
CHAPTER ONE

“Any messages for me?”

Essie pressed her palm against the large tree roots criss-crossing over the cave’s entrance. The pouring rain outside made it hard to hear more than the rapid pitter-patter. She sighed, keeping her slim, greyish-beige fingers glued to the roots. There was a time her hands would have blended in with the dark green moss.

“Why do you keep touching the tree?” Kayon sat beside her, propping his elbows on his bent knees. Red scratches and black bruises blemished his rich brown skin.

“I’ve been listening for word of Leala.” *And Darius too.*

“And the tree is going to tell you?” Though hidden behind curly, black hair, she sensed his skepticism.

“Yes.” Being the mother of Essence had its perks. Hearing the voices of the flora and fauna was one. It meant she had spies and messengers everywhere, though it often took time for news to reach her.

That’s all the silence was. A delay. She wouldn’t let herself think of the alternative.

Darius is alive. Kayon said he saw him running before my trees attacked Pirro.

The latter part she didn't remember, but from Kayon's tale of how the earth had quaked, Orrin's claim that the roots had carried Pirro up as high as the ptero soaring over the canyon, and Kesindra's nasty description of the roots squeezing Pirro until his bones must have broken, she believed it had happened.

And that was another bonus of creating this realm. She had an army of creatures and plants, ready to fight her enemies with her. But her goal wasn't to win all the fights. It was to stop them from happening. Fights led to battles; too many of those, and they'd find themselves in a war, breaking the one condition the Queen of the Land Above had set for Essence to continue to exist. If war ever touched Essence's soil, their Majesties would destroy it.

Soil shifted. Kesindra shuffled over, her shoulder-length, straw-coloured hair swaying with her movement. In her pale hands, she held a small, wooden mortar in which she smashed herbs with a pestle. "How do your ribs feel?"

Essie rubbed her sides. "The paste you made last night is still working."

She had created the plants of Essence with healing properties, never knowing she'd rely on them herself. Twice now.

"I'm making you more," Kesindra said. "It will wear off soon."

"When do you think it'll stop raining?" Orrin asked. He rubbed sleep from his ice-blue eyes, identical to Kesindra's. The tips of his straw-coloured hair flipped out at his earlobes.

Kayon poked his head out of the cave. "It—" He yelped, shuffling into the cave wall.

"What—"

Four small, black pupils peered into Essie's own. Sharp overbites stuck out from the snouts of two gobi, hugging their tails close. The squirrel-like rodents' wet, green fur added colour to the grey cave.

"Oh, hello, lovelies." Glancing from the harmless gobi to Kayon, Essie failed to hold in giggles. Kesindra covered her smile, but Orrin rolled onto his back, laughing.

Kayon scowled. "They startled me."

Mama's friend is upriver, the gobi squeaked.

Essie's giggles vanished. "They found Leala."

Kayon scrambled to stand, bumping his head on the cave ceiling. Cursing, he lowered to a crouch, rubbing his short, black curls. "Where is she?"

Essie hid her smirk better than her laughter. "Upriver, they said. Can you

go find her?”

“Yes,” he said.

She gave each gobi a tickle behind the ear. “These two cuties will guide you.”

“Ha ha, funny.” Kayon narrowed his dark brown eyes. “Does my face scream ‘I’m a fool?’ or something? It’s insulting that everyone thinks I have birdbrains.”

“Some birds are very smart, you know,” Essie said. “And I’m serious. The gobi will lead you to Leala. Won’t you?”

Yes, Mama. The gobi wound around Kayon’s ankles like cats.

He looked to be fighting the urge to kick them away. “I believe you. Tell them to keep their distance.”

“Enough,” Essie said.

The gobi scampered from the cave. Kayon breathed deeply before crawling under the roots after them.

“Now what?” Orrin asked.

“We wait.” *And hope Leala has a plan...*

A tiny foot booted her insides as if saying, “She better.” Essie lay down, resting her hand on her belly. *She will, Sweetling. We will figure out how to stop this war.*

* * *

Pirro’s red glare loomed in the darkness. Tober’s round head thumped into Essie’s lap. Messy black hair stuck to his dirty forehead, his carefree smile never to be seen again. His entire complexion changed from fawn to white as snow to match the dagger plunged into his sternum. Tober morphed into another person. The dark stubble on the jawline faded to white. Dark, scruffy hair fell out piece by piece. Black eyes, shadowed tunnels that would never lead to light again.

No!

She lay in the cave, far from Pirro and Tober’s murdered corpse. And Darius...

Is alive.

The longer she went without a message from him, the harder it was to believe the mantra. Essie heaved upright, gritting her teeth at the sting in her side and throb in her rib bones. She needed another layer of paste. Neither

Kesindra nor Orrin were in the cave, so she ducked beneath the roots and crawled outside. A sweet, fruity perfume filled her nose. Leftover raindrops sparkled on the leaves in the daylight.

Orrin picked berries from the shrubbery surrounding the mouth of the cave, piling his blue pickings on a giant leaf.

“Orrin.”

He jumped, dropping some berries.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you,” she said. “Where’s Kesindra?”

“Identifying flora.” Orrin pointed across a tiny meadow beyond the cave. Kesindra crouched beside a patch of jasmine, flipping through a journal. “To collect more supplies.”

Mama! a creature squawked.

Wings tucked in, a ptero perched on a thick branch belonging to a wonky tree whose base started beyond the shrubbery but split in the middle; one part of the trunk reached for the sky, the other dipped low, extending horizontally over the cave’s roof. A tether fastened the ptero to the horizontal branch.

Essie picked up a handful of berries from Orrin’s pile, offering them to the ptero. “What’s your name, handsome?”

Screech! He let out a noise, a cross between a bird’s tweet and a frog’s croak. His long, pointed beak tickled her palm, gobbling up the berries.

Orrin finished picking and stood, mumbling, “Checkriver.”

“Huh?”

But he’d already disappeared behind a curtain of ivy blocking the nearby river from view.

Screech clacked his beak. Essie tossed him another berry. He caught it with ease. She wiped the juice on her dirty, torn dress as she limped across the grassy meadow to find Kesindra. Sunlight warmed her spine, roasting her skin. She didn’t hate heat, she was the daughter of the God of Fire after all, but fire only harmed if the flame touched directly. The sun harmed from afar, from a single beam, which wasn’t surprising considering who controlled it. The heat intensified to a burn, like the sun was moving closer. And quickly too.

They’re coming for me!

Essie spun around, blinded by light. Screech flew in front of her, his giant wings shielding her.

Run, Mama! His screech morphed into an ear-piercing shriek.

Essie’s legs stiffened like tree trunks. Golden light outlined Screech’s

entire reptilian body and outstretched wings. Starting with the tip of his talons, the light devoured him, one scale after another, evaporating him from existence. Hot hands seized Essie's shoulders, tearing her from the spot. She squinted through the light, making out an angry, handsome face and hair held in place by a crown.

Sweetling wriggled, begging her to do something. Essie called for her claws, her feathers, anything, but the throbbing in her ribs and the sting in her side held them hostage. A crack echoed. Prince Elio grunted, releasing her. She rolled twice, the soft, mossy earth cushioning her fall. A fallen palm tree pinned Elio on his stomach. He slapped the bark. A beam roasted the tree like it had Screech.

His glare found Essie. "You turned her against me."

"W-who?"

"Elle."

That's what this was about. Not that she'd attacked a fellow godling. Not that Essence was on the brink of war, threatening to violate the one condition keeping it alive.

"The last time I talked to her, we fought." Essie used a branch to stand. "If she ended things with you, that's your own fault."

Sunlight exploded from Elio, disintegrating the rest of the tree. His scorching body slammed into hers, pinning her against a trunk. Vines slithered around his neck, his elbows, his wrists. A root shot from the grass, coiling his ankle. All worked together to pull him off her. He fought with his light, his heat burning them and her.

I can burn too.

This attack was completely unwarranted, instigated by another ego-hurting fiend. She ushered her suddenly boiling blood into her hands so sweat seeped from her palms. Snapping her fingers, weakness rippled up her arm.

Not this again. Fire, you can't hide. I need you.

Elio's beams vaporized the last vine holding him from her.

"She'll never forgive you." Essie's voice cracked, shrill and desperate—not what she intended. "If you kill me, you'll never win her back."

The intensity of the heat decreased from scorching to sizzling. Elio withdrew, his crown askew, pieces of his hair tangled in the gem-encrusted prongs. His tunic had a grass stain; the fabric was torn to match his pants. He looked like he was going to say something. Instead, he darted upward, golden

cape flapping.

Ribs prickling, side wound splitting, skin blistering, Essie slumped to the ground, patting her belly. Stillness greeted her palm.

“Sweetling?” she gasped, pressing harder. “Are you there? Sweet—”

The faintest nudge on her fingertip unleashed a flood of tears. “Mama’s so sorry.” *Mama almost let him get you.*

“Essie?” Kesindra crept from a firebush, orange petals in one hand, her journal clutched to her chest.

“Do you have anything for sunburns?”

Kesindra shoved the flowers and journal into the bag slung over her shoulder, rushing to Essie’s side. Together, they hobbled in the direction of the cave.

“Who was that?”

Essie gritted her teeth, glaring at the sun. “Prince Elio.”

“Why did he attack you?”

“I’m not sure. He—Ow!” Essie groaned, planting her foot sooner than expected as the terrain sloped upward. “He said I turned Elle against him.”

“Leala’s sister?”

“Yes.”

Kesindra brushed aside a large frond. They stepped into the meadow.

Orrin inspected Screech’s broken tether dangling from the branch. “I think the ptero flew off—What happened?”

“Essie was attacked,” Kesindra said.

“By who?”

Kesindra explained. Essie hugged the tether. It’d only taken seconds for the sun to exterminate Screech. If he had flown for the sky instead of in front of her, he’d still exist. She may have an army, but already too many of her flora and fauna had lost their lives to protect her. She was their mother; she should be protecting *them*. And Sweetling too. But this injured human body of hers was too weak for her to do her job.

CHAPTER TWO

In the farthest, shadowy corner of the palace library, Elle crouched at the last bookcase in the row, pulling on the thin, green book resting on the bottom shelf. Though it refused to be removed from its home, it tipped onto its side, causing the floorboards to creak and open downward. She didn't fall like she had the first time; instead she slipped through the square hole in the floor, floating into the darkness. The skirt of her sparkly, navy gown billowed, its extravagance too much for this mysterious hall hiding the Land Above's secret past. But the daily assembly had just ended, and she had tea scheduled with their Majesties shortly. There wasn't time to change.

She landed in front of the statues of Serafina and Cato, Queen Aurelia's long deceased siblings. Forever extending her hand, Serafina's welcoming smile seemed to warm with each visit.

"Like my headband?" Elle patted her band of silvery gems, inspired by Serafina's stone band fastened over the statue's two long braids. "And my braids?"

Elle swung her own two braids from side to side, taking the journal she'd left on top of the stone book Cato held. His expression seemed to grow more serious. If Serafina was happy someone was finally learning their history, Cato

was sorry no one had learned it in the first place.

“Don’t apologize, Cato. You’re not the one who murdered and deceived.” With a sigh, she patted his second arm pointing at the long, dark corridor behind him. “Although I wish you could tell me which tapestry shows the secret weapon you were building.”

The weapon could be the key to Essie and Leala defeating Pirro without bringing their own execution. They could give it to one of their human companions to wield.

The other statues lining the corridor made her spine tingle, each one calling her over to discover the tales of the tapestries hanging behind them. The first vision she had witnessed, where Aurelia and her husband coerced Serafina to lead them to Cato’s secret weapon by threatening Serafina’s three children, was tapestry forty-four of fifty. Tapestry number one, which Elle had viewed yesterday, confirmed the two giant faces carved into the wall at the end of the corridor belonged to the parents of Her Majesty and her siblings.

The second tapestry hung behind a decapitated statue, the number two stitched into its top left corner; yellow and golden threads depicted a sun. Hugging her journal close, Elle touched the woven fabric.

Heat stole her from the cool, shadowy chamber to a bright, spacious room with many floor-to-ceiling windows. Hundreds of translucent spirits crowded beneath colourful, gem-encrusted chandeliers, chattering with their neighbours and excitedly pointing to the dais at the top of the room.

Three individuals emerged from the double doors. Even though they weren’t made of stone, Elle recognized Cato and Serafina immediately. Cato walked between his two sisters. A silvery-grey suit popped against his russet skin. The tips of his slicked, black hair glimmered violet, matching his tie. His expression mirrored the guilty sadness sculpted into his statue while Serafina’s smile was even bigger than her statue’s as she waved at all the spirits. Specks of purple sparkled on her warm brown skin and two dark brown braids. The silvery-grey dress she wore was simple, hanging only to her knees and accented by a purple ribbon circling her slender waist.

Aurelia, however, had her silvery-yellow hair in an intricately braided bun and wore a gown so grand she was one layer of silvery tulle away from drowning in it. Elle cringed at the similarities to some of her own outfits. With no trace of a smile and narrowed purple eyes, pale Aurelia regarded the spirits like they were beneath her, the same way she did centuries later as the Queen

of the Land Above.

The siblings stopped in the centre of the dais.

“Welcome.” A deep voice echoed through the ballroom, shaking the chandeliers. “Today marks the beginning of a new era.”

Elle inspected the large staircase and the balcony extending from its top step but spotted no one.

“After a long competition”—a second mysterious voice filled the hall, this one feminine—“it’s time we choose the individuals who will join our children on the Council of the Land Above when our time in this universe inevitably ends. Our son, Cato, will officiate the vows. Our daughters will perform the blessings. Cato, the floor is yours.”

Cato cleared his throat. “It is my pleasure to call up our first victorious champion. Cym, please join us on the dais.”

The crowd shifted, creating space for the spirit to reach the steps leading up to the dais. From where Elle stood, the spirit’s features were difficult to make out in his translucence. Light hair, strong jaw, and died as a soldier in the Lands Below judging from his metal armour, was all she could tell. The spirit strutted with a confidence she’d never seen from a spirit in the Land Above before.

He paused on the top step. Cato offered his hand to the spirit. The corners of Cato’s lips drooped... or did they? Elle looked closer. His lips remained in a neutral line. *Maybe I’m seeing things?*

The handshake concluded with the spirit kneeling.

“Cym,” Cato said. “You have fought hard to prove yourself worthy, triumphing over nine others to earn the God of Sun title. Do you vow to uphold the values of my mother and father, to work respectfully with your peers on council, and to provide the Lands Below with the light and warmth they need to thrive?”

Crossing one arm over his chest, Cym nodded curtly. “I do.”

This time, Cato’s frown lasted longer, at least long enough for Elle to confirm she wasn’t seeing things.

“Take our hands, Cym,” Serafina said, as both she and Aurelia reached for him.

Cym took each of their hands. A bright golden light emitted from their conjoined fingers. Cym gasped but didn’t let go as the golden light slowly moved up his arms to his chest, spreading to his shoulders, his neck, his cheeks,

and down his torso to his legs. Golden clothes materialized; the last garment to form was a long cape.

Serafina and Aurelia released him. The golden light disappeared from their fingers but didn't leave Cym. Serafina dropped her gaze while Aurelia inspected him closely as he rose.

"Welcome," Cato said. "To the Council of the Land Above, Cym, God of the Sun."

Cym faced the audience.

The king? Elle's jaw dropped and her knees gave out. She landed on the cold, stone floor of the mysterious chamber.

The king had been a spirit?

Her mind whizzed with a million questions, one after another popping into existence until it felt like the aftermath of a lightning strike behind her brow. She opened her journal, touched pencil to paper, but couldn't produce anything but scribbles. She had a tea party to attend.

Tea with the king. Her legs wobbled so violently she had to fly to the exit. *How am I to face him now?* She accidentally bumped Serafina's monument. *What if I give away that I know his secret?* She smacked her head passing through the hole in the floor. *Reveal the existence of this chamber?*

Coughing on dust, she rested her throbbing forehead on the spine of a book, planting her palms on the shelf.

Keep it together. Deep breaths. You won't give anything away. It took several breaths before her knees stopped shaking so she could navigate the maze of shelves.

"Where were you?"

She emerged from the row into a dimly lit reading nook. Wilf's translucent form glistened in the orange glow. The boy spirit lounged in an armchair, propping his feet on another. A giant book lay open in his lap. Dozens of other books lay in a messy pile on the floor. If Saga, the God of History, saw the books like that, he'd lose it.

A single wrinkle creased Wilf's translucent forehead—the wrinkle signifying he was an older man trapped in a twelve-year-old's body. "Not reading through these books, that's for sure."

"None of your business," she said. The words came out weaker than she intended.

The wrinkle in Wilf's brow faded. "You visited that chamber. What did

you learn?”

The king used to be like you. But the words refused to leave her mouth.

“Will the information help Essie, at least?”

Would it? No. Essie’s conflict is with Pirro, not the King of the Land Above.

“I think you’re wasting your time. Everyone else has already figured out their Majesties are twisted, lying monsters.”

Elle scoffed, snatching the book from his lap and tossing it onto the floor.

“Like what you’re doing is any more helpful to Essie.”

“It is! I’m trying to figure out how to make another secret tunnel,” he grumbled, dragging himself out of his armchair to pick up the book. “You know, like the one *you* let their Majesties close.”

Book in hand, he elbowed her. A flash of yellow and blue sparkled up her arm, singeing the lace on her dress’s sleeves.

Pest. She marched into the nearest row. *To think a couple days ago, I almost considered him a fri—no, ally.*

She found the library’s exit and stalked through the second-floor corridor to the wide staircase descending into the entrance hall. Pale, grey light filtered through the windows on either side of the grand doors, preventing the sparkles that usually shone from the gold banisters and wall hangings. Was this the same entrance hall that Serafina and Cato had known? Or had it been rebuilt after their deaths?

Elle crossed from the bottom step to the double doors on her left, leading to their Majesties’ wing of the palace. A small, green figure crept from the shadowed archway behind the staircase—the entryway to the dungeons. One of the yellow leaves in the Goddess of Nature’s beehive bun of leafy hair fell to the marble floor.

“Tivona.”

Two vines snaked out from beneath Tivona’s green cloak, attacking Elle’s ankles with their thorns, forcing her to back away or suffer cuts. “I have nothing to say to you,” Tivona said, stalking by.

Damn you, Wilf. He had told Tivona what Elle had done.

“I saved Pirro to save Essie. The harm-another-god-face-punishment-in-kind rule still applies to them. If Essie kills Pirro, her punishment will be death.”

Tivona paused in front of the staircase’s bottom step. “You’re certain of this?”

“Yes. And so is Leala.”

Tivona’s vines ceased their assault on Elle’s ankles, receding beneath the nature goddess’ cloak. “We’ll have to find another solution.”

“I’m working on it.”

Tivona tilted her head to the side like Essie often did when she wasn’t sure she believed what she was hearing.

“Were you visiting Ignacio? How is he?”

“Fired up.” Tivona frowned at the dungeon entrance. “He thinks his daughter was betrayed.”

Elle winced, picturing the God of Fire combusting in his cell, cursing her name.

“And Amora and Alvaro like to talk loudly between their cells, taunting him about Essie’s fate and how there is nothing he can do to stop it.”

“May be he can’t, but we can.” Cato and Serafina were going to lead her to a solution. She knew it.

“We shall see,” Tivona said. “Don’t you have a tea party to get to?” Her tone pricked like a thorn. Shifting into a small bird, she flew to the ceiling, seven stories above.

Elle breathed deeply to banish the hurt Tivona had caused and the lingering annoyance at Wilf for tattling on her. Lifting her chin, she strutted into their Majesties wing.

Her navy gown clashed with the golden tapestries and furniture decorating their Majesties’ parlour. Aurelia smiled at Elle from the loveseat in front of the window. *When did her silvery-yellow hair and purple irises switch to gold? Was it before or after she killed her siblings?* Her love of over-the-top dresses hadn’t changed. This afternoon, glimmering gold silks swathed Her Majesty from shoulder to toe.

Beside her, Cym sipped tea from a teacup. His Majesty had a thicker beard than he’d had in his first moments of being a god—

Pretend you don’t know that.

His robes were almost identical to the ones he’d worn during the blessing ceremony. *Did Aurelia change her colouring to match Cym’s sunny complexion? Or maybe Serafina or Cato altered her appearance to remind her she’d chosen a rotten, has-been spirit over them.*

Stop it. You know nothing!

Elio occupied the chair directly across the table from his father, his golden

cape draped over his chair's armrest. Mud dirtied the bottom of the handsome garment. Elio wasn't a hiker; he preferred to keep to clean paths when outdoors.

Why does he have mud on his cloak?

Never mind. Focus.

His golden hair was in a ponytail. A bit of green stuck out behind his ear.

Is that a leaf?

Focus! You have a role to play.

"Hello, my love." The words tasted vulgar on her tongue. She kissed his jaw.

His face tensed into a stiff smile. As she claimed the chair next to his, he glanced at her left hand, where his ring hugged her fourth finger. For show. And he knew it. But his parents didn't, and she intended to keep it that way. If she were to truly aid Essie and Leala, she had to do more than uncover the secrets from a hidden chamber. She had to subtly sway their Majesties' decisions and distract them from the happenings in Essence. To do that, she had to make them believe she was their pawn.

Aurelia's brow furrowed, inspecting Elle's two braids. "When did you start wearing your hair like that, dear?"

Elle reached for a teapot. "Oh, not too long ago." *Since I discovered the statue of the sister you murdered.*

Her Majesty's smile faltered. Maybe she saw a ghost, felt some remorse.

Good.

The king's stern glare made Elle's spine shudder, banishing her smugness.

Remember, you know nothing. Tea splashed into her teacup, a few drops spilling onto the little plate. As a coverup, she pretended to be interested in the two unused settings on the table. "Are we expecting others?"

"We are," Aurelia said, as a knock rattled the door. "Come in."

Darkness crept inside the parlour, quickly taking the form of a woman in black robes, the Goddess of Night and Dreams.

"Mother," Elle murmured.

"Nisha, thank you for joining us," Aurelia said.

Nisha's crystal irises shifted from Elle to their Majesties. "Thank you for the invitation, Your Majesty."

"Is Celous coming?" Cym asked.

They invited Father, too?

“I’m here.” The God of Sky strode into the room. Though his robes were sky blue to match his eyes, his complexion was grey, like the cloudy sky outside the window. “Your Majesty.”

He bowed low. As he straightened, Celous frowned at Elle, but it wasn’t the frown she’d expected from him since she’d aided in Leala’s banishment. It lacked the disgust and disappointment, in fact, it didn’t feel directed *at* her but *for* her.

Clouds converged inside Elle’s chest. The last time their Majesties had gathered her family in their parlour was to celebrate her engagement to Elio.

Oh, no...

Elio’s strained smile shifted into more of a smirk. Internal thunder rumbled, rain pouring from the gathering clouds, pooling in Elle’s lungs.

“Please take your seats,” Cym said to Elle’s parents. “We have much to discuss.”

Her mother sat closest to her. Tendrils of darkness hugged Elle’s knees beneath the table where their Majesties couldn’t see, attempting to lull the brewing storm to sleep. It soothed some, enough for Elle to catch her breath.

Focus. This is the role you must play.

“The discussion we are about to have is long overdue,” Aurelia said. “It’s about Elio and Elle’s wedding.”

“Wonderful,” Elio said, taking Elle’s hand and kissing the ring. “We have delayed our marriage long enough, haven’t we, my love?”

Her lightning yearned to zap him, but she kept the electricity contained. She needed to be the Princess of the Land Above to protect Essie and Leala from their Majesties. Elle let visions of a future where they were safe fuel her smile. “Indeed, dearest.”

Wedding ideas poured from her mouth. Cym raised his brow while Aurelia beamed. Elle had passed the test.

CHAPTER THREE

Isa's father, Leader Gregon of the Ani, had always said both good and bad fiends existed. But there was no doubt in Isa's mind that a bad fiend was behind the stampede of strange, four-legged creatures that had charged her village and snatched her. A torturous ache festered in her hips, spreading to her shivering legs straddling the animal's back. Its giant, brown antlers resembled splayed human hands with an extra finger, and its feet sounded like rock hitting rock as it plodded up onto the bank of the river. It followed others of its kind into a thick wood.

Goosebumps covered Isa from head to foot. Water soaked her grey-green dress from the waist down; the thin, torn fabric clung to her frozen skin. If it weren't for the warmth coming from the bulky man sharing the creature with her, she was certain she'd have perished from the cold by now. When the man had first snatched her, she'd thrashed and flailed but failed to break free of his constricting hold. Then, a voice had whispered, *Stop resisting*, and the fight had drained out of her until she couldn't move at all. Not to escape or massage her aching limbs or scratch the annoying itch on her neck. Even her eyelids refused to obey her.

Disobedience was something she was familiar with. Despite being the Ani

leader's daughter, few people listened to her. Although it stung, she couldn't fault them. The villagers had chosen her father to lead them. They hadn't chosen her. Her eyelids, on the other hand, were a part of her, and their refusal to obey, in the same way the rest of her body refused, was the biggest betrayal she'd ever endured. That, and Darius bringing home Essie when he was supposed to be catching Isa a gobi.

Bushels of leaves dangled in front of her. Unable to duck as her steed carried her forward, the leaves brushed the blisters on her neck, igniting the itch again.

Blame Essie, the voice of her brother, Cazer, whispered in her head. *She's the one who burned you.* But Isa remembered that no more than she remembered the actual flame that had seared her flesh. A whack to the head had knocked her unconscious before that and when she had awoken, Essie had disappeared.

Halt your cer. The voice speaking to her this time was real, not imagined like her brother's. It was the same voice that had told her to stop resisting. It reverberated in her bones, making her stomach knot with sickness. The man sharing her steed pulled on the reins. The animal tossed its antlers but stopped, its tail end remaining within the tree line. The rest of the herd invaded the glade, some already munching on the dewy grass.

Get off the cer.

Isa's joints rejoiced as they cracked, finally able to move as she dismounted from the antlered creature—or cer, as the voice had called it. Bare feet planting on the grass, stillness overtook her again, evaporating the celebratory spirit.

"Oy, Satol. What are we supposed to do with all 'em?" a man asked. "We're running out of food and supplies."

"Tomorrow," another man replied, "you and Mal will continue with the Nivi to start phase two. I will take the Ani to Volon and will join you after."

Volon. A sour taste filled Isa's mouth, but she couldn't swallow it. Volon was the city Cazer had wanted to attack because they had accepted a fiend as their king. Isa had wanted to dismiss Cazer's claim as another of the wild conspiracies he'd become obsessed with since their mother's sudden death; she likely would have ignored it if Essie hadn't told them an evil fiend might come prey upon the village only moments before Cazer's arrival.

I fear the fiendish king your brother speaks about is the same fiend Essie warned us of, her father had confessed to her one night. He wasn't one to let fiend stories

bother him, so Isa knew the king of Volon was a threat to take seriously.

“What should we do with these young ones?” the first man asked.

“Your questions are getting on my nerves.” The second man stepped in front of Isa. The black garments dressing his muscular form made his tied-back, golden hair and fair skin stand out in the shade. Handsome as he was, his leer filled Isa with unease. “Just give them to the women.”

He thrust a baby at her. The slamming thump of Isa’s heart stopped her lungs from taking air. The infant’s pudgy cheeks and round, copper eyes—so like Isa’s own—lacked the expected tears from being handled so harshly.

Take care of the child, the commanding voice whispered.

For once, her thoughts and traitorous arms agreed, instantly accepting the child. The man’s red cape dragged behind him as he strutted out of sight, oblivious that he’d given the nine-moon-old infant to her aunt. Zinnia likely didn’t know her relation to Isa either, because until this moment, Isa had never had the chance to hold her. After Cazer had abandoned the village, Zinnia’s mother, Ayami, pretended her children had no paternal side.

A wet warmth soaked the bottom of Zinnia’s nappy, dripping onto Isa’s arm. She couldn’t wipe off the pee or scrunch her nose against the smell. But what was worse was that Zinnia didn’t fuss. No squirming, no crying. Not even a whimper. The same spell holding Isa hostage held Zinnia, too. These horrible men—these *fiends*—had captured an innocent baby.

The voice in her head issued several commands—*Line up before the wagon to collect your rations. Eat your rations. Mash this papaya and feed it to the baby*—all of which she obeyed without hesitation. The papaya juice stuck to her palm, but the voice did not command her to wash up, so her hand remained sticky.

Sit in the grass. Quietly. Isa obeyed. A few rows ahead and to the right, her friend Bly finished her own rations. Bly’s dishevelled honey-brown hair had fallen from the bun she always took such care to perfect, especially since meeting the Gerii warrior, Jag. Isa had done the same thing as young as ten, trying to make Darius notice her. He never did.

“I’m beat. Can’t you put them to sleep already, Satol?”

The man’s question reminded Isa she had much more dire things to think about than unrequited love. She lay down at the command to go to sleep. Zinnia nuzzled her collar. Despite the rays of afternoon sunlight, the itch on her neck, the stench of dried pee, the ache of her body, and the fear of what was to come, darkness claimed Isa against her will.

* * *

Darius's swollen left cheek intruded into his vision, but despite the hindrance Cazer's knuckles had caused, Darius could still see the green haze lingering within the circular canyon, casting what had been a battlefield a day ago in an eerie light. He breathed in the smoke, savouring the only physical part of Essie left here. Not that he wanted her to be here. If she were, Cazer would have tied her to this log too for drawing Pirro to the Ani.

Instead, his fellow prisoners included Noll—a thirteen-year-old-boy from Niviland whose only crime was being affiliated with Darius—and Makarys—a friend of Leala's accidentally left behind by the crew that had rescued Essie. The Ani had mistaken Makarys for one of Pirro's minions. She slept on her side, her messy, deep red braid draped over her face. Shaggy brown bangs flopped into Noll's pale brow resting on Darius's shoulder. Drool dripped from the boy's mouth.

"Gross."

"Huh?" Noll yawned. "Waas the matter?"

"You're slobbering on me, worse than Nesa when she sees meat."

At the far end of the log, Nesa snapped at the rope tethering her to the spot. The muscles in her two legs bulged beneath her grey scales as she tried to break free, her tiny front arms too useless to do anything. With her tail, she whacked the log in frustration, her yellow eyes pleading with Darius.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm stuck too."

Though the only prisoners tied to this specific log, they weren't the only ones. The adjacent tree had four unconscious warriors strapped to it. Darius had the clearest view of a young woman, maybe eighteen years in age. His mother, Mag, tended to the gash bloodying the injured woman's short, black curls. Mag's tired gaze met Darius's, her usually smooth, golden-beige skin now puffy and grey.

"You should sleep," he mouthed.

The only present healer, she had likely been awake fixing injuries since the fight had ended. Despite their distance, Darius smelled the sweat and blood soiling the burgundy healer's dress Mag wore.

"Tried," she mouthed. Pieces of greying, black hair fell from the messy knot atop her head.

A small tremor quaked the earth, like someone had sprinted beneath the grassy field from the rocky passageway in the opposite canyon wall. One

tremor became several until it felt as though an entire stampede raced underneath the soil.

Makarys gasped awake. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Since midmorning.”

“Figure out how to escape yet?” Makarys leaned forward and wiggled, failing to break free.

“Obviously not or we’d be gone,” Noll whined.

Darius nudged Noll as hard as the rope would allow. “I’ve been waiting for Vin to be put on guard duty.”

Their current guard—one of Cazer’s Gerii friends—spun his spear in circles, a yawn overtaking his youthful, bearded face.

“Cazer must not trust him with me.”

Not that he expected Vin to free him. Vin hadn’t come near, or looked his way, since Darius had been taken prisoner. Somehow, he’d lost two friends yesterday. Tober and Vin.

The rumbling ground tamed. A crowd swarmed a giant rex, ten times the size of Nesa. Its riders dismounted from the two-legged reptile’s back.

“If you didn’t find them, why are you here?” The yelling woman’s voice was one Darius knew well. His cousin, Ayami, hidden from view due to her short stature, spoke louder than everyone. “Cazer, send them out again! We need to find them.”

Adorned in the same reptilian-scaled gear as the Gerii, Cazer smoothed his short, dark brown hair, growing out from being shaved nearly to the scalp. “We will. Turrim left with more men on the hunt.”

“That’s not enough!” Ayami shoved out of the crowd, her toddler son, Axil, on one hip, her hand on the other. Strands of knotted, black hair clung to her round face, scrunched into an angry squint. “Our daughter has been taken! I—”

“I know.” Cazer patted Ayami’s shoulder. A fresh bandage wrapped his golden-brown fingers together. Darius hoped his cheek had caused that injury.

“We will find Zinni,” Cazer said, “Isa, and all the others. I promise.”

Ayami shook him off. “Your promises are dirt.”

Cazer’s frown revealed his dimples. His father, Gregon, the late Leader of the Ani killed in the attack, had been an expert at keeping his emotions unreadable. Cazer still had to work on that skill. A full scowl broke through when he spotted Mag tending to the unconscious warrior. He marched over,

kicking the box containing her healing supplies. “What are you doing wasting your herbs and bandages on them?”

Mag continued to scrub blood from the young woman’s dark brown skin. “How are they to tell us where the kidnapped are being taken if they all die of infection?”

Cazer opened his mouth, but others nodded in agreement with Mag. Thin lips pressed together, Cazer shifted his glare to Darius’s log, focusing on Makarys. “That one is awake. Orso, grab her with me.”

Makarys lifted her chin, no trace of protest on her bruised face. She didn’t know where the entranced Nivi were taking the Ani any more than Darius did. She could say so.

Orso, the guard, untied the ropes connecting Makarys to the log and hauled her up. The bindings pinning her arms to her sides stayed intact, but her pale fingers stuck out, stiff, and spread apart. A sharp breeze brushed Darius’s temple and sent Orso tumbling. Makarys dropped to the ground. Despite letting out a pained hissed, she kicked her legs, tripping Cazer as he reached for her. His nose fell for Darius’s knee and Darius booted him with all his might. Like a wild animal, Cazer growled, jerking back. Darius aimed another kick at Cazer’s throat. He dodged the attack. Orso tackled Makarys onto her side. A fist smacked Darius’s jaw. His head walloped the log.

Black dots converged, flying him up and dropping him while Pirro watched from the canyon top. *No, this is not my end. I still have to hurt him, to kill him.* Energy rushed from his hands and his plummet halted.

An irritating throb knocked on his skull. Go away, he wanted to tell the intruder, but his mouth refused to cooperate. “G—”

“He’s waking,” Noll’s trembling voice broke through the black dots’ defences.

“Noll.” Globes of blood spilled out with the name.

“I was afraid we’d lost you to Penance.” Makarys’s voice came from Darius’s other side.

Darius lifted his head, still suffering from the annoying knocking. “WhatdImiss?” A flare of pain surged through his jaw. *Damn you, Cazer.*

“Your cousin, Ayami, brought us scorched bird,” Makarys said. “Not the worst last meal I’ve ever had.”

Last meal? “Wha—”

“He’s going to hang her!” Noll squeaked, and not because he was in the

beginning stages of growing from childhood into adolescence.

Darius's stomach plummeted like it had in his dream.

"In the early morning, when all the children are asleep. Because of what she did."

Darius recalled the breeze that had brushed him on its way to throw Orso. Strong and chaotic, much like the energy that'd whooshed from his palms and stopped his fall from the ptero's talons so Essie could catch him. Impossible, and yet, he'd somehow managed it. And so had Makarys with calculated intention.

"They think she's like Essie. A fiend."

Not a fiend. A human with a fiendish, or rather, a Land Abovian power. Darius wanted to ask Makarys how she had done it, but now wasn't the time.

Reclining against the log, Makarys stared at the stars. "Maybe I can continue this fight somehow when I return to the Land Above."

She didn't mean the fight with Cazer or even Pirro. She meant the fight to defeat all the tyrants up there. A fight few humans knew about.

"No. You're staying here." Darius's heart thumped like a blacksmith's hammer.

"I'll get you out of this."