

CHAPTER ONE

Clumps of orange vomit splattered the bottom of the bucket. Essie sunk to her knees, drenched in cool sweat as burning lava rose within, taking over her chest, her throat...

Please, not again.

Another explosion burst forth, stealing what remained of her strength. The rim of the bucket dug into her forehead, the wooden walls rattled, embraced by her trembling arms.

In her one hundred and thirty-five years of existence she'd endured heartbreak, harassment, and banishment, yet managed to stand through it all, but three moons in this human form and a bout of illness could knock her off her feet for hours at a time.

There are worse fates though, she supposed.

A tawny hand touched her sweaty shoulder.

“Here, Essie, drink this.” With a scrunched nose, Ayami offered her a full wooden cup. Essie breathed in the sweet scent of watery grass and nectar, a more preferable smell than what was coming from the bucket. A single sip tamed the rumbling volcano.

“What is it?”

“Poison.”

Essie spit out her second sip.

“I’m fooling you.” Ayami giggled, her round cheeks rising into her dark brown eyes. A couple strands of black hair fell from the messy bun atop her head. “It’s a concoction Mag makes for Ax and Zinni when they’re ill. I mean, I hope it is. I’m not an expert when it comes to herbs.”

“So it could still be poison.”

Essie drank more. The sweetness spread and solidified in her limbs, dispelling the trembles. “It seems to be helping. Thank you.”

“Anytime.” Ayami’s grin faded as she glanced at the treehouse nearest the river on the other side of the semicircular glade where Mag removed a hook from the lip of a fisher’s thirteen-year-old nephew. “Maybe don’t tell Mag. Aunty doesn’t like when we go through her healing shelf.”

“I won’t.”

Essie set aside the smelly bucket and leaned back against the kapok tree’s thick trunk, picking the sides of the knee-length, faded-brown dress clinging to her sticky skin. It was an old, pre-infant, dress of Ayami’s she’d been given when she first arrived here. Ayami now wore a dark brown sash over her bosom and a skirt hanging from her fleshy waist, a more convenient outfit for a breastfeeding mother Essie had been informed.

After a long afternoon of sweltering the jungle, the tyrannous sun had finally fallen behind the treetops to the west, making it safe for the village children to chase each other around the bulbous tree growing from the glade’s centre. Essie drank the rest of the potion, but it was the precious sound of innocent laughter that stole away the remainder of the illness.

“Would you look at some of those saltut stalks?” Ayami said.

To the right of the big tree, patches of saltut plants blossomed in the pink light, the leafy stalks reaching taller than the gardeners who harvested them for their honeyed, filling fronds.

“Someone should tell the sky we are good for rain for several moons,” Ayami said. “If the glade floods one more time, the entire village could eat saltut for twelve moons and we’d still have some left over.”

“That’s better than going hungry, isn’t it?”

“Sure, but I like variety in my food.”

Essie chuckled. The humans of Essence were so spoiled and they didn’t even know it. Not every realm had plants like saltut that grew in abundance, lived long after harvest, and filled the belly all day.

And that was because not every realm had been grown by her.

Infant wails drifted from the cottage in the sturdy branches above.

“Sounds like nap time is over.” Ayami rolled to her knees and pushed herself to her feet.

“If you’re up to it, do you mind trying to get a fire started? Mag will want to start cooking once she’s home.” Ayami climbed the staircase wound around the tree trunk.

Essie collected a stack of wood from the basket beneath the staircase and shuffled by the two log benches surrounding the cooking stone, a cylindrical-shaped boulder high enough off the ground that the charred bowl carved into the top was usually safe from submersion when the glade flooded. She arranged the wood into a pyramid over the black-and-white ashes caking the bottom of the bowl. Picking up two pieces, she scraped them together, calling for sparks.

None came.

Sweat beaded on her forehead as she rubbed the wood at different angles, different speeds, only wearing down the bark.

Flames flickered from cooking stones in twelve of the seventeen yards bordering the glade as neighbours prepared for their evening meals. The matriarch of the big family two yards down loudly instructed her granddaughters on how to chop potatoes. The old man to the right, carefully turned the spit his bird roasted upon, while his son and daughter-in-law hauled baskets of saltut into the yard, calling over their shoulders for their children to stop chasing their friends around the big tree. Except for the chickens in the coop one yard over, no one paid any attention to Essie.

She snapped her fingers at the base of her wood pile. Her heart drooped from an inner hornet’s sting.

Three moons ago, a snap of her fingers brought flames to life. Now she snapped her fingers—once, twice, ten times. No smoke. No steam. Nothing.

She sighed, staring at her hands, no longer jungle green but greyish-beige with a greenish tinge, lacking the power they once had after Amora stripped her of her godliness. A good thing for someone trying to live a simple, human existence...

Still, why did starting fire have to be so hard? With a huff, she chucked a piece of wood at the ground and sunk onto the log bench.

“Her hair looks like dead leaves.”

Essie blew a tangled strand of brownish-orange curls off her face and turned to the voice. The neighbour’s adolescent daughter simultaneously poured seeds into the chicken coop and gossiped with her friend.

“And her eyes are too bright.”

“Also, her ears can hear,” Essie said.

The girls jumped and scampered into the foliage behind the chicken coop.

It wasn’t the first time she’d overheard the gossip and the sneers. If only they knew who they were insulting. Perhaps their words would be kinder for the godling who planted this beautiful garden they called home.

But she was a human now; who she used to be wasn’t relevant anymore. Not in this new life she was trying to lead.

“Don’t mind the clucking hens next door.” Ayami descended the last five steps of the staircase, carrying both her infant daughter and toddler son. “I’m jealous, to be honest.”

“Jealous?”

“I worked hard to be the most gossiped about person in the village, you know? Then in one day my title was robbed by this odd-looking stranger my cousin decided to bring home.”

Flashing a grin, Ayami plopped onto the log. “Can you hold Zinni for a moment?”

Essie took the eight-moon-old babe. Only slightly heavier than a

coconut, Zinnia wiggled her little limbs, her tawny skin so soft and warm.

“Hello, Sweetling. Did you have a good dream?” Essie tapped Zinnia’s button nose, drawing out a heart-melting giggle.

“I’m ready.”

Essie leaned away from Ayami, not ready to give Zinnia up yet.

“Get your own.” Ayami chuckled, stealing back her daughter.

Essie’s lap wasn’t empty long. Axil waddled over, sucking his thumb. She wiped the leftover tears from his chubby cheeks and patted his soft tuft of black hair.

“Dar-Dar-Dar,” he whimpered.

Essie smiled, resting her chin atop his head, picturing Darius’s scruffy, black hair, the light in his dark eyes, and most especially that smile that never failed to bring out her own. “He’ll be home soon.”

* * *

Moss blanketed the toppled-over tree blocking the jungle path ahead. Darius hiked through ferns and Arisaemas, ducking under and pushing aside stray branches to reach the tree’s base. Nesa’s tail brushed his frayed capris as her two feet carried her into the long grass ahead. He lost sight of her grey scales among the green.

“Oy, Darius!” Tober called from his perch on his adolescent rex’s shoulder. His thick fingers gripped the top of the brown harness wrapped around the giant, two-legged reptile’s upper body. With the soles of his sandals hugging the harness’s lower rung, for the fifth time that day, Tober tested the limits of how far he could lean back. Darius predicted in a moment or two, Tober would fall and tear another hole in his shorts or add a fifth bruise to the others already turning his fawn skin purple.

“Where you headed?”

“This tree wasn’t down yesterday.” Darius ran his palm along the trunk’s mossy bark.

“So?”

“So? You’ve been a protector longer than me. Isn’t this something we

should be investigating?”

“It fell over. End of story.”

Darius shook his head. “But why did it fall?”

Nesa sniffed the broken stump, her little nostrils quivering.

“What have you found?”

He crouched beside her. Navy cloth hung from the scorched splinters. The cloth was smooth as silk, far from the fabrics woven together to make his and Tober’s vests and pants.

His stomach knotted. *Is somebody spying on us?*

Traces of sunlight poked between the gaps in the canopy above.

No, not *us*. *Her*. If they were spying, they were spying on her.

“So, what’s the tree’s story?” Tober called.

“Huh? Oh-eh.” Darius rolled the fabric into a little ball and trekked back to the main trail. “Rex prints. Maybe a rogue knocked it.”

“How scary!” Tober clapped his hand over his wide mouth. “A rogue rex is romping around the village. Darius, protect me!” His rex, Tooth, grumbled softly, yellow eyes rolling back to check out his handler.

Darius shook his head but also grinned. “Is there anything you take seriously?”

“Is there anything you *won’t* take seriously?” Holding the top of the harness, Tober reached his long, bulky arm to Darius.

He latched onto Tober’s fingers, using him to climb up onto Tooth’s back. “While on patrol? No. Our families rely on us to keep them safe.”

“Fiends, you’re worse than Vin.” Tober tugged out the little axe strapped to Tooth’s harness and started twirling it carelessly in circles. “Keep them safe from what? Rogue rexes?”

Gods and goddesses, more like. If only rogue rexes were all there were to fear. Darius squeezed the piece of fabric hidden in his other hand.

“You’ve turned into such a worrier. Ever since you came back from your—*adventure*.”

How could he not worry now that he remembered the tyrants looming above? Any moment one of them could come down and take away

everything. But of course, Tober didn't know that. No other human did.

"If you're not careful"—Tober nearly dropped his axe, the sharp blade aimed for his thigh. He barely caught the handle's end, but immediately continued twirling the tool, unfazed—"I'm going to start calling you Cousin Cazer."

"That's not fair." Darius scowled. "I didn't abandon my family. I came back."

"With a pretty woman in tow." Tober winked and elbowed him.

"She's more than that." A vision of eyes of green fire appeared in a patch of green shrubbery. His heart inflated, pretending it heard her cheeky laugh too. The silky cloth in his hand stole away his grin, a reminder that the bliss of the last three moons could come to an end soon.

The ground rumbled with each of Tooth's steps, but his giant strides weren't carrying them fast enough home, to her.

* * *

Essie held the reeking bucket at arm's length, dumping her vomit into the river, the current carrying the orange globs away. She didn't know such an atrocious substance could come out of her, out of anyone for that matter. Ten times sick and she still wasn't used to the stench, likely never would be. Thank goodness saltut leaves had the power to freshen one's breath and banish the nasty taste or she'd throw up all over again.

"Oh, Essie, are you not feeling well?"

An arm looped through hers. For a moment, she thought Elle had sidled up to her, but the slender girl holding her arm hostage had a complexion of golden beige, not of starlight. She held herself similarly though, back straight, chin lifted, showcasing a pretty dress no one else had—the embodiment of a lady with power, or at least, pretending to have power.

"I wasn't earlier, Isa." Essie held the bucket as far away as possible from the leader's daughter's plugged nose.

"Is the jungle not agreeing with you?"

Getting used to this human body isn't agreeing with me. Essie swallowed her initial response along with a salted leaf. "I'm not sure what's bothering me."

"The humidity isn't for everyone." Isa brushed some of the sweat from Essie's brow.

Essie stiffened at her touch. "I don't mind the humidity." *I'm the one who made it this way...*

"If you plan to stay around here, you should try putting your hair into a bun." Isa patted Essie's brownish-orange curls, tangled in a half up, half down mess that couldn't be tamed. "It'll keep you cooler."

Isa plucked a pink hibiscus from a patch growing alongside the riverbank and stuck the stem into her bun of dark brown hair. Though the petals complemented the greenish-grey colour of Isa's flowy dress, Essie wilted in solidarity with the poor flower prematurely sent to its death. Still, she allowed Isa to guide her from the miry riverbank. They passed by families sitting together in their yards. Roasting fish and simmering stews mixed with the jungle's fruity scent.

"By the way, my father was wondering how long you planned on staying with us."

Nearby, a father taught his teenage sons how to gut fish while his wife helped their infant daughter to walk. Beneath the neighbouring treehouse, four older women sat in a circle, chatting as they pieced together a large fishing net in the glow of the firelight. A simple existence they each had, exactly the kind she'd craved from her days with Wilf in the palace nursery.

"Until I'm old and grey."

Isa's dimpled smile faltered.

Essie tilted her head. "Am I not welcomed?"

The father scowled at her. His two sons tightened their grips on their knives used to gut the fish and his wife scooped up the infant, turning away so Essie could no longer see the child.

"Oh, no, no, you are!" Isa's voice increased in pitch. "We're only curious. We've never had a stranger come live with us before."

Essie muffled her doubtful snort. The four older ladies leaned in to

whisper to one another. The truth was in their glares.

But too bad for them... “Far as I know, I’m here to stay.”

Shrieking with laughter, five children cut across their path, gripping clumps of mud in their small hands.

“You hooligans!” Isa laughed, following the running children. “What fiendish game is this?”

One of the little dears tripped in front of Essie.

“Careful, Sweetling.” Essie knelt, setting down her bucket and picking up the little girl. “Are you hurt?”

Shyly smiling, the girl shook her head, brown hair falling out of her neat updo.

“Henna!”

A pale woman scurried up to them, her dark hair pulled back into such a tight bun it looked like it hurt. She snatched the girl, holding her at arm’s length to inspect her. “Did she trip you?”

“I didn’t—”

The woman retreated, hugging her daughter close. *Does she think I’m a monster?* Essie straightened, scowling after the mother. *I’m the one who stopped the monster.*

Something wet and chunky splattered her face. She wiped at her cheek, mud sticking to her fingertips. A little boy roared with laughter, his giggles mingled with the sniggering spreading through the surrounding yards. Essie’s skin burned beneath the wet soil.

Where am I? The court of the gods and goddesses?

“Ry!” Isa scolded. “That wasn’t ni—”

A wad of grass and dirt smacked Isa’s mouth, smothering her words. A breathless Ayami sprinted to Essie’s side.

“What was that for?” Isa demanded, wiping her lips.

“From back there.” Ayami gestured wildly in the direction of home. “I saw you whisper to Ry. You told him to throw it!”

“I did not!” Isa’s words came out fast and shrill. She was telling another lie. “Why would I want mud thrown at Essie?”

Essie guessed Isa was thinking of the votes she might one day receive for making the hated stranger look like a fool.

“Jealousy!” Ayami scooped another clump from the ground and whipped it. Little Ry giggled, clutching his sides as the mud splattered Isa’s chest.

“Ayami!” Isa screeched. “Why do you always have to—”

An onslaught of brown chunks pelted the leader’s daughter, a few muddy bullets struck Essie too. Several children charged out from behind the giant tree.

Ayami smirked at Essie, mud dripping from her hair. “MUD FIGHT!”

The wet sludge squelched in Essie’s fingers as she moulded it into a ball. Women ran into the frenzy, attempting to wrangle the children. Essie launched her first mudball at the mother of little Henna, hitting her on the side of the head.

That’s for thinking I tripped your daughter.

“Stop this fiendish game!” Isa shrieked. Three more gobs hit the back of her beautiful dress, soiling it. “As the leader’s daughter, I—”

Essie’s muddy missile smacked Isa’s scalp, knocking the flower from her bun.

That’s for your false welcome.

Goopy grass showered Essie’s back and she ducked to avoid a mouth full of it. Three boys closed in on her, a woman chasing after them.

“Watch out!” Essie laughed, throwing more mud. The woman gasped and fell to her knees. The little boys spun around, now aware of the enemy in their presence, and bombarded the woman with heaps of sludge.

“You tiny beasts!” she screamed.

Essie couldn’t help it. Giggles rose up, spilling out of her as easily as the vomit earlier.

“Essie, enough.”

Vin towered over her, crossing his muscular arms over the khaki vest draping his broad chest. He led a team of reinforcements, coming to aid Isa and her comrades. Fathers and older siblings caught hold of the children or

helped herd them into a smaller circle.

“It’s over.” Vin chuckled, shaking his head.

“No, it’s not!” Essie laughed. One of her mud bullets missed, the other splattered his fawn cheeks as she dodged around him. “You no-fun-traitor!”

“Essie!”

His shout was echoed by Ayami’s. She led a horde of laughing children. Essie scooped up an armful of grass and dirt, joining the battle line. Hurling the mud—left, right, straight ahead, left again—each clump hit a target. Children slipped from the adult’s grasps, and the circle dispersed into a new mess of chaos.

The adults groaned and grumbled in their defeat, brown chunks dripping from their hair and clothes, smeared across their scowls.

It’s what they deserved. If they wanted to be petty, she could be too.

This is for not letting me become one of you.

* * *

Darius jumped from Tooth’s back, landing upon flattened grass. His fingers itched to rip the silk cloth to shreds or toss it aside, pretending he never saw it. But he had to show Essie. Perhaps she could identify who it belonged to. A friend, maybe?

Hopefully...

Thinking of the alternative seized hold of his lungs.

“Oy! Move it!”

Tober’s heel kicked air back into Darius’s chest as he swung down behind him.

“See you later, Toothy-boy!”

Tooth stomped for the meat pile in the far corner of the rex yard. Nesa’s smooth scales brushed Darius’s calves. She waddled after the larger rex, focusing on the spoiling boar carcass and fish guts.

“That rex of yours is going to be huge if you keep letting her eat so much.” Tober chuckled, tossing his axe from hand to hand. “Probably not a bad thing.”

A twig fell onto Darius's head. Two little monkeys played in the vines dangling over the dirt path.

"Tooth is tiny compared to the others his age."

The furry hooligan's playful chitters competed with Tober's yammering. Their screeches, though growing louder, stayed behind.

They weren't the culprits of the noise.

"I blame Vin. He never let me feed—"

"Shhhh!" Darius elbowed Tober, making him drop his axe. "Do you hear that?"

"No." Tober scowled, picking his beloved tool from the dirt. "It's the crickets. Or the birds."

"Shut up and listen." The sound was shrill, ghostly even. How could he have mistaken it for monkeys? "It sounds like—"

"Screaming."

I'm too late!

Clutching the cloth, Darius sprinted down the path, Tober's heavy footfalls trailing him. Smoke drifted from a cooking stone in an abandoned yard. Blinded and spluttering, he staggered over undergrowth until he burst into the glade. His knee hit the soil and he wiped the stinging blur from his eyes.

"What the?" Tober exclaimed, halting.

Squealing children chased one another, mud-splattered adults struggled to wrangle them. Dodging clumps of mud in the centre of the chaos was Essie.

Darius loosened his grip on the silk cloth and stood, relief sweeping through him.

Essie spun to avoid a shower of mud, colliding with Vin. He snatched her elbow, his other arm looped around Ayami's torso, holding her so her kicking feet couldn't reach the grass.

Vin hauled them both from the battlefield. Mud dirtied each of their laughing faces, their arms and legs, it was even caked in their hair, the clumps of brown much more apparent in Essie's orangey-brown curls than

Ayami's dark tangles and Vin's black tufts.

"You're no fun, Vin!" Ayami protested, still flailing in his hold.

"I've been telling him that for years." Tober laughed.

Vin stopped, and Essie and Ayami ceased their struggling. Essie's emerald irises glowed meeting Darius's.

"Have you been causing trouble, Treela?"

"Do you even need to ask?" Vin said, releasing her and setting down Ayami.

"Ayami started it," Essie said.

Ayami shook her head. "No, Isa started it. She's still upset that *you*"—she poked Darius's sternum—"didn't come home with a gobi for her."

"Wasn't getting her one in the first place," he grumbled, wishing, not for the first time, he had told the truth about the expedition he had taken three moons ago. But there had been no time to explain, no other way to guarantee no one would follow him and Essie on their mission to save Essence from Pirro. It was easier to play along with the human customs, at least until they had to come home.

"Try telling her that." Tober snorted. "Our cousin has done nothing but pout the last three moons."

"Your teasing hasn't helped," Vin said.

Peace had come to the battlefield. Mud-soaked parents dragged their children from the glade. Isa thanked them for their help as two of her friends whispered in her ear, frowning at Essie and Ayami. The leader's daughter wasn't looking at either of them. She was looking at him.

Darius turned away, panged with guilt. Isa had never stood a chance, through no fault of her own. He may have lost his memory of the Land Above, grew up in the village of Ani with no recollection of Essie, yet his heart had remained with her. Just like it had in his life before this one, in the Land Below of Duto.

"I'm going to go wash up." Essie's voice pulled him from his thoughts. "Ayami, you coming?"

Ayami shook her head, gesturing in the direction of home. "I better

get back to Ax and Zinni. I left them with Mag. I'll clean up later."

"Darius can help you, Es." Tober swatted Darius's backside and winked at Essie. "He can make sure you don't miss a spot."

"Tober," Vin scolded, shaking his head at his brother, but Essie grinned.

Darius slugged Tober in the arm before catching up to Essie. She latched onto his fingers, her dirty palm hot, not sweaty, sweltering like a fire burned beneath her skin.

They cut across the glade, passing on the far side of the giant tree in the centre to avoid their angry neighbours clustered beneath their houses.

"They don't like me right now." Essie sighed. "Not that they liked me much before."

He squeezed her hand. "Give them time. They'll come around."

"I'm not sure about that."

Following along the river, bushels of tall shrubbery and towering trees shielded them from the glares. Essie pulled her fingers from his and scooped up some rocks from the bank.

"I've tried being their friend; I've tried leaving them be. No matter what I do or say, they always find something to dislike." She chucked the stones at the water. "I can't win."

Darius bit his tongue. What she described was the experience of most spirits. The gods and goddesses never let them win either.

Essie was one of the few members of the godly court who cared about the spirits. She wanted to see them win. It wasn't fair she was made to feel this way.

"It will get better." Darius slipped his arm around her shoulders. "Although throwing mud at them likely wasn't the best move."

"No. It was impulsive." She rested her head against his shoulder and he kissed her brow. The corners of her lips twitched upward. "At least it wasn't fire, right?"

Darius laughed. "They don't know how lucky they are, Treela."

"What are you holding?" Essie reached for his hand still clutching the

silky fabric.

“Oh...” The last thing he wanted to do was add more insecurity to her rough day, but she pried open his fist, revealing the navy cloth. “I found this on my patrol.”

She snatched the cloth and shrugged him off with rigid shoulders, her green irises flickering.

Was that confirmation of his suspicions? “Do you think it’s—”

“Yes.” Essie nodded curtly. “It’s from one of them.”

His insides swelled, his inner walls pushing against his gut, his lungs.

“It’s not gold at least, right? Or pink.” *Not their Majesties’ or Amora’s.* Words of optimism spilled out of his mouth. His heart pounded, slow, but forceful, trying to beat away the growing weight inside his chest. “It’s navy, which means—”

“We don’t have to worry.” Essie scrunched the fabric into a ball and tossed it into the water.

Darius’s jaw dropped as fast as the river carried the cloth away. It was gone from sight in an instant.

He turned back to Essie who was already strolling in the other direction. “Are you sure?”

“They likely wanted to catch a close up of me living as a human.”

But they have viewing orbs for that. Why come all the way down?

“They’ll be laughing at and mocking me for centuries.” She gestured at the bits of grass sticking to her faded, brown dress.

Darius brushed at the dried mud on her cheeks. “Does that bother you?”

“No, let them mock me.” She grinned as she curled her fingers around his again. “I get to live in peace with my little birdie.”

Darius cringed. Why she insisted on that horrid term of endearment was lost on him. “Stop calling me that.”

Essie hopped up on her tip toes and planted a smirking kiss on his jaw. “Never.”

His heart backflipped, same as it had all those years ago in the dungeon

when he saw her cheeky smile for the first time. A feeling he was no stranger to, one only she could cause. He let it push his worries aside to enjoy this bliss while it remained.

“Careful, Treela.” He tapped her on the nose. “I now know how to get rid of annoyances from the Land Above.”

“Oh, yea? How?”

“You toss them into the river.”

He scooped her off her feet.

She let out a giggle of surprise, flailing her arms and legs as he carried her closer to the river’s edge. “Don’t you—”

Her left leg broke free of his hold, her heel sinking into the miry bank, sturdy as a tree. One arm coiled around his neck, the other gripped the front of his vest. A laugh lit her beautiful face. “If I’m going down, you’re coming with me.”

“Gladly.”

He leaned into her, tasting her lips as they toppled over. Water crashed around them as the river swallowed them whole, together.

C H A P T E R T W O

The river teased at pulling Darius away from her. Worse villains had tried before and lost. One arm hooked around his neck, the other around his waist, she happily drowned in his kiss. He kicked off the algae speckled rocks, launching them back to the surface.

Lips parting from hers, he surrendered to a deep exhale.

“Ha, ha, I held my breath longer. I win.”

“It’s always a game with you, isn’t it, Treela?” He chuckled, grabbing hold of an overhanging branch of lush, sharp-edged leaves to keep them afloat. Cool droplets fell from his slicked, black hair to her cheeks.

She tilted her chin to gaze upon his thin nose and pointed chin to the faint stubble along his jawline. A different face from the one he’d had when she first met him in the Land Above’s dungeons all those years ago, but his face could change a thousand times and he’d always be the same sweet soul that sparked her inner glowfly to life.

Looping her legs around his hips, she climbed to be nose to nose with him. He inhaled sharply, anticipating her next move.

“Race you to the waterfall.”

She shoved his head beneath the water and used his knees as a springboard. The gentle current half-heartedly fought against her agile swimming.

“Cheater!” Darius spluttered and laughed. Rapid splashes gave chase. She broke left at the river fork, the waterfall three, maybe four strokes away. The cascading flow rained down the side of the mossy cliff, rippling the circular pool at its base. Her fingers reached for the watery curtain, moments from victory. Arms snaked around her torso, tugging her backwards. Darius’s panting breaths tickled her neck. “Caught you.”

She giggled and squirmed in his tight embrace. “It was a race, not a game of tag.”

“If you can make up rules and change the game mid-play so can I.” He leaned in to peck her cheek, but she turned, catching his lips with hers.

“New game,” she murmured.

One kiss too easily became ten, eleven, twelve. By the fifteenth, Darius scooped her up and carried her to the bank where they rolled together in the flowers and mud.

Their first entanglement had started much the same way. Once they’d washed away the blood from their battle with Pirro, they had clambered onto the riverbank, initially shy and awkward after a century of distance, but they found their rhythm in the end. Or rather, in the beginning.

The patter of falling water pulled Essie from the depths of slumber. Darius’s steady heartbeat thumped against her ear resting on his warm chest.

The waterfall glimmered in the pale moonlight, poking through a gap in the canopy. Radiant glowflies hovered over a patch of hostas on the pool’s bank, their vibrant wings of light adding colour to the blackened jungle. A purple glowfly fluttered over and landed on her cheek. *Hello, mother. How did you sleep?*

“Well enough.” Though she wished she didn’t need to. In the past,

once she reached a certain age, slumber rarely pulled her under unless she wanted it to. Now, it invaded every evening, and if she didn't let it claim her, her temple eventually ached and her thoughts muddled together. She finally understood why humans slept so often.

Darius snored softly, his breath chasing away the glowing insect. Shifting in his sleep, he pulled Essie closer, skin against skin, legs tangled together, their clothes lying beside them.

How long they had dozed, she didn't know. Judging from the moon, long enough to miss the evening meal and send Mag into a frenzy.

"Darius." She untangled her legs from his.

"Hmm?" He stretched his arms but kept his eyes closed.

"Wake up."

He rolled over, nuzzling his nose into the crook of her neck. "Why?"

"Because Mag is likely panicking right now." Essie sat up. Darius's head thudded against the mossy ground beneath them.

"I don't care."

"I do." She reached for Darius's trousers and tossed them back at him. "She hates me as it is."

"She doesn't hate you." He sat up, dressing

"Yes, she does." Essie squirmed into her dress, still damp from their swim. "I can see it in the way she looks at me. Same as all the rest."

Darius brushed her cheek. A familiar light shone from his pupils. "If they knew who you were..."

"No." She shook her head and stood. There was a reason she'd tossed the navy cloth into the river. Her life as a godling was over. "I've told you before—"

"A simple existence is what you want, I know." Taking her hand, he used her to pull himself to his feet. "But—"

His grip tightened around her fingers, gaze on something behind her.

"What is it?"

The river glimmered in the moonlight spilling not from above, but from the thick foliage to the right of the bank. Essie rubbed her thumb

across her fingers, remembering the smoothness of the navy cloth. She'd guessed who it belonged to; this pale glow confirmed it.

She crept over the stilted roots of the walking palms and ducked beneath drooping ferns and spindly dragon trees.

“Stupid plants!”

Essie halted.

A pale blue skirt snagged on one branch, a navy hood caught on another, and long fair locks, dirty with twigs, a personified star, fought with the jungle's greenery.

“Elle?”

The star jerked around, tearing her hood from its twiggy captor's clutches. A piece of navy dangled over her as her gaze met Essie's. Their combined inhales whisked them away to a blurry world of green and starlight where only they existed.

Essie's stampeding heart urged her to run into her dear friend's arms, but the memory of their last glimpse of one another—Elle slumped against the Godling Prince, Elio, her starry shine dwindling as Essie was hauled from the council room to await banishment—kept her heels planted in the sodden soil.

A bump to her shoulder knocked her off balance, out of the blurry illusion. The starlit foliage came back into focus. Gentle fingers caught her elbow, steadying her.

Elle pursed her lips. “Good, you're clothed.”

Ob... dear. Essie winced, cheeks flaring hot. The time on the pool bank no longer held such a sweet memory. “You saw?”

Darius released Essie's elbow, staring at his toes, his pink cheeks highlighted by the white glow.

“Not much, but enough that my eyes are still burning.” Elle rubbed at her eyelids. “Even after hiking the jungle for hours.” She held up three shiny fingers, waving her arms about. “For three moons I've been searching this jungle for you.”

For three moons? *Three.* Out of two hundred and thirty-one since her

banishment. Had it taken that long for Elle to forgive her? Or perhaps she was only facing a traitor of the Land Above on orders.

From Elle's sneer as she clawed twigs out of her hair, the latter seemed most plausible. "Coming back and forth and getting lost in this stupid, sticky, dirty jungle more times than I can count."

The complaint unleashed a hissing cat in Essie. The feline's angry call sent a flash of heat down her arms.

"And then, finally, I find you, and you are fooling around with a human!" Elle scrunched her nose. "As if turning you human wasn't enough. Amora had to go and cast a love charm on you too."

Essie bristled. "She did not."

"Then how do you explain *him*." A flash of blue and yellow light danced around Elle's wrists.

Essie stepped in front of Darius, lion roaring within. "I fell in love with him all on my own. Amora had nothing to do with it."

"It's wrong for godlings to play with spirits."

The words of young Elle, never spoken again in front of Essie, but Elle grew up believing them all the same. How could she not, being a pet of the Majesties? The perfect princess for the Land Above believing their ridiculous ideas that some existences were worth more than others.

"Your head is so high in the clouds you can't fathom loving anyone but your golden prince, can you?"

Elle's glow took on a reddish hue. "I didn't come all this way to be insulted in defence of some human."

The condescension in her voice made the blood sizzle in Essie's veins, sweat oozing on her skin. Smoke tickled her nose from the greenish haze drifting between them.

"Why are you here, then? Your precious majesties have a message for me? Have they realized being human isn't a fate worse than death to me like it would be for you?"

"The message isn't from them!" Elle's shine took dominance over the haze. "It's from your mother."

Essie's heart skipped a beat, a stampede of creatures coming to an abrupt halt, torrents of lava simmering.

Elle rose, focus on the star-bathed canopy. "Pirro is alive."

Pirro...

In a flash of light, Elle was gone casting the jungle into darkness. Only a faint green glow remained as if Elle had left her at the bottom of the ocean. *No, no, no.* She sunk further down into the depths of the underwater abyss, lungs pleading for air, Elle's words echoing, threatening to drown her. *Pirro is alive.*

"Essie!" A warm touch flew her back to the surface, gasping for breath. Darius gripped below her wrists. "Your hands."

Tiny, green flames flickered from her fingertips, but now wasn't the time to be rejoicing at the return of her fire.

"Pirro can't be alive." Essie closed her eyes, returning to Pirro's side, three moons ago. His body still as stone, criss-crossing black scars bright against the pale grey rash consuming his skin and no trace of a heartbeat. "His heart stopped. I felt it. It's impossible."

But so too was the emerald fire blazing from her hands and yet there it was, burning as brightly as it had before they'd turned her human. And if she still had some powers, then that meant it was possible that...

No, no, no. Her flames extinguished and with them her strength, gone in a puff of smoke.

Darius slipped his arm around her, the only thing keeping her from collapsing. "Essie, breathe."

"Breathe?" How was she supposed to breathe when the monster was still out there, her flora and fauna still in danger?

She met Darius's gaze. Resolve hardened his features but a light shone from his pupils.

"Why are you so calm about this?"

"I'm not. Listen." He cradled her against his chest. His heart slammed his ribcage with such force it bounced her cheek. Very different from the gentle thump she'd woken to earlier. "But one of us has to stay rooted,

Treela, don't you think?"

He brushed her tangled curls. "If he's alive, where is he? And why hasn't he bothered us?"

"I-I don't know." She clung to him. He was the tree this time, she the creature in the branches about to be blown away by the arrival of a sudden winter storm. "Maybe he's hurt and recovering? Or-or plotting something, something huge, disastrous!"

Rain broke through the canopy.

"What are we going to do, Darius?" She buried into him, absorbing strength from his embrace.

"Is there anything we can do if we don't know where he is?" he said. "Or what shape he's in? Do you think Elle will come back?"

She sighed, boas twisting in her gut at the words she let fly. It was their fight in the nursery all over again. Except the stakes were higher now.

"The last time I screamed at her in defence of a spirit we didn't talk for twelve years."

Lightning flashed, bathing the foliage in white light, a reminder there was another daughter of night and sky they could turn to.

"Leala. She'll help us find him."

* * *

Elle burst out of the secret tunnel. The stone slab hurtled into the air and fell to the cobblestone with a deafening bang, pieces chipping off of it.

A wet wind swept the alley, dark clouds materialized overhead, but the impending shower was nothing compared to the blustery storm ravaging her insides and pushing out the first drops of rain. Her tears.

Oh, Essie, I've lost you again.

Elle ripped twigs and leaves from her fair hair, chucking them at the concrete. The clouds spit at her with increasing intensity.

She hadn't meant to explode.

Hours of hiking the humid jungle with mud clinging to her feet, plants snagging her dress, birds attempting to make a nest of her tangled locks,

had the storm already brewing. Once the thunder rumbled, she couldn't reign it in.

I wish I had never found you.

That once again, she had suffered the jungle for nothing and returned to the Land Above a failure. To see Essie in person, without her leafy hair, wrapped in the arms of a human...

Elle gagged again.

She'd heard the rumours. "*Did you hear Tivona's daughter is in love with a human?*" "*If I were Ignacio, I would never want to leave the dungeon and show my face again.*" But she hadn't believed them until she saw it herself.

Briefly. Thank goodness only briefly. Yet long enough to sense the love, the passion, and confirm Essie had played into Amora's game, dooming herself to an eternity of shame. And from her stubborn defence of the stupid human, she didn't realize the severity of it. Why would the gods and goddesses help a spirit-lover over Pirro?

"Well?" A boy spirit strutted into the alley. "Did you find her this time?"

His voice—that same, annoying voice that had taunted her throughout her nursery years—sent a zap shooting to her fingers. Flashes of lightning zigzagged across the dark sky.

"Yes, Wilf, I did." She gritted her teeth. "No thanks to your directions."

"I told you what Tivona told me," Wilf said, sloshing through a puddle. "Viewing orbs aren't maps, you know?"

Why Essie's mother insisted on involving him in their plans to help her daughter, Elle would never understand. All he did was nag.

"Did you tell her about Pirro? Where he is?" Water splashed Elle's ankles from Wilf's footsteps.

"Yes, I told her about Pirro." *Though not where he is...* She'd left too soon for that. Not that she would tell Wilf that. She didn't need the spirit of a scrawny, twelve-year-old boy scolding her.

"Good." The wrinkles behind his short, curly bangs didn't fit the

youthfulness of his umber face. “She’s on the alert. Now, we just need to find out what Pirro’s plan is.”

Elle stiffened. Beyond the barrier wall at the end of the alley, a sheet of lightning turned the black sky white. “We know it. He’s made himself king of some humans in the northwest corner of the realm.”

Earlier, through her viewing orb, she’d seen him sitting on a throne. A position he’d won himself over a moon and a half ago. As much as she wanted to zap him into a smouldering heap, she had to admit he was doing mortality correctly: ruling over humans and not loving them.

“The Volo, yes,” Wilf said. “But we need to know why. None of the returning spirits I’ve interviewed can even guess what his intentions are. And one of them was a maid in his castle before she died. Has Leala learned anything?”

“No.” Elle grimaced, an old wound flaring in her chest. “Like I’ve told Tivona, when she learns something I’ll tell you.”

Wilf crouched over the hole, frowning at Essence, concealed by the nightly storm clouds. “Why hasn’t she left Niviland yet?”

“She hasn’t?” Elle pulled her hood over her head.

“No, I saw her in Tivona’s viewing orb this afternoon sitting in her study.”

“Hmm, how strange. I’m getting out of this ra—” A tug on the bottom of her cloak forced her to look around.

Wilf gripped the soaking fabric, an old man’s stern scowl on his young face. “Leala doesn’t know what’s going on, does she? You’ve been lying to us about meeting with her.”

“How dare you call me a liar?” Elle yanked her cloak from his grasp and jetted into the torrential downpour over the dormitories.

The rain soaked her garments, but it wasn’t their heaviness dragging her down. She splashed into the giant puddle forming beneath the lone willow tree in the corner of the garden where the palace met the spirit village wall. Elle sighed, shaking her sodden skirt, but mud clung to it as stubborn as the horrid feeling clinging to her heart.

Tiny rivers crisscrossed over the garden path leading to the courtyard. Drenched as she was, she didn't bother to leap over them. What would be the point?

Reaching the courtyard, her starry glow competed with streaks of pale blue light blasting the sky, separating the black clouds. Her father, Celous lowered his outstretched palms as the rain ceased.

Turning, his sky blue stare fell to her. Thunder boomed, rocking the palace's golden bricks. Elle stumbled to her knees into another puddle. Her father turned his back on her like she'd turned her back on Leala.

"You narcissistic traitor."

Louder than the thunder, his words from years ago took her back to the council room where she had chosen the king and queen and what they thought of her, over her own sister's life. Thank goodness the punishment was only banishment, not execution. But still...

You're right, Wilf. I am a liar.

Her father's wrath was nothing compared to what her sister's would be. How could she go to her after what she had done?

CHAPTER THREE

Hidden beneath pink flowers and tiny, green leaflets, Kayon lay with Tannis's small head resting on his chest and her arm draped across his waist, highlighting how her warm brown complexion was a couple of shades lighter than his own rich brown. An itch festered on his shoulder blade but to scratch would only disturb her slumber and he wanted to be alone with the few stars that remained in the sky.

Stay with me, please.

Every dawn he asked the same thing of the stars. Their pale light charmed him more than the rays of the scorching sun ever could, but the stars always surrendered to the sun's haughty command.

Kayon wiped sweat from his brow into his short, black curls. Morning heat crept into his and Tannis's little haven, humid today because of last night's brief rain shower. It was time to find a real roof before the heat boiled them to death.

"Rise and shine."

Tannis awoke as Kayon sat up and reached for his tunic hanging on

the branch next to him.

“Are we leaving so soon?” She stuck out her lip, sweeping her long, black braid over her shoulder. Her pout made her even cuter.

“Where do you keep your energy?” He chuckled. Her soft, humming giggle sounded like a purr. “I’m worn. You’re almost otherworldly.”

“*Almost* otherworldly?” She smirked, dusting off her yellow skirt. “Not fully?”

“If you were fully otherworldly, you wouldn’t want anything to do with me.”

He glanced at the sky. A help to his people in the past, the real otherworldlings had since abandoned them.

Arms around one another, Kayon and Tannis trudged from the catclaw bush. A yellow field stretched before them, bordered by brittle sagebrush and thirsty juniper trees. A flock of ornith soaked their fuzz-covered scales in the lake, dunking their long, skinny necks so their lizard-like mouths could gobble up the algae. The younger of the brood tested the speed of their two, springy legs, racing each other on the shoreline. In the far corner of the field, horses and cattle avoided the ornith, choosing to huddle in the shade provided by the towering walls of his father’s fortress.

Something odd lay in the grass between them and the livestock. Kayon squinted for a better look and sped up his pace.

“Slow down, love,” Tannis complained, her short legs struggling to keep in stride with his lanky ones.

“Do you see that?”

“What?”

“It looks like a—” *Child*. A little girl to be exact. Familiar black curls hid her face from view.

“Alani!” Heart pummelling his ribcage, he dropped to his knees and turned his little sister over. Unconscious but still breathing, dust coated her navy nightdress and dark brown skin from head to foot. “Who let her out in this heat?”

“She must have been looking for you,” Tannis said with a purring

giggle. “Could you imagine if she’d found you?”

Kayon glared at her. “This isn’t something to laugh about.”

Alani hardly weighed more than a bundle of blankets. He raced through the field of dry grass, ignoring the disgruntled whinnies of the nearby horses.

“Kayon, wait!”

“Go home, Tannis.”

The fortress’s sandy bricks rose higher than the treetops. Few knew of the crack in the wall’s corner. He ducked, holding Alani against him as he squeezed through the gap that was much harder to fit through as a sturdy nineteen-year-old man than as the puny twelve-year-old who had discovered it years ago.

Kayon passed no one in the maze of alleyways to his family’s wing in the middle of the fortress. He barged through the wooden door to his sisters’ quarters and tramped up the stairs to the second level.

His other three sisters slept in three of the four beds in the shadowed bedroom. He gently set Alani upon the empty bunk and turned.

“WAKE UP!”

“Why are you yelling, Kayon?” Brisa yawned, brushing her curly bangs back and stretching her scrawny, ten-year-old arms.

“Alani has sun sickness again. Go get her water.”

Brisa scrambled from her bed and raced downstairs. Kayon turned to his other sisters, glaring at Theo, only a year younger than himself. “Why weren’t you watching her?”

Theo patted out her bed-head, looking at the curtained window rather than him. “I was sleeping.”

“I don’t care.” Kayon crossed his arms. “Jena is too busy with her own infants. Alani’s care falls to you when I’m not around.”

“Then you should be *around*”—Theo returned his glare—“instead of sneaking off to tumble canyon girls in the bushes.”

The accusation kicked his gut, igniting a fire in his cheeks. He turned from Theo’s smug expression to Brisa returning with the water basin.

Kayon took it from her and crouched at Alani's bedside, gently splashing her with the water. She stirred, blinking her big, umber eyes.

"K-kayon?" Her small voice cracked.

"Have some water, Littlelun." He helped her sit up so she could sip from the basin.

"Kayon!" As if the water had reminded her, Alani's tiny hands gripped his arms. "They found a man! Threw him in the—" Alani coughed twice and Kayon held the basin up to her, but she shook her little head. "The pit. Father wants you!"

Shit! All over Kayon's skin old bruises flared.

"Alani, you drink the rest of this water." Carefully, he handed her the water basin and kissed her forehead. "I'll be back."

Bounding outside, he skidded around the corner of the building. People gathered beneath the archway marking the fortress's entrance. He shouldered to the front of the crowd. At his toes, the ground fell away into a deep pit—the drop deep enough that even Kayon, as tall as he was, would need assistance to get out.

"Nice of you to show up, brother," Zelta grumbled. With a glare identical to Theo's, he jabbed his bulky elbow into Kayon's ribs. "Tumbling another canyon girl?"

Kayon clenched his jaw, focusing on the stranger pacing the bottom of the pit. The man's sandy complexion stood out against the darker complexions of the men and women staring down at him. A mane of thick, brown hair hung past his neck, the strands drenched with sweat.

"Gods, it's hot." The stranger ripped off the crimson cape clinging to his broad shoulders, using it to wipe moisture from his neck. "I'd appreciate a response to my proposal before I melt, Taur."

Kayon could feel his father's hot fury from across the pit, but behind the white scars criss-crossing his dark brown face and hairless scalp, neutrality beat out anger for display. For now.

His father used his staff to step to the edge of the pit. "Why does your king want *us* to help him with his enemies?"

“Your prowess in your last scrap with the Gerii has spread all the way to Volon,” the stranger said.

His father’s extra-long robes were meant to hide his missing foot, a battle wound from that fight, but the stranger inspected the black cuffs like he was seeing the non-existent limb anyway. “He knows you won’t let him down in battle.”

“What does he offer in return?”

“He’ll fight the Gerii with you.”

“Eight years too late for that,” Kayon mumbled. A few of the men and women around him nodded.

“The Gerii have stayed on their coast, away from us, since our victory,” his father said.

“But they could come back, yes?” The stranger paced the pit again. “And if they were all slaughtered, there would be no need for you to live in this dry canyon. That *is* why you live here, correct? It’s strategic. This southern heat keeps the Gerii away because they don’t know how to live with it.”

“Your offer is enticing.” Kayon’s father turned his attention to his staff as he tossed it between his hands. “But I’m not sure I want to lead my people into an unnecessary fight.”

Unnecessary is right. As far as Kayon was concerned their last fight was unnecessary too. A thirst for blood was all it was.

“Are you afraid, Taur?” The stranger scoffed. “I’m disappointed. I was told the Desaro were warriors, not bunnies.”

Someone from the crowd threw a stick at him. “Are you calling us cowards?”

The stranger smirked, unaffected by the blow.

Something isn’t right about him. “I’m starting to dislike that smirk of his,” Kayon said.

“Would you keep your mouth shut?” Zelta hissed.

“Perhaps I *am* calling you cowards,” the stranger taunted, “but never fear, my king will give you back your courage.”

Taur consulted with his brothers and closest friends. Knots twisted in Kayon's stomach. "I don't trust this man or this king of his." Once again, he wiped the sweat from his brow.

Zelta waved his fist. "If you speak one more time, I'm going to punch you."

Kayon's retort died on his lips.

"We will accept your alliance proposal," their father said.

Shit. What happened to not wanting an unnecessary fight? One of his idiot uncles must have said something to convince him otherwise. *Probably Roan...*

"Smart choice." The stranger readorned his cape. "To finalize this, my king requests your presence at court. As a guest."

Or prisoner...

His father glowered, hopefully thinking the same. Uncle Roan whispered something into his ear and he nodded.

"As much as I hate to admit weakness, I will not be able to make such a journey." Taur kicked out his footless leg. "But in my place, I offer to send my eldest son, Kayon."

Me?

Kayon's airway tightened as if Zelta had followed through on his threat to punch him. The crowd disappeared in a blur, their hushed whispers of "Him?" buzzing in his ears. Their questioning was right. He was the heir to the Desaro arch-rulerdom; his place was in the fortress with the Desaro people.

A bump on his shoulder brought him from his reverie.

"Not fair." Zelta stomped from the pit, dispersing the crowd.

Does he want to go? If Zelta wanted to be a pawn in a questionable alliance, he was welcome to.

A man cleared his throat. Kayon stiffened, turning to his father.

The flecks of gold in the arch-ruler's brown eyes crackled like fire. "You will leave tomorrow. Go prepare yourself."

Kayon gritted his teeth. "What if I don't want to go?"

“You have no choice.” His father’s staff struck his shoulder quicker than a blink.

Kayon fought off a wince, though burning prickles spread from the newest welt on his body.

“I’m sending you on this task because you need to learn to be a proper Desaro man if you ever want to be arch-ruler one day. Your days of sneaking off on reckless adventures with canyon girls are over. I won’t say it again. Go prepare yourself.”

He whacked Kayon once more with his cane, stalking into the fortress yard as easily as if he had two feet. Uncle Roan hobbled after him. It seemed like the wrong person had the cane.

Kayon rubbed his aching shoulder. *If anything is reckless, this is.* Allying with a king they knew nothing about could lead them to their downfall, similar to their past alliance with the otherworldlings which had led them to be trapped here in this unforgiving canyon-land.

And to be a proper Desaro man, what did that even mean?

In the shade of the armoury building, within three separate pens enclosed by wooden fence posts, young boys and girls adorned in tight-fitting, black garments sparred with each other, eager to follow in their warrior parents’ footsteps. At their age, he had refused lessons. Learning to fight meant going to battle and battle usually meant dying, something he wasn’t eager to do. Did that make him any less a Desaro man? In his father’s mind, maybe, but he didn’t think so.

Doesn’t matter what I think, though. The welt on his shoulder flared. He marched to his quarters, adjacent to the armoury, kicking in the door. *Or else I wouldn’t be sent off with some loony stranger.*

In the sitting room, he pushed over a chair.

“Why are you so upset?”

He spun around to Theo leaning in the doorway, brushing her short curls back with a headband. Dressed in her black pants and cropped top, she was ready for her daily sparring match.

“You’re getting what you’ve always wanted. To leave this place.” She

gestured behind her at the sandy, fortress yard bustling with warrior families.

“I wanted us all to leave this place.” The image of Alani lying unconscious from sun sickness materialized on the dusty, brown rug.

“Is your head that empty?” Theo marched to him swatting his head. The impact rattled his skull. “Don’t you see? Working with the Volo is our way out.”

The rattling faded and so too, did the image of Alani.

She’s right. If they defeated the Gerii, they no longer had enemies. They could move wherever they wanted like the stranger had said. “I’ll do it for Alani.”

Theo scoffed. “You say that like father gave you a choice.”

“Let’s see what this Volo king can do for us.”