

## CHAPTER ONE

The green spark danced upon her palm. Essie sat crossed-legged on her bed, willing the tiny blaze to curve into the shape of a rose. The flame shifted, full of life, into the essence of other flowers, lilies, daisies, tulips. Below her loft, slippers shuffled back and forth over the carpet.

*Come on, Talitha.* Essie huffed, her flame twirling into the head of a sharp-toothed reptile. *Hurry up!*

For the last hour, Talitha, the Goddess of the Nursery, moved from crib to crib, bed to bed, tucking in each of her wards. Essie had closed her eyes and faked a couple snores when the matron climbed up to wish her “sweet dreams.”

If only Talitha knew the truth. It had been moons since her last sweet dream. In fact, the last time Essie had a dream of any kind was moons ago, her need for sleep diminished once she entered her seventeenth year of existence. It made the nights long, but thankfully, Essie knew of ways to pass the time. If only Talitha would hurry up and

leave...

*We've had enough of your fussing for today, Talitha!* But shouting such a thing would only wake the spirits.

The footsteps migrated to the nursery door. *Yes...* The clicking of the handle was music to her ears. *Finally!*

Scrambling out of bed, Essie ran to the edge of the loft and peered through the railing bars at the nursery's lower level, double checking that the goddess was indeed gone. With no signs of Talitha's plump form, Essie grinned and returned to her bedside.

Reaching beneath the mattress, she pulled out a bouquet of branches. Though patchy in places where leaves were missing—a condition resulting from years of use—the bouquet still resembled Essie's leafy head of hair well enough. She placed the branches on her pillow and adjusted her bedsheets to give the appearance that Essence, daughter of the Goddess of Nature and God of Fire, was snoozing in her bed and not sneaking around the Land Above in the dead of night.

A little bird twittered in her chest as she swung her dark green cloak over her shoulders and hurried down the spiral staircase leading from her loft. Reaching the bottom, she paused, scanning the circle of cribs before her. Except for one sleepy gurgle, the room was silent. Essie tiptoed across the carpet for the double archway. As she passed, a whimper came from one of the cots.

*Keep going.* She kept her focus on the archway. *You have places to be.*

But the infant whimpered again—a sad, croaky sound that tugged at her heart and changed her route. Within the noisy cot, a translucent babe squirmed against her white swaddling blanket. Eyes still closed, she let out a third prolonged whimper.

*The poor dear is having a nightmare.*

Essie scooped up the young spirit, who was light and airy as a balloon. The infant's eyes opened, her face scrunching into a grimace, a cry moments away.

“Shhh, don’t be afraid, Sweetling.” Bouncing her gently, Essie brushed the babe’s cheek. “You’re safe here with me. Shhh.”

Slowly, Essie circled the cot, focusing on the infant’s crinkled face. “Talitha taught you fear today, didn’t she? You poor thing.” The infant stared up at her, her lip quivering. “Has she taught you love yet?”

Essie pecked the top of the babe’s smooth head. The little dear’s eyes grew round, and gradually the corners of her open mouth curved upwards.

“It feels nice, doesn’t it?” Essie smiled and the young spirit returned it. “Your lives in the Lands Below will be full of love. I’m sure of it.”

With a sigh, the infant rested her head against Essie’s chest. Warmth permeated from the spot, igniting a flurry of flutters. Slowly waltzing around the cot, Essie waited for the infant’s eyes to close. When the little spirit was once again in dreamland, she placed her in her cot, ignoring the slight droop of her own heart.

Tomorrow, she could cuddle the infant spirits. Tonight, she had somewhere to be.

Essie hurried into the next chamber before another infant distracted her. Two long rows of single beds lined the narrow room, each mattress occupied by a slumbering spirit. The patter of her feet disturbed a few of them, but they simply rolled over, promptly falling back into the dreams that would prepare them for their futures. One of the spirits, however, wouldn’t be falling back to sleep, she’d see to that.

Her best friend, Wilf, lay in the bed closest to the nursery’s giant, floor to ceiling window. Yet to become a true human soul, his perfect symmetrical face and hairless scalp made him identical to the other male spirits lying in the beds next to him. His ivory translucence shimmered in the moonlight spilling in from outside.

“Wilf,” she whispered, poking his airy shoulder.

“Hmm?” Wilf rolled over, his eyelids fluttering open.

“Wake up!”

“No,” he mumbled, shutting his eyes again.

Essie huffed. This was becoming a common—and rather annoying—response. Grasping his pillow, she yanked it out from beneath him. His eyes shot open as his head thumped on the mattress.

“Come on, Essie.” He grunted, propping himself on his elbows. “Let me rest. I leave tomorrow.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Which is exactly why you should be awake and sneaking around the gardens with your best friend.”

“Best friend?” Wilf snorted, lying back. “You mean biggest pain in—”

“Don’t make me throw you out the window.” Grinning, she grabbed his arm and pulled him upright.

“It’s not like you haven’t done it before.” With an eye roll, Wilf followed Essie to the window.

“I didn’t throw you.” Essie shook her head. “I pushed you, because you would have got us caught.”

Essie smiled at the memory—that was the first night they snuck out, only four years into their existences.

Arriving at the window, Essie carefully pushed open the pane and stepped aside. “After you.”

Wilf narrowed his eyes, but obliged. “If you push me, I will—”

She shoved him, for old time’s sake. Biting back a laugh, so as not to wake the entire nursery, Essie followed him out. The distance from the nursery window to the flower patch below was a fair drop, but Essie had perfected the jump over the years. She landed gracefully next to Wilf on his hands and knees.

“Need a hand, clumsy?” Smirking, she offered her arm.

“No.” He swatted her away, standing on his own. “Damn you, Essie.”

“Oh, shush.” She entered the garden, waving at him to follow. “Come on!”

They crept away from the palace with its glowing brick walls and seven towers, following the zigzagging path lined with neatly-groomed shrubs, passed patches of daffodils and tulips, under arches of white orchids and over small bridges spanning across ponds full of lily pads. The journey through the maze of greenery took time, as the garden was a vast place.

Essie still had yet to visit parts of it, particularly the sections closest to the walls bordering the palace grounds on its south and west sides. One day, she would know all the parts of the Land Above. This was her nest, after all. It was her responsibility to know every twig.

When their trail finally met with the garden's main lane, Essie and Wilf crouched behind the rose bushes fringing the golden-bricked walkway. Mindful of the thorns, Essie peered over the branches, scanning the path from where it began at the palace's front entrance to its ending at the gate—the only way in or out of the Land Above.

Spying no one, she pushed through the thorny branches and gestured for Wilf to follow her across.

On the other side, the terrain sloped into a pathless incline. Essie navigated the hill, weaving around weeds the size of ferns, warning Wilf about unruly roots, and trekking through knee-high grass.

A thicket greeted them at the bottom of the hill. Essie breathed in its fresh scent before entering. The thick foliage growing overhead and underfoot blocked any light from the distant palace and the stars above, but Essie could still see the intricate crisscrossing of vines and the beautiful curtains of ivy all around her.

"Essie, wait!" Wilf called, from further back than she expected.

"Keep up, you tortoise," she shot over her shoulder.

"You know I can't see well," Wilf grumbled. "I don't have eyes of green fire like you."

"That's not my fault." Essie smirked. "I didn't ask to be the daughter of fire."

“That’s not my point. Shine a light for me, will you?”

“Fine.”

With a flick of her fingers, small green flames sparked to life in her palms, adding a soft green glow to the thicket. Wilf stumbled through the greenery, hurrying to catch up to her.

“You’re welcome,” she teased, as he arrived at her side, panting.

“Thank you—” Wilf nodded at the flames. “—Ignacio, for passing along your fiery powers to your daughter so she could help me see in this dark thicket.”

“Ha ha!” Essie shook her hands, extinguishing the fire. “You can be blind, then.”

“We’re almost there, anyway.”

Essie brushed aside a curtain of ivy, emerging in a small glade. A hedge ran along the eastern edge. Beyond the green wall, the night sky stretched on and on. Essie approached the single tree in the centre. Moonlight shone upon its umbrella-shaped canopy like a spotlight.

She placed her hand upon the trunk, greeting the tree like an old friend. For as long as they’d been sneaking out of the nursery, she and Wilf had been coming to this glade.

“So, what do you want to do tonight? Play True Lie? Or,” she moved three steps south from the tree’s trunk to where the ground fell away, forming a mossy cliff. A circular pool glimmered at the bottom. “We could swim?”

“Maybe later.”

Essie glanced over her shoulder. Wilf stared over the hedges, out at the universe. She joined him. From their lookout, they could only see one of the five Lands Below, the leaf-shaped one.

*Finova.*

“Have you been told which realm you’re going to?”

Wilf sighed, not moving his gaze. “Alvaro told me Duto.”

“Ugh, not Duto. That realm barely has any trees.”

Wilf frowned. “Nothing I can do about that.”

“You’ll be alright, Wilf.” Sensing his worry, Essie looped her arm around his. “Just think about all the experiences coming your way.” *Experiences without me.* “You’ll see new sights, learn new things, meet new people...”

Wilf looked at her. “Will you miss me?”

“No.” She rested her cheek against his shoulder. “Not one bit.”

“Oh, good.” He chuckled. “Because I’m not going to miss you either.”

Essie elbowed him and stepped away. “Only because you’re going to forget about me.” She joked, but the truth of the words wiped away her grin.

Spirits lost the memory of the Land Above when they became human souls. Only after death, once they returned to the Land Above did their memories come back. Depending on how long Wilf lived, it was possible that for one hundred years her best friend wouldn’t remember she existed.

A familiar heaviness set in, the same that weighed on her whenever she truly thought of Wilf’s departure. She hadn’t lived a day without him at her side. Tomorrow, that would change.

“Eh—race you to the pool bank!” Wilf punched her arm, sprinting for the cliff’s edge.

“Ouch! That hurt!” The throb spider-webbed, pulsing up to her shoulder, down to her elbow, even cracking through the hefty weight pressing down on her. She shook off the rest on her own. *Thanks, Wilf.*

She smiled after him as he dived off the cliff. *I still can’t let you win. You’re going to hate me for this.*

Throwing off her cloak, she extended her arms, her green skin peeling, making way for feathers. She shook her head, and her mouth and nose expanded, morphing into a long beak. A godling no longer stood in the glade, rather a green bird, ready to take flight.

One flap of her wings took her to the cliff edge, a second sent her hurtling for the middle of the pool. Before she hit the water, she shifted back into her godling form. A wave burst into the air, sloshing the surface as it fell. Essie turned to Wilf, droplets sprinkling her face.

“Oy!” He exclaimed, treading in place. “How did you—?”

She grinned. “I’ll tell my mother you say thank you for passing her shifting powers onto me.”

“That’s not fair, Essie!”

Essie floated on her back, idly kicking her legs. “You didn’t set any rules.”

“You’re so annoying!” He slammed his fists on the surface, water spraying his face. “You’re always cheating!”

“It’s not cheating, it’s called finding a loophole.” Her back bumped the pool’s edge.

“It’s. NOT. Fair!”

Giggling, Essie grabbed onto the muddy bank, pulling herself onto shore, her leafy hair resembling a tree in a rain shower. A distant noise pierced the night, causing her to slip and kiss mud. Wiping her mouth, she rolled over to face Wilf arriving at the pool’s edge. His round eyes darted between the starry sky and the surrounding trees.

“What do you think—?”

Screaming disrupted the hush, the anguish within the cries seizing hold of her, tugging hard. Shifting into a bird again, Essie flew in the direction of the cry.

“Essie! Wait!”

Leaving Wilf behind, she soared over the thicket. From her vantage point, she spotted two bright figures promenading the garden.

Their hair of sunlight and garments of shimmering gold identified them unmistakably as the king and queen. They moved slow and elegant, like a sunrise, in the direction of the yells.

Essie flew for the victims, keeping low. Their cries grew louder the

closer she came to the gate. She landed behind a cluster of shrubs bordering the gate's white-bricked courtyard.

"Please, let us go!" A female whimpered.

Essie shifted into her godling form to see better in the dark and bit back a gasp.

Two spirits hung on the gate from stakes nailed into their hands. A hooded figure tied ropes around their ankles.

"All we asked was to stay up here in the Land Above," the female spirit said. Her male companion kicked his legs, trying to free himself.

"Hence why I've summoned the king and queen." The hooded figure turned his back on his victims. Essie didn't need to see his round, skeletal face to recognize Alvaro, the God of the Gate. His soft, sneering voice was enough indication. "You can ask them."

*How can he be so cruel?* Heat shot down Essie's arms. *Hanging them like paintings.* Essie glanced over at the approaching king and queen. *They'll put a stop to this.*

Sunlight radiated off the monarchs. Essie squinted as they passed by her hiding place.

"Your majesties." Alvaro bowed low.

"This better be important," the king said. A hot breeze swept through the courtyard, ruffling the king's long, golden cape and blowing Alvaro's hood off.

"It is," Alvaro moved aside, revealing the two spirits.

The queen stepped closer, the train of her magnificent gown, trailing across the bricks. "What do we have here?"

*An atrocity.* Essie leaned forward, trying to see the queen's face, but golden locks hid her majesty's expression.

"The spirits have something to ask of you," Alvaro said.

"And what is that?" The king raised his eyebrows.

"We—we don't want to be sent back to the Lands Below," the female said, her voice trembling. "We want to stay here because—"

“We’re tired!” The male blurted. “Tired of being forced to live one life after another. We’ve suffered and suffered again!”

*Suffered?* Essie’s gut curled. *Wilf. Will he suffer too?*

“We deserve a rest.”

The majesties exchanged a look. The queen flicked back her hair, revealing the growing smirk on her lips, a smirk that matched her husband’s. Essie furrowed her brow. *What’s the joke?*

“Oh, Alvaro.” The queen simpered. “You’ve made our night bringing these two to our attention.”

*Made their night?* Essie’s stomach churned. *They should be punishing him...*

The king nodded. “We do love dealing with spirits like these.” He looked back at the spirits. “You’d like to rest? Well, there’s nothing more restful than nonexistence, is there?”

*What does—*

Beams of light burst from the king and queen’s palms. Raising their arms, they aimed their light at the spirits’ feet. Two bone-trembling shrieks rocked the garden, knocking Essie backwards. The grass vibrated beneath her back, absorbing the screams.

With trembling arms, Essie used the shrub’s branches to pull herself upright. She nearly fell back over, her innards plummeting down into a dark, dark pit, as the beams feasted upon the spirits’ toes, leaving nothing behind.

Slowly, the fatal light moved upward, devouring their ankles, their knees and thighs. The less of them that remained, the louder they screamed—to the majesties’ delight. Essie clapped her hand over her mouth, stomach heaving at the glee on the king and queen’s glimmering faces. *They’re monsters!*

Arms wrapped around her, dragging her back. She squirmed in her captor’s grasp, but his strength bested her, her power waning with the spirits as the sun scorched them from existence. The shrieks faded into

nothing more than an echo. The green of the thicket blocked their murderers from view.

Wilf carried Essie all the way to the pool's bank before setting her down. She sank to the ground, mud squishing beneath her knees. The horrific scene replayed on the pool's smooth surface, showing once again the bright light, the spirits' thrashing, and—worst of all—the monarchs' terrible smirks.

Her gaze darted from the pool up to the acacia tree on the clifftop. Shadows she did not recognize crept into view. How many more waited to be uncovered?

“My nest has monsters in it, Wilf.” She hugged herself. “How am I supposed to live here?”

## C H A P T E R   T W O

Side by side, Essie and Wilf scanned the gate's white iron face from top to bottom. Smooth and unstained under the clear morning sky, the entryway lacked any signs of the terrible murder the night before.

Wilf put his back to the gate. "You have to promise me you won't do anything foolish while I'm gone."

"Foolish?" Essie forced a grin. "Do you know who you're talking to, Mister?" She poked him in the chest.

"Yes, I do." He cupped her hand in both of his. "You're the Godling of Impulsivity." Though he smiled, it didn't reach his eyes. "And—"

"And my voice of reason is going away." The weight in her chest expanded, threatening to suffocate her. Blinking back tears, she threw her arms around his neck. "What am I going to do without you, Wilf?"

He squeezed her tight. "Just, whatever you do, don't draw too much attention to yourself. If the monsters don't see you, they can't get you."

“I wish I could go with you.” Not only to forget the Land Above, and the villains that lurked within it, but to stop this goodbye.

Someone cleared their throat. Essie and Wilf pulled away from each other. Alvaro tapped his foot, his skeletal face hidden within the hood of his black cloak.

Sweat beaded on Essie’s palms, but she kept her flames at bay. The God of the Gate deserved to be burned for what he let happen to those poor spirits, but throwing fire at him would surely count as one of those foolish acts Wilf begged her to avoid.

“It is time, Wilf.” Alvaro grabbed the gate’s long chain and tugged on it. Slowly, the gate swung open, revealing a view of endless blue sky. “Go.”

The command sucked the air out of Essie. This was it, the final moment. After Wilf stepped over the threshold, he’d be unreachable. She snatched Wilf’s hand, gripping it tight, as if that would be enough to either keep him there or bring her with him.

Wilf frowned at her, his eyes wishing the same. “You have to let me go, Essie. I’ll see you again.”

He gave her fingers one last squeeze, then released her hand and passed through the gate. Essie closed her stinging eyes, unable to watch her best friend vanish into the blue. The gate thudding shut drew out her tears.

“Oh, stop your weeping,” Alvaro scoffed.

Brushing her wet cheeks, Essie glared at the god.

“And over a spirit too. It’s pathetic.”

“You know what’s pathetic?” Heat shot down her arm to her hands, but she clenched her fists to smother the sparks. “A friendless snitch, like you, who—”

Sneering, Alvaro raised his eyebrow. “Snitch?”

Her next words caught in her throat. Saying anything more would reveal her transgression the night before. Biting her lip, she spun and

marched away.

“You are your father’s daughter,” Alvaro called after her. “And your outbursts will get you into trouble one day. The both of you.”

Focusing on the palace ahead, Essie quickened her pace, eager to escape Alvaro’s sight.

“*Saying that was foolish, Essie,*” Wilf would say. “*Exactly what I told you NOT to do.*”

“At least I didn’t set him on fire,” she grumbled at the imaginary Wilf.

Essie entered the palace courtyard, pausing as she passed the fountain in the centre. Water cascaded into five unique wells from the hands of two god-shaped statues. It was supposed to represent the creation of the Lands Below, but after last night, she saw the wells as poor spirits and the jets of water, the deadly beams of light used to destroy them. *I wish I could burn it down.*

“*But that would be—?*” Imaginary Wilf said in her head.

“Foolish and impulsive.”

With a sigh, she dawdled to the entrance. The doors burst open as she reached them, knocking her down. Leala, the daughter of night and sky, stormed into the courtyard, either ignorant or uncaring to Essie sprawled behind the door. Though daylight dimmed her usual shine, the contrast between Leala’s black dress and starry complexion still brought out some sparkle. Her sister, Elle, flounced behind her, holding up the edge of a frilly blue gown. “You better not be headed where I think you’re going.”

*Where is that?*

Personified stars, beautiful and difficult to look away from, Elle’s fair braid glimmered in the light, while Leala’s wavy locks shone as black as night. Their confrontation caught hold of Essie, drawing her in as she found her feet. *Why shouldn’t she go?*

“It’s none of your business if I am,” Leala snarled over her

shoulder.

“It is my business,” Elle insisted, grabbing her sister’s arm. “Our family’s reputation is at stake! Everyone already thinks you’re in love with a—”

*In love with a what? Essie tilted her head. A spirit?*

“And whose fault is that? You’re the one who made up the rumour!” Wisps of bright blue and yellow light pulsed from Leala’s arms. Elle gasped and released her.

“Leala!” Elle shouted after her sister, who stalked from the courtyard. “You’re going to ruin everything!”

Elle turned with a huff. Spotting Essie, her navy eyes rounded, quickly shifting focus to the doors. Tilting her chin to the sky, she strutted inside, reeking of the same stuffy pomp she bathed in as a child.

“*It’s wrong for godlings to play with spirits,*” she told Essie once, when they were both still very young. Essie shouted her disagreement, defending Wilf and all the others. Elle hadn’t spoken to her since.

Dusting herself off, Essie lingered in the courtyard, allowing Elle’s haughty fragrance to fade before following her inside. A group of gods and goddesses crowded the entrance hall, conversing after the daily assembly. Her parents mingled near the foot of the wide staircase across from the door. Her father’s fiery cape and her mother’s tree-like nature were hard to miss, even in a congregation as unique as this one.

As Essie moved through the crowd, a blue arm swung at her face. She ducked to avoid it. The arm’s owner tittered, blissfully unaware she nearly decapitated someone during the animated telling of her story. Rolling her eyes, Essie moved on, only to dodge heads thrown back in laughter.

*How can they be so cheery, knowing they serve a couple of monsters? The smiles, the giggles, should be non-existent, reserved for the ignorant, like she was only days ago. She gasped. Maybe they don’t know the truth! I have to tell—*

Smacking into a wall of flesh, she hit the floor for the second time.

“Sorry, I—” Her apology caught in her throat.

Blood red eyes loomed above her, delving into her own. The face was grey in colour, square in shape, and boasting a cleft chin. She’d only glimpsed this face once before, from afar, but she still knew his name.

*Pirro.*

“Oy, you big oaf!” Her father shouldered to her side, his flaming hair blazing bright and wild. “Mind where you’re walking.”

“Don’t speak to my son that way, Ignacio.” Amora, the Goddess of Love, stepped up beside Pirro, her arms crossed over her voluptuous bosom.

Sparks shot up Ignacio’s orange arms, singeing his sleeves. “He knocked my daughter over.”

Amora shifted her gaze to Essie, a smirk forming on her plump lips. Essie squirmed beneath the goddess’ teasing stare.

“Why is she out here in the first place? Last I heard, dear Essence was still a ward of the nursery.” Twirling her finger around a strand of her magenta hair, Amora looked to the double doors on the hall’s left wall—the doors leading to the king and queen’s wing of the palace. “Our majesties wouldn’t like to hear about a nursery escapee, now would they?”

“Don’t you threaten me, Amora.” Flames engulfed Ignacio’s hands.

“Father!” Essie scrambled to her feet, reaching for his arms to hold him back, but someone else’s green hands had already grabbed him.

*Mother, thank goodness.*

“Enough of this nonsense!” Tivona gripped both of Ignacio’s elbows. Her wild head of leaves and colourful flowers wilted from the heat of her husband’s flames. “Simmer, Ignacio!”

“Listen to your sensible wife, Ignacio.” Amora turned on her heels, the skirt of her silky red dress twirling to reveal a scandalous amount of leg. “Come, Pirro.”

Essie glanced at Pirro. He loomed over her, like a large boulder on the edge of a cliff. A single strand of dark hair fell from his low bun, and he blew it out of his face before following after his mother, his heavy steps thudding across the floor.

Her father cleared his throat, winning back her attention. “Why *are* you out of the nursery?”

“Talitha gave me permission to say goodbye to Wilf.”

“He’s gone!” Her mother smiled, new flowers blooming in her hair. “How wonderful for him.”

*And how awful for me...*

“I have something to tell you both.” She glanced between both parents. “Can we go to your tower?”

Her mother slid her arm around her shoulder. “Of course. Let’s go.”

They climbed the winding staircase, up to their tower on the third level. Once inside their parlor—a circular room with green vines growing along the wood panelling and a giant stone hearth on the north wall—her father set the grate ablaze, while her mother guided her to the loveseat in front of the fire and sat beside her.

“What is it you need to tell us?”

“First, I broke a rule last night.” Essie looked between her father, leaning against the fireplace, and her mother. “I snuck out of the nursery—”

“Essie, do you realize how dangerous that is?” Her father straightened, his fiery hair blazing brighter. “You heard Amora’s threat earlier. You can’t be so reckless!”

Essie recoiled as the blast of heat wilted her leafy hair.

“Ignacio, simmer.” Her mother waved him away, taking both of Essie’s hands. “Essie, dear, you must be careful. The king and queen take rule breaking very seriously, even if the offence is as minor as yours. You mustn’t cross them.”

“Would they kill me?” Once again, she saw the beams of light, heard the spirits’ shrieks.

Her parents exchanged frowns, her mother squeezing her fingers. “No. Not for that.”

Essie tugged her hands out of her mother’s and hugged herself. “I saw them murder two spirits last night.”

Her mother sighed. “That’s the fifth bunch this quarter.”

“They must have come from Finova.” Her father paced before the fire, holding his arms behind his back. “Like the others.”

“The others?” Essie tilted her head. “This isn’t the first time they killed?”

“Hardly.” Her father scoffed. “And it likely won’t be the last, if spirits from Finova continue to return restless.”

Her heart sunk to the pit of her stomach. They knew. They knew the king and queen were monsters, knew they were killing innocent spirits and yet...

“Why don’t you stop them?”

Her father halted, looking at Essie with a raised brow. “Stop the majesties from doing as they please? It isn’t worth it, Essie.”

“Isn’t worth it?” She leapt to her feet. A sizzling heat shot up her arms. “Spirits are losing their lives! Their existences are worth as much as ours.”

“Oh, darling, I wish others thought like you.” Her mother touched her shoulder. “But I’m afraid, you’re the only flower in a garden full of weeds.”