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## Night of Awakening: Strength and Empowerment in the Young Adult Fiction Genre

Shelby Ann Davis

Central Washington University, [shelby.sivad@gmail.com](mailto:shelby.sivad@gmail.com)

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Night of Awakening: Strength and Empowerment in the Young Adult Fiction Genre

Shelby Ann Davis

Senior Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation from  
The William O. Douglas Honors College  
Central Washington University

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Accepted by:

*Sarah Sillin*

5/3/2021

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Thesis Committee Chair (Sarah Sillin, Assistant Professor, English)

Date

*M. O'Brien*

5/4/2021

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Thesis Committee Member (M. O'Brien, Assistant Professor, English)

Date

5/7/2021

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Director, William O. Douglas Honors College

Date

## ABSTRACT

The Young Adult Fantasy genre is often written off as a useless, or immature form of writing. However, there are studies that prove that this specific genre is not only engaging, but it is also empowering for young readers. By writing toward adolescent readers, authors are able to promote various ways in which their characters adjust or interact with their surroundings, which also influences their readers' self and social awareness. By representing feminist perspectives and depicting the effects of trauma, YA literature fosters progressive social change and conveys the importance of mental health. In writing my own novel, *The Night of Awakening*, for my Douglas Honors College Thesis, I discovered how my own characters could represent young women's power and mental health awareness to change long-standing institutions related to oppression and incorrect representations. My main character, Alina, is isolated from all those around her because of a mysterious power that has taken her hostage. While seemingly "powerless" in a world of magic, Alina embodies feminist power as she finds her own ways to battle ancient powers and acknowledge the trauma her own family has inflicted upon her. By using scholarly articles to meter my study, I was able to discover the ways in which my novel might impact the literature scene and influence young, impressionable minds.

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## Introduction

Young Adult (YA) literature is often depicted as a deceitful or lazy form of literature. Young Adult fantasy is often viewed as overly simplistic in its writing style and language, unrealistic in the solutions characters find to their conflicts, unhealthy in the relationships and beauty ideals it models, and lacking attention to broader cultural concerns, such as romance standards/practices and government structure. Whether these assessments started from a distasteful few or preconceived opinions is unknown. However, with the advancement of the education system and reassessment of the literature preferences of young adults, young adult literature is creating a movement in the literature scene.

Editor and teacher Chris Crowe observed his students' preference for and involvement with young adult literature inside the classroom. As one of his students declares:

I was taught by my parents and my English teachers to indulge myself in the classics, literature that had deeper and more meaningful insights on life. Now I know that YA lit does provide meaning for teens. These books aren't just stories about secret crushes and high school sports; they deal with much larger issues that almost all teens have to deal with in some way or another. I think that teens should read books that provide meaning for their lives right then at that moment. (Crowe 114)

It is with this thought process alone that we reassess the young adult literature dilemma. Do we view young adult literature as “less-than” because society pressures us to read for academic purposes? Are we separated from the pleasures of reading due to pre-conceived notions of the academic principles of written words?

In a recent survey “about adolescents' reading habits outside of school (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer & Morris, 2008), nearly a third of respondents reported reading young adult novels but

not necessarily the texts that are valued in school” (Ivey 257). Ivey is stating that students avoid their required readings, which corresponds to the pursuit of reading outside of the class due to the lack of interest presented within the classroom. Since students are introduced to novels within the classroom that do not pique their interest, they do not pursue reading outside the classroom, which lowers the percentage of readers among young adults. Perhaps it is with these Western-standard education practices that reading is seen as a sparse activity among young audiences due to their unfamiliar time period and social interactions. In Western-standard education, there are select works of literature that are deemed “essential” for basic education. However, when the curricula force young minds to read works such as Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students may see reading as a chore rather than a welcomed pass-time. Crowe observes this same idea when reflecting on his students’ engagement in the classroom. However, when introduced to a young adult novel that was targeted at their age division, Crowe’s students expressed a new form of engagement. We find similar results in an experiment by Gay Ivey and Peter H. Johnston, where they measured student engagement with young adult literature. Ivey states, “[e]ngagement was evident not just in the time students spent reading but also in how they talked about their involvement with text, which they juxtaposed with passive, compliant reading of the past” (Ivey 161). Perhaps this was due to the advantages of the students reading about characters of a similar age bracket to their own, while also undergoing coming-of-age dilemmas of a common adolescent. This also raises questions about the common standard of canonical texts and their acceptance/place in the education system. Why do we value these canonical texts? Why do we integrate them into the American education system? Also, why is there little research on the topic of student engagement rather than the standard of education? As Ivey suggests, “Perhaps the failure of

research to provide these insights is due to the absence of personally relevant texts in secondary English classrooms... where required canonical texts from American and British literature, rather than engagement, anchor the curriculum” (257). When literature is written toward adolescent readers, it often not only engages them by representing subjects relevant to their lives, but also lets them explore differences among their lives.

With the few studies that do exist on the topic, we are able to see not only the engagement of students but also the way in which these YA novels influence their growing minds. From pre-constructed lesson plans by the authors of young adult novels such as Suzanne Collin’s *The Hunger Games* and Leigh Bardugo’s *Shadow and Bone*, we begin to see the ways in which young adult literature can promote growth in young adults. From representing mental health disorders to placing oneself in an otherworldly or dystopian society, young adult novels offer readers an opportunity to resolve issues through the characters’ perspectives. Whether tearing down an entire government system in revolt or choosing the remainder of their life at age sixteen, these characters go through hardships that will either passively or actively influence their young readers.

With these concepts in mind, I, along with other YA authors set out to explore the ways in which my own young adult novel attempts to influence young minds. Writers such as Megan Cox Gurdon have argued that YA creates a troubling portrait of our world:

If books show us the world, teen fiction can be like a hall of fun-house mirrors, constantly reflecting back hideously distorted portrayals of what life is. There are of course exceptions, but a careless young reader—or one who seeks out depravity—will find himself surrounded by images not of joy or beauty but of damage, brutality and losses of the most horrendous kinds.

While this may be a negative interpretation of the problems presented in YA fantasy, it holds some truth in observing the emphasis on trauma. Yet, as Roxane Gay argues, Gurdon “largely ignores the diversity of the genre, and the countless titles that aren’t grounded in damage, brutality, or loss. More troubling, though, is the suggestion that somehow reality should be sanitized for teen readers.” It is with this thought process that we can assess how YA fantasy challenges young readers to apply themselves to threats and obstacles that the characters face, that can prepare them for similar situations. While the characters often face issues that can only be found in the fantastical world, they can be translated into real-life situations that a young adult might have to face. For example, within *The Hunger Games*, Peeta Malark presents his seemingly irrelevant skill of cake decorating into a life-saving technique within a life-or-death situation when he disguises himself as a rock, making it impossible for others to observe his presence. While readers may not be pressed with such dramatic cases, Suzanne Collins draws attention to the importance of an expanded array of skills that can be potentially applied to everyday life or perhaps a career. As for my own critical response to this assessment, my main character, Alina, who was once plagued with the destiny to be a powerless pawn in a powerful family, then encounters the true meaning of power when an ancient power overtakes her body and mind. From wresting her own mental barriers inflicted by her family’s outlook on her to outsmarting an ancient ruler, Alina shows young readers the power of a young woman. By specifically addressing feminist themes and mental health awareness in young adult literature and throughout my novel, I gain a stronger understanding of the ways in which young adult literature can impact its readers.



## Feminist Influence in YA Fantasy

Through Young Adult literature, authors have an opportunity to indirectly influence the thoughts and standards of the younger generation and potentially change our broader cultural views on subjects ranging from gender roles to mental health. By presenting strong female leads in young adult novels, authors can express not only the ways that women are equal to men but also the ways in which women can excel. It is with these impressions that young readers can see a new standard for women that can alter their own perspective on current real-world issues, such as women's beauty standards and women's roles in politics. In Marissa Meyer's *Cinder*, a retelling of the classic *Cinderella*, Cinder is not a pitied, fragile woman, but rather a cyborg who runs her own mechanic shop. Since she is a mechanic, Cinder is often depicted as covered in grease or spotted with oil stains. This is a sheer contrast to "Levana, whose beauty is a facade, a glamour that hides not only a cold, vicious heart, but also a physically unattractive face" (Dougherty 52). Levena's beauty is often noted as "unnatural," which makes her beauty unsettling.

It is with these observations that the standard of women's beauty is called into question. Does a "stick-straight figure," not supported by signature womanly curves, become a more appealing beauty as it is not as nerve-wracking as Levena's false beauty (Meyer 34)? By demonstrating to young girls that the beauty standard is unreliable and that Cinder's physical talents are more helpful to the plot of the story, Meyer is promoting young readers to ignore adult ideas of beauty and instead, focus on their passions. In fact, it is Cinder whom Prince Kai finds more attractive, including her robotic foot. The Prince even chooses Cinder's personality over Queen Levana's awe-striking beauty.

A different view on women's empowerment can be observed in Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, as the main character is a self-driven female lead. By presenting a strong female lead who breaks oppressive expectations that women will be submissive and weak, Sarah J Maas presents a fresh view on feminist empowerment. Feyre, who has been imprisoned in the Fae realm for murdering a Fae, must survive and maintain her sanity in a foreign land. After the first novel, Feyre not only breaks a curse that no other Fae is able to stop, but she also becomes High Fae herself through the blessings of each High Lord. By the second novel, Feyre is regarded as an untapped powerhouse who is capable of overthrowing the entire country. Due to her notable power, Feyre is an inspiring character for young women.

As a multi-times bestselling author and renowned author on BookTok (the literature community on the social media app TikTok), Sarah J Maas has amassed a following of young adult readers who cherish her three unique series. Her novels *Empire of Storms* and *Tower of Dawn* remained on the US top ten bestseller charts for ten and thirteen weeks, respectively. RaeLynn D. Pena specifically studied Sarah J Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, searching for the aspects in which Feyre demonstrates feminist powers. Pena states "Feyre's new powers as High Fae have parallels with gender issues, such as how the ability to shapeshift is like her ability to shift between and to combine the masculine and feminine spheres" (Pena iii). Pena then proceeds to observe the ways in which Feyre's actions and/or traits empower both women within the novel and women reading the novel. In the second novel of the series, Feyre's newfound powers are not only significant due to their outstanding capabilities, but also notable due to the fact that she is the only woman among the mainland that holds power equal to the High Lords.

At the end of the second novel, Feyre gains significant power among all lands as the first High Lady. Earlier in the series, Tamelin, a High Lord, told Feyre that it is impossible for there to

be a female equal to the High Lords of each country. Tamlin's truth is deconstructed when Rhysand, a High Lord, crowns Feyre as "[n]ot consort, not wife. Feyre is High Lady of the Night Court. [His] equal in every way; she would wear [his] crown, sit on a throne beside [his]. Never sidelined, never designated to breeding and parties and child-rearing. [His] queen" (Maas 620-21). Feyre is recorded as the first High Lady of all Fae history, despite her being born a human. This action alone depicts Sarah J. Maas' use of a female-driven plotline with strong leading characters. Through these characters, Sarah J Maas' novels offer a feminist perspective that inspires young women.

## Feminist Influence in *Night of Awakening*

Exploring scholarly readings and popular reception of Maas' work has, in turn, helped me identify the feminist perspective shaping my own work, which is likewise evident in the power or strength that each main woman demonstrates. The main character's sister, Jenessa, presents the highest form of magic in decades. The Chief's wife, Julianna, shows that she has influence with her husband and is the first to marry a leader of another country. Also, the main character, Alina, trains herself in weapon handling, is able to calm her fiancé in intense situations, overcomes the darkness corrupting her body in secrecy, and is able to level with an Ancient, one of the most powerful beings in the novel. It is with these events/characteristics that young readers can perceive feminist standards that women are an essential, equal part of the human race.

As supporting characters, Jenessa and Julianna claim active roles not only as national leaders, but also through their potent magic. Since potent magic is rare among the people, Jenessa and Julianna present great strength past their nation, promoting their strength to the entire continent. Jenessa, the younger sister of Alina, showed promising powers from a young age. In a world where the main characters of power were buried centuries before, Jenessa holds a vast amount of power. While most children have little or perhaps no power, Jenessa is able to summon entire vines on demand. While that does little to scale with previous powers in the lands, it is recognized as the most powerful form of magic in generations. Not only does this speak to the power of the leading family of the country, but it also empowers young women by showing the potential power of women as an equal threat to men. Also, Julianna can be seen as another female power throughout the novel. While her power is more subtle than Jenessa's, her influence can be seen throughout the novel. Julianna is married to the Chief of Neswia, and while

she cannot directly command the lands, her influence can be seen throughout the novel. Due to her ability to influence and read emotions, Julianna solidifies herself as an essential force to deter political conflict. In fact, when Alina, Jenessa, and Jerran leave for an expedition at the end of the novel, they are led by a stable boy. When speaking with him, Jerran remarks that his father made a fine choice in choosing him for the trip, but the stable boy replies, “Actually, Miss Julianna was the one who approached me, sir” (Davis 140). While it could be argued that the Chief simply didn’t have time to contemplate such minor decisions, Julianna’s interjections throughout the novel prove that she makes such decisions herself.

As for Alina, the main female-lead of the novel, her progressive movements to redeem herself as a notable character are less obvious. Alina struggles with being seen as the weaker sister and simply as a gift for her fiancé. She is written off as a person who was created for the gain of others. However, both after and before her own awakening, Alina can be seen fighting for her place as the lead in the story. When rejected from her place as the future Agede, Alina began training herself in partial secrecy. During one of her runs, Alina recalls:

There was once a time that I was only able to sprint a few seconds before my lungs were burning with the air that shredded them. That was a time where my sister’s crown was still fresh on her head. That was a time that I enjoyed the comfort of my bed at night instead of the rough terrace of the ground beneath my feet. That was the time when my crescent daggers still felt uncomfortable held in my raw palms. (Davis 57)

Her own motivation pushed her to train her body to the point of exhaustion, which proved to turn her body into her current state of athleticism. This not only is useful for her role as a trainer for other Neswians after the Night of Awakening, but it also provides the endurance she needs in order to prove a viable vessel for the magic of Jordith, the Ancient who awakens in Alina.

As Jordith's participation in Alina's life becomes apparent through his first manifestation, Alina is startled, but recovers quickly. While this might seem like a predetermined story of a young woman succumbing to the power of a stronger, older man, Alina fights against Jordith, which also resembles a fight to break away from the subordinate female role as simply a means for male/masculine power. Another presentation of Alina's strength is shown through her determination to handle this herself. When determining how best to deal with Jordith, Alina concludes that "[e]ven though this magic was a curse that [she] never asked for, it had become [her] responsibility to bear" (Davis 92). She also decides that even though the most feared Ancient is using her body as a vessel, she must fight against him. Immediately, she levels with one of the most powerful species in all the land despite having no prior power herself. She even learns how to control this newfound magic on her own terms, trying to turn it on Jordith.

My novel thus resonates with work by scholars like Pena, who argue that feminist empowerment in Young Adult fantasy novels "navigates values about femininity and masculinity," "breaking standards," and "stands up to inequality and helps others" (iii). I can actively compare my novel's elements to these assessments. Between Jenessa's, Julianna's, and Alina's active engagement as leaders of Neswia and self-titled strength, *Night of Awakening* is filled with a powerful female cast and hosts the perfect opportunity to inspire young readers. Due to inspiring characters and other analyzes on reader empowerment, I can conclude that my characters are an outlet to foster discussion or thoughts of feminist empowerment. Compared with the leadership personality of characters like Feyre in *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, my female leads present the same influence.

## Mental Health Awareness in YA Fantasy

Along with feminist perspective, mental health awareness can be recognized in a variety of forms in Young Adult fantasy. While representations of young women as the leading characters often invite readers to recognize women's strength and rethink familiar gender roles, depictions of mental illness can highlight the devastating effects of trauma, while suggesting how pervasive mental illness can be, thus questioning the stigma around it. Both of these topics present a call to action to young readers, but both are addressed and assessed in different ways. Sometimes characters directly address mental health by stating their diagnosis within the novel, and sometimes the characters are not even aware of their circumstance themselves. A common recurrence in mental illnesses within YA fantasy is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Whether brought on by war or perhaps witnessing a loved one being murdered, PTSD is a common experience for main characters in fast-paced YA fantasy novels. Not only does this bring depth to the characters, the readers analyze how traumatic events will influence the characters, but it also provides an opportunity for young readers to become aware of forms of PTSD.

Leigh Bardugo has created the world of Grishaverse, which currently includes three different series: the Shadow and Bone trilogy, the Six of Crows duology, and the King of Scars duology. *Six of Crows* was named a New York Times Notable Book, while *King of Scars* has sold over three million copies. Also, her original series, Shadow and Bone, has been adapted into a Netflix original which was released April of 2021. For the sake of argument, I will be addressing the two duologies, Six of Crows and King of Scars. Within these two series, there are two male lead characters who suffer from their own trauma and PTSD that interferes with their

lives. With these two series and supporting articles, we can examine the ways in which mental health awareness is addressed within YA fantasy and how it affects young readers.

In *Six of Crows*, Kaz Brekker, a renowned gang leader, deals with PTSD. In his younger years, Kaz Brekker witnessed the death of his brother. As depicted in the first novel, “[h]e woke surrounded by corpses . . . Jordie’s body was beside him, barely recognizable, white and swollen with rot, floating on the surface like some kind of gruesome deep sea fish” (Bardugo 275). Such trauma leads Kaz to extreme habits connected to his PTSD. Throughout the entire novel, Kaz wears a signature pair of gloves, which is later revealed to be his form of avoiding human contact for fear of touching human flesh once again. Due to his brother’s death’s connection with exposed, deformed flesh, Kaz is no longer able to make contact with human skin.

It is with these scenarios that we can see the depiction of PTSD within YA fantasy. Kaz Brekker’s strength breaks from assumptions that mental illness renders people somehow “weak” or less than. Yet at the same time, the novel acknowledges that he often feels compelled to deploy his strength as a mask to cover his trauma. He rose to power in order to enact revenge for his brother’s death. Kaz Brekker is the leader of one of the deadliest gangs in the fantastical lands simply because he aims to use his power to enact his plan of revenge on all those associated with his brother’s death. As pointed out by Catherine Esposito, “Kaz is only focused on righting the wrongs that have been done to him. His selfishness... [is] reflective of the origination and content of their traumatic pasts” (Bardugo 16). Kaz’s trauma manifests itself as not only PTSD, but also his entire drive to control the lands of Ketterdam.

Through Kaz’s unique trauma history and forms of coping, Bardugo presents a reliable demonstration of a particular case of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Instead of sticking to tropes and writing Kaz’s trauma as a tagline, Bardugo explains the ways in which Kaz was mentally



impacted by his traumatic event and how he copes. Instead of facing his problems directly, Kaz avoids human contact and does not allow himself to form personal connections. As a study on PTSD symptoms in youth indicates, “Cognitive distraction was found to moderate the level of violence exposure such that, as violence increased, the use of cognitive distraction was related to an increased frequency of cognitive arousal” (Dempsey ii). Both of these coping mechanisms have a direct tie to his trauma and offer the reader a reliable case of PTSD. Also, instead of directly dealing with his symptoms, Kaz pursues Pekka Rollins, the indirect killer of his brother. There is no guarantee that growing wealthier than Pekka Rollins and tormenting him will satisfy Kaz’s lust for revenge for his brother, but it is Kaz’s highest form of coping and therefore his highest priority. This revenge plot is Kaz’s coping mechanism, which is true to the symptoms of someone suffering from PTSD. It is with both the development of Kaz’s PTSD and his coping mechanisms that Bardugo makes a true to form character, which can influence the reader’s perspective on this particular mental illness.

In *King of Scars*, however, young King Nikolai Lantsov undergoes a much different form of PTSD. His worries are caused by current events. During the previous series, Nikolai underwent a transformation into a dark-winged beast. Unable to control himself during his transformation, Nikolai attacked enemies and allies alike. When the spell was finally broken, Nikolai was abandoned with the weight of a kingdom that was now under his control and the blood of his friends on his hands. Once again, Bardugo translates real-life PTSD into a character who has negative repercussions because of their traumatic experience. In particular, Nikolai undergoes a traumatic event that deals with both war and death, a common association with PTSD in our society. Although Nikolai is a fictional character based in a fantasy world, Bardugo incorporates backstories, symptoms, and side effects of real-life PTSD.

As an overall light-hearted character, the transformation of Nikolai's mental health was evident. Scholar Kaylee Lambert analyzes the text of *King of Scars* pertaining to Nikolai's mental health and concludes:

Nikolai's half-human/half-monster identity roots him in a liminal space, which is reinforced and propagated by the people around him. Nikolai presents an complex case for study because his internal anxiety is made physical by the introduction of literal monstrosity, which is a unique feature of young adult speculative fiction. (Lambert iv-v)

Lambert is stating that Nikolai's transformation not only left physical differences in Nikolai's body, but also rooted into his mental health. Also, when analyzing Nikolai's hints of anxiety on the subject, the lines become blurred. The novel starts with traumatic retellings of his time as the monster and his fear that the monster is not completely removed from himself. Not only is this true due to the mental trauma inflicted on him, but it is later discovered that there are indeed fragments of the spell still existing in Nikolai, and the monster is willing to reclaim his body as its own. The fact that Nikolai's anxiety is ridden with proof makes it difficult to draw a line between what his mind drives him to belief is truth versus what is indeed truth.

Through both Kaz Brekker and Nikolai Lantsov, Leigh Bardugo presents mental illnesses within the YA fantasy genre. While only two cases within a wide genre, they both provide evidence of tones of trauma and grief. By reading about these extreme situations, young readers can reflect and relate. Presenting young readers with fictional characters with normal human characteristics, Bardugo invites readers to relate to these characters. Not only do these novels raise awareness of the ways in which PTSD affects a person, but they also raise awareness for warning signs of PTSD within oneself. By presenting the entire story of these characters' trauma,

Bardugo offers the readers perspective that will allow them to adapt to real-life encounters with PTSD victims.

## Mental Health Awareness in *Night of Awakening*

Compared to the works of Leigh Bardugo, my novel's approach to mental health awareness is not as readily evident. However, the main character, Alina, and her sister, Jenessa, are both put under extreme pressure due to their inheritance of the throne and the process they have undergone in order to get there. Because of the standards that their family held them to, we can see Alina and Jenessa contemplating their every action. While their trauma is not due to an instant occurrence, such as Bardugo's characters, their trauma is caused by an ongoing form of abuse due to their condition of their upbringing. It is with this excessive addressing of their surroundings that their mental illness can be linked to anxiety. According to an assessment of anxiety, "[e]xcessive worrying about daily matters is a hallmark of generalized anxiety disorder, especially if it is severe enough to interfere with daily life and persists almost daily"(Healthline). Also, there are hints that the sisters once had a joyful relationship, now they simply maintain the image of sisterhood for show and are constantly irritable with one another. Another main symptom of anxiety is irritability. With these symptoms, it can be concluded that both sisters have formed some variation of anxiety due to their fostering environment.

First-born to the Agede, Alina automatically assumed the role of one day taking her father's crown. However, once Alina matured and still did not express any form of magic, that role was handed down to the second-born, Jenessa. Before this change, however, Alina still went through intensive training to assume the role of the Agede. She was trained to read people, connect with her people, and be the secondhand man for the chief. This training, which both she and her sister have undergone, has significant effects on their minds. Both sisters are hyper-aware of others' emotions and intentions. Since the story is told from the perspective of Alina, we see her constantly searching faces for emotion or reading body language. We also see hints of

this in Jenessa, as Alina watches her. When the dreadful night, *The Night of Awakening*, takes place, the people of Natrail turn to their leaders. Finding the weight of her people pressing in on her, Jenessa summons her power in large quantities to prove her strength to her people. After the speech concludes, “Jenessa collapsed as soon as the door closed behind her” (Davis 44). It is obvious that Jenessa has worked herself to the exhaustion simply to satisfy her people. It is due to the stress of the potential crown placed on her that Jenessa feels compelled to drain her body past its limits.

Alina’s fear can also be seen by her constant assessment of social outings. As part of the most influential family, she must make various social outings in order to uphold her family's image and influence. Her stress during such outings is apparent throughout the novel. Not only is she hyper-aware of the way outsiders interact with her family, but she is also aware of the glances pointed in her direction. Before one particular outing, Alina notes that “in a crowd, it was impossible to hide from their pity coated eyes as they talked about [her] in a lower tone” (Davis 21). It is obvious that Alina is constantly stressed about the way people perceive her. Due to a combination of reading those around her and awareness of public image, Alina is riddled with social anxiety.

The mental strain of both sisters’ responsibilities can also be seen through their relationship. Before the role of future Agede was passed onto Jenessa, the sisters were supposedly close. Memories of Jenessa and Alina training together and learning how to apply make-up hint at the sisters’ shared connections. However, after the transition of Jenessa taking Alina’s place as the next Agede, there was an obvious shift. When thinking of her sister, Alina states “she was more educated and trained than I was. She stood high on the pedestal of our family inheritance for Neswia, and I stood ideally by her side. She simply played these foolish

matches with me to remind us both of her placement” (Davis 3). Alina thinks of her sister as a powerful being who simply toys with Alina in order to prove her strength. Alina is correct in this assessment. Due to the stress now placed on her, Jenessa takes out her anger on the one person she looked up to, yet outpaced in training. Jenessa uses Alina as an outlet for her stress and anger because Alina was the one person whom Jenessa looked up to and Alina disappointed her when she was no longer able to fulfill the role of the Agede’s first-born.

Due to the high stress both sisters experience, they experience mental illnesses prior to the start of the novels. Both Alina and Jenessa demonstrate ways that mental illnesses can impact their lives, which has the possibility of being a point of relation to young readers. Since adolescence is often associated with living up to certain expectations, whether implemented by a parent or even themselves, both Alina and Jenessa can prove to be a relatable source of connection with the reader. Also, due to the sisters’ vast difference in coping mechanisms, there lies a higher possibility of readers relating to perhaps one sister, or maybe even both. This connection could possibly inspire young readers to recognize their own mental illness, which can present opportunities to cope with their condition or even seek professional help.

## Conclusion

Between analyzing the works of other YA fantasy authors and scholarly analysis of how such works are perceived by readers, I can conclude that my work has the possibility of inspiring young readers. By presenting feminist-influenced characters and mental health awareness, I am leading my readers to become more aware of their surroundings and their own aspirations. While my novel does not have a direct call to action, I empower my readers through my characters, who have to undergo their own experiences in order to progress. It is through the characters growth and awareness that readers can learn second-hand how to address their own actions.

While Young Adult fantasy is categorized as fictional, there is an underlying influence of real-life dilemmas and experiences. Works of fiction are often not completely dissociated from reality due to the personal influence that the writer projects into their novel. For example, in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, the government is not structured like that of the United States government today, but it is still ruled by a President and highlights the division of poverty lines which can be evident in the current United States system. While *The Hunger Games* is fictional, these parallels have expanded critics' response to the novel by dissecting it in a more scholarly approach. With this assessment, it is easy to distinguish the ways in which authors can indirectly influence and raise awareness in young readers. By indirectly presenting real-life dilemmas and experiences, authors are able to influence young readers.

Young Adult fantasy is the perfect opportunity to empower young readers with the means to control, or at least express, their own dilemmas/issues. It is with my novel that I wish to empower young readers and inspire them to pursue their own passions. More specifically, this encouragement can lead them to pursue their own forms of expression. For example, the community of BookTok has expanded to create a diverse group of voices that offer newfound

perspective on novels, expression of issues related to reading, underrepresented novel recommendations, unpopular/popular opinions on mainstream novels, and original prompts for possible novels. This same form of expression can be found on popular websites, such as Wattpad or Archives of Our Own, that promote “fanfiction.” Fanfiction is the expansion of a published novel created by readers. On these websites, readers can become writers through the process of writing more content on a published novel. A few forms of expansion can be reimagining a select scene, switching a character’s gender, or even continuing the story past the original ending. It is with this expression that the reader is then engaged to further the literature scene by creating original context of their own, which may lead to a new sense of self.

How my novel will directly impact my readers is still unknown, but it can be concluded that my novel will hold influential sway, as *Cinder* by Marissa Meyer, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J Maas, and *King of Scars* and *Six of Crows* by Leigh Bardugo have. However, I can conclude that through my expression of feminist perspective and mental health awareness, my readers will be encouraged in select forms of expression and empowerment.



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Shelby Davis

Word Count: 93,410

NIGHT OF AWAKENING

By Shelby Ann

## Chapter 1

The warm air whipped across my face as I ran after my little sister. My muscles propelled my legs in a gliding motion while her breaths drifted in the wind. Her breast-length, wavy brown hair trailed behind her. She was only about fifteen meters in front of me at this point, despite her generous head start, and I was gaining quickly. My strides still patted at a steady pace, while her bare feet were already stumbling with exhaustion.

To my left, the water nymphs dove in and out of the calm river, enjoying the common race of my sister and me. A dainty form of laughter emitted from the nymphs as they beheld our foolish habits. Their water-formed bodies were momentarily seen as they broke the water's surface in a gliding motion that exposed them from their head to their feet, but they were once again lost as they dove beneath. They glistened with the afternoon sun. For the moments that they did form from the water, it is obvious to notice their pure beauty. With large, doe eyes and wavy, flowing hair, anyone would be intrigued by their beauty.

My arms gracefully broke the air as they pumped forth. I was still gaining, only a few meters till I won.

Out of the corner of my eye I spotted a stable, green mass. The most sacred forest in all of Neswia, Ediran. With trees as old as the Ancients and the most beautiful species of animals, Ediran claimed the title of the Chief's Land. Glancing at it, I could feel the pure harmony that the forest resonated. The magic of our ancestors still hums through every tree that sprouts from the land. Dalleia, the Ancient of our land, once raised this land as her own forest. It is said that this was the very land that the first people grew from. It was in Ediran where she gave our ancestors a fraction of her power so they could fight alongside her in the War.

It wasn't until peace spread across the world of Rylina that Dalleia laid to rest in the forest and a tree bloomed from her slumbering body. Now the Tree of Dalleia can be seen as the largest tree within the Ediran forest. The still large trees were dwarfed in comparison to the beauty and size of the Tree of Dalleia.

As I am recalling the history of our lands, I felt something amiss in my stride. One moment I am facing the beautiful stocks of the Ediran trees, and then my face is making contact with the solid surface of the ground.

Sitting up with a groan of pain, while wiping my face clean of the grass burn and dirt stored in my mouth, I pull at my feet. While I am known in the village for my agility, my sister is known for being a Descent and, therefore, able to wield the Power of Dalleia. The proof of her power was wrapped around my left ankle in the form of a vine.

Used to the quick trick, I extracted my dagger from my scabbard placed on my hip and made a quick slice at the vine. Weakened by the clean cut, I unwrapped the vine from my ankle and made a note of the banded bruise already blooming. The sound of approaching footsteps came closer to me as my sister's shadow grew on the grass beside me.

"I suppose this means I win?" Her smirk was visible through her words. I didn't even have to turn to know that her hands were crossed across her slim chest in a mock pose. She passed me up in height years ago, standing a few inches taller than my small frame but still as slim as myself. I felt her dark brown, almond eyes glare at my weakened state.

"Only if winning means using dirty tricks." I sheathed my blade and rocked up onto my feet.

“Now Alina, how else would battles be won if not for a few tricks up one’s sleeve?”

I pivoted on my heel and laid the palm of my hand on her shoulder. “I suppose you're right. In that case, I win. I caught you before you reached the boulder.” My face now held the smirk as her’s faded into a shocked expression.

“That’s not how this works! I came to help you instead of running off without you. I should win simply out of being the better sister!” She was practically stomping her feet.

“Ahh, dear Janessa. When will you ever learn? I didn’t need your help. In fact, I am perfectly fine.” *Except for the taste of dirt still in my mouth.* “So there was no need for you to sacrifice your winnings for your sister. But if a pity winning of ‘best sister’ is what you want, then I have no reason to argue. I do have to tell you the dreadful news though. Sadly, there is no prize for being a pitied second.” With that I turned back on my heels with my sister’s protests meeting my uninterested ears. I started walking back to the village.

While the Ediran forest is what us Neswians love to brag about, it pales in comparison to our capital, Natrail. Sitting on top of the world's largest waterfall, the capital city towers over the land of Neswia. The Chief's house rests on the boulder that sits at the top of the waterfall, overlooking the land below. Nestled below the boulder, closest to the Chief's house, is my family home. Made purely of sources straight from the ground, the houses blend into their surroundings, but are large enough that when compared to the surrounding, it is obvious that they are man-made structures.

The sun reflected off of the water flowing across the stream, connecting the two houses as it plummeted down and past the boulder. Our own waterfall created from the mass plummeting down the cliff edge that the Chief's house straddles.

The frame of the house facing the cliff’s edge is the living quarters. The view above the waterfall opens the lands of Neswia to one’s eyes, and the view is breath-taking. With plains, rivers, and forests to venture, the land is a wonder, and it is all in the hands of the Chief.

A movement on the patio caught my eyes. Someone sat in a chair upon the edge of the cliff, hunched over a small object. The long wisps of hair catching in the wind gave him away; Jerran, the Chief's son and my fiance. The open patio view also has the benefit of providing the perfect environment for the Chief's son's favorite hobby, reading. Standing strong everyday, the only time that the natural born warrior was not completely aware of his surroundings was when he was infatuated with his most recent reading endeavour. Even from the bottom of the cliff, I could see his bronzed body exposed to the sun as he adjusted his literary world to draw closer to himself.

“Alina!”

My eyes snapped back to my sister who now has stopped walking to cross her arms at me. I realize that I have also stopped walking somewhere along the way to gaze at the Chief's house.

“You know, I think there still might be something on your face.” Jenessa leaned towards me and squinted. Her hand drew to her mouth while making a flicking motion. “Oh, nope. That is drool. You might want to wipe that off.”

At that I shifted into action. Jenessa already caught onto the playful rage sparked in my eyes and flicked her hand to shoot a singular vine at the base of my feet. I knew that that would be her first move and was already jumping to the side of the projectile. With a role across the land to catch my lost balance, I sprung up next to my sister. All she had for defense was a surprised scream.

I threw my weight against her abdomen and she defenselessly fell to the floor. I moved my head from her torso to look at her face that would be stricken with disappointment with herself. But it wasn't. Instead she was grinning at me like I am the idiot laying on the ground by force. As my own facial expression contorted into confusion, Jenessa flicked her finger and made a small twirl. Two vines sprung from the ground on either side of my hands and clamped them against the ground.

As I was struggling against the vines, now grasping my hands and legs against the ground, Jenessa slid out from under me. She dusted her hands as she rose and stared down on my defenseless form. "How is that for you, Al?"

I shook my head with an exhausted sigh, letting my shoulders sink into a sign of surrender. "Just get rid of them already."

"I don't know, I kind of like this. I could leave you past dinner." Another flick of her finger and another vine made a full two wraps along my torso before synching me to the ground. Now my entire front side was tightly connected to the solid mass of dirt, save for my face that was level with the plain. "Then you might miss out on your night with Jerran. Oh!" She clasped her hands together in pleasure. "Yes, I do like that idea. I like that idea a lot."

At that, Jenessa turned on her heels and continued her walk to the village.

She exited my line of sight so I strained my neck to face her. "Wait! Wait! You can't do this to me!" I called out at her, but it was futile. I could even tell from her swaying saunter that she was wearing a smirk. "Ugh. Fine! I am sure father would be pleased to hear that you are abusing your powers!"

Her hand waved off the notion. "Psh, he would be proud that his one blessed daughter is strong enough to accomplish this."

This is what I get for thinking myself best to my sister. She was the one Descendent out of us. Even though I am the eldest, she was more educated and trained than I am. She stands high on the pedestal of our family inheritance for Neswia, and I stand ideally by her side. She simply played these foolish matches with me to remind us both of her placement.

I was supposed to hold her position as the eldest, but she outpaced me long ago, just as she outgrew me.

I gritted my teeth and tilted my head to face up on the waterfall. Seated on the top, the top of Jerran's brown hair was visible over the edge of the balcony. Even though my sister took my crown, I still had the future Chief as my future spouse. One way or another, both my sister and I will both be ruling Neswia as the next generation.

Obviously I couldn't see his face from this great distance, but it was easy to picture Jerran's glowing face, enjoying my presence even though I paled in comparison to my sister. He was the man destined to rule over our people and all with good reason.

I sighed and laid back into the ground with my cheek falling flat against the ground, feeling the cool dirt moisten my skin. Time to get to work on the vines that still wrapped around my limbs.

## Chapter 2

Standing outside the door of the Chief's dining room, I heard the rise of laughter surge through the room. I rubbed at the bruised rings wrapping across my wrist. They were still red and raw from the struggle, but they should only be sparse scabs by morning.

Checking my loose brown pants and tight black top that I just changed into at my house, I pushed back the door and slid into the room. The dining room of the Chief's house was spacious with a slanted ceiling that rises high and made of a light wood. The floor was also made of a light wood that is accompanied with a deep red rug positioned beneath the large dining table. With enough room to host our family of four and the Chief's family of three, the table was made of a dark oak that was moved from the Ediran forest. The shutters are closed for the night, but this room stood in front of the waterfall. When the shutters stand open, the whole wall is moved and one can stare across the expanse of Neswia. For now, the room was lit with several gas lanterns placed around the room.

The room was full of shared happiness and familiar laughter.

The laughing and pleased expressions quietly died out as the door clicked into place, and a voice from the chair on the left side of the table that sits closest to the door spoke, "Took you long enough." Jenessa.

My father lifted his glass towards me from his seat at the left end of the table. "I believe your younger sister is soon to take the lead in your skirmishes, Lina." Even after all these years, my father still tried hinting at the potential that I have. I let it pass as I always did. My guess was that he relies on that phrasing because a small part of him still hopes that his eldest daughter will show powers of being a Descendent. But for me, that hope was driven away years ago as my sister grew strong with power, and I found myself training by myself with common muscle workouts in the patch of forest outside my bedroom door.

My father's face was stubbled with a grey outgrowth that matches his grey shoulder length hair. Glowing with its usual happiness, his signature facial expression speaks of shared memories and invited friendliness. Our family was trained in the art of reading a person and acting accordingly, but as far as I can tell, my father was born with the ability.

Leaning back in his chair with one leg propped on the arm, he emitted a casual persona that is reserved for only his Chief.

My mother tapped my father. "Roile, don't say that. Alina trains to the best of her ability. We all know as soon as we are awoken by her stumbling back into the house in the night hours. My Lina is strong." I nodded in thanks to my mother, but I knew we were both playing along for the sake of my father. My mother sat to the left of my father, her back to the closed shutters. Her once slim body now seems frail with age, yet her almond-shaped eyes speak of hidden strength. She mimicked my father's mood through a soft laugh that she attempted to conceal with her hand. On her middle finger lay a simple wooden ring: my parents' wedding band. Her hazel eyes match the deep wood and sparkle with the lights in the room.

An eye roll from my father. "I wasn't saying she wasn't strong my dear Nimdre. I was simply stating that Jenessa has her fair share of victories over the past few matches." My father uses a fork to pick up a morsel of meat and brings it to his mouth. Nimdre. The term is shared across many couples across the lands of Rylina, a word that is powerful enough to be known across every culture. A word that describes a bond more powerful than marriage, the bond that is formed between Nimdres is permanent. While the bond is not as distinct as it was during the War, when the purest form of magic was flowing through everyone's blood, it is still powerful enough to draw a pair together in mind and soul even now. Everyone has one Nimdre within the world of Rylina, and it is rare to find them.

Gladly, my parents found each other and, acknowledging their naturally shared bond, my mother accepted her role at my father's side. The crown of the Agede was a heavy one but, as if the Nimdre bond intended it to happen, my mother was strong enough to share the responsibility of that inherited crown with my father.

I stepped forth and drew my chair back. At this, the chair to my right pushed back and a tall, strong figure rose. Jerran motioned for me to sit, and I complied. With ease, he pushed forth my chair and returned to his seat.

Glancing at him, I said my thanks. His purple eyes returned my glance as he flashed a smile. Jerran's canine teeth extended slightly longer than the rest of his teeth which would make anyone else a fright, but the startling feature accompanied his inner-soft personality in my eyes.

Across the table, sitting to the left of my mom, Jerran's mother said, "Ah, my son. The most perfect gentleman." Even aged, Julianna's body was still slim and alluring. Julianna's strapped, magenta shirt was clasped at the dip of her shoulder, exposing her marked brown skin. Her black hair bounced past her shoulders in long wisps. But her striking purple eyes were sure to entrance anyone not from her home country. Julianna's everlong beauty and eyes are the distinct features of a Canmoan, a territory on the sister side of Rylina. As she talked, her elongated canines flashed the light of the lanterns. "And my husband of course. Bless Nidean and Dallei for me being surrounded by such perfect gentlemen." Her purple eyes slid from her son to her husband sitting to her left.

The characteristics that craft Jerran that his mother doesn't share are obviously from his father. While Julianna was slim and shocking with elegant beauty, the Chief was built and marred with years of scars.

The Chief's strong hand interlaced with his wife's who shared matching leafy marks that twined up to both of their elbows. His muscular body took up a great portion in his extravagant chair that sat at the end of the table. With a peppered grey beard and matching shoulder length hair, the Chief looked like the older, stronger brother of my father. His body had aged, but that didn't do much to stop the muscle definition of a trained warrior. Even though he was intimidating and seen as a pillar of strength across the territory, here was the toughest man reddening with fluster at his wife's words. "Julianna, I thank both Dallei and Nidean every day for bringing you into my life." He leaned towards his wife and planted a loud kiss on Julianna's full lips.

"Ahh, come on, Heliad. We are not in Canmoa as you might be tricked to think." My father shouted through his mouthful of meat.

"Ah yes, that is right. We are in the land of my home, not the entrancing land of my Nimdre's." Heliad pulled back from his wife and leaned back into her chair, still clasping Julianna's hand. "It is a beautiful land though. We should visit again soon. Doesn't that sound nice?" His eyes locked with Julianna's.

"Oh please, and see my countless siblings? I would rather not. I enjoy the quietness of this land quite well." Julianna waved off her husband with her free hand, showing her distaste for his suggestion.

A muffled interjection emitted from my father. Everyone faced his way as his throat bobbed with the strain of swallowing a large bit. "You know, the Chief might have a point here. It might be good for Jerran to make a return to the land. A reminder of our peace in living flesh. Also, it wouldn't hurt for the boy to see the other side of his heritage again. Embrace both sides so he can be a stronger blend of you both."



A light giggle escaped Julianna. "Do you see my boy? No way anyone can miss his Canmoan eyes or teeth. Both signatures of my heritage that will soon watch over this village. I don't think you can get much more obvious than that."

A hearty laugh from Heliad. "Have you seen that boy walk lately? He walks like a through and through Neswian warrior!" This earned Jerran a crisp slap on the back from his father. "Alina walks more like a Canmoan than this boy does."

"True, my daughter has almost mastered the feet of assassin's, but it is nowhere close to the natural step of the Canmoans." My father's eating utensil flicked toward Julianna. Having been to the land before and returning later to our homeland suddenly aware of every step of the people around me, I knew exactly what natural talent of the Canmoans he was referring to. "Having Jerran immersed in Canmoan culture for a few days might benefit him in several ways. It just might awaken those hidden sides of him that he gets from his mother. Just imagine a man of his strength able to sneak up on you! Now that is the great power of a Chief."

Jerran chose to speak up at that moment. "If we choose to actually follow through with this then, I think Alina should join us."

The room fell into silence. Then, laughter. Roile and Heliad rocked back in their chair, shaking with roaring laughter. My mother's face lightened with a satisfied smile as Julianna's smile drew into a mischievous grin.

"Ah, the love birds in the town of love. How perfect." Jenessa finally broke her stare from her plate to smirk at me. I noticed now that she has changed into a green, loose-fitting shirt complemented with black leggings. Green, the attire fit for the future Agedede of Neswia. Even though she was soon to be the master of the territory's interactions, she was having a difficult time hiding the pure joy at me squirming under the eyes of the whole table.

"I um," I cleared my throat, "I think that would be nice. I would love to see Canmoa again and meet your side of the family, Julianna." Julianna has insisted I call her "mother" several times now, which I refuse to do. Even after all the years Jerran and I have been fitted for engagement.

Julianna clasped her hands together. "Oh, yes! They would love to meet you! They might even give us some input for the wedding." At this, she used her one free hand to grasp the hand of my mother.

My mother's smile was still drawing the lines of her crow's feet. "That sounds pleasant." My mother adds to Jerran's suggestion.

"A little bit of Canmoan in a Neswian wedding?" My father made a face of contemplation even though this had been the intention of the wedding since the very idea was conceived. "Judging from the first one, it is bound to be fun." A flick of his fork indicated his change of motive for pleasure to a political stance. "Also, it will send out a good message about the first royal offspring expressing both his heritages while being the husband of the most influential wedding in the history of Neswia."

Influential wedding was putting it light. Not only was Jerran the first royal child of two different countries, but we were also the first of the Agedede and Chief families to marry. Jerran and I were the first opposite sex offspring of the Chief and Agedede families which made marriage easy among the two families. Ever since the beginning of Neswia, the Chief and their Agedede were never of opposite sex, meaning that there was never marriage between the two families. Until us. Jerran and I grew up together and quickly found that we were chosen by Dalleia to be joined in marriage.

Jerran was the first offspring of two countries' royal blood in the history of Rylina. His mother was the third Princess of Canmoa, and his father was the Chief of Neswia.

As soon as I was born, the change in the connection between Chief and Agede was apparent. At first, it was believed that the involvement of another race in the creation of Jerran was the reason for the difference in sex between the two leaders of Neswia. Soon after, it was realized that our birth was a sign from our Dalleia to finally retire the two roles to create a singular leader for Neswia. With our marriage, the two separate roles of Chief and Agede will forever retire as our child will inherit the roles of both.

That was what we first believed at least.

Then by the age of twelve, we realized that my power was never to manifest. I had started my blood cycle and still possessed no power. If a person does not manifest their power by maturity, they will never inherit power. While I possessed no gift from Dalleia, my sister was the first to be significantly blessed in generations. I trained for years on end, hoping to become a better vessel for Dalleia, but I never showed a drop of power.

The sign of Jerran and I being joined was changed once more. Our marriage was then the sign of Dalleia blessing the choice to unite the countries after centuries of peace. Dalleia's Nimdre present to Julianna and Heliad was a perfect Nimdre for their son. I was the gift of Neswia. Never to be blessed with the power of Dalleia, instead the gift of Dalleia.

Julianna clapped with excitement. "If I get to bring my future daughter, then I will be more than happy to return to Canmoa! I will make a word home that rooms must be reserved. That is three of course." She smiled at Jerran and me specifically, meaning that one room was to be shared between the soon-to-be-wedded.

"It's set then. Heliad, Julianna, Jerran, Alina, and I will head out the day after next to Canmoa. We will send a messenger in the morning to get a day's start for preparations. Varonica and Jenessa will serve as temporary Agede and Chief while we are away. It will be good training for Jenessa, too. See how well she can handle the village without me."

"I will even give Jenessa room while you are gone so she can prove that she is fully capable of being Agede here soon." My mother suggested.

My father released a low chuckle. "Don't get rid of me so easily, Varonica, I still have a few years in me. I am not too sure about the old Heliad over there." He raised his glass of wine toward the Chief and he returned the gesture along with a hefty laugh. "As for my daughter, I know she is fully capable of taking my position. This trip will be simply a reminder to the country that they are in capable hands for the next generation."

My mother lifted her glass to her mouth and took a sip of her water. "Good, I was worried that you have no faith in your daughters."

"Of course I do. If it isn't enough, I am marrying one to the future Chief while the other is being trained to take my place as Agede. Both of my children are going to lead all of Neswia, and I have complete faith in them."

"Thank you, Father." I took my turn to raise my glass and offer my gratitude to my father. He accepted my gesture with a wink and a wide grin.

"Thank you, Agede." My sister took the more humble rotation and nodded her head at our father.

My father turned to look at my mother, "See, I have full faith in my daughters."

"All this talk of your daughters, yet no talk of my son?" The Chief raised an eyebrow from his reclined chair that he teetered on the back two legs. "He is worthy of Dallaei's attention after all!"

Julianna stroked his arm and he eased his chair back towards the ground, but he was still leaning heavily backwards. "Yes my Nimdre, everyone sees the man our son has become, especially those seated at this table. No need to brag about it again."

"Well since you brought it up, I might as well!" At this realization, the Chief sat down his utensils to free his hands for his elaborate story telling. Julianna rolled her purple eyes, but it was with the usual playfulness. "Have I told you the story of Jerran capturing his first beast in the forest?"

"Yes, father. They have heard plenty of those stories." The room was already nodding in confirmation at Jerran's observation. "How about we talk of more recent events since we already know everything about the past. I know I would like to talk about the training of the young warriors."

"Now that is boring." Julianna replied to her son. "How about some dessert? Now no one can be upset about that." She rose from her seat to get the desert she had made earlier.

Heliad scooted his chair back without a moment's hesitation. "On my way."

The remainder of us collected our plates into the middle of the table to make room for Julianna's dessert.

My father continued the conversation as the other two left for the kitchen. "So, Jerran, how is the training going? Obviously it is beneficial for you, but are the others able to keep up?" It was true, one glance at Jerran and it was easy to tell he was a trained warrior. With defined muscles still visible through his loose fitting shirt and flecks of scars peppering his skin like his father, his past of long days and nights training in various terrains around Neswia was apparent.

While Neswia no longer had a need for warriors ever since the War, it was one of the many traditions passed down through our ancestors. Instead of being warriors on the battlefield for Dalleia, the warriors now held positions like hunting, machinery, farming, or building. Some took a different approach with their skills and used them for theatrical or competitive means.

Jerran was trained with the warriors because it is the traditional role as the Chief's first born. Whether the first born is male or female, they are enrolled when they are of age to train until the time of coronation. Not to say that past coronation the Chief loses any of these skills, Heliad is an example of the never waning muscle mass that a warrior gains through the trials.

Jerran set down his final silverware on the pile of dishes. "Yes, the others are doing quite well. The trails are not simple for me either though, there is plenty of training that I still have to endure. As for the rest, they are still training as hard as they can. The motivation is all over the place, but those who didn't have enough already dropped out long ago. Everyone who is left is in it for the long haul. I am sure the trails aren't exactly the same as when Dalleia was around but from what I have read, we have stayed true to the old traditions. For how much it challenges the body and mind, it still makes a solid warrior in the end."

Heliad and Julianna entered the room, Heliad with a large, crystal bowl of custard and Julianna with seven wooden bowls. Heliad paused in the doorway, "Talk of warrior training? As soon as I exit the room? You owe me a conversation now, Jerran." Heliad set the bowl on the table and crossed his arms, glaring at his son.

“Oh please, father. As if you aren’t the first one to be notified of the training. I am sure you know more than I do.”

Julianna returned to her seat as Heliad pulled the chair out for her. Jerran stood from his chair as it made a sound of wood rubbing wood. He started to ladle a heavy spoonful into the wooden bowls, passing them to me when they were full. I passed them to my sister and they continued their rotation until one reached my mother.

Heliad huffed a heavy sigh and collapsed into his chair, already leaning into the hard mass. “Yes, I still overlook the training of the warriors as the Chief, but that isn’t the same as hearing it from you. I only hear the stats of everyone, not the first-person experience.”

“And how are the numbers, Heliad?” My father inquired, now including Heliad in the conversation he so desperately wanted to be a part of.

Heliad was already in a pleasant mood, but it seemed to deepen when presented with the chance to talk about the warrior training. “Surprisingly well. This upcoming generation must feel an urge to surpass their elders because the turn out and performance numbers are more steady than they have been in years. Oh, Jerran, there is even a boy who just surpassed a record that has been held for more than fifty years! He did... his name is... Oh, Jordith, I can’t remember.”

“Language, Heliad!” Julianna gave Heliad’s hand a small slap. Jordith, the Ancient of Atral. While using the name of Ancients tied to other countries has long been frowned upon since the countries live in harmony, the one exception is Atral’s Ancient. Atral is known as the land of darkness and barely any of their people have left the hidden country. Surrounded by a dense forest and high mountains, no one dares to go in, and no one dares to exit. Jordith is said to be the cruelest of the Ancients, formed from the darkness itself. Another rumor is that he self-destructed when he fell into Hibernation, taking a large portion of the Atralian population with him. The Atralians who have entered our population never speak of the land of darkness, and we are too afraid to ask. However, his name is now used as a form of cursing unpleasantness.

“Neron. His name is Neron.” Jerran said between bites. “He broke the record for the most weight a warrior can carry up a tree in the Ediran forest. I was there to witness it.”

Heliad shot forth, pointing at his son. “See! Like that! I just heard about it but you were there to witness it firsthand!”

Jerran held out a bowl of custard to his father.

“Oh, thank you.” Heliad returned to a calm state and leaned back in his chair, licking his spoon clean of the desert.

“It wasn’t even that entertaining, Father. We strapped him up with bags of sand and then watched him for the first few meters. He was hugging the tree with all four limbs as he slowly moved one at a time. Then we lost him once he passed the first layer of branches. After a while, we saw his feet break through the first layer. He eventually touched down into the floor, and we all helped take the bags off. He didn’t fall to the ground when he got back, simply stood there, red in the face, as we took off the bags. The only thing to show that he made it to the top was a pinecone that only grows on the top layers of the Ediran trees.” He finished filling the final bowl and sat down. “Thank you for the desert, Mother.”

Everyone echoes their thanks and continues to eat their custard.

“This is truly a beautiful recipe, Julianna.” My mother, always complimenting the chef on their accomplishments. “It’s so rich and yet smooth. You must share it with me.”

“Of course. The recipes of Canmoa are always open for the crafts of Neswia.”

“I have to agree that that was some mighty fine custard there, Julianna.” My father made a show of patting his belly before stretching his arms away from himself with a heavy sigh. “A good invitation of what is to come in Canmoa. We must take that as our sign of parting so we can get some sleep for tomorrow. Tomorrow is going to be all about preparation so we have to all be working on full capacity.”

My father stood and the rest of the table followed suit. Hugs were exchanged. Heliad embraced me in a tight hug followed with a slap on the back. Julianna hugged me with a firmness and then held me at an arm's length before telling me that I do look stunning tonight.

Then there was Jerran. He pulled me in tight, his chin resting on top of my head. His thick arms encased me completely. I was home within those arms. Then he pulled back slightly to place a small kiss on my lips. I took the next moment to stare into his bright purple eyes while he only had my dull hazel eyes to stare at. We had not had much time together recently, with his constant training. But with this trip to Canmoa, we would have plenty of time to ourselves and each other's side. Starting tomorrow, we would again be inseparable.

“Ugh, talk about love birds.” My sister, always the one to ruin a moment.

I rolled my eyes and took a step back from my fiancé.

“Ahh, I thought it was cute.” Julianna made a pouty face and crossed her arms.

“That would be the Canmoan speaking, my *Nimdre*.” Heliad placed his arms around his wife to draw her in closer.

I coughed to test my voice. “Well, bye Julianna and Heliad. Jerran.” I waved my good-byes and made my exit as my family turned to follow.

It was as I was crossing the threshold of the door when a thought of how to start the next day struck me. “Jerran!” I pivoted around, catching Jerran from walking out the front door. He turned to face me, an expression of questioning presented on his face. “Would you like to visit the Natrail Market tomorrow?”

The corner of his mouth caught into a grin as I am sure he was picturing the magnificent market just as I was in that moment. “I would enjoy that.”

I smiled back, pleased that I was able to start my day with the things that mattered most to me, Jerran and fine pastries. “I will see you first thing then.”

“See you then, Lina.”

“Bye, Jerran.”

### Chapter 3

I woke to the morning light breaking through the cracks of the shutters, hitting me directly in the eyes. Stretching my arms, I rolled out of bed and dressed for the day. A flowing pair of black fabric forms my pants and my brown close-fitted shirt pairs with a loose blue cardigan. I deemed it as casual attire for the future Chief's wife to wear around the village.

I made my way to the room shutters, opening by wall to my patio. My room didn't face the waterfall edge, but it did face a dense forest. The morning sun pierced the breaks within the branches and shone by columns of light. I took a deep breath of the fresh air. In the distance a four-legged animal with short, brown fur stood with an offspring. The young one had the starting of white horns that

bumped from its head. The elder stopped eating and its delicate ears flick up, followed by its head. Elongated horns wove together, creating a pointed temple on top of its white, speckled head.

Its blackened eyes found me, and we stared at each other. The smaller one noticed something off and glanced at the elder. Its eyes then met the gaze of its elder, ending on me. After a moment, it resumed eating the grass on the forest floor. Although the fawn found me to be unimportant, the elder retained its steady stare. It even had one ear pointed to me and the other in the direction of the fawn. Its eyes shone with uncertainty but underneath seemed to be a layer of curiosity.

“Al! Jerran is here!”

I jumped and faced the door, startled at the sudden yelling. Worried about my morning companions, I quickly turned back to the forest. Two white bottoms with a long, thin tail leats behind the treeline, out of my view.

With a huff, I yelled back to my sister, “Be there in a second!”

A soft knock tapped against my door.

“Come in.”

A tanned hand clasped the opening door, followed by the rest of the muscled form of Jerran. “Good morning.”

A smile spread across my face as he made his way across my room. My arms automatically opened to embrace him. “Good morning.”

His arms folded across my body and his chest pushed against my face. My hands found their way to his shoulder blades as I pulled him close to me. We stayed like this on the patio for a minute before he pulled back enough to look me in the eyes.

“Are you ready to start the day? There is plenty on the list for the trip, but we have plenty to bring with us at our request.” His eyes flicked across my face, reading my emotions that were displayed there. “And I am sure you will request something from the bakery.”

My grin was true as I said, “Yes. Today is going to be wonderful. I even made sure to skip breakfast so I have plenty of room for food from the city”

Jerran pulled me back to his chest, his hand placed on the back of my head. “Good. I am looking forward to today, also.” He planted a kiss on the top of my head. “Let’s get going then.”

“Okay, let’s go then.” I took the first step to the bedroom door and Jerran was quick on my heels.

The dirt roads toward the village made for a silent walk, save for the birds chirping a morning song. We walked the path, standing only a foot from each other. The sun shone bright, the autumn bite not yet settled in yet. The road was two simple paralleling dirt paths that were shaped by the wheels of countless carriages. The distance from our houses on top of the fall to the village down the river was about a mile. Evergreen trees sprinkled the sides of the path, providing shelter for the birds singing the breath of a new day. The crashing of the waterfall was still heard from where we stood, a soothing sound from the distance.

I broke the sounds of nature and asked Jerran, “How was your night?”

He continued to stare at the sky, examining the cloud formations far above. “After you left, I helped mom with the dishes and then went to my room. I continued reading this book about the legends surrounding the island of Biala Mohakio. The legends of that island are vast. To think that a

whole culture was to believe in such tales,” Biala Mohakio is another country that stayed mostly to themselves even after the War. With their brutal lifestyle in the coldest region in Rylina, the people of Biala Mohakio were chiseled into stone-hard soldiers who saw no need to travel to the mainland. Unlike Atral, their region was not a mystery saved for a small island in the bay that is actually a mystery for the people of Biala Mohakio, also. Plagued with monsters born from the same evil of Atral, the small island was a nightmare incarnate.

“That sounds interesting. I just got home, changed clothes, and fell asleep.” The village was starting to show around the bend in the road. A few wooden buildings joined the structures of the trees. That was just what was on the ground though. As the capital city, Natrail was the home to the largest tree city. While a layer of buildings rose from the floor, there was another level of structures in the trees. Spiraling staircases rose from several locations in the village, connecting the two layers of the city. Boardwalks grew from one tree to another in order to provide easy rotates between the upper level businesses.

As the capital city of Neswia, Natrail was born from the magic of the Blessed. Our ancestors built this city during the War. Since it was furthest away from other countries and was far enough from the water to not scare from sea warfare, our ancestors deemed this location the most suitable spot for a trade base. They made the most out of their newfounded base by adding multiple layers to the small, yet dense city. Everything that was built on this very ground was done so by the magic of the Blessed.

Lost in my own mind, wandering about the process in which the airwalks were grown, Jerran called me back to reality. “Where to? Any specifics for breakfast?” Jerran offered his arm to me. I folded my arm around his elbow.

I didn’t miss a beat. “I am craving something fluffy and made of bread.”

A light chuckle came from Jerran, knowing that he should have known my answer before he even asked. “Sounds like we will make our first stop at Ranees’s bakery. I am convinced that you are her biggest client.”

“Nothing wrong with that. I am proud to be the number one supporter of the finest bakery in Neswia. Even Rylina for that matter.”

Jerran chuckled at my declaration. “Strong words coming from someone who has traveled so little.”

“Even so, I know it is true.” We had reached the base of the first spiraling staircase. We started on our way up the steps that were grafted into the tree. The floor slowly pulled away as we ascended, and I could start seeing the rooftops of the one story buildings on the floor.

“Okay, if that is the consensus, then I will take your word for it. I have yet to have a bad piece of bread so I can’t argue.”

“You say that like the only way you can promote Ranees’s pastries is if you compare it to bad pastries.”

Jerran shrugged, obviously not understanding the topic as I did. It was fine with me though because now we stood in front of the shop doors. The smell of freshly cooked flour and sugar wafted out of the etched french doors. In the windows were barrels of loafs of bread, all crisped brown. Jerran opened the door and I followed step into the small shop. Shelves lined the interior, encasing the variety of pastries on display. From donuts to long loaves to brownies, Ranees baked everything one can desire.

I stopped my stride in front of the shelf on the back corner of the room. I was naturally drawn to this section because in front of me stood my favorite morning treat, a cinnamon sticky bun. I drew a paper bag from a small canister pegged onto the shelves. With a pair of tongs that rested by the tray of buns, I picked out the biggest bun and placed it in the bag.

I turned back around to find Jerran already at the front counter with a simple bran muffin. Rolling my eyes at his simplicity, I joined him.

“What?” He had a hint of laughter in his question.

“Oh, nothing. Just good to know that you are alright since you are still choosing the most boring thing in the whole shop.”

“Really? Boring? I think if I were boring I would have chosen a loaf of wheat bread.”

“No, that would have been more interesting.” I tapped the bell on the counter to alert Raneë of our purchase.

“What? How so?” A smile played on his lips.

“At least if you had chosen a loaf of bread, it would have made an interesting scene as to how you would eat it. A little fork taking little bites of a large loaf on a tiny plate.” I was making a motion of bringing an imaginary fork to my mouth when the kitchen doors behind the counter flew open. Out came a tall, lean woman with a floured, green apron.

“Alina! Jerran!” Raneë quickly maneuvered past the counter and embraced us in a hug. “How are you kids this morning?” Although Raneë was only twenty-five to Jerran’s twenty-one and my nineteen, she still called us terms like kids.

“Great, actually. Thank you for asking. We are just spending a day in Natrail before leaving to Canmoa tomorrow.” Jerran replied.

“Oh, Canmoa? I haven’t heard word about that yet.” Raneë stood back and placed her hands on her hips.

“Word hasn’t had time to travel yet. We made the decision to visit my mother’s family last night.”

“Oh, yes. Always fun to meet the In-Laws isn’t it Alina?” Raneë held up her hands to show her matching rings on her middle fingers. Her wedding was only last summer, I was in the second row when my father called forth those rings from Dalleia’s Tree. “I can send you with some of my food for the trip. I will send it to the Chief’s house by tonight.”

“Actually, that would be great. We are already making food preparations for the trip but I am sure Alina would be more than happy to snack on your bread throughout the trip.” Jerran stated, matter-of-factly.

“In that case, I will make sure to add sticky buns to the list.” She gave me a wink.

I returned the gesture with a wide smile. “Thank you, Raneë. I highly appreciate the offer. A taste of home across the world. Oh.” I then remembered the pastries on the counter and started to fish out a coin from my pocket.

“Oh please, you know those are in the house. For the future Chief and wife.” She gave a small cursey with her apron. “Think of it as a sample of my wedding present.”

“And you know that I insist.” I placed two coins on the counter. “Thank you again Raneë for making my morning splendid.”

“My pleasure, Alina. Enjoy the bun and enjoy the muffin, Jerran.”



With that we took our leave. Once the door fell into place behind us, I let out a small laughter. Jerran glanced down at me. "What is it now?"

"She even thinks you are boring with your bran muffin. And she is the one who cooks them! She probably expects the elders to purchase those!"

"No, she just told me to enjoy it." Jerran returned his focus to his muffin and started to peel away the wrapper.

"Sure, but did you hear her tone? She was like, 'enjoy your muffin, oh-bland-one.'" I added a tone of distaste to my Raneë impression.

"That is not at all how she sounded. And these muffins are the right amount of nutrition to start the day. That qualifies as a good choice, so I don't understand what your deal is."

"Do you hear that? You are judging your food off of its contents, not the fact that it tastes good. Sugar. Now sugar is what makes it taste good." To accent my point, I tore a piece of my sticky bun and raised it from the brown bag. I tossed it in my mouth and an explosion of sugar escaped the fluffy mass that melted on my tongue. "Now that is a way to start the morning."

"Of course I judge my food on its contents, otherwise you would be putting random things inside of your body." He took a bite of his muffin and mumbled out a few more words that I did not understand.

I rolled my eyes again at his logic.

Jerran wiped the crumbs from his face. "Okay, well where are we off to next?"

"How about we go on a shopping walk? I always love bringing something home for my mother." I licked my fingers, cleaning them off of the remainder of my sticky bun.

"Okay. Off to the market then."

We walked across the skybridge that formed a hexagon over the town square. Below, people gathered around a beautiful pond surrounded by narrow, pebbled paths and raw wood benches. There was an elderly couple leaning against each other on a bench while children raced around the pond, spooking the fish under the water. Two young adults walked across the small bridge, blushing as their hands grazed one another. Many lives, gathered in one place to share a moment of their life. Natrail had that power. A natural pull to love those around you, the same as you cherish yourself. One would find it quite difficult to be irritated when surrounded by such natural bliss. The opportunity to share one's happiness and experience the life of another is true bliss. I breathed in my own bliss as I leaned against the wooden rail, experiencing these intimate moments along with the people of the village.

"Let's get going, Lina." Jerran's hand brushed against my upper spine as he started in stride again. He had stopped but did not lean against the wooden rail as I did.

I stood up from the railing and instinctively brushed at my forearms for bark or splinters that might have parted from the wooden railing. The logs that craft the railing were never polished but after centuries of hands rubbing across them, they were without a stray sliver.

As I stood, I directed my eyes towards the shopping walk of Natrail. Even though I could not yet make out the building behind the massive trunks of trees, I knew the path I had to take in order to reach the famous marketplace. I had walked this very path myself for my entire life as my father had and the previous Agedë families before him. Walking above the treetops was the path of least resistance for a family that was known across the lands.

We passed a barber shop next. I waved at the clients waiting against the wall. The younger ones perked up at our presence. One even pulled his mother's dress, and her face pulled into a smile as she realized just who her son is causing a ruckus about.

The next windows were full of leaves of all shapes and sizes, some even adorned with buds. A fresh scent of exotic nature drifted from the shop doors and added an extra skip to my step.

A few other businesses passed by until we reached the archway of the shopping walk. Engraved in the wooden archway were the words "Market of Natrail". Standing mere meters away, wondrous smells of unique cuisine and captivating sounds of mastered instruments wafted out of the market.

Taking the first few steps into the market served as a shock everytime because nothing was ever the same as the last time. As the only widely solid floored boardwalk of Natrail, the Market of Natrail had three whole floors of vendors from across the world. Each floor was lit with small bulbs that were strung together across the ceiling, walkways, and railings. Not only was the structure itself breathtaking, but also the vast amount of people displaying their merchandise along with the amount of curious customers was enough to steal even the breath of a wealthy Ritzvian.

The aisle ways between the vendors left enough room for three lanes of people: one to look at the merchandise on the right side, another for the merchandise on the left, and the final row in the middle to flow the traffic. Jerran and I turned into the middle row and started searching left and right for anything that might catch our eye.

We didn't get far. Only a few booths in, I tugged at Jerran's arm to veer into the left side lane of onlookers.

In front of us sat a booth displaying simple, silver jewelry that held one distinct material each. There were necklaces interweaving metal and wood at the end and rings that held various jewels. My hand traced the curtain of necklaces that hung from the top of the booth.

Eyes started to turn in our direction. I could almost hear the words that began to whisper across the open floor, *the family of the Chief and Agede are here, the future Chief and his fiancé are here*. It usually didn't take long before we were noticed and the atmosphere shifted. I enjoyed those few moments before people start to notice; I imagined those moments of no tension within people is how it is to talk to people without them turning into what they are now, perfect for their Chief and Agede.

The marketer of the jewelry booth emerged from the shaded canopy and framed his face in the gap of the curtain of necklaces. He must have heard the murmurs because it seemed like he had not emerged to speak to any other possible clients.

"What can I get for you fine people?" He had a chipped front tooth that lisped his words slightly. His browned hair and muted red eyes clearly mark him as a Ritzvian. Explains the intricate detailed metal work that braces the jewels. People of Ritzvia are especially talented with metals due to their Ancient, Vicreno, being the Ancient of Fire. While Blessed Ritzvians were able to wield flames to their will, the diluted power of Vicreno now only supplied his descendents with the ability to withstand heat to some degree and to bend licks of flame. While it doesn't do much good in combat, it definitely is beneficial to those who wish to craft metals.

"Just looking for now." Jerran didn't notice the change of the people around us as he casually glanced across the works of the Ritzvian merchant. I don't think Jerran has ever noticed. The Chief has always asked his people to treat him and his family as equals so Jerran has always assumed that that is

what the people do. He thinks that this is how they act to everyone, but I notice the tension in the merchandiser's shoulders as his eyes flick between the two of us, no one else.

I forcefully drew my attention away from the merchant, trying to be as casual as Jerran standing besides me, oblivious to the drifting eyes. That was when one necklace caught my eye. It hung close to the end of the curtain of necklaces. "How about this necklace? I find it quite beautiful." My hand rested on a small, dark leather necklace that held a matte black stone on the end. My thumb caressed over the small stone, and I noticed the divets in the stone that ran smoothly to each other, resembling dense fog. My head tilted to the side, curious to know if the stone began to heat at my touch. "What is this stone?"

"That would be Onyx Smoke, rumored to be from the castle of Atral. I, myself, have no idea where the rock was found, since I bought it from a collector, but the only Onyx Smoke has ever been found in Atral." The merchant's hand reached forth and made contact with the stone. I didn't miss him pulling off the small, paper tag on the side of the necklace. "A mysterious stone that holds great beauty. That would be one higher coin for the pretty lady." A small price for a rare stone, especially since the other necklaces boasted two higher coins and they were simple rocks from the Neswian River.

"It is a rock, it can't be that mysterious." Jerran leaned in to see the Onyx Smoke for himself. "It is beautiful though. I will give it that. It would compliment your clothes, Lina."

He was talking about the darker tones that I wear compared to other Neswians. Usually the people of Neswia purchase lighter fabrics occasionally accented with darker tones, but I, as a self-trained warrior, find it more convenient to fill my closet with darker tones. Instead of rubbing out the grass stains earned from the unyielding forest floor, I was able to leave them as they were unseen in the dark tones. It is not frowned upon in my household, but rather a signature that the people of Newsia remember me for.

Mysterious or not, the necklace piqued my interest, and I agreed, it would pair well with my clothing.

I dug my hand in my pocket and emerged with two higher coins that were slightly larger than a regular coin and shaped like circles with one straight edge. I set them on the counter as the merchant unties the necklace from the canopy. His years of working with fine metals showed as his shaky hands jittered around until they touched the material they worked with day after day. He handed me the necklace, one hand supporting the stone and the other elongating the leather intertwined with the metal chain.

Careful not to touch the merchant's calloused hands, I drew the necklace towards myself. The solid stone was noticeably lighter than I thought it would be.

I held the necklace up, and Jerran answered my silent request, lifting the necklace from my hands. I turned and swiped my long, wavy hair over my shoulder. Jerran rested the stone above my chest and clasped the metal trinket at the end. My fingers traced over the stone again, noting that the stone grew warm at the touch of my skin.

By now, everyone was glancing at us as they passed by. I shifted uncomfortably at the purposeful glances that don't linger long. I started to enter the middle lane of people again so we could move onto the next booth when I noticed that Jerran wasn't following. I turned to find him scooting a coin toward the merchant as he stuffed something into his pocket.

"You coming?" I asked him.

“Yes. Anywhere you go.” He held out his hand and joined me in the middle lane, ready to search for the next booth that caught our eye.

We passed a few more booths, some selling bread, others selling musical instruments.

Jerran was caught by a bookshelf and we stopped to look at what was offered. He settled on three books: one of the technology of Ritzvia, one talking of the creatures of the sea bordering Neswia, and a final one of destinations in Canmoa.

To all the books, I simply raised a quizzical eyebrow to which Jerran response was, “I probably could finish these within a few moons. You are lucky I do not purchase more and make you carry them.”

On the second level of the market strip, there was a man playing an Ocarina. The flowing rhythm was gathering a crowd as they appreciated the man’s art. A smaller child in the front started to slowly dance to the music, swaying with a scarf in both her hands.

Walking again, we came across an herb stand. With both of our mothers’ love for cooking, we veered off in front of the stand. The young, doe eyed Neswian woman handed us some large quantities she deemed samples for the wives of the Chief and Agede. On top of the “samples”, we selected a few spices that we have picked up in our mothers’ many conversations of food since another thing we picked up from their conversations was that one can never have too many herbs on hand.

Before we took the stairs to the final floor of the Market of Natrail, we were stopped by a small crowd gathering by a vacant booth stall. In place of the booth was an Jutean man. His red, short cropped hair caught the lights and resembled fire. Although his hair distinctly placed his heritage, it wasn’t as breathtaking as the golden eyes that scanned the gathering crowd.

There were many Descendants who used their powers as a show, but the Jutean power was especially popular amongst the younger audience. With the Ancient, Sieno, who possessed the power of shape-shifting, the Descendents of Jutea were quite aware of their bodies’ capabilities.

The Jutean scanned the crowd one final time and began his performance. First, he pointed toward his right thumb before popping it out of place and then letting it dangle. Some children let out a shocked scream while others began to laugh in amazement.

A joint manipulator. Low-level like a lot of the Descendents, unlike when the Ancients were alive.

Juteans used to be fully-capable shape-shifters when their Ancient, Sieno, was alive to bless his people directly with powers. Now, like every other country, the only power remaining is diluted powers from once powerful ancestors.

For Neswia, the only power that remains of Dalleia is slight influence of plant growth or nature manipulation. My sister was the most powerful Newsian today, but her power was nothing compared to the Blessed. The Blessed of Dalleia were able to spontaneously move the very ground we walk on or manipulate entire trees or even animals.

But the dilution of power also held many positive impacts on Rylina. When the people of neighboring cities no longer saw each other as enemies capable of killing them with hidden abilities, the territory lines began to blur. About 300 years after the War, children of mixed heritage were common in four of the six territories. Without power, peace befell Rylina.

The proof of that history stood in front of me within the Market of Natrail. A Jutean man was flexing his arms over his head and returning them to the front of his body like a jump rope as Neswian children with skin darkened by Canmoan heritage giggle at the entertainment.

After a few tricks, parents started to hand coins to their children to hand to the man. He thanked them with a double-jointed thumbs up that he popped in and out of place. The children walked away with their parents, trying to see how flexible their own thumbs are.

Jerran and I descended the stairs to the final floor. Another floor of countless merchant booths bloomed in front of my eyes. We wandered the floor before exiting the market completely, satisfied with our purchases.

“Where to next?” Jerran asked me as he adjusted the bag carrying his purchases.

“I think I have had my fill for the day. The family is probably packing by now so I should join them.” I faced our houses and sure enough, the sun was suggesting a few hours past noon.

“You’re right. We should join everyone else.” With that, Jerran extended his free arm to me, and we began our walk back before our trip to Canmoa starting tomorrow.

#### Chapter 4

Packing was a simple task with everyone simply taking care of their own belongings and the choafers caring for the rest. I was greeted in the morning with Ranees’s freshly baked cinnamon sticky bun.

Then, the traveling started.

Jerran, Julianna, and I shared one carriage while Father and Heliad occupied the second. From the moment the horses pulling the carriage jolted the cabin into movement, conversation started.

“Mother.” Jerran was the first to speak since my mouth was already stuffed with one of Ranees’s cinnamon sticky buns, still warm on my tongue as the fluffy skin fell apart, and Julianna was watching our home fade into the distance.

At the mention of her name, however, Julianna had turned over to face her son. “Yes?”

“Most of my knowledge about Canmoa comes from books since the last time we had been there was for visits when I was younger,” he turned to face me to allow me to emphasize the next point he had to make, “and I am sure that Alina also remembers very little of her lessons.” *Lessons that she stopped taking after she lost her role as Agede.* Jerran would never directly say such words that he knew would trigger feelings of guilt but they were hidden beneath.

Taking his cue, I added, “Yes. Especially since I never visited the land myself.”

“Well where is there to even start?” Julianna shifted from a position that faced her out the window to face directly toward us. She began rattling off a list of possible things to discuss about her home culture. “The Palace? The royal family? The economy? Perhaps local lore?...”

Jerran’s interest already peaked with the first suggestion. “How about the Palace?”

Julianna gave a light-hearted giggle at the same time my lips tugged into a smile. Of course Jerran would talk about all the possible topics he could. Julianna could mention one of the most boring topics of Canmoa first, and Jerran would absorb it all. He was a natural lover of knowledge, and he would never turn down an opportunity to learn as much as he possibly could.

Julianna leaned back into her seat, knowing that this was going to be a long conversation. The spark in her eye told me that she would love talking about her homeland as much as Jerran would love to hear of it. “Well, the Palace stands as the most precious structure of all of Canmoa. The Palace rests in the middle of the capital city, Kaliod. The building dates back as far as the Ancients and has been

expanded throughout the years. I even spent my entire childhood in that Palace and there are still surprises to me.”

“But you will find fairly soon why the Palace is the most sacred place for all of Canmoa.”

Jerran shifted to place his elbows on his knees as he settled his chin into the palm of his hand. His thinking pose. He was now truly engaged in the conversation. “I read that it is the most valuable building because it is the last standing structure that Nidean helped to design.”

Julianna’s head tilted back and forth in compilation. “I suppose that is true, but there is more to it than that. Nidean crafted the building himself, yes, but as the Ancient of Passion himself, Nidean crafted the Palace as a place of absolute pleasure. Every detail of the building is hand-engraved by Canmoans and lined with the finest materials Rylina has to offer. As a child, I would try to count how many colors there were in the main foyer, but I was never able to count them all. Even the purples. I was never able to count how many purples were mingled in those walls.” Julianna’s own purple eyes unfocused as she remembered far off childhood memories.

“The main color of the palace has always stayed the same, never fading despite the years and sun exposure. Purple. Beautiful purples that cover each wall. It is rumored that after the building was first built, Nidean created a specific blotch of paint for each person who helped build the Palace, and the paint was of the exact shade of each of their eyes. Together, the people painted the walls, overlapping each shade to create beautiful streaks of all the purples of Canmoa.

“Following Nidean’s tradition, once each new addition is built, the builders will create paint of the same shade as their eye and will paint the interior together.”

“Have there been any new additions since the merging between the countries?” Jerran was still posed in his thinking stance.

“Yes. And with that, some of the corridors now incorporate reds, golds, maybe a streak of green, and, of course, brown.” Julianna turned toward me, with my darkened hazel eyes. “But of course the structure of the building is just the beginning of what the Palace means to the people. The true love of the building comes with the traditions it holds.” Julianna’s mood turned from her childish fondness to her lips curling up into a mischievous smirk. “Including the eternal parties.”

Now, it was my turn to be engaged. “Eternal party?”

“Yes. The ever going pleasure of Canmoa is most potent in close proximity to the grounds of the Palace.”

While Jerran was still engaged in the conversation for pure pleasure of knowledge, I was now listening intently to learn exactly what an “eternal party” entailed. Social outings of course were fine with me, being the center of the Agede family, the former Agede-in-training, and the Gift of Dalleia bound to make one as such. However, there was only so long before the looks of pity became too much. Standing between Jerran and Jenessa, my lack of power is always obvious. Either Jerran’s honed body contrasted my thin body or Jenessa’s natural-born magic demonstrated my completely absent magic. Even though I was redeemed as the Gift of Dalleia, people couldn’t help but feel sorry for me. Sure, the girls were jealous that I was destined to marry Jerran, being both handsome and smart, but it didn’t stop them from feeling sorry for what I lacked in a family tied to greatness.

Standing on stage was different. I could always look across the mass without seeing the looks they gave me specifically. But in a crowd, it was impossible to hide from their pity coated eyes as they talked about me in a lower tone.

A party? I could manage. An eternal one however? Depends on how often I can visit my chambers without being questioned.

“And where will our room be compared to this?”

Julianna’s lips drew into a smile. “Oh, your rooms will definitely be concealed from the main foyer.”

Jerran knew his mother’s smirks as well as I did. “And what does that mean, mother?”

“Well as far as the entire continent of Rylina is concerned, you both are claimed.” Julianna looked between us. “Which means that you will get one of the master bedrooms on the end of the hallway. In these rooms, no one will bother you and the rooms are completely soundproof.”

“So no one will follow us into the room?”

“No one will even touch your door once you two settle in. You two are lucky since even though you don’t have any marks or jewelry showing that you are claimed, people of both Canmoa and Neswia know what you both look like and your situation.” Julianna heaved a small sigh as she shifted to look out the window. Green plains now spanned across the horizon like a sea of green. “It was the same for Heliad and me. Everyone knew it was unique for a Princess of Canmoa to be marrying the future Chief of Neswia. And to make it even more notable, it wasn’t even of political charge. We knew from the moment we met in the court that we were Nimdres.”

Everyone knew the story of Heliad and Julianna, especially in our close families. The two fell in love instantly, as the Nimdre bond is intended. A few months later, the two held their first marriage ceremony in Canmoa. It was there that they were both inked with the tattoo to mark both of their heritage. While a traditional Canmoan Nimdre mark is made of solid black bands, theirs was a leafy mark that reflected the lands of Neswia. Then they returned to Neswia for their final Nimdre ceremony. It was there they were united by two wedding bands from the Tree of Dalleia in the Ediran forest. While the traditional Neswian wedding band is engraved with leaves, theirs stood as a solid band to reflect Canmoa tradition.

“I guess our movements around each other said as much, too, because as we entered our chambers that same time Heliad had visited, that was the first time that no one had followed me into a room. Usually, other Canmoans would follow me into my room because they knew that a Canmoan was always accepting of an after-party company, whatever that may imply for the time. And this was especially the case for a Princess of the Canmoan court.

“However, with news spreading that the leader of Neswia had found me to be his Nimdre upon visiting, no one had dared break the golden rule of Canmoan bedroom etiquette.”

“Bedroom etiquette?” Jerran still was leaning heavily on his thighs as his mother’s eyes shifted from the window, to her son. The curl of her lips told enough that Jerran had asked the exact question she wanted to hear.

“Yes. When a couple has been spoken for, no one may enter their shared quarters unless both invite them in.” It was the final line that was to Julianna’s usual taste. “But usually a couple will accept extra company to warm their Palace bedroom.” As she saw Jerran’s cheeks butter with pink, Julianna turned back to the window, this time donning a satisfied grin.

With that single line, Jerran, Julianna, and I turned to observe the gradually changing landscape for our own. Silence encased our carriage as the sounds outside grew in noise.

However, silence doesn't last long with an eager-to-learn son and a mother willing to tell the wonders of her world.

The Neswian landscape blurred into Jutean grasslands as Jerran, Julianna, and I talked. The conversations merged from pastries to Canmoan politics to marriage to clothing.

We made two stops in Jutea simply for restroom breaks and munched on foods during the ride. Jutea was a narrow country so the ride through the hot, dry land was quicker than the trip to the Neswia-Jutea border.

With only one night of sleep spanning the ever moving travel, we reached the streets of Canmoa. After traveling on dirt roads from Newsia to Jutea, the change to gravel paths was immediate. Canmoa held fewer roads than the other two countries we traversed since the people only have specific locations that they choose to gather. There were smaller roads to reach homes or unexplored lands, but the main roads were well traversed within the country which meant each was specifically paved for the usage of carriages.

We followed the main road starting in Jutea that led to the capital of Canmoa, Kaliod. As our carriages pulled in front of the royal housing, my eyes were almost blinded from the light bouncing off of the white marbled exterior of the palace. A glance toward Jerran proved that Nadean, the Ancient of Canmoa, rested outside the palace entrance way, for to the opposite side of our carriage stood a spectacular tree with golden leaf quaking in the wind. But it wasn't only the magnificent tree that stole my breath, but it was the palace itself. The entire building stood stories high and was crafted of a single large bulb of room in the middle, extended by blocks of building sprouting from the center piece.

Our carriage pulled up alongside the flight of stretched stairs leading to a set of grand doors. There stood Julianna's family, waiting to invite us into their home.

We exited our carriages and extended our blessings to the Royal Family of Canmoa. A sea of purple eyes on tan skin was humbling due to the family's natural beauty. My clammy hands shook the hands of several princesses and princes who smelled of an array of exotic flowers. Tan skin was exposed in the warm weather, and there was proof of the Canmoan tattoo patterns decorating every part of the body. While there was a gap between each individual piece, there wasn't a limb untouched by the Canmoan art.

I remembered the names Jailen and Umetia and the distinct smell of jasmine before the two families drew back apart. Traveling for an extended period left my family with crumpled, casual clothing and limp hair. Standing next to the Royal Family, I felt inadequate. They stood tall with a blissful smile on each of their faces. Each member wore thin cloth to match the humid climate. Several of the members had wedding bands tattooed on their arms accompanied with many other decorative body arts. Their hair was all styled in a shocking combination of razor cut or flowing long. They were intoxicating. Everything about them secreted confidence and bliss.

My dad made a show of stretching his back which led to an elongated groan and distinct pops. "You would think I am Jutean with how my body chooses to demonstrate its abnormalities."

At this, the tension washed away and both parties covered their mouths to compress smiles or light giggles. We were then led into the mansion by the Emperor and Empress. Passing the large double



doors of the entrance, the common room struck us as extravagant. Standing about 9 meters tall, the ornate common room housed a massive dual staircase that seamlessly combined the two floors.

“Welcome to our home.” The Emperor held up his hands as if the room was supported by them.

“We hope you enjoy yourselves during your stay.” The Empress completed for her *Nimdre*.

Canmoa was the land of love, which also meant that they believed in giving themselves over to pleasure in many forms. From the expensive clothes that hung from their bodies to their ornate housing that was large enough to host numerous guests on any given occasion, the Canmoans lived a life of luxury, and the Royals were far from an exception. Although the members of this residence were all flowing with royal blood, they saw themselves as hosts for lively events for their people. Just then, I wondered if they were going to host a party for our arrival.

As if on cue, the Empress added, “And please, feel free to join us for the party tonight. Anything to see my darling Julianna home with her beautiful family.” She motioned to Jerran and I, the unsteadiness of the movement was the only thing that showed her age. “And, of course, for the soon-to-be-wedded, a night of love and pleasure.”

I almost let out an awkward laugh at the notion, but I caught my tongue just in time. A glance over at Jerran was all I needed to confirm that he felt the same with his grandmother’s suggestion for his cheeks shone a shade toward pink.

After taking in the room, the Emperor and Empress assigned the people around them to lead us to our sleeping quarters. Julianna and Heliad were led off by a younger princess whom Julianna seemed to remember from when she was even a younger child. My father was led by the First Prince, and they broke off talking about the desert land of Jutea, already slapping each other on the back like old friends. Jailen, who introduced herself as the Second Princess’s first daughter and seemed slightly older than Jerran, offered to lead Jerran and me to our room.

We were led down a hallway that held the doors on the left and a full glass wall on the right. The doors were separated at irregular intervals, meaning that each room was either a powder room, a bedroom, or an entertainment room. Each door was engraved with an elaborate design that every Canmoan would be able to translate into what truly stood behind the door. Although the hallway was large and did not have any labeling or decorations, the walls were engraved with barred and whirled designs, creating a beauty of its own. Also, the wall along our right side was a full window that displayed a finely groomed garden and outdoor walk-way.

We finally reached the end of the hallway, and Jailen opened the door for us. The room was large, filled with a wooden wardrobe on one side and a vanity on the opposing side. In the middle of the room, on a platform and shrouded with translucent cloth, was the bed. Large enough to fit over four people, the bed was obviously the main attraction.

“Your luggage was dropped off last night by the carriage sent out in front of your own. Everything has already been stored for the time you are here.” Jailen was still standing outside the bedroom threshold. So Julianna was true when she said that Canmoans stood outside of a bedchamber when someone is spoken for.

“Thank you, Jailen. We best get ready now. I heavily need a bath about now, and I am sure Alina would agree.” Jerran turned from the now opened wardrobe and addressed his relative.

Jailen’s mouth quirked into a grin. “I think you will find the bathtub to be fitting for both bodies.” With that, she turned from the doorway and disappeared down the corner of the hall.

I turned to Jerran, and he was staring at the floor, not noticing that my cheeks had flushed. We saw each other naked at a young age since our mothers' led us children to bathe in the streams from the Natrail Falls. But we never saw each other past underwear or swimwear after maturity. By then, the future of our marriage was decided, and we saw no rush for the lifetime of being with each other, body and soul. Even though Jerran has Canmoan blood trickling through his veins and is matched with other natural urges, he never made a move on the subject either. We simply never breached the topic even though many assumed we had.

"I will bathe first then." With that, I pulled a new pair of clothes from my side of the wardrobe, which was obviously tainted darker than Jerran clothing.

I straightened as I saw fur cloth poke from his portion of the wardrobe.

"Is that your... beast?" I was now moving closer to his portion of the closet, intrigued by the notion.

As a Neswian warrior, Jerran had to traverse into the deepest woods of Neswia on his fifteenth day of birth and kill a beast of the forest with his bare hands. He returned with a majestic beast that was twice his size and covered with black, shaggy hair. The beast had sharp claws that sized to the size of my hand. A few claws on one hand of the beast had blood caked underneath them. Blood that belonged to Jerran. After receiving the wound, Jerran's skin on his left pec has always been marred with a whitened scar since.

Jerran rose from the bed and rubbed the corner of the pelt between his thumb and forefinger. "Yes. The beast that I had to take the life from. It is an honor for the creature to be with its captor for the remainder of its existence."

I held my hand to my tight lips to suppress a laugh, but it wasn't enough to stop a heavy exhale slip through my nose that resembled a snort.

"What?" Jerran's loose-fitted bun flopped to the side as he tilted with confusion.

"You mean to tell me," I now was standing below him, staring up at him from his chest, "that you carry this... pelt everywhere you go?"

He was still gazing at the fur. "Not everywhere. Just to where I will stay the night."

I muttered his last words. With the questioning look still on his face, it was obvious he was still oblivious to my mocking. "And you are telling me that this... thing will be sleeping in the same room as us here?"

"Well I am returning here."

"And our honeymoon?"

He now looked down at me, immediately taking note of my smile that was serving as a dam for my giggles. "Okay. What is it?"

"That is a rumor! Jordith, if I thought my closet always had to host as a resting spot for a dead animal, then I would have never married a Neswian man. But, Jerran, no one does that!"

"What? That is untrue. How many men's closets have you seen, Lina? Because everyone I know keeps their beast with them." He hoisted me onto his waist. "And you act like it is a burden. Look at it! It is a magnificent beast!"

"It is a rumor!" I leaned back in a giggling fit, causing him to lose his balance. This uneven footing stumbled to the edge of our bed, dropping me into the soft cushion. Still not regaining his balance, he

landed on top of me. I broke out in laughter, and his body flexed against mine, proof that he was suffering from his breath being taken away from uncontrollable laughter.

My laughing toned down. A deep breath. An exhale laced with, "Only you would fall for such an obvious rumor."

He moved his head so his chin rested on my abdomen and his purple eyes gazed at me. "My dear, Lina. You will come to realize that I am not the only man who keeps a *dead animal* in my closet."

I spread my arms over my head. "Well all I can tell is that you are a foolish man who believes in a rumor that young children spread about. My closet will forever be haunted because of your foolishness." I returned my gaze to those purple orbs. "Or will it?"

Jerran's eyebrows formed into a quizzical expression. "What are you thinking?"

"I mean, if somehow your beast were to disappear in the night..."

"You wouldn't dare!" Jerran launched deeper onto the bed, opting to pin my hands beneath his, knowing my first move would be to roll to the side. But he didn't pin my legs in time. My knee made contact with his outer hip, allowing me the room to slide out from beneath him.

I was leaning off the bed when his arm wrapped around my waist and pulled me back onto the mattress. I tried to use the momentum of my body to hoist myself up, but his arm proved to have no give.

So I opted for my special technique. I scrunched one of my sides to allow my arm to have more length to reach Jerran's side. Then I danced my fingers across the exposed skin at the base of his shirt. The wall around my waist instantly drew away, and laughter once again bubbled on Jerran's lips.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, I leaped forth and rolled onto the tiled floor. Thanks to countless times practicing the same maneuver, I returned to my feet momentarily. Jerran was now sitting up, crossing his arms across his abdomen, but wearing a contagious smile.

"I think that would be called cheating." The placement of his hands acted as a shield for his one weakness I discovered through our childhood brawls.

I took a step forth and was standing squarely between his spread legs. I planted a kiss on his lips. "And you sound like my sister."

I turned towards the bathroom, now eager for that warm shower as I felt a tendril of sweat run down my spine.

"Because you cheat, Lina. You are a terrible cheat." He all but stuck out his tongue at me.

"Well some would say that you two are simply sore losers." I raised my hand in a mock wave as I turned past the bathroom door frame.

The bathroom had a double sink counter, a sitting shower that sprayed from every side, one toilet in the corner, and a tub big enough for two that was also held on a tiled platform.

With a glance behind me to see if the shower could be seen by the bedroom, I stripped from my day old clothes and stepped into the shower, my stomach still warm with giggles.

After Jerran had showered and dressed, we left for the streets of Canmoa with an hour to spare before the party. Left would not be accurate since the town square was simply the front porch of the Royal's housing.

Crossing the street, Jerran and I already stood beneath the Tree of Nidean. Like every other Ancient, Nidean had a signified place of resting that was near or in the country's capital. Like Dalleia,

Nidean blossomed a tree. But unlike Dalleia, the Tree of Nidean sprouted golden leaves that quaked with the breeze and the papery trunk was a different shade of pink with each layer that peeled away. A vibrant tree for a vibrant town.

Bustling with activity compared to the quiet forest of Natrail, Canmoa's capital was a startling contrast to its sister country. Although both countries thrived off of the state of being one with those around them, Canmoa focused more on its people than its surroundings. Buildings were stacked two stories high or perhaps three and lined narrow streets that crossed across the capital. Pastel colored signs popped from the darker buildings, displaying a variety of businesses that all boasted to be the best.

With my stomach growling and Jerran's stomach replying with its own protests, we decided that a stop by a restaurant would be the best choice. Luckily for me, Canmoa also enjoys the sugary offerings of a pastry, for we only walked a few blocks before my nose spotted one. Jerran found a vanilla scone and I, a cinnamon roll. Although the food was not as good as Ranees (Jarren had no opinion on the matter), it still filled my stomach with a warm fullness.

After a few more stops, I noticed the shops starting to close.

One joyful shop owner was humming as he turned the sign to his shop. With a slight tap on his shoulder, I asked why the streets were closing so early. One look at my tanned skin and brown hair told the man that I was new to the town. Then he saw Jerran standing behind me with his Neswian body matched with Canmoan eyes, and I saw the recognition spark in the old man's eyes. An even deeper smile creased the man's face. "Well we usually close only a few hours after this time for the party at the Emperor and Empresses's estate, but tonight is special. The party for your arrival is held even earlier than usual so we can give you a proper welcome. Now if you excuse me, I must change into my finer clothes." With that, the man tipped his hat and left down the street.

We didn't even watch the man walk away too far before we turned toward the capital. As if they appeared as soon as we left for our walk, guests had already formed a long line at the front door of the palace. The palace rested higher than the rest of the town so it was easy to see the people already filing through the front door. The line already disappeared from view and judging by the rate the people were filing in the front door, the palace was already beginning to fill.

I turned toward Jerran, hoping to see him as shocked as I was, but instead he wore a neutral expression. It was expected of him, I suppose. He was always the type to weigh facts rather than being offset by them.

"Well I guess we should be heading back too then," Was all Jerran had to offer on the topic. I know that Julianna had mentioned that the Canmoan Palace parties were always extravagant and lasting for long past the hours we were used to, but I didn't expect it to start this early.

So, Jerran started toward the Royal Palace, and I followed a step behind, in the Canmoan spirit.

## Chapter 5

Another thing that Julianna was right about was that the Canmoans know how to party. Only a few hours had passed since the doors were opened to the people of Canmoa, and I was already ready to retire to my room. Out of us who travelled from Neswia, my father and Julianna seemed to be the only ones who were still ready to party till the sun rose from the mountains. They were in the middle of the foyer, passing a bottle of champagne without pattern from one another to the Emperor and Empress.

Heliad was starting to pass out from trying to keep pace with his Nimdre's family in a Canmoan drinking game. He was currently spacing out at the wall, mumbling under his breath that the designs in the walls were moving. The only sign of movement from him was when he would turn away from the walls in what seemed like fear only to forget and turn back to them mere minutes later.

Luckily, not sharing his father's same hard-headedness, Jerran passed on his cousins' offer to join the drinking games and opted to simply watch the festivities from the balcony. Even though his location seemed like the best option in the crowded foyer, he had to host many conversations from the people who swung past the balcony before disappearing into the hallways and the entertainment rooms beyond. Jerran's slightly disturbed face showed that although the party was obnoxiously loud, he could still hear the unique sounds that emitted from those rooms.

I chose to mingle amongst the crowd furthest from the door. While they were not as wild as the crowd toward the middle or front of the foyer, they still were heavily influenced by the drinks in their hands and thought the best way for conversation was yelling over each other and the music. People would talk to me for a few minutes about the lands of Neswia or how lucky I am to marry such a fine man with Canmoan and Newsian blood; they also noted that he was noticeably keeping an eye on me the entire time. A timely glance with each mention confirmed their accusations.

I turned to Jerran once again, and he noted the hint in my eye. All it took with him was one simple glance, and he was able to tell that my mind was already wandering past the party. As children, we would play a game where we would guess each other's emotions based on a facial expression. This was one of those moments that the skill came in handy.

He nodded at the couple who were talking to him at the moment, the girl weighing against the man and obviously not invested in the conversation with Jerran. Once dismissed, they ran off for a room with rush as Jerran descended the stairs. He met me by the hallway leading toward our room. We started down the hallway at a casual pace, the music and commotion already fading behind us.

"Well that was even more than I thought it would be." Jerran grabbed my hand and pulled me closer as a couple came stumbling out of a room, giggling and adjusting the strap holding one of the woman's shirt. The other woman wiped lip coloring from her neck as she helped her partner.

I huffed a thank you as I watched the women go sauntering off down the hall. "It was educational at least. Now I know that whenever you complain about being tired, you truly have a load of energy that you haven't even broken into yet."

"Do you see me? I obviously didn't inherit that from my mother." The gleam of his smiling canines seemed to argue that he did, in fact, inherit his energy from his mother. "Instead I am doomed to resemble my father, not being able to hold my alcohol and believing that the wall is talking to me." He shook his head and laughed at his father's inability to keep up with the Canmoan drinking.

"True. You better stay clear of any drinking games your cousins host at the wedding. Same goes for any Neswian since we seem to be obnoxiously light-weight. Save my father."

Jerran pushed back the door to our room, and the heavy doors locked into place behind us. Silence took over the room. Of course the most elegant bedroom at the end of the hall was the only one that is truly soundproof.

"Well I am going to wash again. Who knows what is on me from all those hands." Jerran exited behind the curve of the bathroom.

I took off my slim, dark blue party dress and tucked it into the closet. I then dressed with a light sleepwear of a tank top and loose pants.

I was laying in the bed, staring off at the ceiling, as Jerran slid out from the shower and into our bed. His arm drew around me and pulled me close. My small framed body matched his muscled skin.

Although Jerran and I were never to be ones who were physically intimate past our friendship, that did not mean we were never close. When we were children, we would pin each other down in wrestling matches or perhaps tickling fights. When we started spending more time alone, our hands would always find their way back to being interlocked. When we started spending nights together, we found it most comfortable to be tucked into one another.

We drew comfort from being close to one another. Especially when home is far away, we were able to find home in one another's arms.

I fell asleep encased in the scent of dew touched grass and a strong arm protecting me from what was to come.

Pain.

Hot searing pain coursed through my body. The world was filled with a swirling darkness. My eyes flew open, but the view did not change. Dark shapes swirled across my vision. Whether it was behind my eyelids or above, I was unsure. It felt like the blackened smoke was even rooting into my mind. Talons of darkness tried to pry their way deeper into my skull.

In the distance, there was screaming. Layers of screaming that were reverberating through my head even though they were coming from far away. Three different pitches, joined together by a common pain. The screams ricocheted off of every surface and grew louder with each echo.

The visions of dark smoke whipping to and fro grew more intense. Then, they started to form known shapes. Embedded in them were images: limbs, trees, mountains, faces. Nothing was defined; I saw them morph from the smoke in an instant, only to return to the chaotic swirl.

The dark talons finally reached the center of my brain, the claws scratching together. That was when I felt it throughout my whole body. The pain grew as I regained feeling in each new part of my body. My body was already convulsing before my mind told it to. My limbs whipped in every direction, not taking a single pause. They flew around only to be stopped by an immovable object. They would redraw only to slam back onto the surface.

Then I was forced to feel the state my lungs were in. I was breathing acid-coated cotton. No air was moving through my system, but with every startled breath, more cotton drove deep into my lungs, scratching more sickly venom across the interior walls of my body.

Fear truly struck me when I felt the talons command my mind to take control of my heart-

Then a click. Everything stopped in an instant. The brightness of my room in Canmoa pierced my sensitive eyes, shocking a throbbing headache rooted deep in my skull. I was connected with my body, no longer wandering the dark abyss in a sea of pain.

There was a golden figure obstructing my blurry view. Jerran was clenching my arms with white knuckles. He was solely in his undergarments, kneeling on our bed and holding my limp body by the shoulders. I was sitting almost eye level with him, and the tears glistening in his eyes were still fresh.

Once I noticed that Jerran was the only one supporting my body and I had no muscles engaged, I tried to engage them. With a simple contraction of my abdomen, my muscles shouted out in pain. A shot of pain howled through my body. Tears leaked from my eyes.

“Alina?” Jerran’s voice was hoarse. His hands loosened slightly but they still were digging into my shoulders. In the sea of pain my body was enduring, his strong fingers digging into my skin was lost on my nerves. As tense as the rest of his body, his head snapped up and down, inspecting my own body.

“Jerran?” My voice cracked as my throat clenched at the pain. I guess one of the many screaming voices was my own.

“Thank Dalliea.” He tugged me into a hug, holding our bodies flush.

I moaned at the pain. My entire body was limp with excursion.

As if he remembered something else besides my own painful trial, Jerran pulled back from me and searched the room with deadly precision. Ever the trained warrior. “Something isn’t right.” He released my body gently against the bed, even carefully resting my head against the stack of pillows that still remained on our bed. There was a significant amount of pillows missing, probably tossed off throughout the night. Jerran then eased out of the bed. “Stay here. I have to go see what is happening.”

I leaned up onto my elbow, gritting my teeth at the pain protesting against the movement. “Wait. Let me come with you.”

Jerran stopped in the doorway and looked at my pathetic body, only able to support the upper half for a few more seconds. With a moment’s hesitation, Jerran crossed to my side of the bed and hoisted me onto my feet. A heavy moan escaped my lips, along with a fast breath that forced itself between my teeth.

Another fast breath forced itself between my teeth at the pain of him placing his hand underneath my chest. He paused and allowed me to adjust. My hand raised to my chest and found heat emitting from it. I moved to adjust my necklace on my bare chest, and Jerran suddenly was intrigued by the walls encasing us, searching as if an intruder was lurking in the room.

That was when I saw the location of the burning pain. The necklace had burned me! It still burned hot as I set it between my breasts, lacking the effort to rip the brutally beautiful stone from its chain. In place of a red, burn mark, there sat a crusted black form. In the same shape as the stone, my skin on my left breast now was thick and blackened. I touched it but quickly pulled my hand back as it stung like an opened wound.

I placed my hand back on Jerran’s chest, letting him know that it was okay now. He turned back toward me, content for the time being with scanning the room. His purple eyes showed that he knew it was far from okay.

My feet stumbled across the marbled, hollow hallways as Jerran took steps that must have felt grudgingly slow for him. Although his feet moved at a pace that didn’t cause me as much pain, his heart beneath my hand did not slow.

My eyes were still heavy, but the few moments my eyes fluttered open, I saw the shadows of the room stretch out as if they owned the night. Some of the tendrils seemed to reach out towards me like hungry claws. If they could talk, they would be asking me to simply give into the darkness.

After what seemed like ages of slowly maneuvering in ways that caused the least amount of friction on my constructed muscles, we reached the palace entryway. Only hours earlier, the room was packed with a copious amount of people. Now, the empty room only hosted six figures that lurked

within the scarcely empty room. Their hushed whispers carried across the entire room. A ghostly whisper compared to the thunderous sounds of last night's event.

Practically letting him drag me across the open foyer, Jerran walked us to the hushed whispers emitting from the shadowed figures. His weighted footsteps echoed in muted thunders as the scampered shuffling of my feet hauntingly whispered across the foyer walls.

"No, I just woke up, too." Julianna's baffled voice rushed in hushed tones.

"Then you felt it?" The Emperor stood in his silk pajamas.

"Yes. We both felt it. That's why we are here." Heliad had obviously sobered up despite only being hours past the heavy drinking episode.

"I have no idea what it was. It just felt like... like..." The Prince stuttered his words, seeming to find it impossible to describe whatever they were hurriedly discussing.

"Like power." Everyone turned to the words of truth. My father was wearing the face of the leader. The Aged. Even the shadows seemed to mirror the weight of his words. The tone of his voice. The shadows strengthened his facial features, making his underturned lip corners seem like a placid mask of solemnity.

His calm demeanor on the otherwise weighty topic was not transferring to the others. There was a thrum of fear humming through these few people. The leaders of two large countries. Leaders that were otherwise as placid as my father in front of their people. "I felt it. My abilities have been enhanced. I can feel it now." The shadows agreed for they stirred as the heartbeats in the room grew in pace.

The reactions came at once.

"That's preposterous." Heliad.

"Ridiculous." The Emperor.

"Not possible." The Prince.

The room echoed their answers in mockery at the concept.

Jerran looked at me. I could read it in his eyes. He was thinking of the events that just took place behind our doors. My body convulsing in pain. Screaming. His tears were dry by now, but it was easy to see their marks in the moonlight leaking through the skylight.

A small tilt of my head to the left and right answered his silent question. Whatever they were talking about was not the same event as ours. No one in the room displayed any sign of pain as I did. I could read the pain on their faces as fear, nothing physically straining.

Their muttering protests continued as Jerran and I redirected our attention towards the circle. They were even asking what my father meant by "power". How throwing around a word like that gave no answer to their questions.

To seem less suspicious, I lifted my head and solidly planted my feet. The pain howled at me for my actions but I bit my tongue instead of letting the sound escape me. A metallic taste coated my throat.

Now their protests were morphing into explanations of their own.

"It must have been a power surge." Heliad threw out.

"The Canmoan culture integrated the Ritzvian technology of power long before you, Neswian." The Prince countered. "Any flaw with the system was worked out decades ago."



“It might have been a Descendent using their powers for the first time.” The Emperor said.  
“Nidean’s power can be quite potent the first time.”

“I made sure the corridor’s were clear before I departed before bed.” Heliad answered.

“As if you were sober enough to even remember such a thing.” The Prince scoffed.

Julianna spoke up for the first time to defend her Nimdre against her older brother. “I was there to make sure.” She raised her hands, annoyed by the accusation. “Plus, it has been *decades*,” her teeth flashed at her brother, “since a Descendent has had enough power to surge through the entire palace at once. This was of a much larger scale than some mere child.”

Whatever they were talking about, it was best to leave our events to ourselves for now. Jerran knew this as well as I did.

Jerran was opening his mouth to make his first comment on the topic when his grandmother beat him to the case.

“Silence!” We fell silent in an instant, the echoes whispering across the halls dying out within a single heartbeat. I felt the wave of involuntary influence run across my skin, telling my mouth to stay closed instead of my own mind. Even the shadows obeyed the order, momentarily stopping their wispy movements to listen to the next demand.

Everyone turned toward the Empress with closed mouths, eyes wide open with either wonder or fear. They didn’t choose to be silent in that moment, it was as if they were forced to.

One simple word and the answer was displayed before us.

Power.

The Empress’s eyes flew wide, and she clasped her hands to her mouth.

Mind manipulation. The most popular power of the Blessed of Nidean. A user who is compatible with the ability is able to influence any unsuspecting listener to carry out any action forced upon them. The only reason why it was shocking to see used that night was because it hasn’t been felt for over a century. It was diluted out of the bloodlines generations ago since it was one of the most powerful abilities of the Blessed.

But I just experienced it and so had everyone else now silenced by the Empress.

Tears started to flood the Empress’s eyes, and the Emperor tucked his wife’s head to his shoulder. “You should go.” His voice was grim, but he looked at us all with determined eyes. “Like you, I have no idea what is happening here, but I do believe you need to return home. See if your land is also stricken with this strange power.” He turned toward my father, tears catching the shifting moonlight. Fear contorted his face in strange ways, making him an entirely different man than the beautiful ruler we saw mere hours ago. “Roile, please.”

My father stood tall and nodded at the Emperor. The Agede of Neswia strode to the side of his Chief and whispered something to him. Heliad gave a tense nod and reached for his wife’s hand, their tattooed skin joining.

“Let’s go. Pack your stuff and I will have the chauffeur at the front door as soon as you are done.” Heliad faced the people of Neswia in the room. We didn’t hesitate at the command of our Chief, save for Julianna.

Although she joked about escaping the crazy lifestyle of her homeland, she still was family with these people. The smiles she shared in this very foyer only hours before proved as much. She grew up with the people who shared drinks with her last night, and they easily fell into patterns that were

natural to her. While in Neswia she was sharing a true position of power with her Nimdre, this was the country where she was royal by blood. Although this throne would never be hers, she shared full blood with the one who would one day rule over this country. The Emperor and the Empress, her father and mother. The Prince, her brother. The rest of the court and the people of this country shared her blood.

And now, at the start of a possible surge of power from whatever this might be, she was to turn her back on them for her new family. As the tears of her mother were hidden, the tears transferred to Julianna's bright purple eyes. Eyes so purple that her tears reflected the color of the palace and every prized Canmoan iris.

Julianna's sing-song voice still shone through even as she let out a frail, "Papa?"

The Emperor locked eyes with his third daughter, the daughter he had handed over to marriage to another country. The daughter who took a different throne. The daughter who was never as boisterous as other Canmoans but as passionate as a Canmoan could ever be. As if simply looking into his daughter's eyes and hearing her murmur his name instantly mirrored the same pain she felt, the Emperor's eyes glossed with the same purple tint.

With a small, defined grunt, he gave a terse nod.

Her flawless voice still didn't even hiccup as she countered, "But Papa-"

"Juli." With that simple name of endearment, Julianna went quiet. "You made your family in Neswia and that was where you are to return. I knew that the day I inked your arm with the marriage band," his eyes dipped to her leafy band that wrapped her forearm, equal in height to Heliad's, "I was handing you over to your rightful throne. The throne you now share with your Nimdre." As the Emperor of the land of love, he knew how important it was for her to return to the people who called her their leader. As the Emperor blinked, a tear ran down his cheek, the exact same moment that a tear fell from Julianna's eye. Even though the tear streaked down his face, his face was still stern, as if the emotions were not entirely his choice.

With her father telling her it was okay, Julianna was convinced. She turned to her husband, waiting at the beginning of the hallway to their room. I saw him hold out the hand that was below the same tattoo they shared.

Little did she know that by turning her back to her blood family, she was choosing a side that she wouldn't be able to change. By grabbing her Nimdre's hand and walking from that foyer, she was sealing her fate as a Neswian rather than a Canmoan.

As I turned the corner of the hallway, I saw the Emperor tuck into his Nimdre's slouched body as his back arched in one heavy sob, as if he already knew.

## Chapter 6

Jerran's feet sounded in a rhythmic, weighted echo that filled the hallway. As a weakened background noise, there was an unsteady shuffling that grew and softened in an unpredictable pattern.

Jerran shifted his view behind him for a second to watch my body move as unsteady as the muffled noises. A single glance of stubbornness was all I needed to get to him. Jerran knew me well enough to back away from offering me an arm. Most of the pain had subsided, so I was able to walk alone.

*Silence.* That one word still ran through my head, echoing across the silent hallways still. My jaw was sore from clenching it tight. Even though the effects of the Empress' words had worn off by now, a small part of me still wondered if my clenched teeth were partially her doing.

We reached our room without a word. Jerran walked to his half of the closet and began throwing his clothing in his bag. Before I even noticed, the pelt of the beast landed on top of the bag. His breath was heavy along with mine. Our huge chambers felt both gigantic and claustrophobic inducing.

Jerran was the first to break the silence. "I have to tell them."

I stood straighter against the wall I was leaning upon. "No. You can't. I have no idea what happened and neither do you."

He stared down at his hands. "Lina, something is happening. I can feel it." His fingers curled in, clenching and unclenching. "I have no idea what it is yet, but something is here." Jerran's fingers stilled, freezing in motion. "It can't be a coincidence that you... you... you had that... episode in the dark." He was shaking his head, trying to find the words.

"It was a coincidence!" My voice broke in fear despite my attempt to stay neutral. If what he was saying were true, then there were enough problems right now. I had no powers so it couldn't be connected to me. I simply had a bad reaction to what every Descendent translated into power tonight. It was nothing. Jerran had to understand. "My mother would be terribly worried. With everything that is happening at the moment, I can't add this!" His face was still turned away from me. There was no reaction. "My father would be distracted with his daughter when the world is going crazy with this." Yes. This would convince him. "The Agede of Neswia would be worried about his daughter while the entire country is in turmoil. Who knows what will happen when we get home. Who knows what is happening right now. You want my father, and potentially your father, to be concerned with their home life before their whole country? I don't."

"Dammit, Lina!" He threw his hands to his side and pivoted to face me. Even the shadows seemed to shrink away from his forceful turn. "You scared me! Seeing you thrash around in that bed, as if an unseeable creature was ripping away at you! The darkness in the room was overwhelming, and you were screaming yourself hoarse!"

He sat back down on the edge of our bed and stared at his open hands, lying face-up. "There was nothing I could do. I tried to hold you down, but you kept writhing, crying out. I couldn't see anything. No wound, no burn, no broken bones. None of the signs I have learned to look for on a fallen comrade. Something was attacking your mind, and I couldn't get there. You were suffering, and I couldn't help. What friend- what fiance- what husband does that?"

This was not the reaction I was searching for. I walked over to Jerran. Resting my own hand on his tense shoulders. There was still sweat beaded on the back of my palm. His shoulders had no give to my touch.

"Jerran. It was a coincidence. I am perfectly fine now. I just might have experienced this... surge a different way than the rest of you." If emotion wasn't going to phase him then, then I had to argue with logic. "The other few people who hold no magic in this magic bearing world must have undergone the same hellish night as I just did. They too must be trying to comfort loved ones, the same as I am to you."

I bent onto the floor in front of Jerran, my knees resting on the shaggy carpet. "Look at me." I clasped his head between my hands. His purple eyes seemed to glow in the dark, meeting mine. "I am

not Blessed and I never inherited any magic. My body must have reacted differently to this power. It simply shocked me but look," a weak smile crept onto my lips, "I am fine. We will pack-up our things, head home, and see what this is all about. We have each other, we are strong."

His face read that he was on the turning point of taking my side. One more point and he would be convinced; something that would convince him of the positives that would come out of this scare.

I knew exactly what I had to say. "Maybe even now, after all of this, our Nimdre bond will connect." Now, the possibility was there. If this did awaken some hidden magic within me, I would finally have the means to form a Nimdre bond. While my awakening, if I could even call it that yet, was much differ than other magic awakenings, it was still possible that it would give me enough magic to form the bond. The single bond between two, fated to be together and share the very magic they were blessed with.

The same weak smile overcame Jerran's mouth and he leaned his forehead against my own. "I would like that very much." That was the response I was hoping for. Even if I barely even believed it myself, my heart still tugged at the possibility. The possibility of having closure with my Nimdre.

I tipped forward and traced his lips with my own. "Then how about we go home?"

With that, we slowly raised and began packing the remainder of our clothing. My clothing.

Within mere minutes, the room was cleared of any evidence that we were moved into the chambers only the day before.

Jerran swung his bag onto his right shoulder and mine onto his opposite. The door clicked behind us with the same volume as thunder. The boom echoed down the hallway, mocking our short visit.

My father was already waiting for us by the carriage. He was talking with our chauffeur in hushed tones. I heard a whispered apology the same moment I noted the sleep-deprived bags under the chauffeur's eyes.

Julianna soon joined us with a small bag that she tossed within the cabin of our carriage. Heliad trailed shortly after with another bag, this one a larger, body-sized bag.

Loading up in our carriages, the chauffeur responsible for the remainder of our luggage, we started our trip back to Neswia. Heliad and my father in one and Jerran, Julianna, and me in the other.

As we were exiting the city, buildings were awakening, as was the magic stirring within them.

## Chapter 7

I heard the waterfall before anything else. I drew back the curtain hanging from the wooden frame trimming the carriage window. The moon shone bright on the plummeting water, refracting the light onto the steam below. Despite the rushing water creating a mass cloud of mist and causing the river to mix in harsh patterns, there was a disturbing silence to it.

Then I realized the missing life from the river, which was so natural for me to see that I didn't notice its presence until it was gone. No water nymphs rose above the surface of the water, forming smooth forms that contrast the roaring waves. No fish jumped from the water, causing ripples of their own. There wasn't even a single animal lapping water from the river or walking in for a midnight hunt.

Part of me wondered if even our homes had the same eerie silence. Would there be no creatures walking past our open doors, on our patio?

Once we passed the dirt turn-off to our homes, I remembered that my question would have to be answered later. The night before, we had discussed that our first stop would be in the city. There was no time to stop at home when our entire country was possibly awake in confusion.

Only the night before, our fears were confirmed. When we were nearing the Jutean border, we had hoped that there would be a difference in whatever the rest were sensing since that night in the palace. At first, when the distant buildings shifted from elegant marks of Canmoan culture and shifted into the sharp edges of Jutean culture, we had hoped that the border between the lands had shifted over the years and we had not yet reached the true Canmoa-Jutea border. But once we reached an obvious Jutean hotspring resort, complete with marks of dragons, we'd had to come to terms with reality.

"I still feel it." Jerran had said, facing his open palms, as if he could read the reality through them.

"So do I." Julianna's voice had lacked her usual sing-songness. I was slightly surprised her voice did not crack when she spoke since it was the first time I had her voice since we left Kaliod.

We had emerged from the stilled carriages. Once glance at my father and Heliad confirmed that they felt it, too. At least their faces didn't still have the same paleness that they all had at the starting of the day. They claimed they all felt nauseous with whatever was flowing through them and one look at them could prove it. Each of their faces looked like they had been close to death and the blood beneath their skin had ceased to flow.

The next day, we didn't dare hope again as we drew closer to the Neswian border. I am glad we didn't because no one even seemed to notice when our windows shifted from the desert plains to the familiar plains of home.

Then we were home. I couldn't tell if I pictured it this way already or if it was unsettling.

The city was silent in the dark, but held an uneasy stir. The lights of the Market of Natrail usually showed bright through the entirety of the night. Now the life-flowing city was overtaken with the shadows of the night. Only a small haze of light showed that there were still people living within the village.

The shadows strung across the bridges and under the canopy trees. They were alive. Dark leaning toward dark. As if villagers of a different life were adapting to the new state of the land.

I grunted as a shock of pain clenched at the front of my head. A web of pain sprung across my forehead. My hand rose to my forehead on instinct.

"Lina." The seat beside me shifted. Jerran didn't reach for me, simply turned to see if I was fine.

I was about to respond that it was nothing when a wave of nausea overtook me. Instantly, my throat contracted, and I began to gag. Now, Jerran's hand rested on my back, testing what he could do to help.

I let my throat dispel hideous, dry coughs. Jerran's other hand rested on my chest, supporting me upright as I focused on hacking up whatever it was that my body was labeling foreign.

Then my throat clenched more. I felt the slight change from my uneven breathing to not being able to intake air. My throat was swollen to the point where not a single breath of air reached my lungs.

My stubbed nails ran to my throat and started to scratch, as if the problem were resting on the surface. I felt my eyes bulge at the reality of the situation. I wasn't breathing.

Jerran must have also felt the shift because he pushed my body back to read my face. At once glance, his expression turned from fear to dread. Two times in short periods I was now putting him in a frightful situation.

Julianna was already paying attention to me, also. She dropped her knees to the floor and stood eye-level to me. "Breathe, Lina." She exhaled a deep breath, ever so shaky despite the situation we all were in. "Breathe, Lina."

I tried to mimic the motion that she was doing. The same contraction of muscles that had been natural to me from the moment I was born. Nothing. No air breached the wall of muscles that my throat was now set as.

All I saw was Julianna as my vision began to blur. My head was corrupting the world around me, making it appear as if the darkness was closing in. I had tunnel vision, and the darkness was quickly closing in on my view.

*Get outside. You need to breathe the air outside.*

My hands shifted across the side of the carriage, searching for the door handle. I had to get out. I had to breath in the fresh air to release my throat from this searing pain.

I felt the silk interior of the carriage and the gaps filled with engraved wood. My fingers stopped on every elaborate design of the wooden edges. My eyes were no longer reliable. I only saw blurred shapes.

Jerran and Julianna caught onto what I was trying to accomplish and acted quickly. Jerran banged open the window to the chauffeur and yelled out commands. My hands bashed into Julianna's as she also started shuffling for a handle.

A handle. My fingers curled around the handle and pulled. The door fell open and I fell with it. My shoulder made an impact with the solid, grass-covered floor before the rest of my body collapsed on impact.

A bitter taste escaped my mouth as I heaved onto the ground. The contents of my stomach mixed into the grass.

*Breath. You need to breathe.*

I gasped for the air. The coolness of the night air coaxed my throat to calm. My ragged breathing continued pumping oxygen through my deprived body.

Then, through the blinding pain in my head, I heard the yells of Jerran to stop the first carriage. The chauffeur stopped the creatures hauling our carriage and called out to the other chauffeur driving the second carriage. Feet were quick to appear in the corner of my returning vision. Hands searched my body, rushed.

Jerran then entered my line of sight, searching my eyes. Searching for some reason as to why I was laying outside the carriage, in a puddle of my own vomit. Upon looking at my eyes, he noticed that I was transfixed on something behind him. He quickly turned on his haunches, facing where we all were looking, at our home nestled above the waterfall.

My tunnel vision allowed me to transfix my view on the top of the waterfall. The only light emitting from Natrail wasn't from the village, but rather from torches resting behind the house of the Chief. Faceless figures stood behind the house, waiting for a leader who was, as far as they knew, in another country.

“It happened here, too.” One of us said what we all thought. The torches illuminating the darkness were all we needed to know that the people of Neswia also felt the surge of power that raced across Rylina. This ancient power was altering life as we knew it. We left our people without a leader in a moment of crisis. They were waiting for an answer to what was to come.

“Everyone, get into the carriages.” Our view shifted from the scared villagers to the Chief. He stood tall and confident, almost concealing the sign of a restless ride that showed under his eyes. He didn’t break his glare from his home. “Now!” His voice held power that made everyone obey him. Heliad pivoted and planted a solid step in the direction of his carriage.

Roile walked to the side of his Chief. Julianna gave a terse nod, hands clenched at her heart. Jerran slipped a hand under my armpit, careful not to rest his knee in the contents of my stomach blended in the grass.

He hoisted me up and whispered in my ear, “You okay?”

“Yes.” I pushed away from him and stood on my own. He gave me a look as if he were unconvinced, but turned when I stepped forward with an unsteady foot. The world swayed to the side in an uneasy wave, but I was able to stand. My view was only hazed around the edges, so I was able to see the ground under my feet. The darkness of the world seemed to still for the time being.

Jerran held open the carriage door for me, holding out one hand that I accepted to give me the strength needed to scale the tall step.

Once sitting in our respective seats, Jerran noticeably closer to me, the carriage lurched forward as the beasts pulled forth. We only need to scale the side of the waterfall before we reach the villagers of Natrail.

“Lina?” Even though she kept her face neutral, Julianna's eyes held concern. “Are you okay?” She body bobbed along with the bumps the carriage took over the uneven ground of the waterfall side.

“Yes. I am fine. Jerran got to me in time as he always does.” A weakened smile crept onto one corner of my lips. There was still a reasonable hum of pain resonating from the front of my head but I no longer was nauseous.

Julianna returned the attempted smile, as unconvincing as my own. Jerran didn’t even attempt the futile peasantry. I already knew that his mind was racing over the same things we all were wondering-what was happening?

## Chapter 8

The curtains of our carriage lit with a spotted glow from the world outside.

Our carriages came to a halt on the gravel path, raising dust in our wake. We didn’t wait for the chauffeur to open our doors, but rather Jerran leaned into the wooden frame, opening the door himself.

Our carriages were stopped in front of the steps of the Agede house. My mother and Jenessa were standing on the front porch, surrounded by the various villagers. My sister, able to calm her face in the time of crisis as a well-trained Agede. My mother, who was not trained from birth to manipulate her emotions, wore the mask of fear the same as the other faces surrounding her.

At the appearance of Julianna, Jerran, and I emerging from our carriage, the crowd surged forth toward us, leaving the huddle that was just centered around my sister and mother. Glossed and reddened by endless tears, their eyes reflected the lanterns and torches held in their hands. They took slow steps toward our carriage as if uncertain if their true leaders were among us.

There was one woman who pushed herself through the crowd and emerged front and center. "Please help!" I recognized the woman's face. Ingree. A cloth seller in the market. I pictured the toothy smile she always produced when a customer ran their hands across her uniquely embroidered clothes. Now bubbling saliva stream down the edges of this same mouth, mixing with her running tears. "Please, my husband is at home with our grandchildren, trying to calm them. They-we have no idea what is happening!"

As soon as Ingree addressed her own problems, it opened up a chance for everyone to speak. They rapidly start firing off their encounters.

A young woman standing on the opposite side of the crowd held up her hand to produce fingers that spontaneously popped off leaves that quickly shrunk back into her fingers, before repeating the process. "I can't touch my Nimdre with this!"

A man closer to the back of the group fired off, "A tree is growing in my living room!"

"Something is wrong! I can hear everything in the ground!"

Then the crowd turned toward their questions.

"Are we at war?"

"What is happening?"

"Where is the Chief?"

There it was. The reason why these people were truly running around with their heads cut off. Because their head was gone. They relied on him. He would solve all their problems because he always did, the same way his predecessors had done for generations.

Even though Jenessa stood before them, she had yet to claim the crown as hers. These people had yet to follow Jenessa so they were not willing to trust her words as truth. Not to mention, the Agede was not the same as the Chief.

They were helpless without their leader. Their Chief. Heliad.

At that, the door of the second carriage drew open. A large frame emerged, shadowed by a bright light emitting from behind him. The Chief hoisted himself to standing, leaning on the door, and then landed on the ground with solid feet.

The Agede emerged behind him, holding a lantern in his hand. He now supported a finer, Neswian shirt that paired with his humble wood woven crown. The symbol of the Agede, woven branches of the Tree of Dalleia, the only branches to have ever fallen from the immortal tree.

Both of their outfits were obviously Roile's idea since the image of the Chief and his right hand fell as the Agede's role. But my father's outfit was a simple feat compared to the wardrobe change of the Chief in the tight quarters of the carriage.

The Chief stood tall with the fur of a beast slung from shoulder to shoulder.

*So the rumor is true then*, I thought as I glanced at Jerran. He didn't even notice me for his view was transfixed on his father. In fact, all eyes were fixed on Heliad, save for me, looking at Jerran, my father who was searching the faces of the crowd, and my sister whose view was searching the crowd before she glared at me.

The crowd fell silent at the entrance of their leader.

"People of Neswia," he raised his hands broadly above his head, "there is no need to fear! We have lived through the war and survived without Dalleia standing by us. We will battle this, too."



Murmurs emitted from the crowd. I noticed that a few of their lanterns and torches were extinguished, but not by their will. Instead, they lost fuel from being ignited for too long. The few torches that still smoldered in the night burned close to the holders' hands.

This time, there were repeated words in their whispers: *power, war, help*.

"A mere feeling does not contradict the solid truth that Dalleia rests in this land and protects as all," the Chief hallored. The crowd once again stood in stunned silence at the words of their Chief.

I took this moment to look at my mother and sister. I only saw the top of my mother's head past the crowd. She now rested in a chair that sat on the raised patio. My sister still stood tall though. But I could see the signs of wear on her body. She swayed slightly, as if she had been defending the porch for hours. Her eyes spoke she did because there were obvious bags formed under her eyes. These villagers had been here this entire time. They were restless and frightened and a mere talk from their Chief wasn't going to be enough to calm them.

The Agede was scanning the crowd. As I was trained by him to assess the people standing around me, I knew he was reaching the same conclusion that I did. He made a full assessment of the crowd and rested his eyes on me. His hazel eyes connected with their replication. I gave him a nod, reading the message that questioned in his eyes. My father always knows what the best course of action is and I trusted him to handle the current state of our people. He turned back toward the crowd, the confirmation from his oldest daughter motivating him.

I caught Jerran looking at me from the corner of my eye. I turned toward him and his eyes relayed a simpler question.

"This will all be okay." I whispered as I closed my arm around his elbow.

He directed his attention back toward our people. Their murmuring had grown into a hum of fear. "You know that is not what I am afraid of."

My opposite hand squeezed his forearm that was as tense as he stood tall. "I know." I made sure to straighten my back, standing as tall as I could. The more healthy I appeared, the less Jerran would have to worry about me.

The Agede stepped forth and cleared his throat. A few villagers in the front row paused to look at him. "Please people of Natrail." He yelled out to the remainder of the people. They gave him their attention but not complete silence. "You are here because you too have felt the power surge through our land. We felt it in Canmoa. It has surged across all the lands as far as we know. But it is nothing to fear." He held up his hand, palm up, next to the lantern held in the other. A small seed balanced in the wrinkle of his hand. Then, a daisy bloomed from the palm of his hand, unfurling from the base until the petals flipped from the pistol. It stood about eight inches out from his palm. He curled his fingers up to pluck it from his palm. He handed it to a young woman standing toward the front of the crowd. She stared in bewilderment.

The Empress in Canmoa accidentally activated a power that has been dormant for a century, but I had no idea what the descendants of Neswia were capable of yet. But here was my father, simply able to manipulate the growing pattern of a life source. Not as powerful as the Blessed of Dalleia, but powerful enough to demonstrate powers that were diluted in our bloodline generations ago.

The young woman handed the daisy to a small child standing by her. The child's face blossomed a smile of her own but as the woman stood, her face no longer held the momentary happiness. She

glanced up to the Agedede, tears shining in the lantern light. "If it happened across Rylina, what will the others do? What about," she paused to absorb the weight of the word we all feared, "war?"

Our ancestors fought for years for this land. Everyone of Rylina used to war against each other under their Ancient for power and land. Thousands of lives were lost over those corrupted years and if we were obtaining powers again after finally finally finding peace, well I don't think the Agedede even had the right answer for what was to come.

A glance at my sister across the crowd and my father was able to relay that he needed her to join him, now. She stepped from the porch, gliding across the floor as the crowd parted around her. Janessa's chin stood tall despite the signs of fatigue under her eyes.

Janessa pivoted next to the Agedede, facing the crowd. She wore a billowing, light blue dress that flowed in the slight breeze. She had already dressed the part for her people, reminding them of the flow of nature around us and through us.

Janessa raised her hands, flicking her fingers. I had seen that motion enough to know that she was calling forth her vines. Except this time, no vines were called. I thought it must have been because of exhaustion, but then I realized it wasn't that at all. In fact, it was because she was calling forth something bigger than we ever witnessed.

The carriage that the Chief and the Agedede had stepped from began to shake. The crowd let out a gasp as the carriage started to rise from the ground. The carriage took a wobbling halt as the wheels stood about a foot off the ground. Underneath the carriage were vines that spanned about a foot in diameter. There were five of them balancing the base of the carriage.

Janessa let out a deep sign and opened her eyes. The crowd was silent, the only sound coming from the waterfall.

"If we were to ever face any... war, we will be prepared. It is safe to assume that the other countries have experienced the same awakening that we felt. Most likely, they have also received a new surge of magic that we received, maybe stronger or weaker. But either way, we will be prepared. We will not start any war, that is not the way of our people and we have no reason to. But we will train. We still have our warriors. They will protect us and we will train more. There will be no reason to fear." My father paused, looking at Janessa who was murmuring to herself. "What is it, my daughter?"

She softly said something under her breath as if to test out her words. She straightened her back and focused on the people standing in front of her. The people who listen to the Agedede, which would soon be passed onto her. "Night of Awakening. We have experienced the Night of Awakening." She motioned to the sign of her powers still balancing the carriage. "We have no idea where this power is coming from but we do know that it ties back to Dalleia. We also know that with training, we can determine how much power we hold. I will train with each of you who are able bodied so we can be prepared for what is to come. We have no need to fear."

The crowd began to murmur again, but the tone was different this time. Instead, there were hushed whispers of reassurance and determination.

Janessa still stared out upon her people, the people who were quick to listen to her powerful words. Yes, my sister was going to be a fine Agedede. My father knew it too because he was staring at her instead of the crowd, pride shining in his eyes along with the lantern.

I felt Jerran's arm loosen ever so slightly under my arm. He trusted the words of my sister, evidently.

The Chief walked back into the light of the lantern. The people didn't have to be silenced this time, instead they were already prepared for the words of their leader. "My brothers and sisters, the family of the *Agede* is right. We have experienced the Night of Awakening and we have endured the War. We will prepare what is to come, starting tomorrow. We will gather at the base of the Tree of Dalleia when the sun rises a quarter in the sky. For now, return home and fuel your bodies with sleep and food. We all must be prepared for what is to come tomorrow."

While the words of my father and sister were powerful, the people of Neswia trusted the word of the Chief as law. With evidence in place that they had less to fear, they simply needed a final acknowledgment from their Chief to properly process the information.

They turned down toward the scattered houses in Natrail.

As the crowd shifted away from us, an elderly woman emerged, now standing where the crowd originally was. She stared up toward her leader, not completely looking at him. The lantern the *Agede* held illuminated her eyes, exposing her clouded irises. "I felt something dark this last night." A few of those close enough to the elder stopped and turned back to listen. "A dark form surged throughout our village, coming to this very fall." She hobbled on her cane, facing toward the sea in the distance. A crooked, shaky finger pointed toward our house on the waterfall's edge. "It stood there for a very long time. As if waiting for something or someone. Then it left, heading West." She wobbled back around to the direction of her Chief. But before reaching her Chief, she momentarily paused. Looking at me, looking directly at my chest, as if she saw the dark stain that now showed on my left breast. Her eyes widened.

The family of the Chief and the family of the *Agede* exchanged looks, our exhausted eyes proved that all we could think about was sleep.

"We all saw or felt things unusual that night." Jenessa mumbled low enough that only we and the elder could hear. "Please return home and we will talk in the morning." With that, she turned toward the house, attempting to still stand strong.

We followed her.

As I turned to close the front door behind me, I saw our carriages haul off into the night followed by the remainder of the crowd. The elder, however, still stood exactly where we left her, staring off with her foggy eyes.

By the next morning, the only sign of the crowd was grass patted down flat.

## Chapter 9

Jenessa collapsed as soon as the door closed behind her. My mother was already by her side so she caught my sister's slack body and guided her to the bench by the front door.

"Bed. Please." Jenessa whispered those simple words, and my mother looped her arm under my sister's to support her weight. Standing, my mother was slightly shorter than my sister but still stood taller than myself. They started their trek down the hallway, towards my sister's room.

"Goodnight, father. You did well tonight." I nodded at him and turned in the opposite direction of my mother and sister, toward my own bedroom.

"Goodnight, Lina. Jenessa and you did well tonight, too." My sister obviously did well tonight, showing her exactly what Neswia was capable of. My job was simpler though. He was talking of the role I played as the soon-to-be Chief's future-wife. While Jerran and I were not in the direct spotlight tonight,

we were statues of the promising future Neswia still had. While my sister was bleeding herself dry of powers, I, who was born without powers, was still playing my own role by standing with my arm clasping the son of the Chief.

I entered my bedroom and immediately stripped away my clothes. I had changed into my attire from yesterday as we were in the carriage, the only clothing I had grabbed as the luggage was packed. The clothes still smelt of the Royal house party as I drew my shirt over my face.

I stopped by the mirror in my undergarments, inspecting my body for the first time since the Night of Awakening. My strong legs spanning to my toned arms offered no indication of the experience I had during that night, save for the black scar that rested above my heart. I lined the necklace with the scar, a perfect fit.

Lightly touching the surface, I felt the skin that now felt as smooth as my own skin, no sign of the scar being from a burn. In fact, the stone was still humming with warmth.

I blinked, and the world was taken over by shadows. From the stone, small tendrils of black smoke were reaching toward my skin.

Shocked, I dropped the necklace, its warmth now laying flat on my chest, and looked up toward the mirror.

Around me were dark tentacles of smoke, reaching in various directions. They held no solid form, instead venting out from me, as if I were a newly extinguished fire.

My skin shifted with the dark swirls, moving under my skin as if they were worms trying to find an exit.

I didn't scream. I couldn't find any words or even sounds as a dark form constructed from my shadows consolidated into the form of a man behind me. He stood to my left, overlapped by my body and only inches behind me. He stood significantly taller than me but not as tall as Jerran was to me. The shadows were morphing, shaping the finer design of a tailor suit and a face. The unformed face glanced into the mirror.

*There you are.*

I blinked.

The shadows were gone. The only darkness surrounding me was the unlit corners of my room. Everything was the same as it was before. My skin only held scars from training and the newly acquired black scar over my heart.

I rubbed my eyes, freeing them of the dark illusions that were brought on by lack of sleep. I was sleep deprived. I had barely any sleep the night before and a long journey before that. I was tired and needed sleep.

I slipped into soft, thin pajamas and curled under my blanket.

Sleep encased me within seconds.

*I dreamt of a foreign land. A land that was opposite of Newsia. The land was tougher and less forgiving than the land that I grew up with beneath my feet. Even the ground hummed with a menacing message.*

*Around me, trees grew so close to one another, I had to weave between them at times. Their thick exterior presented a troubled look, broken from age and other creatures rubbing against them. Not to mention the tree canopy that blocked out any source of light, not allowing me to navigate by the stars and encasing the entire forest in darkness.*

*I was staring at my footing, trying to avoid the thorny vines that laced the uneven ground. It only took seconds for my eyes to adjust to the lighting, despite the lack of moonlight.*

*I paused my grueling task of walking forward when a loud howl echoed around me. I couldn't tell which direction it came from, but I could tell that it was close. Whatever beast was able to announce its presence like that without the fear of being hunted was a creature that I did not want to encounter.*

*My head whipped back and forth, waiting for the beast to howl again, allowing me to narrow down which direction I traveled in.*

*Hwwwllll.*

*The deepness of the howl probably meant a larger one of the species. Even so, I did not run into a single one of them. But I did hear it come somewhere from my right so I turned toward my left and continued my slow progression of avoiding the thorns.*

*Step after step.*

*Another howl, this time sounding closer, but still behind me.*

*I picked up my pace, wincing at the few barbs that caught the bare soles of my feet. Hopefully the beast did not possess a powerful sense of smell because I felt blood trickling down my feet as I raised them in the cold air.*

*Step. Prick. Step. Step. Prick.*

*Light started to prickle my toes. I looked up and realized that I exited the forest. Around me, a vastly different scenery was now laid before me. Rolling hills were illuminated by the exposed moonlight. The mountains in the distance met the beautiful night sky.*

*Above me was the most beautiful night sky I have ever seen. Two bands of star clusters banded across the sky, emitting a blue and purple haze. Other variations of stars overlapped, some shining bright while other ones accented their brothers and sisters.*

*On top of the highest mountain peak sat the brightest star of them all, beckoning my attention. I reached for the peak when my necklace heated on my chest.*

*I pulled back my plain black shirt to reveal my necklace. The stone was fluid, no longer holding a solid shape, rather appearing as smoke that was condensed in an invisible container.*

*But it wasn't the necklace that was heating, it was as cool as a stone. Instead, it was my scar. The scar pulsed with my heartbeat, stretching out and contracting back.*

## **Chapter 10**

I woke, holding my necklace in a fist. Daylight was bursting through my open curtains. Even with my eyes closed, the light still colored my eyelids.

Excepting the new day, I hopped from my bed and dressed for the day. I opted for the lightest clothes I owned since my family would be the center of attention today. We were used to the attention since the fate of Neswia had long rested in our hands, but today would be the first time in generations where the problem blossomed in our home country. Neswians were peaceful people. Rarely did we hold trials for crimes since Neswians knew what belonged to nature and what belonged to another villager. I thought about it, this would be the first meeting we would have hosted since my sister was renamed the Agede. Times had vastly changed since then, even without the addition of newly awakened power.

In the bathroom, I applied a small line of kohl to the ends of my eyelids. With a dampened finger I smudged the dark lines, blurring it into a fog of darkness. If I was to be in front of an entire town today, I would at least wear my signature make-up.

Before leaving my room, I crossed to my window. I drew back the door and stepped onto my porch. The morning sun warmed my cheeks as I looked onto the shrouded forest before me. Light broke through the gaps in the trees, sending beams that dispersed the dark green of the shade. I set my hands on the porch fencing and inhaled the fresh air. Once my lungs filled with the pure air, I let it exit my body in a long sigh.

Nothing. Normal as any other day. Even after everything, I still felt no hum of the forest around me the same way my sister and every other holder of Dalleia's magic said they did. A small part of me was disappointed with this truth. An even smaller part of me was relieved by the normality of it all.

I exited my room wearing tight leggings that were a dark mossy green paired with a light grey, fitted shirt. My sister was already by the front door, staring straight forward toward the waterfall, toward the Chief's house. She wore a flowing grass green dress this time that lightly grazed the floor. Both sides of the dress split at the waist, exposing her smooth, tanned outer thighs. Her eyes had a thin line of khol, accenting her dark brown eyes.

"Good morning, Nes."

She didn't even fidget from her gaze at the house paired with ours. "Good morning, Al."

I walked forth and stood by her side. I noted the hint of perfume that emitted from her, like misted grass. Even her scent hinted at growth. Obviously her training from our father exceeded my own knowledge, but I was able to catch onto the intentional cues.

I, too, faced the home of the Chief. The rising sun shown from the left, illuminating the magnificent structure that was constructed when the Ancients walked. From this view, the library of the Chief's house was on full display. An open wall made of windows spanning from floor to ceiling laid out the mismatched coloring of the book spines covering the walls. In the middle sat a large desk that faced our house, paying tribute to a tradition shared between the house of the Chief and Agedede. To the right of the window my sister and I now faced was a room of our house that was the equivalent of the Chief's library. In that room, the desk also stared out towards its twin desk in the Chief's office and was surrounded by its own volumes of books.

The facing desks were started by the first Chief and Agedede of Neswia. They created the desks so they would be able to communicate easily while working in their office. Both of their wives would ban them from talking over political matters and the War after a certain period of the day so they would return home, afraid to anger their wives. However, they did not stay in bed for long.

Once their wives were fast asleep in their bed, the Chief and Agedede would sneak out and return to their respective offices. They would start a piece of paper for their writing and wait for the other to arrive in the open window. Once the other was seen, the first arriver would slip the note from the window and, with the Blessed powers inherited by Dalleia, summon a nearby bush to gasp the letter and carry it to the other leader of Neswia, now patiently waiting behind their translucent wall.

This technique became their method of communication that was passed down through generations. With each new Chief and Agedede pairing, natural powers would shift slightly so their methods of transporting the notes shifted. There were some that transported their notes by manipulated animals or others that would spin vines that ran across pulleys on either house. When

there were rumors of Jutean shape-shifters resting in nearby trees to catch a glimpse of a few words, the Chief and Agede changed their methods of transferring to an underground root system.

Even though powers of that caliber were diluted generations ago, the desks stayed situated this way. It might have been to hold tradition, but the shifts made me start to wonder if we knew all along that the Ancients would not slumber forever.

The door of the Chief's office swung open. Jerran was already in training clothing of leather and his hair tightly knotted in a bun. He took three long strides and reached the side of the wall of books. Dancing his fingers over the old spines, he withdrew one book and blew off the dust. Having been in that library many times myself, I knew that the only dusted spines were those written by the Blessed. Of course he would choose one that would be about the Blessed powers. Jerran was uncomfortable with a situation that he hadn't read about already. He always has to know the power of the situation at hand before he can assess the situation accurately. And his people needed him more than ever.

My sister's eyes didn't break from Jerran who was drawing a few more texts from the dusty shelf. "So, did you receive any powers, AI?"

I stared at my open palms. I used to fall asleep, staring at these same palms, wondering why they didn't hold the same powers as my sister. Why I was not destined to be the Agede and lead the people that I love so dearly. Every face that I have come to know in the country of Neswia once looked at these palms with fascination, wondering what powers the Gift of Dalleia would be able to summon one day. Then they looked at these palms with pity, realizing that I was simply to bear the next generation with the Chief. Nothing about these palms was special anymore, nor would they ever be.

"No. Nothing." I dropped my hands to my side.

"Not even the current?" She was referring to the pulse of nature. Everyone who is Blessed or at least a Descendent is able to feel the current. A connection between the natural world and a child of Dalleia.

I was all too aware of the awkward way my hands felt at my side. "I still don't feel it. I tried this morning. Even standing on the porch. Nothing."

"I am sure that the other children who were diluted to nothing, also, will be the same as you then-still not possessing magic. Hopefully their parents will bring them to Ediran for the training so we can train them as you were. Find other strengths so they can still contribute to Neswia's growth and avoid ridicule of the other children."

My eyes turned toward her. She was still glaring at the Chief's house, eyes almost glossed over by now. "So we really are to train them then? You really think that something is coming?"

A slow blink, as if to assess how much information I was to have. Her own sister. My family was one to protect information and use it to their full advantage, but it wasn't until recently that I saw the tricks personally. "It isn't for a war on the horizon. The people need something to do, a reason."

She felt my glare still resting on the back of her head.

A light sigh. "We also need to see the extent of their powers."

I still felt like that wasn't the entire truth, but it would have to suffice. "Yes, I will train them then."

She then turned from the window, looking down at me from the few inches that separate us. There was no pity in Jenessa's eyes; she found it to be a wasteful emotion. "Good. They will follow you."

Our parents exited their room, the door squeaking on the old hinges. My mom wore a flowing light blue dress that hung from her shoulders. The dress complimented her small frame while accenting the muscle definition that had yet to fade over the years. Her light brown hair flowed slightly past her exposed shoulders. She complimented my sister's natural look of Neswia.

My father, on the other hand, was demonstrating the ferocity of being attached to nature. His beast, which I hope stayed in his closet during our trip, slung over his shoulders and covered his back. His beast had large paws that were clasped together at his neck. At his waist, a belt displaying a curved knife hung from his hip. Light brown clothes were worn underneath the fur of the beast.

My father glanced over his family. My mother, the retired warrior who now dedicates her life to leading her people through the Agede. My sister, a natural born Descendent with the strongest power in all of Neswia and the intelligence of the Agede. Me, the Gift of Dalleia and a brutal warrior. And then there was my father, the Agede himself. We were the strongest family in Neswia for a reason.

"You ready?" We tilted our heads in a nod as my father started walking toward the door.

We only walked a few meters down the pathway when the Chief family merged with ours. Jerran's hand automatically interlocked with mine. My sister automatically scoffed at the display.

We walked in silence, no one saying a word.

In the distance, the trees of the Ediran forest grew. Crowds of people were migrating toward the full forest. Children chasing each other around their parents whose shoulders hung. Young couples clasping hands as they stared at the tall trunks of the forest.

Although the size of Natrail could be intimidating, very little of the everyday population was permanent residents. The small stream of people breaking through the forest line showed how little the population truly was.

We were the last ones. I glanced behind me, and the town of Natrail wasn't lit in the usual illusion behind the trees. Instead the few visible houses on the edge looked like empty shells. Lifeless.

After a little time, the shade of the Ediran forest cooled my skin. Even though very little light broke through the canopy that now shaded us, a glow from the forest edges illuminated the leafy ferns that sprung from the floor.

In front of us, a trail led to the main tree of the forest, the Tree of Dalleia. The people of Natrail were already gathered by the base, most facing the unnatural patterns that were woven into the thick, smooth trunk.

The wedding bands that symbolize the love between two all originated from that very trunk. My father and the Agede before him till the time the Ancients rested have placed their hand on that tree and called forth the bands that are spotted across the crowd.

The Chief and Agede do not waste anytime. We follow them onto the platform that rests in front of the tree. Heliad and my father first, trailed by Julianna and my mother. Next is Jerran and me. Finally, my sister's back hem of her dress brushes across the final step.

We only stand about two feet taller than the crowd on the platform but it makes all the difference. We could be standing only a foot taller or even on the same level and the people of Natrail would still fall into the same silence that casted over them at that moment.

In the moment before the Chief began to talk, I quickly scanned the crowd for any sign of the elder who was the last to speak the night before. If I were to see her, I would ask more about what she meant by the thing that seemed as if it were searching for something.



But as I glanced over the crowd, there was no sign of the elderly woman. Hopefully, our paths were to cross again in the future so I could question her.

“Clan of Natrail.” The Chief positioned himself in the center of the stage with the Agede to his side. Jenessa stood on the opposite side of the Chief with Varonica and Julianna locking arms behind her. Jerran and I also interlocked arms as we stood behind his father, me standing closest to my own. “People of Neswia. Children of Dalleia. We have gathered here today to embrace the power that Dalleia reunited us with.”

That is the story we are going with? That Dalleia woke to return the magic that has bled from our lineage for over centuries? The theory obviously bloomed from my father’s politically orientated mind. The people followed their Chief, but they dedicated their lives to the Ancient.

“My daughter, given to me by Dalleia herself, is the proof of Dalleia’s awakening.” The Chief pointed toward me, skimming over the fact that I did not possess a wedding band yet. “Nineteen years ago, Dalleia stirred beneath the ground to prove that she was still here. She blessed us with a strong woman for my son, who will succeed me! A gift. A seed to prove that She is still with us. That She will never leave us. Even though She rested her body here over a century ago, She has taken root across all of our land. See for yourself, with the magic she has returned to us. Feel the currents that swim across this land.”

The Chief bowed his head and without hesitation, everyone else did too. Although I knew the task was futile for me, I, too, bowed my head and closed my eyes. I tried picturing the currents around me, beating from my heart, flowing around me.

Heat. A spark of heat flitted across my body.

*Open your eyes.*

## **Chapter 11**

My eyes sprung open. Three tendrils of black smoke spread from my body. Knowing that everyone else in the crowd was going to open their eyes soon, I had no time to stand in awe or even question the existence of the tendrils of smoke. Quickly, my hand rose and swiped at them. They dispersed into the warm air, disappearing as quickly as they appeared.

I quickly looked around me, trying to make note of any straying eye, even a mere child’s. Not a single person from the crowd had lifted their bowed heads yet. Even a quick glimpse from the corner of my eyes proved that none of my family had either. No one had seen the illusion. I could have imagined it myself. I was still shaken by the events of the week. My mind might still have been slow enough to imagine such things as my eyes readjusted to the light. In fact, it might even have had to do with the lack of oxygen still from the carriage-ride episode. Yes, I thought, that is what it was. It wasn’t the first time my eyes saw shadows. But usually they had just been in the periphery. This was the first time they had seemed so, well, close.

I was already standing tall and eyes pried open when the Chief called for the crowd to raise their heads once more. “You see? Dalleia is with us no matter where we are. This is a sure sign that Dalleia is awake.” The crowd began to murmur their agreement.

However, when I completed my scan across the crowd, my eyes met Jerran’s. His purple eyes were open in shock. I made to murmur an excuse when the Chief began his speech again.

Jerran leaned in close to me and the speech from his father began, a far away sound as Jerran's breath brushed my eye and my heart thudded within my chest. "Did you feel something, Lina?"

At that single question, my fear shifted into sadness. Pity even. Pity for myself. He hadn't seen it. His shock was about something that was an unanswered question since my birth. Of course he was shocked at me freaking out. None of them knew if I had received powers from the Awakening, and me moving during our silence would have been a sign that I experienced something I never had before. "Did you, you know, feel Dalleia?" His eyes were hopeful.

I wanted so badly for my answer to be yes. I wanted to raise down my hand and bloom a flower or call upon a small creature. But my answer would always be no. "No. I just grew restless."

Jerran's eyes clouded with pity. The first daughter of the Agede, still not possessing magic even after the Awakening. I was used to it by now, but that pitiful glance from Jerran made my heart clench at the harsh reality of it all.

I remember the day that my sister was claimed as the next Agede, the day that I proved I would never be a vessel for Dalleia's magic. I was relieved that there was finally an explanation as to why I never felt this natural flow that everyone around me did, an explanation for the faces of pity that became a constant in my life.

Her slim, lengthy form had slid across this very platform that day as I stood toward the back of the stage: in fact, where I stood now. Jenessa summoned forth a slim, twig woven crown from the Tree of Dalleia. My father took the crown from her fingers and set the crown on her bowed head. The crowd cheered and I joined them.

From that day forth, I trained consistently until my legs gave out and my lungs no longer contracted.

The only doubt of my new mission had spawned from the look in Jerran's eyes that day.

His purple eyes again showed the same pity they had that day, except this time they were no longer staring across the stage at me, but rather mere inches from my own.

I looked forward, toward the crowd that stood before me. I was not their leader. I was not Blessed by Dalleia, even after her magic surged across the land.

That was my sister. It was her that was a Descendent of Dalleia.

Jenessa now stepped forth, drawing even on the stage with our father. Her green dress caught the slight breeze, exposing her thin thighs. "I feel our Ancient beneath the land. She lives within the land we have raised our children, the land where we have tilled our harvest, the land where we'll rest. She has comforted us birth till death and now she is here with us in this Time of Awakening." Jenessa was easing closer to the front of the stage, almost on par with the Chief. "We were in the capital of Canmoa on the Night of Awakening. The Empress was able to use charmspeak on our own." Julianna flinched slightly, but Jenessa's voice demanded the attention this harsh reality deserved. "While there was no hostility, it was proof that their Ancient is also stirring. We don't know what is to come in the future but we, as Nesiwans, will be sure to be prepared. We are tied to peace. We are tied to Dalleia. We will make sure that those truths stay as true as our connection to Dalleia."

The Agede stepped forth. Now the Chief, Jenessa, and the Agede were standing on the front of the platform together. "We unite here today, closest to the resting place of our Ancient to determine

the strength of our numbers. This will help us decide the actions necessary to hold these morals. Those of you who had a significant power before the Night of Awakening, follow Jenessa and the Chief. For those of you who had slight power before the Night of Awakening, you will be paired with Jerran and myself. As for those who possess no power, follow Alina and Varonica.”

Immediately, a small hand rose in the crowd, completely erect from the small body it paired with.

“Yes, little one?” The Agede addressed the child. Lynia, twelve years of age the previous season. Even though she was missing her front tooth and stood over a foot shorter than those surrounding her, she spoke with confidence. “What about the ones who had no magic before but now do?”

Lynia had magic; she loved helping the flowers in front of her house bloom. Then I saw the top of a fluffy, brown-haired head. Her little brother, Eliad, who was a mere eight years old. So he had received magic then. I wondered who else was now able to feel the current after being blind to magic their whole life.

The Agede was quick to answer Lynia’s question. “Join Jerran and me then with those who had a slight bit of magic before.” My father then directed his attention to the crowd once more. “Now follow the leader you were assigned to so we can begin training.”

I didn’t miss the signs of glee on young Eliad’s face as he gazed up at his sister. Obviously he showed great pride in his sister’s powers and was thrilled to train alongside her.

With that, we walked off stage in different directions, the crowd parting for us. The crowd curled back around as we passed, preparing to follow their respective leaders.

The power of Dalleia only recently diluted out of the bloodlines completely, so I was prepared to train with children. I began to run over the plans for the lessons in my head as I walked toward my respective side of the forest, furthest right from the stage. Since I was working with a younger crowd, I would start with showing them the basic stance of a fighter. We would then work on being agile by working on our foot movement around markers on the floor. Luckily, they would have plenty of energy and dedication to the cause, so that I wouldn’t have to worry about running them dry.

I stationed myself by a stout tree, away from the crowd. I unstrapped one dagger from my calf. Leaning against the rough trunk, I began to throw the dagger in the air, let it tumble while it refracted the morning sun that showed from the edge of the forest, and returned to my hand, the smooth, metal handle cool in my hand.

My sister and Heliad were doing a headcount by the tree on the opposite side of the platform. Each body in front of them stood tall, probably already feeling the weight of their power pressing on their shoulders. If they didn’t feel it yet, it was bound to hit them by the end of the first lesson. If things were to go astray in the near future, they were to be the front lines.

My father and Jerran were still walking toward their tree, furthest from the stage. The crowd followed them, with a few stragglers glancing at Jenessa and Heliad’s group. I recognized the faces of the people who were tough deciding. A young, newly wed couple, I believed were Irisa and Reid from this distance, were stuck behind, waving their hands back and forth while deep in an argument. Irisa rolled her head and then stomped off toward Heliad’s group while Reid watched her walk off.

Before the Awakening, Irisa had been a plant manipulator. In small quantities, she could weave pieces of grass or stems together. Her power had created beautiful baskets or other woven treasures that decorated her small shop in the Natrail Market.

Reid on the other hand, had been a growth enhancer. He worked on the fields due to his innate ability to promote plant growth. While Irisa had to concentrate excessively on her magic driven talent, Reid emitted magic that was happily absorbed by surrounding plants.

Even though it most likely hurt the couple to be separated in this harsh time, it was for the best. The knowledge of their powers were on two different levels and required two different forms of training. Irisa would get the best training with the group of Jenessa and Heliad. Her powers could benefit on a battlefield if worst came to worst. Tactically speaking, Reid's power would wait further behind, merely being an enhancer to those in Jenessa and Heliad's group.

Reid and Irisa seemed to settle with this fact because he turned around reluctantly and joined the group gathering around my father and Jerran as Irisa disappeared within the crowd of the other group.

"Where do you expect our people to be?" My mother's light voice was merely a whisper in the cacophony of conversations reverberating around the forest, but it was easy to hear her for she was now leaning against the same tree I was.

She had a good point. Despite all the groups that were gathering around the other two pairings, no one was walking toward me and my mother. I scanned the people standing in the second group. No children were nudged by their parents to come our way. No one was trying to shove their way through the crowds to reach me. Not a single person was even turning their head in our direction.

"Maybe they just need a little longer to grow comfortable enough to come this way." I stood there a while longer, watching my family split apart their respective groups, dividing them even more by their previous knowledge or power type.

Julianna still was stationed on the stage, overlooking the grouping take place. She noticed me and my mother standing alone and tilted her head sideways to express her question.

I lifted my shoulders, showing that I was as unaware as her.

She turned back to my sister and her husband. Now a few people were walking away from the group and toward my father and Jerran's group. Obviously Heliad and Jenessa determined that the people joining the second group were not to the standard of the first.

If people were being sent down to the second group, then people might be sent my way. I returned my view to the second group, but the only people leaving their group were people being sent to the first. I recognized those walking toward the first group; they were all modest people when it came to the natural magic they inherited.

But not a single person was walking my way. Did they all get magic from Dalleia? Was I the last standing Neswian who did not possess powers?

I turned back toward Julianna who was already looking at me. Her purple eyes did not match the pity that showed in her son's eyes, but rather posed a question. I was unable to read her question, but she read me as if she could find the answer written on my skin.

After mere seconds of examining me, she waved toward the second group. She wanted me to join the Agede and Jerran in training the second group. Even from mere body motions, I understood her reasoning. If there was no one who was to join me, I would still prove valuable for training. Maybe those

who were supposed to be in my group were hidden within the second grouping still. At least I could teach them the basics of fighting before they tried to master their powers, especially those who were feeling the currents for the first time in their lives.

I chose not to read into the reasoning that the people who were supposed to be in my group might be hiding within the crowd of Jerran and Roile.

I strapped my dagger back to my calf, seating it into the strap that was cinched around my leg. I looked up at my mother, but the tree where she rested was now bare. I quickly found her stepping toward the stage once again. Julianna must have motioned for her to return to her side as soon as I ducked my head.

Then I walked over to the second group. I circled around the group and ended up next to Jerran's side.

Jerran didn't even turn his head from the person standing before him, used to my soundless movements from years of spontaneous sparring within this very forest. The person standing in front of him was so concentrated on trying to summon his magic that he jumped when he saw me standing before him. The small sapling that he worked so hard to summon from the ground withered away instantly.

Jerran directed the person to the back of the group, settling him with the second group. "What are you doing here? Did you already call it quits with your group?"

"I have no group." He turned toward me and saw that there was no smile on my face. I was being serious. He turned toward my father who was assessing the placement of one of the members in the group.

My father turned toward me and flipped back toward the crowd, quick to find the root of the possible miscommunication. "Those of you who are not able to use magic, raise your hands."

No one raised their hands.

My father barely left room for question as he asked the next question. "What about those who had no magic before the Night of Awakening, but now are able to feel the currents?"

Over twenty hands sprouted up toward the front of the crowd and several more were held higher by their parents. As I suspected, they were all young children, only a few older than myself.

The Agede scanned the faces of the children who almost all raised their hands with pride. Not a single one of these faces were the faces of children who were disappointed. Each one wore the smile of a child who had just received the gift they had dreamed of for years. I guess every child here did receive the gift they had wished for. The same gift I wished everyday as my sister summoned forth another, stronger vine.

"And all of you now feel the currents of Dalleia?" There was no need to ask, the answer was already apparent. Yet my father asked his people.

The children with raised hands glanced around at each other. Their smiles grew bigger as they spotted friends who also raised their hands toward the tops of the trees. Then they all turned back toward my father, heads bobbing with confirmation.

A teen, aged around about seventeen who I had yet to learn the name of since he was a new face within the crowd, stepped forth. "I had no idea what the current felt like before that night. I attended many lessons as a child with my older sister, trying to connect with something that I was convinced didn't exist until I realized that I was not connected to Dalleia. My sister barely possessed any

power herself. She was able to calm frightened animals. I was convinced that I would summon something from moving here, to Natrail, but I discovered that there were many children of the new generation that were completely dilated from Dalleia's power. Al-" An abrupt stop to what was obviously going to be my name, but he thought twice when making an awkward glance in my direction. "Many children obviously have the same lack of magic here. I came to terms with that only upon moving here because I was the only one in my village."

He held out his hands in front of himself, reading them as if the answer to his troubles was engraved in his skin. "But then the Night of Awakening happened. I now know what my sister was talking about all those years. I feel a hum through my body that was never there before. I am connected with every limb of my body."

His hands fell slack and his brown eyes scanned from my father to Jerran to me. "I have yet to know what user I am but anything I am capable of will be dedicated to Dalleia, for she is my lifeforce."

"Me, too." Reid raised his fist.

"Me, too!" Lynia's tanned hand extended.

"And me!" Eliad's hand was already raised so he hopped to emphasize his point.

The remainder of the crowd joined in on the confirmation with their own form of interjections. Everyone here was carrying the current of Dalleia, already saying that they were dedicated to displaying their affection for their Ancient with their lives.

That left me. I was the last standing person in Neswia who was not connected to Dalleia. I turned toward my father, mother, and Jerran. Their eyes showed their pity. My dad concealed his feelings; however I knew that that was simply a trick of his lifelong dedicated to suppressing his emotions.

It was all too much.

I was alone.

Alone, while surrounded with the very people who I had led my entire life with.

## Chapter 12

I turned back to the stage where Jenessa had sealed her fate as the next Agedo. The stage that one day will host Jerran's and my marriage. The marriage of a man who would one day lead the country and a powerless wife. A wife who was not tied to the land that she walked.

Julianna stood on that stage now with my mother. She stood tall with a shut smile spreading across her face. Both of them were always content but unlike my mom, Julianna never was quiet. Not once during this whole ordeal had her mouth opened to show her elongated canines.

In a backwards way, we both were dealing with the same issues at the moment. She was also unconnected to Dalleia. But unlike me, she did have connections to a different ancient. An Ancient that was our enemy in the past. An Ancient that belongs to another land.

Her eyes relayed all I needed to know about how she was dealing with the situation, which was ever so slightly familiar to my own. While the eyes looking in my direction displayed tones of pity, those that were to glance in her direction hinted at unease. She was a possible enemy among us all. I knew her never to betray the one family she loved dearly, but if the people were to start questioning others, Julianna would be the first target. Knowing this herself, she opted to stay silent throughout the entire meeting today, for the most powerful thing of a full blooded Canmoan is their voice.

For all we knew, her light words could now be traced with sickly sweet compulsion. Julianna never explored her powers in the past since there was no need to in a neighboring country so far from being the Empress of her homeland. But with everything shifting, her powers might be easier to embrace than ever before. As her own mother had in the palace, her words might now carry hints of charmspeak that could easily be coaxed out with the correct tone.

She understood the uncomfortable feeling I was experiencing yet she stood tall by the people she has come to know as her family. Despite the danger she could possibly be put in if everything were to not go according to plan, she was ready to risk it all to stand tall by her family. If that meant sacrificing a few words to win over the trust of the very people who referred to her as their own version of Queen, then she would go without a voice.

Julianna's head bowed slightly. It was her role as the Chief's wife to stand by her people, but it was not yet my time. Jerran had yet to bear the crown, and I had yet to bear the wedding bands to prove my tie. For now, I was able to leave. Her strength allowed for a perfect opportunity to leave the pitying eyes to turn to uncomfortable at her sight.

With a slight dip of my own head to acknowledge Julianna's sacrifice and one more glance to my family who was occupied with their respective groupings, I turned toward the edge of the trees and ran.

Only a few strides away, I heard Jerran call after me. "Alina!" I ignored his call and let my feet keep their momentum that was already carrying me along quickly. A few heavy steps sounded after my own, but he knew that it was useless and gave up almost immediately. While he had the training of a warrior able to defeat a Beast, I was the agile one. The only one close to my pace was Jenessa, and she was busy with her people to even notice my escape. In fact, if her and Jerran's places were reversed, I am sure she wouldn't have even turned at me fleeing. There were more important matters to deal with currently.

I felt the breeze whip across my face. My hands swung by my side, solid movements that cut through the air.

There was once a time that I was only able to sprint a few seconds before my lungs were burning with the air that shredded them. That was a time where my sister's crown was still fresh on her head. That was a time that I enjoyed the comfort of my bed at night instead of the rough terrace of the ground beneath my feet. That was the time when my crescent daggers still felt uncomfortable held in my raw palms.

Now the thickness of my palms pushed the weight of my body over a grounded log. My toned body fell perpendicular with the log before I propelled back down to the floor.

The high sun warmed my skin as I broke through the forest's edge.

The feeling of the sun illuminating my tanned skin reminded me of the times that my lungs once clenched from running to the forest's edge from the waterfall. Now my throat wasn't even raw as my feet propelled off the ground at a steady pace.

I ran toward the waterfall, now in plain sight. Only a few trees sparsely grew across the green terrain. That is why my sister and I always competed on this part of the land. She knew that I would have fewer advantages if she had fewer obstacles. My body loved the feeling of being airborne over a grounded log or sliding under a low branch. Working around obstacles was how I spent my life so it only made sense that I found a mission in the physical ones also.

The waterfall was drawing closer. The water nymphs were not yet in sight, probably tucked behind the rocky side that disrupted my vision of the waterfall's end.

I ran up the hill, headed toward my house.

I slowed my pace as I closed in on the front door. The door fell back as I turned the handle and pushed it back slightly. I headed for my room.

As I entered my room, my lungs started to burn. But not because of the sprinting, I still had further I could go before I felt the effects of running. Instead, they felt like they were filling with water.

Brushing it off as a mere muscle spasm, I exited across my room toward my back porch.

I stumbled across my porch, my legs turning to lead, as if blood no longer were rushing into them.

Carried by my momentum, I crossed the break in the porch's railing and I stood before the darkened forest. Sun still shown bright by the heavy canopy above the dense forest outside my room that made the forest appear as if it were night.

My lungs kept filling as I crossed into the shadowed forest only a few meters from the door to my room. The sun no longer was shining down on my face, and the heat of the sun already left my warm skin.

I fell to the ground, finding it difficult to use my legs any longer. I needed a moment to assess what exactly was happening to my body because this was not a common muscle spasm. The grassy surface braced the impact from my knees. I attempted to breath softly, in through the nose and out through the mouth. But I felt the capacity of my lungs change every second as they filled. My breaths turned to short, shallow huffs that filled the remainder of my lungs that weren't crowded with this unknown substance.

My face made contact with the ground as my vision was blotted with black, my torso falling on top of my thighs. I tried to inhale but there was no more room. I was suffocating, and there was no explanation.

My body felt weak, as if the thing filling my lungs was also running heavy through my veins. I was exhausted even though in normal circumstances, my body would have only shown few symptoms of fatigue from running Ediran to home.

I attempted one more breath but my lungs didn't expand in the slightest.

I did the only thing my weighted body could still do.

I tightly clenched my eyes and the grass between my fingers as I released a wild scream.

The weight left my body, shooting out in every direction.

As quickly as the episode had happened, my lungs invited air in again. I gulped down the fresh air that flooded into my clear lungs. I could taste the coldness of the forest air on the back of my raspy throat. As I lifted my head, there was no longer an added effort as if my head was weighed down by an invisible force.

But as I lifted my head, that was when I saw it.

Everything that had happening to me these last few days was no longer avoidable. The shadows moving in the Canmoan halls, the darkness forming a man within my room, and the forms that swirled over my eyes on the Night of Awakening. I was quick to deny all of these occurrences, but there was no way to deny the darkness that spun from me now. It wasn't all an illusion, it was reality. It was as plain and simple as the very magic I had seen everyday.



Around me, the tall grass was mowed down as if a giant beast slept there the night before. The bent grass fanned out from me, and it was tainted black. Instead of a beast, the scene looked as if a bomb of darkness had shot out from me.

*Which it had.*

I jumped, still on hinge from the events that just took place.

*Usually when an Atralian awakens the darkness, they do so in small amounts. But I guess you are neither Atralian or aware of your awakening.*

My head rotated across the forest in front of me, no one. I flipped around, my behind falling flat against the ground. No one stood behind me either.

*Quite impressive though. It has been a while since I felt such a strong force of darkness. Then again, it has been quite a while since I have felt anything. Actually, I haven't seen anything for a while either so thank you for that. But I would rather not see the lands of Neswia. Atral is far more beautiful than this false happiness.*

"Where are you?" I was still scanning the forest line, trying to find the source of the voice. But I was looking too far because the voice felt a lot closer. Almost as if it were coming from my head.

*That would be correct. So she is smart too then.*

I stopped looking across the ground. I stayed still, trying to comprehend what was happening. Then my head snapped upward as I spun to scan the trees above me. At this point, I was on my hands and knees, crawling across the blackened grass.

*Or not.*

I fell back onto my butt as I turned to inspect the treetops behind me. The source of the voice was nowhere. There was no source of life in the small forest in front of my bedroom porch.

*And good thing there wasn't. If anyone saw your little stunt, we would have a lot of explaining to do. Well not you necessarily, because you have no idea what is happening. I would have to do all the explaining, and I obviously can't talk to them personally because I can only seem to talk to you.*

I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing. In through the nose and out through the mouth. Again. Again.

My heartbeat fell into a slower rhythm.

*Ah, there you are. There is the honed assassin that I was drawn to.*

I didn't listen to the voice's words. I needed to assess the situation. I needed to figure out exactly what was happening. I was finally calm enough that I trusted my voice.

*"Who are you?"*

*Wasting no time I see. Well, I guess I owe you that much explanation at least. Now, would you like to know the partial truth or the whole truth?*

I took one slowed heartbeat before I said, "The whole truth."

He made a sound of clearing his voice before he answered. *I am known as the Ancient of the Dark, but those who know me call me Jordith. Nice to finally meet you, Alina.*

It was too casual. Much too casual. For if it was true, there was an Ancient who was speaking to me through my mind. An Ancient who had entered Hibernation centuries ago. An Ancient who had never been seen out of his darkened territory even when he was walking on Ryline, corrupting the very ground where he stood.

Our land called him the King of Darkness and rightfully so. We were the land of day and life, and he was the Ancient of the land of night and death.

One more slow breath before I asked my next question. "What are you doing here?"

*That is a fair question, too. You see, someone woke me from my sleep, which I think your people are calling Hibernation. It was a great commotion and next thing I knew, I was in the lands of Neswia, then Canmoa and then here again.*

Another cold breath. "When was this?"

*Your people are calling it the Night of Awakening.*

"How do you know that?"

*Because you scream it out all the time. I can't help but know all about your relationship with your sister and that Jerran. Quite complicated for a soon-to-wedded couple if you ask me.*

"That is-" I caught my tongue. I took another breath and let the blood flow from my heated face. "What are your intentions?"

*You know, I haven't quite figured that one out myself yet. All I know is that my power seems to dwell within you, and I believe that is why I am here.*

I stared at my hands. There were black forms licking under my skin. They rose to the surface with their dark forms and then dipped back under just to return again.

*And that is why you can hear me so clearly now. You haven't been able to release your magic so it has built up within you until you drowned in it.*

The vision of the carriage ride from Canmoa flashed across my mind. Tumbling out of the carriage and choking on my breath.

*Ah, yes, the other time that your power was filling your lungs. It would have been such a downer if you would have died then. Good thing I was there for that, too.*

I planted my hands on the ground. Hard. Hard enough that uncontrollable tendrils of black smoke shot outward from my hands, shooting across the already blackened grass. But instead of evaporating instantly like the previous show, the smoke shifted close to the ground. It was contracting into one form in front of me. First it built up to a form that stood much taller than my own and then it drew in tighter, compacting into a steady body. Then the details started to form. A tailored suit. Close cropped hair that was slightly longer on top and flipped toward his right. A strong nose that dipped at the end. A dominant chin that paired with a strong jawline.

He emitted an aura of cunning confidence that was fitting with his smoke form. With the smirk that curled up his lip, I could already tell why he was rumored to be the most manipulative man to ever walk the lands of Rylina.

His smirk grew bigger as I finished my toe to head assessment of the Ancient standing before me. "I am pleased to know you like what you see. It would have been an awful waste of my time if you didn't appreciate the outcome."

His hooded eyes scanned me from bottom to top. I shuddered as his eyes roved over my clothed skin. Jordith, the Ancient of Atral, connected his shadowed eyes with my own, "Now do you want my help or not?"

### Chapter 13

"Help?" I blurted out as I stared dumbfounded at the human-shaped smoke towering over me.

“Yes, help. I think that is how your people say that.” One hand moved from his crossed arms to his chin, leaving a trail of mist in its wake. “In fact, I heard Dalleia cry out for it enough times that I know for a fact that is how you say it.” Another shadowed move and he was looking at me with his arms crossed once again. “So yes, would you like help?”

A feral sound scratched the back of my throat. I stood up, staring down the Ancient standing before me even though I only stood as tall as his chest. “You have no right to be here. Get out of here.”

“Oh, trust me, I would if I could. You see, I just have this slight problem that I seem to be tied up here.” Jordith tapped his temple.

“I have no idea what that even means, and I don’t care about why you are here. All I care is if you find a way you get out of here quick or I will--”

“What? Call daddy or mommy? But their powers are too simple. How about your soon-to-be father-in-law? But I guess his little vanishing tricks only work on vegetables. But then there is dear old Jerran. I am sure he would be interesting to fight since his new powers are still a mystery to us all.” His hand fell back down to his side as his eyes narrowed, readying for his final blow. “Or maybe dear old sister. Her natural born abilities were enough to alter your life so surely she will have a shot.”

“Stop it!”

“Oh, am I hurting your feelings? All of your family seems to have their little quirks but you seem to have,” He spat the final word as if the word tasted foul on his tongue, “nothing.”

The corners of my vision burned black as I launched myself at the shadow morphed Ancient. My crescent shaped blades effortlessly unclasped from my hipside brace and held firm in my hands. I had a moment to cross my arms in front of me before I slammed into the form while slashing in opposing directions with my blades.

There was no impact but my bones sang with the connection to the smoke. It filled my mouth with the taste of ash and went dry as paper.

I pivoted on my heel, turning toward the cloud of smoke that was already morphing back together.

*Nothing.*

I planted my feet and launched again, this time barreling into the cloud with my elbows in front of my face.

Another surge washed over my body with every contact point with the smoky mass.

I pivoted again, and it was already condensing once again.

*Are you done yet?*

This time I opted to use my favorite weapons that sang in my hands. The curved blade of my crescent daggers flashed off the beam of light that broke through the treetops. I slashed to and fro, dispersing the shadows with every move.

One slash to the right and a shadow of dark mist trailed behind.

Another to the left and the mist dispersed more.

I continued slashing back and forth at the mist that was so dispersed, there was no way it could condense back into a humanistic form. Subconsciously, I knew the blades were unnecessary because the mist was blowing apart simply from the movement of air around my slashing hands, but if there were any chance that this thing was able to feel pain, I was sure to deal as much damage as I could.

As soon as I could see the trees on the other side of the opening, I bent over my knees, breathing hard. Sweat had begun to form on my brow, either from exertion or anger. I was standing on green grass. I guess I had moved quite a ways from my original stance.

As I stared at the grass, the edge of my vision began to return, no longer corroded by blackness. "So that is the power of Dalleia's Gift then?"

I jolted up, snapping my back straight as I ducked into a fighting stance. My hands rose to my chest level, displaying the blades to the Ancient who had the audacity to transform in front of me yet again.

His eyes lit up with amusement at my display. I thought I detected a hint of pride within his eyes also. Then the same playful smirk quirked up the corner of his lips. "And the power she holds is that of darkness." His eyes were locked on my right hand.

I immediately flipped my head to my right hand that was held level to the side of my chest. My crescent dagger no longer was gleaming the radiant beams of light that refracted in the forest. Instead, they were a matte black that also encased my hand. The shell was solid, but swirled as if it were smoke encased by an invisible barrier. The same way my stone did within my dream.

My head snapped to my other hand which was still held in front of my chest. It, too, was encased in the black mass.

Suddenly there was a trace of pressure on my neck and abdomen, followed with a dispersed pressure against my backside.

"Lesson one," Jordith's voice sang by my ear, "never let your guard down."

A smoke hand reached toward my right hand which was still frozen in place because of shock. "As for this," he guided a few tendrils of smoke from my crescent dagger, leading them in a twirl as his finger etched a single loop in the air, "Now this is impressive."

His finger tapped on the back of my palm and the shell exploded outward. The black fragments fell to the ground, disintegrating instantly. Not a single piece connected with the ground, instead creating a mist of smoke that dispersed with the breeze.

I let my arms fall slack at my side. I had no idea what was happening. I had no clue of what magic was presenting itself at the moment.

But then I remembered who was also sharing this moment. The only person who could be responsible for such a corrupt form of magic.

My blades came up eye level again, this time gleaming in the rays of moonlight, not corrupted by the darkness. "Why are you manipulating me? How?" I was ready to slash yet again. If he had been able to trace the feeling on my back, there was a strong possibility he was registering the pain dealt with each slash of my blade.

"I would like to ask you the same." A smoky hand trailed toward his skull and then pointed towards mine. "But from what I can tell up here, you are as clueless as I am on the matter."

I raised my eyebrow from their furrowed position. "And what do you mean by that exactly?"

"Alina," My name sounded different from him, a wave of stillness ran through my blood at the syllables, "I wouldn't manipulate you."

"Spoken from the Ancient that manipulated the entire world!" I am yelling now. If Jordith was here on some sick mission, I wasn't going to make it easy for him. "The Ancient that manipulates his

people so much that they are still trapped within their own torment centuries after he was put in the ground!”

Something like hurt flashes in his eyes, but it must have been an illusion because his sadistic face is still in a haunting smirk. “If I were to waste my time in a country that is furthest away from my pleasure, don’t you think it would be more fun to play with someone who is more powerful. I would be tainting the mind of your precious sister if anything.” A tug of the corner of his lips. “Imagine how those vines would look encased in darkness. Fitting if I were to make them wrap around her own families throat as she claims the throne for herself. Just a little power from me...”

A feral cry broke from my throat as I ripped at Jordith’s shadowy form once more. Left, right, across, right, across. My blades swung in a pattern of their own, dispersing the shadows that brought to life the sadistic creature standing before me.

Instead of falling to my knees in exhaustion this time, I fell to the floor. My knees made first contact but my chest was soon to follow with the blades falling at my side. Between running to the house, the overwhelming attack of my lungs, and the fighting with Jordith, my body was completely drained of energy.

I was facing towards the darkest part of the forest when his feet reformed first. Only the balls of his shoes were touching the grass as he bent down in a crouch in front of me. As his top half condensed back into focus, he was straightening the ends of his sleeves. “I didn’t come here to tell you what I would have done in another scenario, Darkling. No, I came here to converse about what exactly the tie between us is.” Done straightening his sleeves, he placed his elbows on his knees, letting his hands fall slack in between his legs that were stanced like a butterfly. “But you seem to be useless to me on that front so why don’t you do me a favor instead. Next time you have one of these impulses to fling around my power as if it were a parlor trick that turned around to bite you in the ass, focus on just what makes it tick. Because if the reason I can’t completely awaken right now is thanks to you absorbing some of my powers, I will not be happy to say the least. In fact, I think furious would be the correct word for that.” His head cocked to the side and ducked closer to my own face. “And it would be very inconvenient to have an Ancient pissed at you.”

Jordith stood again, obviously not done with me yet. He started to walk as if he were simply talking to an old friend on a patio, fixed with drinks. “I shouldn’t have even been able to pass the barrier that Dalleia made. My barrier still stands strong to this day. I built it to do so.”

“All the barriers fell when the Ancients left us. We have been crossing the borders more often ever since.” I mumbled the words but obviously he heard every syllable because he seemed to perk with interest.

“Fools. They didn’t even think about protecting everyone afterwards.” He said it under his breath but I still felt the need to justify.

“They thought about a future for their people to finally unite out of their freedom. You only sought to keep your people tormented forever.”

“Ah yes, the sweet land of torment, Atral.” There was a hint of sarcasm or remembrance in his voice.

A slam of a door caught both of our attention, and we immediately faced the origin of the sound.

“Lina? Are you here?” Jerran. He would be walking straight toward my room and the back door to the porch was wide open, showing me and the darkness in plain sight.

“Oh, good. Oblivious boyfriend.” I could feel the disapproval on Jordith’s breath as he turned to look toward the door of my bedroom.

I rolled my head back toward Jordith. “Get out of here.”

“You are a fool if you think I will let you go that easily.”

“Lina? We need to talk.” His steps were drawing closer to my door; the echoes of his voice were bouncing in the hallway outside my room.

“I said get out of here.” I turned around to the Ancient. Between his legs and upper half, his torso still had not formed back, instead it was a shifting mass of smoke. It was as if he didn’t deem the middle to be necessary.

“Well you are the wielder of this magic, my Blessed.” He held up his hands, his shoulders raised as if he was asking me to throw my weight at him yet again.

My voice came out in a harsh whisper. “I don’t have time for this. Just get yourself out of here. Disappear the same way you came.”

“Lesson two, focus on what you want.” His eyes conveyed a challenge as he stared directly into my own, but I didn’t have time to decipher their meaning.

“What?!” My head was pivoting between my bedroom and the smoked mass Ancient standing out of my porch.

“What do you want?” He shrugged nonchalantly and stood, blurring the remainder of his form as he moved. He started to step toward my room, practically only a crude outline of a human form.

“I want you gone.” More breath than air exited my mouth as I cut out a harsh whisper.

“Sorry. Not good enough.” He was now crossing my porch, growing closer to the door of my room.

“I said I want you gone!” This time I yelled it. A current washed over me as the words flew off my tongue.

As the only defined part left of his body, Jordith’s smirk drew into a satisfied grin before his smoky form exploded outwards. All that was left of the Ancient was a large mass of thinned smoke that quickly dispersed in the breeze.

Knowing I had seconds before Jerran opened the door of my bedroom and saw me lying face down in the grass, I placed my hands underneath myself and pushed from the ground.

“Lina, I just want to talk.” His voice stopped right behind the door, not daring to open the door. Not yet at least. “I am sorry about the meeting today. I had no idea that there were going to be no one in your group.” Jerran was stringing together words, stumbling over most of them.

I was now standing, even though I was obviously unstable on my feet. I weighed heavily on the railing of my patio, pulling myself up the meager two steps. I went to close the door behind me when I saw that there was still proof of Jordith. Plastering the grass down still, there was a blanket of darkness covering the grass. I clicked the door behind me, deciding that I was going to face the other problem at my other door.

I didn’t even register that Jerran was still trying to find words of comfort. “We could have used your knowledge though. You could have shared your techniques--”

I pulled open the door, and Jerran stumbled into my room, putting too much trust in the door as he leaned on it heavily.

His eyes assessed me from head to toe. I didn't shiver as he did so because when it came to Jerran, he was only assessing my health.

"How are you?" His purple eyes landed on my hazel.

"I am fine." My hand rose to my necklace and clasped the warm stone.

He cleared his throat. "Um, good." He pointed at my bed. "Do you mind?"

Even though I nodded my head slowly, I was relieved that I would be able to sit without raising concern. "Of course not, Jerran."

He sat down by me as I laid across the horizontal portion. We didn't say anything at first. We sat in silence, processing the events that had taken place the last few days.

I shifted my eyes from the floor to the man sitting next to me. My fiance. My best friend as long as I have been alive.

Then I remembered something; Jordith knew all of this. Somehow he was in my mind. Somehow he was able to pry into my mental capacity and reveal all this personal information about my life. If that were the case, then that meant that he had access to my thoughts. That meant that I was a spy for the enemy without even knowing it.

There was one thing that stuck with me though, why me? Out of all the other people in my family, I was not the most influential. Jordith could have chosen my father or Heliad since they were currently in power or maybe even Jerran and Jenessa since they were next to take the crown. However, he was choosing to manipulate me. Something didn't add up.

But then again, Jordith had centuries of experience with manipulation. Maybe there was an advantage to choosing the weakest link in the family, and he was attempting to throw me off his track.

*Not the problem right now, I reminded myself, one issue at a time.*

I spoke up, immediately trying to find something else to consume my thoughts. "What did you-"

"What were you-?" Jerran spoke at the same time.

We stopped, looked at each other and laughed. There was no one around so we could stop the perfect couple charade.

Jerran fell back onto the bed and huffed out a sigh. "There is barely anyone in the second group who knows what magic they even possess yet. They all feel the currents but only a few actually were able to manipulate some plants. It was exhausting.

"But the first group was doing well. Your sister had everyone excited over there because she kept summoning these massive vines so everyone else tried doing it and actually got some pretty decent outcomes. There was even this one woman who summoned a sapling before she realized that she used up all her power and collapsed."

I laughed at the idea of a young woman being all hyped up thanks to the acts of my sister and then exhausting herself to the point of collapse. "My sister does love making a show of things, that is for sure."

When we were little, my sister would always run into the house, shouting that she learned something new. My parents would quickly drop the projects in their hands and rush outside. I watched from the door frame as my sister grew both physically and magically. Each time, she would have more

vines or they would be quicker to grow or they would be thicker. One time, she even formed the words for "Alina" in the air for me. Her smile was as radiant as the sun that day.

"Yeah, well it motivated a lot of people. She has a reason for her tactics, you know?" He lifted his head from the bed, looking at me over his broad chest.

"I know. She is the trained Agedede afterall."

"Yeah. Someday I will be ruling all of Neswia with her." He sighed and let his head fall back on my bed. "Who knows what will be required of us at this rate."

Then it dawned on me. I had no idea what magic Jerran was in possession of. Before the Awakening, he was able to manipulate the ground slightly, creating bumps or divots in the ground's surface. It came in handy in childhood races for he tried making us trip to steal the lead. Rarely did it ever work though, and sometimes it would even backfire. He would be so focused on creating another divot that he wouldn't even notice the last one he made was stealing his feet out from under him.

"Jerran?"

An acknowledging hum from him.

"What is your magic type?"

This time he planted his elbows on the bed as he slowly rose. "Ground manipulation still, except now I think there might be more to it. Follow me." He stood from the bed and began to cross to the door to the porch.

"Um, wait!" Remembering the dark patch marking the ground outside, I shot up from the bed, holding out a hand to stop him.

Luckily, he turned around but then he gave me a quizzical eyebrow. "What?"

"It's just that it is cold outside, and I would rather not."

"Well, don't you want to see?" He motioned toward the door.

"Of course I do. It's just that... um..." I was looking around my room, trying to come up with an excuse when I spotted my potted plant by the windowsill. "Just use this. Dirt is dirt right." I crossed the room, picked up the plant, and held it out for Jerran.

"I guess that will work." He shrugged off my strange behaviour, taking the potted plant from my hand. "Okay, watch this." He bent over slightly, allowing me to see the brim of the pot. At first, there were only a few grains of dirt hoping at the corner of the pot. Then a hill started to form as if there were something growing beneath the surface until the hill collapsed and exposed a hole that dived down the bottom of the pot. The plant now stood taller since the dirt it was rooted in now stood equal to the pot's brim.

"Wow! Impressive." I stared at the pebbles that lined the bottom of the pot. It had been so long since I had seen them, I had forgotten that I lined the bottom of the pot with them.

"Yeah, I have a ways to go since I have no idea where the bottom of my power lies, but I think this is a promising start." I could feel the joy humming off Jerran. He is infectious that way. From talking about his books or training or even the animals spotted in the woods, he was always intrigued by the world surrounding him.

I looked up from the plant and, sure enough, Jerran's eyes were transfixed on the plant held in his hand. His eyes were tracking back and forth, most likely making calculations of the act and figuring out how he can improve the display. A smile bloomed across my face naturally. Infectious. That is why this man was made to be Chief one day, his infectious joy would be able to spread across the lands of



light. Paired with his natural talent of observation, Jerran was among the top Chiefs of Neswia before he even took the crown.

His eyes then snapped up, his tight bun bouncing ever so slightly. "So we need to talk, Lina?" Jerran's voice was already glazed over with the same meticulous wording that my family used when speaking of powers. Ever since I came of age to no magic, my family developed that voice, as if saying the wrong thing might allow me to see what I already knew I didn't have.

I already knew what he wanted to talk about from that tone alone. I hung my head, suddenly finding my hands to be the most intriguing things in the room. "No, nothing at all. I haven't felt a trace of the power that was meant to run through my veins."

Jerran's rough hands clasped around my own. The hands of two warriors, but with different strategies. One pair to raise a country and the other to hold the other pair. "Maybe." One hand of mine was enveloped in his two. "Maybe you just need practice."

*You don't understand or it's not like that* were the words that wanted to fall off my lips, but I stopped short when I met his eyes. So much hope danced upon the purple shine.

I sighed. "Okay."

Not letting go of my hand, Jerran led us back to my bed. Once my weight sank into the edge of the bed, he finally let my hand fall back onto my lap.

"First, you need to clear your mind." I turned to him, raising my eyebrow. I had heard this same process countless times before as a child to no avail.

"Just bear with me. Look," he clasped his hands on his lap and sighed as his shoulders fell low, "I will do it with you." He leaned his head downward, closing his eyes.

I shook my head, but mimicked his actions.

"Clear your mind."

If only it was that simple. Visions of my sister springing forth massive vines below our carriage, Jerran's terrified eyes searching mine in the Canmoan bed, and the Ancient of Atral forming in my forest flashed before my eyes.

"Try." Jerran breathed calmly.

I huffed a long sigh, shoving all the images aside. All I saw was the black on the back of my eyelids.

"Now dive into yourself. Find the kernel of your life."

I began at my head, envisioning the tissue that rested between my skull. As it was the numerous other times my instructors prompted me to do the same exercise, there was nothing that sang to me. Not even a slight flicker of life.

I started to work my way down, picturing my body behind the flesh. A vessel for magic. My throat, my chest, my stomach, my waist, my thighs, my toes. Nothing. I expected as much. I only did it to satisfy Jerran's curiosity. I heaved a loud sigh, letting Jerran know that I was done.

"One more time. The other way now."

I closed my eyes again. Starting at my toes this time. Toes, thighs, waist, stomach, chest. I stopped. Chest. There was something there. My eyes scrunched tighter as I tried to envision my heart. I felt the beat of my heart, thumping inside my rib cage. But as my eyes were closed, as I felt what laid in my heart, I discovered something I had never felt in the lessons I was subjected to as a child. Except

instead of the light that my instructors told me to draw closer to, this source of power was a surging life surrounding my heart. I felt it within me, expanding and contracting around my heart like a flexible shell.

This is the source of Jordith. This is what had been planted within me as my family shined with the light of Dalleia. This was the culprit for all the darkness corruding me these past days. This was Jordith's grip on me, and he chose to encase the very thing that pumped life through my veins.

My eyes drew open, the light of the room contrasting with the darkness planted within me. Jerran was already staring at me, eyes full of hope. This was the first time that I had actually stayed silent for this small lesson of finding one's magic source so it was no wonder that his mind was dancing with the possibility of Dalleia's magic planted within me. Part of me wanted to tell him yes just so I didn't have to see his eyes turn downward as he assesses the correct words to someone who possesses no magic in the world of power.

Instead, I shook my head slowly, confirming his fear. I had no magic of Dalleia within me. In fact, I had the kernel of the life of an enemy encasing my heart.

## Chapter 14

As the lights of the house flickered out, I exited my room and walked barefoot on the forest floor.

My family had returned home shortly after my discovery of the corruption of darkness within me so I had no time to dive deeper. Jerran stayed for dinner and by the time we set down our utensils, nighttime had set in. Jerran had crossed the short distance from our living room to his front door as my family retired to our sleeping quarters.

Now my hands ran over the darkened grass that dipped down where our yard approached the forest. I bent forward, curling into a sitting position at the center of the grass circle. Focusing on my heart and the core of power that enveloped it. If Jordith was going to use me for whatever game he was playing, I was going to inconvenience him in the process.

For now though, I had to erase any evidence of him, starting with the tainted grass.

I was able to find the core of his power within seconds. In my quick assessment in my room hours before, the darkness seemed to clench my heart, allowing barely any room for it to expand and contract to keep the blood running through my veins.

Now, I could see the flawless gap between my heart and the power's shell. Shell was not an accurate word because it was not the same hard shell that concealed my hands while they held my crescent blades. Rather, it was a living wisp of dark smoke that moved in rhythm with my heartbeat.

I opened my eyes and drew forth the necklace that hung on my chest. The stone swirled in the same concealed pattern the core within me did. I placed the stone directly on the scar resting on my left breast; the stone movements grew more dramatic but were still contained within the same confinements.

I unclasped the lock at the back on my neck and held the stone at arm's length. In the starlight, the stone's movement became less eccentric and cooled ever so slightly in my hand.

"What is this?" I whispered out loud. I didn't realize I was waiting for an answer as I asked the question, but I frowned when the sound of the breeze through the trees was the only sound that answered me.

I received a long sigh, letting my shoulders fall limp. With everything that happened these last few days, I had to get to the bottom of this. If the necklace was somehow another anchor that Jordith had entangled me with, then it was the second task on my growing list of procedures to take to get to the bottom of this problem.

First, my problem was trying to manipulate a power that wasn't even mine. Simple enough.

I held out my hands in front of me. A deep breath in and I tried to summon the powers from my hands. I closed my eyes and pictured my mother guiding me through a lesson when I was much younger. My father was in the house, caring for my toddler sister but my mom and I were in the front yard, sitting with our legs crossed in the tall grass.

*Listen to the power within you, Lina, and draw it forth.* Her hand hovered over a small flowerbud hidden within the grass. As her hand held over the plant, it opened into three violet petals that slowly unfurled from the center. *Like that.*

I held out my hands now, palms up, trying to summon the dark shadows that shifted around me when I met Jordith. I pictured my core, my heart, drawing toward my hand as Jerran had explained his magic in the past. He said that his magic core rested within his gut and he always had to draw a connection between it and his limbs. Each time he summoned his power, he drew the power from his gut and extended it to the ground through either his feet or hands.

Nothing happened.

Then I remembered my dad walking from the front porch, my sister asleep on his shoulder. He sat next to us, creating a triangle from us three. "Use what is already surrounding you, Lina. The world already provides you with what you need." He waved out his free hand and held it over the same flower my mother just bloomed. The stalk of the plant grew further from the ground, sprouting another leaf as it grew. "Dalleia has already given you the resources, you just need to learn how to use them."

Dalleia was now providing me with the strength that Jordith was attempting to corrupt. These black blades were not Jordith's, rather they were the nature of Dalleia he was attempting to steal. In order to overpower the magic of the Ancient that was trying to corrupt this land, I had to call upon the original power of this land, Dalleia.

I unfocused my eyes from my palms and looked at the circle of darkened grass that I sat. Choosing a thick blade of grass that grew sideways next to my leg, I focused on the black corrosion on the plant. This power came surging out of me once, so I had a right to reclaim it as mine, even if it was a foreign power.

As I hovered my hand over the plant, I focused on each particle of the darkness, calling it back to my hand. Then small fractions of the darkness started to flake away from the grass, as if it were old paint. The particles drifted upward, affixing themselves to my hand. I turned my palm over and watched the last particles dissolve into my flesh like melting snow.

A smile creased my face. I had control over what was happening to me. I was never trained to master the magic of darkness, in fact I was trained in the opposite. But I was starting to realize that they might not be all that different.

I lowered my hand to the next blade of grass growing next to the one green blade in the field of black. The flakes were quicker to start moving this time, falling upward toward my hand.

I barely even paid attention to the darkness flooding into my veins.

By the time my eyes fluttered closed due to exhaustion, a grass patch the size of two larger feet was green and standing up again. I called it a night and exited back toward my room.

The door clicked behind me and I tumbled into a pair of nightclothes before I fell into the cushions of my bed. The coldness of the sheets shifted into warmth after a while. I thought of the process of controlling my magic. I had finally learned how to control the power within me, both with and without the help of others.

*Yeah, some help you are.* I thought to the voice that now shared my head. Not once had Jordith showed his presence through the grueling task of removing the black stains from the backyard.

I felt a low chuckle reverberate in my head as my eyes fell shut, inviting the darkness of sleep.

## Chapter 15

I woke to a light tap on my bedroom door. Only my mom knocked on the door in that pattern.

“Lina, come join us for breakfast when you are ready.” Her light footsteps padded down the hallway.

I rolled out of bed and shrugged on my dark clothes, no longer caring what signals they displayed in our uneasy times, at least they offered some normalcy.

When I entered the living room, my family seemed to ease slightly when they saw my usual bedridden ponytail and darkened cloth. They, too, appreciated the normality to the attire.

I drew forth a large spoon of yogurt and dolloped it onto the plate that sat in front of my seat. I then grabbed the bowl of granola and tipped in an ungodly amount of the crunchy accessory.

As I was mixing the granola into the yogurt, my sister broke the silence. “We are taking the day off as far as training.” She spoke over a spoonful of steaming oats.

I lowered my spoon to the table and looked up at my family. My mother had no makeup, opting for a natural look in a green, flowing jumpsuit. My father had on a long sleeve shirt with fitted, rougher pants. Their outfits were common enough; it was their face though that caught my attention.

I hadn’t seen the pity in their eyes this severe since I was a child. After every lesson with a new instruction, when I came walking in the house’s door frame, my parents always wore this face as they stood on either side of the doorframe. Their eyes set tight in the corners from an unnatural smile, creasing the wrinkle between their eyebrows.

“We are going to visit Natrail for the day, calming the remainder of the worries within the town.” My sister never wore those eyes. Not that she didn’t have proper training from my father on how to manipulate one’s facial expression, she was an expert in that department; it was because she never wasted her time with pity. Both my immediate family and Jerran’s family treated me as if I were a measly sapling that would snap under any pressure.

My mother and father scanned my face as I assessed the situation. They surely wanted to see how the city was functioning, now that the power of Dalleia pulsed through the ground again, but another reason would be to see how I was functioning. Dinner last night was quiet and short, no time to tell them what I was feeling after the training the day before. Maybe they still possessed some hope that my power still had simply not awakened yet. A small part of me hoped the same.

“I will join you then. Just let me get dressed and then we can leave together.” I scooped up a large spoonful of my yogurt mix and licked my spoon clean. The smooth texture was broken with chunches in my mouth. Both sweet and savory.

My parents glanced at each other and then looked back in my direction, nodding their heads in approval. My mother was the one who spoke first. "Of course, Lina. Take the time you need. We were thinking about walking there instead of calling on a carriage."

My father's head was still bobbing. "Yes, yes. Get dressed in some comfy clothes, and we will go to the market. Even stop at that one bakery that I hear you talking about constantly." A deeper smile crossed his mouth. "About time I see what it is that you rant about so often."

There it was. This was a trip to monitor me. They wanted to make sure that I wasn't left alone at this time. There were rumors that the first generation to dilute out of the magic made several attempts on their lives. Seeing their family and friends mature into their powers drove those without powers to acts of self-harm. Behind my parents' pitying eyes was fear. They saw me as fragile and weak, so in their eyes, it was in my capability to take my life. Little did they know that when I found out that I had no magic, I wasn't as impacted as they thought. Instead, I found my own strengths. Strengths that were now taunt beneath my shirt, muscles lining my durable bones.

I planted a smile on my face, growing in their false sunlight of smiles. I, too, had mastered how to escape this. I couldn't blame them. They gave birth to a daughter who was destined to bring greatness to their land but fell short. So short in fact, that her little sister had to bear the weight of the burden instead.

I swallowed the last bite of granola and yogurt. "Okay, well I will see you back here in a few then." My chair scraped along the wooden floor as I stood.

"See you, Lina." My parents were almost in chorus, and my sister mumbled a goodbye over another spoonful of her oats.

When I walked into the bathroom attached to my bedroom, I used a warm cloth to wash off my face. I lined my eyelashes with a small brush of blackened paste and smudged it at the corners. I then walked back to my dresser and traded out my morning clothes with a pair of black leggings and a dark brown shirt that stopped at my forearm.

I turned to the mirror on my wall. Only a few nights before, Jordith had appeared in here for the first time. Then, he was only a crude outline of a man. Last night, he had been so real that I considered if the smoky form was his true form. No one knew how Jordith really appeared, but from his descriptions on the battlefield from old texts, it might be true. Either way, he had gained enough power again in that short amount of time. It might just be a few more days when his plan would come to light. A plan that would most likely turn the lands of Neswia dark.

My hand naturally rose to the necklace resting on my chest. I hadn't seen any sign of Jordith since yesterday. No shifting darkness in my vision, no voice reverberating in my head. Hopefully that meant that I could go the day with my family without him. Another problem to avoid when I already had so many to confront. This meant that the removal of the spot in the yard was to be delayed.

I knotted my hair into a loose braid on the back of my head and shifted out of the door. My family was waiting by the front door as they had said they would. My parents scanned me once and pressed a warm smile to their face. I guess I had passed the first test of the day.

We started our walk to Natrail, meeting the Chief's family where the roads to our houses met. Heliad was in his casual wear that clung tight to his muscle on his thick arms but ran loose past his stomach. Julianna was in the most Neswian clothing I had ever seen her in. Loose cloth rippled in the breeze from her collarline to her ankles. I met her eyes, maybe her eyes didn't gleam with the same pity

the rest of the family did. Her purple eyes have spoken of pity in the past for my condition but not the same way the rest of the family did. As an emotion manipulator, Julianna was commonly in tune with the emotions of the people surrounding her, so I think she might have sensed my unease around my family's unnatural smiles since the first day. She didn't mention it and I didn't either because we both knew how finicky people can be on the topic.

Jerran's purple eyes held the most pity of them all though. He stands to the side of his mother, generously passing her in height. His smile hung limp on his lips as his eyes slowly moved over my slim body. He met my eyes, finally, and the corner of his lip tugged up as if that was enough to prove his happiness.

This is what he is going to marry. A frail creature. A person who would always hold him down since he would have to protect her first.

I glance across at my sister. She stands poised and eyes searching Jerran's. Even in this time of crisis, she stands tall, ready to take on any obstacle that bares to break her path. If Jerran were to marry her, they would be able to be the main front for Neswia's wars, battles tooth and nail for the country that they call theirs, without me as a barrier. I was an unnecessary addition to their equation.

"Shall we go then?" Heliad steps forward and clasps a hand on my back. That slap is usually meant for my father so it catches me off guard as a hand the side of a Beast slams into my back. I stumble forth, two stuttering steps bracing me instead of falling.

A few startled glances are exchanged between everyone before I straighten my posture and chime, "Yes, let's." A smile grew across my face, too. I'd be damned if I did not enjoy this time I had with my family. Everything was normal again. Not even a swirl of darkness dared to corrode my vision.

## Chapter 16

The city was teeming with activity. Part of me thought that everyone would still be hunkered down in their homes, fearing the Night of Awakening, but the lessons yesterday obviously lifted everyone's spirits. Judging from how many people were in the city, it was simple to tell that there were even visitors to the city. Definitely not as many as the usual, but there were visitors nonetheless. While Natrail's resident population is low, one would never guess based on how many visitors the city hosts daily.

Children were running across the dirt paths, playing tag, as parents watched from the chairs on patios.

"How come they are not using their magic?" I asked my family who was walking beside me on the main dirt path running through the various housing.

Jerran answered, being the all-knowing one he is. "We banned the use of magic in the residency areas so nothing goes astray. Our magic is beautiful but it also can be harmful." I thought of the instant hole of dirt Jerran was able to carve within the potted plant. That was only the beginning of his power so far. What if one of these children accidentally pulled their friend underground when he went to reach for his friend's arm in a game of tag? A life lost, just because of lack of training, a lack of knowledge of one's power.

"Yes, don't want them to awaken something that we haven't discovered yet." Heliad answered from the other side, standing in front of us.

One of the children ran into his legs. The child's small hand rubbed against his head, "Ow, I am sorry-" Glancing up at who he just ran into, the boy's face turned into an expression of awe, "Mister Chief."

Helaid let out a low chuckle. "No harm, boy. Now hurry before your friend catches you."

At the mention of the game again, the boy turned back to his friends who had also stopped to stare at our passing. But with a quick yelp from the boy as he sprinted off, the friends were quick to return to their game.

Jerran returned to our original conversation. "I was reading that there were cases back in the time of the Blessed that new powers were risen when the Blessed were in times of stress or shock. Usually it was pregnant mothers who would discover a new power during pregnancy or sometimes it was the death of a Nimdre that sparked intense emotion in the individual and would lead to an unleashing of their powers." Jerran took a moment of silence, probably leaving room for questions. "Not the same as the combination of a Nimdres' powers though. The connection between Nimdres is a sharing of pre-existing powers while this personal awakening is more like uncovering powers that had no need to manifest before."

I glanced at Heliad and Julianna who stood in front of me. They had yet to address the Awakening of Julianna's powers. Heliad probably felt it too if the rumors of two Nimdres from other countries were true.

It was written that sometimes, on the battlefield during the War, a connection between Nimdres would lock into place. Different countries took care of the connection in different ways, but they were all the same story. Once one Nimdre died, the other would go shortly after, their life source gone from the world. Sometimes the warrior would try to conceal the new powers that they were in possession from, but sooner or later, they would misstep and be put under the knife. Any tactic was used to keep the upper hand during War.

Jerran continued. "But that is written text, we still have no idea how deep our powers run. It seems that we are not directly Blessed so we most likely will not experience a personal awakening."

My eyes shifted back down to my hands hanging by my waist that swayed to my steps. Awakening. Jordith's manifestation had to be connected to that night. That much was true. And by some means, he was using my own body to control his long lost powers. Maybe that explained the hardened smoke that encased my hands when I was tossing about Jordith's ghostly form.

Seems like Jerran's books were right after all, but that is not what I responded with. Instead, I gave a single nod to confirm that I understood. I could feel my parents' approval oozing from them. Their daughter might not pulse with the same magic but she knew the ways of her people like a proper Chief's wife.

"So where is that delicious bakery? I am starving." My father rubbed his hands together, creating a sound of rasping leather.

I made to step forward, but Jerran already took the lead. "Right up there, Roile." He points to the treeline, the bakery still hidden behind the needles of the pines.

"Oh good, I want a big old muffin. Do they have those, Lina?" My mother turned to face me.

"Yes, Renee makes the best muffins." I reply, narrowing my vision on Jerran. "Jerran would highly recommend them."

Jerran's eyes make a small roll, taking the bait. "If you would like a bran muffin, then Renee has the best." He turned toward me with a full grin. "I suppose."

I rolled my eyes but it was Julianna who sighed and retorted, "Of course it is the son of Heliad who walks into a shop of sweets and chooses the blandest option."

At this, Heliad released a hearty laugh. "I am sorry, Your Majesty," his hands wave in the air in mockery, "that the lands of Neswia do not fit your standards of pleasure, Your Majesty." Another one to prove his point.

Julianna's laugh sounded as a windchime, full of light and memorizing. "Oh, *our* lands serve me plenty of pleasure." As she emphasized "ours" she leaned into his sturdy arm.

"Oh please, you two!" My father moaned from the opposite side of the dirt road. "We are in the lands of Neswia, may I remind you!" Another round of laughs from the group. Even Jerran released a short exhale of air at my father's commentary. Only my sister was left looking tense from the situation. On the opposite side, she stood erect, observing the people of Natrail.

So simple to turn the situation for the best. Everyone was enjoying themselves once again instead of focusing on the Night of Awakening or my lack of power.

I sensed that Julianna was the cause of all of this enjoyment as her tight eyes glided to my own. Her smirk deepened. She seemed to be saying *I understand*.

## Chapter 17

"These are not bad." Bits of bran muffin caught in Heliad's beard.

"See. I told you." Jerran was already on his second helping, trading Renee a coin for another bran muffin.

I shook my head. "Not bad? It is as if you both think nothing is better than fine. Have you not taught your son the pleasures of the world?"

"No, that is his mother's job." Heliad took another bite from the muffin, already devouring half of the treat.

I turned toward Julianna, who rolled her eyes. "Oh please, at least I taught him manners. He surely didn't get that from you." She had a point. She was delicately eating her fruity pastry in dainty bites as her husband's beard was speckled with his muffin.

"Well it is good. That is for sure." My mother held out her berry muffin, showing off the array of colors captured within the brown fluff.

"Indeed." My father made a dramatic show of rubbing his stomach and licking his lips of the frosting that was originally coating his mini cake.

"Thank you." Jenessa motioned toward Renee, beating us to the punch. We echoed our thanks. Even though she was trying to conceal it, Renee's cheeks flushed a light shade of red. "I am glad you visited today."

"Of course! Always welcoming the finest pastries in all of Neswia!" My dad was now licking his fingers clean of the dessert that passed as his breakfast. I cringed slightly at the entirety of the conversation with Renee. Everyone acted as if we were all usual visitors, happily forgetting the fact that the Chief and the Agede barely had time to make their rounds in the hometown these days. In fact, though this shop had opened years ago, my father and Heliad were visiting it for the first time.



And Renee was playing it off as any proper Neswian citizen, to treat their leaders as equals. If only it weren't so unnatural.

We ushered our way out of the bakery, and Jerran led us to the market. Eyes shifted to us, followed by straightening of dresses or shirts. My family stared ahead, either not noticing or ignoring the awkward shifts of the people around them.

Even when I was little, and my mother and father would take me into town, I was aware of the unnatural movements of the people around us or the second look at their own spouse. I now turned toward my family, noting that their eyes were dancing among the treetops and their sparkling lights. Either they didn't notice or they dismissed it as natural.

The only exception was Julianna. The first few years, she seemed uneasy about the treatment of the leaders in public spaces, but I barely even remember that because by the time I could process memories, she had already been married to Heliad for years.

But now I noticed the difference in her. She shifted over the faces surrounding her and flinched in unpredictable intervals. I had a feeling that she felt the emotions of each citizen and they weren't as pleasant as they let on.

Yet Julianna still wore her natural smile and asked all of us, "Where to next?"

Her son answered. "I was thinking about the Market of Natrail. We could stop at a few booths along the way before settling for some late lunch at a restaurant."

"Sounds good to me." Jenessa said from the back of our walking structure. "As long as we make a stop by my favorite booth."

Being younger and not yet taking the official crown of the Agedede, Jenessa also made her rounds in the land of Natrail. While Heliad, Julianna, my father, and my mother only visited for political reasons, Jerran, Jenessa, and I visited to draw closer connections with the people we vowed to one day protect. Part of me was intrigued to see what exactly was fine enough to be Jenessa's favorite booth in the Market.

"Of course." This time, Jerran's pointed smile was directed at my sister. Was that a genuine smile that tugged on her own lips? I haven't received that smile since we were little ones.

We continued our walk to the Market of Natrail as the sun rose in the sky.

As we entered the main level of the Market, the difference in the amount of people was astonishing. Since the Market of Natrail was a base for merchants of every land to exchange their merchandise, I should have known that the Market would stand bare compared to the usual commotion.

Next to the streets of residents running about, the Market seemed to stand still. There were deep lines in the floor, exposed for the first time since the Market opened. Gouges ran like veins over the floor of the Market from years of collapsible booths coming and going. There stood vacant room for two more booths between each booth, sometimes even more.

Even though the booths were few and far, there was still a considerable amount of people milling about the lobby. Although there was no sight of Canmoan purple eyes gleaming in the lights above or the fiery red of Jutean hair. For once, the Market swarmed solely with the brown hair and hazel eyes of the Neswians.

“Anything you would like, Nimdre?” My father broke the silence. The younger portion of our group was stunned by how empty the Market looked while the parents were taken back by how much the Market had grown since the crowns were placed upon their heads.

My mother was still staring at the small lights twinkling across the railings. “I wouldn’t mind a new necklace. Or perhaps a bracelet.”

Jerran practically perked up, satisfied that he knew the answer once again. “Oh, Alina knows just the place! We just got a necklace here before our trip to Canmoa.”

The attention shifted toward me again. I was satisfied with their natural mood as if they forgot that I was to be protected today. “Yeah, it is beautiful.” I pulled the stone from under my shift and held it out for everyone to see.

As if it knew it was being watched, the stone was still, no longer whipping around like caged smoke. A confirming sound of awe emitted from my mother and Julianna.

“What is it?” Julianna had to lean down since she stood a head taller than me.

“The merchant said it was from Atral. I couldn’t resist it when I saw it.” I shifted the stone in the light. Instead of reflecting the light like many other stones, the stone seemed to absorb the light that dared to shine next to it.

“Atral? You sure about that one?” My father obviously took an interest in the stone now.

Heliad clasped a hand on my father’s back. “Roile, your daughter seems to have some nerve if she wants to wear a gem from the cursed lands!”

“Oh please, he was guessing, and he is a trader who is trying to find the best story for his merchandise.” My mother this time. “I am sure it is truly off the beaches of Jutea or something like that.”

“Well I think it is beautiful, Lina.” Julianna tilted her head back in approval and glanced at her husband with accusing eyes.

“Oh,” Heliad cleared his throat, “I think it is beautiful, too.”

“Where is the merchant of this fine stone then?” My mother seemed convinced that she now must buy a stone from this anonymous merchant.

“I would think he would be around here somewhere. Merchants come and go but he just set up shop a few days ago so I am sure he would still be here.” If he didn’t move because of the Awakening.

We started walking across the first floor, searching for the booth. We reached the location much quicker than last time since there was no crowd stalling our walk.

Where the booth was before, there was only a trash can and a few scattered papers.

Jenessa was quick to direct our attention to something other than the lack of jewelry before us. “I know a good booth for jewelry. Let’s go.” Without a word, we turned and followed Jenessa to the second floor of the Market.

Once we got to the booth, Jenessa greeted the fragile old lady behind the counter as the mothers awed at the display of jewels tied to various straps. The decision was quick, my mother selecting a small light blue gem hanging from a brown leather strap and Julianna choosing a red jewel that sparkled from a ring she quickly placed on her finger.

Julianna held her ring up, its gold contrasting with her browned skin. “I think this was a fair find, Jenessa. I do hope the other merchant pays a visit in the future though because I would be interested in

a rare stone such as Alina's." She let her hand fall with ease to her side. "But this will more than do for the time being. Now where did you want to go next?"

A smirk spread across my sister's face. "Follow me."

We descended the stairs of the Market, making our way to the second level. There were also vacant places blotting the second level, merchants gone to their homelands. Even at the top of the stairs, there was no longer a Jutean man manipulating his body into weird positions. In fact, there was no performance on the small platform that was seated next to the stairs.

We approached a small shop which was built into the wall frame on the second floor. These structures were permanent and owned by locals. I didn't visit these as often because the merchandise stayed more or less the same since it was the same shop owner every day. However, I could see why I usually avoided this shop. The humble brown sign stood over the small door frame, "Natrail Books". A bookshop. I usually forgot that my sister enjoyed the hardbound covers of paper and ink. Except where Jerran prefers books that educate him on old war strategies or the culture of other countries, Jenessa enjoys the world of fiction.

Jenessa, leading the way, pushed open the small door that dinged a petite bell that announced our arrival.

A middle-aged woman with a dainty frame came around the corner of the front counter. Her face immediately lit with joy at our arrival. "Oh, Jenessa. Jerran." She gave a nod to Jerran but embraced Jenessa into an all encompassing hug which was partially returned in my sister's standoffish way. "So good to see you both!"

"Nice to see you, too, Nalia." Jenessa replied, surprisingly not too uncomfortably.

I knew Nalia in passing. I had passed her shop before but, due to my lack of literary interests, I never stayed for long.

Nalia pulled back from my sister and flipped around toward Jerran, pointing a finely trimmed fingernail at his chest. "I have a new book for you!" She then scurried behind the counter, disappearing into the nook behind the wall. A few clatters were heard behind the wall as she looked for the book.

While Nalia was making I am sure what was a mess back there, Heliad turned to his son and Jenessa, "You two visit here often?"

Jerran said, "Of course."

As Jenessa said, "Not that often."

Startled by their common interest, they exchanged a glance. Then Nalia came around the corner, the clattering coming to a halt. A book slammed on the counter, less from her force than the sheer weight of this book plummeting down. The thick book released a large puff of dust, and we immediately started fanning the air, coughing at the particles that already reached our lungs.

Jerran moved forward, eyes locked on the old, worn leather-bound cover. "What is it?"

Nalia wiped the front of her shirt, dust already attaching itself to its woven yard. "I am not too sure myself. There was an elder who dropped it off. He said that he sees you stopping by my shop often and wanted to make sure that it got to you next time you stopped by. I looked at it myself, out of pure interest and for your protection," Her face flushed slightly at admitting that she had peaked at the gift to the future Chief'. She coughed, either to brush off the fact or to clear her throat of the dust that was so dense that it was contorting the light surrounding us. "But I think that it is about war strategy, from what I was able to gather." She flipped open the book to a random page, letting the weight of the front

cover create a loud thunk as it made contact with the wooden counter. One side was composed of text with three smaller images while the other page was covered in one large painting.

The painting depicted a man with silver hair being held to the floor. All four of his limbs were held by men with brown hair. A fifth man kneeling next to the silver hair man's head held a pointed knife. There were already slashes running through the man's torso but the man holding the knife seemed to be moving toward his face now.

"I wasn't able to read much of the text since it is in old Neswian. I know some of the language since it sounds similar to our current tongue, but most is lost on me. I also wasn't able to find the time to translate it. I know you are more fluent in Old Neswian than myself so you might have an easier time with it."

Nalia was right, Jerran loved learning the languages of old text and the other countries. Not much was recorded since our people were focused more on the War than on recording information for future generations, but there were a select few in the world who dedicated enough time to the few texts that they were able to piece together the languages, one of which being Jerran.

Nalia leaned in close, pointing to scribbled writing in the corner. The handwriting was scrawled in thick lines, not as fine as the writing tools sold in the markets. "I also couldn't figure out if any of this text was relevant. But what I did gather is that this book seems to be orientated around war tactics and torture methods. Maybe you could add it to your collection at home. I am sure the elder would be honored knowing that his book made it into the Chief's collection." Nalia smiled, her teeth gleaming in the artificial light.

Jerran didn't smile however. Not because he was afraid to show his teeth that extended further than the bookshop owner's, but because Nalia had reached a false conclusion on the matter. This wasn't the generous donation of an old man, he had no such intentions. No, this was a confirmation that the people knew war was brewing. This elder was donating a book of war tactics and gruesome torture methods because he wanted his Chief to know what was standing on the horizon.

## Chapter 18

We said our thanks to Nalia as Jerran wrapped the leather bound book into a ragged cloth. Before taking our leave, Jenessa wrapped two novels in her own cloth, tucking them into her satchel.

"Should we leave for lunch then?" Heliad said as he clasped his hands together.

Julianna shook her head, dismissing the fact that this would already be his fourth meal this morning, but it was Jenessa who spoke, "Yes, please. I know a place we could go."

We followed Jenessa down the third platform of the Market and back onto the grassy floor. Jerran was back in stride with me, at the end of our party, Jenessa taking the lead, and the two Nimdres walking side-by-side in between. As usual, Heliad and Jenessa leaned into each other as my parents walked with a healthy gap between them.

Standing outside the Market platform, there stood a small cafe. Neswians were seated on outdoor benches, passing about bowls of soup and salad. Of course Jenessa would choose this restaurant for today. Exchanging food with the people of Neswia is the perfect way to show that the Chief and Agede stand level with their people. I even saw my father nod his head in approval, noting the same reasoning behind Jenessa's choice.

“Oh, lovely.” Julianna’s happiness flooded through me, making me forget about the book that was firmly tied in Jerran’s bag or the fact that Julianna was the only one amongst the crowd who had skin darker than the Neswian tan.

As the country of love and the country of light, Neswia and Canmoa were the first to form a neutral connection after Hibernation. People flooded into both countries, eager to start a new life that included each culture. Our ancestors dreamt of peace between the two countries and that is what we lived in for the past century. There were no conflicts between the two races, only peace.

Yet now I look at the people gathered in the small Natrail cafe and can’t help but note the contrast between the Canmoan brown and the Neswian tan, along with the startling contrast between our eyes. Newsian eyes played with shades of brown that drew us back to the ground where Dalleia lies. On the other hand, the Canmoan eyes shocked purple, enticing anyone who fell for their naturally synthetic look. My eyes then traced down to Julianna’s arm that was now covered despite the warm weather. Below her sleeves were other marks of her home country. Elaborate tattoos covered her arms, painting them brown and black. People of Neswia didn’t believe in the body art that Canmoa treasured so dearly.

As Julianna’s smile still lit her face, I noted the crease of her brow, tucking in concentration. She had to concentrate on her powers to keep them hidden; I knew that before the Awakening. Her powers were so innate to her emotions that they simply leaked onto the people, influencing their emotions to match her own. Judging from the crease in her brow, though, she had to concentrate a lot more to keep her powers on the low when everyone was already on edge about other races’ powers.

We approached a larger table for eight on the far side of the outside patio. Jenessa pulled a coin from her satchel and placed it on the table. We all followed suit, placing a coin in front of us. A waitress in a yellow jumpsuit swiped the coins, signalling a chef to our table. A young chef with short-cropped hair glided over to our table while holding a tray of filled bowls.

The chef gracefully sets the bowls down on our table. “I have selected these myself to start your meal with us today. Enjoy.” He bowed deeply, placing one hand to his waist and the other gracefully pointing at us.

I already could tell that the salads and soups placed on table, that is two salads and three soups, were some of the finer platters rotating throughout the restaurant. But the chef would never directly suggest that he was saving the best for the Chief and the Agede. Which meant that word had already circulated around the village that the family was making a rare visit to Natrail. I wondered how many restaurants around the village had a special platter waiting for the Chief who did not choose their establishment today.

Heliad and Jerran were the first to start on the meals, filling their personal plates and bowls with the green salad and the vegetable soup.

Once the food made its way around to me, I scooped a small portion of each option onto my plate and into my bowl. My spoonful of corn soup met my lip, and I moaned in satisfaction. Julianna and my mother also hummed their delight as they tasted their own soups.

The rest of our platters lived up to the first, offering their own unique tastes that intrigued my tastebuds. Since we were not filled by our platters that by our table alone cleaned, we accepted the platters that were being passed around the cafe. Jerran intercepted a fruit salad that was offered by the table next to us. We cleaned that bowl instantly.

Then Heliad was offered a large bowl of clear soup from a small girl who glanced back at her parents cheering her on from the opposite side of the cafe. The clear soup held the most potent taste of them all, with strong flavors of salt and ginger, but it was gone instantly, too.

Finally, Jerran received a bowl of noodle soup from the same table, and we slowed our eating. It was the first bowl to escape our table with contents remaining. The table on the opposite side of the table graciously accepted our platter, eager to try the food for themselves.

Heliad and Jerran were the first to set down their forks, since they ate most of what was placed in front of them, not discriminating the taste of each platter. I, too, set down my silverware between bites, saving myself for the rest of the platters that I had yet to try. Julianna and my mother were also mimicking my habit, eager to try as much as they possibly could before their stomach rejected the thought.

“So, Jenessa, what books did you choose from the Market?” Heliad attempted to make small conversation while my father’s mouth was still full of a new salad topped with small seeds.

“Oh, nothing special. Just a story about a fictional world.” Jenessa waved her fork in the air, dismissing the question. She, too, had yet to stop eating. Most likely she was exhausted from the training from the previous day.

“Bah. What nonsense!” Heliad caws. “Why would you waste your time in a world that doesn’t exist when you could be learning our own?”

Jenessa still held a neutral face, as if the question did not bother. But her response spoke otherwise. “Because in a life of constant development and political gain, having a different world at your beck and call is reassuring. When I want to cool off from training or take my mind off a pressing matter, I read a story about another person. Also, it allows me to see the ways in which people think. No two people think the same and by reading a story, I can see the unique patterns in which people think.” Now her eyes shone slightly, the only sign that she was passionate about the topic. Her voice still kept its neutral bored tone, however. “And not to mention that the author of the story is always relaying their own emotions and feelings into a book. If you want to know how a person truly feels about a political matter, observe the underlying theme of their book. It is bound to expose the author’s true feelings on their rulers or family or friends or culture.”

She released a sigh. “I do read my fair share of educational texts as Jerran does, just not as in depth. I just feel it necessary to be as well-rounded as possible for my own purposes along with my country.”

I turned toward Jerran, who sat to my side and directly across from Jenessa. His view was completely enveloped with Jenessa. He wore a quizzical face, as if he were contemplating my sister’s words. Actually, that was exactly what he was doing. Jerran never was one to cut off someone else’s thought process because he would much rather see their side to the story. So now he was contemplating the words of my sister, probably thinking of what books to start reading next.

Heliad was about to respond with a humorous retort when Jerran cut him short. “What books would you recommend?” The eyes of our table shifted in his direction, slightly shocked. Yes, Jerran treasured the thought of others, but to actually sway in the direction of using educational time to read fiction?

The gaze of the table then shifted to Jenessa, awaiting her personal answer on the matter. Of course, the wheels in her brain were already turning, thinking of a response fit for the son of the Chief.

Something that would both benefit her point while still providing a plot line worthy of a country leader's attention. "I would suggest a small novel on the life of a young noble prince who inherits a broken throne after his father is mysteriously slaughtered." Jenessa's voice trailed smoothly, as if her summary was rehearsed. Her voice was soft so the nearby table wouldn't be startled by the talk of murder at the cafe table. "I still own the book myself. I will give it to you when we get back home." With this, she picked up her fork and lifted a purple, pitted cherry to her mouth.

Jerran nodded his head, confirming that he would attempt to read this new genre. "Thank you, Nes." After all these years, that was all it took.

I shook my head at the simplicity of the conversation. The mothers echoed a small laugh, promoting the easy-going atmosphere.

Then Heliad barked, "Really?! You are that willing to give into her ways!" He almost drew his hands across his chest in mock tantrum, but let his arms drop once he realized he was in a public setting. He settled for a pouty lower lip, supposedly the maximum weakness he could show while not in his own home.

My father held out his hand. "I think this means I win then."

Heliad grumbled something like, "only one more year," under his breath before placing a handful of coins in Roile's hand.

"Haven't you learned yet not to place a bet against me, dear friend?" Roile taunted while counting the coins that he scootched around in the palm of his hand, nearly toppling off a few.

Now Jerran's face was actually lit with shock. "You bet on us?" He accused his father.

"Not bet but..." Heliad now turned toward Roile again, allowing him to pick up the rest of the sentence.

Forever the Agede, prepared to relay the true meaning of his Chief, my father calmly replied, "More of a confirmation as to when each one of you reaches a chapter of their life."

"Each one?" My sister's face was still passive but there was a hint of distaste in her tone.

My mother decided to chime in, helping the men who are obviously digging themselves a hole. Sometimes even the Agede cannot even deal with the politics of family. "Yes, each one of you. They have been doing this," she waves her hand in their air, trying to find a better word but settles, "betting on each one of you since you were born. Never truly was a fan of myself but it sure made them pay attention to you children a lot more."

Julianna nodded her agreement.

"Really?" Jerran turned back toward his father. A smirk now danced on his face, the same one that he wears right before he turns to race me. "And who guessed when I would take my first step."

Roile raised his free hand. "I was off by three days and your father a month."

Jenessa chimed in. "And me?"

Roile's hand stayed raised. "One day versus two weeks."

"First word?" Jenessa ployed.

Roile.

"My Beast kill time?"

Roile's hand now fell as Heliad beamed, "Roile guessed over the time and I was almost spot on for the weight too!"

"My power awakening?" Jenessa gleamed.

Heliad let off a frustrated huff and his hand fell. Roile's hand rose again. "Off by a few months while he was off by a whole year."

Jerran leaned in. "Mine?"

"Four months verses two years. Surprising considering you both matured your powers at the same age." Jerran gave his father a disappointed look for underestimating him, which Heliad slightly shrunk in his seat from.

But it was Jenessa who really broke the ice. "Alina's power awakening?" The table froze. The light laughter from the mother's stopped and Jerran snapped his attention to Jenessa, his eyes frosted with accusation.

My father didn't look up from his gaze set below the table. "I guessed the tenth month of her fourth year while Heliad predicted the second of her second year."

So young. So very young.

From the day I was born, they had such high expectations for what I was. Everyone across Neswia knew about my birth, but it was driven in deeper with the fact that I was meant to be born a male, like Jerran before me. I was the first outlier in the history of Neswian leaders, and they thought that meant I would be special. So special that I would be born with the strongest powers that Neswia had seen in centuries. A child with raw power from Dalleia.

I was special, just not in the way anyone expected. I was negatively special. The first child in the Agede family to be born without powers. I wonder how long Heliad and my father laid on that bet, hoping for some sign that I had some, any power in my powerless body.

Jerran placed his hand on mine, curling his fingers between mine. I didn't look up from my hand interlocked with his. I didn't want to look into the eyes of my family, which would surely be overwhelmed with despair at the moment.

My mom was the first to break the stunned silence, voice cracking on the first syllable. "We would like you to train with us tomorrow."

I could feel the mood lighten. My mother's words dissipated the gloom from the table, but it still hovered over us. I raised my head toward my mother, hoping that a simple movement would displace the gloom even further.

I opened my mouth, unsure of the words I had just heard. "What?"

My father now chimed in, taking the cue to convince me of the benefits. "We have many people in the second division who are still unaware of the intention of their power. It has been proven in the past that with training of the physical body, a warrior will be able to strengthen their power. So, we are asking you to train those with lack of physical strength and endurance. Jerran will focus on the strength while you can focus on the endurance aspect. That is if you would want to." Something about the delivery of the speech and the watching eyes from the remainder of the table makes me think that this is not a simple request and that this is something that they concocted together.

The crowd around us continued their usual chatter. A child laughed at his brother as another table hosted a drunken conversation that sent them into a fit of laughter. Happy. That was the way of the Neswian people. We had known peace for the past century and lived in happiness. I could not imagine the people of Neswia being trained warriors. Even the warriors who were already trained still wore joyous smiles, laughing as they leaned on each other after intensive training. But I could never



imagine them with the face of war. Faces that spoke of heartbreak and brutality. Never the people of Neswia.

But that was what my family was preparing for. There were traces of war in the air, and even though it wasn't yet enough to change the habits of the people, it was enough to send the Chief and Agede into the mode of strategy. I was just surprised that I was even considered in the plan.

I never lived up to the standards that the country held me to since birth but I would supply what I could. I hadn't stayed up every night, cold sweat rolling down my back for nothing. This was my time to show my family that I was capable of a little more than endurance.

I let this smile come naturally, allowing the table to return to its original happy tone, the same tone that might soon disappear from our lands. "Yes, nothing would make me happier."

## Chapter 19

We turned toward home shortly after Jenessa and Julianna generously tipped the chef. The air was cool against my skin as we left the restaurant, walking the quiet streets of Natrail.

The sun was close to setting, so the town was lit with an afternoon glow. Our shadows stretched behind us, cast down the rocky road.

"Where were the children?" Julianna asked as we pass the final housing line of Natrail. "I didn't see a single child of mixed heritage. No spouses of other countries either. Did they already flee?" Even though she seemed to be asking any one of us, she obviously was addressing Roile.

My father held the most rational explanation as always. "They are afraid. They are afraid that even though their children have only known these lands as their home and their spouses long since left their homeland, they will be treated as the enemy. I am sure they have not fled, but have rather sheltered them in their homes."

Julianna stared at where her marriage tattoo prints on her arm, the tattoo that wraps around her forearm underneath her clothing. "They didn't treat me any differently. Or Jerran."

Heliad walked forth and clasps his wife's hand, bringing it to his chest. "Because you have me and no one would dare cross me."

"That, and you are their Chief. Plus, I am sure that you sent a positive message today by staying by Heliad's side. I am sure that the families who saw you today, standing strong in the capital of Neswia, not changed by events, will take note."

"Our waitress," Jenessa contributed from the middle of our group, "has a husband from Jutea. Both of their children have red hair like their father. They are always at the cafe for lunch time when their mom works. I didn't see them today." Jenessa raised her eyes to face Julianna. "But I am sure that they will be there for her next shift since the waitress saw you today. A good sign for our people. Give them hope so they can return to normalcy."

My father picked up the remainder of the thought. "Yes. And it will remind them that the training is simply a precaution. All that has happened is the Ancients stirring. And even that we are not too sure of. There is no sign that the other countries are planning for war, which is the last of our wishes." He now addressed Julianna specifically. "Seeing you as the same loving Nimdre of their Chief, it will raise normalcy. As Jenessa said, people who are sheltering their mixed children at the moment, will realize that it is unnecessary."

Julianna's long black hair bobbed across her back as she gave a single nod.

Heliad let their entwined hands drop to his side. He still held her hand tightly though.

We finished the trek to our houses in silence, drawing to the porch of the Agedé's house first. Heliad and Julianna exchanged hugs and waved their goodbyes as they continued down the path to their house. Jerran stayed behind, following Jenessa to her room for the book she spoke of at the lunch table. Sleep already weighed on my parents eyes as they retired to their room.

I strolled down the hall to my bedroom. The sun was lowering below the mountain, casting shadows in the hallway. I made note of each shadow.

That was when I realized that I hadn't even thought about Jordith once since the night before. While my family was trying to distract me from my abnormal lack of power, they were also distracting me from the darkness that had corrupted my body. A grin tugged on my lips as I realized how helpful my family is even when they are not aware.

As I scanned the shadows, a small part of me hoped I would not spot the form of a man within them. An even smaller part of me hoped I would.

I paused at a plant that sat on the window sill. The plant was made of many blades of thick, green leaves that branched out from the same origin of the brown dirt. A shadow hid behind every blade, casting spikes across the wooden floor. Shadows overlapped each other, forming a darker shade. I passed my hand through the shadow, and it enveloped my hand in the same overcast. Everything was the same as it had always been, so why did I feel the lack of heat and light so intimately?

I pulled my hand back into the waning sunlight and continued to my bedroom. I might be the vessel for the Ancient of Darkness, but that didn't mean I had to appreciate the lack of light that was so familiar to me.

Crossing my room directly for my lamp, I flicked on the lantern that stood by my bedside table. I turned and saw the room cast in blackened shadows.

I walked to my wall past the end of my bed. A shadow from a blemish on my lampshade lay on the wall. I rested my hand on it, feeling for the void that was cast on my wall. My hand wore the same shadow the wall had.

I pulled my hand back, letting the shadow rest on the wall. I stuck one finger forth, pointing at the mark while casting my own shadow that moved closer to the mark.

I curled my finger backwards, guiding the shadow to me. It did not budge.

I concentrated, observing the shadow as something that could be manipulated. This time I curled my finger slowly, drawing a tie between the tip of my nail and the edge of the crude circle. This time, the edge of the shadow rippled, as if a leaf landed on a calm lake, sending out ripples from the disturbance. I didn't breath; I was too focused on the rippling shadow in front of me. I still had yet to discover the magic of the hidden land worked and just what darkness it controlled.

A knock on the door startled me, breathing in a gasp of air as my hand contracted to my body. "Lina, it's me." Jerran.

I crossed over to the end of my bed, shaking off the knowledge that I gained from my mysterious powers. "Come in."

The door slowly swung inward, and Jerran entered my room. The shadows of the lantern both complemented and exposed him. While the muscular definition was accented by the dull light, it also exposed the bags under his eyes. No amount of physical strength could fight off the troubles of one's mind.

“So I have been thinking...” He sat down heavily on my bed, the sides dipping in at his familiar weight.

“Oh, what a terrible thought.” I tried to lace my words with humor, but it was futile as it meets the tone of his voice. Something had been weighing on him and it took him this long to tell me which meant that it was something he had been trying to avoid but no longer could.

He didn’t even attempt a faint grin at the attempt of my humor. “I think I need to say something.”

“About what?” I knew what he was talking about but I wanted to hear him say it.

His eyes were fixated at the back of his hands that hung between his legs. “About the Night of Awakening. How it affected you. How you...” He paused, trying to find the words to describe that night. Even after the first time we had this conversation, he still was unsure of what to call it. I wondered if the night had grown better or worse within his memories. “How you freaked out as if there was someone taking over you. How you were screaming in pain and not here. Not yourself.”

I paused, too. I needed a moment to find the words to say. To convince Jerran that I was fine and there was no reason to tell anyone. Just another secret. A secret like the ones we used to share when we were children. Like when Jerran wet the bed a little after he broke the habit. Like when I admitted that I snuck a candy from the Market. We had secrets. We had secrets that only we knew. Secrets that we still remembered from directed glances across the dinner table or from across the hall at council meetings.

Except I wasn’t alright. I had the enemy of another country in my mind. I had proof of power equal to a Blessed’s power laid bare in my backyard. I had darkness coursing through my veins that found pleasure in pouring out from my pores.

But there was no way he could tell anyone because my family already looked at me with enough pity. I had no need for them to hold me closer, afraid that the Night of Awakening damaged my already frail body. I allowed them to think what they must but that might be my breaking point.

“Please don’t.” Even I was startled by the crack in my voice, tears ready to fall. Jerran finally looked at me, a shine over his purple irises.

“Lina,” He said my name like a prayer. He was the first to say my name like that. I could still remember the first time he said it, sending my heart fluttering. We were under the trees in the forest outside my porch. I was watching the birds flutter from tree to tree, singing a song at each new perch, while Jerran was buried in his book. His hair was cropped short then so there was no sway of his locks as he turned to me suddenly, excitement burning in his eyes. He had said that name as a declaration.

I had always hated the nickname my sister called me by, sounding too harsh on the tongue. But he said that name, and it felt new. Still my name, but not. A name that belonged to him and me.

Now he spoke it as if everything balanced on those two syllables.

“It is different now. You said before that it was probably just the effect of the Night of Awakening on you, who did not inherit magic. But that is not the case.” His gaze has fallen back to his hands, clenching to suppress the break in his voice that threatened to break.

“I talked to the children who woke from the Night of Awakening with the magic of Dalliea. Not a single one of them went through what you did. None of them even woke up in the night. The only sign that something was new came when they woke up with the sun the next morning.” He met my eyes

again, the shine gone, replaced with a worried set. “You seem to be the only one who had that spell when the Awakening took place. I don’t know what that means and I think we need to get help.”

My eyebrows dipped, a sign that I was questioning the matter, also. “Then if none of them woke up, how come our parents were waiting in the lobby of the Canmoan palace?”

“The people who had a significant amount of magic before the Awakening woke up when it happened. There was some sort of surge that they felt when it happened. Some have described it as a race through their body that woke them while others complained that it was an irritating stomach ache that didn’t settle well.”

I didn’t ask him how he felt because he probably doesn’t remember. He was too focused on me that night that he probably didn’t take enough mental notes about his own feelings.

“I think it might have to do with me being a gift from Dallee.” I just pulled the idea out of thin air, not even realizing that the words were already coming out of my mouth.

He breathed heavily. “How do you figure?”

I came up with the reasoning as I went. Piecing together a lie I hoped he would buy. “Probably because Dallee crafted me as a vessel without power. She never meant for me to have power and when the Night of Awakening happened, it affected me differently than everyone else.” That was convincing. If I hadn’t had darkness running through my veins at the moment to prove otherwise, I think I might have believed it myself. I guess it was the lie I wished could be the truth.

“I don’t know, Lina. We need someone else’s help. We need someone who can figure out why you are different.”

I placed my knees on the floor in front of him, sheltered between his legs. My hands cupped his face, stubble grazing against the palm of my hand. His purple eyes shone in the dark, a beacon. “We have always known I was different. No one is going to say otherwise. I was born to be by your side and that is what I will do. I have been with you through thick and thin even before I have vowed to you in marriage. I am a gift from Dallee herself, and I was affected by her Awakening just as the rest of you, but the effects for me worked differently. There is nothing to fear and no question to ask.”

He closed his eyes and leaned into my touch. I had forgotten how strong his face had become over the years. I still pictured the man in front of me as the boy who would chase horned frogs in only his underwear, mad splattered all over his pudgy body from hopping into the creek. Now his face was broad, no longer supporting any excess skin but rather muscles that clenched as his jaw did. There was a small dip under his cheekbone but it didn’t take away from his broad stature.

His eyes opened, brown eyelashes drawing upward. A smile didn’t play across his face. He should be wearing a smile, it suited him. Emitting a pleasant aura was his specialty, despite his lack of his mother’s powers.

“Nothing.” I watched the word morph on his lips. Then I met his eyes again.

“What?”

“Nothing. I felt for you. I reached out with my core, and I felt for you. There was nothing. I can see around you but you are framed as nothing. It is as if you are a black void.” No humor played on his voice, he was telling me exactly what he saw.

“See, special.” I tried a hint of laughter, but it was lost. I took a mental note though as to what that meant. I had to see later how I was compared to the world around me. What the view would be from my side.

I took advantage of the topic change however, seeing a doorway to take his mind off this mission. "How is it? The world around us. How do you see the magic around you?"

His eyes were still locked with mine and even though mine searched back and forth across his, he stared directly forth. "It is like I can see the ground around me and the life on it. There is a haze above it, probably stuff like dust caught in the breeze. That is when I am outside though, standing on the ground. Right now I see gray. As I close my eyes I see gray, and you are framed as a dark hole." I shifted. He returned too quickly. I had to try harder if I wanted to change the topic.

"Lina?" My heart clenched at him whispering my name, laced with pain.

I wiped a finger against his cheek, feeling the stray hair that poked from his skin. "Yes?"

"Do you-" He choked. "Are we not- Why can't I feel you?"

I pressed on his face, now gripping his cheeks. "I can feel you."

He sighed. "That's not what I mean. Why can't I feel this?" His hand felt against the left portion of my chest. I knew what he meant.

The Nimdre bond is shared between two people who are connected in mind and soul. That is what we were told from birth. There is no explanation as to why it forms. There is no tie of the bond having to do with any particular Ancient and no timeline as to how someone will experience it. There are only a few consistent facts with a Nimdre bond, however. A person will only experience the bond with one person, and it will happen whether or not both parties accept it.

The bond is deeper than any marriage vows or symbols. Powers are shared and emotions are usually replicated through the bond.

There are rumors that the Blessed were more powerful with their Nimdre because they were able to speak through each other's mind and feel each other's soul even across the battlefield.

But through all that, people without power have not experienced the Nimdre bond. So I uttered the words that are the most true. "Because not even gifts from the gods can be perfect." My eyes fell to the floor.

We sat in silence for a while. Jerran surrounded me, providing me protection in my own room, as I comforted him, as I was designed to do.

I didn't know how long had passed. But the shadows of my room ran deeper which meant the sun had long passed the mountains.

Jerran exhaled softly. I didn't realize he spoke until I looked at him to see him waiting for an answer. My eyebrows tilted inward, asking him to repeat himself.

"Do you love me?"

Such a simple question that had a simple answer. "Yes."

He tilted his head down meeting my forehead with his own. Our breaths ran together, sharing the same air. "I love you, too." Except I already knew it. We had loved each other as long as we could remember. From friends to now, we had always known love.

"So," I took a pause, thinking of my wording before it came out. "You know there is nothing to worry about?"

Instead of answering my veiled question, he answered the one I truly mean. "There is no reason to tell anyone, so I won't worry them." His purple eyes searched mine, jerking back and forth in the shaded light. "Just promise me that you will tell me the moment you feel anything wrong. Even if it is something as simple as a strange stomach ache."

This was my chance. I could take this chance to tell everything to Jerran: the darkness that runs in me, the Ancient sharing my mind, the patch of darkness that painted my backyard. But I held my tongue. Jerran had enough to worry about. He had a whole country waiting for him to take the crown and watching his every motion as a sign as to what the future holds. He had the power to determine whether or not the people of Neswia once again experienced the horrors of war and I knew he went to bed every night fearing the stats that he read within the covers of his books.

So I replied, "I promise." Because, this was the one demon I must shoulder myself.

## Chapter 20

I led Jerran to the front door, watching him saunter off into the night. His father was right, he definitely has the stride of a Neswian warrior, not the glide of a Canmoan royal.

Shutting the door behind me, I quickly headed back to my room, headed straight for the back porch of my room. I reach the back patch that still corrupted the floor of the forest edge and begin my work.

With less concentration than last time, particles shifted toward my hand, but then I stopped. They fell to the floor like ash falling.

What was I doing? Why was I giving in so easily to these powers? I understood that these powers had attacked my body before I started using them of my own free will, but did that really mean that I had to come to terms with this being my new reality. I simply accepted that I had this foreign power and that was okay?

This was all too much. Only a few days ago I had been the gift of Dalleia, proof that our countries were finally at the beginning of a new era. But now I was the main connection to the enemy. An enemy who was rooted in my head.

Jordith had not appeared this entire day, but that didn't mean that he wouldn't return. This was his power. The magic of a hidden country that once was vowed to be our enemy. I had every right to be upset at the Ancient that forcefully took my mind and made it his home. I had to get out of this situation now and fight it.

I pushed myself to my feet. As I adjusted, my necklace shifted enough to trace cold metal against my rough scar. I retracted at the feeling and dug into my shirt to grab it.

The black stone stirred in chaos under its invisible prison.

*That would be Onyx Smoke, rumored to be from the castle of Atral.*

The merchant was right, this stone was tied to Jordith. The disappearance of the merchant would match the idea that this was all some elaborate scheme made by Jordith to convince me to buy this stone that he possessed. He must have used the stone to reach my heart and encase it with his magic. That would explain the scar I received on the Night of Awakening. He used the necklace as an outlet for his awakening to start using my body as his own. Also would explain the weird characteristics of the stone, such as the signature shifting darkness or the strange warmth it emitted.

I gripped the warm stone and tore it from my neck. The metal chain and the leather band snapped. I felt a flare of heat as if the stone was calling out for me to reconsider. Then, in one fluid motion, I threw the stone into the dense forest. I wasn't able to track how far it flew, for the darkness of the forest covered its track, but I knew that with how much force was behind the throw, it would sail far.

It might already have been too late now to stop Jordith from using that stone to control me, but if it would lessen the effects, then it was well worth it.

I stomped toward the porch, ready to throw this behind me and fight to be normal again.

But something stopped me short, one foot on the wooden steps and the other firmly planted on the ground. Jutea was once our enemy too. Same with Ritzvia, Biala Mohakio, and even Canmoa. We were all once enemies so maybe it wasn't too difficult to think that Atral could be much different. A part of my heart yearned to know about the land ever since I was little. I remember Jerran retelling his findings to me as children, his face lit up at the possibilities of each new land. Biala Mohakio was home to some of the most ferocious, deadly winter beasts that stalk the glaciers near villages. Ritzvia's capital was sculpted from metal and iron so the entire town was forged by the Blessed's fires. Even Jerran's other home of Canmoa hosted a city-wide hot spring that drew out every possible pleasure known to the human body. But nothing about Atral, the land of darkness.

As my sister sat idly by, pretending to not be interested in Jerran's retellings even though it was obvious that she hung on every word, I pushed to know more about Atral. Since Jerran was interested in everything as much as I was in Atral, he searched. He searched every book that came his way about the land of Atral, but his findings were slim. Usually, the stories were only stories of the creatures that people living on the border heard. There were only a few first-person retellings of the land, but they were in Atralian, and there was no one willing to translate.

This was my opportunity to learn about the land, being a gateway to the Ancient who had been there since the beginning. A part of me still yearned to know more about it and what if they are simply misunderstood? A land trapped by the deadliest forest and no way to escape.

Except this power was forced upon me. According to Jerran's reading and old tales, the Blessed of an Ancient had to dedicate their body to their Ancient in order to obtain their powers. That meant that the warrior had to willingly accept the offering from an Ancient, which meant that Jordith somehow found a way to force me into being the vessel of his power.

But didn't Jordith say that he had no idea why he was here? Maybe he had no idea what was happening either. Maybe Dalleia had no idea that she sent a wave of power through her people, blessing them with powers long since diluted. Maybe the other Ancients had no idea what was happening on the surface as they once again stirred below the surface.

I slammed my fist against the porch railing in annoyance at my thought process. No one knew anything about the people of Atral. The only tale that had escaped their lands was the horror of Jordith, the King of Darkness. Judging from the stories, he also should be deemed the titles king of torture and deception, too. I couldn't trust his words. Everything that fell from his corrupted mouth was a lie, and I would be better off figuring this out myself.

I turned toward the forest as a small critter ran through a bush by the tree edge, visible through the thin branches. It stopped eating and stared at me. It's brown eyes shone in the moonlight. Big brown eyes. Just like my sister's.

I had to do it for her. I had to master this darkness that flows through my veins because no matter how much I fight against my sister, I love her and I cannot let my powers harm her. I pictured my dark tentacles lashing out again, but my sister standing close. Jerran was trying to help me, too. That night when his hands were dancing over my body, trying to find the reason why my lungs would no longer function. My parents, too. It was too much.

Even though this magic was a curse that I never asked for, it had become my responsibility to bear.

So I crossed to the edge of the tainted grass, held my hand over a spot of corrupted grass, and summoned the darkness. Next time Jordith chose to show himself, I would make sure we had a detailed discussion, but until then, I had a mess I had to exercise.

I went to bed within the hour I started to uncover the grass from my outburst. I wasn't yet drained, but I remembered that training was to be the next morning. With how late I was already staying awake and paired with how much energy I already exerted, I was sure to start training exhausted.

The sun woke me up first, breaking through my window and onto my eyelids. If the sun was already up, that meant training would begin soon.

Still pulling off my tight black pants, I stumbled into my bathroom, searching for my eyeliner. I didn't bother with make-up as much as my sister and mother, always opting for the natural look, but today felt like one of the rare occasions that I could finally bring attention to myself.

Walking down the hallway with a small line of eyeliner accenting my upper lid and smeared on the edges, I found my parents already waiting in the hall. They, too, were wearing tight clothing for training but as usual, theirs was of a lighter tone.

"Good morning, Lina." My father greeted me as my mother dipped her head in greeting. There was still a signature hint of pity but most of it had worn away. Either from exhaustion on the subject yesterday or the fact that I was going to contribute to the training in my own way, I was unsure.

"Good morning." I was already awake, despite the fact that I had just jumped from my bed not even minutes ago. "Where is Jenessa?"

"I am sure-" My father started.

"I am right here." She glided down the remainder of the hallway that led toward her room. She too was fit with clothing that hung on her form but her green shirt bloomed at her arms, fabric hanging from her spread arms and cinched back at her wrist. Being a magic user who could work from a distance, she had no need to worry about excess fabrics that would be caught in battle. Unlike my simple line of black on my lid, she had dark green wings that extended from the corner of her eyes. She always outdid me so this was to be expected.

A smile spread across her face as she saw the slim line on my eye. "Nice khol, Al. Now let's go train a village."

## Chapter 21

The spring bite was out of the air, instead the weather was warm against my skin even under the shaded branches of the Ediran forest. The people surrounding the platform also seemed to have their spirits lifted thanks to the warm weather. Maybe it was simply a psychological coincidence but Neswians seemed to be at their best when in warmer weather.

"Welcome back to training!" The Chief stood at the front of the platform once again. He seemed more casual today with a short sleeve shirt that exposed his arms thick lined with muscle. "I am glad that you joined us today. It seems like there are more of you today than there was the first time and for that I am thankful. Thank you for choosing to join us today." Sure enough, there were more in our crowd. And not only were there more, but those who joined added diversity to the crowd. There were



Canmoran browns and red hair of Jutea now standing in the crowd. Two children with shockingly red hair were standing next to the waitress from the cafe yesterday. Looked like Julianna's presence was already influencing the people.

My father now stepped forward, drawing even with Heliad on the platform. "We have made arrangements to the leaders of your training. Heliad, Jenessa, and now Jerran will be leading the first group." My view shifted to Jerran who stood on the opposite side of the stage with his father and my sister. Jerran was already looking my way, an unsure smile pulling his lips tight. *I'm sorry*, he mouthed. I nodded back in confirmation of his decision. He must have held something back about the capabilities of his power if he had been promoted to leading the first group. I made a mental note to watch his power demonstrations today across the field.

"And the second group will be myself, Varonica, and now Alina." This sparked a unified expression across the crowd of confusion and wonder. All the eyes shifted toward me and there were some who were wondering if I somehow had manifested my powers after all these years. Those who wondered had hope shining in their eyes as they searched by body as if it were a visible cloak. The other half pinched their eyebrows together in confusion, wondering how a powerless girl could help them in their training.

My father pushed forth with his speech, unaware of the crowd's reaction. "So, please, break off into your groups as your leaders part ways across the forest."

At that, the first group broke off to the stage left, and we walked off stage right. I glanced back at Jerran, who turned back toward me at the same time. I displayed a comforting smile, which I knew was the only way to show Jerran that I was fine. Sure enough, his shoulders seemed to rise, the weight falling off, and he reflected the same smile.

Next came the fun part of figuring out how I was going to lead any instruction without Jerran by my side. Without him, I truly was powerless in the eyes of these people.

We gathered in a group below one of the broader trees. There were many faces in the crowd this time. Only a few hushed whispers emitted from the crowd along with the sound of shuffling feet.

As always, my father broke the silence. "Welcome, group two. We will be starting the morning with an agility and endurance exercise hosted by Alina." As he swept his hands toward me, the view of the room followed. The entire group was focused on me. I thought that after living my whole life being on center stage, I would be used to it. And I was. The only difference in this scenario was the fact that this was my first time having the attention directly on me for many years. When I was younger and there was still hope that my powers still might develop, I was directed to lead the people.

But that all came to a halt when my sister proved to be more powerful than me. Since that day, she led lessons or talked to the people. When I was the center of attention, it was always with Jerran at my side and right now he was on the other side of the training field.

Suddenly my eyeliner felt like a dreadful decision.

My father laid a hand on my shoulder. "You ready?"

I wasn't entirely alone then. I had my father and mother next to me whose eyes shone with encouragement.

I could lead a simple jog. My shoulders flexed back but my chin didn't raise as my sister's would. It was enough to convince the crowd though because the portion of the crowd that looked like they were anxious to see how my training would go seemed to dwindle.

“Okay everyone. Follow me and don’t fall too far behind. Those of you who already have a built endurance, follow me. Those of you who are less experienced, take the end. Make sure to encourage each other. We are a team after all.”

My father’s eyes seemed to spark with satisfaction at the final statement, happy to see that his eldest daughter still remembered the tricks of an Ageded.

Roile then chimed in. “Elders, please stay with me so we can practice stances to improve your magic base.”

I then leapt down from the rock formation that I had stood on with my parents and started to jog out the side of the crowd. It didn’t take the crowd to figure out where they lay in the group. Most of the young adults kept rhythm with me at the beginning, while the younger children and the adults brought up the end of the group.

We first headed toward the light at the end of the forest. I kept a steady jog, my arms pumping smoothly at my sides. I was even breathing steadily, in through the nose and out through the mouth. The beating of my feet against the soft, grassy ground was comforting.

I remember when I first started training without magic intent. It was shortly after I had my first bleed and realized that I was born without magic. My family was still reeling from the fact that I was not what they had thought I was. I had already come to terms with the knowledge long before them. It was the fact that my family was devastated that drove me to stay inside.

It was Jerran who led me out to the forest’s edge and encouraged me to keep up with him in a jog. I was hesitant at first, but I was intrigued by his offer, knowing that he always held good intentions.

By the time he had finally slowed from my pained yelling, I collapsed to my side as it stabbed me with pain. Sweat was running down my temples, and I could feel it dripping along my spine. My breath came in raspy huffs against my parched throat. I was in so much pain that I did not want to rise to my feet ever again, much less participate in any more of those horrendous runs.

But as my heart slowed its tempo, I craved more. I wanted my heart to keep beating at that rate and never slow. The sweat on my back was starting to chill my skin, and I wanted to be warm again. I wanted to feel the air run across my damp face.

So as I smiled at Jerran with pleasure, he understood immediately and started at the same pace, me close on his heels. I continued running day after day, sometimes several times during a day. Jerran eventually became so busy with his training that I ran alone. And soon enough, a solid run wasn’t enough for my heart so I tried some techniques I saw Jerran practicing with his friends.

At first it was only a stick that I found laying on a run. I cut the air with the unbalanced stick and practiced my kicks, aiming at invisible enemies.

I found my crescent daggers only a few months later. By then my arms had grown taunt with muscle, no longer waiting for powers that didn’t exist. My body was now prepared to fight for itself instead of relying on something that never would come.

I was trailing through the Market by myself after picking up a biscuit from Renee’s shop. Jerran had told me to meet him at the Market after his training so I was wandering across the stands as I waited.

That was the first time I saw them glint in the afternoon sun, catching the beauty of the natural world and making it its own. They were unlike any of the other blades on the merchant’s display. My

blades were hidden in the back of the booth, hanging from the back of the tent, unlike the straight blades that were displayed front and center.

I walked up to the merchant booth, unsure on my footing. I never was drawn to weapon booths before; I thought it was brutal. But with those curved blades, I saw the beauty in something deadly.

My voice, to my surprise, was not shaky. "What about these ones?" My finger pointed at the blades in the back, shaking, but the merchant didn't notice as he already turned toward the back of his booth, his brows knitted in question.

He turned back, and I noticed the knicks in this uneven beard where hair no longer grew. "Those ones are defective."

Defective. That is the word I had been searching for. Not a single person uttered a word about what I am so I had forgotten the word. I had laid up at night trying to remember what word was missing from my vocabulary to describe what I am.

"I tried to edge the blades but it bent the entire thing. Wasn't able to fix it past that." The merchant raised his hand to wave off the notion.

I looked back up at the blades. Standing closer, I could tell that the handle wrap was hastily applied. Only wrapped enough to protect the handler's skin against the sharp blade but not wrapped in a delicate pattern as the daggers that stood in the front of the booth. The wrap also was a dulled black, obviously not used on any other knife on display.

My reflection stood in the thick blade. My wavy hair danced past the end of the curve, extending to my waist at the time. My almond eyes were opened in wonder.

"I will take them." The words fell off my lips in a slight whisper. I looked back at the merchant, his thick, dark brown eyebrows dipping even deeper in questioning. So, I tried again, my voice stronger, finally matching the new founded strength that was hidden beneath my loose clothes. "I will take them."

We broke the treeline as the memory of the wind tearing across my face subsided. The sun now shone on my skin, already warming me.

I glanced back at the crowd running after me, taking note of the expressions on the faces. Most at the beginning were not even showing signs of exertion while those in the rear were starting to fall behind with eyes clenched in exhaustion. I smoothly lowered my speed, hoping that it would help the people taking up the end. Then, I held my arm to the sun, blocking the direct contact to my eyes.

After I revealed the blades from the satchel on my desk in my room, I unwrapped them from the crude wrapping. The cloth fell off easily, not even matched with an applicator.

I felt the black cloth, a long piece of fabric that fell to the floor. The light falling through the window lit the cloth, exposing the pinholes that broke across the fabric. The fabric was thin, but once it was wrapped layer upon layer, the light was no longer able to penetrate the dark void.

There was no need to purchase any cloth for the blades because the black wrap was perfect. I used a clear applicator that I found in my father's blade cabinet and began to wrap the blades again, this time with the dedication they deserved.

After the grueling process was over, I was left with two blades that curved like the moons and were gripped with darkness.

My hands now flicked across the handle of the blades that beat against my hips as I ran. The handles were no longer smooth, but rather indented where my fingers naturally fell. But the black cloth still was dark despite the sweat that has soaked into it for all these years.

I hurdled over a fallen log, my hand launching me over the thick tree. Watching the remainder of the group as I continued my run, the first portion took a moment to prepare themselves to launch their body weight over the log while the group behind had to take steps over. A smile spread across my face as the final members made their way over the fallen tree. A few smiled back.

We had begun to loop back to the beginning, as some of my trainees had already caught on, judging by their sudden surge of newfound energy. The sounds of training were coming from one side of the forest. The first group.

I couldn't see any concrete images as we passed their area, only masses growing and vanishing in between the trees. No sign of my sister until I heard a feminine yell which was accented by a small tree-sized vine sprouting next to several silhouettes. Even across a forest, our group could not help but note her presence.

In front of us, another group was starting to show through the treeline. A voice emitted from the trees, "One, two, three, four. Doing good." The source of the voice, my father, was pedestaled on top of a flattened rock, standing above the rest of the second group. One leg was set further back than the other as he moved his arms slowly in a circle in front of his vision. "Now move the other way." His hands stilled for a second before they circled in the opposite direction.

As we drew close to the crowd, I slowed to a walk. The people following me attempted to slow to my pace, but as they followed my view to the Agede, they saw him pointing for them to join the group in the back. A few grunted as they picked up their pace once again to settle at the back of the elders who were all lowered in a wide stance. As soon as they reached their destination, most hunched over their legs, trying to hide their red faces as the ones who stood tall pretended that their breath wasn't lost.

As the last filed in, my father stood tall, addressing the group I led in. "Welcome back. I see my daughter treated you well." He chuckled lightly. "Well you better get used to it because she will be treating you to a light run every morning before training." Groans escaped the crowd between their ragged breaths. I suppressed a smile.

Every training? I had to train these people every time a training was called?

I almost forgot my fear of being alone as my heart beat fast in my chest.

## Chapter 22

"Well I would say that was a success." Heliad exclaimed from the end of the table.

"And I would have to agree." Roile raised his wine glass from the other side of the table.

We all were seated once again around the Chief's dining room table, enjoying the fine dinner prepared by Julianna. She had left the lesson early since the job of standing watch became less useful as the training progressed. Little by little, the people of Natrail became more involved in their training so they forgot to glance back at the Canmoan wife. She found it better to use her time to prepare dinner for her family.

I passed the bowl of biscuits to Jerran and accepted a bowl of salad from my sister. Jerran passed his bowl of dinner pudding to his father.

“And how did you enjoy the training of our elite group, Jerran?” Heliad is always one to boast about the people surrounding him. “Was it better than the measly second?” He exchanged a competitive glare with my father across the table.

Jerran laughed at his father’s childish habits when it came to competition. “Well, there is not much to compare it to,” Heliad gave a premature *ha* while jabbing his fork at my father before Jerran accented his second part of the sentence, “*because* there was not much training the first day. On either side.” Heliad placed his fork back on his plate as if it never left. “But it was different than my usual training. Instead of training with other warriors who have adapted their training to not rely too heavily on magic, this is the complete opposite. I wasn’t quite prepared for the lessons that I led.”

My sister didn’t look up from her plate as she said, “I tried helping you plan beforehand, but you were too occupied with your book.” So Jerran had known before the lesson that he was going to leave to the second group. Most likely, everyone at the table already knew but I was spared. They probably thought that I would question running a lesson if I were alone. They weren’t wrong.

Jerran leaned forth, seeing past me to look at my sister. “You did not say that.”

“Yes, I did.”

“When?”

“When you were picking up the book. You were just ogling at the book so the words probably flew out your thick skull.” Jenessa was loading her spoon of peas.

“What words did you use exactly, Jen.”

““Maybe a lesson plan would be a good idea.””

Jerran leaned back in his chair, giving up on trying to make eye contact with Jenessa. “No wonder why I brushed it off. I make plans for training all the time so that was obvious enough for me. You could have mentioned the magic aspect at least.”

“I thought that was obvious enough since you were going to be training with people who are *newly Awakened*.” She lifted the spoon to her mouth, obviously meaning that there was no further discussion to be had.

Jerran sighed, still excited about the conversation. “Well I am sorry that I did not think about the finer details. I am the Chief’s son after all, not the Agede’s.” He sighed again and brushed his face with the entirety of his hand.

Even Heliad stayed silent for a while, testing the atmosphere of the room.

The history of the Chief and Agede was always tied together. Through all the generations, they had been best friends due to their close status since birth. As among friends, there were always squabbles between the Chief and Agede. Sometimes it had to do with a simple disagreement over what food to eat and other times it was as deeply rooted as a love interest. In the end, the two always have found a way to work past their disagreements and return to their natural state of working together in harmony.

However, with the first generation of having two genders being the future leaders of Neswia, there seemed to be a lot more squabbles between them. And judging by the awkward glances between the current Chief and Agede, I assume that they never were on each other’s cases as much as my fiancée and my sister are.

It was my mother who broke the silence. For two gatherings in a row now, my soft-spoken mother saw when her words are needed. “Well I am glad you enjoyed the workings of the first group,

Jerran.” Her view shifted toward me. “I am sure you will be glad to know that Alina led a run this morning.”

Jerran shifted in his chair once again, this time leaning toward me. “Is that so?” His eyes spoke that he was also remembering the first run we took after that day. We had always promised that we would be there for each other and that was one of the many times we proved our commitment.

“Yeah.” I lifted a bite of salad to my lips. The leafy green spread across my tongue, cleaning the taste of the previous bite of steamed vegetables.

“Well, how did it go?” Jerran was looking for good news, hoping that I would enjoy the one skill that he was aware of.

I swallowed the mashed greens. “Most of the group was able to keep up. I only had to slow my speed slightly a few times.”

Jerran’s signature smile spread across his face. His smile is so wholesome that his whole face participates in the action. Also, if his father’s power weren’t dominant, I would say that he even emitted happiness. It was so infectious that I could feel my lips pull tight as I chewed another bite.

“I am so proud of you. Leading an entire group, Lina! Pulling the whole group and I bet you didn’t even break a sweat did you?” I didn’t respond which he knew meant that the answer was yes. “I knew it! You just need to find your niche and you can do amazing things.”

There was no silence around the table as Jerran brought up the fact that I wasn’t unique in magic like them. Jerran was the only one who was able to bring it up nonchalantly. He always said it as a minute problem instead of laying so much weight on the simple fact. I always noted my appreciation for the fact. Another strength of Jerran, his loving nature, leached into his words without him even considering it.

In fact, instead of wearing their typical fictitious smiles, the family was beaming in pleasure also. Even though it was a simple task, Jerran pointed out my hidden accomplishments and obviously my family saw his point.

“Well I was thinking that if we tire them out enough, we should only do the training a few sporadic times, here and there.” Heliad set his fork on his empty plate and leaned back in his chair, earning a glare from his Nimdre.

“Really?” Roile barely looked up from his plate at the opposite end of the table. A chunk of meat was tucked on the side of his mouth as he spoke.

“Yes. They don’t need to be training almost everyday. First of all, it is bad for the body. Any warrior can tell you that. Second of all, I only insisted that we did the training so consistently because they were terrified at first. In the few days that have passed since the Night of Awakening, we have already seen a huge change in morale, so I think there is no reason to make them more scared by hosting training practically everyday.”

“That is fair reasoning. I was wondering the same thing myself so this works well. I will send out a messenger first thing in the morning so the people don’t make their way to Ediran.” My father listed a napkin to the corner of his mouth, wiping away a little sauce from the salad. “Which reminds me, what have you heard from the messengers traveling the country?”

Travelling the country? Of course they were checking on the remainder of the country. I had been so caught up in the politics of our one city that I forgot about the remainder of the country.

I glanced at Jenessa. She was smirking at me. She noticed my hiccup at the mention of the rest of Neswia and was satisfied with the fact that she was obviously more adapted to be the Agede.

The borders of our country were either surrounded by the shapeshifter land of Jutea or the ocean. We didn't have much to fear because even though the bond wasn't as strong as Canmoa, we shared a common interest with Jutea. Our people were able to find peace easily at the beginning because after shifting for many years, the Juteans were able to transition into the Neswian culture easily.

Luckily, Heliad's calm demeanor suggested that there was no bad news related to the remainder of the Neswia. "A few of those I sent to the closer cities have already returned. All experiencing the same thing as we are: a surge of magic, previous non magic users being about to connect to Dalleia, a few families with a spouse from another country hiding. But the other cities were already ahead of us. Where we are now in progress is almost exactly how they were from the beginning."

Still observing Jenessa from the corner of my eye, I saw the dip of her shoulders as she heard the hidden reason behind the findings of the messengers. I heard it, too. The other cities were already where we were because they didn't even notice that their Chief and Agede were gone. It had been years since there was any reason for the Chief and Agede to travel the country so it was no wonder that the cities were unaware that we were in another country as the magic stirred.

All this meant that the people of Natrail acted the way they did simply because they noted the absence of their leader. If we would have been here when they needed us most, there would have been no surge of conflict or concern.

Heliad was still leaning heavily back in his chair. "So I also take that as a sign that we won't have to do much training from here on out if the country is still calm about the matter. If Neswia is calm, I am sure that others are also."

"I am sure that the land of Canmoa would agree with that statement." Julianna's voice carried across the table as a melody. Even listening to her talk now seemed to ease everyone around the table.

Heliad mumbled something to Julianna that sounded like, "We talked about this."

My mother cleared her throat, ready to ask another question that the family steered clear of. "Which reminds me, Julianna, what magic came to light for you? I also think it would be best if we explained our findings over these last few days to the rest of the table. We are united most when we know the extent of everyone else's strengths and weaknesses." Varonica might be simply the wife of the Agede, but I am convinced that she caught my father's eye for her innate ability to address a room.

There was a pause before Julianna answered. "I am what the people of Canmoa would call an Influencer. Most of you were aware of my gift before as I sometimes worked up the strength to lighten the moods of my irritable husband or my snotty son as a child." This earned her two distinct looks of argument from the two people at the table she called out. She returned their glares with a loving smile laced with bragging rights.

I recalled the times during my childhood where Jerran had just entered his feared teenage years. He was not as rude as the other children his age; Jerran never had the heart for that, but he was infatuated with his studies. It was shortly after my first bleed, so I was constantly being paired with Jerran during my freetime. Not that that was much change from what the situation was before, but the difference was the weight of me being Dalleia's gift to him, which changed everything. We tried to return to our simple friendship, knowing that we would one day marry. We almost succeeded, but it

mostly showed in the times where there were bouts of silence hanging between us. We had yet to figure out the body movements for being a newly paired couple so we sat on different ends of the room. When our conversation died out, we were left with the weight of the unasked questions hanging in the air.

Julianna was always the one to save us when we were caught in those situations. Sensing the off kilter aura admitting from Jerran's room, she would enter the doorway and suddenly, Jerran thought of a new project or conversation. We never thanked her personally for those times where she returned us to our former normalcy, but I am sure she sensed that also.

Julianna's eyes turned downward to her plate. "After we returned from the palace, though, I discovered that my ability had been amplified. As we were in the carriage, I thought my power felt like it was rolling off me. When I use my magic, it feels as if a wave of emotion is pushing out from my body, headed for my target. Except this was not at all like that. This time it was rolling off of me without a thought and in every direction. At first I thought it was just my mind reeling from my mother using her Charmspeak but then I noted Jerran and Alina's demeanor. Both of them seemed to be content with the actions that occurred only hours before even though they had seemed as rattle as myself. That was when I realized that although my magic didn't grow in toxicity, it grew in quantity."

She released a sigh and raised her head again, glancing across the table with her shocking purple eyes. "I am glad that I got that off my chest. Thank you, Varonica."

My mother's head dipped in acceptance. "I guess that means I will go next then. Before the Awakening, we all knew that I was able to enhance a budding flower to bloom. Now, from what I have discovered so far, I am able to lead a flower through the entire process of budding, to blooming, to wilting. Simple enough really." Although she said it as something to be ashamed of at the table of the most powerful people of Neswia, my mother did not stumble on a single word and delivered the statement matter-of-factly.

My father was the next to speak, following the pattern of rotating to the right around the table. "Before, I was able to enhance the growth of plants around me. Unlike the rest of you who have a focused outlet, besides Julianna of course, I emitted my magic indirectly. After the Awakening, I have been able to lead smaller plants through the succession of life from seed to root. I believe that once I find the bottom of my outlet, I will be able to transfer these skills to larger plants."

"A few days ago," Jenessa almost interrupted my father with how quickly she started her statement, "I was able to summon up to four small vines at a given time. They proved to be quite a nuisance for some." Even though she did not look in my direction, the smirk that played on her lips was obviously meant for me. "But since the Night of Awakening I have been able to summon several thicker and longer vines spontaneously." With the two statements side-by-side, I made a mental note to never challenge my sister to a race ever again.

Next to speak was Jerran, obviously skipping over me. "Before, I was able to manipulate the ground by condensing the dirt into small bumps of divots beneath the top layer. Now I can shift the ground almost immediately and to the size of a small animal. I can only do this once in a while though, so after I create the shift, it takes a while for me to fix it again." I had forgotten to take note of Jerran's training today. I didn't see him through the treeline as we ran so I am pretty sure I wouldn't have had the opportunity to see it anyway. "I am currently working on expanding the size of the movements and



the intervals between them.” Although his power seemed unique and unimportant, I was well aware of the stories that are associated with such power.

When Jerran’s power first manifested, he threw his studies into finding Blessed who wielded his same magic type. He would bring me stories of the Blessed who could absorb whole armies into the ground with a flick of their hand. A hole would open, people would fall in, and then the Blessed would close the hole over them. Buried alive in a blink of an eye. I felt sorry that a man so loving would possess such a power, but I am convinced that someone as pure of heart as he is would find a positive need for his power within the world.

Then came Heliad’s assessment of his power. Although Jenessa was the strongest with magic in Newsia, Heliad possessed enough physical strength to enhance the magic he inherited. “Before the Night of Awakening, I was able to summon plants that I previously knew in new locations. I was able to take small plants in our garden from home and relocate them as I wanted.”

Wherever there is dirt, Heliad is able to call forth other plants to where he is. As with any power though, there is a natural limit to its capabilities. Heliad was only able to summon plants that he knew previously and it was solely limited to something as big as a small bush. Therefore, Julianna always maintained a fine garden for her husband for this sole purpose. Supplying a yearlong stock item in their backyard, Heliad always had an arsenal for his magic. Heliad showed his appreciation for her commitment to the garden by summoning fruits, vegetables, and herbs as she cooked meals.

It was practically a parlor trick. If his son was hungry as they walked near the base of the Natrail Falls, Heliad would summon an apple. It also was a way to demonstrate the power of the Chief to the people of Neswia. He always carried his signature flower in political parties: a purple thorny flower, the same shade as his Nimdre’s eyes, that held four curved petals that drew to a point at the end. He kept the mother bush near the garden and would always summon one of the buds for public events.

And of course, Heliad always enjoys showing his magic to the children because nothing is as sweet as a child’s eyes lighting up as a tomato suddenly appears in front of them.

“After the Night of Awakening, I have been able to call upon larger forms though, both in mass and quantity. The largest object I have called forth is a branch of pears! I then fed them to the people of our group.” Heliad’s teeth were bared in a satisfied grin as his hands were folded behind his head. His smile fell, though, as his wife planted his chair back to the floor, earning her a frown of disapproval which was ignored.

Julianna was the next to speak, almost like she felt inclined to in order to continue the cycle we started with her. “Well I am glad that we lie on the same page now. I had no doubt before, but I think it proves we can rely on one another’s strengths.” Julianna left it at that, her canines flashing in the light as she smiled.

We nodded our heads in approval of Julianna’s statement.

“Well I think that sums up dinner for the night.” Sure enough, everyone had set down their utensils by now, only a few bits of leftovers lying on the plates. “Thank you, Julianna.”

She dipped her head at my father. “It is my pleasure.” We echoed our thanks. “I am thankful everyday for you accepting me in this family.”

“It would not be the same without you.” My mother replied.

I looked at Jerran and squeezed his hand under the table. “It really wouldn’t.” A small amount of red colored his tanned cheeks and my grin grew.

“Which reminds me, I am going to head over to Alina’s after this.” Jerran stated to the table. “We need to discuss training, even if we are taking tomorrow off.” It wasn’t unusual for Jerran to spend the night in my room or vice versa but the reaction was always the same. Roile and Varonica saw it as Jerran stated it, which was mostly the truth. They both nodded their heads, happy that their son-in-law would be sharing their roof for the night. Heliad and Julianna saw it as only a Canmoan would. Their mischievous grins conveyed their thoughts of what Jerran and I would be using our extra time for. Used to it by now, heat didn’t turn to my face as I suppressed my smile of their reactions. Jerran’s face, on the other hand, ran red as his parents inferred our actions in a shared bed.

My father luckily broke the glances between the Chief family that were just reddening Jerran’s face even more. “Of course. You are welcomed to spend the night of course, Jerran. I will be happy to make breakfast.”

“Oh, good. Jerran, I hope you know that Roile never makes breakfast except when you are over. That might have an influence on why we enjoy your company so much.” My mother commented.

“So I have been told.” Jerran was returning back to his natural tanned tone, grinning at the familiarity of the conversation.

My sister stayed silent by my side, unusual for her. Judging by her furrowed brow, I thought that she was even hardly paying attention to the conversation. She probably still was thinking of the politics surrounding the training.

My father rose from his seat, reaching for his Nimdre’s cleaned plate. “Well I think we best be heading home now. Even though we might not have training at the break of dawn, I still have some plans for the day that have to be completed as the Sun rises.”

Heliad rose from his chair on the opposite side, followed by everyone else at the table. “I enjoyed the night my friend. I will see you first thing in the morning.”

“I swear, if I did not have this to prove otherwise,” Julianna held up her left arm wrapped with dark leaves, “I would think that you both were married.”

“I wonder the same thing, too, sometimes.” My mother wiggled her middle fingers, showing off her wedding bands. “Just seems to be the way of the Chief and Agede though. I was warned by his mother, yet I didn’t believe it until I saw it.”

Heliad laughed at his wife’s commentary. “Well I will make sure to wake you with a kiss in the morning to remind you.”

“As long as Roile doesn’t receive one after me.”

Roile chuckled. “He is much too of a sloppy kisser for my taste.”

“Well you can blame that on my Nimdre, my friend.” Heliad looped a hefty arm around his small-framed wife.

Jenessa took that opportunity to finally speak-up. “And I think that is a good cue to finally leave.” She took the dishes from our father and made her way to the kitchen without another word.

“She does have a point. See you later.” My father crossed over to Julianna and hugged her. They all exchanged hugs.

“We will follow you over in a little, I just have to collect some of my stuff that I brought to Canmoa.” Jerran stated as Roile grabbed his extended hand and pulled him into a hug.

“We’ll see you in the morning, Son. I am going to hit the bed as soon as we cross the door.” Roile pulled back and turned toward the door, Varonica on his heels. Jenessa crossed out from the kitchen and closed the front door behind her.

Heliad turned toward Jerran and me, still standing behind our chairs. “I think we will be headed to bed, too. Goodnight, Son.” He braced Jerran close, patting him on the back. “Goodnight, Lina.” His embrace was a lot softer with me. Julianna simply smiled from the opposite side of the table before locking her hand with her husband’s once again and turning toward their room.

With the click of their door down the hallway, Jerran and I headed toward his room. His bedroom was down the hallway on the opposite corridor of the waterfall. The moonlight shone through the windows standing on one side of the hallway, the other wall was shared with the kitchen.

Jerran clicked open his door and I followed him in. His room was dim, lit solely by the moonlight that illuminated the room. His room was raw wood. Wide beams lined the ceiling with gaps between as supporting beams. The walls were of a lighter wood, while the floor and ceiling were darker, although there was not much to his walls, since they were mostly covered by his bookshelves. He started filling the bookshelves in his room when he was seven years old. The Chief’s library was already full at the time, filled with ancient texts from the previous Chiefs. Jerran was upset that he was unable to understand most of the texts at such a young age, so he wanted to perfect his first language so he would be able to eventually learn the languages that came before. He collected these books from the town, bringing them home and stacking them on his floor.

It wasn’t until he had about ten large stacks of books standing behind his door that he built his own bookshelf. He brought home wood from the Market and took some tools from his father’s shop. He opened my bedroom door that day with his bruised fingers wrapped in bandage cloth but a smile that overrode the pain that was throbbing through his hands.

I followed him to his room, running after him in the grass with bare feet, my short legs crossing in quick intervals compared to his long strides.

Before he opened his bedroom door, he told me to close my eyes. After he guided me into my room and told me to lower my hands, I saw the mass that he had created. A large shelf with no back and thick wood with raw, unsanded edges. There was no coating to preserve the wood because that was not a concern for a child who simply desired to find a way to hold even more books in his room.

I ran my hand over the edge of the shelf now, remembering that it was once difficult for me to reach a shelf that I traced at hip height. As I grew older, I realized that the middle shelf sloped slightly to the right, while the sides bent in around the top shelf, which was not as wide as the rest. It wasn’t long before the shelves started to bend in the middle, shifting under the weight of the bound papers.

I felt the dust under my finger, worked into the wood. This shelf hadn’t been used in years, forgotten books of a language too familiar and words already discovered.

All the while, I heard Jerran shifting about the room, collecting the supplies that he took from my room before our trip to Canmoa. My room was slightly empty without his morning supplies sharing my counterspace. I was satisfied to finally have them returned to my room.

If I were to cross to the bathroom connected to Jerran’s room, I would find my toothbrush and other supplies rested by his. I always had a second supply in his room and another for trips, while those were the same for Jerran.

Jerran's hands traced my waist, drawing me close to him. His breath warmed my neck. "I am ready."

"I am tired. Sure we cannot just stay here for the night?" I pulled my finger from the shelf, wiping the dust onto my pants.

Jerran rose and set his chin atop my head, there was pressure as his jaw slightly moved as he spoke. "I am sure. I look forward to your father's warm breakfasts." A pause. "Plus, I do not have to compete with my father for devouring the most meat."

"I am sure my father enjoys having another male in the house."

"Well I have always been a part of the family so I am sure that isn't it."

"That is even more reason why I am correct. He said he missed you in the house so I am sure that is a call for another male to join the household once again."

"Well I like spending my time there because it is my only chance to not be solely in this household." He had a point. A Chief grew up in the same house where he or she would die. Same goes for the Agede. The only one who is newly integrated into the household is the spouse. Unlike any other Chief before, Jerran was going to marry someone from the house paired with the Chief's, never to stray too far from his base. Ironic considering his father found his Nimdre in another country.

I turned around, planting my lips to his. He tasted of the morning dew that collected on the grass tips. Pure and untouched. "Well I guess we better get going then." I murmured against his lips. A hint of intent flashed in his eyes before he turned toward the door, firmly holding my hand in his as I trailed after him.

## Chapter 23

We crossed the yard between the houses quickly and without a word. The cold air of the night nipped at my ears even though I tried tucking them into the excess fabric of my shirt's collar.

Jerran walked tall as he did in the day, not letting a simple chill run him ragged.

We closed the door to my bedroom, and I already was throwing off my chilled clothes, biting my lip as I expected the coldness before I dressed into my bedtime clothing. I slid into thick fabric pants that cinched at my waist by a ribbon and an oversized tee.

I threw back the blankets of the bed and hopped under the sheets, tugging the blanket back toward myself before gravity was able to. I still had not spoken a single word.

The bed dipped inward from the end as Jerran crawled toward the half of the bed that was pinned to the wall. I rolled slightly backwards as he lay behind me. An arm laced with muscle looped around my stomach and pulled me toward his warm body. My small body easily tucked against the curve of his hip as I ran flush against him.

I immediately was warmed. Just like every time we shared a bed, I only stayed warm next to his body that radiated heat. On the nights without him I usually was layered with two comforters in the summer and even more in the winter. With him though, there was only a need for a sheet to lay over our dipping bodies.

He breathed in quickly as his bare skin made contact with my own. "How are you so cold?"

I grabbed his hand and held it in front of me. His calloused fingers splayed wide as I held his thumb in one hand and his pinky in the other. There were plates of thicker skin at the base of each

finger, worn from years of training with an arsenal of weapons. "You know the price of getting close to me at night. There is no escape from my icy skin."

Even his breath was warm on the top of my head. "That is fair. Yet I cannot seem to resist."

I was glad that I was facing the opposite way because I was sure that Jerran would spot the pink that spread across my face. I, instead, wiggled back into him at his commentary. To which he groaned and turned sideways, lessening the direct heat from his body. But I was no longer shaking from the cold so I wasn't greatly affected by the loss of heat.

There was silence for a while as he laid face-up at my back, one of his arms braced under my head. Then, Jerran whispered, "I have been thinking."

My eyes fluttered open, trying to find sleep, but failing. "That is a terrible start."

His free arm pinched my side and I giggled at his effort to tickle me that always fell futile. "And they tell me that you are supposed to support me through thick and thin."

"And I always will." I turned over. Jerran's eyes practically shone in the night. "And what were you thinking, my Chief?"

His elongated canines flashed in the moonlight, happy to share the thoughts that ran rampant in his head. "With all of this worry running through the land, I think it is about time we get some good news."

A warm smile played on my own lips. "And what would that be?"

His mouth closed as blush spread across his face this time. "Well I was thinking of some sort of event. An event that would raise everyone's spirits."

"That sounds fun. I would definitely be interested. I can tell you have something specific in mind though so would you mind telling me exactly what you are thinking?"

"You know me too well." He adjusted on the bed, caving in the bed again as he added pressure. "So I was thinking..." his eyes leaped back and forth my face. "A wedding?"

I raised an eyebrow. "And who's wedding would that be?" I had an idea but I wanted him to say it.

"Well I was thinking," he pushed his body up against the head of the bed as his blush deepened, "ours?"

I giggled and sat up next to him. My hand rested against my chest in a sign of shock. "Jerran, did you just propose to me?" We might be engaged, but we never had a formal proposal. Since I was a gift from Dalleia for Jerran to marry, we simply started planning our wedding without a traditional proposal. No one asked about it because we have been projected to marry since childhood so there was no need to address something that was destined to happen.

"I guess I did..." His eyes grew wide, and he leapt from the bed. I drew in a fit of giggles as his foot caught in the blanket and doomed him to tumble off the bed. He crossed to my dresser in his light blue boxers. I allowed my eyes to stroll along the dip of his spine that was surrounded by thick muscles on both sides. Although I did skip by eyes from his back dimples to his boxed thighs.

Jerran opened a drawer on my jewelry box on top of my dresser. Unlike my sister, I had very little jewelry. I kept a few pieces from my childhood and even fewer pieces that I wore for gatherings. I had one earring on each ear that forever stayed as grain-sized, silver studs. I rarely wore rings unlike Julianna who always had rings spanning from thick black bands to silver woven leaves. Even the one necklace I used to have was already gone.

He dug around in the drawer for a little longer before settling on what he was looking for. His shoulders flexed as he emitted a slight laugh and his head shook.

Jerran then turned around with his hands pinned behind his back. He lowered to his knees by the edge of the bed. I rose on the bed, sitting criss-crossed in front of him. We both wore a mischievous grin that was accented by our glowing eyes in the moonlight.

Jerran dramatically cleared his throat. "Alina, first daughter of the Agede Roile and Varonica. Will you marry me?"

I leaned forward and brushed a light kiss against his lips. As I giggled with happiness.

"So will that be a yes?"

"Jerran, first and only son of the Chief Heliad and Julianna, I accept your marriage proposal."

Jerran then showed me the jewelry he chose from my jewelry box. It was a childhood ring of mine made from thin, flexible wire. The wire looped many times around a centerfold to create petals. Overlapping several times on itself, the wire formed a blossoming flower that delicately was woven into the band that closed together. Jerran had offered that ring to me around a month before my first bleed. By that time, I had already come to the conclusion that I was not ever going to awaken any power from Dalleia because I was of age. I felt the stomachaches long before my first bleed so I knew my time had run out. I was wearing a smile everyday for my parents who still exercised me everyday to see if I was able to feel the pulse of Dalleia. I was tired but I knew it was necessary to keep them as happy as possible until the day came where my fate was sealed.

Jerran saw the strain in my eyes. We were meant to be married but he was cursed with a defective wife. Except that was not how he saw the situation at all. He saw someone whom he would care for everyday and would love the same because she was never to change. As we were lying by the base of the trees as usual, he unwrapped a cloth from his book bag. The sun stood at high noon so my first glimpse of the ring was the metallic petals reflecting the Sun's beams.

"I know you feel as if you will never possess magic of your own," Jerran whispered as the sun shone on his cheeks as his cheeks speckled with pink, "so I made you one. Since both your mom and dad have magic relating to the life cycle of plants and we don't know what Jenessa's magic type is yet, I assumed that your magic base would probably be close to your parents." He slid the ring onto my finger, the coldness of the metal soaking into my sun soaked skin. Jerran then pointed to the blossoming flower resting on my right pointer finger. "This is an internal flower; It will never wilt, it will never change color and it will never die. You bring life to everything you touch so this flower will be as immortal as you."

The view of the young boy drifted from my mind as I stared at Jerran, kneeling before me. Although his body was speckled with countless scars from warrior training and his hair now was long enough to wrap in a bun, his eyes still shone with the same love for the world around him. I breathed a small prayer that he would never lose that.

I held out my hand and set it in Jerran's open palm. His other hand held the ring between his first two fingers and his thumb. He met my right hand pointer finger and pushed. He tried twisting the ring, and it still didn't fit. With a grunt, he lifted the ring to his mouth and placed it around his canine. With a little pressure, the two sides of the ring grew apart, opening the size of the ring. Then he wiped the ring on the side of his boxers. This time, the ring slid onto my finger as it did that first day when we were just children. Jerran whispered a soft, "There."

I lifted my hand to the moonlight emitting from my window. The ring reflected the light, casting the metal in a luminescent glow. Jerran was watching the ring dance in the light, too. "I am surprised you kept that after all these years."

I turned toward him as I let my hand fall onto his shoulders. "Well of course I did. It meant a lot to me. The only reason why I didn't wear it was because I was afraid that the wire would catch on the cloth of my blades." I turned over my hand to my palm, seeing the clasp of the ring running flush with my skin. "But now that it fits, I have no fear of that happening." I then met his purple eyes again. "But I do have one question."

"And what would that be my dear fiance?"

I held up my hand and wiggled my fingers in the air. "Aren't you supposed to buy me a ring?"

He huffed a laugh and ran his fingers through the hair that was escaping his bun. "Lina, we are everything but traditional, I believe. But..." He looked at me under his thick eyelashes. "Well if we were going by tradition, I would have proposed with the Chief's traditional ring..." He stood from the floor and crossed to the corner of the room where his clothes laid. Jerran grabbed his pants by the ankle and gave them a good shake. A small piece of wood fell from them and landed on top of the rest of his clothes still lying on the floor. As he bent over to grab the wooden object, I had to turn my vision to something else.

I turned to him again as the bed dipped under his weight. This time he was lying on his stomach, holding a thin, wooden wedding band. All that marked the band that was no thicker than my pinkie nail was a series of dots and lines that wrapped evenly around the band. The Chief's band was simple because when it was first created in the time of the Ancients, there were no fire wielders of Ritzvia to educate Neswians on wood branding.

"Well isn't that convenient?"

Jerran shifted so he could rest on his elbows as his legs still hung off the end of the bed. "I wouldn't really say convenient. After carrying this around with me for so long, I think I will miss the daily heart attacks when I think I have lost the damn thing."

"You have had it this whole time?"

"Yeah. Front pocket of every pant I wear."

"Oh really? I thought that was just you being happy to see me." I smirked at my joke. Jerran's eyes flashed in concern as he looked at the tiny ring and then back to me. "Forget it. Just," I stuck out my hand again, "here."

He shook his concerned expression loose and easily returned to his natural state of smiling. Jerran held out his hand again and I placed my left hand this time in his. The ring slid onto my finger like a sleeve. "Now that's what I call convenient." Jerran breathed lightly.

I held out both hands in front of myself. One hand with a silvered flower and the other as a band of simple wood. One personal and the other traditional. The display of rings was representative of us.

"I love it." I whispered.

Jerran started pulling himself up to sit with me on the bed. "Which one?"

I got out, "both," right before Jerran wrapped his arm around my neck and pushed me back onto the bed.

His eyes searched mine once again. "Both?"

"Both." I breathed against his lips before I pressed mine against his. The warmth of his body pressed against mine and I absorbed every ounce of it.

I was leaning further into the bed as it dipped at Jerran planting his hands on either side of me. His torso was falling flat with mine. My hands clutched the bed sheets as his lips explored mine.

We never went that far before. We tried to use more than our lips once but Jerran had knocked his tongue against mine and we were too embarrassed to try again.

*I wonder if he bites.*

A flow of blood heated my cheeks.

Wait, I didn't think that. I don't think like that.

I pushed Jerran back and sat up straight in the bed.

"What? What happened?" Jerran lept back, sitting up on his knees. He held the comforter across his lap. His eyes were darting across my eyes and then down me.

I cleared my throat, a little extra time to buy an excuse to leave immediately. "Oh, uh, nothing. I just need some water." I stood from my bed and slipped into my slippers under the end of my bed. "I will be right back." I waved behind me as I walked toward the door.

"Oh, okay." Jerran ran a hand through the hair that was almost all loose from his bun. As I turned out the door, I waved a quick goodbye which he limply returned.

## Chapter 24

The door clicked behind me and I heaved a heavy sigh.

*First the taste of Jerran and now the esteemed Agede household tour? I am in for a treat tonight. Too bad poor Jerran missed his shot.*

I turned from the door, opting to lean on it instead. My eyebrows furrowed in anger, hoping that Jordith received the expression. "And why are you turning up right now may I ask?" I whispered harshly into the silent hallway.

*Because you called me.* It made it sound so simple.

"Called you? You think I called you?" I kept my eyes trained on the floor as I made my way toward the kitchen. "There is no way I would call you because I was—"

*Busy. Yes, I realize that. So thank you for that image. Just glad you didn't call me a few minutes later. Then it would have been interesting.* I could feel his smirk.

"That would have not—"

*Happen. Well aware of that from your intentions. Once again though, he is not exactly on that same page, but I guess chivalry is not dead after all.*

"Really?" I stalled for a second as my hand crossed to my shoulder, the weight not even comparable to the body that was just resting there. Then I fixed my arm back to my side and held back from stomping the remainder of the hallway. "That is not your business and you have no right to intrude on my time. I would never—"

*Call? I—*

"And stop interrupting me!" I huffed in anger, facing the window that stood out toward the Chief's house. Realizing my mistake instantly, I quickly returned my gaze to the wooden floor. It was too late though.

*Ah, the famous Chief of Neswia's estate. Is the waterfall really over the otherside?*

There was no point anymore and I was sure I was going to run into something eventually if I didn't watch the plants that hung from the ceiling. So, I looked up at the expanse of the house.



Sure enough, there was one plant that hung from a green pot and grew over the side in a spindly vine. Behind it stood the living room that cut into the kitchen. The moonlight cut across the wall-wide windows that cast the long living room table into a shadowed beast.

I crossed to the kitchen, my slippers shuffling across the polished wooden floor. I came to the counter and opened a cupboard, standing on my toes to reach the shelf. I then let the water run momentarily before placing my clear glass under the stream, watching as it filled halfway before I cut off the supply.

I took a sip, placed the glass to the side and then leaned on the counter. "Do you want to explain why you have been gone?"

*I, uh, seem to have lost some power. Probably has something to do with you attempting to use it as your own trick.* I was caught off guard that the Lord of Darkness had searched for a word mid sentence. Also, I made a note that perhaps exercising the magic outside might delay these appearances. *But I seem to be back to my full power now.*

"But without a body?" My eyes scanned the shadows around me, prepared to see Jordith morph from one of them.

*Now is that an invitation?* The usual sense of his smirking returned. I rolled my eyes at the tone.

"No. Not in this household. In fact, not ever." I took a sip from the glass. "You seem to also be the bringer of misfortune."

A low chuckle tickled the bond that was placed in my mind. *If that is how you view it, then I suppose I cannot change your mind. Although, you, yourself, seem to be the bearer of misfortune.*

I glanced at my hand. There was no longer black tracing under my skin, but if I were to pull back my sleeve, I would be able to see the dark tendles ticking to and fro. There had not been any improvement since I had thrown out the stone. There seemed to be no correlation between the stone and Jordith's appearance. The merchant might have been making up the rock's origin to strike a deal after all.

As for the dark veins beneath my skin, my personal training had let me direct them to avoid my face and hands, where they would be most noticeable. Luckily though, they seemed to repel in the sunlight so if I were to wear shorter sleeves within the daylight, the odds would be in my favor.

*I see you have made improvement.*

I tucked my hand back under my arm, crossing them across the counter. "No thanks to you."

A beat of silence. *I tried.*

A laugh laced with discontent gurgled from the back of my throat. "Tried?"

*Yes. I heard you calling to me. Multiple times, may I add.* I didn't allow me to defend myself since what he spoke was the truth. *But I wasn't able to come.*

"Not even an answer?"

*No. I didn't have enough power. It was exhausted.*

"Exhausted?"

*A sigh. Yes, exhausted, Alina. I had used too much to save your useless ass that day.*

Three heartbeats of silence before it clicked. I snorted before I spoke. "You mean to tell me that the whole show you put on ended up draining your entire well of magic?"

*Well, yes.*

“The Lord of Darkness is so dramatic that he sacrificed his entire well of magic to manifest a smoke form in front of me?” Now I was standing straight, my hand placed on my chest in mock adornment.

*That is not true. I figured that I was regaining my magic so I didn't know that it was a well I could drain. I thought it was more of a limit that I would be able to reach anytime I pleased.*

I kept going. “So you didn't talk to me because you returned to such a weak state that you couldn't even talk to me?”

Jordith paused, weighing the words. *I guess that would be true.*

I leaned back against the counter, leaning onto my elbows that were placed under my chin as if I was a starstruck child. “Oh, please. Please do manifest right now. There is a large shadow calling your name from every corner of this room. Answer my call. Manifest this very moment with your entire body in all of its selfrighteousness. I would love a few more days of peace and quiet from your egoistic personality.”

Then a trace of a finger ran down my arm, leaving a wake of goosebumps as it strolled across my skin. In the same moment, a light breath brushed my ear as Jordith breathed. *Enticing. Grow stronger, love, and I will take you up on that offer.*

I stepped to the side, pulling away from the phantom body. Shaking my arm, I felt the goosebumps fade as quickly as they had come. It wasn't exactly cold. In fact, the trace of that finger seemed to leave a different brand of warmth in its wake.

Another chuckle reverberated through my skull, unlike the voice that had just been from outside my body. But the voice still stood by me, as he was a ghostly fantom. *You cannot get rid of me that easily, sadly. I may have been dormant for several centuries, but I do have many centuries before that, Alina. Enough that I can learn from my mistakes.* The guttural growl was no longer, replaced by his usual playful tone that was accented by a shit-eating grin.

“Oh, good to know that it took you centuries to learn a lesson that most learn as soon as they are born.”

*Well for the span of my life, that would be equivalent. But your attempt to scorn me is much appreciated.*

I stared at the glass sitting on the counter as my finger looped around the top.

*It's not going to end anytime soon.* He didn't have to say anything more than “it”; I knew what he meant since the idea was already forming in my mind.

“Don't read. Please.” My last word was weak.

*I didn't. I saw your thoughts forming. You were working up to shout it through the bond so I just mentioned it before you.*

I tucked my chin back into my folded arms on the kitchen counter. The plants hanging closest to the window cast leafy shadows across the furthest walls. “Have you?”

*Have I what?*

“Just-you know what I mean.”

*No. No I haven't. It has been tempting, don't get me wrong, but I haven't. The memories here are for you and I have no right to pry. But most of the time you do not make it easy.* A sigh rolled from my mind, as if he couldn't convey the sound to also come from my side like his voice had been. *Everytime you think about a strong memory, it is as if the memory becomes my own. I am there with you. I see it as*

*clear as you do. Foggy on the sides but crystal clear where it matters. I try not to pay attention, but you hold so much value to every detail of life that I am forced into it.*

*"Sorry."*

*Don't be. I find it compelling that you treasure those around you so much. Reminds me of my home.*

I turned toward the voice involuntarily. Standing by me was a wobbly outline of the Ancient of Atral, staring ahead as if he could see his homeland through the wall and across the country. There was a gleam to his hazy eyes despite the matte smoke that crafted them.

He seemed unaware that he had even manifested. In fact, one glance at my own hands told me the truth. Small drifts of smoke exited my skin without my command and crafted Jordith's smoky form. I had summoned him this time.

I didn't make a move to summon back my smoke. It was comforting to actually see a form to match the voice echoing in my head. If I was going to speak to him, might as well fix him with a body of the darkness. "What is it like?"

*Glorious. Deadly. Beautiful.*

I weighed his words. To be both deadly and beautiful didn't seem possible to me. In order to be beautiful, one must speak of life, but death was the complete opposite of that. Maybe having the two so close together brought a whole new meaning to that. Judging from the reminiscing look that softened the Ancient's face, I assumed that there might be such possibility.

*"Is that all?"*

*Oh, no. There is much more but that is a story for another day.* His head turned toward me, wavering in shape due to the slim form he held.

*"Well I think it is only fair you tell me something."* I leaned back into my arms facing the wall once again. *"You have seen my memories so you owe me at least one."*

*Well you force your memories upon me so I don't think those rules apply.*

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye, challenging his assumption.

*But I guess I can make an exception this one time.* He leaned heavily into the counter, his lightly shadowed arms whispering apart on contact. He joined me in staring at the leafy shadows cast upon the wall. *My castle lies on the tallest mountain in all of Atral.*

*So the rumors are true then,* I thought to myself.

*And when standing outside, there are no clouds above. Instead, they make a false ground. Some nights, all you can see is an ocean of still white illuminated by the moons.*

The image rolled across my eyes as if it were a second layer of view. I felt the cold set in around me first. There was no bite to the cold but rather a soothing touch. I stood taller and my weight was set in different places than I was used to, but that was all a minor detail compared to the view before me. As Jordith described, the world stood in front of me as a white sea as far as I could see. Few peaks stood out from the sea like claws ripping through fabric.

As if that were not enough, the person I shared eyes with looked toward the sky.

*But it is nothing compared to the night sky.*

Around me, the night sky was exposed. With no light to distract from its beauty, the expanse of the universe shone around me as if I were standing on a planet of my own, orbiting the galaxy as I willed.

The first thing that caught my eye were the moons. Stealing the show was the moon of the night. Its round shape shone brightest in the sky. The moon of the day was seen ever so slightly through the blanket of darkness. They were of the same size orbiting together forever in the sky, one trailing the other and one always brighter, although these two moons rested further apart than the ones from my memories.

But it was the band of the galaxy that stole my breath away. A red and blue band of light wrapped across the night sky, blurred on the edges by clusters of stars. Inside the band were even more stars, all shining their own colors and by their own scale of brightness. The speckled the band like freckles on a child's sunridden face.

Then a hand rose in my peripheral. I felt the hand rise on its own accord, a replay of the motions that were already written from memory. The hand was smooth but flaked with white scars against pale skin. There were a few scars that had yet to heal, still purple and swollen. These were the hands of centuries of war.

They rose to the two moons in the sky, separated much further than I have ever seen them. With the thumb resting on the first moon through one eye, Jordith's hand fanned out and touched his pinkie finger to the other moon. A sigh and the hand fell back out of our vision.

My eyes cleared and I was once again staring at the wall across the dining room. When I turned toward Jordith, the two moons shone in his eyes, mirroring the view outside the window. The moons were close enough that they both shared the image in his eyes.

"So that is Atral?"

Jordith turned from the window, breaking his trance. *One of the many treasures of the land.*

I listened to the quickened beat of my heart in my chest before replying. "You know that makes me one of the few people who actually knows what hides behind the Forest."

*And I am one of the first to actually be outside the Forest. Besides, that is one of the vast places that Atral has to offer, it is not as if you have gained too much intel.*

I noted that he described it as Atral's offering, not his own. He was the sole ruler of the land, so he had every right to claim every portion of the country, yet he allowed the land to keep its own personal title.

"I guess we are more alike than I care to admit then."

A soft laugh came from the shadowed form, sending a vibration across the form. *I guess we are, Alina.*

I glanced back at Jordith. His form had dimmed to even less. Now all that stood of him was from the chest up. Whether he was aware of his missing legs or even the fact that he had a form at all, it didn't seem to concern him.

I stood back from the counter. "Well, I better get back to bed." My hands rubbed against my arms, trying to rid myself of the goosebumps that were rising under the cloth.

Jerran didn't turn, just kept staring at the moons in the sky.

I set my glass in the sink and crossed the kitchen, turning into the dining room. As I looked back at Jordith, the only shape left were his eyes, and the two moons became one in their reflection.

## Chapter 25

Jerran was the first to wake. His lips traced my neck as I turned over in a moan of exhaustion.

“Good morning, fiancée.” Jerran’s canines flashed in the morning sun that broke through the window.

I let another elongated groan scratch my throat as I extended into a stretch. “Good morning, fiancé.” I grumbled.

His lips pecked against mine before I felt his arms under me. That woke me up instantly as I tried flipping out of his grasp. I screamed no as an added effect, but it was already too late. I felt Jerran’s arm tense as he raised me from the bed and pulled me close to his chest. Already knowing added movement was futile, I let my head and legs dangle loosely past both of his arms.

“Why can I not wake up on my own terms?” I growled.

“Because we have to get up now, not past the sun’s rising.” Jerran stated matter-of-factly.

“I wouldn’t be that long.” Jerran’s brows rose into a quizzical stare. I fell slack again, knowing that he had a point. “Fine.” I drew the word out as if it were three syllables.

Jerran sat me by my dresser, and I pulled out the clothes on the top, a long-sleeved dark green shirt and blue, rough pants. Jerran grabbed his clothes from the drawer and left for the bathroom.

As soon as the bathroom door clicked, I dropped my pants and tore off my shirt. The tendrils of shadows lurking under my skin seemed to understand my rush because they lashed out under my skin, swirling back and forth quickly. As I glanced downward at my torso, I noted their density, thicker than they were before a few nights ago. Also, they seemed to be pulsing back toward my heart.

*Good morning to you, too.* Jordith purred.

I snapped my eyes to the window of my room. My shirt raised over my head and hung from my torso as quickly as I shed the previous one. With one glance in the vanity mirror, I noticed a few vines of black licking above my neckline. I raised my hand to them, called them forth, and lowered them toward my chest, creating a barrier for their movements for the day.

*Impressive.* Jordith seemed genuinely surprised by my action.

“You talking about my body or my magic?” I grabbed a light jacket that hung from the back of my desk chair.

*Would I be able to say both?* The lightness from his voice from the previous night was long gone, returning to his usual cocky persona.

“Jordith!”

At that moment, Jerran opened the bathroom door, tugging his shirt over his sculpted torso. I caught a glimpse of his indented hipline before the shirt covered it and I wanted to tug it back up, exposing where that hipline led.

“What’s the matter?”

He probably caught me staring, so I played coy. “Hm?”

Jerran kept walking toward me, searching the room. “I heard you say ‘Jordith’,” a surge of panic ran through me, “so I assumed you stubbed your toe or something, being as accident prone as you are.”

I calmed again, remembering the common word for cursing across the world.

*A curse word?* Jordith yelled. *I am remembered as a curse word?*

“Well you have reasons to be.” I whispered harshly.

*And they call me the monster.*

I rolled my eyes as Jerran responded, “You’re right, I do have reason to be concerned because you have always been an accident magnet.”

*Finally, something the boy and I can agree on.*

I nearly stuck my tongue out as my response.

“Well, if nothing happened, let’s go to the dining room for breakfast. My stomach is growling, and I already smell your father’s breakfast.”

Jerran was right, the smell of morning sausage met my nose and sent my mouth watering. “Let’s go.” I walked toward the door and grabbed Jerran’s hand, but I stopped as soon as our fingers locked together. Between our hands was now a metal band. I looked at him and he was already looking at me with a smile formed on his lips. A welcomed change for the both of us.

*He has toothpaste in the corner of his mouth.* Jordith smirked.

Sure enough, there was a corner of white to his mouth. I licked my finger, stood on my tippy toes while resting heavily on Jerran’s hand, and wiped the paste from the corner of his mouth.

“Toothpaste,” I murmured.

Jordith rolled his eyes. *Centuries old and I am doomed to the mind of an adolescent with hormonal issues.* His voice was set in an annoyed grumble.

I called forth the memory of my previous birthday. Both families were gathered in the dining room of our house, wishing me a happy birthday over an extravagant dinner. Jerran was standing on one side while my sister was on the other. Around the remainder of the table was the family, Heliad sitting on the opposite side of the table from me. Standing in the middle of the table were nineteen flowers, eighteen frozen in time before decay, forever brown, and one newly trimmed flower that was a brilliant purple. Nineteen flowers to count the years of my life.

*Fine, young adult if we are being specific here.*

Jerran’s smile grew at my pleasantry. “Why thank you, fiance.” He was going to get his wear on the new name for me, and I had no intention of stopping him. He then motioned toward the door with our joined hands. “May we?”

“We may.” I stepped toward the door as he did, exiting into the hallway.

As we made our way to the kitchen, the smell of fresh baked potatoes grew stronger. The mouthwatering smell was paired with Jerran’s stomach grumbles. By the time we turned the corner, Jerran’s stomach released a startling loud grumble that sent us into a fit of laughter, still giddy about the night before. We turned the corner to the kitchen, bumping off of each other in laughter.

“Well, good morning you two.” My father was standing in front of the stove, cooking the remainder of the potatoes. There were already several other plates of food set on the table and the auroma was mouthwatering.

“Good morning, Roile.” Jerran walked toward the kitchen counter, picking up one of the plates to transfer to the dining table. I pulled a chair from the table and sat down, rotated to face the kitchen.

Seeing the room lit with the bright morning sun was sobering compared to the darkness that corroded the room the night before. Jerran was standing close to where Jordith was the night before, and the difference in them was as plain as day. Not only were they opposite in their light and dark, quite literally for the Ancient who was only able to appear shaped from the very shadows he controls, but there were also the subtler things, such as the broader set of Jerran’s shoulders or the fact that while Jordith still stood taller than me, he was dwarfed by Jerran’s height.

“I assume you slept well?” My mother spoke from the other side of the table, angled toward the kitchen also.

Jerran set down a plate of linked meat on the table. "Yes, I did. It is nice to have a chilled room for once since my mother insists we keep the house warm all year around. Although, I am sure Alina would choose my mother's side on the matter."

I nodded my head in confirmation to his statement. I couldn't tell if my toes curled at the memory of the cold room or Jerran's warm body pressed against mine under the sheets.

*Dreadfully cold.* I ignored Jordith's commentary.

"So what are the plans today since you have the day off?" Jerran walked into the kitchen and gathered the fruit juices from the cupboard. I smiled at him as he chose the tart juice, forever the one to choose the one with the most nutritional value.

My father switched off the stove, the fire snapping off. "Well there is never a dull day for the Agede," Jerran's mouth opened to correct his wording but my father waved him off, "but I understand what you mean. Varonica and I will be skimming over some texts in the library. It might seem safe right now, but it would be best to be prepared for any scenario."

"Plus, Roile loves the melancholy around opening dusty books. I, on the other hand, like to avoid the stuffy nose that entails with the chore." My mother scooped some wedged potatoes from the pan in front of her and placed them on her plate and her husband's. Then, she handed me the bowl. I grabbed for my bowl with my left hand. My mother's eyes lit with excitement as soon as she saw the signature band placed on my finger. She knew the ring well since she was proposed to with its identical twin all those years ago. If I were to search her jewelry box, I would be able to find my ring's twin, waiting for the day where my sister found her Nimdre. Her voice was soft, as if her breath had been stolen. "Alina."

I turned to Jerran, and upon spotting where my mother's gaze fell, a grin spread across my face as did his. "I proposed last night." Jerran set down the final juice jug on the table. He then crossed to my side.

"Well, I hope she said yes." My father released a hearty laugh that shook from his belly.

"I considered the alternative." I toyed.

"But she ultimately decided on yes." Jerran's hands rested on my shoulders.

My mother's eyes glimmered in the morning light. "Well, I could plan the wedding today, instead of working in that dreadful dust coffin." Her insult towards my father's hobbies was counterproductive with her bright smile.

My sister then spoke up from the opposite side of the table. "We already were planning the wedding so I don't see what the big deal is." We all turned toward her; there were bags under her eyes that stood out compared to her tanned skin. I almost questioned her commentary but caught myself for fear that it would create even more friction between us. Even I knew the political viewpoint of the marriage. When people are exiting fear, they need good news. From Jerran officially proposing, the people of Neswia would be reminded of the bond shared between the Agede and Chief family and how we stand strong while united. Returning their focus toward the wedding at the moment would be a welcomed distraction.

I didn't have to worry about retorting my sister's commentary because my father was the one who addressed his daughter's question. "Jerran had the right mindset. The people need to be reminded of our bonds and the love of Jerran and Alina is the perfect opportunity." Roile then crossed to the table, choosing the chair that was rested the closest to the kitchen. "Plus, it is great news for us all. We all

knew it would happen eventually, but to actually have a traditional proposal... Well it finally sets everything in motion.”

My sister gave a small grunt of disapproval, but it was muted by the sounds of the plates of food that we exchanged over the table. Once we all had filled plates, we began to eat. The zest covering a sauteed potato was the first thing to reach my tastebuds. The popping flavor spread across my tongue like a wave of flavor. A pleased hum vibrated my lips.

But I then opened my eyes as it dawned on me. “Except I am unsure how your mother’s family would be able to attend.” I turned toward Jerran who was sitting beside me with a sausage link lifted to his mouth.

His eyebrows furrowed, and he finished chewing the bite already in his mouth. As his mouth was finally cleared he replied, “That is a good point.”

“That can be the excuse to draw the countries together again. A movement to relieve people of their stress over the Night of Awakening without bluntly drawing attention to the situation.” Roile added some more potatoes to his plate. “Plus, as we stated before, the wedding would be much more entertaining with the Canmoans.”

My mother hummed her agreement with a mouthful.

“Unless it is too soon.” Jenessa did not look up from her plate. She had yet to look at either me or Jerran this morning. “Hosting a wedding shortly after this panic might lead to the two populations being on edge which might damage more than it does heal.”

“She does have a point.” My father agreed. “But I am sure that between Canmoa and Neswia, that wouldn’t be a problem. Especially since the wedding will be further off, right?”

Jerran swallowed his second helping of potatoes. “Yes. We will have it when things grow a little more comfortable across the land.”

“Good. We will host it when things are about to blow over so it will be the final shove for people to forget.”

“I will talk to Julianna and start planning out the finer details. And of course you will have input, Lina.” My mother chirped.

“Thank you.” I nodded my head at her offer.

My father spoke in a sincere voice with a hint of pride, raising his glass into the air. “I am proud of both of you. May Dalleia bless this marriage.” My mother echoed Roile’s blessing while my sister still did not lift her view from her still full plate.

At the mention of the Neswian Ancient, I remembered Jordith. He hadn’t spoken up across the entire conversation. I wondered if he had depleted his power once again from last night. *Serves him right for intruding on my night*, I thought to myself. But, he did speak this morning, and if he had used up his magic the night before, there was no way he would have been able to speak this morning. Troubling how he just comes and goes.

My view turned toward Jerran as I raised my glass. As our glasses tinged against each other, emitting a high pitched cling, I wondered how long I could keep my secret from the man I was to marry.

After breakfast, Jerran and I went for a run.

Jerran had thanked dad immensely for the breakfast that he ate more of than the rest of us. As we stood from the dining table, my mother had spotted my second ring and recognized it immediately.



*One past and one future*, my mother had commented. From that, Jerran had remembered my training exercises from the Ediran forest and offered that we went for a morning jog like we used to. I couldn't object to the offer. And now as I felt the wind smooth across my face, I was glad that Jerran had made the offer to begin with.

I wore my tight fitting clothes while Jerran's loose shirt rippled in the wind, hugging his front side and billowing behind him.

We had run down the waterfall, taking long strides down the steeper portions. I had only stumbled once and Jerran had immediately appeared by my side, helping me back to my feet just to have me return to pace beside him.

We then were looping back toward the village of Natrail. There were a few houses speckled across the land. All the houses were crafted from the land so they were a combination of wood or rock.

There was one house we passed on our looped trail to Natrail that struck me as the most beautiful house in Neswia. It was a smaller house, probably hosting only three petite rooms: one for sleep, one for food, and one living space. The walls were crafted purely from stone and grout. There were mostly bland stones of grey, but it all accented the few abnormal stones that were plastered into the wall like the rest. There was an emerald rock by the front door that was clear, I was able to look into the house even though the rock was about a foot thick. Toward the back of the house, there were a few blue stones that were cracked with a black filing and speckled with white. The blue stones were smaller than the rest, but there was a larger quantity. On the front porch stood a wooden swing that I could almost picture an older couple swinging softly in as they watched the sheep graze their field.

But, what struck me as the most beautiful about the house were the leafy green vines that wove up the sides of the rocks. While all the houses were carved from the resources the land had to offer, this house was still living by that land. The vines enveloped the other two sides of the house and were curving to the other walls. On the taller parts and the roof, where the vines received the most sun, the vines bloomed into magnificent pink and purple flowers that fanned out as wide as a hand.

We passed the house as quickly as we did the others, keeping a steady jog through the entire route, but I observed the unique structure for as long as I could, enjoying the inanimate paired with the living.

Our pace only slowed once we reached the village. As our heartbeats' pace slowed, Jerran held his hand for me to hold, making sure that it was the right hand so my left hand hosting the Chief's proposal ring was on full display.

The gasps were audible as the first eyes fell on my hand, knowing the signature ring by heart. The whispers spread like wildfire.

"I guess that didn't take much effort." I stared forth, only noting the whispers by my ears and not giving into the temptation to stare at each person who stared at my hand.

Jerran's breath still was strained as he released a light chuckle. "Not at all."

"I wonder how long before any of them actually decides to speak to us."

"I am sure we will receive very few of those. You do not congratulate a stranger on the street for their pregnant belly, so they will not do so to us."

*Or because they are too scared to speak to someone who will eventually lead them in the new world*, I thought. He might think that the people around us were acting polite out of the Chief's and

Agede's rule of normalcy but I saw the fleeting looks that were reserved for someone who you deemed higher as yourself.

"Ler's pay a visit to Renee." Jerran suggested. I turned to look at his face. Jerran's smile still spread wide on his lips, sparking a lighter mood to each person who was graced by his presence.

"But we just ate."

Jerran's stomach gave a promising growl.

"Well I guess I could go for yet another round."

With those words, Jerran gave my hand a tug and directed us toward the tree that Renee's bakery rested on.

For the remainder of the day, we stopped by many bustling places throughout the village. By the time the sun fell and we walked back toward our home, the whispers of the engaged soon-to-be-Chief had reached every branch of Natrail.

## Chapter 26

We held training only twice through the span of three weeks. The days of group training were sparse but everyday I was either running with my group, with Jerran, or by myself. With everything taking place, I seemed to have gotten back in touch with the self-trained warrior who finds pleasure in her own racing heart.

I enjoyed the runs by myself the most, I think. Being by myself made it easier to talk to the voice in my head that was rude enough to intrude at the most inconvenient times.

*I get the shaved face and the warrior trained body, but why the long hair?* Jordith questioned. To deal with the bluntness of his questions, I formed an ironic image for the Ancient. I pictured him sitting on a chair with one leg folded over the other, his elbow leaning heavily on the raised leg as his chin nestled in the palm. Of course his lip was pouted as he spoke such questions.

As most of our conversations started, I rolled my eyes. "It is a Neswian warrior tradition. Once one kills their Beast, they are to keep their hair at longer length to prove the lengths of their strengths."

*But not a single other "warrior" has such hair.*

"Well, not everyone is as dedicated to tradition as Jerran is."

*When I say no one, I mean no one. Even on the fields, I didn't see a single Neswian man with his luscious locks. Not even the females had long hair.*

I slowed my jog, stopping in a clearing. "Not a single one?" My eyebrow rose in question.

*Nope. I have no idea where Jerran had read that finding, but I do not remember a single tanned corpse that had brown hair falling past their ears.*

I flinched at the reminder that the man who now shared my mind once cut down my ancestors on the battlefield. I felt Jordith flinch even, probably concerned that he said the wrong thing to be controlling me.

"I find that hard to believe." I muttered, trying to move past the reminder.

*Well it is true. Think of how difficult it is to fight when you have a rope for the enemy to snag. He did have a point. Even when Jerran started training with his hair in a bun, some strands eventually fell out, posing to snag on any low hanging tree branch. But if you want to believe Chief son's books over my first hand encounters, then fine by me.*

“How old are you?” The question fell out of my mouth without a second thought. I reeled back as soon as I said it, wondering why I asked such a question without calculating it first. I had lasted so long with speaking to Jordith by weighing every word before it tumbled past my lips.

Luckily, Jordith just chuckled and replied, *That is a story for another time.* Of course he wouldn't answer something so intrusive. *Let's practice a little instead.*

I glanced around the clearing. There were no structures in sight but that didn't mean that someone couldn't waltz through the treeline at any given moment. “Are you crazy? Someone could see.”

*No one is around and I am sure your well of magic is not deep enough to create an explosion large enough for the town to see. Plus, you need as much help as you can get and this seclusion is the perfect setting.*

“Seclusion would mean being alone, and you are ruining that.”

*Without me, you wouldn't be Blessed.*

I still snagged on that term. If that was the term he was trying to use to cover up the fact that he was playing parasite in my body, I was going to play along with it. But I knew that term was wrong for the bond we were forced to share. “And the problem with that would be...” I paused for a response, but he was unable to return a remark in time. “As I thought.”

*Either way, you are now Blessed and need as much training as you can get. So let's see you summon some of my magic.*

I rolled my eyes at both his choice of calling it his magic and his underestimation of me. Within seconds, I called down the black tendrils that lurked behind my sleeve. My hands began to stir with the darkened forms.

I could feel Jordith's satisfactory smirk, and I couldn't help but grin myself. *Well done. But can you summon them from under your skin?*

The grin faded from my face as my concentration returned to my hands. I envisioned smoke rising from the forms, turning into mist that emitted from my palms. Within a few seconds, the image became real. A thin veil of smoke fell from my hands and elegantly fell towards the floor.

*I am afraid that doesn't count.*

I broke my concentration, letting my hands fall to my side, swishing away the remnants of smoke. “And why not?”

*Because you cannot engage an enemy with simply a haze of smoke.*

I leaned back onto one leg, crossing my arms over my chest. “And what if I didn't want to use this power for war.”

*Besides the fact that it wouldn't even pass as a children's party performance? The playfulness dropped from his voice, taking on a whole other persona instantly. Because you need to be prepared, Alina.*

The lack of playful tone in his voice was startling. “I have nothing to be prepared for. Neswia is falling back to its usual order and the people have not a single worry past cooking dinner or hanging the laundry.” I knew better than to truly trust that thought. The moment Jordith managed to transpire whatever game he was planning, darkness would overtake everything we know.

*You know that isn't true. And, although I enjoy your company, after centuries of slumber, I wouldn't deem this land to be my first stop.*

“And why did you choose here again?”

A simple laugh and the playfulness returned to his voice. *Believe me, it wasn't my choice.* Again, always playing that line. It was futile to wish he would tell me the true reasoning, but someday, he might slip. *I have yet to figure out this entire thing. I shouldn't have even been able to pass the barrier that Dalleia made. My barrier still stands strong to this day. I built it to do so.*

“All the barriers fell when the Ancients left us. We have been crossing the borders more often ever since.”

*Fools. They didn't even think about protecting everyone afterwards.* He said it under his breath but I still felt the need to justify my ancestor's actions.

“They thought about a future for their people to finally unite out of their freedom. You only sought to keep your people tormented forever.”

*Ah yes, the sweet land of torment, Atral.* There was a hint of sarcasm or remembrance in his voice.

I allowed a moment of silence to weigh his reasoning behind his tone but changed the topic in the end. “How do you do that?”

*And what would that be?*

“Speak to me.”

*You know Alina, they say that self love is the best love.*

I released a heavy sigh, more disappointed in myself for believing that I thought I would actually get a straight answer in the first round. “You know what I mean. This.” I tapped on my skull.

*I just show you what I want to see.*

All of a sudden, a picture of a hound layered my vision.

“First of all, I hope you know that you just gave me leverage.”

*Oh no, a Neswian woman knows my love for hounds.*

“You are just digging yourself a deeper hole.” I shook my head. “But, my second point is that I actually meant speech. I figured out the recalling memories simply enough since you brought it to my attention that I *recall*, not yell, those and that is how you were able to access them. It is the speaking back part that I struggle with.”

A weighted pause.

*I thought you found me annoying.*

My words fell out, trying to convey my point as quickly as possible, but failing instead. “I do. I just- I need to tell you to shut up sometimes, and yeah.”

*So you want to learn how to speak to an Ancient through a bond, just so you can tell him to shut up.*

A pause. “Yes.”

I matched the sigh he exerted with the image of him roughly rubbing his face downward, pulling his eyes downward. But he said, *Fine.*

“Really?”

*Just, shh.* I raised an eyebrow at his purposeful irony. *Just speak to me. Without saying words.*

My arms fell down to my side yet again. “Just, think the words?”

*Yes. But direct it toward me otherwise it would just be another thought, and I already ignore those as much as possible.*

My eyes rolled in mock appreciation. “Thanks,” I said, right before closing my eyes to concentrate. What does one say to an Ancient as their first mind-bonded words? Something my father didn’t teach me in his Aged speech lessons.

I settled on my words. Scrunching my eyebrows together and clenching my fists, I said my first words to the deity form sharing my mind. *You are a prick.*

*Just one word. Really? “Prick.”*

“Well, there were a few others paired with it.”

*And I hope one of them is the word “not”.*

“Well this is new for me.” My arms folded across my chest in frustration.

Jordith chuckled lightly. *And it is for me, too.*

I raised my eyebrow. “How so?”

*Well this bond is not common you know.*

My eyebrows rose in questioning. Not because he was calling it a bond, he always had, but because he was alluding to new information; information that he had yet to share about why he chose to use me in his schemes. “Bond?”

*Yes. The fact that I am able to speak to you right now should be obvious enough, Alina. It’s- It doesn’t matter.* Jordith exhaled loudly. *Just focus. Will you?*

I tilted my head in confusion, trying to encourage him to speak more to the matter. But once I realized that the silence spanned out long enough that there was no chance of reapproaching the topic, I thought up some new words I could try.

This time, I imagined my speech drifting toward him, meeting his ear. *I wish you would leave me alone.*

*Ah, a simple wish that I cannot grant sadly.*

My eyes sprung open in shock. “You heard that?”

*Yeah, next time tone it down a little, will you? About blew out my ear.*

I didn’t even commit to my signature eyeroll, I was too excited that I had found out how to finally talk down the connection. “So you can hear me yelling in there?”

*Well you can hear me by you right?* I thought of his voice standing by me in the kitchen all those nights ago. *It’s practically the same as that. You will learn in time.*

In that moment, I was so glad that I was not practicing my magic and instead focusing on Jordith because someone came barreling through the shrub. I heard them stumble through a dense bush, breaking branches and crushing leaves. My first reaction was to pull back the tendrils that ran to my fingers, hiding them yet again below my sleeves. Then I turned, slightly shaken from the close call.

Jerran was standing in the clearing, chest heaving. The only distance that could have caused Jerran to breath that heavily was if he sprinted from the house to here, not stopping for a second. He sputtered out words between breaths. “Come. Back to. The house. Now.” The final word was emphasized.

That was when I met his eyes. His big purple eyes, usually so full of joy and contentment, were shining from unshed tears. Then I realized that not only was his body heaving with exhaustion, but it was also shaking with fear. The man who solely emmits happiness was almost brought to his knees with dread.

We ran back toward the house at the fastest pace we could.

**Chapter 27**

"It happened on the upper border." Heliad was walking back and forth in front of the fire pit lined with charcoaled logs. He was wearing casual clothing but behind him hung his Beast, hanging on a post above the fireplace mantel. We were all in the Chief's living room. Both families found either a place to sit or stand in the open room. The message man, boy more so, had been ushered out of the house as soon as Jerran and I walked through the door. Heliad, Roile, and the message boy were all talking in hushed whispers and judging by the look on their face as I walked in, the news was not pleasant. I was right.

"A Neswian family was walking their property line when they saw two families arguing. The youngest of the family, a four year old female, was told to stay behind with her older sibling, an eight year old boy. The remainder of the family, mother, father, and two other female siblings aged sixteen and seventeen, went to calm the issue. According to the boy, the conversation seemed to grow more heated as their family approached. More yelling was heard from the red haired man, and the other two red haired men with him mirrored his aggression. The boy heard a few fragmented words of 'territory lines' and 'Jutean land' and 'Neswian land' so it sounds like the fight was sparked by treaty lines. After so many years of peace, the families living on the border more than likely have forgotten where the true fault line is." Heliad ran his hand over his face, taking a breath that heaved his shoulders. He then met his eyes with his Nimdre's eyes, seeming to convey a message known only between them. Julianna gave a slight tilt of her head in understanding, and when Heliad turned back toward us, his expression was not as ridden with grief.

"The leading Jutean man yelled a final call, 'Neswian filth,' before lashing out at the Neswians. Luckily, the youngest child was spared by her brother turning her before the strike, but the brother saw every movement play out." Heliad's breath hitched for a second but was gone as Julianna sent forth another wave of emotion to calm her Nimdre's nerves.

"The Jutean man grew talons from his fingers instantly, too fast for the untrained Neswians to react. The man of the original family was the first to fall. A single strike to the torso tore across his vitals, leading him to fall instantly. Then his wife was torn through the neck by the second Jutean man who was able to morph his jaw into a row of knife-sharp teeth.

"By then, the second family who was involved, noted the dire situation. The parents sent their oldest children running as they stayed to fight. But the third Jutean hid legs of a fast beast that were able to cut off the children's path within seconds. He then kicked both of them in the gut to bring them to their knees and then the skull to knock them unconscious.

"As the parents turned to their fallen children, the father in the middle of summoning weak plants by the two Juteans' feet, they were cut across the back by the leading Jutean and then struck across the throat." Heliad closed his eyes, hiding the tears that were threatening to fall.

"The boy waited longer, still turning his youngest sister from the mayhem, until the Jutean men retreated. The boy then sent his sister back toward the village, sending her to get help, as he checked on the fallen. The sister returned with three other elder villagers who helped the boy drag his two eldest siblings back toward the village. They were the only ones left breathing. One sister is now caring for her orphaned siblings as the younger of the two is still left in the clinic with brain damage. The sister has still not woken from the encounter.

“The casualties are four dead and one left in unstable condition.” As Heliad fell silent, the room was deadly silent. The thing we feared has finally come true. There were four, possibly five, bodies lying on the Neswian border thanks to the newly awakened magic.

After a few more beats, Heliad nodded at his son, who then walked forth to the front of the room. Heliad took a seat next to his wife on the smaller sofa, interlocking hands with his emotional support. When Jerran spoke, his voice was steady. The voice was that of a Chief. “The talons are a signature shift for Juteans. As we know, the Jutean Ancient, Sineo, prided himself on the form of a dragon and with that, most of his Blessed tried to also obtain this form. The form is not that simple since its form is one of the anatomies furthest away from the human body. If the Jutean man in this encounter was able to achieve the talons of the treasured form, more than likely, they have had proper training.”

My father then spoke from the opposite side of the room. My mother was planted in a larger chair that made her look even that much smaller as my father stood behind her, hands planted on the top of the frame. “Word will spread. If it hasn’t happened already, it will quickly.”

“We need to do something. Fast.” Julianna’s eyes seemed unfocused as she stared toward the floor. There were darkened bags under her eyes despite her naturally glowing tone. She was draining all of her power to simply keep us all from breaking down here and now. I wonder how much power she was using on me alone because the tears were still willing themselves to the brim of my eyelids.

“That is why I have a proposal.” Jerran still held the center of the room, being the only one deprived of emotion to his voice. “Since Alina and I are still newly engaged, we hold the greatest possibility for spreading brighter spirits. And with Jenessa’s strength, we could send a message to them all, too.”

Jenessa perked up at the mention of her name. “And what are you implying?”

“I am saying that we travel across Neswia together. The three of us. Between us three, the towns we stop in will renew their strength and know hope. We can organize training sessions to teach them fighting techniques so they can hone in on their powers and feel safer during these times.”

“And we can imply that you two are married.” My father’s face was tense in thought. Whenever he was strategizing, his eyes seemed to glaze over and his eyebrows knit closer together. “We can pass off the entire trip as your coronation ceremony. You will not only be protecting the people from worrying that this is an usual circumstance, you will also spread happiness by showing the land their new Chief.”

“While that is sweet and all, are we not going to talk about the fact that this was avoidable? That this small massacre, although tragic, is probably the start of something?” Jenessa held no emotion to his voice. She was just stating facts that she knew to assess from her training as an Agede. “Yes, the blood of five is on the hands of those Juteans, but it is also on ours. If we had trained our people, they might have been able to create a diversion to escape. Or going back even further, we could have moved the villages from the borders so there was a separation between us.”

“Separation?” Julianna’s words were weak. A needle falling in a silent room. If we were to create separation, what would that mean for her? What would that mean for Jerran?

“We can only rely on us now. Until we can host a meeting with the other countries, we need to focus on us.” Even though Jenessa was stating what she knew to be facts, Julianna flinched ever so slightly.

"Then let's show the country just how united we are." Jerran tried to emphasize.

*Self-proclaimed warrior has a point. If you are going to prevent another slaughter, you need to unite and educate.* Jordith's voice was almost deprived of emotion, save for the drop of empathy that leaked through.

"I think it is a good idea." My voice filled the void of sound, wavering slightly. I was never one to speak in this situation, and I think everyone was as shocked as I was. I even felt Jordith smile slightly at my attempt.

Jerran crossed to me, sitting on the left side of the largest couch. He knelt in front of me, so similar to his proposal, mere weeks ago. In the days since then, normalcy had returned briefly, only to be snatched away again.

"Do you want to do it? Do you want to marry now so we can commence our coronation? The ceremony will not be traditional; we will have to save that for later, but we can seal our bond by Dalleia's tree."

Despite the horrible news that I had just received, this was the thing that set my heart on edge. When he had proposed, I had imagined our marriage would be further off. I thought that we would still have more time. Images of our paired rings, shaped from Dalleia flashed across my vision. Then a baby cradled in my arms, a small tuft of brown hair fixed on his head, and when his eyes fluttered open, they were bright purple.

My breath hitched, but not out of pleasure; to my horror, it was out of fear. I no longer had time before I was wearing the crown of a country that thought me to be powerless. Even worse, I now was a leader of a country, while blessed by the Ancient of another nation.

My head started spiraling. This was Jordith's goal. I was to take the crown as the Chief's wife, but the entire country would underestimate me. They think I would just be a loyal follower of my husband. They would never suspect me to host powers of an Ancient of the deadliest land known to mankind.

"There is no need." Julianna's voice broke the silence yet again. My vision snapped toward her, thankfulness already shone in my eyes for her answering the words that I couldn't speak. Her view already rested on me. A part of me wondered if with her newly embraced magic, she was also able to read emotions. Would she be able to see the natural reaction of shock that the rest of the room saw, or was she able to detect the momentary horror that rushed over me?

After meeting my eyes, she glanced at my sister, whose vision was once again set on the floor. I wonder if Julianna saw disgust in Jenessa, or something maybe entirely different.

"You two can both have your proper wedding ceremony still. We can simply imply that you already had it, as Roile said, and are taking your coronation tour." Julianna tried smiling her signature smile to bring light back to the conversation, but it didn't quite make the mark. "When you come back, then you can host the ceremony and chalk up the assumptions to that, assumptions. The people will be convinced that nothing is wrong as you tour, and you will still host a traditional ceremony when the timing is right." In the last few lines, Julianna looked directly at me, as if she were proposing this for my sake.

Jerran's hands were still holding mine as he knelt on the floor. His view shifted from his mother to me. "It is fine by me. How about you, Alina?" My head dipped into a nod. "And you Jenessa?"



My sister looked up from the floor, her long brown hair shifting across her chest. "What opinion do I have?"

"I wasn't talking about the wedding. I was asking if you will join us on the tour."

"Seeing as I am the closest to Blessed in these lands, it would be necessary to take me."

Closest to Blessed? I stared at my sister who had always seen me as a disgrace. Her eyes were clear, no tears to be shed for mere statistics of the war she was already calculating. Her scrawny bare arms only fit with essential muscles. Her shining hair that has never been tangled by midnight wind while training meticulously. Most of all, her hands that were never fitted with a blade, thinking that all she needed in this new world was the vines she called upon.

I let her have this one comfort of believing she is the strongest as the dark tendrils of an Ancient's magic surged under my clothes. How much longer until she realized that she was not the entitled child she thought herself to be?

But then again, maybe her hatred for me would be the thing to save the entire country. If Jordith thought he could use me and my position, he greatly underestimated my sister's hatred for me.

## Chapter 28

"Tomorrow morning?" I laid in my bed as Jerran sat at the desk, pouring over one of the many books he carried over after the discussion. Night had set, taking the sunlight with it. Now my room was once again only visible by the dim moonlight and the lamp set on the desk.

Jerran didn't look up from his book, only pivoting his head back and forth slightly as he glossed over the pages. "Yes. We are to leave at daybreak."

I was pitched sideways on the bed, pinning my upper half up by my elbow. "Then we should start packing."

"Your father is already taking care of it with the help of Jenessa" While the Agede was specifically trained to configure the image of the Chief, my father was less educated on women's current fashion. More than likely, my sister was packing my clothing because my father would not know the latest women's fashions spanning across the country. Also, Jenessa was probably packing as if Jerran and I would be treating this as a pre-honeymoon, and with the anger she so obviously displayed of the late, she probably was packing the most unattractive pairings of undergarments. I made a mental note that if I were to appear anything other than a prude woman in bed these next few nights, I would have to smuggle in some undergarments.

"But my clothes are all in my closet." I glanced at the door tucked in the corner of my room. The sturdy door held several dings in the wood from both me and children of the Agede before my father.

"It won't matter. They are choosing all new clothes for the trip. The new Chief and his 'wife'," I heard the scare quotes around the word in Jerran's tone, "must be fitted with the finest new clothing."

"But most of my clothes aren't even worn yet."

Jerran finally turned from his book to me. One finger was still placed over the part where he had stopped his reading. "Yes, Lina. I understand. But even if you wore those clothes once, they are no good. We need clothes that speak both newblood and oldblood. It is a very hard line to meet so that is why we have the two most politically based leaders creating us a perfect image." His tone was neutral, but I could tell he was tired, which caused his voice to rise slightly. Jerran's eyes shot frantically, as if they were that dedicated to swabbing the text of a book.

As soon as he was done, he turned back to his book, picking up exactly where he had left off.

Tired myself, I released a sigh and walked to the bathroom. I already had a change of clothes by the base of my bed so I grabbed them on my way.

The bathroom door clicked into place, and I started stripping off my clothing. The bathroom was lit by a shine of moonlight from the window and an overhead light that I switched on. As I drew off my shirt, I glanced into the mirror.

The dark marks quickly spiraled down my arms, free from the invisible barrier I constructed for the day. I let them freely explore my body as I watched them rise closer to my skin and back toward my bone.

One of the shadows had enough courage to run across my face, moving up my cheek and disappearing into my hairline. I focused on the one piece, calling it back toward my face. It slowly retracted its path, landing on my cheek. I held it there as it pulsed with my heart, bleeding darker to the beat. It carved to my cheekbone, bending at the natural indentation of my face. How easy it was for something so foreign to make home in my body.

*Because it belongs to you.*

Jordith's voice shocked me out of my concentration. I lost my grip on the shadow and watched as it ran back down my neck, leaving my face bare of any dark marks. "Not really. If you don't recall, I am a daughter of Dallee."

*And dear husband is half son of Nidean. I am sure it isn't as simple as that, Alina.*

"Not husband." I don't know why I was so quick to reject Jerran's and my status. "And it is as simple as that. As with any mixed child who holds diluted powers of a Blessed, one side won out for Jerran. His blood of Dallee was stronger." I tugged my bedtime shirt over my head. Luckily I was wearing comfortable undergarments because there was no way I was taking off those in front of a mirror that Jordith could see.

*Then how are you categorizing those marks?* As if to emphasize his point, a few more marks traced my hands and neck, the only visible skin besides my face.

"That would be your making. A curse."

Jordith seemed to cringe away from that word. *And once again, I wouldn't be here if it were up to me.*

"And once again, I don't understand what you mean with your cryptic wording. It is not as if there is anything that can overpower you. You are an Ancient, for the Blessed of Jor-" I stopped myself short of the cussing pattern that I was raised upon.

Jordith simply raised an eyebrow and huffed a dark laugh. *And how much you still have to learn my Blessed.*

"Yeah, well I don't feel like learning your words of wisdom today." I tugged on my pants, still avoiding looking down as much as I possibly could for the chance of Jordith spotting what I saw. While I had more important matters to worry about than if an Ancient possessing my mind saw my exposed thighs, it was something that I would like to avoid. "Now excuse me while I join my *fiance* as we figure out how to solve the conflicts in *our* country."

Jordith didn't even attempt to get in a word as I opened up the door once again to my room. Jerran was still at the desk so I crossed the room to his side.

"I am going to bed since we have a long day tomorrow." I planted a light kiss on his cheek. "Please come to bed soon." My voice was a soft whisper by his ear.

He turned, momentarily brushing his lips against mine. "I will." His breath smelt of mint as he breathed his light words.

With that, I crawled into bed and let the wave of sleep crash over me.

*I was standing in the middle of a plain. To one side, a dark forest stood uneven in the forest, seeming to warn me not to come close. The opposite horizon was constructed by jagged mountains that reached for the stars. The Sun stood low in the sky, easing closer to the horizon.*

*Movement from the clearing caught my eye. There was nothing for miles, so it was simple to see the masculine figure standing about 100 meters away. He rose from the ground and was then dusting his hands off on his legs. Not only was it strange that he was standing in this field alone, but he also was dressed in a tailored suit that was now dirtied with the soil.*

*Drawn toward the one other person, I made my way toward the man. As I neared, I saw that the field was growing darker from the setting sun.*

*In the plain field, he was standing in front of the only abnormality. There was a pile of dirt that was freshly turned. A gravesite.*

*With one extended hand, he summoned particles of darkness to consume the land. They marred the overturned dirt with one perfect slash. A line running from the start of the grave to the end.*

*Next to the freshly turned dirt, there was a patch of new growth. Grass that grew back in a square next to grass that was older. In the middle of the new growth, there was a long line of black. No grass grew on the one mark.*

*Then I saw them. The Marks. Slashes of black that stained the ground in a flawless pattern. They were perfectly spaced across the plain, creating an endless sea of unnatural marks.*

*I stared out at the endless sea of perfect slashes that marred the ground's flesh. Marks of the dead.*

*The man moved again, this time directly next to me. As I stared out at the darkened ground, I had eased myself up to the figure. As I turned toward him, I jumped slightly, startled.*

*It was Jordith. There was no mistaking his striking jawline and his almond shaped eyes.*

*But his skin was pale, and his trimmed suit was of midnight blue. This was what he was like in the flesh, not made of his smoke. My smoke.*

*He was still wiping his hands on his pant legs. There was dirt caked to his knees and under his nails. Simply wiping his hands would not free the dirt stuck under his nails. It took more than that.*

*His eyes then turned toward the field of marks.*

*Blue. Deep blue. Blue of the twilight.*

*Those were his eyes.*

*Even his eyes spoke of the night that consumed his life.*

*But the shine on them was not because of the moonlight that began to spread across the land. The shine was those of tears. Tears for the soldiers who were never to be buried with a name.*

I shifted in bed, my eyes fluttering open from my dream. Jerran was lying by the wall of the bed, facing away from me and fast asleep.

As the grogginess of sleep released my thoughts, I realized why the dream had woken me. There were still dark marks that marred the grass outside the backdoor.

Even though none of my family had walked that portion of the property for years, I was not willing to take my chances. One look at the grass weighed down by a layer of darkness held more questions than I was willing to answer.

Carefully, I pulled the sheets back and slid off the bed. Jerran didn't even shift.

Then I slid into my jacket that was hanging by the backdoor and my slippers.

As I opened the backdoor, I was thankful that the dream had reminded me of the mark because even in the dark of the night, the black stain of the ground was obnoxiously obvious.

Shutting the door behind me, I crossed to the stain and sat down in the middle. I lifted the first few fragments of darkness, watching as they dissolved into my palm.

Rise. Absorb. Repeat.

After what must have been a couple of hours, my arms dropped to the side exhausted. There was no way I would be able to unstain the grass tonight. I should just hope that no one would stumble upon it while I was away. After all this time, I had only lifted the sides of the stain and a few measly spots in the middle. The entire crude circle looked like reverse spots.

Once again, something I was unable to complete.

*Well you can't necessarily put blame for not being born with inherited powers on yourself. I would think that would fall more on your parents.* Jordith's voice broke the still night with dripping sarcasm. As I sighed, I found that it was partially in comfort from the one person on this planet who knew my situation. Besides the fact that he was centuries older than myself and worshipped by one nation and hated by the rest, that is. Also, not to mention that he still was plotting to overtake my homeland. *Though, you can blame this little mess on yourself though. If you would have let me help you sooner instead of ignoring me like a spoiled adolescent, we might not have been here.*

"But I am sure you love it in your own twisted way." I fell back into the grass, embracing the fact that I was going to travel the country with this obvious red flag rooted in my backyard.

*Good to know you are thinking of my feelings as usual.* As he used that tone, the image of him flicking a tuft of invisible lint from his tailored suit passed over my mind. *Now will you consider my thoughts on your training.*

I strung my arm over my eyes, letting the pressure from my arm paint a false starlight beneath my eyelids. "And what will the lesson be today, All Knowing One?"

*Well they did call me the God of Knowledge for a while.*

My eyebrows raised even though they were weighted down by my arm. "Really?"

*You know? With all the sweet nicknames I have received over the years, I do not think that one made the list. That would be more in Vicreno's department I would think.* Vicreno, the Ancient of Ritzvia, the land of fire, the capital of the future. *Either way, I am quite familiar with the power that flows through your veins, so will you accept my help?*

I took a few heartbeats to consider Jordith's offer. To think that this Ancient had only just appeared in my life, implanting a kernel of his magic inside my heart. Only weeks had passed, and we had already avoided a war to turn to the start of a war. It took only a few weeks to alter my view of a sadistic monster who once had an entire country bend to his every command. With how far we had

come in this fraction of a life, I found it easy to accept his help in commanding that new power that still was trying to mix with my blood. "I guess I will." A heartbeat. "Thank you."

*Well that is shocking. The queen of command will bow down after all.*

I wondered if he knew how ironic it was for him to say. I had bowed down my entire life. My younger sister had outranked me from a young age and secured my throne as Agede. I still was to take a place among the next leaders of Neswia, but I would always be heard second to my future husband who was to stand strong as the Chief.

Always bowing. Always second. That was what I would be known for if they didn't label me something as false as Gift of Dalliea.

For once, I realized that the only one to see me as strong and viable was the Ancient I was taught to fear. And it felt pretty damn good.

*But I am sure you are not prepared for what I have to offer for your training.*

I groaned. "Just don't make it too terribly exhausting. I do have to seem presentable tomorrow before we leave for the road. If not, Jerran might fear I am sneaking to another man."

*Hate to break it to you, but technically-*

A snarl grumbled in the back of my throat, and Jordith chuckled the remainder of what he was about to say.

*But you have no need to fear, this will not cost you any more energy than you have already exhausted yourself.* I raised my eyebrow in question yet again. It was growing to be a familiar habit with the Ancient. *Just lean back onto the floor.* I happily followed that order, closing my eyes as soon as my back made contact with the soft ground. *Breathe in. Breathe out.* I let off a heavy sigh to follow that instruction. *What is on your mind?*

I opened my eyes. "Meditation?"

*That is what you call this?* A bubble of laughter broke from me. I turned to my side, curling into a ball of shaking laughter. *What? What is it?*

I wiped a tear shedding from the corner of my eye. "Meditation. I have snuck from my room in the middle of the night to mediate with an Ancient who has been in hibernation for the past centuries." I returned to laughter, this time not escaping my lips, just slightly shaking my body.

A grin emitted from Jordith. *I suppose you could find some humor in that.*

"Damn right it can. In fact, I wonder what it would do to your reputation."

*For the people of these countries, they probably wouldn't believe you. As for the people of my home, they already would know. At least the ones that I knew personally back when I walked the land.*

"Wait. You mean to tell me that the most sinister Ancient took up meditation and his people were fine with it."

*Once again, Alina, so quick to assume you know everything you need to know about me based on a few poorly translated texts.*

"I guess that is fair enough." I wiped away the image of Jordith sitting cross legged and shirtless on a mat in an empty room. "But you have to know that in order to have another understand you, you do need to explain yourself."

*And that is fair, too. Now will you please listen to me?*

"I am starting to think that might ruin my reputation." But I found myself sitting up, crossing my legs beneath me.

*No need for that. Just lay back, Alina.* I didn't even answer. Letting my body fall back to the soft ground was answer enough. *Now do you feel the darkness around you?* I opened my eyes to examine the darkened grass I laid in. *Not by that.* All of a sudden, my vision was taken over by a heavy layer of smoke. *By this.*

My heartbeat picked up its pace slightly, beating heavier in my chest. "What did you do?"

*Don't worry, it is just temporary. It is made of the same darkness as when you summon me.*

I leaned the back of my head back to the ground. "Okay." I focused on my slowing heartbeat. Then, when my heartbeat was almost normal once again, I let my eyelids close, trading in the smoky screen for the familiar blackness of the back of my eyelids.

*Now that I traded a memory with you, it is a perfect time for you to share yours.* I couldn't tell if he was talking of the dream or the meditation secret. If he was only asking for one though, I guessed that he had no idea that he has exposed such a vital story of his past. A king brought to his knees is an image that he probably held tight.

"Give me a topic. There are many to choose from."

*Hmm, Jordith's hum vibrated from my side, as if he were also laying by my side under the night sky. Maybe in another life, we would have been two simple people laying in the grass, talking of the godly tales tied to the starry night. How about the Ancients? Your honest opinion of us.*

A scoff sounded from my throat before I could stop it. "Unlike you, I am not immortal so I never had the pleasure of meeting the Ancients." Jordith was silent, probably thinking of a new topic. I quickly thought of a compromise so he wouldn't have to bother. "But I did think about how it would be to be Blessed by each Ancient individually." With that, Jordith seemed to perk with interest. I tucked my hands behind my head, preparing to stay here longer at least in comfort. "Of course it started with Dalliea. We all had our assumptions of what my magic would manifest as, but I liked to believe in my favorite technique of Dalleia's Blessed's power type: growth. I would run across this forest, trying to summon forth some growth in the plants. Sometimes I would concentrate so intensely that I would be shaking. A few of those times, I convinced myself that I had made a flower bloom or budded the end of a branch. Until I tried to tell my parents. Then I realized that it all was a trick of my mind." I heaved a sigh.

"Then I tried the powers of Nidean. I figured that if Dalliea wasn't answering, then another might. When I talked to my mom while at the market, I would try buttering my words so I could get the pastries from my favorite shop. It worked most of the time, but I knew the whole time that it was a childish charm at work."

"Next was Sieno. At the time, Jerran was obsessed with the biology of Blessed Juteans so I already had an idea of how they could morph their bodies to the animals around them. I would stare at the deer that stopped in the forest and watch them from my porch. Looking at the shape of their hoofs and then back at my own palm, I tried morphing my fingers together and pictured them growing into a harder material.

"Of course I attempted Vicreno's fire manipulation on living room candles when my parents were looking the opposite way. Then Laciana's water manipulation as I was left to bathe. None succeeded. Even the ones from Dalliea."

*But you never tried to summon the darkness?*

"Not once." My answer was quick, without thought. "Most of my attempts came from Jerran's studying, and he rarely spoke of Atral. He tried finding texts about the land because he has always had a

natural hunger for the unknown, but they were extremely rare. And part of me thinks that he might have been afraid to know what actually happens past the Forest.”

*So the one magic you don't try is the one you are left with.* I could tell there was an attempt at humor in his voice, but it was lost in his reflective tone. *Then, if you don't have a story about the Atralian Ancient, do you have an opinion of him?*

A smile tugged on the corner of my lip. “From what I have heard, the Ancient of Atral is a manipulative, heartless man that would slaughter his people if it would fill his endless desire to feel others pain”

A few heartbeats thumped in my chest as Jordith weighed my words. *I suppose it is not entirely false.*

The view of the Atralian sky with an outstretched, scarred hand flashed in my mind. Then I saw the rows of unmarked graves with a dirtied suit standing in silent prayer for the people who would be remembered even in the mind of one. A mind that live for eternity.

I turned back with my own remark, finding that his words did not disturb me since I found I was beginning to see little truth in that statement myself. “But,” Jordith perked at that simple word, “I think that those words might not be all too true.” *I see you were layered within my words.*

Despite his sudden interest, Jordith seemed to shy away from my response. *Rumors spawn from somewhere, Alina. Be careful how you interpret the world around you.*

I felt an irritation gurgle in the back of my skull. He might be immortal but that gave him no right to treat me as an adolescent. I calmed myself before I continued speaking. “And now I think you owe me a truth.”

*If I am keeping my tallies in line, I think that you truly owe me one more before I am in your debt.*

That answered my question. He did know about the dream that I saw. Whether it was against his will or not, I didn't have the energy to argue. “Okay.”

Jordith raised an eyebrow at my easy submission. I didn't have enough energy to fight that at the moment either. *If that is the case then, give me a moment to think of a question.*

As Jordith thought, I used my time to breathe in my surroundings. I didn't attempt to open my eyes because I could still sense the shadowed haze resting on them. I did however, reach out for the darkness around me. Unlike using my hands, sensing my entire body connected me to a larger mass. I felt the entire mass of darkness laid across the grass. I even felt the jagged edges where either grass was spared of the darkness or was corrupted.

Jordith broke my concentration. *How do you feel about what will start tomorrow?*

I felt myself growing too tired to even talk anymore. I opted to talk to Jordith through the bond. *I am not too sure.* I heaved a sigh as I rolled onto my side. *But how am I supposed to play any role in this? Jerran and Jenessa are practically Blessed. If they go, they can show their strength and promote their education.* I stretched my arms above my head, popping my spine.

*Alina, you are vital for this.* His voice was calming. *You may not have the powers that benefit your birth country, but you have the heart to make up for that.*

*Now you are giving me a heartfelt talk?* A smirk that mimicked Jordith's spread across my lips.

A scoff sounded from behind me. *I wouldn't necessarily call it heartfelt. I think it would be more of a statement.* I stirred slightly at the closeness of his voice. I had grown used to him talking to me through the bond but him talking so close to me felt, almost, well, intimate. *They need you, Alina. They*

*need to see the last girl in their country not processing Dalliea's powers standing tall. You are a symbol in yourself. They will come to love you. They already do.*

A crowd of faces pushed its way into my view. A crowd of people shouting. I recognized them. The mixed colors, hairs, eyes all united under the Tree of Dalliea. My sister's coronation. The same crowd that congratulated her success as the most powerful descendent.

Except there was one distinct factor that was different in this memory. I was standing center stage, and the crowd was gazing at me. Hope fluttered across every one of their eyes. They believed in me. I could still feel the lack of power in my bones but they didn't care. I was to be the leader of the Neswians whether by blood or by marriage. I was the one who was destined to take one throne one way or another.

There was one difference about that vision though that was not to be granted in reality. I was not powerless. I have the power of Jordith running through my veins. Pumping in my very blood. I was part of it and it was me.

At that moment, in my vision, I let the blood run through me. I glanced down at my bare arms and let the darkness surge under my skin. It was now mine to control. The dark swirls danced across my arms. I let some of them escape past my skin, creating tendrils of smoke that whipped in front of me.

As I looked at the crowd, their eyes were not of Canmoan purple or Jutean gold or even Neswian brown. They were the eyes of midnight. Some were of twilight while others were of the moonless night. So many colors the night had to offer. A crowd of deep blue eyes stared back at me, filled with hope.

A hand gripped mine. My body did not pull away, it was drawn to the figure who stood beside me. I turned and the eyes of midnight met mine. The Ancient of Atral held my hand tight as he waved to his people. They clapped with enthusiastic applause, pleased to see their king. My heart clenched as I realized they were equally applauding me. I felt a draw to this moment.

I dropped Jordith's hand, and watched the crowd dissolve back into the faces of my homeland. Although their applause was less than that of the Atraliens', my people were still happy to see me. I was their leader, by blood and by marriage.

Jordith's voice brushed against my ear. *See, Alina, they all need you.*

He was right. In front of my people, despite my lack of power, I was what they needed. I was their symbol. As for the country on the opposite of the continent, I had no idea what I would be, and I didn't want to think about it at the moment because I already had enough problems at home.

I felt the darkened shadow lift from my eyes so I opened them. Above me stood the night moon, shining as the purest light in the night sky. Trailing behind it was the minor blushmoon, cursed to live in the background.

My voice came out weak, but there was a stronger tone behind it. "We need to stop the war before it begins."

*Oh, love, it began long ago. You just need to cap this squabble before it becomes something bigger than mortals can handle.*

"Well, let's just hope that is another one of my newly founded talents then." As I turned over to stand, the grass bent beneath me. Shocked by the forgotten texture, I glanced at my hand, gripping the softened texture. All the darkness had disappeared from the grass. The only sign of its existence was the dark wisps beneath my skin. During my vision, I must have absorbed the magic without realizing it.

I held my hands against the moonlight, showing the blackened tips of my fingers.



*I think there are many more talents that you have yet to discover, My Blessed.*

## Chapter 29

“And Jerran’s toothbrush, too?” I stepped up to the cabin of the carriage while facing sideways to speak to Julianna.

“Yes, Lina. I made sure to pack everything you might need. Now hurry up, child.” She shooed me into my seat before leaning forth in a whisper only I was able to hear despite the small cabin. “I even have a few treats in there for you to enjoy.” Julianna emphasized her point with a wink with her full eyelashes. With those few words and the fact that Julianna would take any opportunity of treating this as Jerran and my honeymoon, a slight blush rose on my cheeks, and I immediately dropped the conversation. I guess I didn’t need to smuggle some undergarments after all.

I stepped into the cabin of the carriage, sitting next to Jerran and across from my sister. Jenessa already was arranging her novels, seated next to her along with Jerran’s textbooks. Jerran’s books were easy to tell apart from Jenessa’s, as his were bound with thicker leather and of wider dimensions.

There was about two meters between my sister and me and only half of that between Jerran and me, despite being far enough apart to lean against the walls. The walls of the cabin were dressed with brown fabric that was contrasted to the red curtains that were currently pulled back from the window.

As I sat, Heliad stepped forth to close the carriage door. A smile was spread across his lips, happy for our first adventure alone as the next leaders of Neswia. “I wish you the best on your trip. May Dalliea bless you.”

Julianna stepped forth with a farewell that was not as formal. “We’ll miss you!” Behind her, my mother and father bid their own farewells. They all looked tired from the rough night we all had, knowing that a war was brewing on the horizon.

Heliad turned to the front of the carriage. “Take care of them now, will you?”

The voice of a young man returned the question with an answer. “I will try my best, Your Majesty.” I cringed slightly at hearing the common address of the Chief. Much too formal of a name for someone who wanted to be treated as part of the crowd. Yet, somehow, Heliad seemed to bask in the name.

“Thank you, Son.”

I was too rushed to enter the cabin to even pay attention to the fourth person who was to be sharing this trip with us. Who knew how long we will be finding bedding with the boy who was to guide the horses to our destinations. I kicked myself for not paying attention to someone who would be leading our travel.

“Bye, everyone.” Jerran waved as his father closed the door. Jenessa and I mirrored the action as our parents did the same. The door clicked into place, and the carriage lurched forward as the horses started to trot. Quickly, our parents slid past the small view of our windows as we started down the hill, headed toward the North border of Neswia.

Jenessa and Jerran were quick to pick up their books, leaving me wondering what my hobby during this trip would be.

*You have me, lovely.* Jordith’s soft voice echoed in my head.

I propped my chin in my hand, resting on the windowsill. *Oh, joy.* This ride was going to be long.

Luckily, we made a stop around high noon for the horses to rest and to calm our growling stomachs. We stopped in a small village that had one cafe in what was probably their community area.

As our carriage drew to a halt, I stared out at the petite town. There were houses near the stores on the main gravel road, and they seemed to disperse the further out they were from the city center. Like any Neswian house, they were made of full lumber stocks or rocks pulled straight from the ground. They were also obviously aged with dirt at their bases that was corrupted and patches in the roofs that had yet to be rebuilt.

Since I was so absorbed by the characteristics of the unfamiliar town, I was caught off guard when a young man approached the window. He had light brown hair that was once cut as if it had been trimmed short but was now growing slightly past that. He was thinly built, but it was obvious enough with the way he carried himself that there were fine lines of muscle hidden beneath his riding gear. Riding gear of a coach boy.

The coach boy raised his hand to unlatch the door of the cabin. I noted the hint of strained arm muscles that he only winced at slightly. That was when I caught his eyes. As the door opened and I had a direct line of view to him, I saw that his eyes were unique. One eye was solid Neswian brown, in the shade of dried dirt in the summer sun. It was the other eye, his left eye, that caught my attention. It was of every eye color known throughout Rylina: red, purple, gold, and green. There was no distinction between the colors. They simply just blended together, willing to share the same iris to display their own unique beauty.

As I searched his colorful eye, I realized that I was searching for the one color not present. Blue. The blue of the night. Blue of Atral. Of course it wasn't there. There wasn't enough Atralian blood within the mainland to intermix within the gene pool.

Then he spoke. His voice had a gruffness of someone of hard work, but then it also was smoothed over with the tone of a young man. "We have arrived. I have parked us next to the cafe of the town so you might grab a bite. I will care for the horses while you are all busy."

Jerran had already closed his book and tucked it into the corner of the cushion. "Thank you..."

"Mael."

"Thank you then, Mael."

"Of course, Your Highness." With that, Mael dipped his head and left for the front of the carriage once again.

As he took his first step however, he halted as my sister called for his attention once again. "Mael." His head swiveled toward her. "Will you join us when you are finished caring for the horses?"

A bright smile appeared on the young man's face. His front tooth was overlapped by the tooth to the side. An endearing characteristic that paled in comparison to his shocking eye. "Of course, Your Majesty." His head dipped again, and he finally slid past to the front of the carriage once again.

As I turned toward my sister, a smile was trying to play on her lips but was obviously being denied by her stone cold personality.

Jerran was the first to hop from the side of the carriage. As his weight lept from the side, the carriage raised in a slight relief. It must be straining to carry the solid weight of a Neswian warrior.

As I rose toward the side, Jerran extended a hand for me to balance myself with as I, too, hopped from the side. Immediately after, my sister followed. She hopped alone, denying Jerran's outstretched hand.

We entered the restaurant quickly. As we opened the door, Mael trotted the horses, along with the carriage further down the road and the few people stationed in the booths turned toward us. They seemed to stir at new faces, but none stopped long enough to raise concern of our presence. While everyone at home was acquainted with our looks, the people further from the village were unaware of once. That means that the few people whose eyes lingered were most likely just intrigued by new faces in their town.

We sat ourselves in a booth by the window. The shop was small, perfect for a small village. The window we sat next to was large enough to consist of most of the wall so the people sitting in the cafe must have seen our carriage roll to the front. They knew we were of higher status but were not yet sure of what standing. Most likely they figured that by our age and modest clothing, we were probably entertainment from the nearest capital being sent home from a performance at a city town square. Obviously they didn't think we were of too high of importance when no waitress crossed to our booth immediately.

Then I noticed the moment that Jerran made eye contact with the waitress behind the counter and flashed one of his innocent smiles that tugged at any feminine heart. As soon as she saw his signature purple eyes and elongated canines paired with his tanned skin and brown hair, she faltered in pouring a beverage for a customer seated at the counter. She immediately picked up her writing pad and crossed around the counter to us.

"Welcome to our humble town. Are you prepared to order?" Her voice came out robotic as if she was reconnecting with words she used to recite on a daily basis. Her smile was a little too big to be considered natural. Her eyes were of a light brown paired with her light brown hair. She was simple but her features held a calm beauty with her slim lips and narrowed hips that were held tight by her apron.

"Yes." Jerran pulled our paired hands on top of the table. He held my left hand so the signature Chief proposal ring was on full display. While our faces were not known across the land, as we had matured since our last tour, the ring was something that was known throughout the land. If the waitress had any doubts that she miscalculated the distinct characteristics of Jerran, they dissolved as she beheld the simple wooden band. She even jumped slightly at the sight of the ancient band. "I would love a stack paired with a salad." He turned to me a moment before returning his gaze to the waitress. "And Alina would like a breaded bowl of soup." Then he nodded for Jenessa to pick up the remainder of the order.

Jenessa leaned into her elbows resting on the table. "And I would like to try what you have for sandwiches."

The waitress stopped her scrawling on the paper to look at my sister. "Will that be hot or cold?" "Hot." Completing her order, my sister leaned back in the cushion of her booth.

The waitress curtsied into a dip and turned to submit our order. Except she was quick to turn when Jerran called after her. "Excuse me but can we add another stack to that order?"

She dipped at her knees once again. "Of course." This time she quickly scurried into the kitchen. Behind the counter, it was easy to see her lean into the closest chef and whisper.

My sister raised her eyebrow in a quizzical stare at Jerran.

“What?” He asked. He drew our hands under the table once again. The small sign was not only to confirm that we were the Chief and Agede family but to also start the rumor of our marriage. Obviously our little plan was working; the waitress was already spreading the rumor as the chef was not as subtle as he glanced at our table. He was of older age with subtle grey facial hair, most likely the owner of the cafe. He quickly set aside the pot he was stirring, handing it off to another cook in the back of the kitchen.

Jenessa’s eyebrow still jutted up higher than usual. “Another stack?”

Jerran fell back into the cushion once he realized that my sister wasn’t truly excited. “Yes. We have to order for the stable boy also.”

“Mael.” I said his name as a reminder for myself that I had somehow forgotten to care for the man who was responsible for us being in this town. Without him, our traveling would definitely not go as smoothly. Somehow I kept forgetting about the boy.

As if on queue, the bell to the shop door rang and in came a young man fixed in light brown clothing. Mael stood average height, and his hair was of a brown light enough that it caught in the light of the restaurant. His eyes were cast low, watching his step. His steps were not heavy since his frame was wiry but the signs of taut muscles from a life of manual labor were visible on his exposed forearms.

Jerran raised his arm to signal Mael over. “Over here!”

Mael’s head dipped in acknowledgment, and he quickly crossed over to our table. Noting that Jerran and I were already seated in one booth, Mael opted to sit next to Jenessa and across from Jerran.

The waitress was close on Mael’s heels with a pitcher of water. There were citrus wedges floating at the top. Our pitcher seemed to be the only one with the yellow and orange wedges fighting for surface space with the ice. “Please enjoy while your food is being made fresh.” The waitress’s large smile once against pulled at the corners of her lips.

We murmured our thanks as we began to pour our glasses. With a smooth pivot, the waitress spun on her heels and disappeared behind the counter again, passing an older gentleman raising an empty mug at the bar. The man was ignored.

“Well I am hoping the horses treated you well then.” Jerran set his glass on the table after he took a few sips. There was already a vacant mark where his hand held the glass, dissolving the condensation.

Both of Mael’s hands clenched his cooled glass. “Yes, sir. They treat me well as they always do. Although they will not show their wear, they will most likely have to retire before nightfall.” Mael’s eyes did not look up from his glass. In fact, his eyes barely seemed to stray to make eye contact with anyone within the shop.

“I already was planning on that.” Jerran settled into his elbows on the table. “A few more miles from here and then we can stop in a small village for the night. Settle into a lodge for the night as the horses recover. Plus, one more stop will mean more word spreading and more excitement across the country.”

“You don’t have to worry about that, sir. I already heard a few women outside the cafe chatting about Miss Alina’s ring. Word will spread like fire in a forest with no rain.”

“Well I am glad to hear that. Thank you for the report, Mael. Seems like there is more than stable boy in you. I knew there was a reason my father had chosen you for the expedition.”

“Actually, Miss Julianna was the one who approached me, sir.” Still, Mael’s eyes were fixed on his glass despite him addressing Jerran in such a formal manner.

“Is that right? Well that means my mother has her own reasoning for you then, Mael. Catching the eye of more than one leader and then rooming with the next generation. If I didn’t know any better, I would say you’re pretty important.” A beat of silence. “But we already knew that one, didn’t we?”

Mael’s lips turned into an awkward smile as he lifted his glass to his lips.

My sister turned her attention from the stable boy to Jerran. “Where will we be stopping then?” She asked because she knew that although she was the one of political calculation, Jerran had the most knowledge of the geography of Neswia, which put him at an advantage on the topic.

“I was thinking about Asgell.” Asgell, a village on the border with Jutea. The town was close to the ocean but it was most known for the hot spring fusions that rested in the mountains. The hot springs span all the way to Canmoa but they were not as potent as the springs in Jutea.

“The town is about as far away as you can get from the top border.” Jerran continued. “If we start there, we can stay close to the border all the way up to the target village.”

Jenessa clinked her glass against the table. “It might be risky to leave the main town for our last stop. But if you two are playing your little charade,” she pointed between Jerran and I, “then I am sure word will spread fast, and we will have nothing to fret over.”

“And that is why a Chief must have his Agede.” Jerran nodded his head toward my sister in gratitude. As his head dipped, Jerran caught the drift of fresh cooked meat and his head swiveled directly to the waitress who was holding all our platters on two large trays.

As soon as the tray hit the table, we dug in. Jerran was the first to finish with my sister and I drawing a second, and Mael let Jerran have his stack as a second round.

For the first stop of our long journey, it went well.

### Chapter 30

Night set in as we pulled into the town of Asgell. It was definitely larger than the town we stopped for lunch, but it was slightly smaller than the town of Natrail. Except comparing the two towns would be unfair because unlike Natrail’s layered structure, thanks to the large trees that supported the town, the town of Asgell encompassed a large span of rolling hills.

As we pulled up to the town line, Mael halted the carriage to speak with Jerran. The conversation was kept light as Jerran drew back into the cabin mere seconds after. Supposedly, Jerran directed Mael to the main hotel in the town in those few seconds.

As we drew closer to the center of the town, I realized why it was so easy for Mael to understand which hotel we would be staying at. Sitting at the base of a hill, a large building, standing a few stories high, was glittering in the moonlight. The entire building was wrapped with small light bulbs that mingled with ivy leaves. The building was magnificent and was visible across the entire land.

But the foremost building was not the main attraction of the breath-taking view. Although it was obviously the main building, there were many others behind it, following the same exterior decor. There were larger complexes closer to the main building, but they grew smaller towards the top of the hill. Except at the top, there were two rooms parallel to each other that broke the cycle. The two buildings were obviously the master suites as they boasted the same radiant light that the main building had. The buildings in between the two were lit by the glow of the buildings on either end.

Not only were they obviously part of the same resort due to their similar design scheme, but they also were all connected by one track that spanned across the hillside. The track ran in a straight line from the main building to a split at the suites on the top of the hill.

Between Jerran's obvious features and my wedding band, I already knew that we would be spending the night on the top of the hill.

*Being narcissistic there, love.* I was no longer startled by Jordith's commentary. In fact, I was starting to grow fond of his ridiculous comments throughout my day. I mean, not everyone had the pleasure of a hundred year old tour guide. Besides his blunt honesty and constant nagging, they had their uses.

*I am just thinking about the facts.* From exercising my new ability throughout the day, I found it to be easy to talk with him. While I wasn't sure what exactly he heard, I was just glad that I was getting the point across.

*I don't think you meant to say that much, did you? Okay, maybe it was a work in progress. But if we were to hide Mr. Warrior over here in the carriage while we check in, then I am sure you wouldn't be treated to the finest accomidies this lovely hotel has to offer. It would be quite terrible for that to happen.*

*Thank you for the offer but I am sure I can deal with some more ass kissing instead of my sister having to deal with the front counter clerk. Plus, even though she might look like any other Neswian, I am sure that they will know who she is as soon as she commands them around.*

*Ah, you Neswians and your dear Agede.*

I shook my head slightly as the carriage slowed under the canopy outside the main building. *Not an Agede trait. Simply my sister.* I made to move toward the door as Mael propped it open. I bowed my head at the stable boy as I was first to exit. Jerran was quick on my heels as Jenessa followed, seeming to be more interested in continuing her staring-out-the-window session.

The smell was the first sense that hit me. The air was thick with the smell of freshly blooming flowers. It was both natural and sweet, and I found myself inhaling a long breath to get the most out of the air around me. Luckily, with the next inhale, I found even more of the sweet scent floating in the nighttime air.

Jerran started his way toward the hotel lobby. I was quick to catch up to him and enter only slightly behind him through the large french doors that were opened by two men in casual suits. As I glanced over my shoulder, I noticed Jenessa trailing slightly behind with Mael by her side. The carriage and the horses were already being led off by two other workers who wore the same suits as the men at the door.

As we walked in, the fragrance of flowers grew stronger. The smell encased me like a warm hug. The closeness of the scent was a distinct contrast to the openness of the lobby however. From standing outside, the building seemed to reach several stories high, but from the interior, there was only one floor that spanned stories high. About a story above us, there were thick logs that spanned across the entire lobby. The bark on the trucks was still intact, adding a detailed layer of the age of the log and showing the natural corruptions from weather and animals.

All the logs were embedded with the small lightbulbs that were seen on the exterior walls of the main building. The depths of the logs bark glowed from the inside, allowing a touch of low lighting to heat the lobby.

There were several groupings of chairs on either side of the immediate doors and standing in front of us was the check-in desk. There was a tall column behind the service desk that spanned large enough to count as a wall if it weren't for the absence on both sides that seemed to lead into a corridor.

"Welcome to Asgell Heaven, the largest hot spring resort of Neswia." The voice of the female desk clerk was pleasant enough to sell an interested client. Her loose yellow shirt tied into a bow below her neck and was cut at the shoulders to meet at her elbow once again. Her tanned skin was a beautiful contrast with her muted yellow shirt. Along with her tanned skin, there were her eyes and hair that were carved from the same light brown. While it seemed natural for her hair, the tone was shocking in its own way as it encased her pupils.

As we stepped closer, I detected her eyes narrow slightly as she spotted the wedding band on both of my hands. Most likely she was already thinking of what lover suites were open for such a young couple. Then she saw the contrast between Jenessa and Mael behind us. Mael still had a heavy layer of dust covering him from the trip. I made a mental note to have him change his clothing to match us more on our next stop.

"Thank you." Jerran's voice came out calming. Despite his strong demeanor, Jerran always seemed to talk as if you were supposed to listen to each word he uttered.

"Will it be two rooms for you tonight?"

Jerran started responding with a, "Umm, no," the same time Jenessa said, "Yes." All it took was a glare from Jenessa for Jerran to give into her answer. I felt bad for Mael who would have to share a room with Jenessa.

Then I saw the clerk's eyes widen in realization. She already had us pegged as the family of the Chief and Agede. Whether it was the contrasting characteristics of Jerran, the wedding band she saw in detail as we walked closer, or my sister's unique glare that was known throughout the land, there was no mistaking her realization. She even seemed to stand a little straighter as Jerran crossed his arms over the counter.

"Lucky for you, we just finished a remodeling on the master suites on the top level." The clerk dipped below the counter for a second to emerge with two keys. She placed them on the counter with a soft clink that echoed across the empty room.

*Knew it*, I thought to myself.

Jerran waved his hand slightly in the air, as if he was disturbing the air current of a nearby insect. "We mustn't. I am sure you already have another guest who is occupying the rooms."

The clerk spoke through a smile that didn't fade. "I am glad to say that there is no one tonight or even the following night. Plus, the room upgrade will be courtesy of us."

"Why thank you." Jerran grabbed the two keys, handing one to me and the other to Jenessa. At least they would be sharing a suite so Mael could sleep in a different room than my sister.

Jerran turned back toward the clerk. "We will only need the one night though."

The clerk gave a quick nod and tallied, "That will be 2 gold for the night." I was fairly certain that they charge even more for a one person in the lower rooms, but Jerran seemed satisfied enough in the pricing that he slid two gold coins over the counter. "And would you like fresh water for the tub in both the night and in the morning?"

Jerran turned toward me to answer.

“Yes.” My voice was much weaker compared to Jerran’s, but the clerk nodded. I was fine with her inferring the need for a water change so close together. Between Jerran’s Canmoan heritage and the signs of us being newly wedded, I was sure of her assumptions.

I guess my sister had the same thought as she replied, “For us, too.” The clerk nodded once again and scribbled on her notebook.

As she looked up from her book, her right arm extended and pointed to the corridor to the left of us. “Breakfast will be down this hall in the morning and will stay until high noon. There is always a wide selection to satisfy any hunger. As for your rooms,” her right arm fell to her side once again to raise her left towards the other hallway, “they will be down this hallway. Simply tell the elevator man your level, and he will drop you off at your rooms. There are enough supplies in your rooms for personal needs, and the staff has already dropped your luggage off in the rooms. Please enjoy your stay.” She concluded with a joyous smile despite the time of night.

Jerran returned the smile with his own infectious one. “Thank you.” His hand interlocked with mine, which led the clerk to once again see the Chief wedding band fitted on my middle finger. No doubt she would be spreading word through the lobby tonight. By morning, the entire staff would be circulating the word.

With that, we started down the hallway toward the elevator. The hallway stretched far, with doors that would be open as a market in the morning. The walls were crafted with grey bricks that were brightened by the yellow planks of wood that constructed the ceiling. Instead of the small bulbs, the hallway was brightened by large bulbs that hung from the ceiling.

We reached the end of the long hallway to find a clear door that showed a man patiently waiting behind in a booth large enough to fit about fifteen people. The first door opened, followed quickly by the second.

As soon as Mael crossed the doorframe, the elevator man asked, “What level?”

Jerra’s strong voice answered, “The top level.”

With that, the elevator man simply moved a level placed in front of him, and the booth started to move up the hill. The elevator jerked only slightly.

The hotel building slowly passed by as we climbed the hill. In the night sky, there seemed to be a fine mist over each building. Judging by the location of the resort, the resort likely rested on a significant hot bed spring.

“The lower hotels have one major hot spring that rests as a communal area while the ones further up the hill are more intimate.” I noticed the golden eyes of the man as he glanced toward us in small talk. Below his matching cap that rested on the top of his head, there was brown hair. His features spoke of late twenties, but it was hard to tell if his looks were influenced by the slow aging gene of Jutean blood. “The four buildings on the top are the only one bedrooms to each have a private hot spring. The two on the top, the two you will be staying in, are even more unique for their spacious design. Truly the best Asgell Heaven has to offer.”

“We are looking forward to the experience.” Jerran returned.

It only took several minutes for us to slow our pace as we neared the end of the track. The elevator man eased the lever back into place as the sheer size of our resort lurked over the booth.

The tower stood two stories high, but judging from the placement of the windows, it was only one story on the interior. The outside of the building shone with the same ivy and lightbulb setting as



the main building, but instead of creating an intimidating, beautiful exterior like the main building, it presented itself in a more homely vibe.

As the elevator booth halted by the main porch, Jenessa stepped forth, claiming this stop as her own. Sure enough, glancing at the key in my own hand, it was not stamped with the same number that was decorated on the outside of the door.

The door opened, and there was once again the distinct smell of sweet flowers. Except this time, there seemed to be a salty smell interlaced with the scent of flowers.

Jenessa made a quick exit, only turning over her shoulder to say, "Meet you in the breakfast lobby at daybreak." She waited a beat longer as Mael exited the cab, whispering his sorry as he passed us.

"Goodnight, Jenessa." Jerran replied, raising his hand to wave. My sister simply nodded and turned to the door of her hotel.

*Poor boy*, Jordith commented as he saw Mael trailing after my sister with his head dipped low. Even though Jordith had barely any opinion on my sister, he knew that Mael was doomed when it came to sharing with Jenessa.

The doors simply closed once again, and I sent up my own prayer for the young man.

The booth slid backwards on the track. The booth didn't even have enough time to pick up speed before the door on the opposite side slid open, allowing Jerran and I to step onto our porch.

Like the porch of my sister's room, our porch was big enough to comfortably host a small group. On the opposite side of the porch, there were two lounging couches that looked down the hill. Over the couches sprung a canopy of the same ivy that encased the house.

"Thank you." Jerran waved toward the elevator man who returned an almost mechanical wave. I wondered if you work with machines enough, you became one, too. The few Ritzvians I had met seemed to mimic the same characteristics as their creations, so there was reason to believe so.

I was still facing the elevator as it descended when I heard the click of the front door. I turned to see Jerran patiently waiting in the doorway for me. As I took my first step toward him, his hand distinctly rose up to meet mine. I reached back toward him to answer his silent call.

As I curled into him to fit through the door, Jerran gently whispered in my ear. "Ready for the first night of our honeymoon?"

A blush flushed my face as Jerran locked the door behind us and pulled me in tight to his chest. "You play the illusion so well that you are falling for it yourself."

He nuzzled his face into the crook of my neck, breath warm against my skin. "Well, not everyone gets the pleasure of two honeymoons, so I think we better make the best of it."

This time, I felt my face flush, and I was glad that Jerran was standing behind me so he couldn't see it.

He sighed heavily against my neck and stood up, my head now resting against his chest. "Sadly though, I am exhausted from our trip today, so I am going to bed early." Jerran started walking toward the back of the vast living room, where the door to the bedroom was most likely located. He only took a few steps in front of me before he turned back around to face me. Luckily, I felt my blush already fading, but his next question almost made it return just as hard. "Will you be joining me soon?" It was a question that we often asked, but it felt different following his previous statement.

I tilted my head down in a nod, hopefully distracting him from my reddening cheeks. "Yes. I just have to bathe first."

"Don't be too long. We have to rise early for breakfast. We are already missing out on our time right now." To accent his point, he stretched his arms over his head, raising his shirt ever so slightly to expose the muscle underneath that pointed downward. "Well that is my nighttime calling. Goodnight, Lina."

"Goodnight, Jerran."

With that, he turned toward the far wall. I watched him cross the humongous living room that consisted of a circle of lounge chairs on one half and some indoor activities on the other. A table crafted for several different games was the main attraction for the second half of the room.

Jerran turned toward the right wall where a door almost blending seamlessly in with the wall. With a pull on the indentation of the handle, the door slid sideways, and Jerran walked into our room.

I plucked a towel from the cart by the front door and headed toward another door that blended into the wall. Behind it stood a large glass mirror paired with two sinks. There was also a toilet and a double shower in the corner. The room was crafted by thin rock formations, vastly different from the variety of woods that crafted the living room. While a shower was nice, there was no sign of the hot spring.

I backed out of the room and crossed to the other side of the entrance hallway. Behind it stood a changing room with a clear glass door to the hot spring. The glass door was fogged by the heat of the spring.

I shedd my clothes, eager to feel the renowned waters of the spring.

### Chapter 31

I entered the bathroom. The room was barren, save for the wooden bench built into the wall on one side, the coal burner that was placed at one end of the bench, and the pool placed directly in the middle of the room. The pool was about two meters in diameter and was about a meter deep. On the inside of the pool, there was a bench that dipped in a few spots, but lined the circle completely.

The obvious difference between this pool and another was the material it was crafted of and the layer of mist that hovered over the surface. This was the personal hot spring of the resort room, crafted straight from the ground.

I stepped into the room, making sure to cinche the towel tight to my skin. With how present Jordith has been in my daily life of late, there was no way I was allowing him to pop into see my exposed body.

Jordith's laugh echoed in my ear.

"What?" Despite my whispering, there was no denying the bark in my voice.

*I just find it ironic, that's all.* His chuckled resumed, this time more of a breath.

I scanned the room, checking for any queue if Jerran was able to hear me. I opted for the mindspeech, just in case my voice echoed in this obscenely large suite. *Care to elaborate?*

*It's just,* he released another low chuckle that now seemed to come from an invisible form located a few feet in front of me, *you are willing to show me all your intimate times with Mr. Warrior, but as soon as you are left alone with me, you grow tense. It's as if you are mortified by the idea of me catching sight of anything.*

I glared down at my towel, against my better judgement. *Well he is my fiance, while you are still, but a stranger.*

He raised his eyebrow at that declaration. Even though he didn't manifest a form in the bathroom, I could sense the movement through the silence.

*And, plus...*

*Plus?*

*Plus, you are an Ancient.*

*Are you afraid that you would taint your mortal soul in the eyes of an Ancient? A heartbeat of silence. Well, no need to worry about that, love. No one will worry about the opinion of the lowly Ancient of the darkness. I am sure there are textbooks full of stuff I supposedly have tainted. Plus,* he grinned with the word, *there can't possibly be anything I have not seen before.*

I cringed slightly at the thought of all the women Jordith had probably shared his room with over the centuries he waged war as an Ancient.

*Not,* his voice was strained, as if he wished to take back the words as the first was uttered, *not like that.*

Now it was my turn to raise a questioning eyebrow.

*In that sense, there was only one. Even then it was just a teenage ruse that cost us more than it was worth.*

I hitched my eyebrow up further.

Jordith released another soft chuckle, but this one was not filled with as much ease as his usual. In fact, I was starting to question what I considered to be his usual. *That would be a story for another time, love.*

With that, I felt Jordith retract, leaving me with the mist of the hot spring clinging to the wooden planks of the wall and the question of who could be the one person who would be able to attract the eye of an immortal crafted from the darkness.

I unclenched my hands from my chest. The towel fell to my feet, crafting a layer of cloth by my feet. Then, I slid into the bath. The warmth hugged me tight. I let it consume me. Every inch laid bare.

I slid the bedroom door into place behind me, trying not to make a sound. The room was smaller than I had imagined. Judging from the measurements compared to the wall of the living room, the closet must be considerably huge.

Jerran was already heavily sleeping, snoring slightly. He seemed so vulnerable sleeping. One leg was outside the blanket, while the other was caught in the dense fabric. His top half was twisted the opposite way of his lower half, one arm reaching over the area where I was to lay.

I crossed to the closet door connected to the bedroom. It was the closet so both Jerran's clothing and my own already hung in it. That was when I spotted the night clothing that Julianna said she packed. There was a light, pale blue lace leotard that only actually covered as much as a skinny swimsuit. All that was between were strips of lace. I blushed hard once again at the fact that both the employees who unpacked the bag saw it, and Jerran must have when he went to change for bed.

I looked over at the other frame of a sliding door on the wall to my left. There was definitely another door, so I was wondering why they didn't put Jerran's clothing in that one because it most likely was a closet.

A yawn escaped my mouth as exhaustion settled in. I grabbed a large tshirt and a pair of underwear, no longer concerned about who had previously spotted the laced lingerie that was in my possession.

I tugged on the comfortable clothing and slid into the sheets. As soon as I wiggled under the heavy comforter, Jerran's arm pulled me closer. His chiseled body braced against my back.

I closed my eyes as his warmth heated my body. The darkness of sleep was quick to consume my thoughts.

I woke when the Sun started to show through the window. My eyes fluttered open. I was facing the side of the room that led to a decent sized porch that overlooked the town of Asgell.

I drew from my bed, thankful that I had chosen the underwear that covered past my bottom. I checked my legs for signs of the black swirls, but they were hidden beneath the slim amount of clothing I wore. The darkness beneath my skin was starting to follow my commands without thinking.

Jerran was already waiting on the porch, drinking a warm drink that smoked in the chilled air. I crossed to stand beside him, wrapping my arms around his bare abdomen. I couldn't tell if his sharp inhale was from the contrast of my cold skin or from the intimate notion the movement held. I guessed the loving mindset of this place was already having its effects on me.

"Well, good morning to you, too." His voice was already awake with the day. Jerran's hair was still damp from his bath. It was already tied back in a wet bun.

I looked out over the porch side, where Jerran's eyes were already directed. Despite the early hour, the town was already buzzing with people. It was difficult to make out much from our distance, but there was no denying that the streets were already being colored with the movements of people walking towards their destinations.

"Good morning." My voice was still raspy with sleep. A yawn scrunched up my face, and I leaned into Jerran more. He now smelt of the flowers of the resort mixed with his usual smell of pine.

"Are you ready to go to breakfast?" He shifted his drink into the opposite hand and strung his arm over my back.

"In this clothing?" I looked up as his eyes grazed over my exposed legs. Usually his assessment of my body was purely for medical needs, but this time I could see a hint of something more. His eyes sparkled with a desire. A desire that I was unwilling to talk about at the moment. "Plus," a smile quirked up the corners of my mouth with that simple word, "I think it is too early to deal with my sister quite yet."

Jerran turned back to the town below us, taking a sip from the steaming mug. "I could see your reasoning there. However, she is your sister and not everyone can be a morning person."

"Or simply a nice person." I grumbled those words under my breath, but Jerran's soft chuckle let me know that he still understood. "Either way, I am going to take my sweet time dressing."

"Can I join you?" My head snapped up to Jerran's face, trying to read the emotion there. I was expecting humor or maybe even a suggestive glance. I should have known that being engaged to a Canmonian would only last so long before he asked for more. Instead, his face was of all seriousness. He didn't look down at me, kept staring at the people starting their day below. He was trying to test the water of our first day here. Jerran wanted to establish his boundaries before this trip progressed any further so he would know if my opinion had changed at all.

I, too, stared out at the ant-sized people below. Maybe they were already aware of our presence and stopped to look at our resort at the top of the hill. "I think the bathroom has enough room." I let go of Jerran's torso and crossed back into the bedroom. Just as I caught sight of the closet frame, I turned back to Jerran. "Jerran?"

His bronzed back shone in the morning light. "Yes?" I couldn't place what emotion was in that simple word.

"Do you know why they didn't separate our clothes into the second closet?"

Now, Jerran turned toward me, his features contorted into a question. "Second closet?"

I pointed toward the other sliding door of our bedroom.

"Oh." Jerran's hand cupped the back of his neck, a nervous habit. "Umm, that isn't a closet."

I turned to the door again. It was the mirror image of the closet door that I got my clothes from last night. "How is it not a closet?"

"Did you open it?"

"No." I let my answer drag out as I stepped toward the mysterious door.

"Lina." Jerran called my name, and I halted. "You probably shouldn't."

My head tilted sideways. "Why not? What is it then?"

A heartbeat. "Lina, it is a love suite afterall."

I was just about to ask how that would have anything to do with the second door when Jordith saved me from my humiliation. *It's a sex lounge, love. Mr. Warrior doesn't want you getting the wrong idea of what he wants for his first time with the toys in there.*

A blush ran over my face as Jerran's hand fell from his neck. Although his blush was not as dark as my own, it was definitely coloring his cheeks.

"Well, I am just going to grab my clothes and get changed." I slid open the closet and ran to the bathroom before my blush deepened even more as I thought about everything that had already happened this morning.

Luckily, I felt more at home as soon as I fitted into my tanned shirt and dark leggings. I was already sacrificing enough for this trip, I was allowed to wear clothes of comfort at least.

The main building seemed like a different world from the one we checked into last night. The doors of the hallway were opened, revealing tourist sales that ranged from scenery paintings to local stone jewelry. Uninterested in small trinkets that would simply pile up during our tour, Jerran and I were quick to make our way through the hallway, but he did make sure to hold my hand down the entirety of the corridor. I did notice, however, that his grasp was much softer than it usually was. The question he tried asking this morning was still weighing on him. I made a mental note to try to distract him from the thought, so we could return to normalcy.

Like the hallway, the lobby varied from the one from what we had seen the previous night. The small light bulbs that had lit the lobby at night were dulled. Instead, the morning sunlight burst through the open windows of the building, casting vast amounts of light throughout the open floor plan. Even the desk clerk was now a middle-aged man with brown hair so dark it was almost black.

Jerran was quick to turn the corner, taking the quickest route around the groupings of people so we could make our way to breakfast. The second hallway was much shorter. Instead of brick walls, it

was made of wooden planks that ran horizontal. The morning light mixed nicely with the light color of the planks.

Then we crossed into the breakfast room. Like the lobby, the room was constructed of light paint and wood that mingled with the natural lighting. There were several chandeliers that hung over the lobby, most likely used to mimic the sense of stars over the guests that dined here at night.

Jerran crossed directly to the breakfast buffet table without a second thought. He didn't even stop to glance at the tables around us. I guessed that was what happened when you let a man obsessed with fitness go without a single meal.

As we neared the breakfast table, I noticed the shift of gazes. Despite the room's opulence and the other groupings of people in the room, the majority of people seemed to be focused on us. If the population of the residents of this resort already were made aware of our presence, then that meant that the town of Asgell was likewise aware.

"Lina, look! They have those morning rolls that you love so much!" As Jerran called across the table, heads seemed to turn once again, followed by an audible wave of whispers. The section of the table where he stood was lined with rolls of pastry.

I crossed over to the pastries, snatching a plate from the end of the table on my way. Jerran was already standing with the plumpest sticky bun between a set of tongs, which he set on my plate. The bun alone covered about three-quarters of the plate, so I only added a few fresh fruits from the furthest end of the table.

As we turned around to find my sister, it was immediately obvious where she was seated. There was one table, closest to the window, that was not surrounded by other occupants. I guessed Jenessa's aura was obvious to even the general public, because no one dared sit next to the person whose glare cut like a knife.

Yet as Jerran and I grew closer to the table, I noticed that her cutting glare did not have as much sting as it usually held. I glanced over at Jerran in concern, and he returned my glance, noting the same difference in my sister.

Sitting opposite from Jenessa and Mael, Jerran pulled out a chair for me to sit in before joining me on the right. Without a second thought, Jerran began eating his breakfast, eager to eat every morsel. It wouldn't be long before he would be up for seconds.

Jenessa was done eating already, staring out the ceiling-high window instead. She must have arrived early, probably even bothering the staff to open even earlier than usual. Although she was leaning toward the window, she was sitting close to Mael, almost leaning back slightly to reassure herself of his presence. Then I realized that this observation was not my own, but rather Jordith's. Without his comment, I don't think I would have been able to see the subtle way her body seemed to draw toward Mael, but it was obvious when looking for them. Her eyes even stopped at some point but not to focus on the scenery; it was as if they were glazed over in memory.

*The romantic setting of this resort seems to be taking its toll on many parties this morning,* Jordith's voice was a sweet hum that showed his mocking tone.

I tilted my head ever so slightly so my sister wouldn't see. I was genuinely interested in the dulled edge of my sister this morning. *I do not think I have ever seen her this way. Even as a child she was willing to tear someone apart for a hair standing stray.* Yet here I was with my casual attire as she

was dressed in her influential wear that emitted power. She still had yet to even look at my tight-fitted shirt.

*Didn't your sister also order a change of bath water this morning? I am sure she would be the type to draw a little blood from a lover.*

My head immediately snapped away from my sister, instead turning to the other guests gathered in the dining hall. Whatever happened behind closed doors with my sister was not my concern, even if it were the first time that such words were even uttered.

There was rarely talk of potential suitors for myself or my sister. I was destined to be with Jerran from the day I was born so there was never talk of another. Jerran and I showed friendship from a young age, which blossomed into a fine relationship of engagement. The only whispers surrounding my love life were those who dared to whisper what a man of both Neswian and Canmoan blood could share in the bed.

But there was also little gossip of my sister's love life since she never showed interest. No man ever dared to wink at my sister because their odds of losing that very eye were much higher than actually receiving any acknowledgement from her. Jenessa was never one to share in sisterly gossip about the handsome warriors who trained beneath the waterfall, even though they have been proven to be fair suitors for the Chief and Agedede families in the past. And I had never once heard gossip of my sister sharing her bed because the only times she strayed from the public eye, she was spending her time alone.

Until now.

Luckily, most of the room was so infatuated with their own partners that they paid us little attention. Everyone who was in this resort was obviously of high status so my father and the Chief probably already had personal ties to these guests.

But for the few eyes that lingered on our window side table, they caught on my wooden ring or the curved back of my sister facing the stable boy. But judging by his attire, Jenessa already planned for their gazes. His attire was not that of dusty stable boy attire, but rather the pressed, buttoned shirt of a lord.

Jerran was the one to break the bout of silence, the only hint of his notice of the tension between Jenessa and Mael was heard in the hitch of his voice as his sentence started. "Were you able to find some food?"

Sure enough, both Jenessa and Mael's plates were wiped clean.

"We finished before you arrived. I said to be down by daybreak but I should have known that you two would have spent the first night of this travel sleeping in." Her voice rose, carrying far enough for other guests to clearly hear our conversation. I fought the reddening of my cheeks as the people comprehended the meaning of those words. If I were going to survive this trip, I had to become immune to the assumptions about Jerran and my actions behind closed doors. After all, we were rumored to officially be married.

Jerran showed no sign of uneasiness about the topic despite the question that he raised this morning. His exposed skin still was etched in my mind, now with a new meaning due to the mention of the possibilities. "Sunrise is sunrise. The sun has still barely turned over the hill, yet you are going to lecture us for being late?"

Jenessa glanced over her shoulder at Jerran; this time the bite of her stare seemed to be back to full force, but now filled with a fire that I had not seen before. "And would you be late for training?" At Jerran's silence, she snapped her eyes back to the smooth glass. "I thought so."

Jerran took another bite of his breakfast, swallowing fast. There seemed to be a hint of a smile playing on his lips. "And what will the plans be today, my Agede?"

Jenessa's back straightened with that simple address. Although she did not turn around to finally face us, it was easy to tell that her attention was finally ours. "We are going to give our first address?"

I slightly choked on my drink. "First address? I thought we were going to reach another town before we gave our first speech."

Jenessa gave a slight shrug. "Why should we? This town is large and positioned on the border. Plus, rumors are already circulating thanks to their Canmoan influenced tendency to gossip." I wasn't going to correct her about all the people at home that are quick to spread their own rumors. "Not to mention that I already reserved our rooms for a second night."

Jerran didn't even show his shock. He always seemed to anticipate the moves of my sister. Despite her fiery dynamic, she was a good Agede for him. "And did you take care of the reservation this morning?"

"Yes. Mael and I stopped by the desk on the way here. They were generous enough to offer another night of no charge." I knew enough to know that she did not believe that. They probably would receive a lot more business tonight with advertising that the future Agede and Chief were staying in their resort.

"And I am assuming that you already have a speech prepared for today?" Jerran was still eating his breakfast as if my sister were merely talking about the weather.

"Of course I do. I wrote out our scripts on the ride over."

"Will we be able to read them beforehand?" I was slightly relieved that there would be a script to go off of so I wouldn't have to think about my speech in the moment.

"Yes. I will hand them back to you on the elevator. Mael already received his last night, so you will have to rehearse as you are in your room." Jenessa's gaze was meandering around the landscape outside the large window, gliding her eyes from one side to the other. "It is a broad speech that has spaces to fill in with information that pertains to each town, but the idea is still the same." She flipped her head around momentarily to glare at me for her final line. "Try to not mess that up, Alina."

Mess it up? I wondered why she was so concerned with me when she was asking Mael to present in front of everyone for his first time.

*Poor kid was probably kept up late by her.* From Jordith's tone, I pictured him lazily leaning against the table, a hand tucked under his chin.

I sighed both at my sister and at Jordith's commentary. *I do not need you making remarks like that. If we are going to be on this trip, I do not need to bother myself with my sister's relationships.*

Jordith chuckled. *I wasn't talking about them staying awake for that, Love. Although I am pleasantly surprised that you consider going all night.* He left a moment of silence for a reaction that I was not going to give him. *But I was talking about the script. Your sister probably made the boy recite it over and over again until his throat was raw. You didn't notice the soothing herb in his drink? I am sure your sister can be brutal when training someone for a debut speech with no prior experience.*



My eyes wandered to Mael, noting the tint of the water resting in his mug by his plate. Sure enough, there was a yellowish hue to the liquid.

*Hopefully he will be fine by the time we are on stage then.* I noted how easily Mael was able to fit into the higher-class clothing he donned. He might be new to this field, but there was no mistaking how easily he was able to slide into a demeanor of ease. Without looking at him in the former image I once viewed him in, he truly looked as if he were part of our family at the table.

Then in that moment, either Jordith or I recalled the note that Julianna was the one who specifically chose Mael for our mission. A trip that spent its first night at a romantic styled hotel due to the marriage Jerran and I. A tour that was oriented around the future Chief marrying.

So not only was Mael chosen for his distinct characteristics that seemed to be a combination of every explored country of Rylina-

*He is also meant to be Jenessa's future spouse.* Jordith finished for me.

I almost scoffed at Julianna's assumption of the two. My sister would never fall for such a childish pairing. But then again, Julianna's connection to Nidean allowed her to feel people's true emotions so maybe she was able to see something invisible to the rest of us.

And judging by the dulled edges of my sister this morning, I thought about just how Julianna's simple talent truly was.

## Chapter 32

Like the previous night, Jenessa was quiet for the elevator ride. The only difference this time was when she handed both Jerran and me a copy of what was, I assumed, the script. Jerran tucked the script to his side, and I did the same.

If the elevator boy was aware of us exchanging such valuable papers, he did not show it.

The elevator ride went by much quicker this time around, but there was a change of scenery. Instead of the darkened path lit by rows of small lights, the late morning Sun was showing on all the people outside their buildings, waiting for the elevator to carry them back to the main floor.

Even though there was plenty of room in the moving room, we passed by all of the crowds of people to our buildings at the top of the mountain. Whether it was a pre-established rule that the elevator boy was told or the glares passed by my sister, I had no idea what the true motive was for passing the crowds of people eager for the elevator to whisk them away to the beginning of their eventful day.

Our elevator drew to a halt at our resort. The doors were quick to open and Jerran was the first to exit, with me on his heels. We didn't even turn to wave away Mael and Jenessa. The only tell of the elevator returning them to their hotel was the sounds of air being released as the wheels moved across the track.

Jerran didn't speak until the front door of the resort was closed behind us. "Let's start then." His voice was firm and determined. The fact that he had little time to prepare for his speech most likely set him on edge.

He drew the paper in front of him. That was when I saw the signature watermark at the bottom of the very resort that we were in. Jenessa had written these in the night. Even she was unprepared to start these speeches until last night.

I mirrored Jerran's actions and held the paper in front of me. If anyone else were to write a motivational speech that had the potential to sway an entire country, I would not trust their talent. But not my sister. If there was anything I learned through the years of silently standing by as she sweet talked the people around her to see her as her own gift of Dalliea even though I was bearer of that title, it was that my sister was as good of a manipulator as most Canmoans. Her words mixed with the natural charm of a charm speaking Canmoan would instantly restart the wars that the Ancients fought all those years ago.

*That is a fair assumption, love. Jordith's light breath tickled my spine. Nadean and your sister would have made fine friends were it not for the conflict of their overpowering personalities. In fact, I have the sense that your sister would fare well with most of us.*

I raised an eyebrow. Luckily Jerran was so involved with his paper that he didn't see my act that would be translated into me questioning my sister's probably flawless writing. *You met them?*

*Of course I met all of them, love. We were siblings of sorts, at the beginning. That was until our differences drove us to find our own corners of this world to make our own.* He sighed deeply, yet the elegance of the act was still present. *But I am afraid that you have current matters to deal with and that is a story for another time.*

My eyebrows fell back to their natural placement, but interest still conveyed through my voice. *Well I have to hear more of this story sometime. In fact, I think there are many "stories for another time".*

*As I am sure you will ask again. Maybe if fate allows, I will share them all someday. This makes yet another thing about me that you demand to know more of.* I sensed him placing an elbow on his crossed leg so he could support his chin. *I really think you need to make me dinner first.*

I rolled my eyes at the notion. *I think being a vessel for the undead draws me as fit to know more about the soul I am hosting.*

*Undead? With a word like that, you would think that I am not a deity form still ruling over an entire country centuries after I had parted it. Foolish choice of words. Almost as bad as what your people call the act of our disappearance.*

*Hibernating?*

*Yes, that. Makes me feel as if we have a choice as to when we can awaken again.*

*And you don't?*

*If I did have a choice between having my life tied to a formless soul or a solid body as fine as my own, do you really think I would still be tied to a tree, love?*

*But-*

"I think I have it." Jerran turned to face me once again but not turning his gaze from the paper he gripped. "Do you want to run through our lines and skip Jenessa's?"

I turned back around to Jerran; his face was set in a determined state. His eyebrows knitted slightly together, and his long hair was now tied back into a tight bun. My eyes dropped to the paper in my hand that I had yet to read. "Yes. I am ready, too." I held up the paper to about eye level to prove my readiness for the first line. "Let's start."

Jerran gave a tense nod and lowered his paper, always insistent to get it right on the first try. "I will start." His shoulders raised and clicked backward, as if they found the perfect notch that was knocked in his bones for such occasions. I suppose that with all the training that Jenessa and I had to

endure as the Agede daughters, it was only proper for Jerran to learn this trick as the Chief's son. There was no pause between that almost audible click and the first line. "People of Neswia. Children of Dalliea. Brothers and sisters of the Chief and Agede. I have traveled from the capital of Neswia to inform you all of the change that has swept through not only our land, but the entire land of Rylina." Jerran's voice came to a sudden pause, looking toward his right. Confused by his sudden pause, I had to glance at the paper in my hand to know that that was a cue that my sister would be responsible for the next line. I was surprised by the fact that Jerran was looking directly at his side, rather than looking behind him and down the stage. From witnessing speeches from my father and Heliad in the past, the Chief was to always take center forward stage while the Agede was to take a portion of the stage further back. Having Jerran glance directly to his side for his Agede was rather unusual.

The momentary pause for my sister's silent words passed, and Jerran continued his lines. "As you may have already guessed, this is the work of the Ancients. They are stirring beneath our very feet. Our own Dalliea is present with us right now."

A momentary pause.

"But disaster has struck on our borders. We have witnesses of a killing of our own blood on our own land. That is why we have traveled here today, to bring you news of the family that we have lost out of fear of our newly awakened powers. Please allow us all to learn from the loss of our loved ones. Let us take a moment of silence for the family that had to die for our own awakening. Nod-" Jerran cut off the next sentence and bowed his head slightly as if it were a cue of remembrance. I glanced down at my paper to see why Jerran had stopped mid-sentence. Sitting at the end of Jerran's lines were slash marks around the words at the end of Jerran's lines. "/nod head slowly/". Knowing my sister's speech formations from previous trials of Agede and Chief training, Jerran realized he was reading a stage action that my sister included and carried out the intended action. Even though my sister only had one night to complete this script after deciding that this would be our first speech, she was thorough enough to include a few additional stage directions.

After a few heartbeats, Jerran's head lifted and peered back at the place where my sister was to stand. As he allowed for a moment to pass, his face was stern, staring off to the ghost of my sister. Even though this was all a performance, his face relayed that he was truly affected by the events taking place. In fact, Jerran and Jenessa seemed to be taking this event more seriously than the rest of us. The proof was in my sister's jotted notes on the napkins we held. Jerran's proof was displayed in his constant search through books. Even though he usually spent a great deal of his time with a nose in a book, it had been even more of late.

Jerran then turned back toward the imaginary crowd. "The training will begin in three days time. We will enforce procedures for all residents of Neswia. These trainings will be mandatory, but will be tailored accordingly to each individual.

"Evaluation will begin tomorrow at your training. There you will be sorted into your respected groups and will receive information as to when you will be meeting. Advisors will be selected by myself, the upcoming Chief, and Jenessa, the upcoming Agede. You will find them fit to each division and your respective abilities."

Another supple turn towards the phantom of my sister. "Thank you." He followed his exiting sentence with a final bow.

“So what do you think?” Jerran’s face lit up with a little more of his usual positivity but there was an undertone of the concealed dread still.

I stood from my seat, drawing towards Jerran. “I think my sister showed her remarkable skills as an Agede,” I wrapped my arms around Jerran’s large torso, my head laying against his chest, “and I think you will do a wonderful job performing tomorrow.”

“I wouldn’t think performing is the right word,” His chin nestled into my hair, “but I am glad you think so.”

Sleep was already setting in enough that I didn’t have the energy to read into his words too much. Instead, I breathed in his scent of rain-touched grass and listened to his heartbeat slowly.

His hand brushed my hair that was falling at my shoulders. “We should get some rest.”

I mumbled a reply in favor, realizing that sleep was now overcoming me quickly since I invited it in.

As I laid in bed to sleep that night, I heard Jerran mumble one final thing as the sheets shifted around me, allowing him to enter their warmth.

“I hope it works, Lina.” He rolled over to his side, his next reply even more quiet than the last. “I just want everyone to be okay.”

### Chapter 33

The next morning was like any other in Neswia. The light shone bright through the windows. Paired with the morning calls of the birds, it was a beautiful morning to wake to. Jerran was still not yet awake, still facing away(?) from me with his head leaning heavily on the pillow he cradled. I chose to crawl out of bed and make use, yet again, of the spectacular patio our resort had to offer.

The world was in bliss. The birds were chirping a happy tune, and small creatures were rustling nearby bushes. The people below seemed to be experiencing the same bliss the animals felt, for they were rustling about the city already. Although I could not see their faces, which were surely spread with signs of pleasure, the atmosphere of the bustle was enough to relay the feelings.

The one thing I could see from afar, however, were the horns standing out in the crowd. With a little more focus, I realized that it was a stag. A white stag was wandering down the streets with the people.

The more I paid attention, the more I realized that there were several animals amongst the crowd. From smaller animals jumping around at the people’s feet to larger animals that I could identify from this distance, it was difficult to not notice them.

Both people and animals living in harmony, the way Dalleia would have intended it to be.

The door creaked ever so slightly as Jerran strode to the railing of the porch. A single gaze upon the town and I knew he was observing the same features I was. “You know some would call that a good omen.”

“A good omen for what?” I turned my face toward the Sun, letting the rays warm my face.

“I am not too sure.” His arms tucked into each other as he rested against the railing. His hair rustled slightly in the breeze. Jerran was only in his briefs, but the warm air allowed for such minimal clothing, even in the crisp morning. “But whatever it may signal, it means that good is to come forth

soon. I do not think there is room to question when or how, only to know that they are to eventually come.”

At his words, I looked upon the future Chief. His back was textured with deep muscle definition, but one would be a fool to think that the strength stopped there. Despite the physical strength of Jerran, it was nothing in comparison to this mental strength. Neswia was to rest on that very back, and Jerran would bow little at the weight of that.

We readied for the day quickly. There was no need to pick out clothes for Jenessa already left a package at our front step of the clothes we were to wear. Jerran and I took our respective packages, and I made for the bathroom while he walked toward the bedroom. As Jerran set down the box on the bed to open his package, I slid the bathroom door shut behind me, secluding myself in privacy.

Far off from the dark toned pajamas I was still wearing from the night, the two piece I held out in front of me was definitely a contrast. While my pajamas were of a brown so dark it could almost be called black, the clothing was a fresh grass green.

I lifted the smaller piece up first. It was of two pieces of fabric crossed together. Despite the obvious difference of my usual fashion colorings, my sister did seem to spare me my usual close-fitted comfort. With a few tugs on the fabric as I slid it over my arms and a readjustment of my chest, the top fitted into place.

Next was the lower half. While my sister would be wearing a dress, as she always does, she gave me my usual pant legs. The pants slid on much easier than the top, for they were slightly loose on my legs.

I took a glance at the mirror. To complete the outfit, I only needed to add some khoal to my eyes. Even if my sister were to exchange out my dark clothing, there was no way she was going to get rid of my signature make-up style.

I grabbed the stick off the counter and smudged it above my eyes. I drew out slightly past the corner of my eye before I set the stick back down on the table. Dampening the tip of my finger with a quick lick of my tongue, I made sure to smear the edges, giving my eyes their signature kohl.

I remember the day mother introduced us to the expanse of make-up stored underneath her bathroom counter. Jenessa had caught mother powdering her face when Jenessa, being innocent, yet nosy, blurted out, “What are you doing?” Mother’s face grew into a smile that crinkled her newly drawn eye highlights.

“I am applying my make-up, dear.” She held out the stick of khoal in front of her. “You can try it, too.” It was then that she saw me, leaning into the conversation in curiosity down the hallway on my way to the kitchen. “You can, too, Lina.”

I didn’t waste the offering. I crossed to my mother, now holding a second stick of coloring for me. Jenessa already gripped hers in her hand in front of the mirror. I joined Jenessa at the mirror, stick pointing towards my eye.

“All you are going to do is hold very still and draw a line above your eyelashes.” Mother leaned in toward the mirror and stretched out her jaw before pretending to draw a line above her own eyelashes. Seeing the line already on her eye, it was easy to see what we needed to do.

I placed the tip of the pen against my eye, feeling the dull tip apply pressure to my eyelid. I could feel the coldness of the tip, colder than my hot skin. I pulled the pen toward the corner of my eye. The pen left a black line in its wake.

Jenessa was quick to start drawing her own line once she saw how I was moving the pen against my upper eyelid. When we were done, both of our lines had a gap between our eyelashes and the dark line of the kohl, but mother quickly assured us that that would improve with experience. "Nessa, just make sure to have more sure lines. No need to rush beauty. And Lina, try not to pull out the lines so far."

Ashamed of the dark lines that extended much further than my eye, I quickly went to rub at the line.

My mother let out a light laugh at my attempt to free my skin from the dark line. "Another lesson for the day, it will take an ointment to properly remove the kohl, I am afraid." Mother leaned over to show us the ointment she was referring to. But before I made to grab the cream, I noticed the new effects shown on my face. The kohl now smudged all around the far corners of my eye, leaving no gap between the whites of my eyes and the polluted black of the smudged kohl. That was the first time I noted that my eyes had more lightness to them than I ever had seen before. The darkness surrounding my eyes seemed to bring out all the light colors of my hazel hidden behind the prominent dark browns.

Laughing in her childish high tones, my sister giggled at the make-up and smeared her own. The smudge surrounding her eye was much smaller but she still smiled so wide. A shared memory that she had forgotten, but that continued to influence me.

Ever since then, I have always drawn the edges of my kohl further than necessary and rubbed at the remnants.

Now, I see the hints of other colors dancing in my eyes. Shards of yellows and greens burst behind the countless shades of browns. Despite my sister's attempts to dress me with lightened, common Neswian shades today, there was no way I was allowing her to take away my darkened eyes.

I never quite understood the Neswian obsession with lightened colors. Sure, it is beautiful to see the sunlight dance across the blues and greens of the world and enhance their light colors, but there is a hidden beauty to the world under the moonlight. Instead of being overwhelmed with an entire view, I find more beauty in observing each view more in depth as the moonlight illuminates more and more to the naked eye. The same way dark clothing highlights new aspects of one's features.

Done reminiscing about the small things, I exited the bathroom.

Jerran was already waiting for me by the door. While I was fixed in grass green, Jerran was wearing tones of tan and yellow. He wore a finely fit shirt that tightened on his chest, yet expanded at his waist and shoulders. All his strength was easily shown in the way the shirt ascended every hard ridge of his body. His pants were of other tight fitting fabric that led to excess clothing that hugged his calves.

But the most notable thing about his outfit was the beast pelt draped over his shoulders. While Heliad's beast was large over his broad shoulders, Jerran's was more intimidating. The large teeth of the beast were still intact, showing a double layer of sharp teeth the size of fingers. One paw hung on Jerran's front side while the other hung from his back. The paws were almost the size of my face and had thick claws that looked menacing even though the animal was long dead.

It was crazy to think that Jerran once killed this beast with his bare hands. Not to mention that when they crafted it into the pelt, they had to throw away? over half of the fur since it would be too big for Jerran to wear for events.

“You ready?” The corners of Jerran’s lips were spread into a smile.

For the first time in a while, I truly meant it when I said, “Yes.”

Jenessa and Mael were already waiting in the lobby. Jenessa was dressed in a darker green slim dress that generously displayed her slim form. There even was a slit on the side of the dress that showed her slim legs. As I glanced at her eyes, her menacing look was exaggerated by a perfectly lined khole. She no longer was the little girl who would smear her khole like her older sibling. Instead, she opted for the striking look each and every time.

Mael was close to her side, wearing casual tans that fit his slim, yet muscular form. He was a striking young man when he wasn’t hidden in layers of stableboy cloth.

He stood close to my sister, but there was an air of space between them that seemed like it was of denser meaning. Mael seemed to know not to cross such a line when it came to my sister. Only a few days in and he already was catching onto her cues.

“About time you show up.” My sister immediately stepped into an elegant stride for the front door, expecting us to follow her lead. To her satisfaction, we did.

We exited the front door of the lobby, two doormen opening their respective doors as we passed. Jenessa broke our path, followed by Mael, who was still keeping his respectful distance. Jerran and I followed behind, walking side-by-side, hand-in-hand. The coldness of the metal band was even more evident between our interlocked fingers.

My awareness of the metal band might have also been swayed by the sheer number of people glancing in our direction. It seems like Jenessa’s tactical moves during our stay in Asgell were worthwhile, for every person we passed on the street took a moment to pause and look in our direction. No doubt they were noting Jenessa’s new companion and the wooden band on my middle finger.

As we walked through the bustling streets, Jenessa seemed to carve her own path between the people, not bumping into a single person clueless enough to stay in her path. Then, as we passed the mass of people, they seemed to close back in behind us and curve their path toward our destination. There was no need to tell the city the night before that we would be hosting a speech because everyone was cancelling their prior plans to follow us toward the town square.

Surprisingly, the town square was close to our hotel despite the expanse of the entire city. By the time I started to question how long our morning walk would end up being, I spotted the outdoor raised platform. To confirm my assumption, I glanced up toward Jerran for the first time since exiting the hotel, and, reading the question on my face, he gave my hand a squeeze of confirmation.

The stage was facing away from us, but with the small flight of stairs leading off in our direction. The stage was built purely from solid logs that were a whole arm thick. The top of each log was sawed and smoothed to create an even platform, but the even roundness of each one flowed in bumps on the underside of the stage.

Jenessa, of course, was the first one on the stage and did not stop her stride until she was front and center on the stage. Jerran closed in on the opposite side of her, and Mael and I found our place off to their sides.

People were already filing in front of the stage. There were very few heads of red and black among the obvious sea of Neswians. Maybe other countries were already starting to restrict their own people from travelling to some of the other countries' notable vacation destinations. I didn't even want to consider the possibility that our own people would kick out those with different features than the Neswian browns.

*People demonstrate their worst characteristics when faced with fear,* Jordith commented from the echoing chambers of my mind, *and fear is about to corrupt us all.*

I turned my attention to the faces of the people gathering before us. Not only was the look of question displayed on their face, but their emotion underlying the initial look was that of worry. I was sure that all of their heartbeats were currently pattering more quickly than in a usual state of calamity.

*I simply hope that they-we are all prepared for it.* I felt Jordith's thoughts wander off slightly after his offsetting commentary.

*We are here to make sure that we are.* My back straightened with the thought and as the eyes of the crowd fixed onto us four. *I will make sure my-our people are prepared.*

*I sure hope they are, My Blessed.* With that, I felt Jordith remove himself temporarily from my mind. Whether it was simply because he grew too tired from the conversation or to allow me to think of what was to come now, I didn't think into it.

"People of Neswia." Jerran's voice bellowed out in a strong tone. Immediately, the crowd hushed to listen in. "Children of Dalliea. Brothers and sisters of the Chief and Agede. I have traveled from the capital of Neswia to inform you all of the change that has swept through not only our land, but the entire land of Rylina." Jerran was born for this. There was no way a nation would be torn apart while in the capable hands of Jerran.

But all my concerns vanished with the words of my sister. "You might be stricken by fear," While my sister's voice strikes me on the daily as a dominating tone, it made for the voice of a true leader, "but we are here to tell you that there is no longer a need to fear."

*See, Jordith, we will be fine.*

Despite my dedication to the very people in front of me, I allowed myself to drown out the words of the future Chief and Agede and turn my attention to the large expanse of the sky. Even though the night sky was my truly favorite display, there was something that drew my attention to the sky that very day. Maybe it was the way the clouds were billowing stretches that contrasted blue sky. Maybe it was the moons subtly visible in broad daylight.

Between Jerran and Jenessa, Neswia had nothing to fear.

Then, as these thoughts were all running through my head and the people of Asgell were intently listening to their leaders, I saw it. I was the first to see the two moons collide.

I didn't have time to think. I didn't even let out a yell.

All I knew was that Jordith returned to me when my world went black.