



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

Research Commons

<http://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/>

## Research Commons at the University of Waikato

### Copyright Statement:

The digital copy of this thesis is protected by the Copyright Act 1994 (New Zealand).

The thesis may be consulted by you, provided you comply with the provisions of the Act and the following conditions of use:

- Any use you make of these documents or images must be for research or private study purposes only, and you may not make them available to any other person.
- Authors control the copyright of their thesis. You will recognise the author's right to be identified as the author of the thesis, and due acknowledgement will be made to the author where appropriate.
- You will obtain the author's permission before publishing any material from the thesis.

# **The Phoenix Prophecy**

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

**Master of Professional Writing**

at

**The University of Waikato**

by

**Julia Williams**



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

2022

## **Abstract**

When Soraya Merridan wakes from a recurring nightmare, she finds herself drawn to a box of her mother's belongings. After discovering an antique necklace with a strange stone, Sora accidentally triggers a prophecy and finds herself stranded in Aurelia, a new realm unlike anything she has ever seen.

Upon her arrival, she meets a young prince and discovers a plague of hellish creatures that threaten the lives of everyone in this strange new world. Torn between Earth and Aurelia, Sora finds herself in the unlikely companionship of the prince and his guard. Together, they must journey to the hidden Temple of Arkosia in search of an ancient being capable of stopping the rising darkness and the threat of the Lord Ruler that comes with it. But things aren't always what they seem, and when a dark-haired stranger keeps appearing with a message not to trust the prince, Sora is torn as to what to believe. With the fate of an entire world at stake, Sora is determined to make the right choice.

But is she willing to pay the price?

*The Phoenix Prophecy* features a strong female character overcoming challenges and internal struggles while simultaneously uncovering her own strengths as she navigates this new world. It takes us on a journey where classic fantasy elements interweave with new ones to create an adventure for both the main character and the reader to enjoy, a world to lose yourself in while not straying entirely from our own. In this novel, I explore aspects of politics and social roles which are often built on real-world elements while presenting them in a world that shows a different view of familiar topics.

I wanted to write about a heroine who isn't afraid to dive right into the magic and fight for themselves no matter where it takes them. A strong female character who isn't afraid to get

her hands dirty. In Aurelia the rules are unexpected, it's a place where readers can feel connected to the main character while also enjoying a little spice of magic.

# **The Phoenix Prophecy**

Julia Williams

for my family,  
you kept me sane throughout the writing process.

&

for my friends and workshop classmates,  
your support and feedback helped me write an entire book.

thank you

## **Chapter One**

*Something feels wrong.*

*Something feels very, very wrong.*

Soraya Merridan lay with her back pressed against the mattress, eyes locked on the ceiling. She blinked once, but her attempt to push back the thoughts only made her wince. A persistent ache thrummed in her temples. With the palms of her hands pressed into her closed eyes, she sat up. Dread swirled in her stomach and settled deep in her gut.

Slowly, she slipped out of bed. Her footsteps were silent as she padded across the room. She felt her brows pull together slightly. *Why am I sneaking around my own apartment? It's not like I'm going to wake anyone.* Her roommate had been called into work earlier that night. As a detective, she always seemed to be on call. Adie, a pure white Siberian husky, stretched from his spot in the lounge. The soft tap of his paws against the hardwood floor brought him closer to her side.

He brushed his big head against her hip and whined. Sora ran her fingers absently through his fur. "Hey boy," she murmured. She glanced down when she felt his nose nudge her gently in the leg, his blue eyes bright. He whined again. She dropped to one knee and scratched behind his ears. "Do you feel it too?" she whispered. Adie cocked his head and his tongue lolled out to one side.

Crisp air whistled through her teeth as she sucked in a breath. A shudder rocked through her body. It knocked the air from her lungs and she swayed slightly. She ignored Adie's protests and got to her feet. Her mind clouded as she stumbled backwards. The fog seemed to increase until she could barely see straight. Adie pressed his head into the back of her thighs and nudged her.

As she crossed the threshold into her bedroom, Adie backed away, his body lowered to the floor as he watched her. His intelligent blue eyes followed her movement, but he stayed

back. Her legs trembled as she took another step forward and threw her arms out to steady herself. She let her forearm brace her against the wall before she grasped the doorknob of her wardrobe. It sent a shock through her palm.

She took a moment to compose herself, steadying her heartbeat as it thundered in her chest. The door clicked open and she peered inside, eyes drawn to a dusty old box hidden behind her things. It had belonged to her mother. Her throat bobbed, chest expanding as she inhaled. Sora had been given the box and its contents after her mother died and hadn't been able to open it. Now, it seemed to pull her like a magnet to her very bones.

Without a thought, Sora reached for the box. The second her fingers brushed the surface, the pull heightened. Her fingers pressed against the lid and she dragged it across the floor towards her. A thin layer of dust coated the surface. The marks from her touch stood out against the grey. Her hands trembled slightly as she lifted the lid and peered inside.

There were a few old photos, some of her childhood, others of her mother when she was younger. One in particular – her mother leaning against an old oak tree – brought a sad smile to her lips. She let the pads of her fingers flick through the old pictures until they brushed against something hard and cold. With bated breath, she moved everything aside and stared down at the necklace.

It was old. Definitely an antique of some kind, and flawless. The chain appeared to be a simple strand of silver, but as she looked closer, the metal seemed to glow beneath her fingertips. Carefully, she pulled it from the box. Secured to the end of the chain was a stone encased in thin strands of glowing metal. The stone itself was black. A strange smoke trapped inside. It swirled with dark, inky colours.

Enthralled, she stared at it for a long moment. When she finally managed to tear her gaze from the necklace, her eyes flicked back to the photo of her mother beside the oak tree. Sora took in her broad smile and laughing eyes, surprised at the pang it sent through her. But



it was the necklace around her neck that she was drawn to the most. Even in the photo, the silver metal seemed to glow, as did the stone which swirled darker against her mother's pale skin.

She brushed her thumb against the stone. A jolt of electricity shot through her body at the contact. Her breath shuttered. The darkness inside the stone swirled more violently at her touch. Adie popped his head up from between his front paws, his body remaining alert as he continued to watch her. As if in some kind of trance, she raised the delicate chain and secured it around her neck.

The second she joined the clasp, a flash pierced the room so brightly she cried out. Light seared into her retinas even behind closed lids and scorched her skin. Goosebumps ran the length of her spine and she struggled to her feet. Her limbs shook as she forced herself upright. Breath rushed through her lungs. Something dark shot past and cast a shadow across her face. Sora opened her mouth in a scream, but thick, hot smoke forced itself down into her lungs. Tears blurred her vision, but then a whisper of a breath called to her.

It brushed against her mind, kind and reassuring.

Sora latched onto the comfort. She let out a scream when she lurched forward with such force, her feet left the ground. Desperately, she tried to pull her thoughts together, but darkness crept into the edge of her vision. Her body was still in the air when she lost consciousness.

\*\*\*

Metal against metal rang through the air. It sent a twinge of pain that radiated through her entire body. A groan slid past her lips as she pulled herself into consciousness. *Blinding light, thick, hot smoke ... falling ...* Sora bolted upright so fast her head spun and she grasped it in an attempt to stop the sudden wave of nausea. She waited for the black spots to clear before she glanced around, wide-eyed, at her new surroundings.

Seated on some kind of fur bedding tucked into the corner, she took in the rest of the room. It was a large tent. Thick brown material hung off the post in the centre, curving down and outwards to create a roof. Around the middle column sat a large wooden table with papers and a few books scattered across its surface.

Sora pressed her palm to the side of her head and swung her legs over the side of the bedding. She paused, taking in the black pants, tunic and knee high boots she wore.

*What the—*

She ran her hand against the material, amazed at the softness of the fabric.

*How did I get into this outfit?*

The thought slipped from her mind when the tent flap moved aside and a young man entered. He paused, deep amber eyes widening at the sight of her, but then his expression shifted and she couldn't read the thoughts behind his gaze.

Similar to herself, the young man was dressed entirely in black. Golden thread adorned the fabric over his chest, each intricate line creating the outline of a large bird, wings open in mid-flight. The thread glittered under the dim light of the lanterns, but it was the sword strapped to his waist that drew her attention.

“Ah,” he murmured, his posture straightening. “I wasn't sure you would wake.”

Sora opened her mouth, hesitated, and closed it again. He continued to stare, head cocked slightly as he studied her. When he didn't speak further, she awkwardly cleared her throat. “Um... yes. Well I'm awake now.”

“Indeed you are.”

They fell into silence again. Sora dropped both hands into her lap and played with her fingers. Unable to hold his intense gaze, she lowered her eyes and a thought crossed her mind. “How did I get into these clothes?”

“You don't remember?”

“No.”

“We found you like that. And quite the entrance it was.” He made to take a step closer but she tensed. He paused and leaned back on the table, brushing a hand down his tunic. “It seems I have forgotten my manners. Allow me to introduce myself.” He dipped his chin in the slightest incline. “I am Rydal.”

When he looked at her expectantly, she blinked. *Oh.* “Sora,” she replied. “I would say it’s a pleasure, but I’m not sure it is.”

He blinked. “No? You’ve been unconscious a long time. Perhaps you’d like to get some fresh air? I’m sure it will ease some of your discomfort and allow me the chance to explain.”

*I doubt that,* she thought, but rose from the bed.

She kept an eye on him, something that seemed to amuse him greatly, as he led her out of the tent. A faint breeze swept across her cheeks as she stepped outside and her mouth dropped open in shock. Set out before her were over half a dozen near identical tents pitched in the clearing of a dense forest. Trees with deep green leaves and russet bark stretched into the sky.

Men and women moved about the camp, each dressed in varying degrees of plated armour. Each soldier was equipped with a black-scaled chest plate, engraved with the same bird mid-flight, and a sword strapped to their waist. A few also had a bow and quiver secured across their back. The crunch of dirt beneath boots sounded from her right and Sora whipped her head around as two armoured soldiers strode towards them.

The first was a woman, her long white hair tied in a single braid down her back. Her features were hard, her piercing blue eyes burned as they roamed over Sora’s body. The second figure was a man. He seemed to be in his early thirties, though his sharp features left her uncertain. Shoulder-length red hair had been tied back to reveal a stony face. He didn’t even glance at her as they approached.

Sora tried to take a step back but warm hands, rough with callouses, dropped down on either side of her shoulders. She let out a startled gasp as he firmly pushed her forward. “Captain Wyden,” said Rydal. The red-haired man glanced at him, dark brows lowered over green eyes. His gaze remained hard, but something like respect flickered through his features. “Prepare the horses. The journey will continue as planned.”

“Journey?” started Sora.

The woman turned and those strange blue eyes locked on her.

Sora felt her voice falter. Goosebumps prickled along her skin and she glanced away, but that unsettling gaze remained solely on her. Rydal and Captain Wyden continued their conversation until the woman interrupted them, her voice almost eerie as she spoke.

“Are you sure this decision is wise? I cannot read her.”

Rydal waved a dismissive hand. “I presumed as much.”

“But if she was sent by the Tu—”

“Regardless,” Rydal interrupted, but his eyes flickered towards Sora before returning to the woman. “There has been no immediate threat. Though I do believe it would be in our best interests to return to the palace. Do you not agree, Ayla?”

Ayla narrowed those blue eyes, her features pinched. The air around her rippled in small barely distinguishable waves as she spun around and marched back across the clearing. Soldiers glanced her way, their faces pale as they stared after her.

Sora caught the soft murmurings of the Captain and Rydal as she tuned into their conversation. Captain Wyden ran a hand through his hair. The movement loosed a few red strands from the leather band in the process. His voice was rough as she picked up on the last few words. “—you cannot be sure. No one has seen *Lumiere del Aurelia* for millennia.”

“Lum-what del-who?”

Captain Wyden scowled. He made to step towards her when Rydal blocked his path. He sent the Captain a pointed look and murmured. “The *Tutori* will not choose just anyone.”

Sora barely registered her quick breathing until Rydal placed a steady hand on her shoulder. She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath, then another, until her heartbeat had slowed. When she opened her eyes, she found Rydal watching her carefully.

His nostrils flared delicately. “You’re anxious.”

It was a statement, not a question. Her mother had always told her that she let her emotions play out across her face and she immediately tried to school her features.

Rydal chuckled at her reaction. He gave her some space, still close enough that she could feel the heat of his body.

“The girl will ride with me.”

Sora jumped and her attention snapped towards the voice. Captain Wyden stood a few steps away, arms crossed over his broad chest. She took an involuntary step away from him and felt herself bump into Rydal.

“I suspect your disposition has set her on edge, Captain,” Rydal mused. “We have an extra mount. She will ride beside me.”

“You are an important asset to the King,” the Captain protested. “He would not be pleased if you were to be harmed.”

Rydal narrowed his eyes at the Captain. He let amusement filter over the challenge in his tone as he replied. “He would not be pleased to hear you call me his asset.”

Captain Wyden brought his right arm across his chest. His closed fist thudded against his scaled armour. “Of course, *el Loro*,” he replied.

Sora met his gaze and he bared his teeth. She recoiled at the elongated canines, but when she blinked, they were gone.

His eyes glittered as he dismissed himself to prepare for the journey.

Sora shook her head and forced the image out of her mind. She noted the furious expression etched across Rydal's face as he watched the retreat of the Captain. He exhaled sharply and by the time he glanced at her, the fury was gone.

"What does *el Loro* mean?"

"It's more of a formality." He shrugged and studied her expression instead. "You seem," he paused, as if trying to find the right word, "confused."

"I just woke up in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by strangers in armour who are walking around with weapons strapped to their bodies. Wouldn't you be confused?"

"Yes," he replied quietly. "I would." He started forward. "Walk with me, I promise to explain everything as soon as we return to the palace. The forest is not the safest place at night."

"For the King's asset?" pressed Sora.

"Wyden shouldn't have said that. But yes, for myself and the rest of the soldiers here." He didn't give her a chance to reply. "Now, if you will follow me, I'd like to show you something."

Reluctantly, Sora followed him towards the far end of camp. Her footsteps slowed when she spotted a dozen horses grazing near the edge of the forest. Each mount was equipped with riding gear and saddlebags, with the bird mid-flight embedded on the back of each saddle. Her gaze shifted over each of the horses and stopped on one in particular. It was significantly taller than the others. Her eyes zeroed in on the shimmering black coat. The hair so dark it seemed to glisten with each movement of muscle under the moonlight, its mane and tail equally dark. As if sensing her attention, the horse lifted its head and dark obsidian eyes met hers.

"Beautiful, isn't she?"

"I've never seen anything like her," Sora breathed.

Rydal drew his lips together and whistled one short, sharp sound. The stunning black mare immediately took a step forward, her head bobbing as she approached.

“She’s gorgeous,” said Sora.

Two dark ears pricked forward and she nickered, seemingly preening at the compliment. As the mare stepped closer, her dark eyes met Sora’s and she sucked in a breath at the intelligence in them.

“Darka has been my mount since I was eighteen.” Rydal spoke softly. Arm raised, he stroked an open palm down one side of her strong neck. “When I joined the Royal Armies, my first battle was spent on the front lines. I was naïve and arrogant. It nearly cost me my life.” Darka turned her face towards him and he stroked her head affectionately. “She saved me that day. We’ve been inseparable since.”

Sora watched as he reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a sugar cube. Darka nuzzled at his hand and he smiled. The moment broke when someone called out to Rydal. “I’ll be right back,” he assured Sora, voice tight. “Stay with Darka.”

She barely managed a nod before he strode off towards the camp.

A hot puff of breath fanned the back of her neck. A smile slid across her face at the sight of Darka close behind her. “Hi pretty girl,” she murmured.

The mare leaned closer, nudged at her shoulder and whinnied.

“What is it?” Sora ducked under her neck and ran her hands down the other side of her body. Other horses grazed nearby. A few lifted their heads to greet her as she wandered between the mounts. Sora barely stepped into the line of trees when a familiar rough voice boomed over the camp.

“Arm the soldiers,” shouted Wyden. “It’s an ambush!”

## **Chapter Two**

The whine of swords pulled from their scabbards echoed around the camp before war cries broke out. Sora glanced out from behind a tree. Her eyes widened at the sudden number of soldiers fighting amongst the tents.

Flames erupted from different camp fires and shot towards the night sky in streaks of orange and yellow. Embers sparked nearby tents and the chaos intensified. The horses whinnied. A few charged into the mass of bodies as they searched for their riders.

Sora dug her fingers into the bark of the tree and forced her breath to remain steady as she worked through her current options. She peered around the tree again, her eyes flickering over the horses, but Darka was gone.

Soldiers held their ground against the armed attackers. A flash of red moved across her vision: the Captain. His hair hung freely to his shoulders, eyes turbulent, lips pulled back in a snarl, revealing those pointed canines.

“What the hell—”

A twig snapped behind her and she whipped around. Pure instinct propelled her forward and she hit the ground just as the echoing *thwack* of an arrow embedded itself in the tree. She didn't give her attacker another chance. Scrambling to her feet, she bolted towards the camp, urging her legs into a zigzag motion, her heart thundering as arrows struck the ground around her feet.

Adrenaline fuelled the numbness within her. *I need to find somewhere safe.* Her breath came in uneven gasps as she darted behind one of the remaining tents. A second too slow. An arrow whistled past her face. It left a faint sting and the warm trickle of blood ran down the shell of her ear. *Too close.*



Sora slid to a halt behind the tent. The clash of metal echoed in her ears and her boot struck something solid as she stepped back. Her arms wind-milled on either side of her body and she tumbled through the flap of the tent.

She landed in a heap on the ground. Pain shot through her shoulder and she winced. Teeth clenched, she sucked in a breath at the sight of a bloody arrowhead sticking out the front of her shoulder. She made a panicked sound in the back of her throat and immediately bit down on her lip. The last thing she wanted was to alert someone to where she was hidden.

Her rapidly paling fingers trembled as she prodded the skin around the exit wound. She glanced over her shoulder at the broken end of the arrow protruding from her back. While the end of the arrow had broken, it didn't seem to have splintered too badly.

Her stomach churned.

She made herself take in the supplies scattered around the room. Near the end of the fur bedding sat a small workstation with a few strange tools strewn across the stained surface.

Hues of orange and gold flickered in the dim lanterns. They swung from their posts in the tent and cast a shimmer of light against a metallic blade, half-hidden amongst the tools on the workstation. Sora slumped against the bed for support. Teeth gritted, she fumbled with her uninjured hand for the blade.

Her fingers closed around the hilt. It shimmered beneath the flamelight, its pommel entwined with a darker metal that curved into an eye at the head, a clouded white stone encased in its centre. Slowly, she raised her other hand to run her fingers over the stone. Pain rocketed through her nerves and she hissed, eyes drawn back to the protruding arrowhead. A scrap of material hung from the opposite end of the workstation. Her breath hitched as she reached for it, catching the fabric between her fingers and pulling it into her lap.

The clash of metal thrummed louder in her ears. Sora moved the dagger clutched in her hand over the fabric. Careful of her legs beneath, she sliced through it. Her eyes skimmed over

the bird embroidered into the material, and she tore it into long frayed strips. She focussed on the arrow head and ignored the shudder that rippled along her nerves. Someone could discover her at any moment, she had to be fast.

Her fingers wrapped around the bloodied metal and she adjusted her grip. Every muscle jerked with the movement. She breathed through her nose. Head angled away from the injury, she gathered the collar of her tunic into her mouth. Even with her voice muffled, she cried out as she pulled the arrow from her shoulder.

When her eyes blinked open, she was sprawled across the ground beside the bed. Her fingers flexed around the arrow still clutched in her hand. Blood dripped from her shoulder. She forced herself upright and pressed some of the frayed material into the wound. Her fingers shook as she struggled to wrap the strips around her arm. Her shoulder throbbed when she finally secured it in place, but at least she could move her arm more freely.

Battle cries continued outside the tent and she could see boots through the small tears in the bottom of the fabric walls. She struggled to her feet and swayed for a moment before her vision cleared. The dagger lay discarded amongst the bloody rags. Sora reached for it. Her fingers curled around the handle as she stumbled towards the entrance.

She forced her body to still. Her ears strained as she searched for any movement directly outside before she slipped into the night. Bodies littered the ground. None wore armour, their clothes dirt-stained and torn. A few soldiers lay unseeing in the dirt. Sora shuddered and swallowed the bile that rose in her throat. *It's not real, it's just a dream*, she chanted, stepping over the body of a young boy. *Not real*. She darted into the treeline and searched for a familiar face when she heard a cry. Rydal stumbled backwards, a hand pressed over an open wound on his chest. He hadn't been wearing a scaled chest plate like the others.

Sora was sprinting towards him before she realised she had moved. She watched a dark-haired man with torn black clothing and a sword belt wrapped around his waist raise his sword in preparation for the killing blow.

Five steps. Three. Two. She collided with the figure so hard her bones rattled and her shoulder screamed. They crashed into the ground. Rydal called out, but she barely heard him as the figure rolled and she found herself pinned beneath him.

His nostrils flared as he leaned closer and purred, “what do we have here?”

Sora jerked her hips in an upwards motion that unbalanced him. Her mind raced through the steps her roommate had once taught her and she hooked one leg over his calf and pushed off the ground with her other. The momentum sent them to the right and she landed on top of him. Her fist curled into a ball and she swung, her knuckles connecting to his face and his head snapping to the side. A dark humourless laugh echoed in her ears but she ignored it, pushed off his chest and landed on her feet. She didn't spare anyone a glance as she scanned the forest floor for her dagger.

The blade glinted in the flamelight and she leaped for it. Her feet had barely left the ground when she saw an armed figure a few paces away, outfitted in dirt-stained clothes. Face masked with deep red fabric that revealed a dark, narrowed gaze, he drew a hatchet from his belt and shifted his body. His muscles tensed as he aimed his throw directly at her.

Sora sucked in a breath as the hatchet whistled through the air. Arms wrapped around her and someone pulled her against their chest. They collided into a nearby tree and the figure released a grunt of breath, the hatchet slicing into the flesh just below their ribcage as they shielded her. She felt the wind rush from her lungs, stilling at the haunting voice that reached her ears.

“I have to say,” he purred. “I was rather surprised by your earlier manoeuvre. No one has dared punch me like that in years.”

Sora struggled in his grip but it was like trying to move a brick wall. She swung her knee up as hard as she could between his legs but his thighs snapped together and caught her leg before it reached its mark.

“Stop—” the figure hissed and she screamed when his thumb shifted to press directly into the wound at her shoulder, “—fighting me!”

“You’re the one trying to kill me.”

“I think you’ll find,” he murmured, features tense as he steadied himself against the tree and pinned Sora between him and the bark, “that I just saved your life.” The hatchet cutting a direct path towards her flashed in her mind. Immediately she evaluated herself for injuries. The hatchet lay at her feet, dripping with dark liquid.

Blood seeped from an open wound in his side. She sucked in a breath, startled by the pain – though he tried to hide it – that burned within his silver gaze. His pupils brightened under the glow of the moonlight, so light they appeared almost white. Breathing ragged, his weight crashed into her as he slumped forward.

Shouts sounded in the background. His grip on her arm tightened. It jostled her wounded shoulder. “Stay away from him,” his voice rasped into her ear as he fought to stay conscious. “He’s dangerous.”

Slowly, her hands came up to steady him as she murmured. “Who?”

He tried to move, hissed at the pain and collapsed forward, losing consciousness. Sora struggled to support his weight. Warm blood ran over her fingers. She felt his lips brush her ear. The words fanned against her cheek on a breath as he dropped to the ground, pulling her with him. “Prince Rydal.”

### **Chapter Three**

Thousands of tiny stars littered the night sky. Sora splayed her fingers and weaved them into the grass. Clouds filtered past in shades of blue and black, a reminder of nights spent in the backyard on warm summer evenings. She blinked. Leaves fanned out above her. Shouts and orders echoed in her ears but the clash of metal had died down. The air tasted ashy in her mouth.

Forest debris rustled beneath her weight. Vision still hazy around the edges, she scanned her surroundings, but the stranger was gone. Her shoulder throbbed in time with her heartbeat. The blood soaked into the front of her shirt had started to harden the fabric. She shuddered. Flames flickered throughout the camp, some trapped in dying embers.

A white shimmer of light darted past. She splayed her hand, reaching for the silver blade hidden in the grass. The adrenaline had almost drained from her body and she felt it in each pull of her muscles. Blood crusted under her nails in half-moons and she braced a hand against the nearby tree. Fingertips dug into the bark. Her shoulder protested as she dragged herself upright.

*Stay away from him.*

She jumped when a rough voice barked out her name. Her head lifted in time to see Captain Wyden storm towards her. Blood covered his black scaled armour, a few droplets spattered across one side of his face. Bruising lined the other side of his face in an arc that crept over his cheekbone and partway up his temple. His features remained hard as his eyes swept over her body with quick efficiency, but lingered a second longer on her shoulder. “Your wound?”

“It’s fine,” she shrugged. Pain flared and she winced. Aware of the Captain’s eyes on her, she straightened and replied again. “It’s fine.”

He gave a single nod. Something swept across his expression but it was gone before she could decipher it. A muscle tightened in his jaw as his eyes flickered over the blade. “Rydal wants to see you,” he informed her, his fingers brushing over the hilt of his own blade.

*Prince Rydal, the voice echoed in her mind. He’s dangerous.*

When she didn’t move, he added, “Ayla is healing him. He may not be conscious for your arrival, if you continue to stare at me.”

*Was that supposed to be a joke?*

Without a word, the Captain strode back towards the camp. Sora swallowed past the lump in her throat and followed.

A pained groan broke through the heavy silence as Sora stepped over the threshold. The glow of lanterns scattered around the tent illuminated two soldiers positioned on either side of a makeshift cot. A figure struggled between them. “If you don’t stop moving,” someone grumbled, “your insides will end up on the outside.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m holding you together with my hands,” the voice snapped. “You are not fine, you’re a *morthyn*. Why weren’t you wearing your armour?”

“First of all,” came the strained reply, “you’re far too creative when insulting me to have settled on the word *morthyn*. And secondly—” his voice cut off in a sharp hiss, followed by another loud groan. “Secondly,” he breathed. “If I woke up, surrounded by strangers and someone dressed head to toe in armour, it wouldn’t exactly soothe my nerves.”

“You removed your armour for a girl?” snapped Ayla. “She was caught in the middle of an ambush. Do you believe your lack of armour would make it less frightening for her? Most people do not find an ambush particularly soothing.”

“Perhaps not,” Captain Wyden’s voice cut in and the room fell silent. “Then again,” his gaze dipped to her shoulder, “sometimes people surprise you.”

Sora opened her mouth to respond when there was a loud *thump* and everyone turned to find an unconscious Rydal sprawled across the cot. An eerie voice sounded behind the soldiers and they stepped aside.

Ayla intertwined her pale fingers across his chest. “In the satchel on the table,” she said, “there is a vial of dark green salve and another with clear liquid.”

Startled into movement, Sora rummaged through the satchel; herbs and little jars, until she caught sight of the vials. Rydal was pale as she approached.

“Use the clear vial to sterilise your hands, then apply the salve to your shoulder.”

Ayla continued to order people around while Sora placed the green vial between her teeth. She pulled the stopper from the clear vial and poured it over her hands. Dimmed lanterns swung from their cord above them. A soldier applied a similar clear liquid over Ayla’s hands. The contents seeped through her fingers and into the wound on Rydal’s chest.

Sora swapped the vial between her teeth and peeled off the frayed bandages around her shoulder. She piled the rags on the edge of the cot and listened to the soft puff of air as she removed the stopper and tipped the green contents into her open palm.

It smelt like damp, mown grass as it oozed into her palm, lumpy. She pulled a face, keeping her eyes level with the lanterns, and applied it into her wound. Apart from the smell, it was cool and soothed the ache almost immediately.

“Done?”

Sora opened her eyes, unsure when she’d closed them.

“Good,” Ayla continued. “I’m about to seal his wound. When I start, he will wake. I need you to keep his attention on you. Keep him as still as you can. Too much movement and he could do more damage to his chest.” The woman glanced over her shoulder at the Captain. “You’ll have to brace his legs.”

“Understood,” the Captain replied.

Ayla ordered another soldier, this one tall and broad, to pin his shoulders. She raised her hands a few inches from his body. The blade had sliced into the skin just below his collarbone and ran down the centre of his chest before it veered off to the right. Blood pooled in the centre where the blade had cut deepest.

A soft white glow emanated from Ayla's hands. Rydal jerked and his eyes shot open. He tried to lurch up before the soldier pinned him back to the cot.

"I said keep him still," snapped Ayla.

A groan rumbled up his throat and Sora heard the Captain grunt as he took a knee to the gut. Rydal arched off the cot, amber eyes half wild. Tanned skin stretched across his open wound in an attempt to pull itself together. The edges faded into a salmon pink. His gaze darted around the room until it settled on her. Pain flashed in his eyes. Slowly, she leaned closer and whispered, "Hi."

His nostrils flared.

"You know," she started quietly, "I really appreciate you trying to ease my nerves."

Ayla's palms flared brighter. Rydal jolted and the soldier added more pressure.

"But I'm thinking," she added and her mouth quirked up slightly, "maybe there's a good reason they had you all wrapped up in armour?"

Amusement flickered over the pain. "Is that your polite way of insulting me?"

"Trust me," she whispered and her smile widened. "If I were going to insult you, I wouldn't be polite about it."

Rydal broke into a startled laugh that ended in a wince. He braced against a wave of pain and his entire body shuddered. His head dropped back against the cot.

Ayla lowered her hands. "I've healed as much as I can," she informed everyone, breath heavier than usual. "The scar will fade, but it will always be there."



A bright reddish-pink lined the white mark that ran the length of his torso. The skin pulled tighter as it expanded with the rise and fall of his chest.

“Not surprising,” Rydal breathed, eyes closed. “It was a Nyten blade.”

Surprise washed across Ayla’s features. “Nyten? Are you sure?”

“Well, I was pretty close to it.” He lifted his arm at the elbow and gestured to his body.

“So yes, I’m sure.”

Ayla glanced at the Captain. He read her expression and nodded. “I can have everyone ready in fifteen minutes.”

“Bring Darka just outside this tent. It will be easier to get Rydal in the saddle.”

“Not to be a bother,” came Rydal’s voice, his words a little slurred. “But I’m not exactly up to the task of riding a horse.”

“You’ll ride double with Sora,” Ayla informed him.

His amber eyes peeked out from beneath his lashes. He gazed between them in a daze. Sora opened her mouth with the intent of explaining that she couldn’t ride but Ayla continued. “Rydal can ride, just not at the moment. He needs someone to hold onto and keep him upright and Darka is very particular about her riders.”

Sora frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Darka will protest if I double with another horse and rider,” Rydal began. He tried to sit up, winced at the movement, and dropped back onto his elbows. His face landed close enough that Sora could see the ring around his pupil, which deepened in the centre. He met her gaze and smirked. “As for being particular, I’ve never seen her accept another rider besides me.”

Sora stared at him. “What kind of encouragement is that supposed to be?”

Ayla helped him sit upright. His legs were heavy as he swung them over the side of the cot. “Do you trust me?”

## **Chapter Four**

The ashy breeze swept across the camp. Most of the tents were packed away. Soldiers already on their mounts. A few secured the last of their supplies, and two moved in to disassemble the tent they'd just left. Darka stood a few feet in front of them, ears pricked forward. Rydal braced himself against Ayla, one arm around her shoulders and the other across his stomach.

Sora pulled her jacket tighter around herself. The new, blood-free attire warmed her body and hid the tremble in her fingers. "Okay," she whispered as she reached the mare. "Please work with me on this." Darka shook her head and snorted. Those big, obsidian eyes drifted from her towards Rydal. Careful not to spook the mare, Sora reached for the saddle horn with one hand and caught the stirrup in the other.

Hooves clopped against the ground but otherwise she didn't move. "That's it," called Rydal. With slow movements, Sora eased the toe of her boot, like he'd explained, into the stirrup and tightened her hold on the saddle. Inhale. Exhale. She pushed her weight into the stirrup and pulled herself up. Her right leg swung over the back of the saddle. The toe of her boot clipped the back of it but she caught herself and landed in the seat.

Darka breathed hard through her nostrils and shifted her weight again. Sora gripped the saddle horn with both hands and prepared to be thrown off. She squeezed her eyes shut and didn't move until someone let out an impressed whistle. She peered through the crack in her eyelids.

Rydal grinned.

Even Ayla had lost a hint of her iciness. She helped Rydal towards the saddle, Darka nickering at his approach. "She would have reacted by now if she didn't want you on her back," Ayla reassured Sora. "You need to take your hands off the horn, and your foot out of the stirrup so Rydal can mount up."

Nerves fluttered in her gut. She worked her boot out of the stirrup and used her legs to keep herself balanced. She watched Rydal reach up and wrap his fingers around the saddle horn. His foot slipped into the stirrup and with an additional push from Ayla, he swung up into the saddle behind her. The front of his body slid against her, the warmth of him faint through her jacket.

Ayla grabbed her boot by the heel and shoved it back into the stirrup. “Make sure your other foot is in the stirrup and grab the reins. Rydal will talk you through the rest.”

“You’ve got this,” Rydal murmured. His hands slipped gently around her waist and she tensed. He gave her a reassuring squeeze. “Just hold on.”

“Obviously.”

Soft laughter rumbled through his chest. He pursed his lips and a short melodic whistle brushed against her ear. Darka’s ears turned towards the sound and she started forward. The movement jostled Sora in the saddle and she pressed her legs into the side of the mare.

They met with the other soldiers who had readied themselves for the journey. Captain Wyden sat astride a dark bay gelding, its white rump freckled with bay spots. A dozen soldiers on horses surrounded him as he barked out orders. Half were to take the Northern route through the forest and report any sightings. The second group – which included Sora – would cut across the Eastern plains and loop around the edge of the forest.

The Captain waited for the Northern band to disappear into the forest. His attention lingered on the cart that weighed deeper into the earth than most. Sora knew his mind was with the bodies wrapped in cloth that had been placed inside.

Two of the soldiers remained: a dark-skinned woman with long braids down one side of her face, the other side shaved to reveal a tattoo that swirled intricately around her head, and a man, tall and broad with a wicked three-gash scar wrapped around his throat. She eyed the

scar and let Rydal ease the mare forward. The soldiers fell into stride on either side of Darka. Ayla headed the group. Captain Wyden, after a glance over his shoulder, fell in behind them.

\*\*\*

Late afternoon sun settled on the side of her face. The plains rolled out ahead. Lush, rich grass brushed against hooves and embraced the gentle thud of each step. Fatigue had settled over Sora in the last few hours. Her muscles ached from their position locked in the saddle. Her mind spun with impossibilities.

“Let me get this straight,” she told Rydal. “I somehow managed to open a portal that pulled me into another world. A sister-world. One that you call Aurelia. A world connected through parallel layers of existence that we can’t see ... but somehow ... I opened a pathway between our worlds. Something that shouldn’t be possible, but I somehow managed.” She sucked in a deep breath. “And not only that ... no one can tell me how it happened or why. So now I’m just stuck here with no way home?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Rydal answered from behind her. “You got here on your own, so there must be a way to reopen the pathway between worlds. We just have to find it.”

“How?”

“I’m not sure. But if anyone knows, it will be my father.” He exhaled slowly. A trace of pain still lingered in his strained breath. “Besides,” he added, “you seem to be handling this world pretty well. I take it this one is similar to your own?”

“Not really,” she glanced around. “I mean, a long time ago I guess mine was similar. But it’s a lot different now.” She sighed. “I think I’ve just been in denial that all of this is really happening.”

“And now?”

She felt the warmth of his arms around her waist, the weight of his body against her back, Darka's powerful form as she moved beneath them. "I don't think a dream could feel like this." Sora could hear the smile in his voice as he replied.

"It's not that bad here you know. I know the ambush wasn't the best impression, but there's more to this place than that."

She huffed a laugh. "So you think I should just go with it?"

"Who knows. Maybe you'll enjoy it. At least until you find a way back home."

She ignored the feeling that pulled in her gut. "Maybe," she replied quietly.

A bellow cut through the air. She jumped. Giant, six-legged creatures with long, shaggy hair lumbered across the plains. The four legs at the front of their body supported their enormous humped shoulders that sloped into their smaller rump and two rear legs. One of the larger creatures turned its head towards them with another bellow. Its face was almost feline. A large horn protruded from behind each ear with a smaller one beside it.

"Elkin," Rydal uttered. "They're relatively harmless as long as you keep a healthy distance. They can be incredibly territorial."

"I've never seen anything like it."

"There aren't usually as many around this time of year. They tend to migrate south during the warmer months with their younglings."

She watched a few offspring weave in and out among the larger beasts. They threw their weight at one another. Their off-centred proportions unbalanced them and they toppled into the grass.

Sora felt the cool metal pressed against her calf and glanced down at the blade tucked into her boot, eyeing the white stone embedded in the pommel. *He's dangerous.* Silvery-white eyes flashed across her vision and blood pulsed in her shoulder.

"Can I ask you a question?"

Rydal chuckled. “Isn’t that what you’ve been doing all afternoon?”

“It’s about the ambush.” His arms tightened around her waist but he kept silent. “Why did those people attack you?”

“The Lockéiin have been at odds with us for an age. Although for the most part, we tend to keep to our own territories.”

“So what changed?”

“Someone has been summoning Reavers. They’ve attacked a few villages along the border between our territories.”

Questions burned on her tongue but she felt the tension coil through his body. Instead, she asked. “The man ... the one who attacked you. Did you know him?”

“Why?” he drew out, tone unreadable.

*Stay away from him ... he’s dangerous.*

She shook off the thought. “I got the impression he knew you,” she answered, hesitating for a moment before adding in a soft whisper, “*Prince Rydal.*”

He winced. “Ah, about that—”

She glanced at him over her shoulder. Despite the sun-bronzed glow that had returned to his face a soft pink tinged his cheeks. “That’s where we’re going, right?” she arched a brow, “to the Palace, the one where you live?” His blush deepened. Sora pressed her lips together to hide her smile. “So what? You weren’t going to tell me until I was in the palace? Until I bowed to the King and you’re all, *‘You don’t need to bow, it’s just my father.’*”

Rydal snorted. “I would have told you before then. Probably more of a *‘just so you know’* while walking into the throne room.”

“How thoughtful. So, why didn’t you tell me?”

He sighed. “I wanted to, but Wyden didn’t trust you. And when Ayla couldn’t read you, he told me it would be better if I kept it to myself until we knew more about you.”

“What do you mean, she couldn’t read me?”

Ayla cut off her question with a short whistle. Sora glanced at the woman but she had already ridden ahead. Half distracted, Sora sucked in a breath when she felt Rydal press in closer behind her.

“We’re here,” he whispered. A childlike excitement slipped across his expression. “Hold on. This is the best place to see the city.”

She barely had a chance to ready herself.

Rydal made two short one-note whistles and Darka moved into a brisk canter.

Sora rocked forward. One hand caught the saddle horn, the other tangling in the bottom of Darka’s thick mane. She felt the strength of the mare with each stride as they started up a large hill. Her fingers curled tighter. Muscles taut. Darka passed Ayla halfway up the hill. A few long strides and she broke over the peak.

Sora’s mouth dropped open. She blinked several times as she took it all in.

A magnificent white marble palace spiralled up from the village below. Grand archways and carved pillars reflected the warm glow of sunlight as it crowned in the sky. Deep emerald stone sloped over rooftops, each burst of colour contrasted with the marble. Light danced along each window. Small cottages and townhouses were scattered about the city, each with their own beautifully coloured roof.

“Wow,” she breathed.

His golden eyes settled on her. “Welcome to Surielle.”

## **Chapter Five**

The gentle crunch of grass faded into worn cobblestone as they neared the city. Each rhythmic click of hooves eased the knot in her stomach. A large bridge appeared in the distance, its body arching over a stretch of water. Sunlight glistened off the surface, highlighting the streaks of colour that rippled below.

Darka steadied her gait. A wooden fence extended along the side of the first cottage, housing three small nests propped up on a panel of wood. An angled straw roof hung above it, braced by posts. A horned creature, small and cattle-shaped, grazed in a patch of strewn hay. Its long shaggy coat hung from its body in dreadlocks, cut shorter around its face to reveal a muddy brown nose and dark rounded eyes.

Mossy cobblestone wrapped around the base of the cottage. Broad wooden boards, interspersed with glass panes, met horizontal beams that held up the roof. Faded yellow straw hung from either side, carefully woven into place.

Men and women bustled around. Some glanced their way; others stopped and watched their approach. Children dressed in belted tunics and dark pants chased after one another with wooden swords. Cackles of laughter burst from them, followed by the *yip* and *yap* of their canine companions. Sora stared after the creatures, marvelling at the forked tail that wagged excitedly behind them.

The arrival of several horses, led by Darka, brought pause to their antics. The children scampered onto porches and hung over the wooden rails as they passed.

Rydal kept one arm wrapped around her waist. The other waved at the children who squealed with excitement. One after the other, they peeled off the rails and fell into step behind the horses. Little arms flailed as they followed them past a few houses until their mothers called them back. Sora twisted in her seat and found Rydal's warm eyes on her. "You didn't mention you'd organised a welcome party."



He laughed. “We normally ride in from the other side. It’s closer to the palace and doesn’t interrupt the people as much.”

“So why did you—” she trailed off.

“I thought you might like to see the city?”

Heat blossomed in her cheeks. She shook her head, even as a smile worked its way across her face. As they moved deeper into the city, buildings shifted from wood and cobblestones to faded brick. Smooth with age, the bricks piled higher, some two storeys.

In the centre of the city, buildings surrounded a large courtyard. Stalls lined either side of the square; food, clothing, herbs, jewellery. Sora inhaled deeply. The rich, smoky scent of cooked meat settled in her nostrils. Her stomach grumbled.

Rydal chuckled. “Hungry?”

“What gave me away?”

He let out a soft snort. “Tell the others to take their horses to the stables,” he said to the Captain. “And check in with those who travelled by forest. Make sure they arrived safely. We’ll be right behind you.”

Captain Wyden glanced at Rydal, who smiled, and sighed before he dropped back to speak with the other soldiers. Rydal gave one low, drawn-out whistle and eased Darka to a stop.

“What’s going on?” asked Sora.

“Don’t you want to try some of the local cuisine?”

Her stomach growled in agreement.

“Take your feet out of the stirrups,” he replied with a laugh. “It will be easier for you to dismount if I go first.”

Sora slid her boots out of the stirrups and stretched out the aches in her legs.

One hand braced on the saddle horn, Rydal swung his back leg over the mare and dismounted. His boots landed on the ground with a noticeable thud and he winced, hand ghosting over his stomach. “Alright,” he motioned. “Your turn.”

Darka nickered as Rydal stroked a hand along her neck.

“Since you’ve already taken your feet out of the stirrups, all you want to do is swing your right leg over the back of the saddle and drop off the side.”

Sora ran through the motion in her head, letting Rydal take the reins. She braced her hands at the bottom of the mare’s neck and swung her leg over the saddle. Her legs buckled slightly as she landed, sending her backwards a step.

Rydal reached out to balance her and the palm of his hand pressed against the small of her back. “Not bad for a first dismount.”

She returned his smile. Felt the moment his hand left her back.

The female soldier who had accompanied them came forward on her own horse. She dipped her head respectfully at Rydal. He retrieved a sugar cube from his pocket and offered it to Darka before he passed the reins to the woman. “Thank you, Kaiya.”

“*El Loro*,” she replied, clicking her tongue and easing her own horse forward.

Rydal patted Darka on the rump and encouraged her to follow with a soft whistle.

Ayla rode towards the palace. Her white braid flowed behind her in the wind. The male soldier eased his own horse into a walk, leading a dark bay gelding behind him.

As her travelling companions retreated towards the palace, Sora let her stomach guide her to one of the food stalls. The rich smell, enhanced with a hint of herbs and spices, made her mouth water. Strips of dried meat hung across the front of the stall. An older woman, dark hair peppered with grey, greeted them from behind the assortment of meats. “What can I get you, love?”

“What smells delicious?”

The woman chuckled. Wrinkles creased the corner of her eyes and deepened her laugh lines. “Ah, you must be smelling my famous smoked Duk.”

Rydal stepped up beside Sora and placed four gold coins on the counter. “We’ll take two pieces today, Edith.”

Her warm grey eyes brightened. “*El Loro*, it’s wonderful to see you again. How was your trip?” She slipped the coins into the pouch tied to her belt and retrieved a knife, then lifted a woven leaf cover to reveal a large cooked bird.

Sora licked her lips.

“You know me,” Rydal grinned at the woman. “Never a dull moment.”

Her light, scratchy laugh sounded over the courtyard bustle. “At least Jesper didn’t lose to another mud puddle. Though I have to give the Captain merit for sticking with you.”

“Jesper?” Sora murmured. “That’s a cute name.”

“Don’t let *him* hear you say that,” Rydal muttered, gesturing behind them with his eyes. The Captain stood a few paces away, arms crossed. From his narrowed expression, he wasn’t unaware of the topic of their conversation.

“Does he always follow you?”

“Yes. He’s the Captain of my personal guard.”

The woman finished carving out two large pieces of meat. She impaled each on a stick and handed them over.

“I’m not overly fond of being followed around by an entire guard, but I managed to convince my father that Jesper could do the job on his own. Though I’m sure the Captain often regrets it with the trouble I tend to get in.”

She smiled at the thought and absently took a bite of the meat. A smoky kind of spice, with a hint of salt swirled around her mouth; chicken laced with mint and pepper. Sora didn’t recognise the other flavours, but each came together perfectly.

The woman chuckled at her reaction. “I’m glad you like it.”

“It’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted,” she murmured and took another bite.

Rydal thanked the woman who smiled and waved them on.

Sora, with a mouthful of spiced goodness, waved back. She and Rydal wandered around while she finished the smoked Duk, peering at a few different stalls. One in particular held an assortment of weapons, most no larger than her forearm. Each blade sharpened to a razor point, sunlight glinting off the metal.

*Who would buy such weapons from a stall*, she thought. Her eyes moved between a few customers, dressed in woven tunics, and she wondered at the potential weapons concealed beneath. Finishing off the last of the meat, she disposed of her stick.

Captain Wyden followed them as they wandered down the street. Brick buildings melded into chiselled white stone as they neared the palace. While most of the houses kept their brick frontage, a few featured marble panels in their structures.

The palace towered over the city. Grand marble archways framed the entrance and small, detailed carvings adorned the wooden door. Embedded with gold, the artwork glistened in the sunlight. At their approach, two guards – one stationed either side – moved their right arms diagonally across their chests. Their closed fists thudded against scaled armour.

Rydal mirrored the action, though his palm lay open over his heart.

A faint *click* sounded behind the door and a line appeared down its centre. Warm air blew gently into their faces and the door swung inwards.

Red, orange and gold lit her surroundings. Sora followed Rydal inside, marvelling at each painting that hung at intervals along the walls. Most of the artwork depicted different landscapes, each showcasing a different part of Aurelia: snowy mountains outlined by a sapphire river that spilled down its face; silver trees, stained with black leaves; a lone cottage,

tucked into the corner of the artwork, dwarfed by a golden lake, its colour enhanced by the glow of the setting sun.

Rydal led her down the long hallway, his black scaled armour a stark contrast to the white marble and elegant colours of the paintings. The scent of leather and horses lingered on her clothes as they neared an archway carved into the end of the hall.

Sora slowed to admire the magnificent golden wings carved into the marble arch. She gaped at the detail of each feather, every line and curve carefully etched into the marble. Beneath the flamelight, each groove in the marble cast a faint shadow, creating the illusion of movement as she and Rydal stepped under the archway and into an oversized throne room.

Marble squares stretched out across the floor and led up to a large podium. A throne sat upon it, with whorls of gold that curled along the arms like elegant serpents, peaking over the top of the throne in a spiral fountain and spilling down its spine like a golden cloak.

“Rydal,” called a voice.

Boots echoed to her right and a young man strode into the room. He looked to be in his late twenties, with neat blonde hair and light brown eyes. His black pants and coat accentuated tanned skin which stood out against the white collar of his shirt. Embroidered thread that matched the throne decorated his cuffs and ran down the front on either side of his coat.

A golden circlet peaked out from beneath his hair. Intricately designed wings flared round towards the centre of his forehead. Each wing ended over the arch in his brows.

Rydal raised his forearm to his chest, palm open against his heart.

The man dipped his head. “I heard you were injured.” A smooth elegance laced his accent. “What happened?”

“The Lockéiin attacked our camp. One of their rebels caught me with a blade, but I’m fine. Ayla managed to heal most of it.”

Lips pressed together, the man studied Rydal and sighed. “I’m glad you’re alright.” Sora felt the tension ripple between Rydal and the man who glanced at her. A muscle tightened in his jaw. “And who might you be?”

“I’m Sora.” She cleared her throat. “Well, technically it’s Soraya, but I really do prefer Sora—” Her voice trailed off as she forced herself to stop the nervous ramble of words that spilled from her mouth.

Rydal snorted. “How come I didn’t get any of this full name business?” he teased. “*Soraya*, I’d like you to meet my brother, Prince Nikos.”

The man shook his head. “Please, call me Nikos. I prefer the informal when I can.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Father is just finishing up a meeting. He’ll want to see you about the Lockéiin.”

“Of course,” came Rydal’s reply. The two continued to discuss events of the trip when a shadow of movement swept across the far wall.

Gilded walls, adorned with the same silver and gold lines that marked the hall, separated marble columns that stretched up on either side of the room. A slender shadow skirted around one of the columns. Its shape flickered in the light. Almost human.

Sora squinted at the far wall. A haze clouded her vision and she blinked. Flamelight brushed over chiselled marble and illuminated the bare wall.

*Nothing.*

Her muscles tightened as a whisper of unease slithered down her spine. Hair prickled along the back of her neck. She shuddered.

The murmur of voices echoed down the hall and footsteps retreated deeper into the palace. A door closed in the distance.

“Looks like Father is done,” said Rydal and his hand brushed her back. His brother eyed him curiously. “Shall we? I’m sure we will have much to discuss.”

Nikos ran a hand over his mouth. “Mmm,” he hummed. Sora let Rydal guide her towards the archway. She didn’t miss the soft murmur of the Crown Prince as she passed: “Indeed, we do.”

The receiving room was just as beautiful as the others. Lined with similar marble columns, each curved inwards at its peak to meet a marble beam. In the centre of the ceiling, glass panels formed a dome that cast the late afternoon sun across the floor.

A well-built man stood in the centre of the room. He was older than most of the people she’d seen, but somehow still held a youthful beauty. Long golden hair fell past his shoulders. Two braids wrapped around either side of his head and joined together where they fell down his back in a single plait. A golden crown with intricate spirals separated by solid gold detail rested across his hair. His eyes, a dark brown, held a warmth that settled her nerves.

Rydal paused a few strides from the man and dipped his chin. “Father.”

The man returned the gesture. “I trust everything went well with the Lord of Kaldor?”

Rydal nodded.

“I also heard you came across an unexpected companion on your travels.”

“Yes, this is *Soraya*,” he eyed her teasingly. “Sora, this is my father. King Armand.”

Sora started to bow and then thought to curtsy. It ended up a tangle of limbs and odd angles. She ignored their amused expressions and cleared her throat. “It’s an honour to meet you, Your Highness.” A soft shimmer crossed over his features and she blinked.

“Your accent is most unusual,” the King mused. “Aydian perhaps?”

Sora frowned at the term. *Aydian*?

“Where is it that you call home?”

Unsure of what answer he wanted, she replied awkwardly. “Um, Earth.”

The King blinked. “You’re from *Euriel*?”

“*Euriel*?” Prince Nikos voiced from behind them. He stepped around her and Rydal.  
“The Mortal Realm? How is that possible?”

“Interesting,” the King murmured. His dark eyes swept over her. “She’d need a powerful talisman forged by *Lumiere del Aurelia*. One that would link her to this world.”

“*Lumiere del Aurelia*?” Prince Nikos laughed. “We’ve waited millennia for the *Tutori* to choose someone worthy. And you think they would entrust some mortal girl with this prophecy?”

“This *mortal girl* can hear you,” she blurted, overwhelmed. Their voices trailed off but she couldn’t stop. “It’s been a long day. And I’d like to think I’ve been handling everything pretty well. But I didn’t choose to come here,” she huffed a breath. “In fact I was dragged here by some burning white smoke. So, I don’t appreciate the accusation in your tone,” she glared at Prince Nikos and added, “Your Highness.”

Stationed back in the doorway, Captain Wyden coughed.

The sound pulled her out of her thoughts and she froze. Rydal stared at her with shocked amusement. Prince Nikos blinked. Her face reddened and she half expected someone to call for guards. Or have her thrown in the dungeon for her outburst in front of the King.

Instead, the King broke into a smile and laughed.

“You have spirit,” he started in the same smooth accent as Prince Nikos, though his voice was deeper. “Good. You may need it yet.”

“Y-you’re not going to throw me in the dungeons?”

He chuckled. “No. I understand your outburst. If you truly are from *Euriel*, then this has been quite the shock for you. Your reaction is ... expected.” A crease formed between his brows. “You said you were dragged here by white smoke?”



“What?” she murmured. “Oh, well yeah. It kind of just exploded around me. Something grabbed me and pulled me forward,” she shuddered at the memory. “I don’t remember anything until I woke up in a tent in the middle of their camp.”

Prince Nikos frowned. “You don’t think she opened the *Abraxas*?”

“Perhaps not,” the King mused. The silver blade remained tucked into her boot. Its white stone glimmered. His attention flickered curiously behind her before he continued. “When you arrived here in Aurelia, did you have anything from your world with you?”

She brushed a hand over her coat. “No, I—” she paused. Her hand absently reached for her throat. The pendant from her necklace pressed into her palm through her shirt. Carefully, she pulled it out by the chain. “Well, just this. It belonged to my mother.”

“Hmm, it’s not something I recognise,” he replied slowly. “I’ll have my emissary look into it. She spends a lot of time in other territories. If anyone knows something, it will be her.”

She exhaled quietly. Tucked the necklace back under her shirt. “Does this mean you don’t know how to get me home?”

“I’m afraid not, child.”

“So, what am I supposed to do?”

His smile was soft. “Embrace the impossibility of it all. I know this may not be what you wanted, but why not enjoy the wonders of Aurelia while you are here?”

“You want me to stay?”

“Of course. You are a guest of my son and you shall be treated as such.” He paused. “I have some business to attend with my sons. Captain Wyden will escort you to one of the rooms in the palace.”

“Yes, Sire,” came Wyden’s rough voice.

She thanked the King and followed Wyden down another hall. A threaded rug, adorned with the royal colours, lined the centre of the marble floor. It ended at the bottom of a grand

staircase that wound up to the right. Her muscles protested as they ascended each step of the staircase. Wyden led her halfway down a hall, stopping outside an oakwood door.

“You’ll be staying here,” he told her. When he remained silent, she nodded with an awkward half-smile and reached for the door. Her fingers had barely brushed the handle when he cleared his throat.

A worn, dark leather belt hung from his outstretched hand. Small wings had been tooled into its centre. Thin spirals curled out like vines from behind the wings, creating a pattern along the length of the belt. Hesitantly, she took it. The leather was cool in her hand.

“If you’re going to carry that thing around,” he nodded at the blade, “you might as well have somewhere to put it.”

Sora stared at the belt, at the effort it had taken to tool each mark in the leather.

“It’s a baldric,” he explained. “It’s worn across the body.”

The blade weighed heavy in her boot. “It’s not mine you know,” she murmured. “I just found it when ... when the fighting started.”

Something unreadable crossed his expression but it was gone just as fast. “You survived an ambush. Protected the Prince from greater injury. Even when you didn’t know who he was.” He shifted. “I don’t see why you can’t wield it until the blade is claimed by its true owner.”

One corner of her mouth curled upwards. “Thank you,” she murmured and meant it.

Wyden cleared his throat. The hard expression returned to his face. “Don’t get into trouble. I already have someone to watch. I don’t need another.” Without another word, he turned and strode off down the hall. She waited for his figure to disappear, the baldric still hanging from her hand. After a moment, she reached for the door.

## **Chapter Six**

A four poster bed sat against the far wall and crystal teardrops hung from the ceiling in a spiral chandelier, each droplet catching the light at a different angle and casting patterns across the floor. A marble fireplace remained unlit. Soft white drapes covered a large glass door that led out to a balcony.

Silence settled around her. Thoughts prodded at her mind but she pushed them back. She left the baldric on the bed. Stepped towards the glass door. Unlatched the lock. Crisp air nipped at her skin. She pulled her jacket tighter around her shoulders. Down in the city, people bustled through the streets, lost in their own lives. Sora leaned on the balcony rail and dropped her chin onto her clasped hands.

Sunlight dipped behind a cloud. A rich, crimson glow, silhouetted behind clouds, formed a perfect sphere. Curled in beside it, a darkened crescent shape settled into its left. She squinted. *How strangely beautiful.* Warm rays of light seeped out from beneath the cloud. She pressed the heels of her palms into her eyes.

“Aurelia,” she murmured. “You’re in Aurelia.”

A phantom heat warmed her face and dried her throat. She swallowed. Lips pursed, she exhaled slowly. Sunlight bounced off the city rooftops. Each splash of colour a canvas seen only from the palace balcony. Her gaze rolled off each house as she stared absently down at the city. Crimson sunlight shifted lower. It had settled below the clouds when there was a knock at the door. Half distracted, Sora wandered back across the room and pulled it open.

A flustered young woman stood outside. Chestnut hair fell around her face and settled just below her shoulders. A fitted, long sleeved shirt was tucked into the waistband of her black skirt. “Please tell me you’re Soraya,” she breathed, cheeks reddened from her apparent rush.

“That would be me. And who—”

“Oh, thank goodness,” the woman rushed on. Sora didn’t have time to react before she bustled into the room. Her skirt fluttered behind her as she hurried about and disappeared through a door on the far wall. The gush of running water met Sora’s ears and the woman hurried out again. “You’re supposed to be ready in twenty minutes.” She manoeuvred behind Sora. “I went to the wrong room first,” she muttered.

Palms pressed into Sora’s back and the woman shoved her into the bathroom.

“Leave your clothes in a pile. I’ll take care of them.” She pointed into the room. “There are soaps in that basket. Wash quickly, I’ll find you appropriate attire.” She gave Sora no time to object and shut the door in her face.

Sora jolted at the sound. Slowly, her hands reached for the latch. She locked it in place. The risk of the woman barging into the room, whether she was ready or not, urged Sora into action. Set into the floor, the bath took up nearly half the space. A thin layer of bubbles lined the water.

She quickly undressed and slipped into the bath. The hot water eased the ache in her muscles. Although she wanted to relax, Sora rushed through the movements. She scrubbed the dirt from her body and rinsed out her hair. She was out again a few moments later and reached for one of the towels. She’d barely unlatched the lock when the woman burst in and shooed her back into the main room.

She dressed in a pale grey tunic, its high collar pressing against her neck uncomfortably. Long sleeves ran the length of her arms, the material snug around her torso. It loosened around her hips and flowed down past her knees. A large section of the tunic had been cut out on one side and revealed most of her leg, and she stared at the large sliver of skin it exposed, relieved when the woman offered her a pair of fitted black pants and knee high boots.

“You—” the woman trailed off. “You appear rather uncomfortable.”

“I can’t say I’ve ever been dressed by a stranger,” Sora admitted, though her lips quirked. “It’s like people don’t think I can put on my own pants.”

“Oh, I can’t believe I forgot. I’m Giiva,” she blushed. “Please don’t tell mother I was so improper. She’ll have me mucking out at the stables until I smell like one.”

“Sure,” Sora laughed, wondering if the woman realised she had no idea *who* her mother was anyway. Not that she wanted to complain. Having Giiva blurt out whatever came to mind felt oddly refreshing.

“Besides,” Giiva added, pulling Sora from her thoughts, “if you ever have to put on training leathers, you’ll wish you had someone to help you into those pants.” She mimicked pulling up one of the pant legs before trying to fasten the laces.

Sora grinned and they both burst into a fit of laughter.

“It’s been a while since the Royal family has invited someone into their home,” Giiva mused as she ran a comb through Sora’s hair. “They host the Alliance when it comes around, but with five other territories, it’s only hosted here every so often.”

Sora wondered at the information Giiva shared. A few questions lingered, but she decided not to ask when she noticed the slight tension that radiated from the woman. Instead, she let Giiva braid her hair down the centre of her head and partway down her back. The rest remained loose around her shoulders.

A knock sounded and Giiva pinned the last of her hair into place. She grinned when she caught Sora’s attempt to slide the blade into her boot and grabbed the baldric from her bed.

Sora watched as Giiva adjusted a few straps and helped secure it around her waist instead of her chest. The new positioning of the baldric allowed Sora to hide it beneath her long tunic. Near the split in the material, Sora slid the blade into its sheath. She’d barely secured it in place when Giiva shoed her towards the door.

Rydal stood across from her in the hall. A long velvet coat with two lines of gold stitching down the left side wrapped around his upper body, the familiar crest embroidered on the front. His sword belt remained secured around his waist. He pulled at one of the buttons and shifted.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look so ... comfortable,” Sora teased.

His head jerked up at the sound of her voice and she almost laughed at his expression. “It’s the royal attire of my family,” he explained. “It’s customary to wear it in the palace as a representation of my title.”

“I take it you don’t wear this particular attire often?”

He snorted. “You could say that.” He tried to roll his shoulders but the coat restricted his movement. “We should get going. Best not be late the first time you meet my family and the royal advisors.”

“Advisors?” she murmured. “Wait, do you mean dinner with the royal family?”

“Of course. You’re a guest here.” He gestured down the hall. “Shall we?”

Rydal escorted her down to the dining hall entrance. Her attention shifted to a large painting of a figure atop a mountain. White feathered wings arched out from their back. Head bowed, they knelt at the uppermost peak. A halo of light surrounded the figure. The blend of dark against light framed each stroke of white paint.

“I spoke with my father and brother earlier,” Rydal’s voice pulled at her attention. His accent was soft, almost unnoticed compared to the King and his brother. *Unusual*, she thought. *Since he’s supposedly grown up with them.* “Visitors from *Euriel* are not a common occurrence in this world,” he continued. “Though it has happened before, it has been an age since the last one.” He cleared his throat. “We believe it would be best if as few people as possible knew of your true origin.”

“The King didn’t seem surprised about it.”

“My father has lived a long life. There is little that surprises him.”

“So, what if people ask questions? What am I supposed to tell them?”

“Tell them you’re from Ardwell.”

“Ardwell?”

“It’s a small village, a few weeks’ ride from here. It’s in the middle of the Lupine Forest, so not a lot of people make the journey there. We passed close by on our way back from Kaldor so it would make sense.”

“Of course,” Sora teased. “Because it would make sense that you brought a total stranger back to the palace with you?”

He grinned. “I wouldn’t say you’re a total stranger. After all, you did ride through the middle of the city with me. I figure enough people saw you that they assumed you are someone important.”

“I thought you wanted to show me the city.”

“I did. But now the city has seen you too.” His smile softened. “All will be well. And if you’re nervous, you could always introduce yourself first.”

She frowned. “How?”

Rydal took a half-step back. One arm stretched outwards, he bowed dramatically in the middle of the hall. “I am Prince Rydal Delmarva of House Surielle.” He reached out and caught her hand. Pressed a kiss to the back of her wrist. As he straightened, she tried to ignore the warmth in her cheeks. “Your introduction will follow in the same manner. Your house will be Ardwell.” He paused. “It’s a formality of explaining where you come from to those of royalty or similar.”

The words settled in her mind. She nodded.

“Well?” he gestured towards her.

She moved her right foot behind her left and half-curtsied. “I am Soraya Merridan of House Ardwell.”

He hummed in approval. “Perfect. It’s quite fascinating really. Your speech is remarkably similar to our own.”

“My ... speech?” She made a face. “You mean English?”

“English? Is that what you speak in *Euriel*? Here we call it Aurelian. There must be some kind of crossover in the language barrier between our worlds.”

*I’m speaking Aurelian?* She shook off the strangeness of it and followed Rydal down a flight of stairs.

At the entrance to the dining hall, two guards stood on either side of the door. The tall, broad-shouldered one on the right had a three-gash scar across his throat. He was one of the guards who had ridden with them across the grasslands Sora realised, smiling at him as she passed. He blinked. Hesitated. Then gave her the slightest nod in return. Distracted by his reaction, she walked straight into Rydal who had paused to wait for her. An *oof* of breath slipped out as she stumbled back a step.

Rydal slid an arm around her waist. “Careful now,” he whispered as he steadied her on her feet. The soft chatter that filled the dining hall faded into silence. Any hope that she would make it through the dinner unnoticed vanished as every pair of eyes settled on her. Rydal sent her a reassuring smile and guided her towards the centre of the room. She slid into a high-backed chair halfway down the table. Rydal sat in the chair to her left but quickly became caught in conversation. Sora shifted in her seat.

Directly across from her, a man watched her with a narrowed gaze. Age lined the corners of his eyes and mouth. His dark grey eyes, the colour of clouds in a thunderstorm, made her uneasy. She shifted and started to look somewhere else when the door across the room



opened. The last of the murmurs dropped into silence and Rydal gestured for her to stand with the other members of the table.

King Armand strode into the room, followed by Prince Nikos. They each took their places, the King at the head of the table and the Prince to his right, beside Rydal. King Armand nodded to everyone and took his seat. The rest followed.

“My wife sends her apologies,” stated the King. “She is dealing to a matter of importance and will join us shortly. She asks that we do not wait for her and that we enjoy the meal our esteemed cooks have prepared for us.”

As he finished, the air in front of Sora shimmered slightly. She almost yelped when strange, brightly coloured foods appeared in front of her. The scent of spiced meat, mixed with the earthy scent of herbs and cream sauce poured over steaming vegetables made her mouth water and stomach grumble. But despite the hunger she felt, she couldn’t help but stare. The plate in front of her was piled high with what appeared to be some kind of mashed potato – except it was bright green.

Everyone waited for the King to be served his meal. His goblet filled with a dark purple wine. When his plate was piled high with food, he sat back and raised his hands, a smile brightening his expression. “Enjoy.”

Each of the members at the table, half of whom she didn’t recognise, began to fill their own plates. Sora glanced between dishes. A spoonful of green mash landed on her plate as Rydal filled it with food. He smiled at her, his eyes curious. He added some orange beans, yellow peas, and a few slices of meat which appeared normal enough – until she glanced at the dish it had come from and saw whatever it was still had its two heads. Rydal leaned closer, poured the purple substance into her own goblet. “Is everything alright?”

A momentary panic gripped her chest.

*Was this food safe to eat? What if–*

Technically, she'd already eaten Aurelian food in the market square. Surely, if the food was dangerous, it would have already affected her by now. She turned to Rydal, surprised to find his face remained close to hers. She pushed down her thoughts and nodded at him. A reassuring smile on her lips.

He returned to his meal, though part of his attention remained on her, and began to eat. Sora stared at her own food. It did smell delicious. She picked up her utensils, relieved they resembled a knife and fork. Slowly, she stabbed a few yellow peas onto the end of her fork and scooped up some of the green mash. Rydal had poured a white sauce over her meal and she dipped the end of her fork into it. Her fork hovered in mid-air for a moment and Sora took a bite before she could talk herself out of it.

A blend of flavours exploded in her mouth. The meat was tender, a reddish brown like steak, but somehow held richness that spread as the food dissolved on her tongue. Despite its odd green colour, the mash was sweet. Subtle enough that it didn't overwhelm her stomach, but unlike the starch of potato she'd expected. The peas had an unexpected crunch and crumbled apart in her mouth. She took another bite, and another. Her plate was half empty before she slowed down to take a drink from her goblet. Although it was purple, it had a distinctly vanilla taste. It was sweeter than she expected. The liquid had been warmed and washed the food down with ease. She drank half the goblet in a few mouthfuls.

Across the table, those dark grey eyes watched her. Distaste curled his features. A small scar cut into the edge of his top lip. It deepened his scowl. She'd half turned to Rydal when a woman, tall and beautiful, strode into the hall. She was dressed in elegant, black scaled armour that ran the length of her arms and ended in a point at her wrist. Her dark blonde hair, braided down one side of her head, fell over her shoulder. Everyone at the table stood. Sora swallowed her mouthful of food and did the same. When the woman took her position in the chair left of the King, everyone lowered back into their own.

“Apologies,” started the woman. “I had a matter to attend that was unavoidable.” She straightened. Amber eyes, sharp and calculated, settled on Sora. “So, you’re the girl my son pitied enough to bring home with him.” The murmur of table conversation faded as all attention turned to her.

“Halona,” the King murmured but she ignored it.

“Mother,” Rydal started. The woman held up her hand and he fell into silence.

All eyes remained on her. Sora felt the challenge in the gaze that settled on her. She straightened in her chair. “I am the young woman who accompanied him on his journey back to the palace.” She dipped her chin. “Soraya Merridan of House Ardwell.”

Sora could have sworn the woman’s lips twitched. “Well, Soraya,” she replied slowly. She nodded at her tunic, brow arched. “Can you wield a blade?”

All too aware of the baldric strapped beneath her tunic, Sora swallowed. “I know a little self-defence.”

The man with grey eyes sneered. “Who would have need for a mere girl with little skill and no manners when speaking with the Queen of Aurelia?”

Seated to his right was an old woman. Weathered hands sat clasped together on the edge of the table. Her laugh was sharp. “When our Queen wants your opinion, Kahlan, she will ask for it.”

Displeasure tightened his expression. A muscle in his jaw twitched but he refrained from replying.

Sora ignored the cold look that settled on her. She cleared her throat. “I know that it’s most effective when you stab with the pointy end.” Rydal choked on a mouthful of wine. “But no. I wouldn’t say I’m particularly skilled in that area,” she added, a little embarrassed at her outburst. “Although, that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t be interested to learn.” She eyed the black scaled armour. “If that was an offer.”

“It was not,” replied the Queen. Her attention lingered. After a moment, she turned to her meal and began to eat.

The rest of the dinner was filled with the quiet rumble of conversation. Every so often, someone glanced between Sora and the Queen, but Halona remained uninterested.

Rydal pointed out the other members at the table. Mardini, the older woman. Kahlan, who made no effort to hide his dislike of her, and Samira.

“Samira is the youngest of the royal advisors,” Rydal informed her. “She was appointed to the position after her father passed.” From across the table, Samira talked quietly with Prince Nikos. Long black hair fell over her shoulders in waves. A braided headband rested against her forehead and disappeared behind her head. “She’s also Emissary to the throne so she spends a lot of her time building relationships in other territories.”

As if she sensed their conversation, Samira glanced in their direction. Just above the arch of her brow, exquisite geometric symbols, each with short overlapping lines and no larger than a fingerprint, had been inked down the right side of her face. They created a line of ink that made a vertical line ending halfway down her cheek, separated only by her eye. A faint, untamed wonder lingered in her features and Sora suspected it heightened her talent as an emissary. She smiled, waiting as Sora mimicked the gesture, and returned to her meal.

When everyone had eaten their fill, the remainder of the food shimmered and disappeared. Sora stared at the emptied plates. King Armand and Prince Nikos were called away and they each excused themselves. Before his departure, the King leaned down and pressed a kiss to his wife’s cheek.

Sora stood with Rydal and absently brushed the creases from her tunic. She started when a leathery hand enveloped hers. Mardini sent her a warm smile. “Do not mind Kahlan, child. He has grown bitter in the last few *Sols*.” Sora nodded though she didn’t understand. Part of her wanted to ask what a *Sol* was but the woman was gone before she could open her mouth.

Rydal bade farewell to the advisors and offered to walk her to her room. She let him lead her back towards the main doors of the dining hall.

“Soraya,” a voice called from behind her.

Queen Halona stood behind them. Hands clasped behind her back, she eyed Sora. “Tomorrow at dawn. You’ll train with the others.” Sora blinked. Even Rydal raised his brow. “Don’t be late. And make sure you’re dressed in proper leathers.”

She smiled despite herself. “Yes, um. Your Highness.”

Queen Halona nodded. She turned. Black boots sounded against the marble floor. After a few steps she paused and called over her shoulder. “While we train, my warriors refer to me as General. I expect you to do the same.”

Sora stared after the woman until she disappeared through one of the grand archways. Mind in a haze, she followed Rydal back to her room.

He paused outside the door, his voice pulling her from her thoughts. “It’s an honour you know.”

“An honour? Your mother assumed, in front of everyone, that I needed to be rescued. Besides,” she sighed, “it was only when she knew I didn’t know anything about combat with weapons that she decided to throw me into training with other soldiers.” She made a face. “I think your mother hates me.”

“Hey.” Rydal caught her hand gently and pulled it away from her face. The torches that lined the hall brought out the deep gold in his eyes. “My mother doesn’t offer to train just anyone. She’s the Queen. And the General of the Royal Armies.” His fingers trailed down her arm. “She trains only with her most elite warriors and those who lead other legions. The fact she offered...” Sora glanced at him. “The fact that she *informed* you,” he amended, “that you’d be training with her warriors means that she sees something in you.” His fingers tightened around hers. “Something she deems worth her attention.”

A warmth settled in her chest. “Oh,” she cleared her throat. “Does ... does this at least mean she’ll go easy on me?”

“Gods no,” Rydal laughed. “By the time training ends tomorrow, muscles you didn’t know you had will ache.”

“How was that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Oh, it wasn’t,” he chuckled. “But a word of advice. Get a good night’s rest. Nothing is worse than being cold *and* tired during one of the General’s training sessions.”

She gave him a flat look. “Much better.”

Rydal stepped closer and Sora inhaled the fresh, earthy scent of him. With his free hand, he reached behind her and braced himself on the doorframe. He shifted, head dipping towards her ear. “Oh, I agree,” he murmured. His fingers untangled from hers and slid around her waist. Her heartbeat stuttered as he drew her into his chest. “I find this much better indeed.” Golden strands of hair fell over his forehead and brushed against her cheek. A soft click echoed behind her. The door to her room swung open. His fingers fell from the door handle. His eyes glowed with amusement.

“You—”

“Me,” he replied.

“Did you just—”

“Walk you to your room? Open your door like a true gentleman? Indeed I did.”

Sora bit back a reply. Instead, she prayed the hall was dark enough to hide her blush and stepped back over the threshold of the room. Her hand landed on the door handle.

“Goodnight, *Prince* Rydal.”

He inclined his head in return. “Goodnight, *Soraya*.”

She grinned and shut the door in his face. His deep laughter echoed through the door.

An outfit had been set out on the end of her bed and she slipped into the bathroom to change. The silvery-blue material was incredibly soft. The shirt fell comfortably around her body and the matching shorts ended mid-thigh. A soft glow peered through the curtain that covered the door to the balcony. Unable to stop herself, she wandered towards it.

Crisp night air brought goosebumps that scattered down her arms. The chill so like winter nights back home that she felt a pang of longing squeeze her chest.

She thought of Alex, of the last time they'd spoken. *You can't keep pushing people away.* A door slammed closed between them. The finality of it echoed in Sora's ears. *They won't keep trying forever.* She'd wanted to apologise in that moment. Pride had kept her from opening that door. Her roommate started taking more shifts and Sora had packed most of her stuff in boxes as retaliation.

Stars littered the sky and surrounded the three moons that arched overhead. Rooftops shimmered in shades of black and blue, each tile lined with a silver glow. The contrast so different with the bright colours of the day. She wondered if those down in the village knew of the beauty from above. Atop the balcony, hidden amongst the darkening night, no one saw the lone tear that trailed down her cheek.

Maybe it was better her roommate think she left.

She remained outside until her teeth began to chatter. The lock clicked in the door to her balcony. Her feet padded across the floor and she crawled into the bed, warmth enveloping her. She sighed and sank deeper into the blankets. Exhaustion pulled at her body. A shadow swept across her balcony but she was already asleep.

## Chapter Seven

Sora knew it was a dream. A flicker of red and gold curled along the cave wall. She tilted her head, the movement not quite her own. The tips of her fingers ran along the engravings carved into the black rock. An icy breeze tousled the wisps of hair around her face. She turned. Through a haze, a figure cloaked in black stepped out of the shadows. A hand emerged from beneath its dark robes. Flames scattered in its presence.

The glint of metal was the only warning before a silver blade cut across its upturned palm. Sora flinched. Her fingers clenched unconsciously. Deep crimson liquid pooled around the wound. Slender fingers curled inwards until they tightened into a fist. Its hand stretched over the flame. Blood burned with a hiss. An echo of a voice drifted towards her. “*Este la mor. La herio e tzar, un de Lumiere.*”

She blinked, trying to focus on the figure but fogginess settled between them. The harder she strained, the more the scene slipped away. She felt the air heat. It dried her throat. A flash of light blinded her, scorching her skin before vanishing in a wave of darkness. The sudden cold against her heated skin burned. She opened her mouth to scream but black smoke choked her until she couldn't breathe. Her eyes fluttered shut. Something howled in the distance and she tried to cover her ears but all she heard were its screams.

\*\*\*

Sora sat bolt upright with a gasp, one hand clasped around her throat. Desperate mouthfuls of air forced their way into her lungs. Her chest heaved with each breath. Sweat plastered her hair to the side of her face. Her hand slid down her throat and paused above her chest. The erratic beating of her heart pounded against her palm. She closed her eyes. Each breath cleared some of the murkiness that clouded her mind. She reached out with her free hand. Longed for the comfort of Adie's white fur. Despite the dog bed tucked into the corner of her room, the husky always snuck into her bed each night. Her fingers met cool, crisp sheets.



She blinked. “Adie?” The bare outline of morning light allowed her eyes to adjust to the darkened room. Memories from the day before flashed across her mind. *It wasn’t all a dream*, she realised as she took in the unfamiliar room. *It was real*. She collapsed back onto her pillow and exhaled hard. “This isn’t a dream.” She ran her hands over her face. Winced at the stiffness in her shoulder. Her eyes shot open. She sat up and pulled at the collar of her shirt.

The pads of her fingers trailed over the raised mark on the front of her shoulder. In the dimness, she could just make out the star-shaped scar carved into her skin. She felt the phantom pressure of the arrow in her shoulder and shuddered. *If it had landed a few inches to the right...* her fingers trailed over her heart. “Could I have really died?” she breathed into the silence. Her stomach churned.

A knock sounded from the hall. Sora felt chill against her bare feet as she padded across the room. The lock flicked open and she peered through the crack in the open door.

“*El Lora Soraya*,” greeted Giiva. “I’m here to prepare you for morning training.”

“Aren’t you going to burst into my room like you did last night?”

Giiva flushed and cleared her throat. “I apologise for my previous behaviour. You’re the first lady of the palace I’ve ever been assigned. I didn’t want to mess it up and then you were almost late to the royal dinner because of me.” She shook her head. “Please allow me to start again.”

“Only if you’ll be yourself. No need to be so formal with me.”

“Oh, of course.” She grinned. “I can see why the Prince likes you so much.” Giiva darted past and disappeared into the room before Sora could react.

Even her ears felt hot as Sora followed the young woman. “Not to be rude,” she called. The door to her wardrobe already open. “But what do you mean, assigned to me?”

“Oh,” came her muffled voice. “Her Majesty the Queen assigned me to be your Lady.” She ambled out of the wardrobe with an armful of clothing. “Queen Halona might come across

as rather intimidating sometimes, but she wasn't always like that. Her title as General of the Royal Armies has been passed down through her bloodline for generations. It's quite the feat, even if it makes her unapproachable at times."

"Wow," Sora breathed. "She sounds very impressive."

Giiva hummed her agreement. "Of course, the title of General is normally passed on through the female bloodline, but seeing as Prince Nikos is heir to the throne, and she has no daughter to pass it on to ... the title will eventually go to Prince Rydal. Besides, it's obvious she's been grooming the Prince for the position since he was a youngling."

*A youngling?*

"Anyway," Giiva held up an outfit.

Sora blinked. For a moment, she thought it was a wetsuit. When her eyes adjusted, she noticed the black scaled armour that ran across the shoulders and partway down the front of the outfit which created an upside-down triangle: it was one of the leather outfits most of the soldiers wore.

"You better dress. General Halona will make you regret it if you are late to one of her trainings. Even if you are special." At Sora's questioning glance, the young woman added, "Queen Halona only ever trains her elite warriors personally. Never anyone else."

*It's an honour you know ... it means she sees something in you.*

Nerves fluttered in her stomach. She remained quiet while Giiva helped her into the leathers. Although the pants hugged her figure, they were surprisingly comfortable and it was easy to move her limbs. She let Giiva adjust it around her body and found there were also scaled plates that created the same upside down triangle over her knees. The last of the black scales ran down either side of her hips. Each sleeve ended in a point at her knuckles. A loop attached to the end slipped over her middle finger to prevent the leathers from shifting while she moved.

As Giiva secured them, Sora felt something brush against the side of her knee. She peered down at the three straps that hung from the left side of the outfit.

“Their main purpose,” Giiva explained, her fingers making quick work as she secured the straps around Sora’s thigh, “is to keep the leathers in place. Some people wear more than others, depending on the fit of their armour, but they can also hold weapons in combat.” She eyed the blade secured in the baldric beside her bed. “I’d leave that in your room.”

Sora slid her feet into tight-fitted black boots that ended just below the scales across her knees. The boots remained snug against her calves.

“You’ll probably only focus on unarmed combat anyway,” Giiva added. “The baldric will just get in the way.”

Sora pulled at the tighter areas of the leathers as she followed Giiva down the hall. The material was a little more snug than she would have liked. She couldn’t help but glance at the few guards they passed. As they reached a carved wooden door, Giiva passed through it and led Sora out into a large courtyard outside the palace barracks.

Yellowed grass lined the edges of the yard. Faded orange dirt, worn from use, spread out from the centre. Giiva wished her luck and disappeared back into the palace. At least twenty soldiers, outfitted in similar black leathers, were scattered about the yard. A few soldiers had golden emblems sewn into the shoulder of their leathers. They spoke quietly amongst themselves while the others stretched. Her hesitant approach caught the attention of both men and women, who eyed her with interest.

“I didn’t think you’d show up.”

Sora frowned at Captain Wyden who stood a few paces behind her, arms crossed over his chest. Rydal scoffed as he stepped up behind him. One hand rested atop the pommel of his sword. “How is that supposed to be encouragement?”

“The girl should be encouraged to know that she has already surpassed my expectations.”

Sora made a face at him. “How kind of you to say, *Jesper*. And here I thought we had started to bond after you gifted me a baldric for my blade.” She half-expected him to roll his eyes or glare. With her focus on the Captain, she missed the surprise that lit Rydal’s expression at their exchange.

“Do not call me Jesper,” Wyden replied. His arms dropped to his side and he stalked past her to join the other soldiers.

“What?” Sora grinned at Rydal.

“Only you would find it amusing to provoke him like that.”

“He makes it too easy.”

Rydal shook with quiet laughter. “Well, you better stretch before the General arrives. You better believe she will not be making anything easy.”

They settled into a free space just beside the other soldiers. Rydal showed her some stretches and explained which ones were best for each muscle. She had barely finished when a voice barked out across the courtyard. “Pair off. Unarmed combat. Now.” Queen Halona, adorned in similar armour as the night before, strode towards them. An elegant sword hung from her belt, as well as three knives strapped to a baldric across her chest. A long cloak that no doubt concealed more weapons beneath hung off her shoulders. “*Delmarva*,” Queen Halona called, eyes locked on Rydal, “you’ll work with Captain Wyden.”

“Yes General.” Rydal sent Sora an apologetic glance. ‘I’m sorry,’ he mouthed even as he stepped towards the Captain.

*Delmarva*, Sora mused. *Why does the Queen call her son by his surname?*

As if sensing her thoughts, Queen Halona pinned Sora with a stare as soldiers quickly paired off and began their drills. Sora swallowed and scanned the mass of bodies.

A man with eyes the colour of coal caught her gaze from across the courtyard. Dark hair swept back over his face to reveal an angled jaw and sharp features. A weird familiarity pressed against her mind and she wondered if she'd seen him before. Somewhere in the palace perhaps.

He took in her stance, mouth curling as he started towards her. The collar of his shirt appeared to end higher up his neck than most. However, as he approached, what she first assumed was his collar shifted into swirls of black ink. The tattoo covered the entirety of his neck and curled up behind one ear.

He pressed his forearm across his chest, as she'd seen most of the soldiers do, and gestured for her to do the same.

Sora tried not to groan when he shifted into an offensive stance.

“Don't expect me to go easy on you.”

She sighed. “I expect nothing less.”

He swung at her before she was ready. Through pure luck, she managed to avoid his first punch. When the second grazed her cheekbone and made her eyes water, he pulled back his next few attacks. Adrenaline hummed through her body. Each attack kept her on her toes. By the time Queen Halona called an end to the drills, she was covered in a layer of sweat and had to brace her hands on her knees in order to catch her breath.

Her opponent relaxed his stance. Although his change in breathing wasn't noticeable, his chest expanded a little more frequently for someone who appeared so unaffected.

She waited for her breath to steady, blinking the haze from her vision. Coal-black eyes watched her curiously. He remained quiet as he repeated the gesture from before and waited as she mimicked it.

“You held your ground better than I expected.”

Sora laughed, but it came out as more of a wheeze. “I didn't land a single punch.”

“Not many do. You should be proud you’re still on your feet.”

Queen Halona interrupted their conversation. Her voice carried over the yard as she ordered everyone into groups for unarmed combat. Sora exhaled, her features slipping into a scowl when she heard her opponent chuckle.

“What did you expect?” he asked. “That we’d just warm up and be on our way?”

“A part of me hoped,” she grumbled.

Curiosity flickered in his gaze. Sora tried to read his expression but came up blank. After a moment, her opponent stepped back and moved to join one of the groups. Sora stared at his retreating back and wondered at the familiarity that nagged at the back of her mind.

\*\*\*

Two hours later, Sora lay sprawled in the dirt trying to ignore the ache that lingered throughout her entire body. Her warm-up partner had indeed pulled his punches. A spasm of pain ghosted along her jaw from when she had failed to get out of the way in time. Footsteps came to a halt beside her and a shadow cast over her face. Peeling her eyes open, she blinked up at Rydal.

“At least you survived,” he teased.

Sora tried to swipe at his legs with her arm. Her muscles seized with the movement.

“You should stretch, you know. It will be worse if you leave it.”

Reluctantly, Sora pulled herself into a sitting position. Unable to move any farther, she started her stretches on the ground. She ran her hand over the top of her thigh and tried to ease the tension from her muscles.

Footsteps approached from behind. “*El Loro*,” called a voice. “King Armand needs to speak with you. It’s about...”

Their voices lowered enough that Sora could no longer understand their murmurs. She figured she shouldn't eavesdrop anyway and continued to stretch until she felt Rydal step up beside her. "Go," she started before he had the chance to speak. "That sounded important."

He started to protest but she shook her head.

"I'll be fine."

He nodded and promised to find her after the meeting. She waited for him to disappear before she pulled herself to her feet with a groan.

Giiva stood just inside the hall. She beamed when she spotted Sora, nearly skipping as she wandered over to meet her. "How was it? Was it amazing? Did you get to see the Queen fight? Did anyone take their shirts off?" She fired questions one after the other.

Sora couldn't help but laugh at the excitement that radiated off the woman. "Apart from the fact that I may have pulled every muscle in my body, it was pretty cool. I've never seen anyone fight like that before. Did Queen Halona really train them all?"

"Mhm," Giiva hummed. "Her Majesty hand picks all the warriors for her elite guard. She learns each of their strengths and weaknesses and hones them into near unstoppable warriors." Awe filtered through her voice. "It's incredible."

Sora nodded.

"Did they take their shirts off?" she asked, voice hopeful.

Sora laughed. "All shirts remained firmly on their bodies."

Giiva sighed and continued down the hall.

Back in her room, Sora washed the sweat from her body. She dressed in clean black clothing, similar to her attire when she first arrived in Aurelia, and asked Giiva to show her how to secure the baldric across her chest. The leather was a little too big and fitted oddly around her torso. Eventually, Giiva had to adjust some of the buckles until she managed to secure it properly in place.

“How do you know so much about this stuff?” Sora asked as Giiva helped her with the last buckle. “You know, about combat, and how to equip a baldric?”

“When Prince Rydal was younger, he used to go into the city twice a week and teach the younglings self-defence.” She smiled at the memory. “I used to sneak down and join them when Mother wasn’t trying to teach me palace etiquette. Sometimes he’d bring wooden swords and demonstrate how to secure them in place. He still tries to visit them when he can.”

Sora thought back to when they first entered the city. An image of the children as they trailed after his horse sprung into her mind. She accepted her blade when Giiva handed it to her and carefully sheathed it. The blade was small enough that it was almost unnoticeable beneath her jacket.

Giiva stood back, hands on her hips, and admired her work. “Doesn’t it look great?”

“It’s perfect, thank you.”

Giiva beamed at the compliment and her expression brightened. The lighter expression suddenly made her look much younger.

“How old are you?” Sora inquired. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Nineteen. I’m the youngest in the palace. You know, unless you—” she trailed off.

“Sorry,” replied Sora. “I’m twenty-two.”

Giiva wriggled her eyebrows. “Two years younger than Prince Rydal.”

The startled expression on her face sent Giiva into a fit of laughter.

“So, what are your plans for today?” Giiva asked after she recovered.

“I’m not sure,” she thought aloud. Most of the people she knew here were currently occupied. “But I for one don’t know how anyone manages to go about the rest of their day after training with General Halona.” She flexed her arm and felt the muscles protest. “I could just curl up in bed and read a book.”



“There’s the royal library, I could take you?” She headed for the door before Sora could reply. “Come on,” she added excitedly. “We can take the passageways. They’re much faster, and we can avoid Merrick.”

Sora took half a step towards the door. “Merrick?”

“He’s a soldier in the palace. I heard the prince tell him to keep an eye on you.”

Her footsteps halted. Something tightened in her chest. “He did?”

“Mhm,” Giiva murmured. She strode towards the door and pulled it open. “Come on. I know just the way to lose him.”

## **Chapter Eight**

The passageways, it turned out, were little hallways scattered around the palace, carved into the walls themselves to allow servants to move about without being seen. Servants glanced up as they passed. Most ignored them and continued with their tasks.

Giiva led her down a long hall which ended in a spiral staircase. When they emerged, Sora found herself outside a set of large double doors. Giiva's fingers curled around the handle and the door eased open.

Grand mahogany bookshelves stretched the length of the room and disappeared into the distance. Beautiful carved pillars lined the shelves. Each one supported a walkway around the upper half of the shelves. An elegant entryway surrounded her. Display cases settled in the alcoves throughout the library.

Along the curved ceiling, an extravagant painting stretched the length of the room. Winged creatures, animals with great horns and scales portrayed amongst people and buildings, each image blending seamlessly together. Sora marvelled at the beauty depicted through each brush stroke, almost as if the artist had trapped the knowledge of the library in a single image. She inhaled deeply. The scent of parchment paper, ink and leather lingered in the air.

“Will you be okay here?” Giiva asked from behind her. “I’m supposed to be helping out at the stables today.”

“Oh, yes, of course. I’ll be fine. I didn’t mean to keep you.”

Giiva waved off her comment and smiled. “Don’t worry about it. Promptness has never been my strength, even before you arrived. I don’t know why they’d expect anything different now.” She took a step back and her smile widened. “Besides, there’s only so many stalls they can make you muck out as punishment.” A smile tugged at Sora’s mouth. Giiva pointed out where to find the best books before she excused herself.

Sora wandered deeper into the library, its silence a soothing comfort from the strangeness of this new world. Books upon books lined each shelf and she lost herself in the scent of old leather and wood. The pads of her fingers ran gently along the spines of each book she passed. A few of the older volumes, bound in worn leather, were written in languages she didn't understand.

Near the far end of the library, a soft glow of light cast a square across the ground, catching a few books from the closest shelves. A large leadlight window lined the wall from floor to curved ceiling. An elegant brown leather armchair was tucked in against the window. Rounded at the corners, the seat cushion had faded into a softer shade of brown.

Beneath the window, a small side table sat piled with books, their pages worn to the colour of coffee in the sun. Sora took a step closer, ran her fingers over the cover of the first book and eased it open.

She looked over a few pages, smiling at the familiar language. Most of the books appeared to be about battle strategies and formations; *Legions of Dawn*, *A Marksmen Craft*, a lot of which she didn't understand. She paused on a cover that read *La Foriieva Courtier*, but when she opened it, strange symbols stared back at her.

Sora slumped into the leather armchair with a sigh. The force of her movements shifted the chair, and a soft *thump* sounded against the floor. She peered over the side of the armrest. Dislodged by her movement, an old book nestled between the chair and side table. Careful not to damage the book, she eased it out and set it on her lap. A thick cord wrapped around the leather bound pages. Her fingers trailed over the three overlapping triangles pressed into the cover before moving to the lettering etched across the middle: *Cerulea*.

She loosened the cord and carefully pried the cover open, flicking through a few pages. Each one covered in symbols and characters. As she skimmed through the book, the light from

the window cast a shimmer across the paper. Sora squinted, adjusting the page until she noticed the pale white ink that had been hand written into the margin.

One leg folded beneath her, Sora shifted in the chair until the book rested against the armrest under the sunlight. A few of the symbols has been translated and written in a language she could understand. She strained to read the pale ink as each word settled into her mind.

*A pathway opened, a leap yet stolen. In chaos,  
truth is born. Bound by blood, each trial taken, a  
ruler once was thee. Trapped in darkness, if light  
prevails it will be the end of he. For as death  
slumbers, the fall of one could end humanity.*

The door to the library closed with a click that echoed through the silence. Sora jumped, torn out of her thoughts, and nearly dropped the book. Giiva's voice echoed through her mind.

*I heard the Prince tell him to keep an eye on you.*

Sora tried not to think about what information Giiva had let slip. Instead, she returned to the book and read over the same words. She'd barely passed the first few lines when she picked up the scrape of boots against wood. Muscles coiled in her body and her eyes darted around but the aisles remained empty.

Quietly, she closed the book, secured the cord around it and slipped it back between the chair and side table. The scar in her shoulder pulsed. It startled her enough that she slid out of the chair and ducked behind one of the shelves. She'd just slipped out of view when two figures turned down the aisle and headed towards the window.

She crouched lower. As the footsteps approached, she eased a book off the shelf closest to her and peered through the gap. Sora could only watch their legs as they slowed to a stop

beside the window. She strained to listen as an elegant female voice drifted towards her in the silence. “You need to tell her.”

Prince Nikos sighed. “Is it possible she’s not who you believe her to be?”

“I suppose it could still be possible, but surely even you can see the strength in her. She opened the *Abraxas*. Arrived in the forest. On the outskirts of where both the prince and the daegon were present. And you ordering one of the elite to follow the girl will just make things worse.”

He pressed his lips together. “I need to make sure she can be trusted. Regardless, Merrick is an incredibly skilled warrior. She will never know.”

Sora swore it was amusement that laced the woman’s voice. “I think you’ll find, she’s more capable than you believe.”

The pair continued to speak quietly. Their voices slipped into a quiet murmur that Sora was unable to pick up. She considered slipping away but the woman’s comment made her wonder if she was aware of her presence. Instead she waited silently from her position hidden behind the shelves.

Her legs had begun to cramp when the prince spoke. “If what you believe is true, I will not keep her in the dark. However, until it becomes certain I will not burden her.” His voice hardened. “And neither will you, Samira.”

“Understood, your Highness.” Her body dipped slightly with a bow.

Prince Nikos nodded his dismissal to Samira. She turned and strode off towards the entrance without another word.

Sora listened as the grand double doors opened and the woman’s footsteps faded into the distance. She glanced back at the prince, who ran a hand over his mouth thoughtfully. After a moment, he shook his head and followed after the woman. Sora waited for the faint echo of the door before she dared to move.

*She opened the Abraxas, the words spun through her mind as she slid the book back onto its shelf. They had to be talking about me, but why? What are they hiding?*

Certain they were gone, she followed one of the aisles towards the front of the library. As she reached the end of the shelf, she peered through a row of books. A quiet emptiness stretched out across the room and the tension drained from her body. She inhaled. The faint scent of parchment and ink lingered.

“And what are you doing snooping around my library?” A smooth, detached voice sounded from behind her.

Sora gasped, knocking a few books from their shelves as she spun around.

A tall figure stood a few paces behind her. Their long black robes adorned with silver patterns across the front, complete with a hood pulled over their features, masking them in shadow. The end of a long white beard stuck out from under his hood. A knot had been tied into his beard beneath his chin, leaving the loose hair to brush against the collar of his robes.

“I-I was just looking around,” she stammered out. “Giiva showed me to the library while I had some time to myself.”

“Indeed.” The blatant lack of interest in his tone made it impossible for Sora to decipher anything about him. “I suppose that makes you the young prince’s guest then.”

She eyed him carefully. “I suppose I am.”

His hands clasped together and the sleeves of his robes shifted to cover them. “You may call me Master Atlas,” he replied after a moment. “I am the Scholarch of the Royal Library.” His hood shifted towards one of the fallen books. A sound of distaste rumbled in the back of his throat. “Now, if you have time to disrupt my books, then you have time to stack them.”

“What—” Sora began but Master Atlas held up a hand. He waited while she returned the fallen books to their places and ordered her to follow him. With a glance back towards the

door, she trailed behind him like a scolded child. He led her to a desk tucked in between shelves near the front of the library. His hands had returned to their clasped position hidden beneath his sleeves. He nodded towards a wooden trolley.

Leather-bound books were stacked in piles so high she could barely see over them. A few of the books appeared the appropriate size. Others were great tomes, filled with hundreds of pages and twice the size. “Reshelve these books. You may leave only when you are finished.”

Although his features remained hidden, Sora felt his stern gaze as she reached for the trolley. A set of numbers had been printed across the bottom of the spines. She studied them as she walked down an aisle, relieved to find they shared a similar organisation pattern to her own world. The trolley rumbled under the weight of the books as she explored the library, depositing books into their rightful places.

After a while, her breath came a little harder. Each of the large tomes needed to be placed on the upper level shelves. One at a time, she carried them up the ladders positioned at the ends of the shelves and eased along the walkways. A relieved sigh lifted the loose hair around her face when she slid the final book onto its shelf.

A soft chuckle sounded behind her and she rolled her eyes.

Rydal leaned idly against one of the support pillars and grinned. “How many books did you knock off the shelves?”

“Three. How’d you know?”

“Master Atlas has always been strict when it comes to his books.”

“Sounds like you have some experience in the matter?” He made a face and she laughed. “So, how many did *you* knock over?”

“Thirteen *shelves*.” He grinned. “Master Atlas made me stack books for a year after that incident.” Sora stared at him. “Not that you have to worry about being sentenced to a year

of stacking books,” he added. “My punishment for wreaking havoc on the library was well deserved.”

“How did you knock over thirteen shelves?”

“Master Atlas was our tutor back when we were children. Nikos was always far more interested in his teachings.” He smiled at the memory. “I used to play games, much to the annoyance of Master Atlas. One afternoon I tried to hide from him so I wouldn’t have to study. I thought it would be a good idea to hide in one of the bookshelves. I tipped over the shelf as I was climbing up the side of it. The shelf knocked into the next and so forth until I had knocked over all thirteen shelves in the row. Master Atlas yelled at me until his face turned red.”

Sora covered her mouth and coughed to hide the laughter.

“Anyway,” he added. His eyes glanced around the library. “We should probably go. More than a decade has passed but I don’t think the man has forgiven me completely. We should sneak out before he catches me.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon down in the market square. Captain Wyden grudgingly followed after them as they wandered from stall to stall. Rydal laughed when she wanted to stop at the stall with smoked Duk first. The woman beamed at their approach, cutting two strips of meat that melted in her mouth, leaving a spicy tang as Sora wandered throughout the stalls.

After she’d finished eating, Sora followed Rydal through the city. Children squealed when they saw him and he greeted them each by name. The sun had started to set by the time they arrived back at the palace.

Giiva was already in Sora’s room when Rydal left her to change for dinner. The young woman chattered on excitedly about the stableboy, a faint blush staining her cheeks as she spoke of knocking him into the water trough while she was turning out the horses.



Dinner was just as delicious the second night. The King smiled and engaged with each of his guests, but there was an unease to his posture. Lines of worry creased his brow. Rydal was quieter than normal but still smiled each time he glanced at her. She found a strange comfort in the steel-grey gaze of Kahlan.

“At least try to make a pleasant face,” Mardini had told him. “We have guests after all.” The old woman seemed to take great pleasure in his annoyance, blissfully ignoring the permanent scowl frozen on his scarred mouth. Her words darkened his expression and he eyed Sora with blatant dislike throughout the dinner.

“Don’t take it personally,” Rydal informed her as they walked down one of the grand halls. “Kahlan has always been an unpleasant man.”

“How did he become an advisor?”

“He comes from one of the highborn families in Surielle. His son was supposed to accept the role a few years ago, but after he ... after he lost his son, Kahlan was asked to stay in his position as advisor. His disdain for people only increased after that.” His words lingered as they continued down the hall. Outside the door to her rooms, he paused. Faint amusement slipped over the sadness in his features.

“Whatever you’re about to say,” Sora began, “I’m pretty sure I don’t want to hear it.”

“General Halona informed me that she expects you at training tomorrow.” Rydal laughed at the expression she pulled. “Groan all you want. Just know that if she catches your protests, she’ll make you do extra drills in front of her elite warriors.”

“That woman is definitely trying to kill me.”

“I think it’s quite the opposite.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” She paused and her eyes narrowed. “You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” He dipped his chin and bade her goodnight before he turned to leave. “Don’t be late.”

Sora grumbled out her annoyance as she opened the door and stepped inside. She headed for the balcony. The lingering sunset framed the distant hills in a halo of reddish-pink and orange. Each colour blended into the darkening sky. She leaned against the marble banister, its surface cool against her forearms. The brisk night air nipped at her lungs with each breath. Her mind began to clear.

*You need to tell her.*

There were secrets in the palace, something they didn’t want her to know. Something that concerned her. She drummed her fingers against the marble. Bathed in silver light, Sora glanced up at the three moons that shone overhead. The city drifted into silence as its people returned to their homes for the night. A breeze brushed past her, raising goosebumps along her skin. She ran a hand over her arms and suppressed a sudden shiver. Tiredness pulled at her and she slipped back into the warmth of her room.

At the end of her bed, she picked up the outfit Giiva had laid out for her. A flimsy silk nightgown hung from her fingers. *Really, Giiva?* she thought as she eyed the material. She rolled her eyes and wandered into the wardrobe, frowning at the rows of similar nightgowns in different colours.

With a huff of annoyance, she pulled out the comfiest outfit she could find. Black pants that reminded her of leggings, and a black shirt. She removed the baldric and left it on her side table as she crawled into bed.

A sliver of moonlight slipped through the gap in her curtains and cast the room in a soft glow. She collapsed onto the pillows and stared at the ceiling. Her necklace felt heavy against her chest. She reached for her throat. Curled her fingers around the pendant. Eyes weighed

down with sleep. Her fingers tightened. Finally, as she began to drift off, she couldn't help but wonder if her roommate even realised she was gone.

## **Chapter Nine**

Sora woke with a start. Her hand shot out towards her blade before her mind could catch up. She ignored the heat that lingered on her skin and pulled the blade from its sheath. Light flickered behind her curtains. A clap of thunder echoed overhead.

She slid out from beneath her sheets and shoved her feet into her boots before she rounded the bed. Mind alert, she secured the baldric to her body and slipped into a black jacket. It had a similar black scaled appearance that wrapped around the collar and down either arm. Her footsteps were steady as she eased towards the balcony.

With her free hand, she pulled back the corner of the curtain and peered outside. Whorls of flames curled up from the rooftops. Black smoke settled like a fog over the city. Sora slid open the door and winced. Screams tore at her ears. She scrambled forward. Peered down at the houses below.

Creatures made entirely of black roamed the cobblestoned streets. Their snarls rose above the chaos of the city. Sora forced herself to take a step forward. Peer over the marble banister. Her heart stuttered in her chest.

The scrape of talons against marble sent a shudder down her spine. Four-legged creatures, covered in soot and blood, clawed their way up the side of the palace. Their jaws snapped together with each snarl. The movement revealed rows of black jagged teeth that shimmered under the glow of flames and moonlight. Another snarl sounded from her left and her head whipped around. Long curved talons, dripping with deep crimson, latched onto the smooth marble as the creature began to pull itself over the banister.

Sora stumbled back a step. The creature eased onto the balcony, its body long and slender, an almost stony complexion to its black skin. On either side of its face, the deep red glow of its eyes stared directly at her. She stepped back over the threshold of her room and slid the door shut as it launched itself at her. The glass resounded as it crashed into the door but it

held. Perhaps it wasn't glass at all. Sora's heart thundered as she crawled back. The creature howled as it swiped against the door. Talons whined against the glass and she clapped her free hand over her ear. She scrambled towards the door that led into the hall and pulled it open.

Glass shattered from the balcony and a streak of black shot across the room. She grabbed the doorknob and yanked it closed, falling backwards as the creature slammed into the back of the door. Sora landed in the middle of the hall. Growls reverberated through the wood and her chest heaved as the door shuddered.

She pulled herself upright and broke into a run towards the stairs at the end of the hall. The door shuddered again. Sora glanced over her shoulder at it. She didn't see the blur that shot out in front of her and collided with the figure. The momentum sent them both to the floor and knocked the air from her lungs.

“Giiva?”

“Soraya,” she panted. Her slender fingers wrapped around Sora's wrist and hauled her to her feet. “We have to go, they're attacking the palace.”

Before she could ask, the young woman dragged her back through the passageway. They wound through hallways and staircases until Sora had no idea where they were. She kept her fingers wrapped around the hilt of her blade as they moved deeper into the palace.

After a particularly narrow hallway, Giiva lead them out a door. Stone walls enveloped the entire room. Shelves lined the far wall. A large metal contraption had been positioned over a stone firepit in the centre of the room. “Come on,” Giiva tugged Sora forward. “We can take the exit behind the kitchen. It will lead us to the stables.”

“What's going on?” Sora called out to her. “What are those things?”

“Reavers,” replied Giiva as she pulled Sora through a large storage room. She paused at the far wall and released her grip to unlatch the bolts on the door. “Mindless creatures that feed off the pain and suffering of the living. They're attacking the city.”

“Why?” Sora started but her voice trailed off as Giiva opened the last bolt and started to pull the door open. The glow of moonlight bathed the courtyard in silver. Giiva started to open it further when movement caught Sora’s attention. Her hand shot out, grabbed Giiva by the wrist, and promptly pulled her into a crouch out of sight.

Sora peered through the gap in the door and watched as three of the creatures stalked across the courtyard. While their front paws allowed for great talons to curl out before them, their hind legs appeared to be absent of any deadly claws. Their bodies were bony and emaciated. Their ribcages protruded out from their black marble skin and led to slim waists that arched upwards to create unnaturally hunched backs. Long wisps of black smoke curled out from behind them and moved like tails.

Their low growls reverberated through the silence. Sora barely dared to breathe as they stalked past. Each of their long limbs added to their strange gait. Smoke from the city had settled in the air and it curled around her nostrils. She winced at each faint scream. Her fingers trembled from the grip she kept on her blade.

“Are they gone?” Giiva murmured after a while.

Sora dared to peak out from behind the door. “I think so,” she whispered, “but we should move fast. They could be back at any moment.”

Crouched low, they slipped into the open and darted across the courtyard. Each step away from the safety of the storage room sent her heart further into her throat. As they passed the courtyard, the curved barn-like shape of the stables shifted into view. Its dark walls blended into the darkness. Sora skidded to a halt inside. Her breath came in short pants.

A young man with a freckled face and dark hair ran up to Giiva. A pale grey tunic covered his black fitted pants and knee-high boots. “You’re back. Is everything okay? Are you hurt? Was there any trouble getting back here?”

“I’m fine,” she breathed.

Unconvinced, his eyes scanned her body for any injuries.

She sent him a soft smile and glanced around the room. “Where are the others?”

The man winced. “You know he’s not one to run from a fight when there are others in danger. Besides, he’s a Prince. There was nothing I could have done to stop him.”

Something tightened in her chest. “Prince?” Sora replied slowly. “You mean Rydal?” At the young man’s expression she added, “where did he go?”

“Where else?” he replied softly. His gaze shifted towards the city.

Sora didn’t realise she’d taken a step back until Giiva caught her arm. “You can’t,” she pleaded. “It’s too dangerous. You don’t even know where he is in the city. It will be nearly impossible for you to find him.”

Sora started to protest when a low growl prickled the hair on the back of her neck. A dark shadow flickered over the entrance to the stables and a few of the horses whinnied.

Giiva’s eyes were wide with panic.

Sora pulled at her arm until her attention shifted. She gestured silently at the people around them and pointed to different stalls. “Hide them,” she mouthed to Giiva.

The young woman trembled even as she nodded.

Sora helped usher people into stalls. Talons scraped against the wooden doors of the barn. She’d barely launched herself behind some nearby haybales when a long, narrowed muzzle filled with jagged teeth peered in.

It pressed its mouth to the ground. Two slits positioned on either side of its upper jaw flared as it inhaled, sending a few stray pieces of hay wafting across the ground with the force of its breath. It reached for the nearest stall, wood splintering beneath its talons as they sank into the door. The creature straightened. Its talons curled into the wood as it lifted itself higher into the air and sniffed again, red eyes glowing against the darkness of its body.

Clawed feet landed on the ground as it inched further into the stables. Horses whinnied louder and kicked in their stalls. Its head snapped back and forth with each sound and the strange wisps of its tail flared out behind its body. Sora counted four stalls before the creature reached the one Giiva had hidden inside.

Sora zeroed in on its slow stalk. Each limb stretched out, disproportionate to its body. She peered over its hunched back at the city in the distance. If she could just make it across the courtyard. She knew there had to be soldiers scattered across the city. If she could just reach one of them. The creature stalked further inside. Sora let her eyes dart between the stalls and the door to the stable. Her hands shook. She squeezed the hilt of her blade until it stopped the tremors.

Talons clawed at the first stall door. Pulled it off its hinges. Empty. Its snarl made her wince. She forced her feet to move. Each step silent as she padded across the floor. Another door splintered as the creature tore it off the stall. Empty. It snapped its teeth in annoyance. Sora reached the main door to the stable. Talons slid into the floor right outside the first occupied stall. Sora inhaled a shaky breath and steeled herself. The creature hooked its talons into the top of the stall door. Started to climb over.

Sora rapped her blade against the side of the barn door. “Hey,” she yelled. “Over here.” Its head twisted back in her direction. Dark crimson liquid dripped from its mouth as it snarled. It dragged its talons down the front of the stall door as it landed back on the ground. Its beady red eyes glowed scarlet in the shadows. Sora took half a step back. Its body coiled tighter at the movement. “You want me?” she taunted. Her fear spiked. She buried it deep inside herself. Slowly, her free hand curled around one side of the barn door. Despite her panic, her lips curled into a smile. “Come and get me.”

Black marble skin shimmered under the moonlight as it launched forward with a growl. Sora tightened her fingers around the doorframe and pulled. The door slid across its hinges and



into the path of the creature that slammed against the wood with enough force to knock Sora off her feet. Heartbeat wild, she scrambled upright, careful not to stab herself, and bolted for the city. Her boots kicked up dirt as she thundered across the courtyard.

The creature growled. Talons ripped the earth beneath each step as the creature tore after her. Sora didn't dare look back as she sprinted forward. The rhythmic thud of its odd gait followed closely behind. As she reached the corner, her boots skidded across the dirt as she made the turn. She felt the talons catch the hem of her jacket. Heard the tear in the fabric and pushed herself faster.

Sora ran the length of the courtyard wall, shooting beneath the archway that led down into the city at a dead sprint. Smoke billowed out from nearby buildings and clouded her surroundings in a thick fog. Her eyes watered and she blinked back the blur in her vision. Through the haze, she caught the glimmer of the gold detail that adorned black scaled armour. She opened her mouth to call out.

Blood splattered across the wall beside their head. The soldier stood still, a statue amongst the chaos, until her knees buckled and she collapsed on the ground. A pair of wild red eyes glimmered dangerously, watching as the body spasmed on the ground. Blood bubbled out of the soldier's mouth, staining her lips red. Sora ground to a halt. Her insides churned and she clapped a hand over her mouth to stop the contents spilling from her stomach.

A hard body slammed into her from behind. Sora felt the blade slip from her fingers and she threw her arms up in front of her face as the earth rose to meet her. The force of the impact jarred her body and she rolled, stone pavers tearing at her clothes and grazing her exposed skin until her breath stirred the ashes settled against the ground.

Deep growls echoed around her. Sora braced her hands against the stone as she pushed herself to hands and knees. Three pairs of red eyes surrounded her, each hovering a few feet off the ground, their bodies hidden amongst the ash and smoke. Talons tapped against the

ground as they inched closer. Sora sprawled her fingers across the ground in front of her, not daring to take her eyes off them as she felt around for any hint of her blade. Not that it would help protect her from one, let alone three, of the creatures.

Body lowered in a predator stalk, the creature in front of her edged closer, its lips pulled back in a snarl, its jagged teeth sharp enough to shred bone. It inched forward another step and paused. A constant stream of growls rolled out from its throat but it remained still. Sora didn't dare move. As her fingers trembled, a soft glow washed over them. It spread further, from her wrist, down her fingers until it reached the cold stone before her.

Each of the creatures growled and shrunk lower until their bodies lay almost pressed against the cobblestone. Sora dared the slightest glance down. Her necklace, which had fallen out from its place under her shirt, swung gently beneath her throat. The strange substance inside had taken on an almost silver glow and swirled wildly within the pendant. It radiated out from the entwined stone. Each step the creatures inched forward, the stone flared brighter.

One of the creatures snarled and snapped its jaws. The wisp of smoke from its tail flickered and curled around the left side of its rump. Its body trembled, muscles coiled tight. Sora felt, rather than saw, the creature lunge forward. Unsure what else to do, she jerked away from the movement, her back slamming into the side of the building behind her. She threw her arms out over her face as she braced herself.

A bright light flared out around her. The heat of her pendant seeped through the material of her shirt. Sora felt the hot, rancid breath of the creature brush against her skin. She squeezed her eyes tighter. A whisper of familiarity brushed against her mind. Calmed the roar of her heartbeat.

Slowly, she peeled her eyes open and stole a glance into the street. A flash of black marble lunged at her. As it passed through the glow of white light, its thick marble skin cracked and exploded in a mist of black ash. Fragments of its ashy remains settled against the strands

of hair around her face. After a moment, the light began to fade. It shifted from a blinding white to a soft glow like the flicker of embers until it disappeared completely.

“By the Gods,” a voice murmured. Sora jerked at the sound and tried to scramble to her feet. Black spots clouded her vision and she tried to blink them back, searching for whoever had spoken. Black scaled leathers outlined the figure as they took a careful step towards her. The bodice of their armour held a silver shimmer that accentuated the long braids of white hair that fell over either shoulder beneath a dark hood. “It’s you.”

Sora’s eyes widened as she breathed. “Ayla?”

Flecks of ash stuck to the blood that coated her armour. Although she wore a mask that covered the lower half of her face, her eyes shimmered with a faint blue glow, as if the colour itself moved within her pupils.

The thick, foul smell of blood strengthened as Ayla drew closer.

Sora felt it burn her throat as she inhaled. She pressed her lips together and tried to breathe through her nose but it made her eyes water instead.

Ayla knelt down in front of her. Gently, she raised one pale hand and rested it on Sora’s shoulder. Something settled in those blue eyes that Sora couldn’t read. She didn’t have time to think about it before Ayla murmured, a softness to the usual faint echo of her voice. “You cannot stay here.”

Sora felt the woman press something into her hands and she glanced down. Her fingers curled around the hilt of her blade and the faintest sliver of tension drained from her body. “What about—”

“We must go now,” interrupted Ayla. She left no room for a response as she hauled Sora back onto her feet. A long, slender sword hung from her other hand and she shook the blood from it before wiping the remainder of it on her pant leg. Metal whined as she slid it

back into the scabbard strapped down her back. She kept a firm grip on Sora as they moved deeper into the city.

Every little sound kept Sora on edge.

Ayla led her down side streets. The haze of ash and smoke started to fade. Soon enough, the crisp chill of morning air filtered through her lungs. “Wait,” she breathed, glancing over her shoulder. “What about Giiva and the others?”

Ayla didn’t slow her pace as she replied. “Giiva may be young, but she is not a child.”

Sora pulled her arm from Ayla’s grip. “We can’t just leave them there. We need to go back. We need to make sure they’re safe.” Sora turned back towards the stable and nearly ran into Ayla who had appeared suddenly behind her. She stumbled back a step. “How did you...?”

Ayla pulled the mask off her face and let it fall around her neck. Exasperation clouded her features. “You are just as stubborn as he is,” her lips pressed together. “Perhaps more so.” She stepped forward and caught Sora by the shoulders. “Do you not think I was already informed of their location? The Reavers are much faster than a mere human. How do you think you managed to run so far after you taunted the one from the stables?”

“You stopped that thing from—”

“Yes,” she cut in. “You were supposed to be at the stables, not running around the city with no idea where you’re going.”

“So I was supposed to just let that thing kill someone?”

Ayla pressed her lips together. She studied Sora for a moment before she released her grip and straightened. “I think I am beginning to understand you.”

“Um,” Sora blinked trying to wrap her mind around the strange response. “Thank you?”

Ayla nodded and her head tilted to one side. She stood frozen, as if she could hear something in the distance. “There are more, moving in from the west of the city. We cannot stand here any longer.”

A howl sounded behind them as Sora followed Ayla further from the palace. Each echoing growl set her nerves on edge. The pendant remained warm against her skin as they slipped through rubble-lined streets. Ayla kept them out of sight for the most part. As they turned a corner, a Reaver raised its head to snarl at them. Ayla loosed a knife, striking the creature through the eye, before Sora even saw her move.

The outer city wall towered overhead as they approached. Howls echoed across the city and raised the hair on her arms. Breathing hard, Sora slowed her pace and braced a hand against the ache in her side. A glimmer of light bounced off something embedded in the wall.

A large stake protruded from the stone. Its metallic surface produced a silvery shimmer that struck familiar in her mind. A flat surface on the visible end showed that it had been hammered into the wall.

Sora glanced between each peg as she followed them straight up to the top of the wall. Slowly, the pieces melded together in her mind. She inhaled and turned to Ayla. Back to the wall, the woman had drawn two blades that curved slightly at their pointed end.

Sora glanced between Ayla and the wall. "You can't be serious."

Ayla flexed and loosened her wrists. Strands of white hair blew gently in the breeze. "Would you rather stay on this side of the wall?"

From the shadowy depths of the streets, the glow of red eyes blinked out from the darkness. Their low growls rumbled through the silence. Talons clawed at the ground as they stalked forward.

Sora felt it then. A gentle hum that vibrated through the air. The warmth of it brushed against her skin. She lifted her hand and tried to touch whatever it was before she realised she'd moved. "What is that?" she murmured. Her fingers traced patterns in front of her face, unaware that Ayla watched her in surprise.

Almost instantly, the air around her shifted and the gentle hum faded from her mind. Sora blinked and stared at her hand still raised up in front of her face.

“Soraya,” Ayla called, voice sharp. “You need to move.” She nodded towards the pegs. Emaciated black marble bodies emerged from the shadows. Her blades swung through the air with flawless precision. The eeriness in her tone sharpened her voice. “Now.”

Sora glanced back up at the pegs and with a steady breath reached for the second one. Her fingers curled around the metal. She used her feet to scramble up the side of the wall until she could brace herself on the lowest peg. Her gaze remained on her next target as she slowly began to manoeuvre upwards. After a few steps she dared a glance down. The clash of metal against talons and flesh echoed in her ears.

With each slash of her blade, Ayla took a step closer towards the wall.

Sora caught the streak of black against the chaos as one of the creatures slipped past Ayla’s defence. It launched itself at the wall just below where Sora was braced. She kept her gaze on the creature and eased further up. Talons clawed at the first peg. After a few attempts, the creature snarled and dropped back onto the ground. Chunks of stone crumbled under the force of its blows as claws dug into the wall.

The squelch of flesh against metal sounded below and the creature bellowed. Sora glanced down to find Ayla with her boot pressed into its face as she pinned it against the wall. Her fingers tightened around her blades as she pulled them both from its ribcage. The mask had been repositioned back around the lower half of her face and outlined the blue in her eyes. “I thought I told you to move.”

Without a word, Sora scrambled the rest of the way up the wall, straddled the top and glanced over the edge. The thick scent of decaying flesh slithered down her lungs and she scrunched her nose.

Ayla climbed the pegs and swung her leg over the edge. “You get used to the smell.”

Sora highly doubted that she would but kept that thought to herself. Instead, she let Ayla guide her down the other side of the wall. Each of the pegs had been placed further apart which made it harder to maintain her balance. On the last step, Sora felt her boot slip. She landed on the ground hard, scrambling out of the way to make room for Ayla.

Spread-eagled on the ground, Sora stared up at the sky and groaned.

A shadow passed over her face and Ayla peered down at her.

“I’m getting up,” Sora grumbled before the woman could speak.

## **Chapter Ten**

Ayla remained silent as she stalked through the grass. She kept her blades out, fingers clenched around the hilts, and headed further from the ruined city.

As they trekked across the dewy night grass, Sora brushed her fingers along the pommel of her blade and tried to ease the tension from her body. Howls echoed behind her. Each sound tightened the muscles in her shoulders. Her heart raced a little faster. Goosebumps rose along her skin and she quickened her pace.

With the city in the distance, Sora clambered up a large hill behind Ayla. Her breath came in sharp exhales as she reached the base of a large tree atop its peak and she braced against the rough bark. In the distance, the soft flicker of flames created a faint glow throughout the city. A string of dried meat hanging from a stall, broken and abandoned in the market square, settled in her mind. She pushed the thought back. Ignored the tightness in her chest.

Crouched near the edge of the hill, Ayla stared back at the city. Beneath her cloak, her body was still, almost predatory. As she spoke, her voice hummed through the muffle of fabric across her mouth. “Breathe, Soraya. We’re safe for the moment. Calm yourself while you have the chance.”

*Safe*, she thought. *For the moment*. Sora sank down until she sat at the base of the tree. Bark dug into her back. She let it. Feet braced against the ground, she draped her arms over her knees and stared at the fire still visible above the city walls. Her eyes squeezed shut. “Breathe,” she whispered.

It was all too much. She’d barely arrived in this world and already she felt as though she’d lived a lifetime of danger. Sure, her previous work as a sketch artist had sometimes ruffled a few feathers, but it was mainly witnesses, and there was no danger sketching a face under the lights of the precinct. She’d never been shot with arrows or chased down the street.



The blade felt heavy against her body. She wanted to claw it from its baldric, throw it into the sea of grass that stretched out around her.

The pendant warmed against her chest. Sora curled her fingers around the stone. She kept her eyes closed and listened to the haunted cries scattered around the city. Bright light flashed, talons arching out of the light. Black marble skin cracked, exploding in a mist of black ash. Her eyes shot open as another voice called out from the darkness around them.

“Ayla.”

Sora lifted her head in time to see Samira step into view.

The young woman raised her palms towards Ayla who slowly lowered her blades. A large gash ran the length of her temple. Blood trickled down the side of her face, the deep crimson liquid a stark contrast to the black ink tattooed into her skin. Clasped in either hand, two oddly shaped knives protruded from between her fingers and followed the curve of them. “Are you the first one here?” Tension slipped into her features as silence stretched out between them. “I thought the others would be here by now.”

“Others?” Sora eased to her feet. “Did something happen?”

Samira glanced up at her with a hint of surprised shock.

The expression was so unlike anything she had seen on the woman that Sora couldn't stop the words that tumbled out of her mouth. “Does this have something to do with why you had Merrick follow me?”

A faint smile filtered over the surprise in her expression. “So you were listening.”

“You don't seem overly upset about it.”

Samira twirled her knives. “If the Crown Prince Nikos wanted the matter to remain private, he should have secured his surroundings better.”

“But you knew I was there. Why didn't you tell him?”

“I didn't *know* that you were there. I only suspected.”

“But you didn’t say anything. Does that mean that you wanted me to know?”

“I never wanted to keep the truth from you. It was simply decided that it should not be revealed until *it* became certain.”

Sora frowned. “And when will *it* be certain?”

Metal hissed. Ayla, who had remained quiet, sheathed one of her curved blades. She examined the second one and wiped it across the sleeve on the inside of her forearm. Thick, black blood coated her sleeve. She shook it off and pulled down the mask across her face, easing from her crouch. “It became certain when you killed three Reavers and turned their bodies to ash.”

A shiver crept along her spine. Absently, Sora ran her fingers over the pendant. “But it wasn’t even me,” she murmured. “It came from the necklace.” Her fingers stilled. A phantom heat warmed her skin and the words settled in her mind.

*It came from the necklace.*

Suddenly, she was back in her room. Knelt down in front of the wardrobe. The stone pendant dangled from the chain clasped between her fingers. As the necklace settled against her skin, light exploded around her. She squeezed her eyes shut. Kept them closed until the light had faded behind her lids.

Across from her, Ayla studied her carefully. “Your necklace might have channelled the power. Honed it into something physical to be accessed. But it still needs a source of power to draw on.” Ayla let the faint shimmer in her eyes flare brighter. A gentle hum vibrated through the air. As if in response, a warmth pulsed within the pendant.

“It’s you,” Sora blinked. “The hum of power I can feel sometimes. It comes from you.”

“Yes. Although, you seem to feel it more intensely than most.” At her blank stare, Ayla continued. “Most people feel a sense of unease. They don’t know exactly *what* it is, but their

bodies tell them to stay at a distance. You're different. You *feel* the hum of the power in the air. A part of it calls to you."

"Calls to me?" Sora echoed. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that it has begun. And now it must be fulfilled."

The cryptic response lingered between them. Sora dared a glance at Samira who watched Ayla with equal confusion. Before anyone had a chance to speak, Ayla stilled and her attention swept towards the city. A shimmer of metal gleamed in the darkness as Samira twirled her knives and braced for an attack.

Hooves thudded against the grass, followed by a nicker that broke through the tension. Ayla's fingers loosened around her blade. She straightened as Darka's sleek, black form galloped up the side of the hill. Sora squinted through the faint haze of smoke that fanned out around the city. Black scaled armour curled over Darka's muzzle and ran up the centre of her face. The armour met together in a point at the top of her head and stretched out along the back of her neck in manoeuvrable scaled plates. A second plate of armour had been secured beneath the front of the saddle.

"Easy," Sora murmured as the mare stopped before her, sniffing at the necklace hanging from her neck.

A thud sounded beside the mare and leaves crunched. Sora turned in time to see a large figure dressed in black and gold step around Darka's head. Dressed in leathers that covered most of his body, Rydal appeared the powerful warrior ready for battle. He remained silent for a moment, yet his eyes never left hers. "Soraya," he murmured, a rasp to his usually carefree tone.

Sora read the expression in his eyes. "I'm fine," she whispered.

Rydal didn't react, but she swore tension bled from his shoulders. For a moment she thought he might embrace her, but he simply exhaled softly and nodded. When he straightened, his posture returned to that of a soldier.

"El Loro," Samira started. She dipped her eyes respectfully. Her knives twirled absently in her hands. "What of the others?"

"Everyone in the city has either been evacuated or brought to the palace chambers. General Halona and her elite are doing a sweep of the city. She believes there was a breach in the wards which allowed the Reavers to enter Surielle undetected."

Samira inhaled sharply. "How is that possible?"

"It shouldn't be. We still have people inside the palace. King Armand has agreed to remain within the palace borders. He will maintain the wards until everyone has been evacuated from the city."

Samira nodded. "And Prince Nikos?"

He paused. A muscle tightened in his jaw. "He and Merrick were in the Eudora district. It was hit hard. The children arrived safely at the palace, but they weren't with them."

"That doesn't mean he—"

"Regardless," Ayla interrupted. Her voice retained the emotionless, eerie tone as usual. The tip of her curved blade dug into the earth as she leaned her weight into it and pushed off the ground. Her eyes narrowed on Samira. "You know the protocol, Emissary."

Samira frowned. The tattooed symbols above her brow shifted with the movement. She swallowed, pain lingering in her eyes, but she nodded. Her fingers tightened around her knives until each knuckle turned white.

"If the Crown Prince is unaccounted for," Ayla continued, "your safety becomes of utmost importance." She gestured back to the city with her sword hand. "You know you can't

stay here. Not this close to the city. Reavers might not be the smartest of creatures, but if they catch your scent...”

Rydal’s features tightened but he didn’t argue.

“The Crown Prince might not have gone through the same training as you, but that doesn’t mean he is without his own skill. You know the protocol, Rydal.”

There was a slight tremor to his breath as he inhaled. His eyes locked on Ayla, and for the few seconds their eyes met, something wavered in her gaze.

“I know,” she added quietly.

A faint sadness lingered between them. Sora averted her eyes, staring back at the smoky remains beyond the wall. In the haze of black smoke, the uppermost spiral of the palace stretched up over the chaos. A beacon of defiance that reached above the darkness reigning over the city.

Sora followed the waves of smoke that washed over the rubble of buildings. In the distance, something rippled in a cloud of smoke. The quiet hum of her companions faded into a low murmur as she tuned them out. She took a half-step forward and squinted as she tried to make out the movement.

The darkness rippled again. “Um, guys,” she called out. When no one responded, she turned and found Rydal and Ayla arguing in hushed whispers.

Samira noticed her attention. Her knives stilled as she inched closer. “What is it?”

Sora pointed at the ripple of black smoke in the distance. “Do you see that?” she asked quietly. The veil of smoke had darkened in the centre. “Is it just me or is that thing moving?”

Samira followed her line of sight, lingering on the strange smoke as it swirled darker. As it roiled above the city she stilled, the sharp expression slipping from her face until she stared blankly into the distance.

From behind them, Darka whined and pawed at the ground.

Rydal and Ayla glanced up from their conversation.

A haze settled over her pupils, casting them in a white cloud that stifled their colour.

“Samira,” called Ayla, a warning in her tone as she stepped forward. “It’s the Veil. It has a hold on you.” Another step forward. “You have to break through it.”

“No,” she breathed and Samira bolted forward.

Sora started after her when something grabbed the back of her jacket. She let out a yelp as her body jerked backwards. Darka caught her by the collar of her jacket and pulled her back up the hill. The mare only let go when Sora stood a few steps from the large tree. Darka nudged her with the end of her nose and nickered.

“What is it, Darka?”

Rydal appeared beside her a few moments later. One hand remained securely on the pommel of his sword, his other gently reached for her face. His fingers had barely ghosted across her chin before he pulled away. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” she murmured. “One moment Samira was staring blankly at the smoke and the next she’d bolted down the hill.”

Rydal looked half-panicked as he assessed her for any injuries. His hand gently reached up again and cupped the side of her face. His thumb brushed against her cheek. Her pulse quickened and she hoped he wouldn’t feel it. “And you?” he breathed. “How do you feel?”

“Are you asking me if I feel the sudden need to run back into danger?” When he only stared at her, she added, “I’m fine. Promise.”

Sora felt his fingers trail across her cheek as he slid his hand from her face. She didn’t realise he’d stepped so close to her until she felt the breeze between them when he stepped away. He glanced over her shoulder and she turned.

“What happened to her?” Sora whispered.

“The Veil calls to our deepest fears,” returned Rydal, equally quiet. “It’s a manipulation of the Arkosian Rite, created to cloud the mind and turn armies on themselves. It’s nothing but a twisted weapon used by the Lord Ruler in the First War, though I haven’t seen such a weapon in all my *Sols*.”

Ayla reached Samira near the curve at the bottom of the hill.

Samira coiled back her arm and threw one of her knives with deadly precision.

Ayla caught it with one gloved hand and spun around. Her back leg kicked out and caught Samira directly in the chest. She lost balance as the blow forced her back a step. Ayla didn’t give her a chance to steady herself. She slammed into her and the force of it sent them both tumbling to the ground.

Samira slashed upward with her blade.

Ayla dodged it. Slammed her palm into the woman’s wrist and knocked the blade from her hand with the other. Ayla straddled her in the grass, pressing two fingers against either side of her temples. A cry slipped from Samira and a *whoosh* of energy surged through the air between them. As it faded, Ayla dropped her hands and eased backwards, leaving Samira to sit up in the grass.

Black smoke still churned above the city. Ayla, after a glance at Samira, turned back towards the veil that fell over the city. Her fingers edged towards the blade strapped down her back. She appeared to be listening to something, but even the howls had faded into silence.

Smoke exploded into darkness. A thunderous roar shook the earth beneath their feet. Sora dropped to a kneel as another roar raked across her ears. She covered either side of her head with her palms and tried to drown out the sound. Someone dropped down beside her and she breathed in Rydal’s earthy scent.

He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her in against him. She squeezed her eyes shut, not daring to move until she felt the ground shudder and still.

In the distance, the smoke had thinned out into a mist that settled around the city. She pulled out of Rydal's embrace. Small black flakes fell from her clothing and settled on the ground. She coughed and heard Rydal do the same. As she glanced up at him, she noticed the thin line of blood that dripped from his ear and ran down one side of his neck.

She felt around her own ears. Other than the faint ringing, she found no blood. When her shock subsided, she exhaled. "What was that?"

"A Vulkra summons," Ayla replied from behind them.

"What?" Rydal exclaimed. "How is that possible?"

Ayla shook her head. "I don't know. But if *he* has somehow managed to summon one..." They shared a look. "We have to leave."

"I'm staying," called Samira. Despite whatever affected her in the veil of smoke, she appeared determined. "I know," she added when Ayla glanced at her. "But I won't be caught off-guard again."

"Samira," Ayla warned.

"I have to stay."

Rydal sensed the tension. "It's fine," he interrupted. Back straight, he addressed them with a no-nonsense tone. "Wyden is preparing safe passage away from the city. He has been given a place to meet us and I suspect he will already be there." His eyes lit with warning as he turned to Ayla. "You already knew that Samira would not choose to leave with us." Another howl echoed. "It's no longer safe to wait out here any longer."

Ayla nodded her agreement. "What of the Vulkra?"

"I will not order you to avoid it. But do not let your emotions guide you." He didn't wait for a reply. Instead, he lifted his arm and pulled back the sleeve of his leathers. A gold armband shimmered against his tanned skin.



Rydal slid his fingers around the band in one smooth movement. It expanded enough for him to slide it off his hand. He held it between his thumb and forefinger, dipping his head until his mouth brushed against the band.

“*Amourie*,” he whispered.

The golden band shimmered and began to glow softly from within. It only lasted a few seconds before it faded back into solid gold. Rydal carefully passed it to Ayla who slid it onto her own wrist. As soon as she’d secured it in place, the band shimmered again and readjusted until it fitted. Rydal pinned her with a hard look.

“I know,” said Ayla, “I’ll be there.”

Sora jumped slightly when Rydal touched his hand to the small of her back. They both watched the two women head back in the direction of the palace before Rydal called Darka, bracing his weight in the stirrup and swinging smoothly into the saddle. Seated in position, he extended his arm down towards Sora and wiggled his fingers. “Don’t worry,” he assured her, “it’s just like last time.”

Sora tried to smile at his attempt to ease her nerves. Her fingers trembled as she slid her hand into his and he pulled her up behind him. Calloused fingers slid against her palm and she settled into the saddle with a little less finesse. “Last time,” she murmured, “I spent the whole ride afraid you might pass out and pull me off the horse.”

She felt the rumble of his quiet laughter and scowled at the back of his head.

Rydal nudged her foot out of the stirrup. Replaced it with his own. He gently reached for her hands. Guided them around either side of his body and secured her arms around his waist. The movement pulled her flush against his back.

“Hold on tight,” Rydal whispered back to her. “And whatever you do,” he eased Darka into a walk, “don’t let go.”

He pursed his lips and let out a whistle. The mare broke into a gallop.

Sora yelped, her arms locking around his waist as the landscape started to pass in a blur. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her forehead into the back of his leathers. They felt incredibly soft against her brow. She didn't look up as they raced away from the city. Not until the pace slowed. Rydal made a long, drawn out whistle and Darka eased to a stop.

Rydal slid his fingers over her hands. He gently pried her fingers apart and manoeuvred out of her grip. After Sora made no move to dismount, Rydal slid out of the saddle first and helped her down. "Not much of a rider?" he murmured. His hands lingered longer than necessary before they slid from her waist. A distant howl thundered over the city.

"What is that?" she murmured.

"The Vulkra. I believe it's lost the scent of its prey."

Sora thought of all the people that lived within the city. "Well, that's good ... isn't it?"

"Vulkra are creatures born from the depths of *Hellas*. They cannot enter this world on their own. Only someone of great power is able to summon one."

The pendant pulsed against her throat. Sora curled her fingers around it. Tried to find reassurance in its touch. "Do you know who summoned it?"

"I have my suspicions," Rydal replied. "I just hope I'm wrong."

A howl sounded. Its echo came from everywhere at once. A familiarity ghosted across her mind. She closed her eyes. Saw the cobbled streets. Heard the crack of marble. She relived the shock in Ayla's eyes. Her chest squeezed tighter. "You said the Vulkra lost its prey." Rydal tensed but she pressed on. "What is it looking for?"

His throat worked as he swallowed. "I hope I'm wrong about that too."

## **Chapter Eleven**

Sora leaned back against a nearby tree, a faint unease bubbling in her gut. She hadn't asked Rydal to elaborate any further. Instead, she watched him scan their surroundings. The last hints of smoke had faded into the distance. Early morning pressed through the uppermost branches, waking the forest life hidden amongst the trees that fanned out above them.

Dead leaves and the tangles of underbrush crackled beneath his boots as Rydal began to pace. She read the tension in his face; the slight narrowness of his brows, the tightness in his shoulders, the muscles that coiled beneath his leathers even as he moved.

She blinked, realising she'd read the emotions in his posture without much thought. Somewhat startled, she tried to push the thought from her mind. It was clear that Rydal had expected Wyden – Jesper – to be already in position when he arrived.

Every so often, Rydal tilted his head, as if listening to something distant. He kept his expression carefully blank, though his eyes hinted at the danger he knew came with the pause in their travel.

In the silence, Sora tried to listen. A twig snapped somewhere in the underbrush as a critter scuttled past. Darka watched Rydal carefully. Her ears moved with the quiet sounds of the forest. Another twig snapped.

Sora pushed off the tree with the bottom of her foot. She'd barely taken a step when she caught a shadow of movement. She twisted, her eyes darting around.

*Nothing.*

Rydal watched her carefully as she turned. The forest stilled, the gentle rustle of leaves swaying in the breeze.

*I must have imagined it.*

She made to return to her spot against the tree when a dark figure appeared beside her. Sora yelped. Her right hand shot out in front of her, fingers curled into a fist.

Her knuckles collided with something solid. A loud *thud* sounded between them.

Sora started at the fingers that closed around her hand. Her heart roared and she froze at the sight of a familiar stony face. Oxygen poured into her lungs as recognition dawned on her mind. “Jesper,” she breathed.

At the sound of the name, Rydal started towards them, and Sora wondered why he hadn’t noticed Jesper’s approach. He noted the fingers wrapped around her raised fist and the dark red caked under his nails, pausing on the hand Jesper braced just inside his jacket. “How bad?” demanded Rydal.

“Barely a graze,” Jesper replied, sliding his hand out from beneath his jacket. Dried blood stained his fingers and covered most of his palm. “I left my side open when I blocked a Reaver. I didn’t notice the second one sneak closer. Only saw the movement as it lashed out.” He nodded to where the talon had injured him but didn’t reveal it. “A clean cut, only a few inches.”

“If you so much as wince,” Rydal warned, “I *will* examine your wound.”

In their silent standoff, Sora flexed her fingers. She felt the sting in her knuckles from where they made contact. Behind them Darka pawed the ground and snorted. “Um, guys,” Sora began, “I know we’re further from the city now, but I think we should keep moving before the Vulkra picks up on our scent.”

“Vulkra.” Jesper stilled. “Are you certain?”

“Yes,” replied Rydal.

“And what of Ayla?”

“She returned to the palace to reinforce the wards. I suspect she will reunite with our company at some point.”

Jesper seemed to accept the response and Sora tensed as his attention slid towards her. “What makes you think the Vulkra is tracking us?”

“Well,” she hesitated, “when I first arrived in your camp, it was only a few minutes later that it was attacked. And then at the palace. A few days pass and the city is attacked by these death hounds. I’m not sure I believe it was all coincidental.” A lone soldier amongst cobbled streets flashed across her vision. Blood splattered against the wall. “And all those people who—”

“No,” interrupted Rydal. “This is not your fault.

“But—”

“Reavers have plagued this world since before you arrived,” he explained. “They have been drawing closer to Surielle for a few weeks now. Attacking smaller cities along the border. We have been expecting an attack for some time. Do not put this on yourself, Sora.”

Sora let the pressure ease around her chest.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Jesper began, not sounding apologetic, “but I believe remaining here is not in our best interest. If the Vulkra is truly tracking us like you say, then we need to divert its attention before it catches our scent.”

“Divert its attention?” Sora murmured. “How are we supposed to do that?”

“We give the Vulkra a different target.”

\*\*\*

Sora listened to the splash of the river. Waves rippled out from the impact as Rydal tossed the saddle into the smooth flow of water. The bird engraved on the rear end of the saddle stared back at her as the current pulled it downstream.

Jesper tossed the remaining tack into the water. Although he tried to hide it, Sora noted the residual pain that lingered in his expression.

“Are you sure this will work?” Rydal asked.

“It’s the best chance we have of getting the Vulkra off our trail,” replied Jesper. “Unlike that creature, we will have to stop to rest at some point.” He glanced at Sora. “Since you seem

to believe the Vulkra is particularly interested in you and Rydal, Darka can lead your scents away from our destination.”

“Which is where exactly?” Sora asked.

“Arkosia.”

Rydal stilled. “You want us to go to Arkosia?”

“You know as well as any that a Vulkra summons is no easy feat.”

“I’m aware.” Rydal replied slowly. “It’s also widely known that the Kosha have long since held a dislike for our people. Do you really think crossing into their border unannounced and without a formal invitation will lead to anything other than hostility?”

“We don’t have much choice,” Jesper argued. “Commander Arquinn is a descendant of those who fought in the First War. If there is anyone who may know something about the Vulkra it will be him.”

As if in answer, an anguished howl roared.

“We need to do this now,” Rydal pressed, “if we remain here, it will catch our scent.”

Sora stepped up beside Darka and removed her jacket. She peered over the mare’s back and watched as Rydal removed his cloak. As if aware of her importance, Darka remained perfectly still as Sora ran her jacket across the mare. Sora started at the shoulder and slowly worked her way down Darka’s side until she reached her rump.

A few minutes passed in tense silence as they finished their work. Jesper stood a few paces back, scanning the forest for any sign of movement.

Sora finished transferring her scent, rubbing her jacket partway down the side of her back leg for good measure. Hidden beneath the canopy of trees, the wind held a slight chill. Sora shook out her jacket. Dirt mixed with horsehair wafted from it.

“Be careful,” Rydal whispered to the mare, stroking a hand down her face. He stepped back as she turned, easing into a steady canter as she headed back towards the city. “There is a

chance the Vulkra could happen upon our own trail.” He glanced at Jesper. “Did you manage to bring any supplies from the palace in your sudden retreat?”

Jesper leaned down with one arm and his fingers curled around the dark straps of a pack. He flicked his wrist and the bag arched through the air. Rydal snagged it with one hand and pulled open the fastening to peer inside. He took in its contents in mere seconds and nodded. He made to throw the pack, paused, and swung it onto his back instead.

Jesper frowned but didn’t comment.

“Not to state the obvious,” Sora began, “but I get the feeling no one in this Arkosia place will be overly happy to see us.”

“Indeed,” mused Jesper. “Vulkra were first summoned by the Lord Ruler during the First War. Since his defeat many millennia ago, no one has been able to summon a Vulkra to a Mortal Realm.”

“What does that have to do with Arkosia?”

“It’s home to the Kosha,” Rydal interrupted. “Their people are descendants of an ancient warrior race that fought in the First War alongside my ancestors and our allies. The Kosha are known for the knowledge they pass down to their kin.” He shook his head. “If there is any chance of learning the truth behind the Vulkra’s return or what it means for Aurelia, we must convince their Commander to grant us an audience.”

“I thought you said they were allies.”

Rydal winced, though he tried to hide it.

“What happened between your people?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jesper answered. “What’s done cannot be undone.”

A faint sadness lingered.

There was history between the Kosha and Surielle, but if there was hope they could help them... Sora steeled herself. “We should go to Arkosia.”

Both her companions turned to her in surprise.

She read the questions on their faces. “You believe they’ll have the answers behind the Vulkra summons. And since it seems to have a particular interest in me—” she trailed off but neither objected, “—maybe they might know something about me too.”

Rydal hesitated. “Are you sure about this?”

“No,” she admitted. “But in the last few days I have been shot with an arrow, bruised by your mother’s training sessions, chased through the city by Reavers, and then over the wall by Ayla, who is kind of terrifying when she is covered in black blood.” She glanced between them with a shrug. “How much worse could it get?”



## **Chapter Twelve**

Sora stared at the smooth flow of the river.

Flecks of white swirled in the current near the centre, a sharp contrast to the sapphire glow that seemed to emanate from the water. A few fish – blue and white scales streaked with orange – darted past below the surface as the current swept them further downstream. Despite the beauty of it all, a flicker of warning prodded at the edges of her mind.

She eyed the swirls of white amongst the blue, a reminder of the dangerous strength beneath. “Are you sure this will work?”

“If you want the Vulkra and its kin to lose our scent.”

Sora made a face at Jesper’s reply. Knees pulled closer towards his chest, he carefully tied ropes of vine around his boots. Unlike her own that ended just above her knee, Jesper wore plain black ones that ended mid-calf, allowing dark metallic knee guards to be strapped above the lip of the boot.

A *thwack* sounded to her left and, moments later, Rydal emerged from the trees with two sticks the length of his forearm. Sora would have thought they were bamboo if it weren’t for the silver marks carved into every inch of their surface.

He stopped beside Sora, dropped the two sticks beside the pack. He slid the straps over each bamboo object and used some of the same vine as Jesper to secure the pack in place. “Travelling by river will break our scent and make it harder for the Vulkra to find the new trail once we get out of the water,” he told Sora, hesitating before he added, “this river flows directly from the Kalama Mountains. They are known for their year-round ice peaks which means the water is very cold and the current is stronger than most. We shouldn’t stay in the water for more than ten minutes.”

Her mouth felt dry as she swallowed.

“There are dry clothes in the pack. We can change into them once we get out.” He gestured to the pack. “The cinder root will keep everything afloat, including ourselves.”

Sora stood near the edge of the river as Rydal eased into the water.

Apprehension lingered in Jesper’s usually indifferent expression as he followed. Lips pressed in a thin line, he submerged himself up to his chest and took hold of one end of the cinder root.

Sora waded into the water after them. Air whistled through her teeth. In the panic of a sudden attack on the city, she had simply slipped her boots and jacket over the clothing she’d worn to bed. Every nerve in her body protested as icy water seeped into the material. She staggered the rest of the way in. Her fingers brushed against the silver engravings as she latched onto the cinder root, the grooves rough against her skin.

Rydal pushed off the bank, sending them into the middle of the river. Even with the numbness that sent pins and needles through her body, she felt the strength of the current as it jerked them forward. Neither of the companions spoke as they were swept downstream.

An unease prodded at her mind. Every so often Sora found her attention shifting towards the forest. At one point, she thought she caught a shadow as it peered out from behind a tree at them, but by the time she twisted her body enough to look back, it was gone. She scanned the forest more frequently for a few minutes, but when nothing strange caught her attention, she tried to flex warmth back into her fingers instead.

Sora felt each minute crawl past as they were swept downstream. She clenched her jaw, trying to stop the chattering of her teeth as they approached a bend in the river. It veered off to the left and with the current towing them forward they took the corner a little hard. Her legs swung forward beneath the surface and Sora pulled herself closer to the root and tried to keep her head and shoulders above the water. Sora kept her attention solely on her attempt to remain afloat.

As the force of the turn pulled at her clothes, she was unable to stop herself as her body slid to the right. An *oomph* escaped her as she collided into the solid body at the other end of the root. She blinked up at the solid wall she had crashed into and found an equally surprised Rydal who glanced back at her with concern.

*Are you alright?*

She watched the question play across his face and forced herself to nod despite the growing numbness of her limbs. Pressed up against him, she felt the cold shivers ripple through his body even as he tried to suppress them.

Sora tried to pull herself further up the root. Jesper cursed under his breath, and she glanced up just in time to see the dip in the riverbed. Felt them drop over it. Panic gripped her as she stared out at the scene before them. Cerulean water shifted into a deep turquoise, its colour hidden beneath the clouds of white that crashed around them. Sora barely contained the alarm that lurched in her stomach as she took in the rapids. Each pool of white foamed as the current crashed into one another and changed directions.

She thought she heard Jesper curse again.

“Hold on,” someone shouted.

Sora pulled herself forward and clung to the cinder root. White water crashed around them. Sent a spray of icy droplets into her face. She squeezed her eyes shut. In the darkness behind her closed lids, time slowed down. The current pulled them forward in a smooth roll of motion and Sora felt a thrill of weightlessness as they brushed over the peak of the second drop and plunged into the rapids below.

Although the cinder root held most of their weight, the impact of their descent submerged Sora beneath the surface. Dark water closed in around her. The added chill wrapped her head in a blanket of ice and it throbbed in protest. In the depths of the water the current was

stronger. Sora barely processed the movement as the water tore her from the root and dragged her across the riverbed.

Rocks and forest debris bumped and jostled her as she was swept downstream. Her arms flailed wildly for a hold on something as she tried to decipher up from down. The current jerked her around like a human pinball. Her lungs started to burn and the pressure around her head made her thoughts hazy.

A burn surged through her lungs but she refused to take a breath. Instead, she focussed on kicking as she attempted to locate the surface. Her foot landed on something hard and her body jolted as she collided with it. Sora tried to angle her other leg in the same direction but the numbness that spread throughout her body made it harder to order her limbs around.

Sora felt the change in weight as her foot landed on the rock. The current pushed her closer and forced her to bend her knees to accommodate the dwindling space between them. She waited until her feet were braced firmly on the rock and pushed off with the last of her strength. Water rushed past her ears in an endless *whoosh* as she clawed for the surface.

The gasp of breath swept through her lungs. Her arms splashed around as she fought to stay above water, taking in great mouthfuls of air. Water sloshed across her tongue, and she choked out a cough. A few smaller bubbles of white pushed her around in the water. She inhaled, feeling the pressure squeeze around her lungs. A shiver worked its way through her body, a warning that she needed to get out of the river.

Sora scanned the riverbed, catching a glimpse of movement from the corner of her eye. *Adie*, the world floated around her mind. *H-how is this possible?* She tried to call out to him, but he wouldn't look at her. Instead, the husky moved with practiced ease across the underbrush. He weaved between trees in a steady lope. Pink tongue lolled out to one side.

She opened her mouth but a rush of water swept inside. A wave of exhaustion washed over her and she bobbed underwater. Despite the numbness, a faint sting crept along her limbs.

Sora fought desperately to stay above water, watching as Adie walked along a fallen tree. A few of the uppermost branches jutted over the side of the river, dangling off the bank to dip in the water below. Sora kicked harder. Occasionally her arms broke above the surface in a careless freestyle stroke, resisting the pull of unconsciousness.

She shifted closer, unprepared for the sudden pull of the current. Pressure closed around her head as she slipped underwater. A shadow pressed in against her vision and she threw her hand out, fingers brushing against sodden bark.

Limbs tangled in the branches, she hauled herself upright, until her face broke the surface. The current nearly ripped her from the branches but she refused to let go.

*I need to get out of the water.*

Involuntary tremors swept through her body.

*You can do this. Just take it one step at a time.*

Slowly, she peeled her fingers away from the bark and reached for a higher branch. Even the slightest movement felt like too much effort. Nails dug into the dry bark. Her breath came in short bursts, but she pushed harder. With painfully slow movements, Sora dragged herself up the fallen tree. As each movement pulled her further out of the water, the weight of her wet clothes weighed down her limbs.

Another stretch and she hauled herself onto the end of the branch, wiggling until she lay sprawled across the top. Bark pressed into her cheek. Her body ached. She started to let her eyes flutter closed when a whine pulled at the edges of her mind.

It sounded again. A little louder this time. Sora forced her eyes open, head entirely too heavy as she peered over her shoulder.

Adie stood at the end of the tree. Front paws on the root of the trunk, he peered up at her. Another whine slid from his mouth, but he didn't move. As she watched him, the roots

beneath his feet began to pop as they were pulled from the ground, her added weight at the end of the trunk uprooting the tree.

*Not now, she thought. Not before I make it to Adie. How did he even arrive in this world? Did he follow me from the apartment?*

Her inner voice continued to wander as she straddled the tree and inched towards the riverbank. Rigid from the cold, Sora moved between a shuffle and a crawl, careful not to jostle the tree. Her heart raced with each pop of a root, but her body refused to move any faster. One slip and she'd tumble back into the river. She doubted she would be able to pull herself out again. Sora didn't take a proper breath until her bottom slid off the tree and she landed on solid ground. Her knees buckled and she flopped onto the grass.

The conscious part of her mind wondered what had happened to Jesper and Rydal, but she could no longer lift her head to check. She hadn't noticed them when she had resurfaced and hoped that they were okay. Sora knew she had to get the heat back into her body, but she was just so tired. *Maybe I'll just close my eyes for a second, she told herself. Until I catch my breath.* Her eyes slid shut and despite the morning sun that settled against her skin, darkness swarmed her vision until there was nothing.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

“She’s over there.”

“Thank the Gods, she made it out of the water.”

“Is she alive?”

“Yes. Get the vial.”

The faint murmur of voices pulled at the edges of her mind. With each word, an ache began to push through her body until she felt the bite of pain deep in her bones. Knees brushed against her side, and then someone slid their hand under the back of her neck and gently propped up her head. A vial pressed against her mouth and warm liquid settled against her closed lips.

The heat sent a burst of pain across her skin. Her mouth parted in a gasp and the liquid ran across her tongue. It tasted of warm milk, watered down to a smooth liquid that left a lingering sweetness. As she swallowed, she felt the warmth slither down her throat and into her chest where it spread out like a flower in blossom.

Heat rippled under her skin. Slowly, it spiraled down her arms and legs until she felt the warmth in her toes. She wiggled them in her boots. After a few mouthfuls, the vial was pulled away. Each breath came easier. With each inhale, she no longer felt shards of glass rattling around her lungs. Soft light pressed through the gap in her lashes as she peeled them apart and blinked up at the sky. She started at the bright eyes that hovered above her.

“Thank the Gods,” Rydal breathed.

Sora eased upright. Legs stretched out before her, she stared at the dark legging material as it clung to her skin. She could feel the cold water absorbed into the fabric, but her body remained warm. “What is this?” she breathed.

“Ayla calls it *Kalium*.” Rydal explained. “It’s used to keep the body warm. The effects only last a few minutes, but it gives those affected a chance to change into something warmer or start a fire to reheat their bodies naturally.”

*Sure*, Sora thought, *because that makes sense*.

“So, what option are we going with?” she murmured.

It took both companions standing together for Sora to realise that they no longer wore the fighting leathers from the ambush. Rydal still wore black, but the material was different, finer. His long-sleeved shirt opened at the collar and the hem of it tucked into his pants which seemed to be coated with a special finish that gave off the appearance of leather. His sword remained strapped around his waist. Beside him, Jesper wore similar attire. Each knife strapped across his baldric shimmered in the sunlight. His shirt was a dark grey, rather than black.

Rydal eased open the pack and handed her a bundle of cloth. A flutter of sadness swirled in his expression but he blinked and it was gone. “There was not time to have something custom made for you. The clothes in your room seemed to fit well enough, so I’m sure these will be fine.” He cleared his throat. “You should change quickly. The *Kalium* will wear off soon and the after-effects while still in damp clothing can be rather unpleasant.” From the expression that crossed his face, she suspected he had first-hand experience in the matter. “We’ll wait down by the river while you change.”

Sora thanked him. The unnatural warmth still trickled through her body as she ducked behind one of the closest trees, pulling off her jacket first. She slipped out of her wet clothes and into the outfit provided. Dark grey fabric clung to her skin. Faint traces of the scaled armour ran along the top of her shoulders and down her arms. She slipped into the black pants and a cropped jacket, long enough to hide the baldric she re-strapped around her torso.

Adorned in her new attire, she let the warmth course through her body, welcoming the unpleasant tingle that chased away the numbness. Her companions sat with their backs to her,



no doubt for her privacy, as she approached. With each step that drew her closer, the quiet murmur of their voices drifted across the silence.

“The Kosha will not be inclined to accept our presence,” Jesper argued. “What makes you think *she* will make a difference?”

“You may not want to accept it, but you know what the prophecy speaks—”

“The prophecy was foretold millennia ago. Just because she killed a few Reavers with a lightspell? Any skilled Kosha can summon a mage light.”

“No mage light is capable of destroying them.”

Sora frowned at the topic of conversation.

*They're talking about me.*

A whisper of breath brushed against the shell of her ear.

*Stay away from him.*

Doubt crept into her mind. Curled tight until it settled in her gut. She let her boot land heavier than normal with her next step and Rydal glanced over his shoulder.

Frustration lingered in the crease between his brows. It seemed to soften at her approach. “You fit the Aurelian attire well.”

“Thank you,” she smiled.

A small fire burned on the ground between them. Blue flames flickered against the sunlight. It burned without wood and simply danced around in the grass. Although the flames touched the grass directly, they didn't spread.

Sora tried to wrap her head around it. She felt the warmth of the *Kalium* fade and a chill raised the hair along her arms. It lasted a few seconds before it began to fade and left Sora noticeably colder.

Rydal chuckled. “It's always a little strange when the effects first wear off.” Noticing her attention on the fire he added, “*Cerulea* burns hot enough that it will rid you of that.” He

motioned to the bundle of clothes in her arms. “It will also destroy the scent on them. It will make it harder for the Vulkra should it continue to track us.”

Since she had woken, Sora hadn't seen the scaled armour that Rydal had worn during the attack on the palace. She wondered if he had added his own clothing to the fire. A sadness tweaked in her chest at the loss of such beautiful armour. She knelt close to the blue flames, careful not to touch them. Her boots ended in a triangle over her kneecap. Its design provided added protection from the elements around her as she knelt.

Sora dropped the clothes onto the flames, listening to the pop and crackle as the material folded in on itself. She inhaled, surprised to find no hint of burning leather. Perhaps it was the *Cerulea* that kept the smell contained as the boots bubbled.

Jesper stood, reaching for the pack and swinging it over his shoulder. The rustle of his movements rose over the pop of clothing as it was torn apart by the strange blue flames.

\*\*\*

The sticky heat of the forest created an uncomfortable mugginess that clung to her skin. Sora wasn't sure how long they walked. A steady ache moved along the top of her thighs as she trampled through the underbrush. Fallen leaves coated the ground, masking roots as they tried to steal a glimpse of the world above the surface. More than once Sora hooked the toe of her boot under a root and ungracefully stumbled forward.

Jesper led them onward. Sora trailed after Rydal. They had spoken quietly at first, but their fast pace had left her breathless. She could no longer maintain a conversation and walk at the same time. Once every few hours they stopped. Rydal pointed out certain leaves with a curved dip in the centre that held water safe to drink.

They trekked far enough into the forest that when the light began to fade, she could no longer see the river. When her companions finally came to a stop, neither Rydal nor Jesper

seemed particularly out of breath. Sora collapsed back against a nearby tree and listened to their quiet murmurings.

Jesper tilted his head back and scanned the upper web of branches around him.

Rydal appeared faintly amused as he nodded and headed back towards Sora. “How’s your leg?” he asked when he was close enough for her to hear.

“It’s fine,” she admitted, embarrassed.

As the sunlight faded, a hidden root had caught her off guard. Her reaction had been slow enough that she hadn’t managed to steady herself. Instead, she landed sprawled in the dirt, leaves scattering in her wake. Rydal had pressed his lips together to keep from laughing at her and suggested that perhaps they should find a place to camp for the night.

They had walked for another half hour before Jesper finally stopped.

“It’s fine,” she repeated. Sora pushed away from the tree. As she stepped forward, a sudden exhaustion swept through her, and she winced.

“How long have you been feeling discomfort?”

“It’s nothing really,” she started but paused at his expression. “It might have started when I faceplanted in the dirt.”

“Soraya,” he murmured. “Why didn’t you say anything earlier?”

“It wasn’t that bad until now.”

He sighed, gesturing to her leg. “May I?”

“Uh, sure.”

Rydal knelt beside her. He scanned her leg for any obvious injury but when he found none, he ran his fingers along the back of her calf. Just above her ankle he pressed against a tender spot, and she winced. Rydal stopped instantly and carefully removed her boot for a closer look. “It’s just a strain,” he confirmed, sliding her foot back into the boot. “It should

ease after a night's rest." His mouth curled and he added, "you don't tend to roll over in your sleep, do you?"

\*\*\*

"There is no way this is happening." Sora stared up at the canopy of trees, watching as Jesper balanced in the uppermost branches of a tall tree. He secured the last of the supporting ropes and climbed back down.

"You're welcome to sleep on the forest floor if you'd prefer," he suggested. "I'm sure the night creatures would enjoy an easy meal."

Sora tried not to let his words affect her. She waited for him to look away before she scanned the treeline closest to her. Rydal pinned Jesper with a look, but he appeared completely unbothered, reaching for an object resting on the ground.

"Merridan."

Sora jumped at the sound of her surname and spun towards it. She barely had a second to register the large object as it hurtled towards her face. Her arms snapped up just in time to catch a large, rolled item that looked a lot like a sleeping bag. Upon closer inspection, she realised that it was made with a canvas-like material, secured together with rope.

"It's not going to bite you," Jesper added.

"What if I hadn't caught that?"

"Then I suspect it would have hit you in the face."

Sora wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or throw the object at his head.

Rydal appeared equally surprised at the banter that passed between them though he recovered quickly.

The sleeping bag turned out to be a hammock like the one Jesper secured in the nearby tree. "If this is your way of subtly telling me to hang it on my own," Sora began, "I don't think I'll be able to get into the tree, let alone secure it."

“It was not supposed to be subtle.”

He turned his back on her. Instead, he drew one of his knives and cut a stalk of cinder root from the small cluster around a tree. Two quick swipes of his knife left one end of the root in a point. With a glance at Rydal, he slipped into the trees and disappeared.

“Where’s he going?” Sora asked.

“You know,” Rydal started, a teasing tone to his voice. “My father may have assigned me with a personal guard, but that doesn’t mean I am not skilled myself.”

“What? Oh, I didn’t mean...”

“Do not worry yourself over it.” He picked up his own hammock. “Jesper likes to check the border of our camp. He’ll return shortly.” He nodded towards one of the nearby trees. “Perhaps we shall secure the remaining beddings while we wait.”

Sora glanced at the hammock already in the tree.

“It will be fine.”

She suddenly felt the warmth of him as he stepped up beside her. Sora kept her eyes on the trees but somehow she knew his eyes were on her.

“I won’t let you fall.”

\*\*\*

“Ouch.” Sora jerked back as another branch snapped, catching her in the face. She blinked hard against the involuntary tears that swarmed her eye. “I think this tree hates me.” She heard the faint snort of Rydal’s laughter and still half blinded, tried to glare in the direction of the sound.

“You’re supposed to move *with* the branches,” he called out. “Not *against* them.”

“I think it’s the branches that are against me.” Sora wiped the last of the rogue tears and focussed back on her task. Rydal had secured his hammock in a few minutes and was now perched in a nearby tree instructing her on how to secure her own hammock.

He'd refused to *actually* help her, claiming that even the children in Surielle knew how to set up 'bedding' as he called it. Sora had made a face at him in response and nearly fell out of the tree.

After multiple attempts to secure her hammock in place – one of which included climbing out of the tree to get the end of the rope after she had dropped it – Sora finally pulled the last coil of rope through its knot and pulled it tight.

Rydal eased out of the tree across from her, a wide grin plastered across his face.

Sora was about to ask him what was so funny when she reached the ground, but as she looked back at her work, understanding dawned on her.

Her hammock was positioned in between her companions, but as she glanced at it she realised one end had been secured to a lower branch. It created an angled hammock that Sora suspected she would slide right out of should she try to climb into it.

With a groan, she manoeuvred herself back into the tree.

By the time Jesper returned, Sora was still perched in the tree. The hammock was finally in line with the two beside it and she couldn't help but agree that it now blended almost perfectly into the foliage of trees around them.

Rydal had started a fire while she was in the tree.

No words were spoken as Jesper approached, but Sora thought she saw the faintest hint of a limp. Two rabbit-like creatures, with long bushy tails and curved ears, dangled from one side of the belt at Jesper's waist. As he reached the small fire, he loosed them from his belt and tossed one towards Rydal.

Part of Sora wished she had stayed in the tree as she watched them gut and skin the creatures with mild horror. She knew that it had to be done, but she had never actually seen it happen in front of her and the sight made her stomach churn.

“Sora,” called Rydal. “We need to bury the contents of these *Freida* in the ground a fair distance from the camp. It will lessen the scent and become harder for one of the night creatures to find it.” He pointed to a spot between two trees a few meters away. “Would you like to start it?”

Eager to distance herself from the food preparation, Sora wandered towards the edge of camp. She used her blade to cut a piece of cinder root and used the bamboo to loosen the soil around her chosen spot before she scooped out the dirt with her hands. She made sure to keep a wide berth when the innards were dropped into the hole and buried.

It was a little easier to look at the creatures as they cooked over the fire. When the *Freida* were cooked through, Rydal cut out a large piece of meat without any of the extremities and handed it to her. Jesper didn’t seem bothered in the slightest and ate his meal without a glance at her. Without any spices, the meat held a crisp smoky taste, although there was a hint of tanginess to each bite.

Streaks of pink and orange lined the sky as the sun dipped below the horizon. As the remnants of light began to fade, Rydal smothered the flames in dirt. The absence of heat from the fire left a chill that crept in around them.

Sora watched Jesper climb up one of the trees closest to his hammock.

At the top of the tree, he reached out for an upper branch and winced. His fingers ghosted over the top of his jacket, where his earlier injury had been, before he continued towards the rope that secured his hammock. She watched him carefully and wondered if perhaps he had lied about the extent of his injury.

“The night creatures are unable to climb,” Rydal explained. “It gives the rest of the forest dwellers a chance to escape them. Although, if anything *does* make it into your bedding, it will likely be a *Freida* curled up beside you for warmth.”

Sora glanced at him, panic lacing her expression.

“They’re harmless,” he assured her. “They mainly eat plants, but we tend to eat them when we travel in camps because there are so many of them.”

“What if I fall out of the hammock?”

“It is unlikely that you will.”

“Oh, just *unlikely*.”

Rydal grinned and carefully ignored her comment. He pointed to the best vantage point to get into the hammock. Sora eased back into the tree and watched him get into his own before she followed his movements, making it into her own hammock on the first try.

Her heart thundered in her chest when it swayed, and she barely moved until it stopped. Rydal peered over his hammock at her and she poked her tongue at him and lay back.

His soft laughter echoed across the trees.

Sora hoped she wouldn’t fall out of the tree as she settled into an uneasy sleep.



## **Chapter Fourteen**

Despite her worries, Sora stayed firmly inside the hammock. As morning pressed in through the leaves, she tried not to think about the crackle of leaves that stirred beneath her throughout the night. Jesper and Rydal seemed unbothered by the sounds and slept through the night, although Jesper kept a hand on his baldric.

Bleary-eyed and still hazy with sleep, Sora found it increasingly difficult to climb out of her hammock and down the tree with sleepy limbs. After Jesper checked the border, Rydal disappeared through the trees in search of the snares set in a few nearby trees.

Sora collected a few large sticks and helped Jesper make the fire. She carefully stacked them in a pyramid shape and stepped back. Jesper gathered a handful of moss and closed his eyes. After a moment, he set the moss down and Sora stared at the small flames that flickered across the faded green moss.

He kept his attention on the fire even as he flexed his hand, sending a tendril of fire weaving between his fingers. As the flame curled around his pinkie, he made a fist and the flame disappeared in a faint *whoosh* of air.

*What the hell just happened*, Sora wondered, hardly believing her eyes as Rydal strode back into the camp, two *Freida* dangling from his belt.

Sora quickly volunteered to dig the hole once they started skinning the creatures. She collected her cinder root shovel and made another hole not too distant from the first. As she loosened the soil she stared at her fingers, imagining the tendril of flame weaving between each knuckle. Jesper remained knelt over the fire, setting the creatures over the flame.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. She felt no hum of energy, nor did the flames within the fire seem to reach for him. Perhaps she'd only imagined it. A tiredness had still clouded her mind at the time. Besides, no one could *control* fire like that.

*It was just my imagination*, she told herself. *It must be.*

She kept an eye on Jesper as they packed up camp.

Although she caught no hint of the tendril of flame, her close attention picked up on the strain of his movements. A grimace tugged at his expression when he bent down to retrieve the pack. It wasn't that she was particularly wary of him, in fact she was still curious about why he gave her a baldric when he didn't appear overly thrilled at her presence.

A small tug nagged at the back of her mind, but she kept quiet. Instead, she helped put out the fire and roll up their bedding, admiring how the material packed into an object no larger than her forearm. As they readied to leave, Sora caught her companions sharing a glance.

In the density of the forest, surrounded by shades of green, Jesper's eyes seemed brighter as he glanced towards her.

Sora spoke before he could get a word out, a slight grumble in her tone. "Why do I get the feeling I'm not going to like whatever the two of you are discussing?"

\*\*\*

Sora landed with a thud in the dirt. Instead of a quick scramble back to her feet, she flopped backwards with a groan.

"It was not that hard," called Jesper. "Back on your feet."

Leaves scattered around her as she pried herself out of the dirt.

Beside her, movements blurred together as her companions went about their training. Rydal had underplayed his skill as he deflected each move with ease. Perhaps it was expected of him. As a prince, he likely couldn't show off his true skill, even in front of the elite.

Before their spar, Jesper had shown her some defensive techniques and made her practice. Apparently, sparring with Rydal didn't stop him from throwing an offensive move at her every so often. "You're meant to block," he would tell her as she glared up at him from the ground.

Sora brushed the dirt and leaves that clung to her pants and scowled. She hadn't managed to block a single attack.

Rydal sent her an apologetic glance, but Jesper picked up his attack, forcing Rydal back into a series of defensive manoeuvres. It was clear that Jesper held just as much skill as Rydal, perhaps more so, and had no reluctance at landing his attacks on the prince each time he caught an opening in his defence.

"A warm down spar," Jesper told her when they finished, gesturing between her and Rydal. His eyes drifted between her baldric and the dirt smeared across her cheek before he added, "unarmed combat."

Rydal sheathed his sword. His boots crunched against the leaves as he stepped closer. Apparently, while training in the middle of the forest, he liked to go without a shirt.

Sora tried not to look at the pale, white scar that ran the length of his torso. It reminded her of the ambush, of the star-shaped scar at her shoulder.

"You know," teased Rydal, "it's not that I don't like your admiration of me. But perhaps you might better deflect an attack if you watched something other than my body."

"Maybe you're the one distracted?"

Rydal grinned. He stepped diagonally to the left and raised his defence, motioning for Sora to do the same. "Remember the manoeuvres Jesper showed you?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll lead."

*What—*

Sora barely had time to process his words before he stepped forward and his fist shot towards her face. She managed to block his attack and was so shocked that it worked, she nearly missed his next move. His knuckles graze against her temple.

She stared at him and he grinned.

He aimed for her face again. Sora threw her arms up and knocked his attack aside with her forearm. Wind whistled past her ear, and she sidestepped. Again and again, Rydal came at her. Each time she managed to parry the attack. She knew his movements were carefully controlled. He hesitated for a fraction of a second before he threw a punch, as if ensuring she would be able to deflect his attack before he made it.

Although he held back, he certainly didn't go easy on her.

Sora concentrated on his movements. Tried to find a pattern in his technique, but he was fast. Each manoeuvre kept her on her toes. He stepped forward and tried to throw a left hook that curved around one side of her head. Sora stepped forward with the opposite leg and moved into his body as she turned to deflect the attack.

However, it wasn't the true attack he planned. Leaves crunched as Rydal darted forward, knocking her feet out from under her as he moved to make his final pin.

She knew Rydal wouldn't *really* hurt her and dropped her defensive manoeuvre, kicking out with her leg instead.

Rydal grunted in surprise and his leg buckled.

Sora scrambled to her feet, a wave of confidence filling her chest as she grinned, matching the competitiveness in his stance. Each time she deflected an attack, her confidence blossomed. Rydal aimed for her mid-section. She darted out of the way and kicked out towards his abdomen.

He anticipated her attack. His free hand wrapped around her ankle and he parried, stepping into the movement. Sora gasped as he kept hold of her boot and pulled her off balance. She tried to brace her knee against the side of his body. Tried to break his hold but before she could react, his other leg swept out and knocked her off balance.

Sora landed on the ground, hard. Her mind raced and she tried to kick out at him, but he pinned her leg with his knee. He leaned forward and one arm landed beside her head, the other hovering against her throat and pinned her in place.

There was no pressure behind it. All his weight leaned into the forearm braced beside her head. Sora yielded to their spar and Rydal removed his arm from her throat. “You have a natural instinct for combat,” he murmured.

“You let me deflect your attacks.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Sora opened her mouth to respond when a throat cleared behind them. Her blush spread across her cheeks onto the top of her ears. Rydal hadn’t moved, his bare torso pressed against her. The wide grin that broke out across his face told her he knew *exactly* where her thoughts had gone. She could’ve have sworn his movements were purposely slow as he lifted off her and stood. He offered her a hand up and pulled her to her feet.

Her breath remained uneven. *From the sparring*, she told herself.

Rydal seemed perfectly in tune with his breathing as he pulled a water pouch from the pack. Sora took it gratefully, trying to ignore his amusement as she downed a few mouthfuls. He showed her a few stretches to help ease her muscles while she caught her breath.

As she stood, hair prickled along her neck. She dared a glance over her shoulder and found Jesper glancing between them. After a moment, he pushed off the tree he’d braced against and strode forward. As he passed, she thought she caught a glimpse of warmth in his eyes but by the time she looked back it was gone.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

“You never talk about *Euriel*,” Rydal said one night.

Sora stared at the fire, listening to the crackle of wood chase away the silence. Jesper was still out on his nightly border patrol, leaving her and Rydal alone, the question thick in the air between them. “What is there to tell?”

“Do you not worry about your family?”

*You can't keep pushing people away.*

The slam of the door echoed in the back of her mind. She absently touched her necklace and laughed on a breath. It sounded bitter. “I have no family to worry about.”

Rydal remained quiet, silently offering her a moment to share.

“My mother died not long after my twenty-first birthday,” she continued, her voice slipping into a whisper, “I-I didn't cope with it well.”

“What happened?”

“I lost my job, my friends.” She thought of Alex.

*They won't keep trying forever.*

“After a while, my roommate was the only one who could tolerate me.”

“She must worry for you?” murmured Rydal.

“A few nights before everything happened and I ended up here, we got into an argument. She told me to stop pushing people away, that she wouldn't keep trying forever.” A shrug, “I didn't want her to keep trying. She told me if I really meant it, maybe I should move out. I said I would, and she left.”

Sora remembered staring at the front door. Her fingers closed around the handle. *Open it*, she'd told herself. *Tell her you don't mean it*. But her hand slid from the door, and she'd retrieved moving boxes from the cupboard, packing her things in spite.

“I made it look like I was moving out. I waited for her to come back and see it. Turned out she took a case at work that kept her busy for a few days. She was still gone when I was hit by light and ended up here.” She tried to ease a softness into her tone, but Rydal remained quiet, lost in his own thoughts.

“I had a sister,” he whispered. “*Little Shadow*, she used to call me.” He swallowed, eyes locked on the fire as he spoke, “I followed her everywhere. She even helped me hide from Master Atlas when I didn’t want to study.” He inhaled. “When the Reavers first arrived in Aurelia, she and a legion of elite travelled out to the border to assess the threat they posed to Surielle.”

Flames danced over a piece of wood. It popped and crackled. Rydal occupied himself with the fire. His eyes followed the flickers of orange and gold, their light illuminating one side of his face, reflecting in the gold of his eyes.

“She never made it home.”

Sora swallowed past the lump in her throat. A quiet pain lingered on his features. One she doubted many people ever saw. Unable to find the words, she shifted her leg, until her knee touched his. A silent comfort if he accepted it.

Rydal tensed. And then the weight of his leg pressed into hers. “Mother was never the same,” he whispered. “She trained me in combat instead of politics. A warrior instead of a prince. I grew to hate the formal dress, the deceptiveness of courtiers and eventually my mother banned them from the palace.”

His voice trailed off and silence settled in around them. Sora peered at him and for the first time saw a lonely boy, trained to hide his pain behind smiles, hone his anger into a weapon. A boy who needed a mother, not a general. Sora felt the pressure of his leg against hers and pushed back.

\*\*\*

Their routine stayed much the same as they travelled.

Each morning as the sun pressed in through the web of branches, Jesper and Rydal took turns sparring with Sora until she yielded. Neither she nor Rydal spoke of the words they'd shared in the dark. As the days passed, Rydal told her more about Aurelia.

Surielle and Arkosia were once bordering territories. When the alliance fell, a new city was built between them. Smaller cities appeared throughout Surielle, most on the outskirts of the territory. Each one protected by the King. A few other territories had pledged their alliance to the King and as his emissary, Samira visited them frequently. Arkosia, Rydal explained one afternoon, was located west of the palace.

Jesper pushed them further each day.

Sora was surprised to find that it became easier to keep up with their fast pace. By nightfall, her muscles ached less, and she was able to secure her hammock into a tree without her arms protesting at the movement.

A few days later, they walked out of the forest. Worn dirt trails stretched out in either direction. Although they would have been easier terrain, Jesper kept to the treeline.

Rydal agreed it would be easier if travellers didn't know of the prince's whereabouts. News of his movements would travel fast. They didn't want the Vulkra any closer on their trail.

As night stretched into the evening sky, Sora focussed on her feet, careful not to trip over any loose roots when she almost stumbled over Rydal who had crouched down in the treeline. She quickly dropped into a crouch beside him and scanned the trails for any sign of movement. In the distance, flamelight illuminated a cluster of buildings in a soft orange glow.

Sora blinked. It was a small village.

Crouched along the edge of the forest, she could only see a few houses tucked behind trees, each one carefully placed to shield the village from the nearby trails. Distracted by the sight of it all, she jumped at the sound of Jesper's voice.



“It should be me.”

“You are well known in this village. It is likely that you will be recognised.”

“What about the girl? She would not be recognised amongst these people.”

“Sora does not know where to go, or what we are after. It will be faster if it’s me.”

“But you’re the *prince*,” Sora cut in. “Surely, they would recognise you?”

“Not necessarily,” Rydal shrugged, “I happen to have particular skills that will allow me to remain undetected.”

*What is that supposed to mean?* she thought wildly.

Rydal followed her thoughts. Instead of elaborating, he grinned and winked. “Don’t worry about me, I’ll be right back.”

He pulled a cloak from the bag and fastened it around his shoulders. He tucked something into his pocket before he disappeared into the treeline. A few minutes later, a dark shadow crossed the dirt trails. A small wisp of blonde hair peeked out from beneath his hood.

Jesper shifted beside her. She barely caught the movement of the hammock he tossed at her. Sora glared at the back of his head as he trekked further into the forest. He paused beneath one of the taller trees and began setting up his bedding. She rolled her eyes, but with nothing else to do but wait, she picked her own tree and started to climb into its branches.

Sora fastened the last coil of rope and settled back in the tree. She kept an eye out for Rydal, wondering what he needed in the village that was important enough to risk detection. A *thud* echoed in the underbrush as Jesper landed on the ground. His landing seemed less graceful than usual, followed by a heavy breath. Sora peered down at his figure braced against a tree.

She crossed her ankles beneath a branch, keeping herself balanced, and leaned over the branch for a better vantage point.

Jesper braced one forearm against the tree, brow nearly pressed against it. His other arm wrapped around his torso as he held his side. He remained still for a moment. A hiss of breath sounded faintly over the murmur of wildlife as he straightened.

Sora thought back to when he arrived in the forest, the dried blood that coated his fingers. She quietly eased out of the tree. He looked up suddenly as she landed on the ground, grimacing at the movement.

“Your wound,” she started.

His eyes narrowed to slits.

“It’s worse than you’ve let on, isn’t it?” Hands raised palms up, Sora felt like she was about to approach a wounded animal. She tried to sound gentle as she spoke. “Will you let me check it? Rydal showed me how to make a poultice. You know I’ve needed it a few times ever since we started weapon training.”

Jesper remained tense, a guarded expression sliding over his face.

“If it’s still bothering you after almost a week of travelling, it’s likely infected.” She paused. “I know you haven’t treated it.”

“It’s fine.”

“You’re in pain. Let me help.”

Sora followed him as he headed closer to the treeline. He sought out a vantage point to await Rydal’s return. As he made to climb into the upper branches of a tree he lifted his arm above his head and flinched, his other arm snaking over his abdomen.

A hiss of curses left his mouth, though she didn’t understand them.

Sora pressed her own lips together and exhaled through her nose. A gentle approach seemed ineffective. Her voice was quiet, careful, as she asked, “what if something happens to Rydal and you are unable to help him?”

His eyes darkened at her words, emerald shifting to dark jade.

“Let me help you.”

For a moment, his scowl wavered. He glanced at the silver blade secured in her baldric, studying her for a long moment before his head dipped in acceptance.

Sora rummaged through the pack, unwilling to give him the chance to change his mind. She retrieved a vial of clear liquid to clean the wound and slipped deeper into the forest until she found what she was after. Burnt-orange leaves crackled amongst the underbrush. A web of branches, lined with seaweed green leaves, fanned out above her. A splash of yellow, red, and the occasional purplish brown sprinkled the forest in an array of colours.

Clusters of tiny black flowers hung amongst the orange leaves. From a distance, they looked like blackberries. She followed the weave of branches to the berry tree and ran her fingers over the bark. Covered in damp green moss, it was hard to make out the unusual silver petaled bark beneath. Long flax-like leaves flopped out towards her, their dark green underside masked by the burnt-orange that ran along the top.

She carefully slid her blade out of its scabbard and cut two of the outermost flax leaves, like Rydal had shown her after one of their training sessions. On her way back, she plucked a yellowed leaf the size of her hand from a tree and hurried to make the poultice.

Sora split the flax in half and scraped the gooey insides onto the large leaf, adding a few brightly coloured berries they had collected the day before and crushed them under a stone she'd plucked from the ground. Their vibrant green declared they were poisonous, but when blended correctly they created a pasty substance that could be applied to injuries like a salve.

When she finished, the poultice resembled the same lumpy paste she had smeared into her shoulder after the ambush. The scent of damp mown grass made her scrunch her nose as she picked up the leaf and carried it carefully towards her companion.

Jesper had settled on part of a fallen tree. Sora crouched in front of him and placed the paste on the ground beside her. She pulled the vial out of her pocket, sat back on her heels, and waited. For a moment, she thought Jesper had changed his mind.

With strained movements, he shrugged out of his jacket and reached for the hem of his shirt. Sora could already see the blood that had soaked through the material. She waited as he removed his shirt, unable to stop the sharp intake of breath at the extent of his injury.

The wound itself was a horizontal gash about the length of her palm. It ran across the left side of his abdomen, infection blackening the edges of the wound leaving it deep and painful. However, Sora couldn't stop her eyes from tracing the hundreds of white scars littering his entire body, each mark only a few centimetres in length.

They crisscrossed over his torso enough that they masked the dark skin beneath. Aside from his hands, neck and face, nothing had been left unscarred.

From the precision of each mark, the sharpness of the lines that varied from white to silver, Sora somehow knew that this had been done to him over a long period of time. Tension radiated off Jesper and Sora realised why he hadn't let on the extent of his injury.

He didn't want anyone to know.

Sora kept her face neutral, focussing on the gash across his abdomen. As each moment passed the faintest sliver of tension bled from his figure. He inhaled sharply when she poured the clear sterilising liquid over his injury. Her fingers traced over the cut as she started to apply the poultice. She blinked. The blackness that surrounded the wound wasn't part of the infection but rather blistered skin, as if whatever had done this had burned to the touch.

"A Reaver did this?" she mused.

"Hellfire."

Sora jumped at his reply, unaware she had voiced her question.

“A flame that burns in *Hellas*,” he elaborated. “A Reaver tail burns with its fire. But they can summon its flame into their talons when they attack. It burns cold.” Jesper winced as she pressed the poultice into the worst part of the wound. “Reavers summon hellfire when they want their victim to suffer. It’s an incredibly painful way to die.”

Jesper didn’t speak after that, and Sora remained quiet as she finished. As she secured the bandage in place, she stepped back and cleaned the poultice from her hands, wiping her blade and returning it to her scabbard. The scars across his body remained at the front of her mind. He had just pulled the shirt over the now bandaged wound when a soft whistle sounded through the trees.

Both Sora and Jesper glanced up as Rydal moved out of the treeline and into view. His attention lingered on Jesper, at the hint of a bandage he caught as he stepped into the clearing. His eyes darted between them with nothing but curious surprise. He strode closer, holding up three folded cloaks in his arms.

The material held a shimmer that blurred her vision the longer she looked at it. She blinked and it cleared, but each time she focussed on the material, a faint haze crept into her vision. “What *are* those?” she breathed.

“Nyten cloaks,” Rydal answered.

He passed one to each of them.

“They’ll help us with what we have to do next.” He didn’t elaborate and the longer she stared at him, the more excited he seemed to get.

“What are we getting ourselves into this time?”

## **Chapter Sixteen**

Sora crouched in the grass behind a small hill. Her fingers ran through the soft green blades, peppered with white flowers. Her mind whirled.

It had taken two days to reach the next village, although this one resembled a small town. Dirt trails shifted into quarried stone pathways, stretching between buildings as they disappeared throughout the city. In the distance, a large bridge arched over the river which rippled beneath. Hidden this far back, Sora could only make out the outline of those who stood guard at the bridge where Surielle met Arkosia.

*Laurentius*, Jesper had called it, *the bridge between worlds*.

Their plan settled in her mind. Each time she thought it over, the frown deepened on her face. Eyes still on the city, she whispered, “you know thievery is a crime, right?”

“I wouldn’t call it thievery, exactly,” Rydal began. “It’s rather we’re *collecting* something that is already stolen.”

“I don’t think that makes it better.”

“What if I told you that the people we are *collecting* from are part of the rebel group who ambushed us in the forest when you first arrived?”

“We’re stealing from the people who tried to kill you.”

“Yes. And I don’t doubt they won’t try again if they catch us.”

Sora felt her stomach churn. “Well, that’s not reassuring at all.”

As they waited for night to fall, Jesper went over the plan until Sora felt like it had been burned into her mind. Rydal assured her that she had trained enough with them over the last week that she would be able to take care of herself should the plan go sideways.

When the sun started to pinken the sky, Rydal adjusted his cloak.

Nyten cloaks, she had discovered, were made from a special material that creates a glamour, shielding the wearers’ identities. Anyone who glanced in their direction would see

the hint of a face, though it would remain hazy in their mind should they try to recall it. Unsurprisingly, the cloaks were incredibly difficult to come by and not many people advertised their ability to make such an item.

Sora fastened the cloak around her shoulders and pulled the hood over her head. As the hood draped over her brow, the world around her shimmered slightly and dimmed. She glanced at Rydal to ask if that was normal but found she could see his features perfectly beneath the cloak. She peered at Jesper and picked out his green eyes and stony features clearly, even with the shimmer caused by her own cloak.

*I thought you weren't supposed to see the wearer under the hood.*

Sora opened her mouth, prepared to tell them exactly that when Jesper glanced directly at her. There was a faint glassiness to his eyes, as if he wasn't entirely focussed on her. It took a moment before she realised that he could only see the haze of her features. Her mouth snapped shut and she hesitated.

*Why can I still see their faces beneath the cloak?*

Sora wanted to ask about it, but something kept her mouth shut. Both Jesper and Rydal were sure no one could see the reality beneath the cloak. Hesitant to voice her concern, she remained quiet instead.

“Right,” began Rydal, “Jesper, you go first. We'll follow shortly after.”

Sora watched him nod and disappear into the city.

“You have nothing to worry about,” Rydal murmured. A slight haze worked itself into his eyes as he tried to make out her features beneath the cloak. Unlike his struggle to see her, Sora could make out his expression clearly. “You're stronger than you believe, Sora. You need not worry.”

Sora blinked.

*Perhaps he can see my expression.*

“How did you—”

He smiled. “I may be unable to see your face. But that doesn’t mean I don’t know *you*.”

Sora barely had the chance to process his words before he turned back to the city.

“It’s time.”

\*\*\*

The tavern was dark. Lanterns cast a soft glow of flamelight over the crowd of patrons gathered for their evening of drinking. Her fingers trembled as she pulled back her hood. Boots heavy, she forced her legs to move towards the bar.

*No one knows your face.*

Seated in a makeshift booth along the far wall, Jesper struggled to fit in the chair. Only one leg fitted under the table. His larger frame forced barmaids to edge around him as they manoeuvred drinks between tables. He kept a hand on the top of his thigh, close enough to his knives without drawing attention. The hand on the table held a triangular token between his thumb and forefinger. He drummed the corner of it absently on the splintered wood.

A man sat beside him. Knuckles swollen with bruises as he dealt hexagon-shaped cards out to the players at the table. Although the dim light of the bar cast most of his face in shadow, a silvery scar stood out against his jet-black hair, parting the strands as it ran across the side of his head.

Across the tavern, Rydal slipped into a dark corner. His hood remained draped over his head, but Sora caught the faintest shimmer of his golden eyes as he scanned the room. He’d chosen the corner so he could keep his hood up.

This place tends to house people with ‘lesser morals’, he’d told her.

The barstools were made from a wood that resembled rusted metal. Coils of grey wire wrapped around each leg. Sora perched on one. The instant her forearms landed on the counter, the man behind the bar eyed her. His short-cropped hair revealed the tattoos inked down the



side of his face, each mark continuing down his neck and along his arm. The body of a snake wrapped around his bicep, its tail coiling just below his elbow. It seemed to move as he dried a tankard with a ragged towel. “What’re ye drinking?”

“Erm.” Sora kept her face blank, even as her chest constricted. *They hadn’t discussed drinks in their plan.* Further down the bar, tankards slammed against the counter as people downed them in one breath. Frothy liquid bubbled over the lip. Abandoned jugs left scattered along the bar, a silvery substance dribbling over the lip like leftover gravy. “Erm.”

The barkeep scowled. An old scar curved around his temple, deepening as his lip curled. He flicked the rag back, letting it hang from his shoulder. He’d barely opened his mouth when someone slid into the stool beside her.

“She’ll have my usual,” purred a voice. “On me.”

Sora inhaled at the sight of silvery white eyes watching her from beneath the hood of his cloak, shining like balls of moonlight in the darkened room.

*Stay away from him. He’s dangerous.*

A whisper of his voice echoed in her head. She tried to stand but a phantom weight settled on her shoulders. It forced her back into the chair.

“Now little bird, we don’t want to go making a scene.”

Sora huffed a laugh but there was no humour in it. “First you claim to save me. Now you threaten me. Perhaps you should make up your mind.”

The stranger paused. Head tilted, he watched her with a quiet intensity before his expression shifted. He looked positively delighted. “Well,” he purred, “*you* are just more exceptional every time I see you.”

Sora sought out her companions.

Jesper eyed his fellow players as he tucked something into his jacket.

Tense with annoyance, Rydal tried to wave off a barmaid as she shoved a tankard into his face.

“Tell me, little bird,” he hummed, unbothered by her companions. The faint scent of grape wine and leather drifted towards her as he pressed. “How is it you know who I am?”

“How? You tried to kill my friend. And then told me *he* was the dangerous one.”

“Oh, I remember the attack. But that is not of what I speak.”

Two tankards, filled with purple liquid and topped with froth, landed on the bar before them. The stranger ignored the barkeep, eyes locked on hers. “How do you know who I am,” he repeated, “when I wear a Nyten cloak?”

A weight tightened in her chest. Her eyes swept over the cloaked material, its shimmery thread a match to her own. “Why should I tell you anything?” she demanded. “I know nothing about you.”

“And what is it you would like to know?”

“How about why you keep showing up or what you want from me? You tell me I shouldn’t trust the prince, but honestly, why should I trust *you*?” She scoffed. “I know nothing about you. I don’t even know your name.”

“What would you *like* to call me?”

“There are several things I’d *like* to call you,” she snapped.

He chuckled. “You may call me, Nyx.”

“I *may* call you—.”

“Yes,” he interrupted. “And now that you *know* me, how is it you recognised me?”

Sora felt her heartbeat in her ears.

Across the tavern, Rydal scanned the room. Sora tried to catch his attention. His eyes reached her spot on the bar, brushing over her before he moved on.

*What the hell?*

A dark laugh broke through her array of thoughts. “Do you truly believe that *half-breed* you call a captain is the only one who can glamour?”

*Half-breed. Glamour.*

“What are you talking about?”

He laughed again. “Yet another thing they’ve kept from you. Are you sure you know them at all?” She tried to move, but the phantom weight grew claws that dug painfully into her shoulders. “Careful. The more you struggle—” he trailed off with a grin.

“What do you want from me?”

Sora flinched as Nyx ran the back of his fingers down her cheek. “Nothing,” he murmured. Metal scraped against wood as he dragged the tankard from the counter. He mimicked a ‘cheers’ gesture and grinned. “Until next time.” His voice dropped to a purr. “I do hope it will be just as memorable.”

Like a shadow, he disappeared into the crowd. She tried to follow his movements, but the claws dug harder into her shoulders, and she winced. Her eyes squeezed shut. When the phantom weight vanished, she glanced up, but he was gone.

The tankard filled with purple liquid remained on the bar in front of her. She pushed it back with one hand. Something clinked inside. Liquid sloshed over the lip followed by another *click*.

Near the other end of the tavern, the barkeep poured drinks for a group of rowdy patrons. Already intoxicated, they jostled the people around them. A few eyed the barmaids. Others roared with laughter as they tried to outdo one another in lewd songs.

Sora tuned them out. She shook the glass. *Click*. With a quick glance around her, she rolled up her sleeve and reached into the tankard. Liquid bubbled against her skin. Her fingers brushed against something and she caught it between her thumb and forefinger. Purple droplets sprinkled the counter.

She dropped the coin into her open hand. It almost covered the surface of her palm. It was thin and smooth around the edges. In its centre, three triangles overlapped one another in a continuous line. There was something strange about it. She jumped when a voice called out.

“You cheat!”

The scrape of a chair and a large man with stringy hair shot to his feet. Across from him, Jesper leaned back. He drummed his fingers on the table. “Perhaps you just lack the skill to win, even with a decent hand.”

Fury coloured the man’s face. He gripped the edge of the table. Wood splintered under his grip. “How *dare* you insult me, *half-breed*.”

A heavy silence flooded over the tavern. Even the faint laughter of barmaids vanished. Jesper didn’t outwardly react, but the fire that erupted in his eyes burned hot. A soft shimmer rippled around him. His features sharpened. Everything about his appearance was suddenly more defined. Fierce.

The man shrank back as Jesper rose to his full height. His features remained blank, but the vibrant green in his eyes glowed against the dimly lit room. Sora only saw the pain hidden beneath his anger. She thought of the pale scars that littered his body.

“Say that again.”

Rydal kept his posture idle as he leaned against the wall.

Sora nearly missed his hand as it moved towards his sword.

In the centre of the room, the man tried to melt into the crowd. “I–uhh.” He stumbled over his words, backing up another step.

Jesper matched him, keeping close. Threatened by the proximity, the man lashed out. Poised for an attack, Jesper moved faster than she could follow. He caught the punch in his fist. Bones popped under the force of his grip as he stopped the momentum. Jesper lashed out. Another crack sounded as he sent the man’s own fist back into his face.

He cried out and stumbled back. Blood dripped from his nose.

The patrons crowded Jesper. In their drunken states, people crashed into one another. Drinks sloshed and clattered to the ground, forgotten as roars erupted throughout the tavern.

Sora started as someone collided into the bar beside her. Blood dripped from the corner of his mouth. Eyes glassed with an intoxicated haze, he collapsed over the bar, mind set on one of the wine jugs. She barely saw the barkeep lock a hold on the man's arm. She lurched back as he was pulled over the counter, wincing at the sound of knuckles on flesh.

She slipped the coin into her pocket without thinking and yelped as the stool was pulled out from under her. The stool thief roared his triumph.

He turned his back on her and swung it at the man who stumbled towards him. The impact sent the man into a group of brawlers who turned and engaged. Wood splintered as the thief used his new stool as a makeshift weapon.

Sora scrambled out of the way, running for the door. She fumbled for the hood of her cloak and tried to pull it over her head when an elbow shot out. It caught her along the temple, the impact hard enough to make her eyes water. She stumbled and crashed into someone. Air was knocked from her lungs. She found herself pinned to the wall by an arm.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here?”

Sora tried to blink the water from her eyes, but the figure remained blurry.

“A pretty thing like you shouldn't be in a place like this.”

“Let go of me.”

“Oh, I don't think so.”

A hand ran lazily down her side. Sora forced herself to calm and tried to recall anything that Rydal had shown her about defensive manoeuvres. She lifted her leg and with her body braced against the wall, she kicked out at his kneecap. A bark of pain and the figure doubled over. Sora braced and swung. She made sure to turn her hips with the movement.

*Maximum impact*, she told herself.

Her knuckles collided with the side of his face. His features slackened and he crumpled on the floor. Panic churned in her stomach. She pulled the hood over her face. Without a second glance, she darted towards the door.

\*\*\*

Back pressed against the brick wall of a nearby building, Sora tried to breathe. She welcomed the sting of cold air as she waited. The soft tread of footsteps grew closer. Sora reached for her blade as a cloaked figure rounded the corner. Tension drained from her body, even before he removed his hood.

Rydal stopped in front of her. He eyed the hand on her blade. “Are you alright?”

She winced as she removed her own hood. “Just an elbow to the face,” she reassured him, “nothing bad.”

*There’s more*, she read in his face, *isn’t there*.

When she didn’t elaborate, he nodded his acceptance. “May I?” He gently touched the bruise that had begun to darken along her brow. When he removed his hand, blood stained the pads of his fingers.

“I didn’t realise I was bleeding.”

“The cut is small. It will heal.”

As he spoke, Jesper rounded the corner. Blood splatters covered his face. He wiped at them with the back of his hand, but they only smeared across his cheek.

“Did you get enough coin?” Rydal inquired. Jesper wiped the remaining blood from his face. His hand disappeared beneath his cloak as he retrieved the small pouch of coins. “Good. We should leave, before we draw any more attention.”

Sora followed her companions as they made their way towards the bridge.

*Half-breed*.

The word lingered in her mind as she stared at the back of his tall form. She thought back to the elongated canines that protruded from his upper jaw. She'd seen them once before, back at the camp when she'd first arrived. Her mind grasped at pieces as she tried to put them all together.

\*\*\*

*Laurentius* was not just the city, but an arched bridge that stretched over the waterscape. Great marble columns emerged from the water and formed archways that cast a reflection in the water below. From a distance, it created the illusion of two large circles.

Guards were stationed on either side of the bridge. Each wore silvery-white clothing and dark grey armour strapped across their chest, forearms, and shins. A matching grey scarf hung from their shoulders and protected their necks. Hand-carved bone crowns rested atop their brows. A spear tipped with an arrowhead rested on the dirt beside them.

At their approach, the guards shifted their stance. Their spears snapped together and formed a cross that blocked their path. "The toll must be paid if you seek passage into Arkosia."

Sora stared at the guard who had spoken. His accent was unlike anything she'd heard before. Each word was blunt, harsher than she expected. The gruff rumble of his voice hinted at his unfamiliar use of the common tongue.

Sora barely glimpsed the coin pouch passing between her companions as Rydal stepped past. He came to a stop in front of the closest guard. "We seek passage of three into Arkosia."

The guard weighed the pouch in his hand and dropped it on the ground beside him. It landed at his feet with a thud. Sora eyed it sceptically as the coins spilled out onto the dirt.

A large paw emerged from the shadows and swept over the pile of coins. The steel grey rock tucked against the side of the bridge moved and Sora quickly realised that it wasn't a rock at all. A giant cat uncurled from its spot in the dark. It stretched with a yowl. Slitted yellow eyes blinked up at her.

*Perhaps it's not a cat*, she told herself as it moved into the light.

Two horns curved out from either side of its head. It shifted, and Sora sucked in a breath as it swept the coins into a fur pouch beneath its stomach. The empty purse landed in front of the guard. With a yawn that revealed razor sharp teeth, the cat curled back into a ball and stilled.

Rydal carefully retrieved the purse and tucked it beneath his cloak.

There was a pause before the guards moved. The one who had spoken nodded. “Your toll has been accepted. Your passage begins at *Laurentius*.”

Sora kept her eyes on the guards as she eased past. Their bone crowns reflected the soft light that limned the bridge. Once they passed them, Sora let the breath spill from her lungs.

“Kosha guards aren’t overly fond of conversation,” Rydal whispered.

“No kidding.”

The bridge was longer than it appeared. Its chalky-white stones stretched further than Sora could see. An illusion of white and grey that drifted further into the distance the more she walked. From the city, the bridge stretched across the water and joined either bank, but from her place atop it, she could no longer see the sundried yellow grass, nor the vibrant greens that lined the river’s edge.

They passed no guards on the bridge. Despite the lack of movement, Sora couldn’t shake the prickle of unease that clung to the hairs along her neck. They were being watched. She eyed the carvings that lined the inside of the bridge walls. Strange creatures with great curved horns and long scaled tails.

Sora forced herself to stare at the marble stones ahead, watching as they grew further into the distance. She felt a relieved breath slip past her lips when they finally reached the twin marble peaks that marked the end of the bridge. Three guards lined either side. Small campfires outlined the silhouettes of more amongst the trees, should trouble arise.



A man stepped into the centre of the bridge. He raised a closed fist in a halting gesture. Two spears snapped down in front of them. Another clash sounded behind them as guards blocked their return path.

Boots tapped rhythmically against the marble as the man approached. He wore similar clothing to the guards – though his seemed cleaner – as if he had better things to do than stand at the end of a bridge. The bone crown on his head had two symbols engraved near his temple. Marble grey eyes reflected the flamelight from the closest lanterns, startling against his dark skin. His voice held the same throaty grumble, but it was smoother, more practiced.

“Now,” he crooned. “Why are three strangers dressed in Nyten cloaks crossing the *Laurentius* at this time of night?”

“We seek passage into Arkosia,” replied Rydal.

“Indeed. Many travellers have sought passage since the attack on Surielle.” As he spoke, the faint elation that lingered in his tone made Sora uncomfortable. “Dare I ask of the news you carry?”

“I believe the Royal Army saw to the safe passage of its people.”

“Ah, yes. I suppose with the death of their Crown Prince, many are grieving.”

Rydal froze. “You lie.”

His deathly calmness made Jesper tense.

A grin slid across the man’s face. “Perhaps.” A shrug. “Perhaps not. I only hear what I hear.” He stepped forward and silhouetted figures appeared from around the campfires. “Like the rumour of a certain *prince* and his visit to his aunt for supplies.” He eyed the cloak thoughtfully. “I must say, she does excellent work.”

“If you’ve touched her–”

“I’m well aware of the terms set in place by our ancestors, *Prince*.”

Sora started as an arm wrapped around her waist and before she could cry a warning, a knife pressed against her throat.

“Just as you are aware of ours.”

Both Rydal and Jesper reached for their blades. The knife pressed deeper against her neck and Sora inhaled as a warm trail of blood soaked into the collar of her shirt.

“The intrusion of royal blood into our lands is a crime against the terms formed after the fall of the Alliance.”

The guards stationed around them stepped forward, forcing her companions off the bridge. Soldiers moved to meet them, binding shackles around their wrists. Jesper snarled as they tried to remove his weapons, and someone kicked in the back of his knee. His leg buckled and he landed on the ground at a kneel. A sword pressed against his throat, keeping him still as they removed his weapons.

Knife at her throat, the guard led Sora forward until she stood before the man in charge. Rydal struggled against his shackles, trying to make his way towards Sora. A guard swung the end of his spear at him and the impact made him double over.

Sora clenched her teeth, muscles coiling, but their leader stepped closer. His fingers caught her by the jaw, and she flinched as he forced her to look at him. “I wouldn’t try that,” he warned. “Your loyalty to him will only get you killed.”

A flicker of emotion swept across his face. The commotion had jostled Sora’s necklace free. Its pendant rested against her chest. The man reached for the stone, but the moment he touched it, he hissed and jerked back.

The closest guard took care to drop the shackles into his open palms. A tinge of red darkened the man’s fingers. Faint white lines hinted at the approaching blisters already marked along his skin and he scowled. By his order, the knife remained at her throat until the shackles locked in place. He ignored the burns as he wrapped his fingers around the chain and yanked.

Sora stumbled forward.

His uninjured arm caught her around the jaw again. She winced at the pressure he applied between her ear and jawbone. “You are not as you seem, are you girl,” he mused, though his voice lacked any sign of emotion. “Take them,” he ordered. “I’m sure the Commander will be interested in their arrival.”

## **Chapter Seventeen**

The iron shackles dug painfully into her wrists. Sora grabbed part of the chain, trying to ease the pressure but it only pinched her fingers. Angry red marks encircled the skin beneath her restraints. They rubbed against the metal as she stumbled forward. The guards only had a few mounts and the others who accompanied them remained on foot.

Despite their slow pace, the guard leader eased his mount into a quicker stride that kept a noticeable pressure on her wrists. Sora tried to ignore the growing ache and instead tried to make sense of the strange creatures they rode.

A deer-like creature with an equine face. Large black antlers that grew out the top of their head, covered with gold symbols carved into the bone. Each mount varied in colours of sandy brown with lighter spots on their rump. Four long legs ended in hoofed feet that split into two toes. The strangest part of them was their long, scaled tails. Reptilian in appearance, though their scales were golden, they curled behind them in an arch that threatened to brush against their hind legs.

Dirt from the damp soil dried on her boots. The squelch of mud began to fade, replaced by yellowed grass and plumes of dust uprooted by their movements. Eventually, the grass shifted into a hay-like texture which blended into sandy grass plains that stretched ahead.

Beside her, Rydal stumbled behind another one of the creatures. His rider was less inclined for gentleness and seemed to be trying to wrench his arms out of their sockets. Although deepened marks, raw and painful, lined his own wrists, Rydal constantly glanced at her, as if assuring himself that she was alright. A crescent shaped bruise darkened the skin along his cheekbone. Every so often, he glanced at Jesper, and a quietly pained expression swept across his face.

Jesper fought against his chains endlessly. He snarled and bared his canines at them. At one point, he managed to break out of his shackles. Four guards wrestled him into a second

pair. He'd received a hard blow to the head. The impact split his brow and the guards had left the blood to run down the side of his face. Sora wanted to offer him comfort, even if it was just a quiet nod to tell him he wasn't alone, but he hadn't looked at her once. Instead, he snarled quietly behind the gag around his mouth.

They travelled almost a full day before the first peak of a settlement emerged in the distance. Sora blinked at the clusters of strange trees with silvery-white trunks and black leaves that fanned out above them. The city itself stretched into the distance. Large circular buildings were decorated with elements of the silver wood outlining each door and window. Black leaves woven into sheets of roofing draped over each hut.

A few huts along the outskirts of the city had been carved from stone. Cinder root lined the corners of each building and outlined their roofs, creating a textured finish. From a distance, the grooves on the cinder root reminded her of the markings carved into the antlers of the mounts. A few of the roofs slipped into shades of darker grey, perhaps faded from the sun. A silver city amongst the plainlands.

Sora remained quiet as the strange mount pulled her forward. Her feet stumbled against the quickened pace, but she kept her balance as the guards moved more swiftly towards the city. Boots splashed through a small stream along the border and Sora was grateful for her knee-high boots as the water reached the top of her calves.

On the other side of the stream, the patter of hooves rose, and a group of people rode towards them. They were dressed in similar attire though their armour was lighter in colour. Each of the new riders wore bone crowns, bows and quivers strapped across their backs. The last two who approached drew their bows but kept them against their thighs. Each angled their mount towards them in preparation for any hostility.

Whispers arose as the new arrivals caught sight of Sora and her companions shackled behind their riders. “*Calpain* Theron,” the young man at the head of the newcomers called. “You return before time called upon.”

Theron eased his mount forward, dragging Sora behind him.

She exhaled as her body lurched forward, glaring at the back of his head as he spoke. “The blood of *Lumiere* sought passage into Arkosia. An audience must be set before the Commander.”

“Commander Arquinn will hold no audience until the end of the Rite.”

At the mention of the Rite, Theron shifted atop his mount. “Tell the Commander the youngest Prince of Aurelia walks behind our mounts.”

The young man straightened. His eyes brushed over Rydal who stumbled forward behind his mount. “Commander Arquinn will be informed.” He nodded to one of the riders behind him. They turned and nudged their mount into a run as they headed towards the settlement. The young man glanced back at Sora. Curiosity flickered in his gaze.

“It will be the decision of the Commander,” Theron informed him.

Sora tried to interpret his reply as they waited. A few minutes later, the rider galloped back towards them. He stopped a few paces behind the young man and nodded. “Commander Arquinn will see you now.”

The journey into the city was more uncomfortable than Sora expected. When they reached the border of circular houses, Theron dismounted along with the two who held the shackles for Rydal and Jesper. The rest of the guards remained behind while the young man and three of his riders joined them.

The new riders stared and murmured amongst themselves as they walked towards the largest circular building in the centre of the settlement.

While the city emphasised the silvery-black tones of the trees that surrounded them, the space inside contrasted beautifully. Large woven banners hung from either side of the entrance, its pale silver fabric fluttering in the breeze. An outline of a deer with black antlers had been embroidered into the material. Each woven strand reflected the light. A gilded thread weaved amongst each antler, depicting the golden markings from their mounts.

In the centre of the room, a dais rose above the carved floor. Atop it sat a throne made from thousands of black leaves, each set in a glassy substance that allowed light to pass through until it reflected each leaf with a soft glow.

Theron tugged on the end of her chains, metal scraping along her raw skin. As she came to a stop, she glared at him from the corner of her eye before she glanced at the throne.

At the man who sat atop it.

He wore a leather chest plate, braces, and boots, each lined with a similar black glass to that of the throne. A pauldron made of darker leather was strapped across his left shoulder in three overlapping pieces. A bone crown circled his head, like the others she had seen, though his was larger and made from black bone. Engraved with the same markings woven into the banners, it highlighted the depthless black eyes that stared out at her from beneath the crown. Hair prickled along her skin.

“Well met, Commander Arquinn,” Theron spoke from beside her.

“Well met, *Calpain* Theron.” Sora blinked. She had expected a roughness to his accent like those at the bridge. Instead, his voice was smooth and dark. It took her a second to snap out of her surprise. “You were informed of the Rite at your arrival?”

“Yes, Commander.”

“And yet,” he began, “you have brought me an audience when our traditions forbid such things at this time.”

“Forgive me.” A rhythmic *clink* of chains rattled as Rydal was dragged before the dais. When he was close enough, the guard circled him and kicked in the back of his knee.

A quiet grunt left his lips as Rydal landed in a hard kneel.

“Forgive me, Commander. For I present you with the youngest Prince of Aurelia. And those who accompanied him.”

Depthless eyes shifted between her and Rydal. “*Those* who accompanied him?” he mused. “You have only brought me a girl.”

A muscle tightened in his jaw. “There was another. The half-breed male.”

“You have me disrupt an ancient tradition, yet you do not bring me all the prisoners.”

Theron gestured behind him and a few moments later, Jesper stumbled in behind an escort of four guards. Blood from his brow remained caked to his face, but he sported new bruises along his cheek and jaw. The faintest hint of canines poked against his bottom lip, though he remained silent as he met the blank stare of the Commander.

After a moment, the Commander turned his gaze to Rydal. “Prince of the Realm. You seek passage into our homelands, breaking the terms set in place by the ancestors before us. Such treason allows us to reclaim cities in your territory as our own.” Fingers flexed against the arms of the throne. “You’ve risked the lives of your people. Why?”

Even though he was forced to kneel before the throne, Rydal kept his chin high as he addressed the Commander. “A Vulkra was summoned into the Realm. It laid waste to the Capital of Surielle.”

Commander Arquinn shifted forward in his throne. “Impossible. Vulkra have not been summoned since the days of the Lord Ruler. Not since—”

“*Lumiere del Aurelia* has come to pass.” Rydal spoke quietly. Dark eyes narrowed at the interruption but when the Commander remained quiet, Rydal continued. “The Lord of



Kosha fought in the First War and witnessed the foretelling of the Prophecy. It is known that when a Commander is born, the ancient knowledge of their people is passed to them.”

The Commander did not speak, though he watched Rydal carefully. From her position behind him, Sora couldn't see whatever the Commander read in his expression.

Slowly, the Commander leaned back in his throne. Elbows on each arm, he steepled his fingers together in front of him. “Regardless of my thoughts on the matter, the Rite is our most sacred tradition, celebrated once every four *Sols*. It is known that we do not deal in matters of the throne while the Rite takes place.”

“So, you'd let people die?” Sora called into the silence of the room. Eyes locked on the Commander, she failed to notice the tension that coiled through Rydal. “Sentence them to a death you could prevent all because you refuse to speak of it during your trial.”

“You insult our greatest traditions,” the Commander started as he slowly rose from his throne. Even at a distance, his height seemed to tower over her. “You cross into our borders, filled with traitor blood and expect me to bow down before you.” He stopped so close to her, Sora could smell the leather of his armour with each breath. “You care little for the terms set in place by our ancestors. Terms I've held longer than you've been alive.” His fingers curled around the chain that hung from her shackles and pulled her forward, until she was a mere breath from him. “In what Realm do you think that earns you my favour?”

Sora was saved from a response when a murmur of voices sounded outside. Footsteps thudded against stone and a figure strode into the room.

Dressed in blueish-grey armour and a matching cloak that flowed over their shoulders, the figure stepped into the flamelight. Twin swords remained visible from beneath their cloak and the pommel of their great sword peered out over their shoulder. A dark hood cast shadows over their face, but the wisps of white hair that fell over her collarbone were unmistakable.

“Well met, Commander Arquinn.”

His depthless eyes narrowed. He stepped back and Sora exhaled at the new space left between them. “What concern does a *daegon* have for an appearance in my territory?”

“While your continuous distaste in my presence is no new feat,” Ayla replied, “I’m not heedless of your customs regarding the Rite. You are a strong people, one made of warriors. Surely, should the girl prove herself, she might earn the right to an audience with you before the festivities of the Rite.”

“A girl cannot prove herself in that time.”

“She will partake in the Rite.”

“What?” Sora breathed. Her quiet shock was drowned out by those around the room who burst into their own murmurs of disbelief.

Commander Arquinn stepped forward, coming to a halt before Ayla.

Sora wondered if he realised that he still held her chains as she was hauled forward. “You dare insult me with such beliefs,” he growled. “You’ve earned acceptance in my territory because of what you are, but do not think I will not withdraw that honour.”

Ayla raised her hands slightly, palms angled towards him. “I mean no dishonour. A girl may have arrived with those of royal blood, but she is of no such bloodline.”

*She is of no such bloodline.*

The words weren’t meant for her, yet somehow, they clawed deep talons into her mind. *No such bloodline.* She knew she wasn’t from Aurelia, but there were so many familiarities amongst the strangeness of this world. Despite her inability to return home, Sora had come to like this new place. She’d made friends, people she’d come to care about even in such a short time. Even the emotionless stone she called Jesper had grown on her, but perhaps she’d been wrong. She wasn’t truly of this world after all.

*No such bloodline, she thought. So, what does that make me?*

A rumble of laughter jolted her out of her thoughts. Her mind whirled as she tried to catch up with the conversation she'd drowned out. Ayla kept her gaze on the Commander, yet somehow, Sora knew the woman's attention was on her.

“Prove to me that your claim is true, and I will accept the terms.”

Sora felt her brows draw together at his words.

*What did I miss?*

Ayla approached her in two smooth strides.

Sora remained perfectly still as Ayla reached out with one pale hand and curled her fingers around the shackles on her left arm.

A soft *click* echoed through the silence. The shackles fell from her wrists and Sora didn't have time to react as Ayla caught her wrist, held it up in front of her and slid a knife across her open palm before she realised Ayla had drawn a weapon.

Sora hissed as the blade split her skin. The sting that lingered spread through her hand and into her fingers. Bright red blood pooled in her palm. Sora looked up at Ayla in horror, but the emotions had been wiped from her face. Instead, she pulled Sora by the wrist towards the Commander who ran a blade across his own hand.

Her bloodied palm was forced up towards him. In a panic, Sora tried to pull her hand away but the grip on her wrist was unyielding. She could do nothing but watch as the Commander brought his own palm down towards hers and pressed them together with a horrible squelch. The sensation was like squashing paint between her fingers. Sora tried not to think about the warmth of it against her skin.

“*Lumiere cahn de lore Amourie,*” he breathed.

Each word sounded familiar yet strange to her ears. As soon as the phrase left his mouth, a painful heat began to grow between their joined palms. The cut along her skin burned hot for

several seconds and then began to itch. Unable to do anything but stand there and endure it, Sora clenched her jaw and hoped it would end shortly.

A few seconds later, the pain faded along with the heat. Although the pain was gone, something heavy rested against her palm. Commander Arquinn slowly released his hand from hers and examined what remained in her palm.

The object was circular, no bigger than her thumb. It was deep crimson red with intricate lines that weaved around within the object. As Sora looked closer, she realised that it weaved into the shape of a tree. Its branches touched the outer circle. Each detail filled out the circle until it appeared to take the appearance of a small coin. Sora had a horrible feeling that whatever it was had been made with their joined blood.

Commander Arquinn pressed his lips together, his eyes centred on the object as he spoke. "Through my blood and that of the Commanders before me, a champion has been chosen to partake in the Rite." Displeasure echoed in his voice. "Do you accept?"

"No," Rydal called. "Ayla, please. She does not know what the trials entail."

"She does not have a choice. Not if she still wants to unearth the truths bound to her."

The words pulled at something in her mind. Almost as if they called to her.

*Unearth the truths.*

Sora had to know. She *needed* to understand.

"Yes," she breathed. "I accept."

## **Chapter Eighteen**

The delight that sparked behind the Commander's eyes as he dismissed them left an impression on her mind. Sora massaged the raw skin around her wrists. A purpled bruise began to form along the outer side of her wrist, where the bone was most prominent.

Theron guided them towards a circular hut, a few houses from the Commander. Its black-leaved roof and silver wood boards left room only for windows carved out of the wood. Stone foundations wrapped around the base and carved pillars lined either side of the entrance, forming an arch over the doorway. A snake tail curled around the column, winding upwards where it blended into the rump of an animal.

The deer-like mount had been poised rearing back, its antlers wrapped around the top of the pillar, nearly brushing the roof. If the light hit just right, it almost seemed to move.

With little patience, Theron shoved her forward.

“Was that really necessary?” she grumbled.

“You do not move quickly.”

Scowling, Sora stepped inside. The room was much the same. Picturesque woven hangings depicting strange creatures and warriors with swords made of blue steel lined the walls. Behind the large cot in the middle of the room, a painting had been centred on the wall. Long strokes of black and blue curled around like waves in the night sky. Silver stars peered out from beneath. Each caress of paint heightened the wildness trapped in the image.

She felt Theron's presence in the doorway. His lips curled with a sneer. “While the Commander may have accepted your presence in his lands, you still ride with those of traitor blood.” In the dimness of the room, his pale eyes glowed brighter against his dark skin. “While you hold the hint of a true bloodline, you will always be a traitor. And when the trials begin,” he hissed, “you will die like one.”

As he turned, sunlight cast his figure in a silhouette. His bone crown shimmered, and for the barest of moments, Sora stared at a man cast in shadows, topped with a silver halo.

*You hold the hint of a true bloodline?*

Sora had only moments to process his words before the clatter of shackles sounded from outside. Moments later, Rydal swept into the room, strands of golden hair falling around his face. Faded pink lines wrapped around his wrists, and from the corner of her eye she caught the hint of black ink tattooed across the inside of his wrist.

“What—”

“What were you thinking?” he interrupted. “Do you even know what the Kosha Rite entails? What you’ve agreed to?” His fingers lifted towards her face, towards the dark crimson coin that now rested between her brows.

“We needed to know about the Vulkra. About the reason I was sent here.”

“Soraya—”

“I need to know, Rydal. I need to know why this happened to me. I can’t keep wondering anymore.”

“But these trials...” His hand dropped away from her face and his fingers brushed against hers. “Not everyone survives them.”

“Is there another way?” she pressed, ignoring the unease that churned in her stomach. “One that would stop the Vulkra from tracking us—”

“It’s n—”

Her fingers caught his and she squeezed softly. “I know it’s been tracking us since Surielle. We’ve kept ahead of it for now, but you’re the *prince*. You can’t keep running for the rest of your life. Besides,” she smiled, “I’m stronger than you think.”

He shifted until his fingers laced through hers. Sora thought she felt the slightest tremor in his touch even as he tightened his grip. He reached up with his free hand. Brushed the back

of his fingers across her cheek and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “No,” he breathed, “you’re stronger.”

Sora inhaled. Felt the warmth seep into her cheeks.

“You’ve always been stronger than you know.”

“Well,” Jesper drawled from the doorway, “isn’t this intimate.” Arms crossed, he leaned against the archway and eyed them both. “I’d almost hate to interrupt.”

“That’s not true.”

“No,” Jesper glanced at Rydal, “it’s not.”

“Jes—”

“What *is* true,” he pressed on, eyes shifting to Sora, “is that your acceptance in this Rite was not your best idea.”

“So I’ve been told,” she muttered. “Would either of you care to explain why?”

“The Rite is made up of three trials,” Jesper answered. It was the most she’d ever heard him speak. “One each of the mind, the body and the spirit. The trials follow one after another, unfolding over a period of three days, each one more demanding than the last. Kosha use the trials as a rite of passage for their younglings. A way to prove themselves as a true warrior of Arkosia.”

“What’s the problem?”

“The Rite lasts three days,” Rydal explained. “Not only will you partake in the trials on your own, but we will be in one place for three days. Time which the Vulkra will use to catch our trail.”

“So,” she thought out her words. “So, you’re telling me that if I don’t partake in the trials, which get harder as they progress, we won’t learn about the Vulkra. Or why I was sent here. And if I *do* partake in the trials, the Vulkra will catch up to us?”

“It appears so,” Jesper murmured.

Rydal sent him a glare which he ignored.

Sora forced herself to breathe. She thought back to the night in her room on Earth and a wave of loneliness washed over her. With a jolt she realised that she hadn't felt alone since she arrived in Aurelia.

*Maybe I don't want to be alone after all.*

"Well then," she started, a sudden resolve in her tone, "let's hope I make it through the trials before the Vulkra finds us."

\*\*\*

That night, Sora and Rydal talked about the possibilities of each trial. Jesper supplied comments every now and then, but mostly he sat in the woven armchair beside the cot and kept his eyes on the door to the hut. Sora sat cross-legged at the end of the furs while Rydal leaned against the headboard, one leg propped up towards his chest, his arm draped across it.

As the sky darkened, Jesper lit the lanterns around the room.

"Trial of the Mind will affect you more so than the others," Rydal informed her. "It's the first trial, but it's designed to affect the mind in a way that will limit you in the next trial."

"How do you know all this?" Sora asked, "I thought you and the Kosha were on different ends of an alliance."

"It wasn't always like this. We were once one people, brought together by the First War. There was peace between us for a long time."

"What happened?"

"After the First War, there was a large population of those who believed in the values the Lord Ruler sought. When he was defeated, those who believed in his cause joined together. They formed their own kinsfolk, one not limited by the laws of our people."

*Kinsfolk.* Sora bit back a smile. Often, she forgot that Rydal was of another world, his speech was so like her own.



“The King at the time,” he continued, “did not realise how big the rebellion had become. Not until the night they attacked Arkosia. Kosha are among the most skilled warriors in Aurelia. It was their alliance and aid in the First War that enabled our ancestors to defeat the Lord Ruler. The rebels knew as such. It’s why they attacked them first.” Rydal took a breath and his eyes glazed over as he became lost in the memory. “They came in the night, attacked while they slept. Over half their people were killed. The Commander sent word to the King and asked for aid. It– It did not come.”

“The King didn’t help them?” Sora breathed.

“He believed that if a band of rebels could wipe out the best warriors in Aurelia, then what hope would his own be in such a battle. His decision broke the alliance between our people. The Kosha drew on the power of their ancestors and succeeded in battle. Any rebels who survived were executed.”

Sora let his words settle in her mind. The horror of the battle left her mouth dry, her face pale. “The Commander,” she started voice quiet, “he said there were terms put in place by your ancestors.”

“After the King broke the alliance with his actions, his eldest child visited the Commander. She asked him to let her prove that the actions of her father weren’t that of the people. She alone brought a truce between our people. Although we never became allies again, her courage allowed Surielle to live without threat of a war from Arkosia so long as we leave them to themselves.”

“What happened to the rebels?”

“They scattered throughout Aurelia. Now they call themselves the Lockéiin.”

“Perhaps there is still time to mend what was broken between your people,” she murmured, absently touching the star-shaped scar on her shoulder. “You cannot lose hope.”

Rydal looked at her then and smiled. “Perhaps there is hope after all.”

## **Chapter Nineteen**

Dawn had barely touched the black-leaved roof of their hut when the outdoor festivities roused Sora from her sleep. Soft rays of sunlight pressed in through the open window. They prodded at her closed eyes, and she stretched from her spot curled up at the end of the cot.

Her foot nudged Rydal who had drifted off half-slumped against the headboard.

Rydal sat up and winced at the stiffness of his muscles. Golden hair flopped over his face and he ran a hand through it, pushing the strands back. His bleary-eyed gaze sharpened as he heard the muffled noises from outside.

He slid off the bed and into his boots then grabbed the jacket on the back of the chair that he'd left out the night before. The inked mark across his wrist disappeared beneath his sleeve before Sora thought to ask.

She loosened the remainder of her braid, fingers fumbling as she tried to retie it. Normally, she was happy with a simple ponytail. But the new city reminded her of her time back in the palace; the elaborate braids Giiva had woven into her hair.

However, after a few attempts, Sora had only managed a few braids before the pieces fell apart in her hands.

“That’s quite the new look,” Rydal teased, plucking the strands from her hands. “At least everyone would recognise you.”

“I don’t think that’s the problem,” she sighed, letting him untangle her braid. “How am I meant to get through these trials? I wasn’t brought up in this world. I don’t know how to fight or how to act around certain people. And half the time I don’t even understand what anyone is talking about.”

“Well,” he replied quietly, fingers moving carefully as he parted two sections of her hair. “My mother has never taken someone on that wasn’t in her elite guard. And not many people would have picked up the combat techniques you have over the last week.” He worked

one of the braids around the right side of her head. “And not just anyone would have led a Reaver away from those in the stables.” He secured the braid and started on the next. “You’re not just anyone, Soraya.”

Sora reached for her necklace. Its stone was cold against her palm. The silver strands of metal dug into her palm. She closed her eyes and saw the image of a woman standing beside an old oak tree. A broad smile deepened the lines around her eyes. Something about the image pried at the edges of her mind, but the more she reached for it the further it slipped away.

A soft tug against her scalp pulled her from her thoughts as Rydal secured the last of her hair with a leather band. He stepped back and Sora ran her fingers along the braids. They each started on either side of her temple and wrapped around her head before they met. The braids joined into one that ran down the centre of her back, along the top of her loose hair.

Rydal had then tied all her hair in a ponytail with the leather band, showing off the braids and keeping the hair out of her face.

“How are you so good at that? You don’t even have enough hair to braid.”

“Would you believe me if I told you *Jesper* used to let me braid his hair?”

She laughed. “I would have loved to see that.”

Jesper remained absent for most of the morning. Although Rydal shrugged it off when she asked, Sora could tell it worried him. Instead, she busied herself with getting ready, grumbling at the effort it took to lace up her boots.

It wasn’t until late morning that Jesper swept back into the room, a fresh bruise blossoming across his jaw. He shook his head at Rydal’s questioning stare. “They have begun the preparations for the Rite,” he informed them.

Despite his lack of weapons, Sora caught the hint of a blade tucked into his boot. Somehow, she doubted it was the only weapon he’d acquired.

“*They have begun the preparations,*” she repeated. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” he replied. “That the first trial begins *today*.”

Sora had barely managed to process his words when someone approached their door. A child no more than nine stood in the archway. He wore dark grey. His bone crown stained red, its thin band wrapped around his brow and disappeared under his dark hair. “*Soraya kom Rite*,” he began. “The Commander will see you now.”

Words caught in her throat. Sora couldn’t look away from the bone crown that rested on his brow. The bloodied red near identical to the circular pendant that rested between her brows. She remembered the squelch of blood. Felt it slide through her fingers. A shiver ran down her spine, the pendant on her brow suddenly too heavy.

The boy watched her in silence. Her movements were stiff as she nodded. In return, the boy touched two fingers to the centre of his crown. He brought his fingers to his lips and closed his eyes. His head dipped with the movement. When Sora made no move forward, he added. “I am to bring you to him.”

Rydal stepped up behind her. “We are ready.” As he moved past her, his fingers curled around hers and squeezed reassuringly. The warmth of his fingers lingered. Sora glanced over her shoulder. She motioned under the bed with her eyes, to her blade she’d hidden there last night. Jesper kept his movements quick as he retrieved it and tucked the weapon inside his jacket.

She forced herself to breathe and let the boy lead them forward.

Outside, the atmosphere hummed with anticipation. Young men and women alike emerged from their homes, each led by a child with a bone crown stained black. Sora tried to steal a glance at the pendants pressed to their brows. They appeared darker than hers, but it was hard to tell from a distance.

Sora followed the boy through the twisted pathways until they stepped into the open. Triangular banners hung from the woven cords across the street, each marked with a black

handprint in its centre. Colours painted the streets in great spirals. Children laughed as they chased one another, following the swirls of patterns until they disappeared into the crowd. A small hand grasped the sleeve of her jacket and the boy with the red crown began to drag her forward.

People stopped and stared. A murmur rippled through the crowd. Sora could do nothing but watch as their expressions shifted from surprise to disbelief before they settled on distaste. She wished people would continue with their celebrations rather than look at her. Even those with circular pendants on their brows stopped to watch her as she passed. A few eyed her with curiosity. Most sneered.

*Maybe this wasn't a good idea after all.*

She let the boy guide her through the crowd. He weaved between bodies with an ease that Sora struggled to follow. She bumped and jostled her way through passers-by as she fought against the current of people.

In the distance, Sora caught a glimpse of a large stone. Made from smooth grey rock, its teardrop shape stretched towards the sky. Even from afar, she suspected it would be much taller up close. She didn't realise her feet had started to guide her in its direction until a firm yank at her sleeve pulled her out of her trance.

The boy slipped through streets that kept them out of the main crowd. A few passers-by took their turn to eye her but kept to themselves.

Upon their arrival outside the Commander's hut, the boy let go of her sleeve. He came to a stop in front of her and placed his hands behind his back. Sora caught the faint red stain on the pads of his fingers as he laced them together. Sora tried to push down the horror as she wondered if he had stained his crown with real blood.

*It's just paint, she told herself. It's just paint.*

Commander Arquinn remained atop his throne. His fingers drummed absently on the armrest. Near the steps that led onto the dais stood Ayla. She remained in the bluish-grey armour from her arrival. Her hair had been woven into four braids, two of which fell over either shoulder. Sunlight trickled in from a nearby window and cast a shimmer along her armour. It brought back images of the night the Reavers attacked the palace.

Stationed around the room at various intervals, guards stood tall and silent. Sora flexed her fingers as she came to a stop before the throne.

The boy knelt and dipped his head.

“Well met, Koa,” greeted the Commander.

Koa kept his head bowed as he spoke. “Etchim tom ella.”

Despite the deep throatiness of the language, it flowed beautifully across their tongues. Sora listened to the hard sounds in each syllable. A faint heat seeped into her skin as the blood-red pendant warmed between her brows. Breath caught in her throat, she listened to the words that translated directly into her mind. *“I have brought the girl.”*

Commander Arquinn replied in his native tongue, the words translating across her mind. *“Good. Leave us now. Begin your preparations for the first trial.”*

With a nod, Koa rose. Sora barely noticed as he left the room.

Her mind struggled to keep up with her thoughts as they fired off around her brain. The pendant remained warm, as if in anticipation. *How is this possible?* Stationed in the centre of the room, Sora suddenly felt the prickle of attention.

“*Calpain* Theron,” the Commander began. “Escort her companions from the room. I wish to speak with her alone.”

Rydal started to protest, but Theron, all too eager, intercepted the prince. He and the guards escorted her companions from the room.

“Fear not,” Commander Arquinn began once the quarters had been emptied. “They will offer their farewells at the First Stone.” He propped his elbow on the arm of his throne and touched his fingers to his mouth.

“What is it you really want, *Commander*?”

His mouth curled behind his fingers. “I wanted to speak with you,” he began, descending the dais and moving closer. “Shakar lok ko fieer.”

*“Because you can understand me.”*

As before, the words translated seamlessly into her mind. She tried not to outwardly react, but questions burned in her mind. She made the mistake of meeting his gaze.

*“You’re not like the others,”* he continued with a smile. *“Your spirit holds a fire I have not seen in many ages.”*

Sora tried to process his words, but his gaze had gone glossy, voice distant.

*“Not in many ages,”* he repeated. *“A fire like yours burns bright. But beneath, even the smallest of flames can spark a wildfire inside.”*

“Why does everyone feel the need to speak in riddles?”

A flicker of something ignited in his gaze. *“Your choices will define you, Soraya.”*

The glare she sent him pulled a laugh from his chest.

“Follow the truth within your heart,” he began, his voice shifted as he reverted to the common tongue, “and it will guide you through the Rite.”

“You’re aware that’s not helpful, right?”

Her voice came out a little harsher than she meant it, but the Commander smiled faintly. He tapped the pad of his finger against his temple. “Avor tom Kah.”

*Remember the Key.*

Sora scrunched up her brows. “Because *that* makes more sense.”

“Perhaps when the time comes, it will.”

## **Chapter Twenty**

*When the time comes. Remember the Key.*

Sora tried to decipher his words but came up blank. In her distraction, she almost walked into Koa who stood just outside as she stepped into the sunlight. Its warmth heated her skin, wrapping around her like a blanket until she pushed the thoughts from her mind.

A trickle of unease lingered as she followed Koa back along the pathways. He kept an eye on her as they walked. After a while, they rounded a small hut and stepped out into the plains beyond.

In the distance, the teardrop stone towered over the people gathered nearby. Excited chatter rippled through the crowd. People were dressed in bright colours and woven fabric, each outfit flowing in the breeze. From afar, their clothing blended into an inadvertent rainbow that reflected the morning sun. A second, smaller group gathered closer to the stone. Unlike their colourful spectators, they wore the dark grey clothing of the guards.

Sora faltered as they grew closer. It wasn't until Koa tugged on her sleeve that she realised her movements had come to a standstill. Her legs felt like lead as she inched forward.

At their approach, a group of people stepped forward to meet them.

Theron followed Rydal as he made his way towards her. Jesper walked behind them, flanked by two guards in full armour. He moved slowly, unrushed, and seemingly unbothered by his personal escort. Sora would have thought he didn't care at all if it weren't for the silent fire that burned in his gaze. They all came to a stop a few metres away. Theron halted his guards. Rydal closed the distance between them.

“Are you alright?”

“I'm fine.”

A lie. And they both knew it.



“Soraya,” he whispered, “while I do not fully understand the rituals regarding the Rite, I do know that each trial is made to test you. It is the way in which the Kosha prove their strength as a protector of their people.” His gaze flickered towards Koa. Although the boy had stepped back, there was no doubt he still listened. “Trial of the Mind goes first. It will seek out the truth that hurts you the most. It will show you the *whole* truth, even parts you might not know yourself.”

Sora let the words sink in as silence settled around them.

A ripple moved through the crowd and Commander Arquinn emerged, striding through the wave of people until he appeared before the teardrop stone. A long cloak, woven from black leaves, fell over his shoulders. It shimmered against the light, offering a little colour to the harsher tones of the feathers.

Theron smirked. He stepped up behind Rydal and clapped his hands across the top of his shoulders with more force than necessary, shoving him forward. His expression glowed with excitement. “*May Hellas take you,*” he murmured.

Sora made sure to keep her face blank as the words formed in her mind. She didn’t get a chance to respond before she was pulled away by Koa. She caught a glimpse of Jesper out of the corner of her eye. He offered her a nod, nothing more.

She knew Rydal watched her, long after she disappeared into the crowd.

Commander Arquinn stood in front of the stone as she arrived at the back of the small group. A few women stood out amongst the sea of men, their presence noticeably absent throughout those gathered. Each of the men and women wore a pendant like her own, though the coal-black mark stood out more obviously against their brow.

The young man closest to her wore charcoal warpaint. It emerged from beneath his pendant and ran above each brow before curving down his temple and face until it ended in a point on either side of his neck.

*“Young warriors,”* the Commander began.

His voice rose over the crowd, holding his people at attention with a few words. Sora listened carefully, focussing on the translation that echoed in her mind.

*“Today, you honour your house. Your ancestors. And all who have come before you. In acceptance of the totem you wear with pride, you have accepted the title earned of you in this Rite. For as you emerge, you are no longer a youngling, but a warrior who has earned their right to be known as one among us.”* Excited cheers rippled through the crowd. *“For today the Rite begins. In life and death. We honour you.”*

*“In life and death,”* everyone repeated. *“We honour you.”*

Commander Arquinn dipped his head. The featherlike black leaves woven into his cloak swept behind him. Everyone watched as he stepped up to the stone. He pressed two fingers to the centre of his bone crown. Moved them to rest on his lips. Slowly, he reached forward and placed his hand against the face of the stone.

A blue light emanated from the base. It flowed through each mark engraved into the stone as it spiralled upwards. As it reached the peak, a pulse of light rippled across the sky, mirrored by the pendant on Sora’s brow.

Commander Arquinn stepped back, and the crowd erupted into excited cheers. Sora watched as the first young man adorned with a pendant stepped towards the stone. He repeated the motion. Pressed his fingers to his brow, then lips. However, as he placed his palm against the stone, the light pulsed, brighter. Sora blinked and when she opened her eyes, the young man was gone.

Sora could only watch as one by one, those adorned with a pendant made their way towards the stone. Each repeated the movement. The light pulsed bright enough each time that she was unable to look directly at it. But each time, the next warrior disappeared. Sora was one of the last to approach. Her feet stayed rooted to the spot until Koa nudged her forward.

The Commander stood to her left as she stepped onto the grey glass podium where the stone rested. She didn't have time to process what it was she stood on as Commander Arquinn nodded. "We honour you," he spoke in the common tongue.

Sora glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and his lips quirked knowingly. Too nervous to look anywhere else, she stared at the stone. The light moved through it like a thrum of energy. Her fingers quivered as she pressed them against her pendant. She tried not to think about *how* it was made as she touched her lips.

She tuned out the world, ignoring the whispers that washed over the crowd. The Commander raised his hand. She saw none of it. Instead, she stared at the stone. Her palm pressed against its surface. It was smooth and warm under her hand. She felt the swell of energy as it moved beneath her fingers. The light pulsed from its peak.

She closed her eyes.

A weight pressed against her back. A gentle breeze rolled over her, raising the hairs along her arms. She moved her fingers. Felt the prickle of grass against her skin.

*What happened? D-did I pass out?*

Heat warmed her face.

*I can't believe I passed out in front of all those people.*

She barely wanted to open her eyes. Everything felt heavy as she blinked. A dark blue sky stared down at her, peppered with stars. In the cool silence, she stared up at the lone moon chasing away the darkness.

*A lone moon, she mused. I thought Aurelia had three.*

Sora sat up fast enough to make her head spin. She blinked away the black spots from her vision and glanced around the small yard. A single tree grew out from the corner of the surrounding grounds. One of its low hanging branches stretched out towards her. The rope swing hanging from it shifted in the breeze.

It took a moment for Sora to stand. She made her way towards the swing, noting the two letters engraved into the corner of the smooth wood.

*S.M.*

Sora ran her fingers over her own handwriting.

*What the—*

A porch light flickered on. Sora glanced up and her entire body froze. A wave of emotions slammed into her so suddenly it took her breath away. Helpless to do anything but stare, she watched on in silence as her mother walked up the driveway towards their old house.

She stopped outside the front door. A brown paper bag filled with groceries balanced in her left arm. She pinned her phone between her ear and shoulder before rummaging in her bag for the keys. “Honestly, sweetheart,” she laughed into the phone. “It’s like you don’t think I know you at all.”

Sora couldn’t breathe. She stood frozen in the yard, watching as a new memory played across her mind in vivid detail.

\*\*\*

“Honestly, sweetheart. It’s like you don’t think I know you at all.”

Soraya rolled her eyes, even if her mother couldn’t see it. Empty sketchbooks and loose pencils lay strewn across her desk. She half-heartedly cleared them into a pile in search of her ID card. “What do you mean *know* me,” she huffed. “You make it sound like being late is a trait of mine.”

“You do remember you were supposed to come over for dinner tonight.”

“I know. I know.” The end of a red lanyard peeked out from beneath a mountain of paperwork. Soraya grasped the end of it and pulled it free. She held it between her teeth as she gathered up a folder of papers. “Do I at least get points for remembering to invite Alex?”

“Considering she’s your roommate *and* colleague, I’m going to count that as a no.”

Soraya grumbled into the phone as she weaved through the precinct. She pulled out a few pages from her folder as she neared the photocopy room. “Okay, that’s fair. But this time, it really wasn’t my fault. They brought in an eyewitness for that big case everyone’s working on. They called me in to sketch the guy while it was still fresh.”

“I know. Alex already called me.”

“Alex—” she huffed. “So, you just let me ramble like that?”

Her mother laughed. “And miss a chance to listen to your attempt at a cover story.”

“Alright, I get it. Can we reschedule for tomorrow? I even promise to be on time.”

“Don’t worry. You might be late, but you always show up when it matters.”

Soraya relished in the warmth that blossomed in her chest. “Love you, Mum.”

“Love you too, sweetheart.”

The call ended and she tucked her phone into her pocket. Lifting the lid of the copier, she barely spared a glance at the image from her sketchpad. Not at the pale greys eyes that stared back at her.

\*\*\*

“Love you too, sweetheart.”

Back in the yard outside the house, Sora pushed the memory from her mind. She watched as the conversation played out from her mother’s perspective. Legs leaden with pain and grief, she trailed behind her mother like a ghost.

Just inside the door, her mother dropped the keys into a ceramic bowl. Sora reached out. “Mum.” Her fingers glided through her shoulder.

*This isn’t real.*

A desperate longing clawed at her heart. She thought back to the stone. The flash of blue light. Rydal’s words filtered through her mind. *“Trial of the Mind goes first. It will seek*

*out the truth that hurts you the most. It will show you the whole truth, even parts you might not know yourself.”*

She watched her mother walk down the hall. Her breath hitched.

*It will show you the whole truth.*

Dread seeped into her bones. She balled her hands into fists by her sides.

*What about this night was kept from me?*

The house was just as she remembered all cream walls and grey carpet. She followed the hall until she popped out in the opened space of the lounge. Her mother potted around the kitchen. The brown paper bag sat half empty on the bench.

A three-pane glass door framed the wall that led out to the backyard. Night had closed in around the house, smothering the light until only the glow from the kitchen remained.

Sora watched her reflection in the glass. It stared back. Slowly, the reflection moved, pressing a finger to its closed lips. Sora blinked, trying to wrap her mind around what just happened. She stared at the glass door and her reflection stared back, a confused expression plastered across her face.

The light above her flickered. Hair rose along her arms, and she rubbed them absently. A faint glimmer bounced off the glass. Her mother still wore her necklace. Its silver chain hung from her neck. In the centre of her chest, the black stone pulsed. The smoke trapped inside coiled and struck against its stone prison.

“No,” her mother whispered, pressing her palm over the stone. “She’s not ready.”

Shadows pressed in around the room. The carton of milk slipped from her hand. It smacked against the tiled floor, milk spilling out from its broken seal.

Sora watched her mother rush past. She followed her up the staircase and across the hall into the master bedroom. Her mother knelt before an antique chest at the end of her bed.

She pried it open and pulled an old box from inside. Old pictures peered out over the lip of the box as her mother removed the necklace and tucked it in amongst the photos.

Her fingers trembled as she closed the box. A blue glass lamp, with twisting crystals that spiralled up its body, rested on her side table. It shattered as her mother broke it against the edge. Splinters of glass rained down on the carpet. She plucked out one of the larger pieces and ran it across the inside of her arm. Blood pooled from the broken skin.

Two fingers pressed into the wound as her mother drew a symbol on the lid of the box. “Este la mor,” she whispered. The bloodied mark started to glow, until its three overlapping triangles shone a bright white against the darkness of the room. It disappeared a second later, leaving a faint mark in the lid.

She tucked it back into the antique chest. Scarlet tears ran down her forearm, splattering on the furniture like wet paint. Sora watched her, noting the white visible in her eyes.

*She’s afraid of something.*

Nails scraped against the old weatherboard outside the window.

“No,” her mother whispered. “It’s too soon.”

Wisps of shadow slithered along the windowsill. They slipped beneath the latch and pried it open. Bony fingers, tipped with black stained claws, sunk into either side of the frame. “*Layla Merridan*,” a voice hissed.

Sora felt the pendant pulse against her brow. A part of her knew she was only in a memory, one created by the Rite, and yet everything felt so real.

A figure, tall and shadowy, appeared in the window. Despite its twisted body and blackened skin, it could have been human once. Tangled black hair hung from its face. Hidden beneath the long strands, two horns spiralled up from either side of its head. Great shadowed wings tucked in close against its back as it manoeuvred through the window.

It landed in a hunched crouch. Its massive wings fanned out across its back.

“*Layla Merridan,*” it hissed again. Its sunken face held empty eye sockets. Three rows of teeth lined an open mouth. “*His Lord calls on you.*”

“His Lord can see *you* in Hell.”

Sora shielded her eyes as light exploded from her mother’s raised palm. She blinked a few times, until her vision cleared, and scrambled after her. A wave of nausea washed over Sora as she neared the living room. Memories crashed into her mind, forcing her to brace her hand against the wall as she teetered to one side.

*Red and blue lights flashed behind frosted glass. Heads bowed as she opened the door.*

*“Soraya Merridan ... we are terribly sorry ... there was a fire—”*

A kitchen knife clattered against tiles.

Sora started as the living room shifted back into focus and she looked on in horror at the scene unfolding before her.

The creature towered over her mother. A low growl rumbled in its chest.

Layla swung at the creature, but it caught her wrist in a clawed hand, pinning her to the wall with a sickening crunch. “*The Lord calls—*” it hissed. “*And you will answer him.*”

“Mum!” Sora staggered forward, colliding into an invisible wall. Her palms slammed against it a few times, but it wouldn’t budge. She pressed herself against the barrier, watching helplessly from a few steps away.

*“Where is the child foretold by the prophecy?”*

“Gone.”

*“Impossible. The prophecy speaks of a child. One worthy of a place beside him. One who might shift the forthcoming war in his favour.”*

“Time moves differently here. Surely, *he* knows that.”



Its growl deepened. Shadows danced wildly against its skin. As it moved closer, those large, shadowed wings flared out behind it. Even from a distance, Sora saw the rows of fanged teeth as its mouth curled back in a snarl. Rancid breath bathed the room.

*“You will give his Lord what he demands of you.”*

“I will never give him anything.”

The creature curled back with a snarl. Shadows rippled around it, bleeding into the ground until the room filled with darkness.

Sora felt the pendant glow against her brow, casting a red haze over her vision. It chased away the shadows, allowing her to make out the outline of those before her. She inhaled, air burning as it slithered down her throat. Burnt matches and gasoline, lined with something else that blistered her lungs with each breath. Sora choked on the smell. She tucked her nose and mouth under the collar of her shirt and tried to inhale a clean breath.

A phantom wind rustled her clothes.

*“Layla Merridan,”* called a new voice. It seemed darker, haunted as it echoed through the darkened room. A distant murmur distorted part of its voice, as if it were speaking through a wall. *“You’ve caused quite the delay with your antics.”* Despite the faint murmur, the voice was smooth, each word spoken with familiarity. *“I know you’ve taken what belongs to me. And now, my Vulkra has come to collect it.”*

Sora felt the air rush from her lungs.

*Vulkra.*

It dropped into a crouch, wings flaring as it snarled.

Layla matched its posture. Light emanated from her palm, stretching out until it formed a blade of light. It lasted for a few seconds as she lashed forward. The Vulkra reared back, one of its clawed hands landing with a *thud* on the floor. Black blood oozed from its hand, bubbling with a hiss as it painted the carpet in the foul substance.

Sora felt her stomach churn.

The Vulkra cradled its hand against its body, circling her mother with warning snarls that kept her pinned between the creature and the wall. Shadows bled from its bloodied arm, and Sora watched on with silent horror as a clawed hand sprouted from the stump at its wrist.

Mouth open, it snapped three rows of teeth at her.

“Mum,” breathed Sora. Her fists slammed against the barrier, but it wouldn’t budge. Trapped and helpless, Sora could only watch.

The Vulkra coiled back, hissed, and lunged.

Layla dived out of the way, narrowly missing the claws that embedded themselves in the wall. Its blackened talons ripped free, shredding wallpaper in its wake. Its wings shifted as it spun, empty eyes searching after its prey.

Across the room, Layla reached for the object above the fireplace.

*A collector of antiques*, her mother had always told her.

Glass sprinkled across the carpet and Layla pulled the katana from its sheath inside the shattered display case.

For as long as Sora could remember, her mother had always collected strange objects. She thought back to the many hours she’d spent wandering through museums as her mother studied a new piece. She hadn’t thought anything of it. Perhaps she should have.

Layla widened her stance, her eyes following the Vulkra with a kind of focus that reminded Sora of Rydal.

*Had she known the Vulkra would come for her?* Betrayal cut a path deep into Sora’s chest as she stared at her mother. Her fingers slid from the barrier and she sat back on her heels. Memories of her time spent in Aurelia flashed across her mind. *Did she know this would happen to me?* She barely noticed her mother deflect blow after blow.

Something cracked open in her chest.

*Lies. Lies. Lies.*

The katana clattered across the room. Layla pressed back against the wall, breath coming in uneven airfalls. A small trickle of blood pooled around the corner of her mouth.

*“You will give the Lord what he demands of you.”*

“No, I don’t think I will.”

The Vulkra stalked forward. A few photos hung from the wall at odd angles, others lay scattered across the ground, their frames in splinters.

*“You will not deny him this.”*

Inching closer, the Vulkra tucked its wings against its back and paused. A clawed finger latched onto the corner of a broken frame.

Sora recognised the image taken not long after her sixth birthday. Her mother had built her a rope swing and hung it from the tree in their yard. It was early morning when Sora had spotted it out the kitchen window. She’d woken her mother and begged her to come outside and push her on it. Feet outstretched towards the camera. Head tilted back. The absolute bliss captured in her bright eyes and toothy grin radiated from the image.

“Wait,” her mother breathed.

*“A child called by fate. How it will please his Lord.”*

“His Lord can never know. I will not let you.”

Three rows of teeth snarled. *“Then you will die.”*

Sora lurched up. Her palms slammed against the barrier as she nearly barrelled into it. A cry left her lips as the creature lunged. Her heart squeezed painfully in her chest. Her mother barely leapt out of the way.

Sora scrambled after her.

The barrier seemed to form a bubble around the scene.

One hand pressed against the invisible glass, Sora followed the outline of the barrier, her movements swift as she tracked the fight. Tendrils of shadow splintered furniture as they lashed out after her mother.

“Mum!”

Another tendril.

Layla leapt out of the way but wasn't fast enough to stop the wisp of shadow that lashed across the back of her calves. It burnt through the material of her pants and cut deep into her skin. The hot, rancid smell of burnt flesh filled the room. Unable to stop herself, Sora doubled over and emptied the contents of her stomach onto the floor.

Layla inched away from the creature, even as it advanced on her.

Jaw unhinged, it poised for a final attack. Her mother sprawled her fingers out behind her, latching onto the severed hand that lay forgotten on the carpet. The Vulkra struck, talons slicing through flesh and bone.

Sora barely heard the sickening crunch over her own screaming. She clawed against the barrier until her knuckles reddened with bruises. A roar tore through the air. Sora clapped her hands over her ears, vision blurred with tears.

The Vulkra ripped its claws back. They dripped with blood as it stumbled back. Its wings flared open, and it clawed at its face, at the talons from the severed hand embedded in its eye. It landed on the ground with a thud that shook the floor, its body spasming as shadows spilled from its figure. They poured into the ground, leaving an outline of the creature as it shuddered and stilled.

Dead.

The weight of the barrier vanished. Tears ran down her cheeks as she crawled towards her mother slumped against the wall.

“Mum,” she cried.

Sora cradled her head in her lap. Held her tight against her chest and wept.

*They said it was a fire.*

Sora replayed the conversation over in her mind. The crack in her chest split deeper.

*It was a fire.*

She barely felt the heat in the room. It wasn't until a layer of sweat beaded her brow, that she opened her eyes at all. Felt the stiffness of dried tears on her cheek.

The blackened outline that surrounded the Vulkra soaked further into the carpet. An orange and gold light pulsed faintly in its chest.

Sweat ran down her temple. She sucked in a breath and hot air, mixed with the sour stench of rotten flesh, slid down her throat.

*They said it was a fire—*

The Vulkra exploded from within.

Sora cried out as the force of it ripped her mother from her arms. Even the house groaned as a wildfire erupted from the rotting remains. Sora crashed into the barstools like they were bowling pins. Heat washed over her in waves, brushing up against her skin.

Although she felt the heat, it didn't burn.

*It's only a memory,* she told herself.

Sora pushed through the pain, easing herself upright. Fire crackled around her. Its tendrils crept up the walls. In the centre of the living room, charred carpet outlined where the Vulkra had been incinerated in the explosion. Her mother was gone too.

Black smoke thickened as she dragged herself to her feet.

*I need to get out of here.*

She choked on a breath, sending a swirl of ashes up in its wake.

Everything hurt.

The remaining fragments of the photo frame lay in pieces across the carpet.

*Did all this happen because of me—*

She didn't have time to brace herself as another explosion shattered the windows. Flames curled out around the exterior framework. Sora closed her eyes as the force knocked her off her feet. She landed on the ground outside and rolled. She propped herself up on hands and knees, coughing splutters as her body tried to expel the smoke from her lungs.

A soft breeze lapped against her heated skin. Sora sat back on her knees and rolled the ache from her shoulders. She wiped her brow with the back of her sleeve.

Eyes heavy, she pried them open and gasped.

Although the faint scent of smoke still lingered, the expanse of land that stretched out before her could not have been more different. She barely took in the three moons, chased away by the rising sun. Instead, she found herself staring out at the cluster of mountains that stretched out around her.

*How is this possible?*

Heaviness pulled at her heart as she climbed to her feet, peering out at the valley below. A canopy of trees painted the forest in shades of green, orange, and yellow. A shimmer of blue snaked between trees. Every so often, an assortment of rocks lined with moss peeked out amongst the green.

Across the valley, sunlight bounced off something poised on the peak of a distant mountain. Sora strained to make out the object. Sunlight reflected off the stone, casting its teardrop shape in light. From such a distance, she was unable to see the engravings that adorned it, but the teardrop shape was unmistakable.

Sora tilted her head back. She watched the sun through shielded eyes, its crescent companion tucked into its side as it crested the sky. It had barely risen over the peak of the lowest mountain.

*It's early morning, she thought. The sun was well into the sky when the Rite began.*

She forced back the lingering pain in her chest, even as it fought back.

*Three trials over three days.*

Fragments of her conversation with Jesper and Rydal brushed against her mind.

*Each more demanding as you advance.*

She felt the heat against her face. Blood between her fingers.

“Mum,” she whispered.

A tear slid down her cheek. She wiped it with the back of her hand.

“It’s just the Rite.”

*There was a fire—*

Sora shook her head, pressing the palms of her hands into her closed eyelids.

*Lies. Lies. Lies.*

“Stop,” she told herself. “Breathe. Focus.” She pulled the necklace from beneath her shirt, curling her fingers around the stone. She squeezed until it dug painfully into her palm. “Breathe. Focus.” She repeated the words over and over. Kept her eyes closed until she felt more grounded. Her eyes fluttered open, just enough that she caught the sliver of movement from the corner of her vision.

A young man charged towards her. An old rope bridge creaked beneath each footfall. Sora managed to brace herself before the weight of him slammed into her.

Alarm fuelled her adrenaline as they crashed into the ground. It left Sora painfully aware of the flattened mountain peak. She tried not to think of the long drop into the valley below with each struggle beneath her attacker.

He remained close enough that Sora could make out the obsidian pendant between his brows. She pushed against his shoulders. Her boot hooked over the back of his leg, and she tried to use the momentum to throw him off balance.

The young man countered the attack.

Although she tucked her body into the roll, she landed hard. A few loose rocks scattered in her wake. Shaper stones grazed her palms. Not enough to draw blood.

Sora scrambled to her feet, barely on her knees when he charged again. The momentum of his attack sent her sprawling across the ground. Rocks pressed into her shoulder even through her jacket, and she winced. The sudden drop in her stomach warned her she'd landed a little too close to the edge.

Arms wrapped around her from behind. The young man kept her arms pinned against her sides as he pulled her against him, limiting her movement.

"It wasn't my fault. I didn't mean for it to happen."

A hint of desperation lingered in his voice. It reminded her of the dazed tone she'd used outside her childhood home. Perhaps he remained caught in his own memory. Helpless against his attack from behind, Sora struggled as he forced her closer to the edge of the cliff.

"It wasn't my fault," he murmured again, his breath hot against her cheek. "I didn't mean for it to happen."

"No," Sora breathed. Each step dragged her across the rocky surface. Clouds of dust billowed around her feet as she fought against him. He continued to murmur the same words over and over. "Wait," she tried but he barely seemed to register her words.

Fear cast a mist across her mind. Unable to think, she dropped her weight. Startled at the sudden change, Sora tipped him over her shoulder. He landed on the cliff edge before her with a *thud*, but she'd already begun to scramble back.

Sora cried out as his hand latched onto her ankle. She kicked out at him, but he easily caught her other foot. A charcoal handprint marked the lower half of his face, the lines sharp beneath his unfocussed gaze.

"It wasn't my fault. I didn't mean for it to happen."



Once he pulled her close enough, his arm wound around her waist as he dragged her with him. Each breath roared in her ears. Sora tried to fight him off, but the arm around her waist felt like a band of steel.

The edge of the cliff came closer.

*No*, she thought desperately.

Her nails clawed at him but found no leverage as she moved closer to death with each step. Almost a head taller than her and at least twice as strong, he pulled her forward with ease. Sora felt helpless in her struggles. Her nails broke the bare skin along his forearms. “No, don’t do this, please!” Her toes teased the edge of the cliff. “No!”

Sora dug her boots into the ground. Bent her knees and pushed back against him. A fire wound through her, wild and unrelenting. She pushed back again.

The young man stumbled, but her victory was short-lived when he caught her by the arm. No longer in the mood for a scuffle, his other hand seized the collar of her jacket, hauling her backwards and straight off the edge of the cliff.

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

Sora knew she was about to die.

As she felt the weightlessness of her body, she found herself thinking of Rydal, the prince who wanted to spend time *with* his people, not rule them. And Jesper, the captain who had lived through much worse than this, who had endured pain that Sora could only imagine, someone afraid to let anyone in, even his friends.

A lump formed in her throat. She would miss them more than she thought possible. It had been a long time, she realised, since she'd had people to call friends. Alex had tried back on Earth, but after her mother died, she pushed everyone away.

She thought of her friends, waiting for her return in Arkosia. She had people who would miss her, people she was willing to fight for.

*I can't die like this. Not like this.*

Something whistled through the air. It landed with a *thrum* against the rockface. Seconds later, Sora slammed against the cliff hard enough that even her teeth rattled. The left side of her body rippled with pain, but her momentum had stopped.

A large spear stuck out of the rockface. About the length of her arm, it rested in the crook of her armpit, piercing through her jacket and pinning her to the rock. Sora grasped the end of the spear. Her feet scrambled for any kind of foothold. Her right boot landed on a faint crack, and she quickly shifted her weight until both feet were tucked into the gap. It was barely large enough to balance on her toes. Above her, grunts echoed as two people engaged in what sounded like hand-to-hand combat.

The lip of the cliff remained just out of arm's reach. She tried to move, but the spear piercing her jacket kept her pinned in place. Sora tried not to look at the valley below. The toe of her boot slipped, and she grasped at the spear.

Once she'd regained her balance, Sora curled her left arm around the spear. With the other, she carefully shrugged out of the jacket. Each movement jostled the spear and she barely breathed until she freed her arm.

Grunts continued from above as she worked her arm out of the other sleeve. With the spear caught beneath her armpit, it limited her movement as she tried to manoeuvre her body. Sora kept her centre of gravity close to the rockface and slowly slid her arm out of the sleeve. She'd barely freed herself when the rock beneath her feet gave way.

Her fingers latched onto one of the jacket sleeves as she fell. A scream slipped past her lips as the fall swung her beneath the spear. The valley taunted her with the safety hidden beneath its canopy. If she survived the fall.

Sora braced her feet flat against the rockface and used her jacket to climb. She refused to let her momentum slow, even when she reached the spear. Her fingertips slid over the lip of the cliff first, digging into the stone until they whitened. She struggled with the effort to pull herself up onto the ledge.

Across from her, the young man deflected blow after blow from a figure dressed in the dark grey attire of the Kosha. A thin band of bone wrapped around her head and allowed the russet-coloured hair to fan out beneath. Sora crawled further onto the cliff while the stranger forced the man back with each attack.

The woman landed a blow to the inside of his knee, and it buckled. Knocked off balance, his attacker didn't so much as hesitate as she spun, landing a backwards kick to his chest. The impact sent him straight past Sora and over the edge of the cliff. A crack of wood against rock echoed below as the man caught hold of the spear.

Sora jumped as a hand landed on her arm. The woman stared down at her, green eyes flecked with gold and brown. "*On your feet,*" she ordered, surprisingly strong as she hauled Sora upright. "*There are more who follow.*"

Sora barely registered the translation in her mind. Instead, she found herself roughly directed towards the rope bridge. From behind them, shouts arose as others approached.

*“She went that way.”*

*“Get that saavak. She’s mine.”*

Sora let the woman shove her forward, ignoring the ache in her limbs.

*“Don’t stop until you’ve crossed the bridge,”* the woman ordered.

Oddly enough, Sora felt a sense of trust towards the woman. She pushed herself faster. Parts of the rope bridge had already frayed. Splintered wood decorated every few planks, each piece held together by a thread.

*Don’t stop until you’ve crossed the bridge.*

Sora tore across the bridge. The rope swayed with her movement, and she ran her hand over the frayed railing for balance. Wood groaned beneath each step, and she adjusted her stride to every second plank. Boots thundered across the bridge behind her.

The weight of a second body sent a ripple down the rope that knocked her off balance. Sora stumbled in her stride and fell into the rope barrier.

Two young men were stationed at the end of the bridge. A third leaned over the cliff to assist the man who had been thrown over the edge. One of the men eyed the woman who had paused a third of the way across, her movements calculated.

*“You run with the traitor,”* taunted one of the men. Charcoal lined his bare torso. Each line started at his shoulder and moved inward on an angle to meet in the centre of his chest. *“A coward who thinks she’s a warrior.”*

The other man, tall and athletic, with charcoal painted around his biceps like bands, laughed. *“Give us the traitor,”* he called. *“And we’ll let you live.”*

Sora knew she should continue across the bridge, but something in their exchange kept her rooted to the spot. *Traitor.* She waited, until her brain played out the words in her mind.

*You will always be a traitor... and when the trials begin, you will die like one.*

Theron's words echoed through her head.

*It isn't the stranger they're after. It's me.*

Sora backed up a step. At the same moment, the third man pulled her attacker over the lip of the cliff. Blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. He wiped it with the back of his hand and stormed forward. His words were clipped, even as they translated into her mind. *"They don't make it off that bridge."*

Russet hair blew across her face as the woman took in the sight of Sora balanced on the end of the bridge. *"Run,"* she hissed. *"Now."*

Sora read the intent in her eyes. Nearly tripped over her feet as she spun around and sprinted across the bridge. It swayed, but she pushed the panic from her mind, leaping the last few planks and landing on the other side. Her legs buckled on impact, and she rolled forward, propping herself up on hands and knees in time to see the first two men charge across.

A glint of sharpened flint flashed in the woman's hand. She brought it down on one side of the rope, slicing through the last few strands with ease. With the additional weight held up by one side of the bridge, the pressure pulled taut against the frayed pieces. The men stumbled into one another in their halt and tried to retreat. Rope gave way as the weight of them forced tension along the bridge.

The woman curled her hand around part of the rope as the bridge snapped. The men clung to the shorter end as it slammed against the rockface. They each fought past one another as they clambered back up to the ledge.

In a panic, Sora crawled to the edge of the cliff and peered over the edge where the bridge had fallen. The woman hung from the severed end, and watched the others retreat from her spot dangling from the bridge. She waited a moment before twisting around and climbing up the bridge like a rope ladder.

Sora moved back as the woman reached the end of it and swung up onto the cliff with ease. Straightening, the woman brushed off her clothes and turned her attention to the men across the gorge. She pressed two fingers against her crown and raised them out towards the young men like a mocking salute.

*“We should move,” she told Sora. “Before those naavak find another way across.”*

\*\*\*

Sora followed the woman across the flattened peaks of the mountains and over three equally unstable bridges. Her companion moved in silence, not that Sora minded. It gave her time to better take in her surroundings. Each slab of rock they crossed was vacant and Sora didn't pick out any signs of movement from the other participants of the Rite.

When they were a fair distance from the men, the woman crouched down, running her fingers over a smooth carved rock. Sora watched as she pulled the flint from her waistband and pressed her finger into its point. Blood beaded from the pinprick, dribbling down her finger and landing on the rock with a faint patter. Each droplet ran along the top of the rock, defying gravity, and pooling in its centre.

Sora sucked in a breath as the blood coiled around the top of the rock, until it formed a circle with a diagonal line that cut through the middle. As the symbol formed in blood, the scrape of stone echoed behind them.

Along the back of the mountain, where a peak of rock remained, a large crack slithered up its centre. It curved out in an arch on either side, creating the outline of a double door in the rockface. Sora stared as the stone groaned and began to move. The doors ground against rock, disappearing into the mountain and leaving a darkened pathway to whatever lay beyond.

*“Every few mountains, there is a way down into the valley,” said the woman, “if you know where to look.”*

Sora glanced back at the blood circle marked on the stone, but it was gone.

*“Quickly,”* the woman added, *“before they catch us.”*

Sora opened her mouth, intent on asking *who* was coming, but the woman had already disappeared inside. A heaviness seeped into her legs as she tried to step forward. A gentle breeze swept past her, carrying the hint of voices belonging to the men who had chased them across the bridge. Nerves swirled in her gut.

*I can't just let them catch me,* she told herself.

She barely gave herself a moment to consider before she stepped forward, disappearing into the dark pathway hidden within the mountain.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

The stone door swung shut the moment Sora stepped inside. Plunged into darkness, she wasn't even sure if her eyes were open or not as she waved a hand in front of her face. Cautiously, she felt around for direction. Her heart thundered when her foot slipped and landed with a thud on something below.

*Stairs.*

Sora seriously doubted the sanity of whoever thought walking down a staircase in the dark was a good idea. Worried the men following them might know of the secret entrance, Sora tried to move quickly as she descended, following one foot with another. Only the sound of her steps echoed through the darkness.

As she descended, thickened air brushed against her skin. It felt like trying to wade through water, only there was nothing there. Despite the need to breathe a little deeper, nothing else stood out. After a few more steps, the sensation faded.

In the distance, a faint light forced her to squint as her eyes shifted between light and dark. Black spots flickered along the edges of her vision as she stepped into underbrush. The scent of pine and damp moss overpowered the faint sweetness of blooming flowers.

Perched on a nearby rock, the woman plucked clusters of red berries off a thorn bush and deposited them into her mouth. *"You took your time."*

"How did we get into the valley?" Sora mused, staring up at the towering mountain behind her. "I swear I only walked down like thirty steps." Her gaze shifted to the canopy of leaves, unaware that the woman observed her with silent curiosity.

*"For someone who doesn't speak Kosha, you seem to understand me well enough."* When Sora tensed, she laughed. "Perhaps," she continued, shifting into the common tongue, "that is a skill worth keeping to yourself."

"Y-you speak the common tongue?"



“My mother spoke it. She taught it to me when I was a child.”

“Oh,” Sora mumbled.

“You can call me Gwen.” In one smooth movement, the woman slid off the rock and landed beside her. “Stare all you want but we must keep moving if we want to reach the stone before nightfall.”

Sora watched Gwen glide through the foliage without so much as a glance back. She let the image of the teardrop stone fill her mind. *Perhaps I don't have to endure this trial alone.* She played back through their past interactions and found no hint of deception. *Besides, Sora decided. It's not as if walking through a strange forest is a first for me.*

Sora found Gwen manoeuvring between thick vines that claimed the trees in their path. Each vine seemed to create a wall of darkened green, a subtle contrast to the brightly coloured leaves above. Unbothered by such an obstacle, Gwen scaled the vines using their crisscrossed sections as footholds. Once she'd swung her leg over the top of the vine wall, she peered down at Sora with a raised brow.

“Don't just stand there. Climb.”

Sora tried to find a foothold near the base of the vines. Her fingers ran along the vines above her head in search of a safe perch. Despite their appearance, the vines were cold and smooth to the touch. The unexpected texture of them left Sora with an uneasy feeling she couldn't quite explain. Whatever it was, she knew she'd be relieved once she was away from the strange vines.

It was harder than she expected to manoeuvre over the uppermost vine. She felt more like a sloth clinging to a large log as she swung her body over the wall and began her descent. She landed rather ungracefully on the ground and brushed off the flecks of dirt that clung to her clothes. The faintest movement shifted in the corner of her eye.

A large head, with slitted nostrils on either side of its curved nose, hung from the lower branch of a tree. Its lighter underbelly blended almost flawlessly into the canopy of leaves. Dark scales adorned the top of its head.

Panic awakened each nerve and muscle along her body. Sora followed its body over each vine and realised they weren't vines at all. She'd climbed over a giant sleeping snake. Its forked tongue slid free of its mouth, as if tasting the air, but it remained still.

Sora opened her mouth in a scream when a hand snapped across the lower half of her face. She fought against the figure, only calming when she heard Gwen's voice in her ear. "Do. Not. Scream." Her voice dropped to a soft murmur as she added, "Lokath sleep under the cycle of the sun. If you scream, you will wake it."

Sora swallowed her scream. Her heartbeat thundered in her chest, even after Gwen removed her hand. She didn't dare speak until they were well away from the snake. "Are there more creatures like that one in this valley?"

"Yes," replied Gwen.

Sora decided she was better off not knowing *what* other creatures they might run into and let her questions drop. For the next hour, they made their way through the forest undisturbed. She had just stepped over a large root when the first scream cut through the air.

Gwen dropped into a crouch.

The swift elegance of the manoeuvre reminded Sora of Ayla.

*Is that why I feel oddly at ease around this woman?*

She pushed the thought from her mind and inched closer, adopting the same crouch as she tried to listen. A faint rustle sounded in the distance, followed by the snapping of branches. The wind shifted and Sora caught the sour stench of rot as it thickened the air. She tucked her nose into her shirt, but even the barrier of fabric didn't save her from the smell. Tears

blossomed in her eyes, and she pressed the shirt further over her face, trying to muffle a choked cough. Distracted by the overwhelming smell, she failed to notice its familiarity.

Gwen tensed, shifting her weight until she balanced on her toes. Lips thinned, she fought to react to the smell of rotting flesh that deepened with each breath.

Seconds passed and another scream ripped across the forest.

It seemed different from the first, reeking with a desperation that made Sora uneasy.

Gwen pointed in another direction without looking at her. “Go that way. Run. And do not stop until you reach the Silverwood.”

“But—”

“Go,” she ordered.

Sora urged herself into a run. She darted into the trees and let the forest engulf her. She tried to move in a straight line as she manoeuvred between trees, her concentration split between dodging low hanging branches and listening for the growls of whatever roamed the forest with them.

A roar erupted somewhere behind her.

*Reaver.*

Startled at the sudden realisation, Sora missed the hidden root that caught the toe of her boot. Unable to slow her momentum, Sora gasped as she tumbled forward and crashed into the bed of dead leaves below. An ache crept along her leg even before she wrestled it free.

The metallic tang of blood lingered on her tongue. She licked her lips and winced at the cut she felt there, then scrambled to her feet, relieved to find she could put weight on her leg.

*Not broken.*

She'd barely taken a step when the faint murmur of voices caught her attention. She held her breath and listened intently. Three distinct voices. All headed in her direction. Adrenaline poured into her body, numbing the ache in her leg. Her mind raced as the voices

grew closer. She thought back to the weeks she'd spent travelling. How she and her companions had remained hidden from the wildlife as they slept. She glanced at the closest trees. The one that had tripped her held the best vantage point without being seen. She gritted her teeth. *You owe me for that root fiasco*, she chastised silently.

Sora scaled the tree and perched in the fork of its branches. She kept one hand at the base of a branch for balance and ducked out of sight. She had barely settled in the tree when three figures stepped into her previous path. They talked quietly amongst themselves, seemingly unconcerned with the presence of a Reaver.

As they spoke, Sora tuned into her inner translator.

*"You let a Reaver into the sacred trials. Commander Arquinn—"*

*"He should have never let that tainted blood into the Rite."*

*"You saw her totem."*

*"Nothing but a mockery of our beliefs."*

*"A totem cannot be made under a falsehood."*

Sora peered through a gap in the trees. Her eyes widened at the sight of the young men from the cliff. She recognised the two who had chased her onto the bridge and the young man who had thrown her over the edge.

The man who had thrown her from the cliff growled, shoving his companion in the shoulder. *"This fate is one deserved of her."*

*"But what of our people, Kyron? They are in this Rite too."*

*"It only wants the girl. She left her jacket on that spear. It had enough of her scent that the Reaver will hunt her, and her alone."*

*"You believe those screams were hers?"*

*“Only the weak fall by the hand of one creature,”* Kyron snapped. A warning lingered in his tone and his companions fell into silence. *“Either she falls by the hand of that creature, or she dies by mine.”*

Sora froze. Even her heartbeat slowed to a quiet hum against her chest. She waited for the young men to disappear into the trees before she moved. Aware that the Reaver tracked her scent, Sora kept to the trees as she moved. Her time spent balancing precariously on branches while securing her hammock left her with an aptitude for travelling between trees.

Her leg protested faintly as she weaved between branches. She made a few sharper turns, hoping to scatter her scent. A part of her mind remained alert to any danger as she pressed forward. The mahogany undertone of bark faded into a softer brown that reminded her of sawdust. Eventually, the bark shifted into the silver of the trees that surrounded Arkosia.

*Do not stop until you reach the Silverwood.*

Sora slid to a halt, nearly missing the next branch as she played the words over in her mind. Somehow, she hadn't expected the literal silver petals of bark that lined each tree. After scanning her surroundings, Sora eased out of the tree.

She kept behind one of the larger trunks and waited. Only a few seconds passed before Gwen emerged from the forest, russet hair flowing wildly behind her. “I diverted the Reaver, but it will not last long. We must hurry.”

“Where?”

“The Silverwood outlines the border of the valley.” She started forward and Sora followed behind her as she continued. “We will emerge at the base of the Sacred Mountain. It is there that we must pass through the Veil and partake in the final trial.”

“The *Veil*,” panted Sora, “sounds rather ominous.”

“Upon the success of the Final Trial, Kosha younglings appear before the *Skiestone*,” Gwen explained. “To complete the Rite, you must lay your hand against the stone and pass

through. You will emerge before the Commander at the First Stone. As tradition calls forth, by the sharing of one breath you stand before your people with the honour of a true warrior.”

Sora absorbed the information. Trees thinned out and a hint of stone appeared in the distance. *The Sacred Mountain*. As they stepped out of the treeline, Sora tilted her head back as she took in the sheer height of the mountain. It was clearly larger than the flattened peaks they had arrived on.

Nothing about the mountain seemed particularly out of place. Sora had barely begun to wonder about the *Veil*, when a soft ripple of light caught her attention. Her eyes narrowed at the strange shimmer of movement. Near impossible to pick out, the Veil moved faintly against the light. If she focussed enough, the faintest hum of energy brushed against her skin. It reminded her of the energy that Ayla often emitted.

When Sora glanced over at Gwen, the woman nodded. “This is the entrance to the Final Trial and one you must take alone.” Something unreadable shifted in her expression. “Be wary, *Soraya*. For this trial will rival them all.”

Sora blinked at the familiar use of her name. It took her a moment to sort through the pieces of her memory, but she was almost certain she had never mentioned it. She took a step back and jumped when a *thwack* sounded beside her head.

It took her several seconds to register the spear that stuck out of the rockface inches beside her head. Her eyes flickered down and watched as a few strands of her hair fluttered to the ground beside her feet.

The young man from their brawl atop the mountain, the man who had brought a Reaver into the Rite, and who now stared at her with unbridled fury straightened from his attack. “*You*,” he growled in Kosha, “*will not be leaving this trial alive.*”

He'd barely taken a few steps forward when Gwen intercepted him. He expected her attack and countered her move with ease. He deflected each attack before dipping beneath her arm, aiming for the space along her ribcage she left unguarded.

A grunt of pain escaped her. Gwen managed to deflect his next attack, but the movement left her off balance. She landed on her back and rolled, keeping the momentum until she landed in a defensive crouch. "*There is no need for violence, Kyron.*"

He grinned at her. "*Your fate was sealed when you sided against your people.*"

As he spoke, his two companions emerged from their place hidden amongst the trees. They turned on Gwen, assessing for any weakness. Slowly they manoeuvred around her, until they stood between the women. Gwen slipped into a crouch and lashed out as they began their attack.

Excitement glowed in Kyron's eyes as he inched closer. Without the help of Gwen, he backed Sora towards the mountain. Fear quickened her breath. She kept note of each movement as he inched closer, searching for a weakness, for anything that might help her.

One of his arms remained tucked closer into his side than the other. A subconscious action that guarded his right side.

*A weakness.*

Sora focussed on the subtle shifts of his posture without looking directly at the hidden injury. She tried to ignore the blur of movement of Gwen as the woman shifted in and out of her peripheral vision.

Kyron darted forward without warning.

Sora tried to leap out of the way, but the man caught her arm, pulling her back with enough force to send her sprawling into the dirt. Plumes of leaves scattered around her. Sora tried to get to her feet but she was too slow. Kyron pushed her off balance with the toe of his boot, sending her sprawling back into the dirt with nothing but cruel excitement reflecting in

his gaze as he approached. Sora felt another wave of adrenaline rush through her limbs and a new fear crept into her mind.

*He intends to kill me.*

Breath too quick. Mind unfocussed. Sora struggled to piece together a successful manoeuvre. His elbow dropped as he leaned closer.

*A weakness.*

Sora took the opening the moment he reached for her. Back braced against the ground, she used its solidity to kick out. Her boot collided with his side. He recoiled at the contact and stumbled back with a curse. The murderous glare he turned on her when he recovered sent her scrambling backwards.

He grabbed her by the leg, halting her retreat and dragged her towards him. She screamed and kicked out, but he quickly swung his leg over hers, effectively pinning her attack. She clawed at him, but he caught her hands.

*“You just won’t die, will you,”* he hissed.

Sora continued her struggle with a relentlessness that made him growl.

*“I want nothing more than to see that Reaver take your life. But perhaps a death by my hand will be worth the trouble you have caused me.”*

*What trouble,* Sora wanted to scream. *I don’t understand.*

Hands closed around her throat. Sora fought against him, but he leaned forward, using his weight against her. Tears sprang forth in her eyes, even as black spots crept into the corner of her vision. *I’m not ready,* she thought desperately. *Please. I’m not ready.*

Sora didn’t notice the sudden heat the emanated from her necklace. Even hidden beneath her shirt, the faint glow became noticeable against the material. The pressure wavered around her throat as Kyron spotted the increasing glow. His eyes narrowed. No one noticed the sudden approach of a new threat until the snarl erupted from the forest edge.



The Reaver barely even slowed as it lunged for Kyron. He shifted just in time to avoid the lethal blow as talons ripped across his bare torso. He screamed as the hellfire scorched his flesh. Already, Sora knew the injury would be worse than Jesper. Even as she forced mouthfuls of oxygen back into her lungs, the bitter tang of burnt flesh assaulted her nostrils.

The two men engaged with Gwen leaped back at the Reaver's sudden appearance. Their retreat allowed Gwen to scramble out of their path, a hand braced against her bloodied leg. A moment of hesitation passed before one of the men attacked the creature. He coiled back his arm with the spear and sent it straight towards the Reaver. The spear hit the front of its shoulder hard enough that the sharpened tip of the spear disappeared into its flesh.

The Reaver reared back with a snarl, latching onto the end of the spear in its jagged teeth. In its distraction, the young men crept forward to collect their injured friend. A loud groan escaped his lips as they jostled him with the movement. Black spots faded enough from her vision to see the gashes across his body. The three slashes were large enough to cover most of his exposed skin. Charred black lines emerged around the wounds, most of the injuries already cauterised by the hellfire.

In that moment Sora understood the pain that came with a Reaver's death. Their ability to stop serious bleeding meant that a death could be slow, drawn out at their leisure. Sora shuddered at the thought and tried not to focus on the fleshy smell as she wiped the remainder of tears from her eyes.

She still felt the pressure around her throat. Knew there would be a bruise.

Black blood coated the spear as it clattered to the ground. The raw stench of the creature wafted up from the blood. Its tail swished wildly. One hand at her throat, Sora backed up until she was pressed against the rockface of the Sacred Mountain.

The Reaver snarled. Hot breath, filled with the scent of old meat left to decay in the sun, spiralled from its nose with each exhale. Kyron bared his teeth in a grin, even as he

remained slumped against his companions. With slow, purposeful movements, the Reaver dropped into a stalk as it rounded on her.

Sora pressed against the stone wall as it approached. She knew Gwen watched the interaction, but with the Reaver so close, there wasn't anything she could do. Its tail moved side to side, creating a barrier that kept everyone at a distance. Low growls rumbled up from its chest. *No*, she told herself. *This will not be the end for me.*

She kept her gaze on the Reaver and her necklace warmed, hot enough to be uncomfortable. Sora stared into its beady-red eyes. She knew it was a challenge, but it was too late to look away. Faintly aware of the stone at the end of her necklace pulsing, she watched as its eyes pulsed in rhythm. Sora wasn't entirely sure *why* she did it, but as she let the words play through her mind, she forced her intent on each word.

*You will not harm me.*

The Reaver kept in its approach, but Sora no longer felt scared. A strange calm settled over her mind as she repeated.

*You will not harm me.*

Sora lifted her gaze from the creature and focussed on the three young men who stared at her in a kind of frozen panic. As if by silent command, the Reaver veered away from her and turned on the men. Its vicious snarl sent them stumbling backwards.

Their faces paled as it sank lower, poised to attack. Kyron seemed to forget about his injuries as panic lined his expression. His companions dragged him backwards in a staggered run that no doubt jostled the wounds. The Reaver snarled again but made no move to follow them. Instead, it turned back to Sora and watched her silently.

Sora shook her head.

The creature studied her for a moment longer before it took off in another direction. For a split second, her vision blurred, and the hint of a white shadow ran beside the creature.

Gwen breathed something in Kosha.

Another moment of silence passed between them.

“We should pass through the Veil,” Gwen began, “before something else shows up.”

Sora nodded and started forward. The hum of energy from the Veil grew louder at her approach. Everything seemed clouded as Sora tried to process what happened.

How the Reaver *listened* to her.

Gwen caught her wrist. “The final trial will be your greatest challenge,” she warned, though her expression hinted that she wanted to say more. Instead, she only whispered, “may the stars guide you.”

Sora squeezed her hand. Questions burned in her mind, but she knew it wasn’t the time. She pushed everything down, closed her eyes, and stepped forward. A strange pressure squeezed against her limbs as she passed through the *Veil*. A faint light pulsed once. Darkness followed, dropping around her like a blanket until nothing.

She waited for her surroundings to lighten before she opened her eyes.

Recognition slammed into her hard enough to take her breath away.

*I’ve been here before.*

### **Chapter Twenty-Three**

Hues of red and gold bounced off the cave wall. Great sketches etched into the black rock depicted a time of battle. Men made of shadows and beastly creatures with arched backs and a mouth filled with jagged teeth.

Sora ran her fingers over the smooth engravings. Head tilted towards an icy breeze that reddened her cheeks. Just as she remembered, a figure cloaked in black stood in the distance, masked by a faint haze. Wisps of shadows curled around its limbs as it swept through the cave. Sora held her breath, pressing herself back against the wall as it idled past.

Flames roiled against its presence, trying to escape along the edges of the cave. A hand emerged from beneath its robes and the flames stilled. Faint growls, a deep rumble of breath echoed throughout the cave. Despite the small room, the sounds resonated as if the room was somehow endless. A glint of metal reflected the light and Sora flinched.

The figure ran the blade across his palm, parting the skin beneath until blood emerged from the wound. The hilt of the blade shimmered against the flamelight. A clouded white stone set into its pommel. Pale fingers closed around the wound. It held its outstretched hand over the fire. Blood burned with a hiss against hot coals. A voice, distant and hollow, drifted across a phantom breeze.

*“Este la mor. La herio e tzar, un de Lumiere.”*

Sora blinked, expecting the usual fogginess of her dream to settle between them. The figure wavered and sharpened. Heat slithered along her skin, thickening the air until each breath became a mouthful of hot air that dried her throat.

Flames roiled again and black tendrils emerged from within, stifling the red glow with a hiss of smoke. From the corner of her eye, she caught a ripple of shadow. As if her clarity had begun to slip away. Sora watched the cloaked figure as it fought against the physical

presence that kept it visible. Sora blinked a few times, until the figure faded into nothing and she slowly peeled herself from the wall.

Sora felt the presence at her back like a weight. She sucked in a breath and tried to leap away but cold fingers pressed against the base of her skull. A scream erupted from her throat as she staggered forward beneath the pressure of the arm. Her knees stung at the impact of the stone floor.

Black flames stirred excitedly in her presence. Her breath came in sporadic bursts as her lungs ran out of air. A faint ache pulsed in her knees as she spun around and stared up at her attacker. Despite the hood that masked its features, the angle of the fire cast a glimmer of light across its face. Sora sucked in a breath, the hot air dry against her tongue, as she stared up at the figure beneath the hood.

“How is this possible?” she breathed.

The figure reached back, fingers still wet with blood, and removed its hood.

“You’re *me*.”

Sora stared up at herself in complete shock. Although the figure possessed the same identical features, down to the smatter of freckles across her nose, unease tugged at her. Sora knew that this wasn’t the true figure that haunted her dreams.

And yet.

A quiet, humourless chuckle escaped the figure. “*No, my darling Soraya. I am better.*”

Sora gasped as the figure swept forward. It caught her by the jaw and lifted her upright. Sora latched onto its wrist, startled at the coldness beneath her palm. The cave wall bit into her back as she slammed against it.

The cold hand slid from her jaw to her throat, its pressure firm enough to keep her pinned, but allowed for each breath to pass smoothly into her lungs. Flamelight illuminated one side of its cloaked face and Sora shivered at the emptiness in its depthless black gaze.

Sora stared at herself beneath the cloak. Aside from her features, nothing about the figure reminded her of the woman she saw in herself now. It was as if an empty vessel, hollowed by darkness, had left a shell of herself behind.

“Who are you?” Sora whispered before she could stop herself.

“*I am what you can only hope to achieve,*” hissed its empty voice. “*I am endless power. Born from shadow and death, I am what you bury deep within you, even now. I am—*”

“Solaris.”

The figure paused at her interruption. Head tilted slightly, it made a hum of approval, leaning closer. Sora felt a faint pressure in her head, almost as if something pressed in against it. “*Ah,*” Solaris breathed. “*Even now, you remember the stories told by our mother.*”

The way it said ‘*our mother*’ like they were one and the same sent a shudder along her spine. Sora straightened, even as the mirror of her own haunted face closed in.

“I am *nothing* like you,” Sora hissed back.

Cold fingers slid away from her throat as it laughed. “*You are exactly like me.*” Solaris swept forward, caught her head between its hands and Sora gasped as darkness closed in around her vision.

Then it was her eyes that looked down at the male on his knees, her hand that closed around his throat. Raw power, unlike anything she’d ever felt, coiled within. She inhaled deeply, felt the pulse of strength simmering just beneath the surface. Untouched power.

She wanted more.

Her fingers curled tighter.

Reavers paced behind her, their low growls a hum against the rush of power, awaiting their orders. *Her* orders.

And then it was Rydal who knelt before her. Those strikingly golden eyes locked on hers. *Please,* he mouthed, but the roar in her ears grew louder.

She let the tendrils of darkness close around his throat.

A scream cut through the depths of her mind, so painful in its haunted agony that she paused. Darkness called to her, but she smothered it.

Jesper stared at her then, far enough away that his presence watched her through the thick fog that clouded her mind. His eyes were so vibrantly bright that they chased away the smoke, until all she could see was horror and pain and anguish.

His expression tore into her heart so deeply that for a moment, she couldn't breathe. Her mind lashed out, tearing at the darkness until Rydal fell forward with deep spluttering coughs, one hand at his throat.

Sora stumbled back.

Smooth black rock reformed around her. She stood inside the cave, staring at the lone crib at its centre. Her entire body felt numb. Her fingers landed on the edge of the wooden frame, and she peered at the baby within. She stared at the faint sprinkle of freckles across its nose. Her nails dug into the wood.

The baby opened its eyes then, a darkness spilling from its pupils until they turned wholly black. Sora jerked backwards, colliding with whatever stood behind her. Hands landed on her arms, their pressure firm, steadying.

“You need to focus, Soraya.”

A young man stood before her, tall and defined with an ageless beauty that pulled at an old memory. She blinked a few times, trying to focus on the last remnants but they slipped through her fingers. Despite his closeness, the edges of his face remained blurred, as if she were looking through a clouded window.

It took her a moment to realise he was still talking. He gently cupped her face, his fingers cold enough against her skin that she sucked in a breath.

“Focus, Soraya,” he told her again.

Even his voice sounded distant. It echoed faintly in her ears.

“You let the trial overwhelm you. Find your ground, your focus point.” He tilted her face, waiting for her to meet his gaze. The faded blue in his eyes appeared almost white in the darkened cave, as if someone tried to erase the colour trapped within. “Darkness is not without light. Find the light.” He moved closer. Sora felt the brush of lips on her brow. A farewell.

She let her eyes drift open.

*When did I close them?*

Alone in the cave, Sora stared down at the baby. Black eyes blinked up at her, but she no longer felt afraid. Darkness swept in around her, but it lacked the icy coldness from before.

*Find the light.*

Sora let the images press in around her mind.

The warm eyes and soft-mouthed smile of her mother. A bubble of laughter. Wind against her cheeks as the swing lifted her higher into the sky. Blankets tucked right up to her chin. A stroke of her hair. Chocolate cake with *congratulations* written in lopsided icing. A sketchbook wrapped in brown paper. Alex, with her dimpled smile as they moved the last box into their new apartment. A fake plant on the windowsill, because her mother knew they couldn't take care of a real one. Adie, with bounds of energy, flopped onto one side in a silent request for belly rubs.

Darkness roiled and howled. It swept across her cheeks, a cold burn against her skin. Sora squeezed her eyes tighter and let herself slip further into each memory.

Rydal propped against the table, their first meeting. The brush of his hand as they strolled through the palace. His smile. The devotion in his care for Darka. A quiet moment of shared pain. The press of a knee against hers. A gifted baldric from a man who rarely spoke. His quiet acknowledgement before the Rite.

*You are not alone.*



The sudden warmth of the thought wrapped around her mind.

*You are not alone.*

Images faded out until she stared back at the engravings etched along the cave.

Solaris pressed against the wall, draped in the same black fabric. Wisps of darkness swirled around her, closing in as she tried to hide herself within the shadows. Flamelight outlined the curve of her face and a scared little girl stared back.

Sora held out a hand. “There will always be darkness,” she began, watching the shadows whirl as her fingers ghosted across them. “But there is also light. One cannot live without the other. It should be nurtured instead.”

She kept her hand outstretched.

“I am not afraid of you,” Sora whispered.

A long moment passed between them. Then a pale hand emerged from beneath the frayed black cloak. Hesitated. It stretched out across the gap between them. A jolt of energy crackled between them at the contact.

“I am not afraid of you.”

Solaris smiled, her features shimmering against the flame as they began to fade.

Sora felt the heat that rose against her skin. She watched in fascination as Solaris faded into a soft mist that wound up her arm. It slithered into her chest, curling up against her heart. Sora let the warmth of her memories wrap around the darkness.

It rumbled in her chest and stilled.

A sense of peace, something Sora hadn't felt in a long time, settled deep within. She closed her eyes and relished it. Soft light pressed against her closed eyes, not the heat of a crackling fire, but the gentle lingering warmth of sunlight.

Sora opened her eyes, staring out at the view before her.

Perched on top of the Sacred Mountain, the valley below stretched out like a sea of depthless green, highlighted by a shimmer of yellow leaves scattered throughout the canopy. The Final Stone rested near the edge of the cliff. Silhouetted against the sun, the stone appeared caught in an endless halo of light. It towered over her, almost three times her height as she approached close enough to reach out.

Sora felt the darkness tucked in against her chest. It nestled closer. She let it, reaching forward to press her palm against the stone. A hum of power rocked through her like a wave. The stone brightened with soft blue light that ran along each outline carved into the stone. As it reached the peak of the teardrop, the light pulsed outward, like a beacon.

Sora blinked, keeping her hand pressed against the stone.

Slowly, the glow faded, and she became aware of the audience at her back. Rydal blocked out the people who watched on with shocked silence. A faint memory of his choked gasps stirred at the edge of her mind, but she pushed it back.

He was here now.

She caught his evident relief as he stepped forward to embrace her. The familiar earthy scent of him wrapped around her and an unexpected surge of emotions wound through her. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been hugged with the true warmth of someone who cared. She blinked back the sudden dampness in her eyes. Rydal seemed to sense her emotions and held her a little tighter.

He didn't let go until she loosened her hold first. She caught a glimpse of Jesper as they parted. He remained at a distance, but as their eyes met, his gaze softened.

Commander Arquinn pulled her out of her thoughts at his approach. He stopped before her, expression unreadable. He gestured to someone behind. A moment later, Koa appeared, a small bowl of silver powder held between his hands. Commander Arquinn dipped his finger in the substance and Sora noted the three silver dots already marked across his brow.

Sora remained perfectly still as the Commander raised his hand and pressed a finger against her brow, just above the pendant. He repeated the action twice more. The three dots left a cold paint-like feel to them as they marked a vertical line in the centre of her forehead.

Commander Arquinn smiled faintly, his voice loud enough for the crowd to hear as he spoke. “Well met, Soraya Merridan.”

Sora dipped her head. “Well met, Commander Arquinn.”

“You have passed through the Rite with a true heart. We welcome you.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Sora tried to listen, but the Commander stepped forward, his voice quiet enough that only she could hear him. “You did well, child. My word is yours and I shall answer your questions. The Rite ends with the fall of the third sun. We shall talk then.”

“Thank you, Commander,” she breathed.

He nodded once before he turned to Koa.

The boy nearly bounced with excitement as the Commander dipped his finger in the powder again and pressed three dots against the centre of Koa’s bone crown until it formed a horizontal line. When the Commander pulled away, Koa had to press his lips together to hide his grin. The boy bowed and stepped back to return the bowl.

“Koa will accompany you around the village for the celebrations,” Commander Arquinn informed Sora. “He will show you to my throne room when the Rite has ended.”

Sora barely had time to acknowledge his words as the boy returned. He latched on excitedly to her wrist and almost dragged her through the crowd towards the celebrations ahead. She glanced over her shoulder as Koa pulled her forward and felt a sense of comfort at the sight of her two friends behind her.

## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

Excitement roiled the crowd as Sora walked through the heart of the celebrations. A faint eagerness still lingered around Koa even as he tried to keep his excitement under control. Those who passed him smiled and a few others clapped him on the shoulder. From the words that echoed in her mind, she'd come to understand that the marks on his crown revealed that the warrior he was called to had succeeded in the Rite.

Despite the high praise he received, most of those around Sora brushed past without so much as a glance. Those who did stare sent looks that ranged from mild displeasure to outright hatred. She tried not to let them bother her as she wandered through the parade of festivities. She kept an eye out for Gwen, but the woman remained absent from the crowd.

Sunlight had barely disappeared behind the distant mountains when Koa informed her that the Rite had ended and guided her towards the throne room.

Two guards remained stationed outside the door.

Koa stopped near the entrance and turned to her with a small bow. "*Well met,*" he spoke in his native tongue. "*May your journey find its close.*" As he straightened, a faint smile ghosted his lips. His eyes shone with a childlike excitement, though something else lingered. "*May we meet again,*" he whispered.

Sora watched him disappear before she glanced back at the guards. Neither spoke, but the one to her right gestured with his head to go inside. Her footsteps remained hesitant as she approached the doorway. At the snick of steel, she found the guards had blocked the path of her companions.

"*Only the girl,*" said the closest guard.

Nerves snaked around her stomach, but Sora forced her face to remain calm. "I'll be alright," she told her companions.

Rydal eyed her hesitantly but stayed at the door.

Sora tried not to look at Jesper, somehow knowing that his quiet gaze would have picked up more than she let on. She nodded at them, partly to reassure herself before she disappeared further inside. The throne room was just as she remembered it, filled with brightly woven hangings and paintings that contrasted with the shades of black and white that made up the exterior.

“Your success in the Rite will surely be one talked of for an age,” Commander Arquinn began, draped across the throne. His depthless black eyes stared at her over his hand, their colour strikingly different to the light-coloured eyes of his people. “Although whether that is something to be desired,” a shrug, “I suppose only time will tell.”

Sora approached the dais, fingers clasped in front of her. “You claim to know about the prophecy,” she began, eager to pry the words from his mouth. “About what brought me here?”

“I know a great many things,” he replied. “You have earned a great honour through your success in the Rite. Now tell me child, what answers do you seek?”

Sora hesitated, shifting at the knowing way he watched her. “This prophecy everyone seems to whisper about,” she began. “It’s why the Reavers have returned? Why the Vulkra was summoned?”

“Yes,” he replied, eyes never leaving hers. “But that is not the true answer you seek. Come now, child,” he pressed. “Ask what truly weighs on your mind.”

“What does the prophecy have to do with me?”

A faint smile curled his lips. He stood, his dark feathered cloak spilling around him as he descended the dais towards her. Hands clasped behind his back, they seemed to disappear beneath his cloak. He nodded to the wall behind his throne and kept pace with her as they approached. Unlike the woven hangings, this artwork had been etched directly onto the wall. A mass of faceless soldiers stood frozen in action; their spears aimed towards the wave of darkness that approached them.

“Thousands of years ago a great darkness swept over Aurelia. From its depths, a man emerged cloaked in shadows and surrounded by the monsters born from them. He called himself the *Lord Ruler*. Kingdoms fell beneath his rule, until only one remained—”

“The House of Delmarva,” Sora breathed.

“Yes. The Old King *Demetris* knew he could not stand alone. He travelled across the lands, to territories not yet broken by the darkness. He alone forged an alliance with the Aurelian peoples, until an army emerged, one that rivalled this new *Lord Ruler*.” He paused, waiting for Sora to speak the thoughts that churned around her mind.

“On the bridge,” she began, “they spoke of an alliance once forged between Kosha and Surielle. An alliance made during the First War.”

The Commander nodded. “It was the alliance that turned the war in our favour, one that allowed us to call on the ancient Gods for help. A call one such God answered.”

Sora paused at the centre of the wall, directly behind the throne. From her position in front of the dais, she had been unable to see the art that lay behind it. A magnificent bird, made of fire, rose high above the warriors. Its feathers glittered with gold. Each brush stroke made with such passion that its wings seemed to flutter against the flamelight.

“It was told,” said the Commander, “that from the ashes of those who had fallen, a mighty winged creature rose above the chaos. It came before King *Demetris* and the First Commander of Arkosia and showed them how to banish the *Lord Ruler* from this realm.”

“Y-you said Kingdoms fell?” Sora whispered.

“Aurelia was once home to many Kingdoms. Many people. The *Lord Ruler* killed those who ruled over the lands he conquered. Their death extinguished the rebellion of their people. After the war, King *Demetris* offered his protection to those who had lost their Kingdoms. Most choose to follow his rule, even now.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“Once the Lord Ruler was banished to another realm, one faraway from those who he meant harm, his creatures vanished with him. Without his threat, the Phoenix returned to the ashes, but not before it left a wisp of power in a chosen mortal. One that might pass through each generation until the Phoenix might be called again.”

The last painting, tucked into the corner of the room depicted an ancient temple with columns carved to resemble a great winged bird that framed the entrance. Chiselled marble walls adorned with vines curled around its edges.

“It has been foretold,” said the Commander, “that when the Lord Ruler hones his strength, he might break through the realm that holds him. And that when the darkness returns, the one chosen by the Phoenix will awaken.” He gestured to the temple. “They alone are the key to waking the Phoenix so that it might help us again.”

“And you think the chosen one is *me*?”

“You doubt the claim?” he asked, voice gentle.

“I-I’m no one special.”

“I think you’re more than you believe.”

Sora blinked. She opened her mouth—

A sudden roar erupted from outside. Panic spiralled inside her, the familiarity of the sound brushing against her mind.

*Vulkra.*

Shouts sounded nearby and she jumped when a hand landed on her shoulder. Commander Arquinn met her gaze. “The Vulkra hunts you,” he breathed. “You *are* chosen.”

“I don’t want to be chosen.” Sora barely heard the words her voice was so quiet.

“I know, child.”

Sora felt their presence before she heard the first snarl of the Reavers. The stench of rotting flesh wafted in through the entrance to the throne room, followed by the shouts of a familiar voice. “Rydal,” she breathed.

She made to step forward, but the Commander tightened his grip on her shoulder. “Be wary of the darkness,” he warned. “For the monster that lurks within might not be what you think. Do not let it consume you.”

Unsure what he meant, Sora nodded, eager to return to her companions. She made to step back and froze. A necklace had fallen free from beneath the Commander’s armour and Sora sucked in a breath at the black stone that stared back at her. Smaller than her own and rounded at the edges, there was no mistaking the faint swirl of smoke within.

Confusion clouded her expression and she stumbled back.

Commander Arquinn made to follow her, but she shook her head and he paused. “Soraya.” His voice sounded distant against the whirlwind of thoughts that invaded her mind.

“What is this,” she breathed. “How do you have that—”

“*Soraya.*”

She jumped at his voice, startled by the Commander who stood before her, unsure when he had approached. It took her a moment to realise she’d backed herself into the wall. She curled in on herself. Concern laced his expression, his features becoming familiar enough that she whispered.

“Are you my—”

“No, child,” he interrupted. “I am not.” He kept his movements slow, carefully retrieving the pendant from her brow. He brought it towards his lips, “*Amourie.*” A faint shimmer ripped across the pendant until it left a faint glow. Commander Arquinn gently placed the pendant in her palm and closed her fingers around it. “You must take the pendant to the First Stone,” he told her. “Place it against the stone and it will open the *Veil*. It will only remain



open for a few moments. You must pass through with your companions and it will take you to the Temple. You must go now.” He guided her forward, towards the entrance where Rydal continued to protest.

The roar of battle grew louder. “Your people,” she worried. “They’re under attack because of me. I led the Vulkra here. I-I can’t just leave them.”

“Your path is that which leads you to the Temple,” he told her firmly. “It is my duty to protect my people. You passed the Rite today, Soraya,” he murmured. “That makes you my people too.” He guided her towards the door. “You must go now. We will hold them off.”

Sora blinked as he drew a curved sword from beneath his cloak.

“Until we meet again.”

## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

Rydal approached her the moment she stepped outside. “Are you alright?” he demanded, his entire body on alert.

“I’m fine,” she murmured, unable to speak past the whirlwind of thoughts. “Where’s Jesper?”

“He’s staying to fight alongside the Kosha.”

“What? But—”

“He’ll be alright,” Rydal promised. “But we have to go.”

Sora tightened her fingers around the pendant in her hand, repeating the Commander’s orders. “We have to get to the First Stone,” she told him.

He nodded, keeping pace with her as she took off at a run. Sora rounded a corner without checking. A Reaver dropped into a crouch at their sudden appearance and snarled. Unprepared for its proximity, Sora slid to a halt and braced herself as it lunged towards her.

A blast of blue light slammed into the creature. It yelped. Its body convulsing as it fell at her feet. Sora glanced up and met Ayla’s bright eyes staring back at her over the mask that covered her lower face. There was no time to question the sudden blast of power as they followed Ayla to the First Stone.

The howl of a Vulkra followed them across the clearing. Sora didn’t dare look back as she sprinted forward. She barely slowed as they approached the stone. Three strides, two, one, Sora opened her palm and slammed the pendant against the stone with the force of her momentum. Almost instantly, the *Veil* rippled around them.

Unlike the faint light from the second trial, thickened air pulled at her muscles. It reminded her of the descent down the steps inside the mountain. She pushed through, struggling to move her limbs as she felt the pulse of energy hum along her bones.

Sora felt the *Veil* begin to close around them. Limbs heavy, she pressed forward when an excruciating pain tore across her back. It ripped a scream from her throat. She felt cold and hot all at once and suddenly couldn't feel her body.

Light exploded around her and then she was face down in the grass. Hands held her down as she screamed. Panicked voices lingered in the back of her mind.

"Hold her down," demanded Ayla. "The Vulkra tore through muscle. I need to heal the worst of it before we move her."

Sora cried out but she couldn't escape the pain. The scent of burnt flesh invaded her nostrils and her stomach churned. She drifted in and out of consciousness. Her throat felt raw. She didn't realise she'd passed out until she felt a gentle hand shaking her awake.

"Soraya."

Her eyelids felt impossibly heavy as she pried them open. Rydal gently helped her upright and she groaned with each movement that pulled against her back. A distant ache radiated through each muscle and her skin felt taut as it stretched over her bones.

Across from her, Ayla watched her, features paler than usual. "I'm alright," Ayla answered before Sora could speak. "Your wound was deeper than I realised, and I drew on more power than I'd expected."

Sora nodded, her mind still groggy. Pain lanced across her back and shoulders as she tried to stand. Rydal caught her by the arm and steadied her movement.

"Do not rush," he told her softly. "The worst of the wound has been healed, but not all. It will still be painful until it heals entirely."

"But the Vulkra," she murmured, "and the Reavers. We must stop them."

"You can take a moment, *Soraya*."

She paused at the tone of his voice. The way he spoke her name was enough to make her glance up at him. For the first time, she noticed the paleness of his features, the thin press of his lips, and the concern that glittered within his golden eyes.

*He's worried about me,* she thought suddenly.

Without thinking, Sora placed her hand over his and squeezed. She waited until he met her gaze before she spoke. "I'm okay," she whispered, even as her back throbbed in protest.

His hand shifted in her grip, until his palm brushed against hers, his fingers enclosed around her own. "You did not see the wound," he returned, equally quiet. "I thought—"

"I'm okay."

His breath came a little sharper and he kept his hand clasped in hers as he nodded. After a moment, she tried to stand again. She pressed her lips together to hide the pain, but still winced at the movement. Rydal kept his attention on her as she stood.

A beautiful temple towered before them. Its white marble seemed to glow against the faint light of the three moons that arched overhead. Marble columns adorned either side of the entrance, delicately carved to resemble an ancient creature with magnificent, feathered wings and a long-plumed tail that wrapped around the marble column. Its head rested near the uppermost part of the column, its curved beak tucked back against its wings, as if watching those who approached.

An ancient power brushed against her skin, raising the hairs along her arms. Sora let her gaze drift from the carved pillars to the chiselled marble walls that stretched out from the entrance. An odd sensation crept across her bones, as if somehow, the Temple watched her back, waiting. Sora shuddered at the thought even as she eased closer.

Boots clicked gently against marble as they ascended the stairs. Each step pulled at her back. Sora forced herself to stop thinking about the ache and focussed on what lay ahead. Delicate swirling engravings, embellished with gold, filled every space across the door. In its

centre, a beautiful mountain adorned with three different symbols, each carved to appear as the three moons arched over the mountain peak. Near its uppermost point, a teardrop stone, lined with blue glass, had been carved into the marble door. A white star rested atop the point of the Final Stone, as if depicting the power that radiated out from its uppermost point.

Ayla stepped forward and gently ran her fingers over the carvings. “The Temple has been sealed with a bloodspell,” she said after a moment. “Only one who has been chosen by that which lives within will be able to open it.” Silvery-white hair fell over her shoulder as she glanced back at Sora. “The Phoenix has chosen you,” she spoke quietly. “Only you will be able to open its resting place.”

Nerves fluttered against her stomach. “What am I supposed to do?”

Ayla ran her fingers over the star at the peak of the Final Stone carved into the door. “The Temple was sealed with the blood of the First chosen by the Phoenix. It is by your blood it must be undone.”

She gestured to Rydal who carefully removed her blade from his jacket.

“Jesper gave this to me,” Rydal told her. “He said it was to be returned to you.”

There seemed to be a deeper meaning to his words, one she couldn't quite place.

Rydal held the blade out expectantly.

It felt heavier in her hands as she stepped towards the door. She stared at the mountain carved into the marble for a long moment before she carefully raised her hand. She pressed the tip of the blade into the centre of her palm until it broke the skin. Taking a deep breath, she ignored the faint tremor in her hand as she pressed her palm against the door. Let the bloodied part of her palm touch the star marked above the Final Stone.

As she pulled her hand away, blood seeped into the marble. A faint blue light grew from beneath the smear of crimson, running through the engravings along the door until the entire entrance glowed. The sound of marble against stone scraped across her ears as if hinting

the Temple had been unopened for a long time. Sora felt the presence of her companions as the door swung open and they stared into the looming darkness beyond.

She stepped over the threshold.

Flamelight erupted from either side of the hall until it illuminated the marble walls in a soft glow. A faint breeze caressed her shoulders and ruffled her hair as it brushed past and swept into the darkness. Sora pushed back the unease that coiled in her chest. “How will we find the Phoenix?” she murmured.

“It has not been seen for millennia,” replied Ayla. “It was believed the Phoenix returned to ashes, so that it might be reborn when called upon.” She took a step forward, her cloak brushing past Sora as she moved. “I suspect we will have to search for the resting place *within* the temple.”

“You make it sound like we have to split up—” Sora trailed off at the expression on her face. “You’re kidding.”

Ayla glanced back at her and sent her a look as if to say, *I am always serious*, and peered back down the hall. “There are three passageways within the temple. We will each take one and call out if we find the resting place of the Phoenix.” Without room for argument, Ayla strode down the dimly lit hallway and disappeared into the darkness.

*Has that woman never seen a horror movie?*

“Are we really going to search for the Phoenix alone?” she asked Rydal. “Where anything inside could pick us off one by one?”

“This Temple has been sealed for millennia. Nothing could have survived for such a time.” He shrugged, but tension still lined his body. “You are drawn to this place more than most. I suspect you will be the one to find the Phoenix, but we must hurry before anyone discovers we have unsealed the Temple.”

Rydal moved to brush a hand down her back but paused at the scarred gashes visible through the tear in her shirt. Instead, he reached up and brushed a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Be careful,” he whispered.

A grinding of marble sounded behind them as the Temple sealed shut.

“We must hurry,” Rydal murmured with a glance towards the door. “I believe the Temple senses danger and sealed us inside.”

Sora blinked. “The Temple *senses* us?”

“It is the resting place of the Phoenix. The Temple holds power of its own. We must hurry.” Rydal led them down the hall until they reached the passageways.

Flamelight already lit the centre passage. Sora stepped closer to the left passageway and its flames sprang to life.

Rydal’s voice echoed her thoughts. “Ayla has taken the centre passage.” He gestured towards the one closest to her. “It’s alright. You need only call, and I will come for you.”

Sora nodded and forced herself to turn away from him. She took a few steps forward and the next flamelight erupted with life. The passageway took Sora deep into the temple.

Every so often the pathway broke off into another room or larger passageways, but a faint pull kept her moving forward. As she walked, the strange pull thrummed along her skin, seeping into her bones. She barely noticed when she turned or manoeuvred through different pathways. Her uneasiness churned with each step. The pendant on her necklace pulsed in time with her heartbeat. Another few steps and it heated painfully against her skin.

Sora gasped and snapped out of her daze. Her hand automatically reached for her necklace but froze as she took in the room before her. The unease slipped away, replaced with a hollow dread as she scanned the room. Smooth black rock adorned the walls, stretching upwards towards the ceiling where it curved to create a dome-shape that loomed above.

She braced a hand against the black stone to steady herself. Felt the carved detailing against her fingers. Mist pressed in around her mind, and endless screams echoed in her ears.

“No,” she breathed.

*We need to get out of here.*

Sora whirled around. She tried to call out when a hand closed over her mouth.

“Easy, little bird. We don’t need you warning your friends now, do we?”

In a panic, Sora swung her arm back into his side. She felt her elbow collide with the flesh just below his ribcage. Warm breath brushed her cheek as he winced. She tried to pull away, but his arm banded around her waist. She reached for her blade.

Nyx caught her hand. He applied pressure to her wrist, until he controlled her movements. “I’m sorry, little bird,” he whispered.

Sora fought against him. She tried to scream but his hand remained firmly over her mouth. The hand around her wrist slid over her fingers, until he’d pinned them to the hilt of her blade. A tear escaped down her cheek as she watched him turn the blade towards her.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again.

Lost in her panic, Sora failed to notice the pain lacing each word.

“You sealed your fate the day you answered the call to Aurelia.”

*No*, she cried but the words never left her lips. She struggled against him, but there was nothing she could do to stop him as he drove the blade forward and stabbed her.

Sora felt the impact first. Cold. It radiated from inside of her, like a prickle that nipped each nerve in her body. She inhaled, sending a rush of cool air into her lungs. A sudden heat, unlike anything she’d ever felt, spread through her body until it burned. It felt different to the Vulkra’s claws. The sudden searing pain had made her delirious. This pain left a slow ripple of heat throughout her body. Unsure that her mind had truly processed the injury, she let her fingers trail across her stomach.



She barely noticed Nyx lower her body until she lay propped against the carved stone wall. He brushed a strand of hair from his face, his near white eyes glowing faintly in the light.

He seized the hilt of the blade and Sora cried out as he ripped it from her stomach. Metal clashed against stone as he dropped it beside her. Part of her wanted to pick it up, wanted to hurt him for doing this to her, but her limbs felt heavy.

Sora pressed her hand over the wound. Felt the heat of her blood as it seeped through her fingers. Sweat beaded along her brow, hot and cold all at once.

Fingers caught her chin and Nyx tilted her head up towards him. "Fate chose this path," he murmured, voice nothing but a whisper. "It does not mean you must let it." He leaned back, still close enough that she heard his next words. "The prince will come for you. And when he falls by my hand, it will finally be over."

Sora watched his retreating figure through hazy eyes.

*No, she thought weakly, Rydal.*

## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

A hand landed on her shoulder, jostling her awake. Hot, scalding pain erupted throughout her body and pulled a groan from her lips.

It hurt to move, breathe.

“Soraya,” called a voice. “Open your eyes.”

“I thought they were,” croaked Sora.

Hands pressed against her stomach, sending a sharp pulse through her body. “Who did this?” A heat emanated across her torso and Sora tried to move away from it as it increased, but the hands pressed harder, keeping her still. “Who did this to you?”

Sora pried her eyes open, blinking at the figure hovering above her.

“We leave you alone for a few minutes and you nearly bleed to death,” Ayla tsked. Her palms flared hotter and Sora winced at the pull of her skin. “Rydal already lectured me about going separate ways,” she murmured. “If he finds you like this, I will never hear the end—”

A warm breeze drifted across Sora’s heated skin. She sucked in a breath as the unease from earlier crashed through her.

Ayla froze, a sudden panic sliding over her expression. Faint growls echoed within the Temple, and she jerked back. At the loss of pressure on her stomach, Sora felt a new wave of blood spill over her fingers. Ayla cried out, pressing her hands against either side of her head. Warm blood lingered on her fingers, painting lines across her face as she fell back with a groan.

Padded feet sounded against marble.

Sora watched through a haze as an enormous wolf appeared in the entrance. Even from a distance, she knew the creature would reach her chest had she been able to stand. Pure white fur shimmered beneath the flamelight. Its blue eyes contrasted with its coat; two sapphires hidden in snow. Ears, blossoming with pink in their centre, perked up as the wolf tilted its head. “Adie,” she breathed, and the wolf sat back on its haunches, watching.

Ayla cried out, features pinched in agony. Silver blood trickled from her ears, leaving a path down the sides of her face.

Sora stared, unable to comprehend the silver liquid that stained her pale skin. She reached out for the woman, but her wound screamed in protest, and she doubled over. Her palm slapped against the hard floor as she fought to keep herself upright. A bloody handprint remained on the stone beneath her fingers, its edges bleeding into the floor. It ran along the edges of each marble stone, creating a white glow that zigzagged towards the wolf.

A brilliant burst of light erupted from the entrance.

It reminded Sora of the painful light from her bedroom all those days ago. A great sphere engulfed Adie in light, until Sora had to squint against the brightness. From its centre, a figure emerged, silhouetted against the light. Tall and elegant, the figure stepped forward, letting the light fade around them.

A young man stood in the centre of the room. Long white hair framed his face, tied in a thick braid that fell over the front of his shoulder. Delicate pointed ears, adorned with silver piercings, stuck out from beneath his hair. Faded blue eyes left a haunted expression etched across his face. His tanned skin, inked with tattoos of fine black lines, peered out from beneath his clothes. Flamelight cast a golden sheen across his face. A cruel smile curved the outline of his mouth, hinting at the darkness behind his ageless beauty.

His eyes swept over Sora, and he grinned, exposing two elongated canines from beneath his upper lip. “Oh, how I’ve waited for you,” he purred. Although his voice remained smooth, it held a hollowness that lacked emotion.

A thrum of power rippled from Ayla in waves as she tried to stand. Silver blood dribbled from one nostril and over the top of her lip. “*You have been banished from this realm, Adriel,*” she spoke, her voice taking on an otherworldly tone that echoed with each word. “*Your presence here is forbidden.*”

“*And yet,*” he purred, matching her eerie voice. “*Here I am.*”

A knife flashed between them as Ayla sent it through the air. Adriel caught it easily between his fingers, sending it back with a flick of his wrist. The blade of the knife struck Ayla in the shoulder, sending a trickle of silver down the front of her jacket.

Adriel laughed as she pulled it from her shoulder, his voice returning to the smooth hollow tone he seemed to enjoy. “Mortals have weakened you, darling *sister*—”

He continued speaking, but Sora couldn’t push the words from her mind.

*Sister. Ayla is his sister.*

“—a shame really,” he pressed on. “And here I had such plans for you.”

Sora felt the power Ayla sent towards him. He barely shifted as he brushed it off, sending it back towards her. The power knocked Ayla backwards, slamming her into the carved wall behind her with enough force that the stone cracked with her impact.

Ayla crumpled to the floor, unmoving.

“No,” Sora cried.

“Do not fear,” purred Adriel, “she will live.” He crouched down before Sora, catching her chin, and tilting her head until she looked at him. “My dear *sister* has not spent millennia honing her power as I have.” His eyes landed on her wound. Sora cried out as he pried her fingers back, examining the blood that coated them. “I’m afraid I cannot offer you the same assurance.”

Feet thundered down the Temple halls and Rydal burst into the room. He skidded to a halt just inside, breathing hard. Blood covered most of his clothing and the hint of a bruise darkened along his jaw and up the side of his face towards the split in his brow.

He glanced between Ayla and Sora. Faint exhaustion lingered on his features even as he raised his sword. “Step away from them.”

“No,” mused Adriel, teeth flashing in a grin as he angled his body. “I don’t think I will.” He drew twin swords from beneath his coat; bone-white with black ink that matched his tattoos etched into the blade. He lashed forward in a blur. Weapons clashed as Rydal braced under the force of the attack. Adriel moved with a dark grace, each attack honed with unnatural precision.

Sora kept her fingers pressed against her wound. The clash of metal echoed throughout the room. A metallic taste filled her mouth, and she licked her lips, finding blood coating them as well. *That can’t be good*, she thought, muscles protesting as she tried to move.

A groan slid past her lips.

Rydal hesitated at the sound. His attention wavered for the barest of seconds.

Adriel caught the distraction. Angled his wrist.

The sword clattered against marble. Rydal moved for his fallen weapon, but Adriel was faster, pressing the end of his blade against the column of his throat.

Rydal paused. His fingers twitched towards his sword, but the second twin blade snapped down across his knuckles in warning.

“It is not often that a mortal surprises me,” Adriel mused. He moved away, his twin swords disappearing beneath his coat. Rydal started forward but Adriel flicked his wrist, the movement seemingly dismissive. A hum of power thrummed around them, and Rydal grunted at the sudden phantom impact that crashed into him.

Rydal lurched backwards, pinned to the wall by whatever power held him there. *No*, he mouthed, but the words remained trapped in his throat.

“As a reward for your skill, *prince*,” drawled Adriel. “I’ll even let you watch her die.”

Sora barely noticed her laboured breath as he approached.

“I have waited millennia for you.”

Adriel gently plucked the necklace from against her shirt. Its shadows swirled wildly at his touch, sending a faint pulse of warmth through her body.

“It was not easy to coax you from your grief long enough to open that box,” he admitted. “But not even Layla could keep you from me. I believed her death would finally draw you to it, but it seemed you grew rather fond of her.”

“It was *you*. You summoned the Vulkra that killed my mother.”

“Layla was not your mother,” he replied.

“What—”

Cold fingers brushed down her cheek. “Do not lose yourself in the matter now,” Adriel murmured, the lack of emotion in his voice contrasting against the almost tender caress. “One should not suffer the pain of old on one’s final day.” Metal scraped against stone as he picked up her blade. Blood darkened the end of it as he turned it in his hand. “Do not worry,” he told her. “It will be just as you’ve dreamed it.”

\*\*\*

Adriel summoned the flames with a silent command.

A flicker of red and gold curled along the wall, their shadows telling a story of their own. Sora felt the icy breeze rustle her clothing, vaguely aware of Rydal trapped against the wall beside the entrance, his golden eyes bright against the dimly lit room.

Adriel stood with his back towards her, one hand trailing over the tendrils of fire, scattering the flames. In his other hand, a silver blade, *her* blade, cut across his upturned palm. The figure from her nightmares blended into Adriel’s tall figure, their movements identical.

Her own blood had cooled against her skin. Each breath came slower. Adriel curled his fingers until they tightened into a fist, and she winced at the hiss of blood, waiting for the familiar words to echo through her mind.

“*Este la mor. La herio e tzar, un de Lumiere.*”

Sora felt a pull deep within her and gasped as it tugged at her wound.

Rydal continued to fight against his bindings, but it was impossible.

Black smoke spilled around the fire, casting shadows across Adriel's feet. He tipped his head back and let the smoke engulf him. It swirled around him, disappearing within, leaving veins of black lines snaking beneath his skin before they vanished.

Sora watched faint black lines snake along her own arms, but her limbs felt heavy, distant. Unable to lift her head, she watched them vanish beneath her skin. She felt Adriel kneel before her, fingers curling around her own.

He pried them back from the wound, holding them back as blood pooled on the ground around her. Sora tried to protest but everything felt numb.

A strange adoration replaced the darkness in his expression as he stared at her. Sora could barely process the emotion as he spoke.

“By the blood of the Phoenix I was bound. And by blood of the chosen, may I be reborn of this world once again.” He kept her hands from reapplying pressure to her wound. “For it will be your death that returns me to this world.”

He bent forward and pressed a kiss to her brow.

“May Heriotza guide you, for Death is with you now.”

The sudden cold against her skin burned.

She closed her eyes and let the memories play across her mind; Rydal laughing as she tried to climb into her hammock. Jesper dipping his chin in acknowledgement when she finally won a sparring session. Ayla and her quiet strength. She thought of Giiva and her determination to protect those at the palace.

During her time in Aurelia, Sora had lessened the grief around her heart. Let it fade into the back of her mind. Not forgotten, but no longer did it crush her. For the first time since her mother had died, she hadn't felt alone.

A tear slid down her cheek. *I can't die like this. Not when I've finally found somewhere I want to be. Not when I've found my people.* Sora froze. *My people.* That's exactly what she'd

found in this new world. People who cared, people she cared for, and Sora wasn't ready to leave them. Her eyes fluttered closed.

*You will not take me*, she called into the darkness.

And as she fell into the emptiness beyond, a whisper of breath called back.



## **Chapter Twenty-Seven**

A cloud of black fog closed in around her. It slowed her movements, filled her lungs with thick air that pressed painfully against her chest. Sora kept her eyes closed as she waded through what felt like hot tar, each movement burning along her skin.

She stumbled forward another step and the weight around her vanished.

An icy breeze swept along her skin, igniting her nerves enough that she sucked in a breath. She felt the sliver of cold air circle around her lungs. It took her body a moment to adjust. A thin veil of mist left a haze in the corners of her vision.

Sora glanced around, surprised to find herself in the same room. However, instead of black stone that enclosed the room like a cave, this version displayed white marble walls with chiselled pillars set into each corner of the room. The smooth white marble stretched across the floor, a stark contrast to the depthless black stone she remembered.

“What is this place?” she murmured.

*“Peaceful, is it not?”*

Sora jumped and her gaze darted around the room, but it remained empty.

A chuckle brushed against her ears.

She watched a shimmer ripple across the space before her and a man emerged from within. Tall and slim, draped with black robes that fell around his body, he landed silently on the ground. Bone white hands clasped together in front of him, and a dark hood kept well over his face, masking his features.

Despite his ghostly appearance, a strange calm settled around her.

The figure waited silently, almost expectantly, as Sora gathered her thoughts.

She looked around again, taking in the emptiness of the room. “Where am I?”

*“One must remember.”*

Sora frowned at his odd words. *What is that supposed to mean?* she wondered, even as she pieced through her memories. Thick, endless darkness filled her mind. She pushed back further. Heavy limbs, a scorching heat that burned along her skin.

With a gasp, her hand lifted to her stomach. She pressed it against the wound. Nothing. Not even a hint of pain as she brushed her fingers against the fabric of her shirt. She peered at the skin beneath. Found it clean, unmarred, as if the wound had never occurred.

“How is this possible?” she breathed.

The creature before her remained silent.

Sora tried to blink away the faint mist in her vision, but the room remained cloudy. So bright and crisp, she almost had to close her eyes.

“I—”

The word came out softer than she intended, and a lump formed in her throat. She stared at the man. Tried to pick out his expression behind the hood but it remained cast in shadows.

“I died,” she whispered after a moment. “Didn’t I?”

The hood shifted as the man looked around. Amusement seemed to slip into his voice as he mused. *“One speaks of death. And yet one stands before me.”*

His hands parted and one set of bony fingers gestured around the room.

*“If one is dead. What is it that one sees in death?”*

Sora tried to decipher his words, but nothing seemed to make sense.

He waited patiently for her response.

“I’m still in the Temple,” she began slowly. “Only it’s brighter now. I remember it with black stone, creatures made of shadow and smoke carved into its walls.” She shook her head. “I used to dream of this place. I always thought it was a cave, but perhaps I was wrong.”

*“One sees the place of their death. Yet one has not moved on.”*

“Are you telling me I’m in limbo?”

*“Perhaps.”*

“But you’re here ... Does that mean you haven’t moved on either?”

*“I am as I will always be.”*

“Will you always make no sense?”

A laugh trickled out from beneath its hood, the mist around them shifting with the sound. *“Death does not bend to the will of mortals.”*

Death. The word echoed in her mind.

*May Heriotza guide you, for death is with you now.*

“You’re Heriotza,” she breathed. “Y-you’re here to guide me on.”

*“Perhaps it is you who has called me,”* he mused. *“A pathway may lead one down many roads. One must simply choose to take it.”*

“You mean I can choose *where* I end up. Does this mean I could go back?”

*“Bound by blood and sealed by fate, one rises from the ashes. For one deemed worthy must be reborn, their power truly freed. A path destined by the stars retold, a great prophecy is thee. For if darkness prevails the fall of one will end humanity.”*

A shiver crawled up her spine. The words echoed the lines from the book she’d read back in the palace. She thought of Adriel and the darkness she sensed in him.

*For if darkness prevails the fall of one will end humanity.*

“I have to go back,” she whispered. “I freed him.”

“A fate sealed,” Heriotza replied.

“Could you at least tell me one thing that makes sense?” Sora sighed, massaging her temples. Apparently even in death, people spoke in riddles.

He seemed to acknowledge her thoughts.

*“Death must be met with death. Unless—”* he dipped his cloaked head and a white marble bowl appeared between them. Depthless black smoke swirled within like thick water that roiled

and sloshed within its confines. Ancient symbols marked the outside of the bowl, each more complicated than the last. Sora started to look away when one symbol caught her attention.

Outlined with a circular carving, its centre depicted three overlapping triangles drawn together with one line.

Sora brushed her fingers across her pants. The solid pressure of a coin settled beneath her touch. How it had remained in place since the tavern made her mind whirl. Fingers trembling, she pulled the coin from her pocket.

It fell into her open palm, its three overlapping triangles staring back at her.

The moment she held the coin over the pool of black smoke, it rippled and cleared.

A stilled, transparent liquid settled within the bowl. A collection of identical coins stared back at her from within. Sora held the coin between her thumb and forefinger.

Heriotza waited silently as she gently dropped it into the bowl. It drifted deeper into the water, settling at the bottom with the other coins. A shimmer glistened across the coin and the bowl vanished. Heriotza kept his bone white hands clasped together.

*“Your toll has been accepted. Perhaps Nyx will earn one’s forgiveness yet.”*

Sora started at the name, but Heriotza raised both his hands towards her.

*“May you awaken in your truest form,”* he murmured. *“For it seems I have enjoyed your company after all this time.”*

“Wait,” she breathed. “What does this—”

Light erupted from his palms. A flash of darkness and then she was falling. Thick, hot air burned as she found herself ripped through the same substance from earlier. The force of it knocked the air from her lungs.

Sora tried to breathe, but smoke swept into her mouth. She landed in the darkened room of the Temple. Mist lingered, but she was no longer alone. Rydal remained pinned to the wall,

golden eyes bright with anguish. His lips moved but his voice sounded distant through the mist, as if she were trying to listen underwater.

Across from him, Adriel stood, towering over her lifeless body.

Sora stared at herself slumped against the carved black stone, her body pale in contrast to her blood-soaked clothing. She felt the tug of her body and her feet drifted closer without thinking. Her fingers trembled as she crouched down. Arm outstretched, she placed her hand over the cold, pale one that rested beside her body.

Light exploded around her.

## **Chapter Twenty-Eight**

Rydal Delmarva fought against the phantom bands that enclosed his wrists. His muscles still ached from his encounter with Nyx in the temple. It wasn't the first time the man had tried to kill him. He'd wear *that* scar along his chest for the rest of his life.

*A brave girl, Nyx had taunted, to protect you from me. It's a shame you couldn't return the favour when she needed it.*

His words had driven such a panic through his entire being that he'd been sloppy. Almost let the man win against him. But then a rumble of power had rocked through the Temple, giving him the edge to win.

Sword in hand, he'd sprinted towards the hum of power. Burst through the archway into the darkened room and slid to a halt at the sight of Sora slumped against the floor, covered in her own blood. He barely registered the man in the centre of the room as he raised his sword, *step away from them*, and charged.

He thought he might win.

Instead, he'd been forced to watch as Sora bled out in front of him.

He sensed the fear in her and something clenched around his chest, tight enough that he couldn't breathe. He'd watched the man pry her fingers away from the wound. Listened helplessly to her last shuddered breath and as her heartbeat stopped, he'd felt something shatter inside him. Light flared around the room, basking Rydal in scorching heat that burned the very air he breathed.

He recognised Adriel from the stories of the First War. Had seen images of him painted in history books. Adriel gasped and jolted forward and the faint blur along the edge of his features sharpened. A familiar hum of power stained the air. It reminded Rydal of Ayla, yet different. An ancient power filled with cruelty honed from years of isolation in *Hellas*.

"Bring her back," Rydal snarled.

“It was *you* who brought her here,” drawled Adriel, voice honeyed with unnatural charisma. “You brought her for *me*. So that I might return and take my rightful place as Lord Ruler, the King of all.”

“You’ll never be the King,” spat Rydal. He hated him. Gods, he *hated* him. Adriel stalked close enough that he could sense the arrogance that poured off him.

“I was *always* King,” he snarled. “And there is no one left who will stop me.”

Rydal lunged for him, even with the bindings around his wrists, and the world exploded with light.

## **Chapter Twenty-Nine**

Sora thought she felt her bones rattle as she slammed into her body. Nothing about it was gentle as light crashed over her and she was hauled to her feet. She stumbled, her legs trembling against the weight of her body. Her palm slapped against the wall as she braced herself, waiting for the light to fade from her vision.

When it cleared enough for her to open her eyes, she found Adriel staring at her from across the room. The blatant shock etched into his features made her want to laugh but the pain rippling through her body kept her from such a reaction.

“How—” breathed Adriel.

Sora watched his expression morph from unconcealed shock to unbridled rage.

“That *traitor* may have offered you a second fate,” he snarled. “But make no mistake. I will not let it happen again.” He stepped back and a wave of power pulsed around him. “I will send you from this world again,” he promised. “And not even the God of Death will stop me.”

Sora forced herself not to shudder at the pure hatred that laced his voice. She closed her eyes at the flash of light that surrounded them.

*You will not stop me, Soraya,* his voice whispered across her mind.

When the light cleared, he was gone.

“Soraya,” Rydal breathed as he stumbled forward, the bindings broken in Adriel’s departure. Blood still covered them both as he swept her into a hug. His entire body trembled, his fingers sweeping across her cheeks as he pulled away. “How is this possible?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

He cupped her face, running the pads of his thumbs over her cheeks again. “I’m sorry,” he breathed. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you. If I had lost you,” he swallowed. “I don’t—”

Sora covered his hand with hers. “You didn’t lose me. Besides, if I were gone, who else would be brave enough to taunt Jesper with you?”



A shocked breath of laughter escaped him, and he gently lowered his brow until it rested against hers. “There’s no one else I’d want by my side when we tell him we’ve unleashed Adriel from his prison.”

She reeled back at his words, almost head-butting him in the process. “Adriel,” she breathed. “He—”

“I know,” Rydal murmured.

A groan sounded behind them and Ayla propped herself against the wall, a hand pressed to her temple. “I will be feeling *that* for a while.”

“Are you alright?” Rydal asked. “How did he knock you unconscious?”

“His power was full of concentrated energy from his time imprisoned,” she mumbled. “It’s been an age since someone else rivalled my power,” she gestured to herself. “And in this form, my body was weakened.”

Rydal nodded, although Sora struggled to process her words.

“We should go,” Sora mumbled. She felt weird. Everything in her body felt different, new. Almost as if she were rediscovering each movement of her limbs. “We don’t want to unleash anything else into the world.”

Ayla snorted. It was the most casual sound she had ever heard the woman make. Sora glanced up, but as their eyes met, Ayla stilled at whatever she saw in them. In fact, Ayla seemed to be looking *through* her rather than at her. Even Rydal glanced between them.

Sora felt exposed under the intensity.

Rydal stepped between them, breaking the stare, and helping Ayla to her feet.

*Thank you*, Sora mouthed when he glanced back. She kept one hand on the wall and tested her limbs. Each movement seemed easier than normal, lighter. She shook off the feeling and followed closely behind Rydal as they made their way out of the Temple.

As they moved back down the long hall towards the entrance, a wave of nausea washed over her. Sora braced a hand on the wall and watched her vision blur. Heat rose along her skin, and she breathed through the feeling. Her fingers trailed over the wall. Over the handprint she burned into the marble. She stared at the floor, focussing on each step, unaware of the mark she left behind.

The Temple opened at their approach.

Once they were outside, the doors swung shut. Sora felt the strum of ancient power, long hidden within the Temple, ripple across her skin as the doors sealed themselves closed. She blinked at the sunlight that settled overhead.

*How long had they been inside?*

Her lungs expanded as she inhaled, and something stirred within. It seemed to yawn, limbs stretching out before it curled back into its hiding place. A frown creased her brows and she pressed a hand against her chest, against the pendant that still hung there. She wrapped her fingers around it, drawing comfort. Sora didn't glance at the stone as she tucked it beneath her shirt. Failed to notice the white pendant that now warmed against her skin.

Rydal helped Ayla onto the bottom step and waited for her to sit down before he moved back. A rumble echoed beneath their feet. A call made to be answered.

*"He calls his shadow creatures to him,"* Ayla spoke quietly.

Sora kept her eyes down. "All of this is my fault."

"No," replied Ayla. "Adriel's return was foretold millennia ago."

"Is he truly your brother?"

"He was once," she replied. "He was corrupted by darkness a long time ago. I fear nothing of my brother remains."

"Did you know he was in the Temple?"

“Yes.” Betrayal lashed out at Sora, but Ayla continued before she could speak. “Your fate has been foretold. It *needed* to unfold this way.”

“I don’t understand—”

“You had to free him,” Ayla told her quietly. “You were called by the prophecy, Soraya. Only *you* would be able to return him to his physical form.” A deep sadness crept into her expression. “For it is only in this true form that he can be defeated.”

Sora glanced out across the land, noting the vastness that stretched out before them. She closed her eyes, listening to the *click* of coins at the bottom of the bowl.

“A war will arise,” Ayla whispered into the wind. “And we must be prepared.” Her eyes lifted towards Sora, burning with a new-found fire. “For only you can stop him.”

Sora swallowed under the intensity of her gaze until she had to look away. *I don’t want it to be me*, she thought. *It can’t be me*.

“We must rekindle alliances,” Ayla continued, “between those who once fought against Adriel in the First War. Those we once called allies. But for now—” Ayla shifted her attention to Rydal. “For now, we must reunite you with your people.”

“And Nikos?” he asked.

“We do not know he has fallen. Theron could have lied.”

Rydal remained silent.

Sora stepped forward, sliding her hand into his. Although he kept his gaze lowered, she felt his fingers tighten around hers. “Jesper first,” she told them both. “And then we find your family, together.”

A faint smile touched his lips and he nodded.

“Together,” agreed Ayla, easing down the last few steps until she stood beside them. “You will need one another,” she murmured. “For your journey has just begun.”