him for vacillating between them.

After all, as overused and cliched excuse “greater good” might be, this was an undeniable fact.

He went for a walk to untangle his torn conscience, only to stumble into Una. She was sitting like a marble statue on a wooden bench, unaware that both her prana were active; they flitted around her like whispers in the breeze, trying to get her attention.

Sanar experienced yet another bout of guilt. A Cirrah walked on Amon nearly four centuries since the first’s death; however inexperienced she was with her new powers and however many years it might take for her to reach her true potential, Una was still the most powerful human mage alive. And Malakai had no clue.

His prana flared a little to remind him of the consequences of breaking his Oath to her. “I know them very well, thank you,” Sanar replied to it dryly.

“Una?” For some reason, she seemed to be in a state of shock. Cautiously, he touched one of her shoulders not to startle her too much.

In the middle of the winter, like a flower wilting under the summer sun, Una slowly looked up. Her brown eyes were vacant, and her long, dark hair was knotted; it was as if a raging wind had dragged her around.

Sanar’s heart tightened at the sight of her.

Not a Mover, not the Cirrah; all he saw in front of him was his friend in pain. Her strength and confidence made it easy to forget that she had only recently turned twenty.

North of Siremann’s Trail was already getting too cold to be out without a coat. He sat beside Una and wrapped his arms around her, hoping to offer a minuscule of warmth. She only had her nightgown on, so he took off his long coat, and she let him put it on her without any protest. “Sanar, he didn’t...” Una mumbled and trailed off.

He prompted, “What, Una?”

She tried to swallow her tears, but her voice choked with them. “He broke up with me!” A wail left her lips, traveling

through the air to crash into him.

Stupefied, Sanar remained still with a weeping Una in his arms, wondering who she was talking about. Then, a hammer dropped from the blue sky, making him see stars in the daytime. *Ciaran? They were together? When? How? What...?*

He rocked her softly, letting her cry and drench his shirt. As she drowned herself in tears, his scholar's mind flooded with more unanswered questions. Could Ciaran be in a relationship with someone else somewhere else, and Una was experiencing those emotions as if they were hers? What was the affinity of her Bender magic? Was it related to this connection they shared?

Nothing made any sense.

Neither did her anguished sobs.

Finally, she took a few deep breaths and collected herself, barely enough to rub her swollen eyes and mutter, "I'm sorry."

Sanar patted her head. "Don't worry about it."

Una looked at him rather strangely. He was almost concerned about what she might ask of him for a second or two.

Then, she said, "I'm so tired of this, Sanar." Her prana suddenly erupted into a small blue and yellow geyser, both startling and scaring him, before setting down inside her. "I'm gonna find Ciaran. And he better have some answers ready." The sharp steel edge in her voice made Sanar uncomfortable once more to keep a secret of this magnitude from Malakai. If Una had been formidable before, now she was turning into a force of nature.

How did she become a Cirrah? Sanar desperately wanted to find out; his obsession with everything prana-related from his Abbey days was raising its ugly head again.

Repressing his urge to pepper the Cirrah with questions and provoke her even more, Sanar asked, "How do you intend to find him?" No one had seen or heard from Ciaran in so long that he could not even guess where he could be or why he was missing.

The sun was not glaring down yet, allowing the faint white moon to be visible in the clear azure sky. Eyebrows knitted at the sight of the clueless orb, she replied, “Korbridge! I’ll go to his hometown and talk to the space-Bender who works for him.”

That was brilliant. Sanar couldn’t believe that they had forgotten about old man Farley. If Ciaran needed to leave in a hurry, he would have used his services.

“You are not coming to Castle with us?”

Una considered the decision for a moment and shook her head. “No, I’m not. Now that King Malville’s dead and Castellon faces no threat from him using the relic, Malakai can deal with Aldoria, and you guys can help ‘im when you reach the capital.” She paused and said, “Malakai will be fine without me there, but I *need* to figure this out.”

Unable to find any reason remotely persuasive enough to stop her, Sanar asked, “What can I do to help?”

All of a sudden, the determined Cirrah looked vulnerable.

Biting her lip in consternation, she said, “I don’t know where Korbridge is.”

••••

SIRIUS KNEW THE CORRIDOR did not like him.

He shouldn’t complain, considering the feeling was pretty mutual. Still, the celestial master cursed under his breath as he strode down the endless hallway because his eyes would’ve had no problem seeing through its dark if the Corridor hadn’t maliciously enhanced the fog. “What did I ever do to you?” Sirius yelled at it.

With equal fervor, the Corridor screamed back, “You!”

Irritated beyond a decent conversation, Sirius ignored the belligerent Corridor; he was already frustrated with this Una business to argue with it. Thankfully, the Sa’ore Morte had not displayed any further cracks, and the Sa’ore Verite seemed to have swallowed enough human prana to be content for now. Since the third relic had been missing without a single peep in

a millennium, the Devil could safely declare that the looming threat had been resolved for the time being.

Una remained an unsolved mystery, potentially a loose cannon—no, *definitely* a loose cannon.

He needed answers; the only one who had any was this damned sentient piece of architecture. So, swallowing his pride, the all-powerful Devil of Tarderan exhaled heavily, creating a petulant puff of mist, and tried again. “How is the girl visiting you? She is a human, not a celestial. She does not belong here.”

The usually unhelpful echo replied seriously this time, “Belong here.”

“She does? How?”

The never-ending hallway went silent; its darkness stayed unchanged, and its fog unperturbed.

“You won’t give me an answer to that, huh? Will you answer her?”

“Answer her,” the Corridor admitted.

The official rejection stung a bit, but Sirius was used to it after so many centuries. “You like her!” The Devil couldn’t decide if this worried him or made him jealous, especially when the Corridor showed no hesitation in its response.

“Like her.”

Hmm, I didn’t want to do this. But you’ve left me with no other choice.

••••

AMARYLLIS HAD NO OTHER choice.

As much as it hurt her, she couldn’t let her own wishes stand in the way of her friend’s wellbeing; Una needed answers to the mysteries riddling her life, and Ciaran held the key.

So, she sat on one of the wooden benches outside the inn and watched Vid yell at Una.

The little Bender had her arms crossed and brows knitted together as she declared, “You can’t go off by yourself. We’ve already lost contact with Ciaran, and soon we’ll have to search all the islands of Vaneda to find you.”

Bewildered at Vid’s random proclamation, Una asked, “Why would I go to Vaneda?”

Vid glared at her and replied, “Because you’ll end up crossing the ocean in the opposite direction rather than reaching Korbridge two provinces away!”

Point. Amaryllis thought to herself.

Una looked suitably mortified, but Sanar cleared his throat and interceded on her behalf. Unfolding a piece of parchment, he said, “I don’t think so.”

The Healer was holding a hand-drawn map which might be the most detailed and descriptive in the history of cartography. Even Vid couldn’t help being slightly impressed at the enormous effort he had put in. Painstakingly, he showed Una how to travel from their current location at Neubasil to Ciaran’s estate at Korbridge, explaining the paths to take and the roads best to avoid.

Vid tried to argue further, but Hunter laid a hand on her shoulder and said, “Let her go, Vid. She might be our only way to find Ciaran and bring him home.”

Reluctantly, Vid gave in. She pulled Una into her usual rib-breaking embrace and said, “Bring him back. Drag him by his ears if you have to.”

Una nodded, her big brown eyes glistening with tears. As always, Hunter was the only person in all four realms who could convince Vid to back down. Amaryllis suppressed a sigh. Why couldn’t she and Malakai be like them? Unburdened and uncomplicated.

The man of very few words patted Una’s back. “May the Guardians be with you, Una.”

Finally, the moment she had been dreading reached Amaryllis. Una sat beside her silently for a bit and then said, “Amy, you’re the best friend I’d always wished for but never

believed I could have. You endure the worst in me and make me want to be better. I—” Una’s voice cracked, disintegrating her defenses.

Unable to keep herself together any longer, Amaryllis buried her face in her hands and cried because there was one fact they did not want to admit aloud. They were aware of the stark reality but unwilling to accept that by the time Una reunited with the others, with hopefully both Ciaran and clarity by her side, Amaryllis would be long gone from this realm.

They knew this was the last time they would see each other.

Yet, neither said goodbye.

Chapter 31

The King and the pawns

••••

UNA STARED AT THE ENORMOUS crest carved on the heavy door.

It was a saber intersecting a crescent moon.

The manor was sprawled over acres of land, boasting two residential wings and a large ground to train horses. She could see servants, maids, and stewards busy with their chores in the morning. Try as he might, Malakai couldn't pull off being just a knight, let alone a commoner; Ciaran, on the other hand, in spite of his extraordinary strength and inhuman fighting abilities, made people feel comfortable enough to believe he was one of their own. It was very difficult to associate him with this extravagant display of wealth.

With her heart leaping like a frantic frog in a drying well, Una pressed the silver knocker on the burnished mahogany door. For a moment, she worried that a peasant like her might not even be allowed entry to a Lord's residence, and the next moment, her throat clenched at the possibility of Ciaran being on the other side of this door. Would he know who she was? And if he did, would he speak to her?

A middle-aged man, maybe in his early forties, opened the door. "How may I help you, m'lady?"

He reminded her of a weasel, a habitually deceitful, albeit sincerely kind, weasel—one who'd steal your belongings when you were not looking, yet make sure you were warm and well-fed before he ran off with your stuff. Noticing that Una was gaping at him, the weasel repeated himself, "How may I help you, m'lady?"

She blinked at his question, her words playing hot potato in her mind. "I...umm...me..." It was challenging to put one next to the other in a way that made sense.

"Are you here for the auction?" He smiled encouragingly.

By now, it must have been evident to the Lord's steward that she was no noble, but he was generous enough not to change his attitude toward her. Una had no clue about any auction; however, that seemed like the best reason to be here. "Yes, I am. Could you please let me know when it'll start?"

The weasel opened the door for her to enter and said, "It already has. I'm Suon, one of the stewards here. Please enjoy our dearly deceased Lord Oswald's creations. Only one is for sale; the proceeds will be used to build a new training center in the city."

She stepped inside the room and asked, "Training center for what?"

"For non-mages to learn art and trade. For mages to learn balance and control." The pride in his voice was so apparent that she had to smile back as Suon continued to regale her. "Lord Ciaran believes every person in this country should train themselves to be part of something bigger than what their station or magic allows. And Korbridge would be the harbinger of that change."

Not just Ciaran, he was Lord Ciaran!

This was his reality, and she was not in it.

....

"YOU SHOULD CALL ME Your Highness."

A ten-year-old Malakai demanded.

His green eyes sparkling as brightly as his sandy hair against the morning sun, young Ciaran was busy polishing the new wooden sword he had won at the sparring match last evening. "You just hate losing, don't you? Me calling you 'Your Royal Highness' won't change that." He grinned broadly without looking up.

Stomping his foot in anger, Malakai said, "I'm the prince of Castellon. You are my sub...ord..." He couldn't remember what the term was.

Ciaran started laughing so hard that the wooden sword dropped from his hand. "It's subordinate, Malakai."

“Call me Your Highness!” he yelled.

In response, Ciaran picked up the sword from the floor and ignored him completely.

Like scarlet snakes, Malakai’s angry prana raced forward to twist themselves around the nonchalant boy in front of him. “Call me Your Highness.”

The young Destroyer’s red magic tried to conquer the green-eyed boy’s volition. It took control over his muscles, breaking their connection to his mind, and twirled Ciaran around like a marionette to kneel before him. Then suddenly, as if an eclipse gave way to the light, Malakai stood there shocked, overwhelmed by the pain he was causing his friend. His prana retreating in shame, he started wailing, “I’m sorry!”

“You’ll never be anything but Malakai to me!” Ciaran still managed to smile as he hobbled closer and hugged him (tighter than was necessary).

Fourteen years later, Malakai sat on the royal throne of Castellon, his mind wandering to the past they shared. The whole palace had been decorated with lights and colors, and every Lord of the Kingdom had gathered to attend the coronation while the entire country celebrated their new ruler.

He would be crowned king today, a dream he had harbored since childhood, though as a second-born, it was not something he thought would ever be possible (at least, not *this* smoothly).

And Ciaran was not here to share the day with him.

Crimson magic flared on his palm, eager to reacquaint itself with him after so long apart. It had taken a Mover to extract his prana from the Sa’ore Verite without touching it (the relic had been terribly unhappy about it, Malakai could tell), a Bender to smoothen its passage to him, and a Healer to return it to his core. Vid and Sanar had completed the ritual alongside a Mover hired from the city, with Amaryllis guiding them through the process.

It had been a toiling process to reclaim what was his—with a dozen others trapped inside the Sa’ore, screaming in protest

and angrily trying to snatch it back. Being far weaker than Sanar and Vid, the Mover would be out of commission for a few weeks, but Malakai had made sure that he was well compensated for that.

His thoughts drifted to another Mover, the one who should have been here, helping him regain his power as she had promised. But it didn't matter. If Una could find Ciaran and bring him back, she would have done more than anyone ever did for him.

“Ready?”

Amaryllis walked into the throne room, wearing the gown he had specially made for her. Pale lavender with red trim, the dress was reminiscent of the flowers blooming that night in the mountains. As always, she preferred to wear no jewelry, and Malakai admitted she needed none. However, for today, Amaryllis had agreed to try on the white pearl pendant he received from Vaneda's royal house as his coronation present. Nestled at the nook of her throat between her collarbones, the jewel shimmered with lilac eddies forming and disappearing in it. With her blond hair cascading down one shoulder from an intricate knot and her eyes two drops of crystalline ocean, Amaryllis made him forget everything else.

“As ready as I will ever be.” He smiled and held her hand.

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UNA WALKED AROUND THE gallery.

The resident staff was friendly and cordial; they served the assorted guests drinks and appetizers while the visitors admired the magnificent collection. Those stunning pieces captured Una's eyes, yet they kept searching for any trace of Ciaran.

Clocks of every kind chimed and rang to announce the hour.

Some intricate and delicate clocks were undoubtedly crafted by talented metal and stone-Benders, and a few rare pieces by wood-Benders. Ancient sundials, sand, and water

hourglasses stood stoically, a little apart, watching the newer models in silent dismissal.

She came to stand in front of a clock on one of the walls.

At first glance, the clock was simple and small; barely the size of a person's palm, it was oval with two concentric rings. The outer one had numbers etched on it, and the midday was glowing right now, a glow that dimmed as time passed and noiselessly moved to illuminate the next minute. Constellations were carved on the inner ring, so miniature and precisely engraved that it immensely impressed her. She recognized Orion, Horologium, and Gemini among the ones brighter than the others. Her father would have loved this piece.

Una wondered how such a clock was created; it looked like something from a fairytale.

“Lord Oswald was a Bender himself.” The weasel named Suon had walked up to her at some point.

Una was intrigued; she had not known Ciaran's father was a mage. *Why didn't he inherit the prana, then?* “Oh? Your current Lord is one as well?” She feigned ignorance.

“No, my Lady. He's a non-mage.” Suon shook his head and replied, “Both his parents were mages, a Bender and a Shifter. It's because—”

“Benders change other things while Shifters alter themselves. Opposing prana of equal strength cancels each other out,” she completed the sentence for him. To have both yet unable to access either—how painful and frustrating it must have been! After all this time, Una finally understood why Ciaran needed to excel in everything he did.

“Where is Lord Ciaran, anyway?” A booming voice asked the question Una had been trying to find a way to bring up. Many of the guests murmured among themselves with the same query.

Suon raised his hand to get their attention. Despite his size and general weaselly demeanor, his personality was towering. He cleared his throat and said, “Lord Ciaran apologizes for not

being here today. As you might already know, King Malakai's coronation is today. That's where he's needed the most. Please enjoy the art and note your auction bids for this piece on the parchment."

The curious guest and the rest of the gathered crowd of nobles were sufficiently satisfied by the explanation behind Ciaran's absence.

"He's missing, isn't he?" If Ciaran trusted him with the running of this entire manor and, by the looks of it, the province, then she could as well.

Suon's eyes went wide at her question. He grabbed her hand and pulled her away from the room. "Who are you? How'd you know that?"

Una felt miserable to realize he was not here either, but she had to reply, so she settled for a half-truth. "I'm a friend of Malakai, Vid, Hunter, and Sanar. They're worried about him, so I came here to check if he'd returned home and, if not, find somethin' that could lead us to him."

Suon bowed so deeply that his back cracked a little. "My Lady, why didn't you introduce yourself from the very beginning? If you are their friend, you're a noble of the highest stature. I had no idea!"

Yet you treated me as one.

Una wanted to protest his assumption, but it would only waste her time. "Suon, what can you tell me 'bout the day he stopped by here? It was almost eight or nine months ago, right?"

"Yes, it was the last time we saw him. Or even heard from him!" The man's voice choked, making Una appreciate how much Ciaran's staff truly loved him. She had thought Lord Pellin of Zephir, her father's employer, maintained a good relationship with his retainers, but Ciaran seemed to have won their hearts along with their loyalty.

"Where'd he go from here?" Una tried to grasp a straw—any straw, however much splintered, would do.

“To meet Bender Farley,” Suon replied and was about to leave to serve another guest when Una remembered something she had meant to ask.

“What kind of Bender was Ciaran’s father?”

“A time-Bender. One of the only five known Benders in Amon to ever exist with that ability. Now there are none.”

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“CITIZENS OF CASTELLON.”

Malakai’s voice was magically magnified to reach every person assembled on the palace ground as he stood on the balcony and greeted his people. *My people!* It still felt like a dream to him. Even the usually malicious neither-dead-nor-alive prana plants at the corner of the garden appeared to be glittering happily for him (he wasn’t entirely sure if that was a good sign or bad).

“Lords of Castellon and esteemed Aldorian delegacy.” His dark eyes swept past the crowd of nobility standing behind him. After the formal negotiations at the Abbey had concluded, effectively stopping the war before it could begin, King Arden had sent a team of Aldorian ambassadors to endorse his coronation as a token of their renewed friendship. Malakai was genuinely grateful for the gesture.

“Before taking on the mantle of your king, there is a declaration I need to make.” Ignoring her exclamation, he pulled Amaryllis to stand beside him and brushed her hair aside to reveal her pointed ears. The crowd and more than a few nobles gasped.

Amaryllis frowned at his action. “What are you doing?” she hissed under her breath.

“I present to you, the Murasaki of the Mesmers. A fae Queen, she is here to witness my coronation and extend her hand of friendship to humans.” He was aware of the danger in the gamble he was making, which could ruin him forever, but he did not back off. “As your king and one of the monarchs of Amonderan, I hereby declare Fenderan as our old friends and future allies.”

Malakai paused as the noise grew louder, angry protests and jeers now drowning his words.

Two crimson flames ignited in his hands; rising higher and higher, they danced in the air before fusing into one. The Destroyer's magic hovered in the sky like a second sun, stunning the mob into silence under its awe-inspiring scarlet glow.

Without giving the assorted citizens any chance to recover from his display of power, Malakai waved to a dozen palace personnel to distribute copies of CirrahDion's journals. He had copied only the parts related to the massacre and the fae's escape, but that should be enough for the masses. The Aldorian delegates were given one each to present to their people, and Vaneda Abbey would receive their copies very soon.

“An abomination was committed by humans centuries ago. The fae were tortured, mutilated, mass-murdered, and robbed for prana fruits before they fled to save their lives. The loss of live prana plants was an unfortunate consequence of that departure, not their deception or intent. We have harbored unjustified hatred and misconceptions against them for far too long. It's time to make it right.”

The people were busy leafing through the parchments now; shuffles of the pages were the most prominent sound. So, Malakai added something that would get through their typically thick skulls. “You don't need to trust me. Believe the words written by the one and only Cirrah of Amon.”

It didn't escape his attention that Amaryllis was struggling to keep her surprise and annoyance in check. Her agitated magic swirling around was a dead giveaway of her mood. She asked, “Malakai, why did you do this? Without consulting me! Without asking if the fae even agreed—”

“Because I love you.” It was time, and he was ready.

She inhaled sharply at his confession while his fingers tightened around hers.

The people had started talking and arguing while reading Cirrah's old journals. Some were in shock, some in horror, and some in disbelief. After waiting a bit, Malakai spoke again, "I am humbled to accept the crown and the dagger today. Blessed by both Mayaderan and Tarderan, they were CirrahDion's legacy, as is this kingdom. I vow to take this nation to the place he had envisioned. I promise to restore Castellon to its former glory and growth."

The solemnity of this declaration brought the crowd back to the true reason for this gathering.

Slowly, slowly a clap and two broke out, followed by a wave of cheers as General Atkins placed the crown of Castellon on his head and offered him the golden dagger.

Three red rubies on the pommel and yellow citrines around the hilt greeted the king.

Chapter 32

Truth in Blue

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“ARE YOU LOOKIN’ FOR someone?”

Una didn’t hear the person as she pored over Sanar’s map.

While it had been a lifesaver during the journey from Neubasil to Korbridge, it was not helping her with Bender Farley’s residence. Suon had given her the directions before she left, but he expected her to know where north was supposed to be (and Una didn’t want Ciaran’s employee to realize how incompetent she was). Also, why did the streets have no name? Maybe once crowned, Malakai could declare that every street, road, village, town, city, province, and preferably, even the woods and forests should be provided a name. Or, even better, a sequential number.

Korbridge had earned its fame for being the town of scholars and literature.

It was rumored to have every book ever written in Amon, either in the libraries, or the major book shops, or the small back-alley used bookstores. Some insisted the Devil himself visited Korbridge to pick up a book now and then, and some claimed one could find forgotten writings from Mayaderan and Fenderan there. Una didn’t care for any of these stories. She was very lost and starting to get hungry. The lunch of baked chicken with rosemary and thyme, golden buttered potatoes, and crunchy veggies that Suon had force-fed her at Ciaran’s estate, however lavish, was not enough to last a whole day.

“Are you lookin’ for someone?” the woman asked her again.

This time, her voice got Una’s attention. Wearing a light brown coat over her dark green dress, in her late fifties, she had a kind face that appeared concerned for her. Una realized she must look like a complete mess, going back and forth on

the same street and muttering to herself. Abashed, she bit her lip and said, “D’you know a Bender called Farley?”

“Yes, I do. I can show you his place, but it ain’t gonna do you any good.”

Una frowned, “Why?”

“‘Cos he’s away for his brother’s funeral and won’t be back for a while, as far as I know. I’m his neighbor, Rikka.”

The news hit Una like a sharp dagger through her heart. Every time she found a clue about Ciaran’s whereabouts, something would snatch it away—she couldn’t wait for Farley’s return; it had been way too long already.

“I’m sorry for his loss,” Una mumbled her condolences and thanked the kind woman before walking away.

She had tried the usual roads; now, it was time to force open a door.

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MALAKAI CHECKED THE jade spike.

In the deepest part of the dungeon, where no one ever came, it was sticking out of the ground, fully exposed yet impossible to move.

“What do you think?” he asked. The supposedly incorporeal green prana stake was surprisingly solid. Malakai had expected such a powerful magical object to be scorching hot, but it was cold, almost painfully frigid. He had tried with his hands and his Destroyer magic for days; it did not budge from its spot, not even a wiggle.

“Let me check something.” Sanar had been carefully observing his struggle with the stubborn spike.

Malakai stepped back to let the Healer come closer. It was fascinating to watch Sanar’s prana touch the jade stack, which immediately turned dark forest-green and began fighting for dominance. The two magical energies twisted round and round each other; while the stake grew fainter as it battled Sanar’s prana, Sanar himself was in pain—beads of sweat formed on

his forehead, and Malakai could hear his breathing grow ragged.

When the stake was nearly pale, and he thought Sanar had won the duel, it burst into a peridot flame. Malakai barely had time to pull his friend out of its range. Falling on their behinds, they dragged themselves away from the wrath of the ancient magic; its cold rage chilled him to his core. Quite literally.

“Are you okay?” Malakai inquired in worry. Sanar had been too close to the flames, and they did not look forgiving.

The Healer checked himself out and replied, “I am fine, Malakai. My magic might need a couple of days to recover.” He heaved a shaking breath and said, “I figured something out, though.”

Curious, the king quirked his brow.

“It has a restraint placed on it,” Sanar said hesitantly.

Now *that* intrigued Malakai. Restraints on magic were not something a human or even a fae could place—the only entities rumored to do so on extraordinary occasions were the Guardians and the Devil. “So, either Mayaderan or Tarderan had interfered with the Rift to make it permanent?” His heart dropped with disappointment. *There was no hope?*

The king and the knight sat next to each other on the dirty and damp floor, watching the spike settle back into the shimmering green thing buried deep into the foundation of a palace built by CirrahDion.

All of a sudden, Malakai remembered something. He grasped Sanar’s hand with so much excitement that the Healer winced in pain and yelped, “What?”

“Do you remember the story about a fae crossing into Amon about a hundred years after the separation?”

“Yes, vaguely.” Sanar tugged on his earlobe, trying to remember. “Wasn’t he the murderer who butchered about fifty mages before getting caught by one of the King’s Knights?”

Malakai nodded as they started walking toward the stairs.

“What about it?” Sanar asked as he hobbled beside Malakai.

“Cirrah mentioned something in his journals about the danger of having a fae roam around in Amon. I had always wondered if he was referring to the killings.”

Sanar’s eyebrows knitted together, in confusion or pain, Malakai couldn’t tell. “What else could it be? The fae *was* killing people!”

“Yes, he was, but the way Cirrah had written it, it felt far more ominous than mere murders.”

Sanar cocked his head. “What are you thinking?”

“Why couldn’t the fae dismantle the spikes on the Fenderan side? Why was the Cirrah worried about a single fae walking on Amon? What restraint could the celestials place on these anchors to ensure the Rift could not be broken?”

He could see Sanar’s brilliant mind tackle the questions he posed.

When the Healer’s eyes widened in understanding, Malakai knew he had found the answer he’d been waiting for.

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“HELLO, MY DEAR. I’VE been waiting for you.”

Una couldn’t believe her eyes.

She wasn’t sure what baffled her more: finally seeing another person in the Corridor after so long, or that it was someone she’d met before. The hollyroot-berry-man from Siremann’s Trail with the sprig of dark hair still firmly standing at the top of his head grinned at her as if he had run into her at a marketplace.

“Who are you?” Una was afraid to ask, but she did.

“Very rude of me not to have introduced myself before.” As the strange man walked closer, she took a few steps back, unease spreading like shivers in her soul, and Una didn’t know why (apart from him disappearing on her the last time and showing up in a weird place this time). “Let’s start over.” He

smiled and said, “Una of Castellon, I am the Devil of Tarderan.”

That declaration quickly dissipated her fears; obviously, he was lying because she had met the Assassin of Tarderan, and there was no way someone as formidable as Tristen was this man’s minion.

The guy, however, was inspecting her intently and ignored the disbelief in her eyes. “So, you turned into a Cirrah, huh? I hadn’t noticed the signs before. Does Tristen know?”

The name made Una falter, confusion starting to cloud her mind. “I don’t want to talk to you. I’m leaving.”

She turned around to make her point but found herself locked in place by a Mover far stronger than her. Though she had done this to others, Una had never experienced the helplessness of struggling against an enormous weight keeping her immobile, both her prana combined impotent against it. *This is madness... It can't be true!*

“C’mon, Una. Don’t be like this. Here I thought we were friends.” He sounded hurt.

“Who are you?” Una asked again, hoping for a different response.

The man released his power, allowing her to face him. He looked confused. “I just told you. I am the Devil??”

Una frowned at his flippant attitude. However powerful he might be, this man was quite annoying. Her prana rushed forward to subdue him before he could muster more strength. He didn’t even move to dodge them, but a yellow prana countered her Bender magic while his Mover ability deflected hers with ease, both tinged with a black aura.

“You are a Cirrah?” Una gasped at the momentous realization. His ears were not pointed, so he had to be another human. She was not alone! This made her so happy that Una was willing to get past the oddity of this meeting and the man’s psychotic delusions.

He sighed in resignation. “You won’t believe me until I change, would you? Fine.”

And he shifted.

Made of shadows and screams, his body grew larger by the second, and the unblinking eyes that kept her transfixed were solid black with red vertical slits like a serpent ready to swallow her whole. Two red curved horns appeared at the sides of his head, feet turned to cloven hoofs, and a spiked tail snapped behind him. “Does *this* answer your question?” A snarl slapped Una back to sanity (or rather insanity).

She nodded numbly, and the Devil shifted back to his favored appearance of an average man, as ordinary as ordinary could be. “Argh, you guys need to change how you imagine me! This is grotesque with a disgusting taste in fashion.”

Am I going to Tarderan?

He smiled. “Not yet. Maybe not ever. Who knows.”

It was then Una realized he could hear her thoughts as well. Questions tumbled out of her mouth before she could control herself. “You are a Mover, Bender, Shifter, and Mesmer?”

“Oh, I am everything and a little more. Prana defines mortals, not me,” the Devil replied with a grin. “But I’m not here today to discuss myself. Let’s talk about you.”

Una’s throat was so dry that it hurt. “What ‘bout me?”

“Before we chat, I’ve someone who wants to be formally introduced to you.” He scowled as if it was not something he wanted to do and yelled into the void, “Corridor, remember this favor.”

The echoes replied, “Favor, favor, favor.”

Satisfied, he smiled at the flabbergasted Una and said, “CirrahUna, welcome to the Corridor of Time. It has been wanting to say hello.”

“Hello, hello, hello,” the Corridor greeted her.

Una stood there slack-jawed.

••••

“TIME?”

Instead of the Devil, the Corridor replied to her, “Time, time, time.”

“Where’s this place?” Una’s mind was so full of chaos that she could hear a score of woodpeckers trying to make nests inside her head—she needed words, any words, to distract herself from these revelations.

The Devil seemed to have sensed the turbulence in her.

With a kindness she would not have associated with the master of Tarderan, the supposed torturer of souls replied, “Una, this is a lot to take in. But Time is the only bendable that exists in its own dimension; it is not in any of the four realms, though all the four are connected to it. It has achieved ‘sentience,’ as you must have already realized, and it chooses its wielders. That’s why time-Bending is such a rare and near-extinct affinity.”

“Why me?” Una still could not manage to formulate longer sentences.

“That’s what I’m here to understand.” Then, he walked closer to her, and this time, Una didn’t flinch. She was terrified, all right, but surprisingly not of him. The truth she had been seeking for this long was finally within her reach, and Una desperately wanted to flee.

“Shall we find out?” the Devil asked.

“How?” Her voice trembled, despite her attempts to steady it.

“Ask a question.” A trace of bitterness trickled in his tone. “It likes you. I’m sure it will answer.”

Her heart painfully hammering against her ribs, she touched the cold mist-coated walls of the Corridor and pleaded, “Where’s Ciaran? Where did I see him last?”

“Last, last...” A door appeared, flickering in and out of her sight, allowing her to open it. Una was about to step in when she turned back to see the Devil standing a few paces away.

“Ain’t you coming?”

He sighed regretfully. “It won’t let me. This door seems to be yours and yours only.”

Una bit her lower lip, and in a choked voice, she begged, “Pleeease let ‘im come with me. I don’t want to be alone.”

She noticed the surprise on his face when the door silently opened ajar.

Together, the Devil and the Cirrah of Amon crossed the threshold of Time.

Chapter 33

Come back

....

AMARYLLIS NEEDED TO hurry.

Yet she found herself procrastinating.

Looking for one excuse after the other to wake up next to him, spend another day with him, talk, and have dinner with all of them. She kept hoping that Una might show up soon; Amaryllis wanted to see her before she left forever, but it was time.

She had things to pack, which was funny because Amaryllis had nothing when she'd entered Amon. Why she'd come so unprepared, and why could she not remember the day she had crossed the Rift; it had been niggling at Amaryllis for a year now. The Mesmer tried to recollect her memories of that day when Malakai stirred awake from his sleep. "Lis..." He pulled her into his arms, and her jumbled thoughts went out of the window.

Malakai was somewhat pushy, a side of him that was not so evident during their journey together. Amaryllis found it equally endearing and annoying that sometimes, he was a little kid unwilling to listen to reason, and sometimes, he was a wise king willing to do anything for his nation. Recently, he had been spending a lot of time down in the dungeons with Sanar, but whenever she wanted to talk to him about it, he'd changed the topic.

She caressed his cheeks as his lips explored her face, distracting her from rational thought. "Kai, we need to talk."

"Uhhh...?" He didn't stop his kisses; after marking her from forehead to her jawline, he was moving to conquer further down. Amaryllis' back arched in pleasure, and her plans were getting very fuzzy. Once more.

Then again, she was a fae. And a fae knew how to savor but also resist gratification.

So, she let out a small burst of her magic and made a tiny memory erupt in Malakai's mind—the memory of something embarrassing enough to instantly make him release her, and he gasped, “Why'd you do that?”

Amaryllis giggled, enjoying his reaction to the fragment of a memory he detested.

He sat up, shuddering and gagging. “That was pure evil, Lis!”

She grinned in response, though almost immediately, the laughter vanished from her face. “I have to leave now, Malakai. We can't keep delaying the inevitable! I will call the Fury to take me back to Fenderan.” Her heart nearly broke to see the dejected expression on his face. “Will you have the knights ready Sa'ore Verite for transport? Preferably in a crystal container.”

Something about him made her pause.

His red magic was swelling up around him. Even if Amaryllis didn't believe he would ever harm her, and more importantly, she was far stronger than him, his magical affinity still made her uneasy. The power to destroy free will was not something a mortal, let alone a human king, should wield. She had to trust him to know its perils and its vice.

“I can't live without you,” he said as if it were obvious. Amaryllis did not know how to respond. After all, she had not even managed to reciprocate his confession during the coronation that day. “I don't *want* to live without you,” he asserted.

“Kai, listen to me. There is noth—” Her words were cut off by his lips firmly pressing against hers.

Then, he murmured, “Lis, please! Don't leave me.”

••••

UNA STEPPED INTO AN apocalypse.

The sky was splashed with flaming tangerine—not the gentle colors of a peaceful sunset over the ocean but the violent hues of fire and carnage. Cracks were forming in the

air as if the sky had turned into glass. There was a lot of screaming and running around, but nowhere was safe. The royal palace was the only building still relatively intact; the rest, as far as Una could see and probably even beyond, were in pieces. Castellon, and possibly the whole Amon, was getting destroyed by things falling from above, rising from below, pelting from all around, and colliding with the force of a hundred asteroids. Instead of hailstones, these were mountains, trees, chunks of valleys, and sometimes whole woods.

An ocean seemed to have risen from the next town over; Una could hear the roar of the waves drowning the screams of people who lived there. Every now and then, she caught glimpses of equally terrified people through the holes in the air, running and holding on for their dear lives not to fall through them. Not people—they were fae.

Her eyes went wild with fear, and she grasped the Devil's hand without a second thought.

“What's happening?” she yelled above the chaos around her, taking a deep breath and regretting it immediately. The acrid stench of burning houses, trees, animals, humans, and fae assaulted her senses.

“Someone broke the Rift,” he replied, non-flippantly for the first time. The seriousness in his tone scared Una more than the flames threatening to engulf her.

“All of this ‘cause the Rift broke?” Una's voice failed her as she watched the top of a house fly and crash into an invisible wall, disappearing without a trace.

“Space and time in Fenderan work differently. If the barrier breaks, the two timelines collide, and everything and everyone close to that merge vanishes. These space collisions might demolish almost everything, save a few safe zones!” the Devil had to yell back for Una to hear a word he was saying.

She moved closer to the palace. Though the building stood, it had also suffered some damages: the biggest of them was a huge hole punctured through the ceiling. By now, Una had figured out that she couldn't be physically hurt while she was

here, but out of pure instinct, she kept dodging the flying projectiles and the pockets of fire. The palace garden was charred in places; the delicate blossoms, already burdened by winter's arrival, didn't have the strength to stand up to the incoming assault. However, the ones that seemed to be celebrating the disaster around them were the prana plants—their amber turning green!

More than curiosity, the people she noticed from afar forced her to walk closer to the palace. "Amy?" she gasped at the sight of a woman lying on the dirt, bloody and in tattered clothes. Una dashed forward, leaving the Devil behind, and tried to hold her friend, but as always, her hands helplessly went through the specter from a different time. At least Amaryllis was still breathing in her unconscious state.

"Come away." Another familiar voice made Una stand up and turn around.

"Ciaran, she's gone. I'm sorry for what happened, but it did! Now, we need to get back into the palace. It's a safe zone; you know that!" The worry in Malakai's tone settled at the pit of her stomach like a block of steel. Yet, seeing Ciaran after so long made her want to cry out in relief amidst the death and chaos—everything, and everyone, ceased to exist. She didn't hear what came next: Malakai arguing with Sanar about something, Vid crying, and Hunter's quiet voice trying to calm them.

Kneeling on the graveled ground, as oblivious to the surroundings as Una was, Ciaran was holding someone in his arms.

Malakai grabbed his shoulder to force him to leave.

He didn't move an inch or actively resist his pull; Ciaran stayed still.

Una couldn't believe her eyes when she noticed Malakai's prana, in the shape of a crimson rope, snaked around Ciaran and pulled at him hard. "I'm sorry, Ciaran. You need to come with us! Listen to me!"

“What’re you doing?” A scream left Una’s lips simultaneously as Vid yelled out the same. “Malakai, please! Let him have a moment to grieve!” Vid’s yellow Bender fought to counter Malakai’s red Destroyer. Sanar and Hunter looked at each other before joining in.

“Please, Malakai,” they pleaded with the king while trying to stand against him.

With a jolt of shock, Una realized he was stronger than the three powerful mages combined as his dark eyes glowed scarlet in anguish. “I didn’t mean to hurt her...It was an accident! I am sorry. She’s dead; I can’t change that! But if Ciaran doesn’t move away from here, he’ll die too. And so will we!”

Una couldn’t understand what was going on: why was he not helping Amaryllis lying a few feet away? It was almost as if she was a stranger to him.

But nothing mattered.

All that mattered was the one person before her.

She was finally close enough to see who Ciaran was cradling in his arms. The hilt was buried deep in her chest, with the tip of a dagger protruding from her back; three red rubies shone on the pommel, studded with yellow citrines around them and down the hilt, reflecting the destruction around them. Blood soaked the ground wet around the woman’s body.

“Don’t die, please. You can’t die...” Ciaran mumbled so quietly as if it was a prayer.

As if it could bring back the dead.

Una couldn’t see the face of the woman yet, but deep inside, she knew. So, too, did the Devil, it seemed. He floated next to her and held her hand this time. With her friends fighting amongst each other, and her best friend lying untended on the ground, the presence of the most feared entity in the four realms was the most comforting thing to her.

The reality haunting her nightmares for almost a year was staring at her face.

She remembered her own death now.

“I love you. I have always loved you, even when I had to pretend otherwise.” Ciaran’s voice grew more agonized and louder. “Don’t die without knowing that.” His gasping sobs broke her heart. Far worse than witnessing her lifeless body, drenched in dark blood, was the tormented anguish of the man she loved.

“Please don’t go. Una, come back.”

He threw his head up and wailed to the shattering moon.

“Come back! Una, come back!”

The cry became a scream that pierced the sky, the ground, all the realms, and then time itself.

••••

THE DEVIL HAD THE ANSWERS he’d been seeking.

He was used to having all the mysteries of the four realms at the tip of his celestial fingers, and not knowing had been excruciating, yet now he wished that he didn’t. Since he had found the Sa’ore Morte cracked, Sirius had had to accept how little he understood the mortal lives he played with; then came Una and the Devil discovered that humans could still astound him.

At this moment, he bore witness to another human changing the laws of magic once written in stone—a human who was the half of the whole. For a love that reached beyond the restraint of Time.

Ciaran’s cries echoed against the crumbling Rift, and the world seemed to have stopped for an instant that lasted forever.

Sirius secured a struggling Una’s hand in his grip as she tried to reach Ciaran.

“What!?!” A collective exclamation was heard from the Destroyer king and his knights, but they stayed away. The Devil had to say that they were smart in doing so because whatever was unfolding here was far too dangerous for any

mortal to interfere. Even he might not have been enough if he were allowed to intervene.

All Sirius could do was watch history rewrite itself and take care of the woman next to him.

The other half of the whole.

Ciaran's body went rigid; his back arched as he spasmed violently. A yellow so bright that the Devil had to shield his eyes surrounded the man's body and shot out from him in every direction. Sirius ignored Una's desperate cries and hugged her tight, if nothing but to prevent her from going any closer to the inferno of a man blazing like a thousand suns. Ciaran convulsed and thrashed as his core awakened, and his newly-activated prana went haywire.

"Stop! Ciaran, stop!" Una was fighting the Devil with all she had, but he didn't let go. It was hard to watch as the yellow prana flowed out of the man's body like sunlight pouring into a poorly-lit room through the cracks of a glass window.

Ciaran didn't drop the Una close to his chest even though he twisted in burning torment.

After several agonizing minutes, when he finally could control his body, Ciaran took a shaking breath and leaned in for a kiss.

A kiss he did not break when a yellow wave rose from him and roiled around, wiping out everything in its path...the entire horizon, as far as it stretched, was gone.

It was cascading toward them fast, a tsunami of Time devouring itself at the request of a mere human!

"Let me go! Let me go to him!" Una cried.

Sirius didn't know her for long enough, but somehow, he had no doubt that she would try to hold the world together to protect the man she loved, and to his surprise, he realized he couldn't stand by to watch her fail. Instead, the Devil stood bleakly as the wave inched closer and closer to them in the palace courtyard, erasing an entire timeline on its way to them.

From all the realms.

Saving them in the process—just to save her.

“Help him. Please!” Una wept, fighting in futility against the deceptively strong hands of the Devil. “Make him stop. Please make him stop! He can’t control it. He’ll die—do something!” Her sobs were so close that he could hear them in his decorative heart.

Sirius could not stop thinking about how he had tried to revert Time, begging it to go back so he could protect the ones he had lost a millennium ago. And it had denied him.

The reason was as clear as the burning and bleeding night: Sirius was not worthy; he had offered nothing of himself for the unbendable element to bend itself.

Ciaran had freely done so.

The man before him crumbled away as if his body were made of gold dust, though his lips stayed locked with hers.

“Stop, please stop. Don’t do this—Ciaran, stop!” Una’s sobs melded with the other humans there.

His core broke apart.

The prana drained out of his body, but instead of flowing into the ground, the yellow magic seeped into Una’s deceased body, fading into her. Her dying blue prana glowed faintly once, accepting his parting gift.

At that very last moment, before the tidal wave of time-bending swept them away, the Murasaki of Mesmers, having regained her consciousness a little while back, managed to reach the couple. Amaryllis activated her magic and drew a pattern of violet chains on the dead Una’s wrist linked with Ciaran’s dying one.

“Remember him. You have to—” The violet chain shone in acknowledgment of the Mesmer Queen’s command.

Ciaran’s hand fell from Una’s.

The Devil, however, made sure he caught the Una beside him before she hit the ground; it was the least he could do.

••••

DOM SAT AT THE EDGE of the makeshift shadow bed.

Una had been unconscious since the Devil carried her into the Keep.

He remembered how scared he had felt when he saw her there; it didn't help much when the master of Tarderan explained the circumstances behind this anomaly to the assembled Shades. "She was dead once, and then she wasn't. Meet the new Cirrah of Amon." At Dom's gasp of surprise, the Devil assured him, "With my invitation, she can enter and leave Tarderan. I won't do anything to harm her, little one."

Dom's head had started spinning as he explained how everything had unfolded, how Ciaran had turned back time to bring Una back to life—at the cost of his own. Dom had always thought that he had never met Ciaran, but the description made him remember: the only person, other than Una, who had cared enough to ask his name, the blond man with emerald eyes who'd come to stay at Zephir inn and disappeared without a trace.

It was too much for Dom to handle, let alone comprehend.

So, he sat by Una's side and caressed her hand, hoping for her to wake up, hoping for her not to die.

Tristen had fled immediately after the Devil gently broke the news about his old friend. Dom would have never thought it possible, but his heart had welled in sympathy for the Assassin of Tarderan; everyone knew he had been searching for Ciaran for a while now.

The Devil hadn't stopped him. Neither had Melodus and Althrus; they let the Shade mourn in solitude.

"She'll be okay, won't she?" Dom asked the master of Tarderan, trying to hide the tremble in his voice. The Devil got up from his throne and walked up to the bed in the corner of the room; something odd, almost soft, passed over his black eyes as he glanced at the unconscious girl. The formidable entity was looking strangely tired. "I hope so, young one," he said. "I truly hope so."

*“Sa’ore Morte shall delight in despair
Sealing Reality, Release, and Reason
When Death so sure cannot endure
The Sa’ore shall make its decision”*

Dom didn’t know what the poem meant, but he didn’t interrupt as the Devil continued, “It was not someone *cheating* death that cracked Sa’ore Morte! It was someone defying death,” he said in a voice so full of reverence that Dom shook from within.

The Devil knelt next to her bed and took one of Una’s hands between both of his. “Grieve, my dear. But know this, the time that does not exist anywhere will forever exist in you.” Dom’s eyes filled with tears, though the words went unheard by his sworn sister.

The master of Tarderan gently placed her hand back over her chest and said, “All that matters is you keep living, for he is alive in you. So...come back!”

“Una, come back,” they called her.

Together.

Chapter 34

The exception to the rule

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SERAPHINA WAS GETTING anxious.

She had not heard from Murasaki for a while now.

Mayaderan was aware of the turmoil that'd ensued once the newly-crowned king of Castellon had revealed the stories, buried for centuries, about Fenderan, Amon, and the events that brought about their separation. In a way, it was about time the animosity between the humans and the fae subsided. The realms had to stay separated, of course, but as the Fury of Justice, it made her happy that the truth had been revealed.

Alectina, on the other hand, was furious.

Her hatred for humans was as old as the Rift itself; everyone else could forget the pain behind the separation, but the Fury of Vengeance could not. Would not.

The Fury of Repentance and the Guardians remained indifferent (no surprise there). So far, there were contradicting reports about how Fenderan reacted to the news, considering they only heard rumors of it through their Mesmer nets. Well, there would never be a free channel of visit or communication, so it didn't matter how either side felt. The Murasaki in Amon was the only remaining anomaly and the current source of concern for Seraphina because Amaryllis should have called her by now; there was no reason to linger—the Sa'ore had been sitting in the palace, and so did she.

Seraphina couldn't check in on her because there was no such thing as friendship.

Not between a mortal and a celestial.

The Fury of Justice tossed and turned in their sitting room, unable to concentrate. "If you are bored, go, and chase the Assassin, Phina. I sense him hovering at the edge of Tarderan," Alectina quipped.

At the mention of his title, Seraphina stilled for a second. She hadn't seen Tristen since he'd had the nightmare and hugged her. "If he is not among the mortals, I can't pursue him." She struggled to control the yearning in her voice, something that annoyed her to no end. "You know that as well as I do."

Alectina shrugged. "He is so distraught; I can sense it from here. Might be within the rules to strike him when he's at the border?"

That concerned Seraphina even more: something was happening or was about to happen...she didn't know what or why, but she needed to find out.

All Seraphina needed was a summon—at this point, she didn't even care who called her.

••••

SANAR WENT UP THE STAIRS with Vid at his heels.

She had insisted on coming with him, against his and Hunter's wishes.

When he opened the locked room, the half-conscious woman shifted slightly, trying to conceal a whimper of pain. Still wearing the dress Malakai had gotten made especially for her, Amaryllis was lying on the same bed she had shared with Malakai for days—now her solo prison.

Sanar suppressed a sigh of consternation: what had to be done...had to be done.

He looked at Vid to gauge her reaction, wondering if she felt as conflicted as him or if this appeased the desire for vengeance somewhere dormant in her.

"Was this necessary?" Vid whispered to him as he unscrewed the small vial that he had started to hate.

A wave of relief washed over Sanar at Vid's comment. So, it wasn't only him questioning this! "Malakai thought it was," he replied in an equally hushed tone.

Vid rubbed her little face with both hands, took a deep breath, and squared her shoulders. “Maybe we can convince her, and then everything will go back to normal!”

Sanar doubted it could ever be “normal” again. Vid had to know that there was no going back from here, yet both Malakai and Vid seemed to think that a betrayal such as this could be justified or forgiven. But what did it say about him—following a path that his conscience was painfully aware of being wrong? Malakai and Vid were doing this for their ideals, however misguided those might be; Hunter was going along with the plans for Vid (that man would stand against the Guardians if it were for her). What were Sanar’s reasons? The desire to be a part of a choice that would alter the course of the future? Or simply weakness?

He readied a syringe, pulling the liquid inside. A concoction of nightshade, hemlock, and monkshood in a specific ratio, it was a marvel to Sanar that the Reapers could come up with this drug which took a trained Healer like him so long to replicate, even with a sample at hand!

Amaryllis opened her eyes briefly and noticed him. “Sanar...”

He froze with the filled syringe in his hand.

“Please—” Amaryllis’ voice broke. Her body and prana were so weak from the poison that she could barely lift her head from the pillow.

“I’m so sorry, Amaryllis,” Sanar said softly, barely audible to his own ears. While he understood why keeping Amaryllis’ magic in check was necessary for their sanity, if not survival, it still pained him! Especially because though Malakai insisted the reason behind his plan to break the Rift was to restore access to the prana fruits for Castellon’s sake, the Healer had no doubt that he was doing it for her. And yet, after this, she was lost to him...forever...only Malakai didn’t appear to see that! Or rather, he didn’t want to.

Before he could plunge the syringe into her arm, Vid stopped him and stepped forward. “Amaryllis, we don’t want to do this,” she said. “Please listen to me.”

Amaryllis, now slightly more awake, silently stared at Vid, who completely missed (more likely, ignored) the waves of hostility from the Mesmer and kept talking. “Once the Rift is broken, it’ll take a little time to settle things down. But now that people know what happened back then, we won’t repeat the same mistakes. We need the prana plants here, Amaryllis; you’ve seen it for yourself! You know what happened to my family and many other families! The fae and the humans can coexist peacefully. We’ll make sure of it!” Sanar tried to stop her rambling. Amaryllis was waking up, and it would not be safe for much longer, but Vid blissfully ignored the danger. “Malakai will make sure of it,” she declared.

A violet light leapt from Amaryllis—the anger in it was like a blazing slap. However, the poison had weakened her enough so Sanar’s prana could counter the magic before it hit Vid.

“Shut up,” hissed Amaryllis. “You are delusional, Vid! As is your king.” A purple cloud was gathering around her.

With no time to lose, Vid regained her senses and grabbed Amaryllis’ arms so Sanar could inject the venom into someone he had once called his friend. Her cries waned into silence soon enough.

Slowly, Vid pulled the embroidered blanket over the unconscious fae and gently tucked her in. Then, without another word, she turned and left the dungeons, leaving Sanar there, his fists clenched so tightly that the nails dug into his palms.

He let them bleed.

••••

AMARYLLIS FELL DEEPER into her mind.

Amid the excruciating pain the poison inflicted on her body, she tried to find a place to hide, but there was no escape. She was trapped in an endless nightmare, whether awake or asleep, and it always started at the same place—on the balcony, under the full moon.

She had other dresses, but for their last dinner together, Amaryllis wore the special one: pale lavender with red trim. “I owed you a grand dress, didn’t I?” He smiled.

The scene shifted like a horse suddenly jerking off the paved road that she had no way to steer, and they were inside the room. “Kai, I’ll leave tomorrow morning. Whether you agree or not, I can’t wait around any longer,” she insisted.

Malakai’s jaw hardened. “Lis, I refuse to lose you.”

The nightmare fizzled in and out of focus as Amaryllis tried to block her memories; she didn’t want to remember what happened next. His voice, however, kept reverberating in her mind. “I want you to stay with me. Don’t you want the same? To be together?” His questions felt like it would shatter her heart, yet the answer was obvious: something she had repeated many times, and he never seemed to listen.

“You know I do, Kai, but you can’t always get everything you want in life!” She couldn’t even replay the rest of the conversation—or was it an argument? All her exhausted mind could recall were Malakai’s final words. “I’ll break down what makes Castellon weak. I will break down what keeps us apart!”

In her venom-polluted sleep, Amaryllis remembered how stunned she was. “What are you talking about?!”

“You know very well,” he said; his tone was frosted calm compared to her agitation.

“No one can do it! They’ve tried and failed. So will you,” she retorted sharply and started to walk toward the door. She had had enough of his stubbornness. Yes, she loved him, but *this* had to stop!

A pained cry escaped her mouth as she stirred in her sleep. The burning agony of the drug had spread to every inch of her body, and even if she was not in chains, Amaryllis could feel them tied so tightly that it was difficult to breathe, let alone move. The same way Malakai’s Destroyer magic had bound her that night with the affinity to destroy volition, designed to

compel actions. “I am sorry, Amaryllis! Please, don’t make me do this! I don’t want to—”

Like a bird with broken wings, her mind limped from one memory to the next, finally settling on the worst: Malakai’s eyes turning crimson as his inhumanly strong prana seeped into them, and then, widening in surprise when her violet magic countered and subdued his. “You might be more powerful than most human mages, Malakai, but I’m far stronger than you.”

The violet crown settled on his head, with his crimson prana desperately trying to resist. Flailing and failing. The thorns dug deeper and deeper, letting Amaryllis witness all of Malakai’s buried memories: the loneliness of a prodigious child with the fearsome power to compel, the short-lived happiness that crumbled with his mother’s untimely death, the equal measure of neglect and abuse of his older brother, the failures and self-loathing, the insecurities he could never reveal, the shame of being jealous of someone so dear to him, someone without any prana, someone still far more capable than him...Ciaran.

His knees buckled, and Malakai crashed to the marble floor, clutching his head as his entire life, every precious and painful memory, kept him rooted.

Amaryllis’ eyes burned as badly as her heart ached. She wanted to stop, but her magic had not found his worst memory yet—without that, it would be easy for someone like Malakai to recover fast. She needed time to find the Sa’ore and escape without alerting the others.

Malakai writhed in pain while his prana tried to get a hold of her once more. She swatted the scarlet ropes away like they were flies, and her magic sifted through his memories like sand, searching for the nightmare that would keep him paralyzed. And she found it.

In his memory, Amaryllis saw herself battling him! She saw themselves pitting their magic against each other—just a few minutes ago.

The moment her prana latched onto that memory, Malakai's eyes started clearing. Though tightened in pain, they turned crimson again, and he locked his near-feral gaze on her. With a shock, Amaryllis realized her magic had a fatal flaw. She should've chosen another bad memory to trap him; even a good one would have entranced him just long enough to escape. But her power had diligently searched for the memory that would cause him the most anguish, and she happened to be in it! This had never happened before—with anyone!

Panicked, Amaryllis tried to put him to sleep, but her magic would not change form that fast.

She knew it. He knew it.

Recovering from her attack quicker than she thought possible, Malakai was behind her like a flash of lightning. "Murasaki, your magic can't trap me in my worst memory, can it? Not when you yourself are standing before me!" She could feel his warm breath on her neck as he whispered into her ears. "I'm the exception to your rule."

The moment the syringe went into her arm, Amaryllis knew that he'd taken the poison from the Reapers. All those times when he had professed his love for her, made love to her, Malakai had kept this vial safely tucked away.

"I love you, Lis. I always will." That's what he had said to her as she passed out that night more than a week ago. The same crepuscular mist now took hold of her mind, forcing her to submit to the venom that ravaged her body.

Amaryllis prayed she would die.

••••

THE DAGGER LODGED IN her chest insisted she should die.

In her comatose state, Una convulsed in agony—Ciaran was going away. "Don't leave," she sobbed, seeping in and out of her consciousness.

A pair of cold hands touched hers and gently placed her back on the bed. Una couldn't open her eyes yet. Everything

was dark as if she was back in the Corridor, and all the doors were closed tight.

She needed to die so he would return.

“Una, can you hear me?” A voice from far away floated to her, but she didn’t respond, for it had to be a dream. Dom was dead too.

“Una, please. You gotta eat somethin’.”

Someone replied, “She won’t be able to swallow anything; she’s not fully conscious.” They paused for a moment and said, “I am a Healer as well, remember? I won’t let her die.”

No...please, let go of me!

A stern voice percolated into her thoughts, unbidden. *I won’t! As the master of Tarderan, I forbid you, Cirrah of Amon, to perish on my watch.*

An unwelcome warmth spread through her body, nourishing her and pulling her away from the darkness and cold. The man spoke to her inside her head. *Una, he died to save you. To give you a second chance.* With every word, the ache returned with a resounding roar, cracking her soul, wringing out every fiber of her being. The voice was relentless. *You have to live! And you will stop what is about to happen. A mortal has to protect their realm; we celestials can’t intervene.*

Una didn’t want to protect anything; she only wanted this emptiness to end.

Do not let him down!

Helpless against this plea and command, Una had no choice but to cry because, against her desperate wishes, she was awake. She could see the Devil and Dom sitting beside her bed while Tristen silently stood in the corner.

Una had come back.

Ciaran did not.

Chapter 35

Broken bonds

••••

“FORGIVE ME.”

Since her incarceration, someone would bring Amaryllis food twice a day and force her to eat just enough before Sanar administered the poison. Vid had never accompanied him again after that day, and Malakai had abandoned her there. Only Hunter visited her daily, though he never said a word; the Shifter would simply stand at her door for a few minutes and then leave—Amaryllis appreciated his silence.

After what felt like days of this torture, the King of Castellon had finally deigned to pay her another visit. Tiredly, she rested against the pillows, softer than the softest of Mullein leaves, as he paced back and forth in front of her. “Lis, you have to understand. I’m doing this for us.”

“Stop talking! Kill me and be done with it.” She wished she could muster up enough magic to shut him up, but he didn’t put her in chains because she had no strength left in her.

Malakai (or Sanar) had played around with the dose to ensure that.

“Kill you?” Amaryllis winced when he stopped before her and gently took her face in both hands. “Lis, why don’t you get it? I love you! I know what I have done is—” he swallowed painfully and continued, “I know you hate me right now! But this is as much for us as it is for our country. Nothing will ever change if no one does anything, afraid of the change.”

“This is not my country! It’s not even my realm. And you killed us when you betrayed me.” Amaryllis jerked his hands away. The movement made her head spin and almost knocked her out, but the look on his face was worth the pain.

He tried to control his demeanor: it seemed to flicker between anguish and anger, with his eyes sparkling red from

time to time. “When I’m done, there’ll only be one mortal realm. And in time, Amaryllis, you will realize that we’ll always be us. It hurts me to see you in pain, and I wish—” His voice quavered, “I wish I could take it all back. But I can’t wait any longer for you to understand. I can only pray to whoever is listening that you forgive me someday!”

He lifted Amaryllis in his arms like a prince sweeping his princess off her feet.

Every step felt like a thousand pins and needles pricking through every bone of her numb yet oddly sensitive body. Ignoring the stabbing agony, Amaryllis tried to escape his embrace but realized it was pointless.

Silently, he carried her out of the room, down the stairs (palace staff who witnessed the strange scene immediately gave them a wide berth), and went deeper into the underground dungeon, further down, and toward the garden. When Malakai finally placed her down, she stared at the empty cavern, and for a few moments, with her mind dizzy with the venom, she could not comprehend why they were there.

Then she saw it: one of the Rift anchors.

It was a thing of beauty; exuding magic and power, its color shifted between light jade and vivid emerald. Amaryllis felt like it was watching her, gauging if she was a friend or a foe.

On the day of her officiation, she was taken to one that looked exactly like this for its blessing. It was buried next to Quercus, entangled in its roots, and protected by the giant oak who served as their Council chamber.

“This doesn’t change anything. Why don’t you go ahead and pull it out?” She wanted to see him try and fail.

“You were right. The fae can’t detach it in Fenderan, and humans can’t do it in Amon. But—” Malakai smiled after a long time.

Confused, Amaryllis stared at the pride on his beautiful face, and it finally dawned on her. “But they can be removed

by a human in Fenderan!” she gasped.

“And a fae in Amon,” Malakai confirmed her fear.

You are far more of a danger to this realm than Sa'ore Verite. Seraphina's words rang in her ears; only now she understood what they meant.

She had assumed her magic made her dangerous, but this was far worse.

Simply being a fae here puts everything in danger.

She tried to scamper away, but her body wouldn't move, and at first, Amaryllis thought it was the lingering effect of the poison; then she noticed the crimson strings crisscrossed all over her. Her violet prana tried to fight them off. However, not only was it too weak, but it was also too late.

No...please, no! Her mind, strong-willed yet powerless, screamed inside. He had taken control over her muscles, so while she helplessly panicked, her mouth was not allowed to make a sound.

“I'm really sorry, Lis!” The pain etched on his perfect face almost made her believe he truly meant it, yet his actions proved otherwise as he compelled her to grab the stake.

At her touch, it immediately changed into an angry peridot green. Flames burst from it, nearly reaching the rocky ceiling of the cavernous space they were in, forcing Malakai to step back, pulling her away with him. Instinctively, he used his body to protect her.

The magic emanating from the stake burnt the parts of Malakai's flesh where it made contact but didn't harm Amaryllis. Instead, the flames danced around her, licking her skin as if she were a precious part of its past.

Please kill me! Don't let him do this! Amaryllis soundlessly begged the ancient relic.

Like him, the stake ignored her plea.

Realizing the energy from the relic wouldn't hurt her, Malakai resumed his endeavor: his strings moved her around like a lifeless puppet. Looking as much in distress as she was,

Malakai made her hold the stake with both hands and pull; it was very heavy—too heavy for something its size.

Minutes passed, and nothing happened. The stake showed no signs of movement. Even in the cold underground, Malakai was sweating from the exertion of using his magic for this long, and her arms were aching to the bones.

He was wrong.

The same thought must have crossed Malakai's mind as well. He paused for a second, contemplating his next move, then closed his eyes as if he didn't want to see whatever he was about to do, and before Amaryllis could brace herself, the human king tugged on all the prana strings at once. The sheer agony of being forced to act beyond her strength and against her wishes made the fae Queen cry out—a sob managed to escape her sealed lips.

Violent jade magic burst out in a fury from the anchor as it dropped on the floor, shaking the entire structure, and did not stop. Malakai ran toward Amaryllis, shielding her from the cavern's roof collapsing when the impact of the outburst caved it in, exposing the sky above the palace garden.

Before her terrified eyes, wafer-thin cracks started forming around them.

As if the air itself had frozen into glass.

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THE BOWL LOOKED LIKE it was made of black glass.

Yet, there was no weight even to perceive that Una was holding it, making her believe it would vanish into the air once its purpose was served. Break away into smoke and shadows. Una stared at the ephemeral bowl filled with hot soup, the steam from it fogging her eyes, or maybe it was something else.

“I can help you drink that if you need,” Dom offered. He had barely left her side in the last few days as Una slowly recovered.

She had figured out he was a Shade now: the specks of shadows dancing at the tip of his spiky hair, his once brown eyes now pitch black, and his constantly cold hands told her that Dom was not the same boy she used to know. However, it changed nothing because he was still her little brother.

“Thanks, Dom. I think I can manage.” She gingerly took a sip. Tarderan’s food was surprisingly tasty. Her year-ago self would have had so many questions: why did they even have food here when no one needed to eat (or at least she supposed they didn’t)? Who made it? Could they appear out of the Devil’s imagination? Most importantly, why did this soup taste exactly like the chicken broth her mother used to prepare when she was sick?

However, today’s Una was too tired of life to chase her curiosity.

Nothing mattered.

“Do you wanna go back home?” Dom asked.

Una’s heart broke at the slight catch in his voice, for he could never return to his.

Her parents’ smiling faces flashed before her eyes; home would be so comforting and might be warm enough to thaw the icicles forming inside her soul. Then, a series of images replaced them: Ciaran disappearing, her dead body in his arms, and the world collapsing into a burning crater of screams and flames. “No.” She shook her head. “I gotta go to Castle. Dom, something’s gonna happen there, and I can’t let it happen!”

“What if you die again?” he said in a small voice.

For a moment, Una didn’t have an answer.

The truth was that she didn’t die in the explosions or by the colliding projectiles; Una was killed by someone who plunged that dagger into her—she couldn’t remember who it was.

“Una...” Tristen walked toward her bed, pulling her away from that thought. He had visited her regularly for the last few days. Being the Cirrah of Amon (something Una would never stop having trouble accepting), the Thief and the Spy had paid

her their respects, but Dom, Tristen, and the Devil still treated her normally, and she was grateful for that.

“How are you feeling?” Tristen asked.

“She finished the whole bowl of soup today,” Dom replied in her stead, beaming from ear to ear. Una was relieved that the natural animosity between a killer and his victim had eventually metamorphosed into the camaraderie of a celestial brotherhood. Considering everything that was going wrong, she couldn’t bear to have two of her favorite people hating each other. *People? Beings? Creatures?* Her brain refused to dwell on that line of thoughts any further.

“I’m feeling better, Tristen,” she answered. “I think I should go to Castle.”

The image of Amaryllis lying on the ground in tatters returned to her, and she faltered, her mind drifting away. Tristen and Dom watched her closely, as did the Devil from a distance.

After waking up, Una had walked around with Dom a bit, though she was not allowed to leave the throne room; Tarderan was not a place she wanted to get lost in, anyway. There was an amber-colored fossil, filled with swirling fog and covered with small fractures, sitting in a crystal case next to his throne. From Amaryllis’ description of the relic of Truth, Una could deduce this was another of those Sa’ore things. *How many were there? Why were they so important? Why did this one keep calling to her...?*

Once more, questions popped up like soap bubbles in her head before fading away. “I need to go.”

She could feel the eternal Mesmer’s touch in her mind, speaking to her in private. *Are you sure?*

Do I have a choice?

You mortals always have a choice. Even when we celestials don’t.

She considered it for a few minutes and then replied aloud, knowing the Devil could hear her from afar. “If the person

who broke the Rift last time tries again, I've got to be there to stop it.”

“Why?” Dom asked, the look in his eyes suggesting he knew her answer.

Because Ciaran would have, Una thought.

“Because I can,” she replied.

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SHE STEPPED INTO THE palace garden, this time with Tristen.

“It has already begun,” he whispered to her.

Standing at the same place where she had died, where Ciaran died, something cracked inside her. Most probably, Una had been dumb and reckless enough to rush into a battle she had no chance of winning like she always did—if she hadn't done that, he would still be alive.

Her thoughts fizzled inside while the air crackled with short lightning flashes, and the kaleidoscopic sky pulsed with many hues of shimmering colors like a nacre dancing on the waves. In the palace and at a distance, in the sprawling city, people were scared and confused; they were standing outside their homes or peeking through the window to watch the stunning display. Slowly but surely, fissures were forming on the invisible veil of time and space that had kept the realms apart for five centuries.

There was no fire and destruction, and there was no screaming.

It took her a moment to realize that she had arrived earlier. “Tristen, it's not fully broken yet.”

The Assassin seemed to have come to the same conclusion. “How did this happen?”

Una had been wondering the same thing, but she stopped herself. “Never mind. How'd we stop it?”

Before Tristen could reply, her attention was grabbed by the giant hole gaping through the palace ground and, more

importantly, by the two people lying next to it: Malakai and Amaryllis, covered in dirt and soil.

Why's Amy still here?

Una rushed to them, leaving Tristen behind, and reached almost simultaneously as Vid, Hunter, and Sanar. Unsurprisingly, they looked surprised to see her. But before anyone could speak, Malakai slowly sat up, brushing away the loose soil from his clothes, while Amaryllis remained unconscious in her ragged dress.

The hairs rising at the back of Una's neck warned her.

As did the jeweled hilt of the dagger hanging from Malakai's belt.

Chapter 36

Seek me and you shall find

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SEVERAL PEOPLE WERE talking at once.

All around them, the world as they knew it was breaking apart.

In the middle of the chaos, Una could not think straight—it was Malakai’s dagger that killed her. *But why? What did I do?* She briefly remembered him saying it was an accident. *Was it?*

Questions overwhelmed her mind, but more pressing matters took precedence as the ground lurched, and the sky rumbled, making her ears ring. Answers would have to wait! The eager discussions of the palace staff peeking from the windows turned to panic while the noise from the city intensified, with pieces of what seemed to be forest floor and land starting to pelt through the cracks.

“Keep him away!” Malakai’s yell grabbed Una’s attention.

For a moment, she was confused about whom he was referring to or who he was talking to.

Then she followed his eyes and saw something unexpected: the Shade had wrapped his shadows around the cracks in the Rift, preventing them from growing further apart. He was trying to keep the fabric of space in the two realms from converging.

With a pang, Una realized the big difference from the erased timeline she had witnessed: Ciaran was not here, but Tristen was.

Celestials were forbidden from intervening in mortal affairs without a summon or a deal. They witnessed the dreaded Assassin breaking every rule—all to protect the mortals he was created to kill.

It was when Malakai noticed her. “Una?? You are back! Did you find—?”

She was not sure who he was anymore: the friend waiting for her to return or the man who had killed her once. There must be a difference between the two! Una had to make up her mind fast, given that he had just ordered his guards to attack Tristen.

At Malakai's command, a dozen palace guards had run out of the building, armed with bows and long spears. They looked terrified, both of the cracking sky and the quaking ground, and most assuredly of the mythical creature made of shadows standing before them. Acting on instinct, Una threw her prana to deflect the first round of arrows flying toward him. However, she and the soldiers soon realized it was unnecessary, for the weapons simply passed through him. Without any further order, the guards kept flinging volley after volley, hoping the celestial might have a core somewhere to hit.

"Una, don't worry about me. Mortal weapons can't hurt me!" Tristen yelled from a distance, "Get Murasaki out of there!"

That jolted her back to reality.

Amaryllis was lying there...Malakai...

"How'd this happen? Who did this!" It finally spilled out of her mouth.

"I had to," he replied without averting his eyes; there was no shame in them, only conviction. And pain. "We need the realms to merge back...for the prana fruits—"

Malakai was the one behind all of this?! Una's mind reeled in shock; none of this was an accident?!

"You understand, don't you? See, it's already working!" Malakai pointed to the prana plants at the corner of the garden; even though the Rift was not entirely broken yet, they responded to the change—patches of green replaced the amber making a mosaic of life and death on their crystalline body.

Una stared at him, unable to reply; he sounded so desperate, but his voice was that of a stranger. Her heart ached for the man she had known for nearly a year, the friend she

had spent time with. He was gone— “Being a knight is about the choices we make each and every day,” she repeated Ciaran’s words and added, “but you’re a king now, ain’t you?”

“Una, listen! Please!” Malakai was not one to give up. “Help me minimize the damage here. Stay with me, with us. Be the knight you were meant to be!”

“What did you guys do to her?” Ignoring his words, Una reached Amaryllis. Knocked out, she was lying next to a giant hole in the ground. Malakai also had dirt and scratches on his body, as if both had been under there when it collapsed. However, Una could tell she had been through far more than an explosion.

Vid opened her mouth to answer before Malakai interrupted. “Vid, Hunter, please herd the citizens to the safe zones we marked on the map from CirrahDion. Sanar, you get the others and send the word to the rest of the country. Contact all three abbeys. Now!!” Malakai told them. “I will talk to Una.”

Talk. Yes... Maybe Una and Malakai could talk and stop this madness—they were friends once.

She saw Sanar, Vid, and Hunter hesitate for a moment; Sanar’s gaze nearly begged her to stand down, while Hunter’s face showed compassion, and Vid’s eyes were stormy with a desperation Una recognized. Yet, none of them spoke a word. The friendship they once shared was not enough to disregard their king’s orders.

“When CirrahDion stood against the clan leaders to protect the fae and finally united Castellon into a kingdom, do you know how many thousand humans died in the process?” Malakai looked devastated, having to explain himself to someone he didn’t think he would have to.

Did he actually think I’d side with him?

“That was an entirely different situation! He didn’t do it for his own benefit!”

“I didn’t either! I admit that I wish the one I love won’t be taken away from me, but that’s not the only reason I did this.

You know as I do that this country's very existence depends on magic, and it is dying, Una! Castellon is dying! I tried everything I could before taking such a drastic measure. Nothing worked! If I must kill to save my kingdom, I will." Malakai had to yell to be heard above the crescendo of cacophony. "If I have to die to save it, I will."

For a moment, Una faltered. Die! Yes, Ciaran died to stop Malakai.

A voice berated from the depths of her mind. *Did he? Or did he die only to save you? What right do you have to accuse Malakai of choosing his love over the rest of the realm? When given a chance, you'd do the same!* Then, something else clicked into place. *Nothing worked?*

"The mages...Their prana...! The things you told us your brother, the king did, were they—?" Words failed her. Una stood there stunned, for her world had suddenly and irrevocably changed.

Why had it been so easy to believe him? Was it because she was more willing to hate the one wearing the crown than the one running from it? Was he laughing at her gullibility every time he told a sob story, and she consoled him? She'd believed him! Every word, every lie.

Trying to squash the tsunami of emotions roiling inside her, Una clamped her mouth shut and hauled Amaryllis' sleeping body up.

"No, Una! Stop. I can protect her at the palace." Malakai's eyes glowed red—something Una had never seen in a human mage. She had assumed that only the fae were strong enough to reflect prana in their eyes.

She was wrong.

"Like you did 'til now?" Una bit her tongue, but the damage was done.

Tendrils of Destroyer magic sprung toward her, barely in time for her to activate her Mover to counter him. Una's blue and Malakai's red met in the middle and fought for dominance. It was then Una realized two huge problems: one,

she had not recovered as much as she had hoped; second, and even worse, Una had activated only one of her cores as a lifelong habit. For the first time since she found out about her change into a Cirrah, Una regretted not having trained enough to use her dual cores.

Ciaran had gifted her this ability, and she was squandering it away.

Horrified at the prospect of fighting a friend (or an ex-friend), she tried to walk away with Amaryllis on her shoulder, but before Una could take a step, she heard Malakai shout, “Una, I told you not to take her!” and a dagger flew at her, making her freeze in fear. With her prana battling Malakai’s and her hands holding Amaryllis, she could not deflect it. Her death might have been an accident in the other past; this time, it couldn’t be anything but deliberate. Una caught a glimpse of Malakai’s shock at his own actions as her life flashed before her eyes—two lives barely lived—to end the same way.

By the same hands.

At that moment, with the dagger so close that she could see herself reflected on its blade, Una closed her eyes; and suddenly, a yellow light erupted from her.

In a swirl of sapphire and citrine, she disappeared.

Poor Amaryllis fell to the ground with a thud while Una reappeared several feet away at the spot where she had first stepped out of the shadows with Tristen, traversing the Corridor to reenter Amon in the blink of an eye.

A bewildered Malakai turned around.

Instead of Una, he faced the Cirrah of Mover and Bender.

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“HOW’S THIS POSSIBLE?”

Malakai looked more hurt now than surprised. As if he’d been cheated out of his birthright.

“Ciaran gifted it to me.” Una didn’t want to say it, but she couldn’t stop herself. Her voice was nearly inaudible by the

swish of arrows and spears crisscrossing the air, still trying to hit Tristen while he held the Rift in place, not to mention the panic all around them. Even though the cracks were not worsening, Una could tell that Tristen was struggling—even an immortal had limits.

“Ciaran? What are you talking about?”

Una stayed silent for a moment, unsure how much to tell him. Finally, she replied, “Malakai, he’s dead.” Swallowing the pain that swelled up again, she continued, “When he passed away, his prana seeped into me.”

He stared at her as if she were speaking in a foreign tongue. Then, the most painful bit sank in. “Dead! No—” His face contorted in undisguised agony as he gasped, “How?” For one second, Una saw the man she used to know.

A part of her wanted to scream back, “*Because you killed me!*” But she couldn’t. Not when it meant admitting aloud that Ciaran died to save her. Instead, she said, “He activated his magic for the first time, and his core broke.” Even this little offering of truth took everything she had.

Malakai trembled so badly that his prana started winking in and out like a candle, not ready to give up yet, but not quite able to keep on going either. How Una wished they could have cried together, grieved Ciaran together...but that was not to happen.

His magic shared his sorrow, and he had let his guard down, even if for a moment. This was the perfect time for her to escape with Amaryllis, but standing at the palace ground where he had died, Una felt equally petrified.

“How could he access his core after all these years? And why? Which class—”

Una could see the cogs turning in Malakai’s highly perceptive and uncannily intelligent mind, putting pieces of the puzzle together. Ignoring the cries from the city and the projectiles flying through the cracks where Tristen’s shadows were weakening, the king worked it out.

“His father was a Bender, a time-Bender who created the perfect clocks. His mother was a Shifter of plants. Opposing prana canceled each other. Then, something terrible must’ve happened...for his emotions to have overpowered the natural constraint—” Without needing Una to respond, his eyes widened at the sudden realization. “All those times you saw him in your visions...they were not visions!” He took a few deep breaths to steady himself but failed. “He bent— Time?? And died doing so? Why?”

Fighting something dark and heavy inside her, Una replied, “He died to protect the world you were destroying. The world you *are* destroying.”

And Malakai snapped.

“Enough!” Anger and madness intermingled with the unsurmountable sorrow in his dark eyes, turning them blood-red once more. “Leave the Shade. Kill her!” His orders boomed through the air.

Weirdly though, Una was grateful. It was over. Whatever had been there between them was officially finished—no trying to explain or understand anymore, no need to search for the person the other cared for. Now, there were only two sides: with Malakai or against Malakai.

And the answer was in the collapsing Rift.

Whatever his reasons, however righteous he might consider them to be, Una could not let the world burn. Amaryllis would’ve chosen the same, and Ciaran too.

The soldiers, looking relieved to have a target they could actually hit, faced her in unison when a bright blue tornado blocked their path; yellow crystals were mixed in the whirlwind, spinning round and round.

Once upon a time, the first Cirrah was the king of Castellon.

Centuries later, the second Cirrah took her stand against the king of Castellon.

She deflected the arrows and the spears with ease, and a few soldiers who tried to attack her head-on with their swords

realized they couldn't get beyond the storm protecting her; the Mover magic flung them a few feet away whenever they reached any close. Flabbergasted soldiers saw their deadly weapons almost touch her and then disappear without leaving any trace as yellow sparks of Bender prana swallowed them up and spit them out somewhere else in time. The non-mages among the soldiers didn't know how to react, but the mages did. Their eyes glanced back and forth between the king and the Cirrah, their loyalty split between the two, but the three made their choice: they deactivated their prana and knelt on the ground. "Cirrah of Amon, we welcome you."

If Una was taken aback at their submission, Malakai lost his mind.

"No, you do not!" Before her disbelieving eyes, the Destroyer bound the three mages with his magic and compelled them to stand up. Struggling like fishes on a hook, they aimed their combined prana at her; their forcefully united magic countered Una's.

She staggered; as powerful as she might become someday, Una was not there yet. One clink in her armor was all Malakai needed. And he found it: the three Movers, puppets in his hand, punched a hole through the tornado.

"Attack her there," he ordered the remaining soldiers, who looked far more terrified of their ruler than their supposed enemy. By now, bigger rocks were raining down from the sky, and exotic trees appeared out of nowhere while the ground shook as if it were waking up from a long sleep.

Una panicked; she was not confident that her Bender magic would be able to handle them. After all, she had never truly honed it.

"No!!" Tristen's shout made her heart stop. The Shade had noticed her predicament, but he himself was unable to help her; tangled in a tough situation, he was trying to slow down the inevitable. Una could think of only one being who could save her right now. Was the Devil even allowed to protect a mortal? Would he hear her if she called?

Una was going to get skewered, and there was nothing she could do to stop them.

“I, Murasaki of the Mesmers, hereby recognize you as the Cirrah of Amon. My power is yours to use.” Amaryllis was awake and standing. Her beautiful face, though tired and drawn, was grim with determination.

Malakai’s face blanched with horror as a blazing violet inferno joined the blue and yellow maelstrom, turning it into a hurricane that swept away the three mages’ prana and destroyed all the weapons in midair. Then, it continued to violently roll forward.

“Run away! Run!”

His warning still came in a tad too late.

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AMARYLLIS WAS DONE being good.

After everything she had gone through in the palace, after what Malakai and his knights had done to her, the final straw was to wake up and find him ready to murder Una.

The violet thunderstorm bottled in her heart finally broke free; joining Una’s vortex, it pulverized everyone in its path—she had no qualms left in her not to squash the brain of every human in the palace into mulch.

“Please, Amy. Don’t hurt ‘em!” Una’s plea reached her and made her pause. Reluctantly and with great effort, she restrained herself just enough to change her magic into a purple poppy shower, and everywhere, people dropped like flies. All the guards fell asleep where they stood, unable to take a step in any direction. Having already spent too much of their prana under Malakai’s magic, the three mages didn’t even attempt to counter her; Amaryllis could swear they had a faint smile of gratitude on their faces as they embraced the oblivion of sleep.

However, her main target was nowhere to be seen.

Una deactivated her prana, given that the immediate danger was averted, but Amaryllis didn’t want to stop hers.

The poison, slowly dissipating from her system, made her even more furious. The amethyst cloud got darker and larger, enough to put the whole city to sleep, with Malakai and others in it—a slumber they might never wake up from. Una had begged her not to harm the humans; eternal rest won't hurt them a bit.

Just when she was about to raise her hands and let the deadly flowers rain over Castle, Una grabbed her hands.

“No, Una. They deserve this. They all do.” Amaryllis hated the sob welling inside her.

“I know,” she quietly replied. “But you *are* better than them. You're better than us.” Una enveloped her tired body in her arms, and the long awaiting tears were finally relieved to be free.

After she had cried herself empty, Amaryllis extricated herself from Una's embrace and said, “Better, yes. Forgiving, no!” Her eyes glowing dark amethyst, she concentrated the magic on her hands, where it solidified into four dark violet arrows.

Una took a step back, but this time, she didn't stop her.

Focusing her mind on the memories she had of her intended prey, Amaryllis released the arrows that flew out in multiple directions. The Mesmer's magic soared straight through the air, determined to find the king and his three knights, wherever they might be.

And find them, the arrows would.

“Things are getting bad over here.” Tristen's voice pulled her back to the way-too-bright world practically crumbling around them. The landmasses from the other side of the Rift were getting larger, and the places where the different time streams collided were fizzing like live wires. The screams from the city were getting louder while the palace had gone entirely silent.

Last time, it had taken the willing sacrifice of a powerful mage to seal the Rift. Would resealing it require the same price?

Amaryllis and Una looked at each other as the same thought apparently went through their minds. “Not you!” they said in unison.

Tristen’s face was tight with pain. Even for an immortal with an endless supply of prana, keeping the two mortal realms apart was too much; his shadows were growing fainter while the fractures were getting more prominent.

Almost like a prayer, he uttered one name under his breath.

Amaryllis was sure she had heard it wrong until a beam of silver light pierced the veil of midnight, and Seraphina stepped out of it. Then she knew the world was indeed ending, for a Shade had summoned an Angel, and the Angel responded to his wish.

The Fury of Justice looked at the chaos around her and said, “I thought you’d never call.”

Chapter 37

Reality check

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THE DEVIL COULD SEE everything through the eyes of his Shades.

And what he had been witnessing for the last very eventful hour was spinning his celestial head: the Rift had been broken apart by none other than the king of Castellon! To think a direct descendent of Dion would do such a despicable thing was beyond imagination.

Sirius didn't initially plan on spying on them, but Tristen was supposed to drop Una off and come back immediately. After what must have been a long enough time in Amon, the Devil had peeked through his Assassin's eyes and uncovered a whole slew of mess which prominently featured Tristen trying to stop the Rift from breaking. Though he understood why the former fae would want to take the matters into his own hands, celestials were not supposed to interfere in mortal affairs directly, and he would have to punish his Assassin when he returned.

For now, the Devil decided to let the Shade have his chance at free will.

If all the anchors were detached, the collision and merger would have taken an instant; with the single imbalance, the process was slow yet inevitable. There was no way even a Shade of his caliber could keep the realms apart while simultaneously mending the fabric of space—Tristen would fail. It took the Devil all his resolve not to run down and intervene. *No, no, no!* He was chanting so loudly that Dom and Althrus, who were in the room with him, turned to stare at him. Then, another unbelievable thing happened.

What the—

The reality Sirius had known for more than four millennia changed before his baffled eyes.

Tristen appeared as surprised at the sight of the Fury as Una and Murasaki (or him, for that matter), while Seraphina only shrugged at their collective bewilderment and said, “What? He summoned me.”

Tristen gulped, staggering at the bulk of the realms on his shoulders. “I didn’t actually ‘summon.’” He spoke in a voice so low that only the Devil might have heard it, “I simply thought of you!”

Then, the precariousness of his situation dawned on him as it did on the Devil: Tristen was so vulnerable at this moment; with his prana completely committed to keeping the Rift together, he had nothing to defend himself against the agent of Mayaderan. She could kill him without much trouble. *Not again!* The world could crash and burn for all Sirius cared; he didn’t want to lose one of his children again.

Seraphina seemed to have realized the advantage she had been offered as well. The Devil watched with bated breath, struggling against the restraints of rules, while the Fury flexed her talons a few times. Then, without warning, a stream of light erupted out of her hands and leapt toward the Assassin. Una’s scream of “No!!” was as futile as anything other than the Devil’s personal intervention, which he was forbidden to do. Sirius couldn’t bear to see Tristen get vaporized, but before he could sever the connection to spare himself the pain, another celestial broke the cardinal rules of immortal life.

Golden magic of pure light sprawled over the holes in the Rift, repairing them and weaving them back. “Phina?” Tristen asked in surprise.

“I told you before that I don’t attack those who can’t defend themselves. Even if they are minions of evil.”

The Devil was highly offended. *Girl, you have never met Evil.*

Her brows knitted in concentration, the Fury ignored the surprised faces around her and said, “You hold it; I’ll mend it.”

“Phina, you will get into a lot of trouble because of this.” Tristen paused briefly and said, “Alectina will kill you.”

The Fury allowed herself a doleful smile. “Seems like you’ve accepted the trouble *you* will be in. And Alectina will ‘try’ to kill me.”

The Devil felt like he was experiencing some bizarre amalgamation of a dream, a nightmare, and what those humans call a severe indigestion. *What’s happening down there?! Why are the agents of Tarderan and Mayaderan cooperating instead of obliterating one another?*

They looked at each other with such softness that it boggled the Devil’s mind.

Carefully, they toiled together to fix the broken veil between the realms: the Shade held the fabric of space while the Fury mended it; their prana spread wider and wider, casting a net throughout the world. The scope of this process was too enormous for mortals to comprehend, but the Devil could see the entire Amonderan at once. Similar disasters were in motion all over Vaneda and Aldoria; people panicked and ran around like the mindless cattle they were. Then, they noticed the cracks in the air starting to heal, with the shadows threading through the strands of light—the mortals would not understand what they had just witnessed, nor would they fathom its gravity.

The Rift, however, kept making ominous sizzling noises like water droplets dying on a heated pan; in the patches they had already “fixed,” there were streaks of lightning dancing around.

It was not working.

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“TIME! WE FORGOT ABOUT time.”

The Devil watched as Seraphina looked at Amaryllis and Tristen in worry, ignoring the human there altogether. “But... there is no time-Bender alive in Amon.”

Before either of the eminences could reply, the ignored human cleared her throat and raised her hand. “Umm, I’m here.”

With some difficulty, Una activated her Bender prana, letting the yellow needles of magic join the shadows and the light. They searched for the loose threads, cautiously suturing them back together.

The expression on the Fury of Justice's face was priceless. "Wasn't she a Mover the last time we met?" She turned to Amaryllis, begging for an explanation.

"Yes. And now, she's the new Cirrah of Amon." Amaryllis didn't seem surprised at Una's revelation, though she didn't have any further insight to offer.

"How?" That was all Seraphina could verbalize before focusing on the task at hand, and piece by piece, the massive veil of space-time started being knit back together; the gossamer barrier, invisible yet vital, was returning to its former strength.

Then, Una faltered.

"She's still a mortal. Cirrah or not, she is just a human," Tristen sighed.

"I can do it!" Una bit her lip and tried to push her prana further, but it had to reach the farthest corners of Amon and Fenderan, a task impossible for a mortal to achieve. Her blue Mover tried to help out; unfortunately, the battle with Malakai and his guards had depleted her to the point that she was on the verge of breaking her cores.

The Devil watching from Tarderan knew it. Seraphina, Tristen, and Amaryllis could see it. The only person who refused to accept her limitations was Una; she was shivering, and her teeth had started chattering uncontrollably with more and more of her prana leaving her body, yet she wouldn't stop.

"Deactivate your prana. Now!"

"Just a little more, Tristen. I can finish this," the stubborn Cirrah replied, struggling to speak between the shivers.

"Una, Stop!" the Devil shouted in the Throne room, making the others present there tense and scared, especially Dom. Sirius was reminded of Ciaran's last moments.

She is trying to sacrifice herself, to make his sacrifice count.

“Don’t do it, Una. You must not,” Sirius muttered, wishing Una could hear him.

Amid Tristen and Seraphina’s combined protests, both trying to find a way to dissuade Una, Amaryllis’ eyes glowed violet. “No way I’m letting you leave me alone. I have lost enough!” She stepped forward and uttered the sacred words for sharing energy. However, Amaryllis didn’t simply add her magic to Una’s; she did something even more radical. As one of the seven most powerful fae, she distilled it into pure energy and infused her life’s essence through Una’s core, enhancing it manifold. This was far more effective than granting the use of her power but also much more dangerous.

If unsuccessful, they would both die.

Tristen, Seraphina, and the Devil watched with horrified expressions when Una and Amaryllis both keeled over in pain, and Una’s Bender magic shuddered before turning off completely. The sky growled, and the Rift started unraveling again—the two realms were failing to stay apart while the two friends were losing the battle to stay together.

After what seemed like an eternity to the immortal, Una’s Bender steadied and flared up with the gusto of new life. The Devil nearly clapped with pride.

The humans of Amon on one side and the fae of Fenderan on the other side of the Rift rejoiced as first the ground, and then the sky stopped shaking. The unlikely allies from the four feuding realms sat exhausted next to each other, allowing their prana to retreat into them slowly.

Together, they had saved the world.

This was a miracle on so many levels! The Devil thought to himself. Amonderan, Fenderan, Tarderan, and Mayaderan, their hatred for each other was supposed to run deep in their veins; it was a truth engrained over the ages, a reality that couldn’t be changed. Suddenly, his eyes widened in panic as Sirius remembered the dreadful lines from the Box:

Sa'ore Verite shall revel in rancor

Sealing Reality, Release, and Reason

When Truth foretold loses its hold

The Sa'ore shall make its decision

Oh! No, no, no! Sirius jumped up, realizing what was about to happen, but he was too late. An explosion shook the foundation of the four realms when an amber relic somewhere inside the Castellon palace shattered into pieces, and a blinding white light shot up through the palace roof.

In the eternally dark and cold Tarderan, the Devil fell back on his throne, scared stiff of the peal of way-too-familiar laughter that echoed in his mind.

“Wait for us, won’t you?” they whispered to him.

Epilogue

The truth was absolute.

Yet, when altered, it had the power to change everything with it.

The Guardian peeked through the window of his room, watching Amon and Fenderan pick up their lives and move on as mortals always did. The Rift was secure again, the prana plants in Amon had returned to their crystalline state, and while the palace of Castellon had suffered substantial damage when the Sa'ore Verite broke, all those things could be mended. "We should've secured the Sa'ore; they should have never been left with the mortals," he sighed, commenting half to himself and half to the other person in the room.

The Devil disagreed. "Once the four realms joined hands for one purpose, Mihael, the relic of Truth would have unsealed wherever it was." He took a sip of his jasmine-laced peppermint tea (the beverage tasted better when created in Mayaderan—most unfair!) and absentmindedly placed the cup on the Guardian's desk to scratch his reddening arm. "To think, they made hatred the reality of our existence. And we perpetuated it for them."

"It was necessary, Sirius." The Guardian spared a disapproving glance at the teacup making a shadow stain on his desk (and the creator of the said cup) before he replied, "Look what happened when my Fury and your Shade decided to play nice with each other. The realms were founded on animosity; we exist to oppose each other. The fae and humans hated one another even when they co-existed. None of this was ever supposed to happen."

The Devil looked at him with sadness and asked, "Are you punishing the Fury of Justice?"

"Not as much as I would've preferred. I have banned her from visiting the mortal realms until further notice."

Sirius understood the gravity of the punishment. "So, she'll hear the cries, especially now that mortals are afraid, but

will be unable to act on it to alleviate the pain a summon inflicts on her soul!”

“Alectina was furious. If she could, she would’ve killed her.”

“Fortunately, a Fury can be poisoned by shadows but not killed by light. Does Alectina believe that we have tainted Seraphina?” the Devil asked with a disappointed smile.

To that, the Guardian shook his head. “No, we don’t think that! She acted on pure instinct to protect the mortal realms—even if it meant breaking the cardinal rule not to interfere and joining forces with a Shade. Seraphina’s integrity as the Fury of Justice was not tainted.” Mihael paused before bestowing another stern look upon him. “So, what’s the punishment for the Assassin?”

“Nothing so far,” the Devil replied, coughing uncomfortably.

“That’s unacceptable, Sirius! If you don’t want to punish him, give him to us. We won’t obliterate him but will drive the lesson home.”

The cup of tea dissipated as the Devil stood up and brushed his coat. “Thanks for your oh-so-kind offer! As the master of Tarderan, my Shade and his lessons are my headaches. Take me to the crypt, please. I want to inspect their condition before I leave.”

The Guardian resigned and followed him out of the room.

The landscape of Mayaderan was constantly changing, each soul seeing its version of the best place. Mihael and Sirius never told each other what the other saw; neither ever asked.

The resident Angels moved away from their path with reverence and fear in their golden eyes; most souls that reincarnated here had been assigned different duties necessary to keep the morality of mortal realms. Incidentally, most of those duties involved diligent record-keeping and tedious paperwork—lots and lots of paperwork.

The Devil couldn't help comparing this realm to Tarderan, where there were only three Shades, one apprentice Shade now, and a couple of dozen mindless shadow-creatures to torture the innumerable souls. After a few centuries, those purged souls would be released from existence to dissolve into nothing, but evil mortals never stopped coming. On the other hand, Mayaderan barely had a handful of souls who passed their grueling tests to enter the gates, let alone be reincarnated as an Angel; the last Fury they'd gained, Seraphina, was reborn four hundred years ago. The "good" souls lounged at the lovely islands or gardens (some at goat sanctuaries?!) until they were ready to embrace release.

As they walked down the paths of Mayaderan toward its very center, the Devil suppressed his urge to ask about Ciaran. After his sacrifice, he must have been granted entry to Heaven and gifted reincarnation. Una had asked a few times, but Sirius didn't know how long it took to be reborn as an Angel, and he could not very well let the Guardian know that he was in touch with a mortal.

Right on cue, Mihael asked, "How's the new Cirrah doing?"

"Stop listening to my thoughts!" the Devil snapped at him.

"Then remember to shield your mind better. I'm going to send someone there to help her train. She is too young, reckless, and volatile to be a Cirrah."

"You mean you will send a chaperone to keep her away from corrupting influences, aka, me!"

"Your words, not mine." The Guardian stopped before a dark and damp cave. Even the purity of Mayaderan could not cleanse the miasma that surrounded the place.

One breath of this air and you would know that you had crossed paths with true evil.

Evil with an E.

Inside the cave were three fossils, trapped in amber crystals and sealed with shadows twisting around them like obsidian shackles. Three silver lines were deeply etched on the

cave's floor, making a massive triangle within which they were secured. One of those lines glowed intensely, and a second flickered like a firefly. The third had gone dark. This was the prison of the three Gods of creation—the three forces of destruction—Reality, Reason, and Release.

“This is what happened when the energy released from the broken Sa'ore reached here.” The Guardian pointed to the dark line. “You need to keep the Sa'ore Morte safe. Hopefully, no one will repeat that fiasco.”

By fiasco, you mean undying love capable of cracking Death. No! No chance of anyone doing that anytime soon. The Devil thought to himself, carefully shielding his mind against the other Mesmer.

Then, he said aloud, “We need to find Sa'ore Vitae, the relic of Life. It has been lost since the beginning. And it's supposed to be in Amon. It's very risky to let it be in the hands of humans at this point.”

“Absolutely!” For once, the Guardian agreed with him (which felt like a harbinger of the apocalypse, in and of itself). “If they break, there won't be a world left for us to protect.”

“There won't be a world left for us to hide,” Sirius added.

The two supreme entities of the four realms stood there for a few minutes, watching the wizened fossils inhale and exhale inside the amber shell. In and out. In and out.

Not that they needed to breathe.

It was only to remember themselves and remind everyone they would never cease to exist.

THE END

Acknowledgments

I want to start by thanking the one person without whom this book wouldn't have existed. Melissa, you're the best friend I'd always wished for but never believed I could have. Thank you for reading every word in every draft, brainstorming how to torment (or "develop") the characters, and being the saner half of my writing process. This book is as much yours as it is mine. It always will be.

Thanks to my wonderful beta readers who made me a better writer with their insights: Katie, Tawnie, Dea, Maria S., Mary, Arjun, and Sam. And someone who deserves special mention here is Valerie Storm. Val, you kept me going when I had given up and reminded me why I wanted to share my story with the world.

I want to thank my Shadow Spark Publishing friends. Especially Jess, for her infinite patience while dealing with me and my incessant questions. You made editing a fun exercise, and that's no easy feat.

Thanks to my colleagues who have endured my constant chirping about the book. Special thanks to my Twitter friends of #vss365 and beyond. If I mentioned every name, acknowledgments would get longer than the book. But you all know who you are, and I love you.

Mom and lil' babbn, thank you for being my reasons for living. Oh, and thanks for reading my book.

Finally, to the one I lost, thank you for showing me how beautiful love truly is. And how powerful sorrow can be.

Credits

Cover Design—Miblar

Cover collated—Jessica Moon

Maps—Shivnath Productions (www.Allentria.com).

Editing—Jessica Moon

Formatting—Mandy Russell



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