

Daughter of Another

By Desiree R. Stafford

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Advisor: Dr. Constance Squires, English Department

Committee: Dr. Tobias Wray, English Department

Committee: Dr. Tajanae Barnes, English Department

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Desiree R. Stafford

Author's Name

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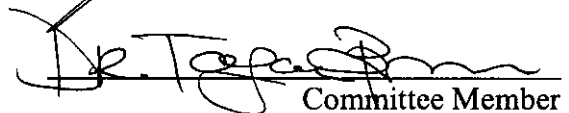
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Committee Member


Committee Member

Committee Member

The Prologue

A slender, handsome man stood over a large table made from a redwood tree. Carved into the surface were ancient symbols only the gods knew, and maybe a few seasoned warlocks and witches. These carvings protected from any spying eyes. No one could magically eavesdrop on conversations or steal a glance. It protected from even the strongest witches and warlocks...

Agracias, masters of all crafts... and even creatures as powerful as the first four, the Numun.

He peered down at two mirrors, not meant for reflection but rather seeing, watching the two young women as they lived out their lives unaware of their audience... Mirrors enchanted to observe, a task this man had been doing for half a moon cycle.

"Are you sure the other one is not an option?" he asked, bringing his attention to his two companions, a tall, young man and a young woman, standing across from him.

The tall, young man removed the hood of his cloak, but left the cloth masking the bottom half of his face. He often wore the hood as a means to hide his hair, pale yellow, singed at the tips with a fiery, bright orange. It kept from prying eyes picking him from a crowd. "She does not have what we need," he answered, speaking of a girl not pictured in either mirror.

"So it's just these two?"

The young woman... no... a girl, who entered the precipice of becoming a woman, nodded. She looked to be a normal human, with thick, wavy black hair falling past her shoulders,

and glowing golden brown skin, but her eyes were a giveaway that she was not human. Her eyes resembled that of a tigress, fierce, determined, terrifying. And she was one to be feared, having caught and torn asunder many prey, even at her young age. A large number of those prey being human, more so, men. Men who oftentimes were much bigger than her.

“We will know more once we get closer to them,” she said.

The leader slowly nodded as he tucked a long strand of straight, black hair behind his ear. “Follow them, but do not make contact.” He pointed at the girl and reminded, “do not let your temper get the better of you.”

She rolled her feline eyes and crossed her arms across her chest.

“And you, do not be seen. This one—” his fingers gently touched the mirror of a young woman with an axe pendant dangling from her neck, “—there is something about her I feel will disrupt our plans.”

The young man with the colorful hair agreed with a curt nod and donned his hood.

“Understood, sir.”

Chapter 1

Instinctively, Hiraya fiddled with the axe pendant hanging from her neck. She did this when she became nervous. Sneaking out made her so. It wasn't like her father would get mad. He probably would allow her to go to the Croec Emporium, being quite lax with her even as the King of Croec and her being the eldest daughter. It was the inquisition after telling him...the invasive questions. Lying did not come easily to her. She wore her emotions on her face and no matter how many times she practiced, her lies remained on the surface. And she knew her father would disapprove of her decision...the decision to add blue highlights to her dark brown hair. Often, colorful hair meant being a creature like a siren, the Shadeu, forest spirits and so on, but in the city of Croec, where creatures and humans coexisted, humans had begun to dye their hair, the current trend. A trend her father disapproved of and thought of as silly, childish.

See. Today...today was the birthmoon of Hiraya. Twenty-two cycles of spring, the season where the skies cried and the trees began to wake up. She didn't expect a celebration, heck, her father probably had forgotten. Being the eldest often meant she was ignored or better yet "independent" enough to need no one's assistance. Of course he didn't. Her mother had passed from a long-term ailment only days after her eighth birthmoon, so his focus had been mourning during this time. Eventually, forgetting was the only way he moved on from such a loss. So her birthmoon was celebrated for herself...by herself.

Hiraya didn't mind. Ever since then, she never wanted a celebration, considering her birthmoon an unlucky day, having some sort of incident happen to ruin the day. Her eighth birthmoon being the time her mother passed and her twelfth being the time one of her friends fell from a hammock, breaking an arm in two places. Instead, she did small things for herself like dying her hair or getting etched, body art imprinted permanently on her body. For Hiraya, she chose a less conspicuous spot of a crescent moon etched onto the lower middle of her back, the only secret she kept from her father.

Hiraya walked through the city. Croec bustled, even late at night. It often held more creatures during this time, many being nocturnal, but it did not mean humans were sparse. Most humans here had spiritual powers, but there had been an increase of regular humans since her father gained control. Even the hunters nearby in Roanoke had changed their views about creatures and humans coexisting, accepting the lifestyle.

The city of Croec had grown tremendously over the last ten years, expanding closer and closer to the base of the mountain at which Laho Palace, Hiraya's home, sat atop. On the opposite side of the city resided the Croec Emporium, a market on the peninsula surrounded by Taeza Lake.

Hiraya's attention went to a gargoyle woman stretching her wings and letting out a yawn. The gargoyle picked up a basket full of bracelets and other jewelry. She probably had a shop she was opening soon.

The distraction caused the princess to bump into something. She turned to find a woman with thin box braids of thick black hair stumbling backwards. The woman caught herself almost lazily and flipped her braids over one shoulder, revealing a rainbow of colorful braids. But that's

not what Hiraya noticed most. The woman's skin resembled the color of umber with blotches of pale white clouds reflecting the pink hues of the sunset scattered across her face and arms.

"Get outtamyway." The woman's words slurred together. She tried to focus on the princess with crystal blue eyes, but failed, unable to find the original one of the two versions in front of her.

Hiraya held up both hands just in case the woman fell and held her breath, worried she would get drunk just from the stench of liquor. "Do you need help? I can walk you home."

The woman scoffed. "Home? Gotnunofthat." The drunkard pushed Hiraya aside and continued down the street.

Hiraya shook her head and returned to her journey to the market. Of course she would meet a drunkard or two. It was the norm for city life.

She turned down the main street which led to her destination. When she turned, she noticed a cloaked figure do the same behind her. Although Croec felt safe, she was still royalty and needed to keep on high alert...you know...just in case. But it didn't mean the cloaked shadow was a threat, just someone to keep in mind.

She paused at a vendor selling bao buns. It was a small wagon sitting on the street rather than a building. Sometimes these vendors were better than the restaurants with full service and dining areas. The bao buns were one of her favorites, filled with ground meat and vegetables. The only ones she despised were the red bean ones. No one could pay her enough coin to eat one of those.

"Oh, Hiraya! What brings you here tonight?" the old man asked, handing her a bun without a word from the princess. Being a regular gave her the privilege to have the owner remember her order.

She handed over a coin and inhaled the aroma: meats tossed in hot, smoky oils and red peppers with onions. “I’m changing my hair color.”

He raised a dark brow. “What color?”

Hiraya chewed her first bite and swallowed. “I’m thinking blue.” She always wanted blue. Her father forbade it when she was younger, but now she was an adult. She should have a say in what she did to her body. *Should*. But she didn’t ask this time for fear of the answer.

He pressed his thin lips together as if holding back his honest opinion. Being older and just a normal human like her father, he probably disapproved too.

“Duan! Don’t be so judgemental.” She waved a hand at him playfully, but her focus was searching for the hooded figure in her periphery. The shadow poked a head around the corner, looking straight at her. Something told her she had a little stalker. Nothing she wouldn’t handle.

Duan sucked on his teeth and shook his head. “You know what your Baba think? He’ll be mad.” People loved her father here, at least the humans did. He was chatty and always tried to befriend the people like he was just a guy off the street like them. He sort of was. Her mother had been the one of royalty, a princess from Maharlika, while her father had been an officer in the Royal Guard at New Calusa.

She sighed, but gave him a large smile. “He’s too busy butting heads with Hex these days to really care about me or Breonna.” Although Hex was the middle child, he did not receive the neglect typical of the middle child. Being the only male heir gave him the spotlight, even though his mother had been from a concubine their father impregnated before moving to Croec. (Although the one actually running Croec being the current Queen and Breonna’s mother, Atatiana.)

She stuffed the rest of the bao bun into her mouth and waved farewell to Duan. She turned down a dark alleyway that ended in the lake. The stores here were built on stilts to ensure that when flooding occurred, the buildings didn't end up underwater. Hiraya hid beneath one, in the shadows, and waited. She twirled the axe pendant at her neck. She thought about drawing her most powerful weapon against her little stalker but shook off the thought. That would be going overboard. Instead, she grabbed a knife from her boot. It was warm.

The cloaked shadow turned the corner and walked past her. The hood masked their facial features, but by their height and broad shoulders, this was most likely a man. She needed to take advantage of a surprise. He could be a creature, and she knew she was stronger and more skilled than most humans, but there was always someone better...especially if this person were a creature. This humble reminder kept her alive this long in the Darkling Plain.

She stepped out of the darkness and thrust her foot into the back of her stalker's bend in his leg. He fell on his knees but spun away from her. He stopped, still crouching, facing her. His hood hung lower, barely above his brows. A black cloth covered the bottom half of his face.

"Who are you?" she asked, more curious than angry or afraid. Her heart beat heavy in her chest. She never had someone follow her before. Although a princess, no one paid mind to her. She had mastered the art of being invisible to the point it felt effortless. Even when she sought attention, the want was never met. It excited her to have someone notice her, even if it was someone who wanted to harm her. Something told her that this person didn't want to though.

The hooded man charged at her. Maybe her intuition had been mistaken. He reached into his cloak, probably a weapon of some sorts. Hiraya spun, her back facing him as he slung what seemed like dust at her. When it landed on her skin, it felt like icy hot needles piercing her. She finished her spin as his charge missed the target, going past her. She grabbed the back of his

cloak as he tried to take this opportunity to flee. She yanked him backwards, causing him to fly farther and harder than she had intended. His hood fell from his head to reveal pale yellow hair tipped with orange. The sides of his head were shaved down and dark brown hair contrasted the wan colors. Was he a creature or someone who dyed his hair just as she was about to do?

He stumbled, trying to stay on his feet, but in what seemed like the slowest descent she had ever seen, fell onto his butt with a dull thud. Hiraya covered her mouth in a feeble attempt to restrain the laughter building in her belly. A few chuckles even slipped out. "I thought maybe you were a creature, but now I'm not so sure," she said, putting away her blade. He definitely wasn't a threat at his point. A warrior could never be this clumsy.

He sluggishly stood, wiping off the dirt. "I am!" he muttered, his voice deeper than expected.

"How am I supposed to know?" She crossed her arms across her chest while the smile still stretched across her light brown face.

He set his gloved hands on his hips. "I don't have to prove anything to you."

She raised a brow. "So who are you and why are you following me?"

He shrugged and ran a hand through his hair. He glanced around, probably searching for an escape route. She stood blocking the only exit of this alleyway, unless he chose to go for a swim. At this time of year, the lake still held the cool temperatures left by the recent harsh winter. Hiraya doubted he wanted to swim in those cold waters nor did she think he was a strong swimmer.

"You're a terrible tail by the way," she told him.

"Really?"

"Yep."

“I’ve been following you for a while.” He raised a brow as if challenging her.

“Why?” The enthrallment of this encounter began to dissipate. The curiosity was now at bay.

He shrugged. “It’s my job.” He wasn’t offering her any information.

She clenched her fists. “Guess I’ll have to force it out of you.” She leapt towards him. A quick flash of orange and red flames enveloped her, only long enough to feel a brief blaze of heat wash over her. Hiraya instinctively crossed her arms in front of her face for protection. She felt something rush past her. She turned to find a large dog. It stood almost to her chest and had a shorter snout with a black nose and gums with sharp fangs barely showing. Its ears perked upwards. Orange-gold fur thickly blanketed its body. A fluffy tail curved upwards and back down towards its spine, revealing a paler yellow underside. Flames softly floated from the back of its legs, just above its paws. When its tail moved, flames formed, tossing tiny cinders into the air. Its auburn colored eyes stared at her as if to say, “I told you so.” It gave her a quick irritated huff.

“A hellhound?” she asked. She had read about hellhounds and even saw some renditions, but none reassembled the creature before her. She just assumed so because of the flames.

Bulgae, a deep voice growled. Before she could say anything more, he took off into the busy street. A few screams of shock resounded. Although the residents in Croec were used to seeing creatures running about, it still startled some, especially if it were a creature not normally seen in these parts. A bulgae was definitely something new to her city.

Hiraya sighed. She had so many more questions. None of them were even related to her and why he followed her. A bulgae was a novelty to her. She wanted to know more. She loved learning about creatures and all the stories and myths that were attached to them. Maybe it was

the lack of friendship or simply her insatiable curiosity, but she always had an obsession with knowing things through and through, hyper fixating on the most niche topics. She could add bulgae to her long list. She would research the creature or even ask Finn and Emtu when they came to train her. They were hunters and knew much more than she did, having traveled to many places residing on the Darkling Plain.

She kicked a rock and clutched her pendant. Maybe she could catch her stalker later on and interrogate him. But for now, she needed to worry about her hair appointment. It was not like she could chase him down now that he was in his dog form. Also the little distraction had made her late.

“Shit.” She exhaled quietly.

She sprinted out of the alley and hurried to the hair witch before her appointment was canceled.

Chapter 2

The reflection stared back at her. She grinned, feeling almost secure in her own skin for the first time in a long time, longer than she could remember. She hugged her torso as her wavy, now black hair tipped with royal blue fell past her shoulders. She took in the rest of her appearance. She had wide hips, thick legs and large calves. It didn't stop her from wearing traditional beige shorts styled like the skirts from her mother's culture. On the front, a wide sash fell down the front center with white tassels at the bottom. Queen Atatiana had designed it for her. The queen was always big on incorporating heritage into fashion, saying it was important to keep those ancestral ties, but also blend it with sensibility. The queen knew Hiraya needed something less restrictive.

Hiraya's leather brown boots laced up to her knees, giving her some reassurance people wouldn't notice her calves. But the part of her body that made her feel the most vulnerable was her stomach. The high waist shorts helped mask it, but even so, paranoia that someone would notice it made her uneasy. The constant whispers about her weight had been one of the reasons for invisibility. Even as a princess, society deemed her less because they thought her fat and lazy. She never really agreed. She was physically strong and was always doing something whether it was reading and learning about creatures to training with the hunters to practicing meditation with her Tita, Aashirya. She only recently stopped listening to those outside voices and started to

give herself grace, but it was hard when her family never let her forget with their offhanded jokes or smirks before a bout of giggles.

A gasp pulled Hiraya out of her thoughts. She turned, finding Aashirya in the doorway of her large suite that resided near the rear of Laho Palace. Aashirya was an older woman with golden kissed brown skin paled by many winters. Her thick black hair was held up by a large clip and she always had a sash around her shoulders with vibrant colors and some sort of pattern. Today, it was a deep pink with gold traced flowers. She raised a wrinkled hand, pointing at Hiraya's hair. "Bhanji!" It was what she called Hiraya since birth, a term of endearment meaning niece in her native tongue. "Sacmuc?"

Hiraya peered back at her reflection, brushing her fingers through the last few inches of her hair. "What Tita? I think it suits me."

Aashirya appeared in the mirror's reflection. She picked up a strand between her index finger and thumb as if it were the tail cut from a lizard. "People will talk. You look like a creature!"

The princess shrugged. "So? They talk about me when I do everything right. Maybe now I should give them something to actually talk about." She turned to face her aunt. Aashirya wasn't really her aunt, but a member of her mother's court, and then later becoming her nanny when her father couldn't bear to look at her. Hiraya resembled enough of her mother to cause him lingering heartache. "Plus, if they think I'm a creature after knowing me all these years, they truly are idiotic."

Aashirya smacked her lips and then smacked the princess's shoulder. Hiraya's mouth fell open, baffled.

“Don’t speak such blasphemous things! What if a servant hears you?” Her aunt glanced around. “The walls have ears.”

Hiraya scanned the room dramatically and covered herself as if she were caught in the middle of donning her clothes. “Someone would listen in on a princess?” she asked, acting flabbergasted.

“Arrē! Don’t be childish!” Aashirya waved at the princess as if it would shoo away the behavior or maybe any whispers fluttering around of Hiraya’s odd interests. She then reached into her sari and pulled out a small box. “I came to celebrate.”

Hiraya didn’t wait for her Tita to hand it to her, but stole it away. The older woman rolled her eyes but continued speaking, “I wanted you to have this. It is a family heirloom.”

The small black box sprung open with a flick of Hiraya’s thumb. Inside were two silver bangles emanating floral and ivy motifs. A flower made of a pearl center and yellow sapphire petals decorated the design. Both bangles were identical and ravishingly gorgeous.

Aashirya pointed at the pearl. “Moti. It represents the moon. It keeps one healthy and helps you control your anger.”

Hiraya scoffed, knowing her anger didn’t even transcend to her brother’s and she always received condemnation instead of grace. But she knew that this was a means to help and that her Tita wanted the best for her.

“These are pukhraj. These are divine gemstones meant to balance and bring blessings to the wearer,” her Tita said while picking up the bangles. “My uncle was a priest, as you say, and gave them to me when he heard I wished to follow in his footsteps. Since I have no children of my own, I thought I’d give them to the only daughter I know and love.”

Hiraya's chest welled as tears formed at the corners of her eyes. Aashirya was normally never sentimental with words, but more with scoldings or throwing a shoe that the princess learned her advanced evasive skills from. She still remembered the day she caught a sandal, and it only added to the scolding. The elation of triumphantly catching the shoe still lingered to this day.

"Aya!" The older woman slapped the princess's shoulder again. The repetition was going to leave a bruise. "Just take it and put it on."

Hiraya picked up the two bangles and glanced at her right wrist. It was already decorated with a jade bracelet given by her mother, the last gift she received from the most important person in her life. The one she missed every single day. She instead slid them onto her left wrist and lifted her arm to inspect them more closely. They were much lighter than she had anticipated. The glint of the yellow triggered the memory of this evening, seeing the young man with the yellow hair turning into the fiery dog. "What do hellhounds look like?"

Aashirya furrowed her thick black brows, knitting fine wrinkles that weren't seen with her normal stoic expression.

"Have you seen one before?" Hiraya asked.

"Personally, no. But I am told they're black with fiery eyes, similar to Cereberus."

Hiraya shuffled through all the literature she had read in her mind's eye. "Hades' pet?"

Aashirya stepped back. "Where does this come from?"

The princess toyed with the bangles not wanting to share it had been at the Emporium. Aashirya already disliked her going alone, suggesting she take one of the Queen's guardswomen, but knowing she went alone would end in an unwanted tongue lashing, something she wanted to avoid on her birthmoon.

“Bhanji?” Aashirya drew out the word to emphasize the need of an answer.

Her tone and the piercing stare caused everything to spill out of her mouth. “I ran across a boy who turned into this golden looking large dog thing with a loop of a tail and fire.” Hiraya wasn’t great with words, especially under pressure. It was one of the many reasons she didn’t feel she should be the heir to Croec. She definitely thought Atatiana best fit the role. It didn’t help that she wanted to omit where she was, not really a lie but still considered one to her (by omission). She was a terrible liar. Plus, lying gave her inexplicit bouts of anxiety. Reading stories was one thing but spinning her own web of lies just seemed so taxing.

“You saw this boy where?”

Of course Aashirya would ask the right question...a direct question that could not be avoided by omission. Hiraya looked away and searched for something in her suite to mess with or clean. “Well... um...” She glanced at her Tita, immediately looking away after meeting that burning glare. “At the Emporium tonight.”

“Hiraya! You told me you went earlier this afternoon!” Aashirya’s eyes scanned for anything in reach. Hiraya added distance between them, knowing what was about to come, and snapped her fingers twice. It was something she did to beckon her pet, Brin. With Brin between them, Aashirya would less likely throw something. Her aunt pointed a finger at her. “Do not call your pet.” Hiraya opened her hand, just as Brin appeared in the doorway. Brin was a gift from her father a long time ago...and a hyena. Her father collected exotic animals and thought Hiraya could use a companion, choosing the multicolored, small hyena pup, not realizing it would grow to half her height, larger than most dogs. Brin sat down, understanding the command to stay.

Aashirya laced her fingers together. “Has your father spoken to you of the Hunt?”

Hiraya stared confused. So no punishment? Just a change of subject? A lucky day. “No. What about it?”

“Aya. He was supposed to speak with you this morning.”

“Tell me.”

“It is not my place.”

It were times like these the princess wished Aashirya was her actual aunt instead of the court, someone of servitude, a nanny to raise her while her father rules. Maybe then, Hiraya would feel closer to her, as if her father’s word wouldn’t be the final say in their relationship.

“Tita. Please tell me.”

Aashirya shook her head and waved a hand at the young princess as if to deter an annoying fly. “Go. I have things to do.

“Aya!” Hiraya mimicked her aunt. “You’re supposed to be my informant!”

“Pshhhh.”

Brin trotted across the room and nipped at Hiraya’s fingers expressing the desire of much needed lovings. Hiraya bent down and scratched the beast's chin, but kept her gaze on her aunt leaving. She didn’t show it, but the idea her father had news pertaining to the Hunt unsettled her, especially since her brother would finally participate. Was her father going to name an heir this time around?

Chapter 3

“And today, I’d like to announce, whomever of my children—” he glanced at Hex approvingly and then turned to glance at Breonna then Hiraya. They all stood on a stone platform carved out of the side of the rocky slope. To the right of them were the group of competitors and directly in front of them were those who wanted to watch the opening ceremony.

The king cleared his throat as the queen reached down to clutch his hand, a united front. “—whomever of my children that wins this hunt, will be designated as the next heir of Croec.”

Hiraya scanned the crowd and noticed a lack of creatures, or at least more noticeable creatures. Vampires, shapeshifters, and the like were often harder to spot, being more human-like than something like a gargoyle or a chiron or even an aran (small creatures that resembled fairies). She couldn’t blame them. There was never a hunt for humans that were ravaging homes in the countryside or even those that harmed creatures for fun. Even her brother was one of the bullies to participate in the harassment of creatures. Could be the reason why she had a strained relationship with him. Or maybe it was the complete and utterly suffocating arrogance touched with apathy for anyone who didn’t look like him. It was probably a little bit of both. Or a lot of it.

Hiraya hated this, every part of it. She didn’t care for the Hunt and only participated because her father agreed to focus on the capture of rogue creatures rather than immediately kill

them. The Hunt had been a means to control the creatures upset with King Ronald taking his older brother's place. They wanted at least a human with spiritual powers and beliefs, not someone who most likely feared creatures. The Hunt quieted them, but Hiraya knew of the whispers from her secret outings to the Emporium. Her requirement for doing this tradition helped, but the rift between humans and creatures needed an immense amount of mending, even in Croec.

But the Hunt wasn't what she hated at the moment. It was the fact that her father decided this Hunt would determine the next ruler of Croec, nevermind Bre wasn't even old enough to join. By Hex's smirk, he convinced such a decision to be made. Of course, Hex would turn a tradition into a competition...one he thought he could win.

Hiraya's eyes narrowed at this thought. She should be listening to her father's speech, taking in all those present to witness the three day event. The audience wouldn't stay the whole time, but the opening and closing ceremonies were a must. She shot daggers with her eyes at her smug younger brother. He chuckled and hit his friend, Landain, on the chest. Landain met her seething glare and blew her a kiss. They both had this strange idea that she had lustful desires for Landain. That couldn't be any farther from the truth. A chill of disgust rolled through her body and landed with a thud in the pit of her stomach. She set a hand on her torso in response.

Brin pawed at her boot, understanding the shift in Hiraya's composure. She smiled down at the hyena and scratched the top of his head. His back foot started to bounce.

"Princess please," Rehia, one of Queen Atatiana's top Royal Guards, muttered under her breath.

Hiraya rolled her eyes and dropped her hand to her side. As much as she wanted to be defiant, she knew Rekia would use her brute strength and speed to force the princess into obedience. “Shouldn’t you be babysitting?” Rekia normally watched over Bre.

“The queen thought I needed a break.” Rekia’s tone remained flat, unphased.

Hiraya met the guard’s dark eyes and smirked. Rekia smacked her full lips together and turned away as if disapproving the little sheepish smile, but the princess swore she saw a blush on those umber colored cheeks. Rekia’s skin almost reassembled the black Calla Lilies in the previous queen’s moon garden. This made it hard to determine if she saw a blush or if it was her imagination. But hanging on the idea that the guard blushed made Rekia more...human...approachable.

Hiraya finally took in Rekia’s appearance. Her usual tightly braided hair was now only done so on the sides of her head with a mohawk of tight curls free. “I like this hairstyle on you,” Hiraya noted.

Rekia’s sharp jaw became more defined as the muscles tightened. “Thank you, Princess. Now pay mind to the king.” Always a stickler for the rules.

A loud gong rang, grabbing everyone’s attention. Many competitors leapt into a sprint, Hex and Landain leading the way. Hiraya peered down at Brin, “Ready boy?” He huffed in response. “I’m off. See you in a few days.”

Rekia shook her head, solemnly. “You really think Queen Atatiana is going to leave you unattended after what you did to your hair?” She held up a dark blue strand to reiterate her point. “I don’t think so. Everyone is whispering about you.”

“You mean humans are whispering.” Hiraya pulled her head away, and stepped down off the stone platform. Brin followed suit. “I can handle myself, Rekia.”

Rekia clasped her hands behind her back. “Queen’s order.”

“What is my queen’s order?” the king interjected, arms across his chest. “Shouldn’t you be in the forest, scouring for rogue creatures?”

“I have three days. Why waste my energy?” Hiraya answered.

“Do you not wish to be the heir?”

“I think this whole idea is stupid,” she mumbled while searching for anything to kick at...any distraction...a rock...a twig would be better than this conversation...even this Hunt.

“Princess!” Rekia spat.

The king chuckled, being used to her candor. “Are you worried you won’t win?”

“More like Hex has probably found some way to cheat.”

Her father chuckled again. Rekia tried to remain stoic, but the princess could see a glint in her dusky brown eyes in agreement.

“Listen, I already got it approved by the Nokomis Council.” The Nokomis Council, a group of grandmothers from tribes and clans across Keya Island, had partial authority, approving changes in leaders and expansions on Keya Island. They were the sovereign power ensuring all cities, towns, and villages alike were in tranquility with each other. “I have faith you will succeed. You *are* my favorite.” He always said this. It wasn’t anything new. His words often didn’t match his actions. From the way he *acted*, Hex had gained the title of favorite.

The king’s blue eyes brightened and wrinkles spread from the corners like veins on an aged leaf. He had changed the last few years, aging at a rapid rate, drinking more, and giving Queen Atatiana more power. Maybe this was why he wanted to use the Hunt to determine an heir. Was he ready to hand over his crown?

“You mean, I’m the only one that calls you out while being the best at everything.” She gave him a cheeky grin. She only joked. She knew it was because even though she was candid with him, she did everything he asked. Only recently did she participate in these small acts of rebellion. She had been testing the waters, becoming an adult and trying to slowly break away from their commands...from what was expected of her.

She picked up her pack and turned towards the forest where everyone had already disappeared. “Be careful. See you in three days!” her father called after her.

She sighed. It wasn’t like he wouldn’t see her. She could come back here for supplies, if needed. She would probably even see him in the morning. Most of the time, competitors caught something on the first night, so they didn’t have to stay the two nights in the forest. It could be quite dangerous. There was the option of capturing multiple rogue creatures. The Hunt hadn’t brought any creatures of status though. Many were lower level. Rogue ones avoided the area due to this tradition. She didn’t expect much this year.

Rekia cleared her throat, causing Hiraya to side step away and instinctively grab her necklace. “I told you I didn’t need a guard.” Her voice was harsher more because of her surprise than irritation.

“You did,” Rekia spoke dryly.

“Then why are you still here?”

“I’ve answered that before.”

“A woman of words,” Hiraya muttered. Rekia and Hiraya had grown up in the vicinity of each other but never really built a relationship beyond mere acquaintances. The current interaction reminded the princess why. Rekia hung on the queen’s every demand and was not one for social relationships. Hiraya considered herself an introvert, a loner, but Rekia purposely built

walls so no one would enter, except for other warriors from the queen's Royal Guard: the Zarians. This group was made up only of women and were from the tribes in Atatiana's homeland, Bantu. This had been before she moved to Croec to be the king's second queen. She brought the Zarians with her after the union.

Hiraya didn't want to walk in silence with a Zarian warrior. She'd rather do that alone with only Brin at her side. She would definitely find a way to ditch Reikia and gain back her freedom.

Chapter 4

Hiraya slid behind a fallen tree as Brin bolted in the opposite direction. She heard Rekia whisper a few foul words before falling for the decoy. She didn't think the guard would fall for something so simple but Brin was smarter than most people expected. Maybe Rekia's expectations fell amongst most.

After the footsteps faded, she peaked over the tree. The guard was nowhere in sight. Brin had done his job well. The princess leapt into a sprint and tried to put as much space as possible between them, so Rekia would give up and go back to Atatiana. Hiraya would later help alleviate the queen's wrath, after she finished with this barbaric tradition, but for now, she made her way to a small stream and followed it a few hundred paces. She moved back into the dense forest, hearing murmur voices. It was a good idea to avoid anyone, but the familiarity of these voices stopped her. She moved through the brush towards the sound.

The first voice spoke, "C'mon. Help me, Lan." She recognized that voice anywhere, being related to him. Hex's voice sounded strained as he spoke, like he was carrying something heavy.

"Man, maybe we should just go find a rogue creature," the second voice answered. That could only be Landain, the one person that would help Hex with any task.

Hiraya stepped out of the shadows to find Landain and Hex trying to untie ropes around a female Shadeu, who writhed on the ground in an attempt for freedom. Shadeu were cousins to vampires, born of the goddess Nytra, except their skin turned a dark, midnight teal color during the New Moon and had silver moon colored eyes. Their fangs grew like a vampire, and they desired blood, but normally only of large animals. But when they were introduced to vampire blood, they became rogue. This one surely seemed to be in such a state.

“What are you two doing?” Hiraya asked. She glared at Hex in the same manner as Queen Atatiana did after Bre caused another ripple of a scandal to spread through the city...usually more dire than just dying one’s hair.

Hex’s hazel eyes darkened as he only took a brief pause from untying the Shadeu’s restraints. “Nothing. Just caught a rogue creature. Bet you haven’t caught anything,” he said, lifting his chin as if in victory.

Landain crossed his arms across his chest and raised his chin to mirror her brother. “Yeah.”

“Really? Then why are you untying the ropes? You should have just left her tied and no one would have noticed.” Hiraya knew her brother and his friend were full of complete minotaur shit. Even in a “rogue” state, the Shadeu were peaceful people and didn’t attack anyone. Hex and Landain were trying to cheat in the worst way possible and not in a clever way, but more of one lacking intelligence.

Landain elbowed Hex’s arm. “Man,” he muttered. “I told you that!”

Hex rolled his eyes. “It’s none of your business,” he said to Hiraya, ignoring his friend’s words. “No one wants to follow a slug.”

A slug meaning herself. Hiraya let out a fake chuckle. "I think you used that insult last week." She shifted her weight to ensure her stance sturdy. From her history with her brother, she knew anything she said could set him off. He never perceived her as an equal, and so he didn't mind acting volatile towards her. Plus, her intention was to set him off. "You and your boyfriend aren't going to win with a Shadeu."

"What did you say?" Hex took a few steps forward and straightened his posture, as a means to appear taller. He was taller. The Maharlikan blood ran through her, being naturally short a part of her heritage. He had the pleasure of vikings running through his blood, those of taller stature. "I can take you any day." He rested his left hand on his sword's hilt, as if it would scare her.

"I think she can take you," Landain interjected.

Hex huffed. "Whatever. I would outrun her before she could lay a hand on me." He scanned her body to prove his point.

Hex was scrawny with little muscle. Yes, he could run longer distances than her, but she knew she had agility and skill. He was too arrogant to gain anything of sustenance and all his rivals were too afraid to beat him because of his immature denial of defeat...or they just excused themselves and made fun of him behind his back. This meant he never really improved. Hiraya always pitied him because of this. It was why she never retaliated nor fed into his verbal attacks. But today, she felt emboldened. There was too much at stake to let him carry on with his immorality.

"Then let's go. I accept your challenge," Hiraya said.

He exhaled and glanced back at his friend as if Landain would tell him he could win, even though his friend just said the opposite. "You can't use your axe." He pointed at her

necklace. Her hand went to the pendant. "It wouldn't be fair for you to use an enchanted weapon."

She released it. She didn't have anything else except a dagger or two, but she didn't need one to beat him. "Fine. But if I win, you will tell dad you don't want to be the next king." She wanted to prove that she could win without any leverage. His hot-headedness would be his downfall nonetheless.

He turned to his friend again. Landain shrugged. "Bet. But when I win, you'll tell dad the same."

She nodded. She didn't want the crown. She just knew he *couldn't* be king. Croec would be doomed if that were to occur.

She stretched out her hand for him to shake. "Deal."

He slapped her hand away. "Yeah. Whatever." He laughed and turned his back to her. He couldn't help but be disrespectful. Hiraya stole the opportunity to make the first move. She kicked the back of his knee, causing him to fall to the ground on that same knee. This was one of her favorite moves when someone turned their back to her. Many people underestimated her so turning their back to her was a regular occurrence.

Landain watched, eyes wide and hand covering his mouth. He knew her to always play by the rules, and a surprise attack wasn't what they expected. Hex drew his sword and spun to face her while still kneeling. "We didn't say we were starting yet!" he screeched, while climbing to his feet.

Hiraya gave him a fake sympathetic smile and shrugged. "Whoops. Guess you shouldn't have turned your back to me."

“Cheater!” he shouted. His face grew a hot red. “Motherless whore.” As he lunged at her, she thought his insult ironic since his mother had died during childbirth, making them both motherless.

She side-stepped. He stumbled forward and turned to face her again. He attacked again, sword forward. She stepped to the side again, grabbing his arm with one hand and hitting it with the other. The sword fell to the ground as he backed away, keeping his injured arm close to his body. Hiraya picked up the sword and brought it down on the ankle restraints of the Shadeu. The creature leapt up and took off into the trees.

“What the fuck Hiraya!” Hex growled. He turned to his friend and ordered, “Go get it Landain!”

Hiraya pointed the sword at Hex’s little lackey. “Stay.” Her voice held an authority she rarely used, never having the confidence to use it freely.

He froze and nodded slowly. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Landain!” Hex bellowed as his friend shrugged, implying Hiraya had more say than him. “This isn’t fair! You can’t do this!”

The princess threw the sword at his feet. “I’ll give you another chance,” she offered. He picked up the weapon. “But this time, I’m not holdin—” He thrust the tip of the sword into her right shoulder. She winced as blood soaked her shirt and a sharp pain rolled down through her, creating a tsunami of rage. Her eyes darkened. Hex’s eyes widened with fright, knowing his mistake.

She brought her right foot up and thrust it into his stomach. He stumbled back, catching himself. He let out a few coughs in response to the power of her kick. Hiraya set her palm to the wound and then brought it to her face to examine the blood more closely, as if to check it were

real. She didn't know what enraged her more, the fact that the pain pulsed through her or the fact that it had been a first for her, to have someone blatantly stab her. "Oh, you're done," she said. Now, she was serious. No more playing around.

He shifted on his feet and tried to act cavalier. "Shouldn't have been talking." He shrugged.

"Hex, I don't—" Landain began to say, but Hex attacked again. He brought his sword up from down low, so the princess couldn't just sidestep. He could easily change the direction to come across and slice into her. She noticed how he held the hilt with both hands to add more power to the blow. Instead of playing defensively, Hiraya sprinted towards him. Her hand wrapped around both of his, halting him mid-swing. She used both of their momentum to build-up power as her forehead met with his nose. A loud crack resonated from his bones and into hers. She had broken something. He immediately dropped his weapon and caressed his nose. Blood poured through his fingers. He screamed more in a high pitched and wailing manner than Hiraya expected. She winced, empathizing with her little brother's pain. She too had broken her nose when she was younger and with the scene in front of her, a phantom ache returned to her own nose.

"Try not to move—" she tried to advise. Moving his nose or touching it could make matters worse.

He stepped backwards. "You fat bitch. You'll pay," he snapped, sounding muffled from his hands. He bent over as the blood continued to gush, dropping his hands away to let it flow more freely. Landain rushed to Hex's aid.

His comment struck her a little harder than she wanted it to. She had heard worse from him, but at this moment, the insult triggered her. She set a hand on her hip and looked away to

appear more apathetic. "I think we both know who won here," she replied dryly, forcing any regret or guilt from her voice.

"You didn't win. This isn't over!" Hex straightened his posture, blood smeared on the bottom half of his face.

Landain handed him a handkerchief. "Man, she definitely won," his friend said. Hex put an arm around his friend's shoulders for support and squeezed, as if to warn that further responses would end in some sort of penalty.

"Shut up," he growled. "I need to find a healer!"

"Are you sure you don't want to finish this?" Hiraya asked, as the two boys walked away. They continued into the trees as Landain reassured her brother his nose didn't look all too bad.

It apparently was a no. Hiraya shrugged, forgetting about the open wound on her shoulder. She grimaced as a pain rippled through her. She needed to see a healer too, but with her brother needing to find another creature meant she had some extra time to find her own to capture. Plus, she knew enough about herbs to aid the wound for now.

The first step to wound care was cleaning it. She returned to the stream she had crossed earlier. There, she washed off the blood and examined the wound. It was a clean cut. What upset Hiraya the most was the destruction of a perfectly good shirt. Even as a princess, her mother taught her to not be wasteful nor reliant on the luxury of being royal. She slipped two fingers through the tear and sighed. She shouldn't be so attached to her clothing. At least she had stopped her brother from being the next heir...for now. An arrogant, insecure boy would only burn Croec to the ground...maybe even expel any and all creatures, the opposite intention their uncle had for this city. He wanted there to be balance, but with his passing, a balanced government seemed more of an obstacle and so her father employed a monarchy.

But what would she do if her brother didn't honor their deal? Landain was a biased witness, and Hex never admitted to a loss. She could just duel him again. But would he do it? Probably not. He would just make an excuse. She shook her head. This was ridiculous...having the Hunt determine the next king...or queen was ridiculous. The Hunt did not test for leadership skills, nor strategic skills, nor combat skills. It merely tested if you were an experienced hunter and had the luck of coming across a rogue creature. This tradition didn't even reveal diplomatic prowess. Hex definitely lacked this trait. No one would want to support Hex. He had no quality anyone adored or even liked. At least that's what Hiraya observed.

She shuddered at the thought of her brother wearing the crown and focused on finding the little white flowers Em and Finn, her mentors, had told her to rub on a wound to accelerate the formation of a scab. It would prevent sickness from entering and festering. She finally found a small bundle of these tiny white flowers with a yellow center. She forgot the name of them but recognized them immediately. She had remembered thinking that these flowers were so commonplace that if more people knew of its medicinal properties, it could help save a life. Knowing small helpful facts like this was why Hiraya loved learning and reading.

Chapter 5

Nothing. Zilch. She found no leads to any ‘rogue’ creatures. Did everyone catch them? She wondered if her brother had caught one yet. He would return after the first catch. He could stay and continue hunting until the final day, but many returned home, not wanting to stay out in the woods any longer. There were many creepy things out here. The ghostly creatures made her uneasy. She’d rather face a Lycan or a chupacabra any day over something that tampered with your mind like a Wendigo. Those were the creatures that caused real damage, and Hiraya didn’t have the spiritual capabilities to fight one of those off. She actually didn’t have *any* spiritual powers.

She sat down on a fallen tree, setting her pack on one side of her and the orb lit her way on the other side. The orb had been spelled to draw power from the moon, to illuminate her path during the night. Her stomach growled in anticipation of pulling out her snack, a traditional rice ball filled with fish tossed in sauce and chives. Delicious.

A whoop pulled her from her snack. She peered over at Brin, who sat patiently waiting to be fed. She grinned at him and pulled out a piece of jerked meat. His paws patted the ground in excitement as a small smile seemed to form on his black lips. Anyone else may have found him threatening, but she knew otherwise. She tossed the meat to him. He caught it with ease, a task they had practiced since he was a pup.

In her peripheral vision, she spotted some movement in the boughs of the trees. The night was dark but not so dark she couldn't see movements of something large nearby. Or was she seeing things? "Hey Brin," she said, not completely done with her bite. The hyena straightened, giving her his full attention. She raised the orb to see the hyena a little better. A piece of the meat hung from his mouth as he intently waited for her command. "Hanâ-hanâ." She commanded him to search, seek out any smells of anyone watching.

Brin lifted his nose, the meat still dangling from his mouth and sniffed the air. Without even moving from his position, he turned to look at the tree tops. His stare and stillness alerted her that her suspicions of someone watching them was true, even though the movement had come to a halt. She stood up, her grip tightening around the orb. She threw it into the trees at the point she assumed her stalker hid. The orb stopped as the person instinctively caught it. It illuminated a hooded figure casually sitting on a branch. She saw only dark eyes with strands of pale colored hair over dark brows. The bulgae.

"Ha!" Hiraya shouted, proud that her gut feeling was correct once again. She needed to quit doubting herself.

The bulgae dropped the orb as if it burned his fingers. He rolled off the branch and landed behind the illumination. He still wore a mask to cover the bottom half of his face, and he held the sides of his hood in hopes to hide his pale yellow hair. She didn't know why though. It was just them, and she was smart enough to know what that hood concealed.

"It's you again. The bulgae," she said, breaking the silence. Brin stepped between them, a wall the Bulgae would have to go through before ever reaching her. A low curdling growl came deep from his belly, a warning one shouldn't take lightly. The growl rolled into a soft laughter,

common for hyenas. She had seen many times what Brin could do, and most of the time he held back. Those jaws had such force, it broke bones like they were dry, dead twigs.

The Bulgae picked up the orb and examined it. Was he pretending to be nonchalant or was he truly unphased? Maybe he wasn't too bright. Not a lot of people had met a hyena.

"Why do you keep following me?" she asked.

He shrugged and tossed the light back to her. It fell short, lacking enough force behind it to roll even to Brin's feet. Brin perked his ears and leaned his head to the side, confused by the gesture. Even her hyena didn't know if he was truly a threat. Hiraya stifled a laugh. "I'm going to pretend you meant to do that." She really didn't feel like he wanted to hurt her. In all honesty, it felt like he was new to the whole tracking and intimidation thing.

Another shrug.

"So who are you?"

He cleared his throat and tried to speak. A quick crack came before his voice deepened, "No one." It sounded almost as if he were forcefully reaching for such a low octave.

She scanned him, wondering what she should do next. Should she just go ahead and attack or continue her questioning? The first interaction added a little excitement to her seemingly mundane life, but now it appeared to be more serious. "Who—" she spoke, but paused when he opened his hand creating a ball of fire. "Well that's interesting." So bulgae not only could turn into a fiery hound but control fire? She made a mental note of that.

He threw the fire at her with more force than he had with the orb. It lit up the forest. Hiraya instinctively grabbed the pendant around her neck and whispered the name only she, her dead mother, and Aashirya knew: *Hindi Nakita*. The pendant enlarged in her grip just as the flaming ball reached her. It splattered across the head of an axe almost half her size. It didn't

resemble a weapon a mere human could wield, but that had been the luxury with enchanted weapons like Kita, the nickname Hiraya had given the axe which could be revealed to others. With the true name, she could use the axe with ease. It didn't feel heavy in her grasp. It felt light like if she were to hold a mere cutlass. For others though, they could not pick it up unless they had unnatural strength.

She moved Kita so she could peer at the hellhound. He stared at her, his skin paled with surprise. Was it the axe or the fact that his attack would have hit her head on and could have incapacitated her? He gulped. She spun the handle in her hand to examine the weapon for any damage. She had used the axe many times against talons and teeth but never a fiery blow. A small discoloration near the large, circular stone at the center of the axe head, marked the metal. The gold flecks within the dark blue stone winked at her as if to say it were fine. Her fingers ran across the smaller aquamarine stones encompassing the large stone. They seemed intact. Symbols etched into its blade and stones decorated it, all to add to the enchantment of her weapon, enhancing it not only for offense but defense against attacks just like the Bulgae launched.

Before she could respond, Brin leapt at the Bulgae, muzzle open and teeth ready to tear at flesh. The Bulgae caught the hyena mid-jump and redirected Brin's momentum, causing him to skid into the nearby bushes. The distraction presented the perfect opportunity for her to attack and close the space between them. Fireball attacks would be much harder in close combat. Plus, close combat was where she excelled.

He turned, facing her. His eyes widened, startled by her close proximity. She grinned. "Hiya." With her free hand, she brought her fist to his chin. She would have rather aimed for his

nose or the spot near the back of his ear for more effect, but his height made that difficult. It didn't help that she was shorter than most.

He stumbled to the side as Brin returned for another round. Fire ignited on his fingertips. Hiraya paused, worried that he'd char her pet. Before she could commit to another attack, a low growl came from the shadows of the trees and something leapt in front of the hyena.

Hiraya had only seen them in her father's "refuge" where he collected exotic animals. Its distinct coat of orange and black stripes glistened in the orb's soft light. A tiger. A powerful, beautiful beast full of prowess and size. Brin had no chance against such an animal, but she had no time to fret over her pet as the Bulgae reached into his cloak, his hand glowing ever so slightly. The princess stepped back to give herself more time to react. She knew what was coming. He had done this in the alleyway. The sting of this attack still resonated in her memory. She raised her axe as he tossed the almost invisible needles of heat. She wondered what it could be, some sort of lava needles? She didn't have time to examine whatever came her way. Instead, she waved Kita like a fan. Whatever he threw, never hit her. She knew it wouldn't. With being so small, a gust of wind could definitely deter the attack. His hood fell backwards with her counter-attack. He grimaced.

"You really are predictable. Now tell me why you are following me, before I force it out of you." Her tone remained flat. This had become more serious. It was no longer an exciting detour from her daily life, but an obstacle that threatened her livelihood. Not only was he no longer alone, he had become more aggressive in his approach.

He didn't meet her gaze, a sign he was either searching for a lie or he wasn't even going to respond. Her patience dissipated. She lunged towards him, swinging her weapon horizontally. He jumped over it with such ease. Time slowed as she released her left hand leaving her right on

Kita's handle and reached up, grabbing the bulgae's ankle. The maneuver took all her strength. She had to ensure she did it correctly and effectively. With all the force she could muster, she yanked him to the ground. He landed on the ground with a dull thud. As he rolled onto his back, she stood over him, one hand on her hip and the hilt of her weapon resting against her shoulder. She glanced around in search of Brin, but the hyena and tiger were no longer in sight. Hopefully, Brin only lead the tiger away rather than try to battle it.

A groan brought her back to the Bulgae. "Here. Hold this for me," she said.

He furrowed his brows, befuddled by her command. She leaned over him and laid the brunt of Kita on his torso. This move would help her in two ways: reveal the Bulgae's strength and/or keep him from fleeing if his strength didn't overpower the weight of the axe.

He grunted. "Ai ya!"

"Now that I have your undivided attention. Why are you following me? I'd just like some open communication. See, my axe is really heavy, and I would gladly lift it, if you would just answer me." She squatted down beside him. "So what do you say?"

He stared into her eyes. Was he going to spill? He opened his mouth. Yes! He was. At least that's what she hoped.

A hazy shadow figure appeared on the other side of the Bulgae and directly in front of her. She stood as the edges became more defined and the black started to seep into colors. "Tsuneo," the hellhound muttered. She glanced down at him, repeating the name to herself. It helped her retain information, parroting names and facts.

A man, apparently named Tsuneo, formed. He had long, straight, black hair pulled into a half bun. His pale skin and dark eyes against the night sky made him even more ominous. He

wore a traditional gray kimono made of silk. Three swords hung from his hip. A warrior. Maybe a samurai? But how could he just appear like such?

His hands hid within the large sleeves as they rested in front of him. He glanced down at the Bulgae, his gaze bored and unbothered. “Otouto, she’s not the one,” he said, his voice low and filled with annoyance.

Who was this guy? “Excuse—” Hiraya began.

Tsuneo reached out in such a swift movement. Hiraya only saw a blur. He wrapped his long, slender fingers around her throat, and then lifted her off the ground with an ease only a creature could behold. The princess’s eyes widened as her fingers searched for any opening to peel off his grasp. She had never been picked up in such a way. She had no idea how to respond to this novel feeling.

He paid no attention to her, instead continued to look down at the stuck hellhound. He didn’t care that her lungs were reverberating to suck in fresh air or that her throat burned with the tightness of his grip. “She isn’t the right princess,” he muttered dryly.

Hiraya swung her feet in hopes to meet with his torso or any part of him. She just needed a small window of an opportunity to break free. Nothing phased the man...no...*creature*. He had to be a creature.

Darkness appeared at the corners of her eyes, slowly creeping into her central vision. She had to break free before she passed out or worse...no. She couldn’t think of that. Freedom. She needed freedom.

Tsuneo grabbed the hilt of the middle sword stowed in a black sheath. A royal blue tassel hung from the hilt. It was strange the details she noticed close to death. That damned blue tassel. Meaningless.

He withdrew the sword, revealing not a silver blade but one made of what appeared to be a moving pale blue light. If Hiraya had to compare it to anything, it almost looked like contained lightning. She paused only for a moment to take in the wonder of the sword, but as he pointed it towards her, she thrashed about. The strange blade sunk into her torso with a quick thrust. A flash of heat filled her, but not in a way that would torch her alive. It reminded her of the times she sat in the shade of the trees, feeling cold, and then stepping out into the full sun of a hot Sturgeon day when the seasons reach its peak warmth.

The man pulled the sword back, and all the warmth snapped back. A sharp pain ran through her. This was what Hiraya thought being struck by lightning would feel like.

All the strength within her vanished and her body felt depleted, almost numb, in shock by being pierced through. The man released her. She fell to the ground, limp. She watched as the darkness continued to seep in. The images began to slow down with her blinks. The man lifting the axe and tossing it to the side. The Bulgae staring into her eyes before standing up and walking away. A young woman joining them, glancing back with cat-like eyes.

The darkness finally consumed her. The numbness also encompassed her. She had imagined death would be cold and lonely. But it just felt numb and full of thoughts of things she still wished to do.

Chapter 6

Hiraya glanced up at Queen Malaya who sat on the black granite steps leading to the pergola where drapes of white flowers hung. The full moon lit up the small pond in front of them. Her mother stared up at the moon with adoration as slender fingers combed through the young princess's dark brown hair. Her mother always seemed lured by the luminescent orb, like the queen had secret, profound conversations with it each night. "Do you feel connected to the moon?" her mother asked.

"What do you mean?" Hiraya's voice was small, young, almost a squeak of a memory. Was she a child again?

"My Hiraya, you know in Maharlika, where I am from, we have a story about the moon."

"Really?" Hiraya's small voice cracked. She loved hearing the stories from her mother's homeland. It grounded her, made her feel connected to something beyond herself.

"There is a tale of the sea serpent god, Bakunawa. His body coiled around the earth as he ruled the oceans."

"That's big!" The princess's eyes widened in awe.

The queen displayed a gentle smile down at the princess. "He saw the seven moons residing in the sky and fell in love. They were seven beautiful sisters. To our ancestors' dismay, he swallowed them, his obsession running deep."

“He ate them!”

Malaya nodded solemnly before both of them turned to look at the moon. “So our people knew they needed to protect the last sister, the one you see now. As the serpent tried to swallow the last sister, the villagers screamed, making as much noise as possible to scare Bakuwana away.”

“Then what happened?” Hiraya leaned forward, closer to her mother.

“If you would stop interrupting little one, I will tell you.” Malaya brushed her daughter’s nose playfully.

“Oh. Sorry. I’ll listen now.” The princess sat back, her shoulders drooping and her eyes staring at her lap.

Malaya chuckled and gave the girl a quick hug before continuing, “Oh you will?”

Hiraya nodded energetically.

“Well then, where was I? Ah yes! All that noise stopped Bakunawa, but only for that night. The noise woke the creator of the seven sisters, Bathala. He saw what was happening and so he hid the moon by planting bamboo. This didn’t stop the serpent god though. He continued to search and obsess over the last sister. Even the goddess of the moon, Mayari, helped deter the sea god.”

“Did he get the last moon?” Hiraya moved closer to her mother, eager for more.

“Do you see the moon in the sky?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have your answer.”

“But what happened to Baka-Bakuway-Bek-that serpent god?”

“He fell in love with a gorgeous human princess and stopped his chase and...” The queen’s voice trailed off as if disappearing into a memory. She shook her head and then touched the jade bracelet on her right wrist. “This—” She brought the bracelet closer to her daughter. “This is a family heirloom. These jade beads are intertwined by hair from the bamboo that protected the sister. The hair was washed in the water blessed by the moon. This bracelet protected not only myself, but the ancestors before me. A gift I shall hand down to you when the time is right.”

Hiraya twisted the beads between her fingers. The stones made her skin tingle. “Will you still be protected?” Did she really ask this question within this memory? Or was this an alteration within the dream, something she wanted to ask now?

A cloud blocked the moon’s light. In the darkness, Hiraya’s mother dissipated, along with the garden. The little girl faded into the blue haired princess. She scanned the black as her heart thumped loudly in her chest, the only sound in this silence. “Mom?” she called out. “Mom! Where did you go? You can have this back!” She raised her right hand, indicating the jade bracelet. She would do so immediately if it meant her mother’s resurrection. Sometimes she wondered if the queen’s death would have been prevented if she hadn’t inherited this heirloom. The guilt settled in her stomach on the days she allowed herself to slow down. Maybe that was why she kept her days so full and busy, to ignore those feelings laying dormant.

“Bhanji.” A voice echoed through the black. “Wake up.”

“Tita?” she asked the abyss.

Heat soaked into the area above her belly button. The spot grew hotter and hotter. She lifted her shirt to find the area glowing a pale blue. The illumination brightened as the heat

became unbearable. The luminosity grew and grew until it blinded her and chased away the abyss.

Hiraya's eyes opened to her dimly lit room. She sat up and immediately revealed her stomach to examine it. Although pain from the splitting heat lingered more as a memory than a physical sensation, there was no mark. Nothing had been drawn into her skin, no mark remained by the strange blade. She saw him draw it though. She felt how it sliced into her flesh with alarming ease. How was she even alive?

She glanced over at her shoulder, where Hex's weapon had injured her. It too had faded but unlike the wound to her stomach, this one left a faint mark. Did the Royal Healer do this? Did they fix her up? There was no way she could still live after that man stabbed her stomach. But maybe it was the healer. Maybe they caught her in time before she bled out. Reikia had been assigned to her.

She glanced around her room. No one. Nothing. Aashirya's voice definitely reached her so where was her aunt? Her eyes stopped at the big ball of fur at the end of her bed. Brin's body subtly rose and fell with long breaths. Relief washed over her. He was safe. She had feared the tiger had harmed her companion, her friend.

Her fingers went to the pendant around her neck, realizing that it had been in its full form when she had passed out. Now, it hung from her neck, its usual place. Did someone know how to return it to its pendant form or did the strange man do something to it? Aashirya did know Kita's name. It could have been her but...

The large cypress wood door opened, grabbing the attention of both Hiraya and Brin. A young woman, no, a teenaged girl entered. She wore her thick, black hair to her shoulders although it probably reached further if it weren't for the natural, spiraled curls inherited from

Queen Atatiana. She wore a purple and gold sari, the fashion that was currently “in” as she would say it. She looked skinnier since the last time Hiraya saw her, which couldn’t have been more than a day. Their gaze met. The dark brown almost black eyes widened. “You’re awake!” she said.

Hiraya nodded as Brin jumped down to greet her. “Bre, do you know what happened? I can’t seem to recall everything.” Like how she got back home after being stabbed or what did she look like when they found her...or even who found her. She had so many questions, but knew Bre wouldn’t be the one to answer them all. At least her younger sister could tell her a quick overview.

Breonna shook her head, more out of pity rather than saying no. “The Royal Guard came across you.” She plopped down on the bed beside Hiraya. “You were unconscious. The nanny—”

“Aashirya.” Hiraya hated when Bre deemed her aunt as only the nanny. Aashirya was like a second mother to her. There was no way she would let anyone speak less of her. Tita.

“Yeah her. She said your man—I mean, life force was drained. Dad brought in the Royal Healer to check on you too. Said the same thing. So what happened? Why have you been asleep for three days?”

“Three days!” Three days had passed since the incident. It felt only like moments. She still felt exhausted, like her muscles were still recuperating from her “life force” being drained. Was that the purpose of that sword...to not physically harm but to spiritually drain? It would explain why she had no scars from the wound.

“Yeah. The nan—” Hiraya glared at her sister, a warning to use Aashirya’s name. “You know what I mean! You harp on the strangest things!” Brin pushed his snout into Bre’s hand,

begging for headscratches. She pushed him away and continued, “But....what was I saying? Oh yeah. Tell me what happened?”

“What were you going to say about Aashirya though?” Hiraya asked. Her sister often got easily distracted. She blamed it on youth and the need for instant gratification in Bre’s generation. Spells and incantations made it easier to obtain things of need as well as things of want. Hiraya was almost seven years older than her younger sister, and even though the gods and deities saw this as a mere blink, she knew it caused enough of a span between them to never really see the need to spend time together. Plus, they were involved in completely different hobbies. Hiraya was actually surprised to have Bre even visit her.

“Oh yes! I overheard her talking to one of the court ladies. She said Hex was mad about you.”

Mad at her? Why would Hex be mad? “The only one who should be mad is me for ending up here and you,” Hiraya interrupted.

“Me? Why should I be mad?”

“Because of the Hunt.”

Bre cocked her head to the side, still not understanding what Hiraya was implying. “You didn’t get to participate in this stupid competition.”

Bre waved her hand. “Oh. I told dad it wasn’t a big deal.” A shadow crossed Bre’s expression, just long enough for Hiraya to notice, but not long enough to remain. “You know me. I have no talent for that stuff. But—”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh yeah! But I didn’t tell you the best part!” Of course Bre didn’t want to discuss it. She had never been one to participate in sports or competitions involving fighting. She would rather

gossip with her friends, explore the city, or simply enjoy any type of gathering event. She was born to be a socialite, a lady of the courts rather than a ruler that makes decisions. Even with this fact, Hiraya still felt it unfair that there were no parts of the competition that her sister may have excelled in. Leadership came from a diversified set of skills, not just one.

“Are you listening?” Hiraya gave her younger sister full attention. “Hex said you were trying to distract from the fact that he won the Hunt. Said you fainting was a scam, an act.”

Hiraya froze. Hex won the Hunt? Did he forfeit the title as the heir? Or was he going to ignore their deal and take the title?

“Mom wanted to postpone the celebration tonight, but Hex convinced dad to continue with it. I’m so glad ‘cause I wanna show off my dress.” Bre clapped rapidly, accompanying it with an enthusiastic squeal. Hiraya ignored her sister’s excitement, thinking of what she should do. From the sounds of it, Hex had decided to accept the title and would do so at tonight’s celebration. He wasn’t keeping his part of the deal.

Bre laid her polished hands and white tipped fingernails over Hiraya’s, bringing Hiraya back into the conversation. “It stinks you won’t be able to go due to your recovery. You’re gonna miss dad naming Hex the next heir.”

“What?” Hiraya said as the words repeated in her mind. She had heard the words clearly. She knew this was what would happen tonight, but it just seemed so strange to have them actually spoken into existence. Hex was going to be the next heir. She had to speak to her dad, figure out some other solution to naming the heir. There had to be something like a rematch. It was only fair and just.

She threw the covers off her and leapt out of the bed. Without saying farewell to her sister, she jolted out of the room, forgetting about the fatigue that had plagued her only moments ago.

Hiraya threw the door open to her father's office, causing it to slam against a bookshelf. A few loose leather bound books fell to the floor. She grimaced briefly before returning to her march towards her father. He sat behind his large, sturdy desk unperturbed by her noisy entrance. On his thick nose sat glasses, which helped him read over a scroll in front of him. He peered over them at her. "You seem to be feeling better. I knew you'd be fine," he said.

"That's not why I am here," she replied as her father returned his attention to the scrolls. She reached across the desk and rolled the scroll slightly shut to impede any further reading. "You can't announce Hex as the heir. He cheated."

"Do you have proof?"

"Well, no but—"

The king sighed and straightened, giving her his full attention. "Then I can't do anything about it." He met her piercing gaze. "Listen, it would be a process. You know it. The Nokomis Council would have to get involved and right now, I'm dealing with trying to find another Royal Warlock, which we would need to even do the investigation. You don't want to be the leader. Who did you think was going to take over? Bre? Don't make this a big deal. "

She crossed her arms across her chest. "But he cheated." It didn't matter if she didn't want to be queen or not. It didn't matter if Bre wanted to be queen or not. Hex cheated and a king should never cheat to gain his crown. A real king would not have to.

They stared at each other, a challenge between like minds. He was the first to look away, taking off his glasses and standing up. "Listen baby girl, I have no doubt he cheated, but you know your brother will ask for evidence. Without it, my hands are tied," he explained while walking around the desk to stand before her. He clutched her shoulders with his thick hands. He was a head taller, his shoulders in her direct eyesight. She was short compared to him, a trait inherited from her mother. The stockiness and curves she got from her viking lineage. She wasn't lucky enough to be thinner like her brother and sister.

He squeezed and then tried to pull her into a hug, something she really didn't want at the moment. She wanted validation, support, a solution, not an excuse and a hug. She pushed on his round belly, a result of too much meade. "No! You could have us battle for it. You want the strongest and smartest to be your heir. A battle would suffice." Her voice slowly grew louder and louder, the swirl of emotions pouring in on each other until it felt like it overflowed. She hated she did this, around her father especially, but it seemed he only listened when she shouted. "Or even an obstacle course, or a test of knowledge. Why the Hunt? It was so last minute and Bre can't participate yet!"

He dropped his hands and turned his back to her. He shook his head and exhaled. "Hiraya." He moved back to his original place behind his desk, her eyes watching his every move. He scratched the stubble on his chin. "Breonna already said she didn't want to be Queen and we all know she doesn't have the brains nor the common sense to lead. She'd give up the crown for some random suitor she met on the streets." He pointed towards the open window, although the streets he spoke of were far below at the base of the mountain.

Hiraya despised the fact that he was right. For Bre, it really was anyone who she thought was attractive and just a little attention would convince her to use her whole purse on them.

Many of her friends were only such so they had access to the royal family riches.

“She could change her mind. She’s only fifteen.”

“Listen, even you said you weren’t interested.”

Her brows furrowed. “That’s not what I said.” And it wasn’t. He was taking her words out of context, chewing them up and spitting them out with a completely different meaning, a talent of his.

He scowled at her with disbelief.

She jabbed a finger in his direction. “You know it.”

“Hiraya. Baby girl.”

She ignored the snide honey dripping from her name and continued, “I said I couldn’t see myself as queen right now. That doesn’t mean never. I still want to travel and explore and learn and stuff.”

He scoffed as if something she said was outrageous. “When? You haven’t left Croec since we moved here. You were five.”

“Six.”

“Either way, you’re an adult and I know you. When you put your mind to something, you do it. You haven’t done anything you just listed.” He donned his glasses again, trying to subtly dismiss her. It wasn’t going to work, but it never really did. Like he said, when she put her mind to something, she did it.

“That still doesn’t mean you should let Hex be king! He will leave Croec in ruins and still say it was everyone else’s fault!”

“He’s smart.” The king reopened the scroll.

“He’s an arrogant asshole.”

Her father chuckled. “Hopefully, he will grow out of it by the time I hand over the crown. Which, might I add, could be twenty springs from now.”

“C’mon. Just one battle or something. You get to make the rules.” She hoped this would entice him. He liked being the decision maker. It was the whole reason he accepted the role as King of Croec.

“Listen. You’re my favorite, you know that, but I can’t just change the rules for you.”

“I’m not—” She groaned, feeling her anger about to explode. He and Hex were the only people who triggered her like this. “Just open an investigation. I bet the Royal Warlock will find something.”

“By Wodin’s last breath Hiraya. The only way to stop anything is if I had another child who didn’t participate and wanted to. But I don’t.”

“This is so stupid. You’re the king.” He had changed the rules before, many times. It was in his power to do so.

“Rules are rules.”

She clasped her hands together more to keep herself from throwing something, an old childhood habit trying to resurface. “Do you hear yourself? If rules are rules then Hex should be dismissed or disqualified for cheating!”

“You don’t have—”

“Then investigate!”

“Hiraya!” His voice boomed.

She knew by his tone he had made his decision. “This is fucking minotaur shit!” She stormed out of his office, thrusting the door behind her with all the anger that had built up during their conversation. She heard objects rattle, and even a few meet the ground. Her father’s voice grumbled words too muddled by the walls for her to comprehend. She really needed to calm down. Instead of stomping off, she pressed her back to the wall. Hot tears rolled down her cheeks. Why didn’t he ever listen to her? He said she was his favorite, but it always seemed he favored Hex. His words never matched his actions.

“What is going on?” Queen Atatiana appeared down the hall, far enough that Hiraya could wipe away her tears without notice. “Did you and your father fight again?”

She pushed off the wall as the queen walked down towards her with a grace only thought gifted to a goddess. Atatiana was quiet too, always moving around Laho Palace absent of shoes even on the coldest nights. Hiraya wondered how she didn’t freeze doing this. The queen wore a simple blue dress cinching at the waist. It went well with the cool undertones of her rich taupe skin, which also matched her calm demeanor. Her thin, long locks were pulled into a casual half up twisted bun and today she wore little jewelry. And even then, she still kept those pieces as silent as her footsteps.

She stopped near the princess and scanned the scene before her. “You are healthy. All is well.” She glanced at the closed door of the king’s office. “I guess he will be in no mood to discuss decor.”

Hiraya watched the queen ponder over the decision to enter or not. This woman confused her. Sometimes it seemed the queen cared, and then other times, indifferent. It was always an awkward indifference, as if unsure how to respond, almost like emotions were foreign. It made sense, being married off to a king as a contract between cities rather than for love like her mother

to her father. Being in this confusion though, made it difficult for Hiraya to confide in the queen. Should she reveal Hex's misdeeds or remain silent? Would Atatiana even help? She wasn't sure. They didn't have the closest relationship. They were acquaintances at best. The palace gave them the space that they only crossed paths when necessary: balls, dinners, and other social events. Even then, they spoke very little.

“Will you be attending tonight?” Atatiana asked.

Hiraya nodded while coming to the conclusion that she'd keep Hex's unethical practices to herself.

“Good. Aashirya has the traditional garb for you.”

Hiraya sighed. The queen always made them wear traditional designs from their cultures. The queen and Breonna wore clothing representative of the Kwe tribe. Hiraya wore clothing from the Maharlika islands. Hex and her father wore traditional viking wear. She understood why, but sometimes she wanted to choose her own dress. She despised the puffy sleeves. But that was the last thing she needed to worry about. She needed a solution for the current issue or else Croec would be headed down a dark road.

“Okay. Well I guess I gotta go get ready,” the princess half lied. She didn't need to get ready right then and there, having the rest of the day to prepare for tonight's festivities. She just wanted to get away to think.

Atatiana nodded and finally decided to enter the king's office. Hiraya left, feeling more alone than ever.

Chapter 7

The sun shone brightly outside, reaching the peak of its rotation. This meant a few hours to spare before the ball began. Hiraya had some free time and she really needed to walk off this stiffness. Being inert for three days allowed her muscles to become rigid.

She closed her eyes and reached for the sun. It felt good against her skin. The cool air revitalized her with each deep breath. When she opened her eyes again, she peered down at the Moon Garden, a gift left by her mother, Queen Malaya, or more so a legacy. For years, her mother built and maintained this part of the palace. The late queen even cherished it like a second child. Hiraya visited this place often as a means to relieve stress and to be closer to her mother. It was as if the dead queen's spirit lingered.

There were three tiers to the garden. Hiraya now stood on the highest one. This one had little growth, with stone tables spread across it to enjoy the two tiers staggered below. The second tier held a small pond. Bright orange and white koi fish swam beneath the water lilies, and other water plants. There was just enough room to walk around the pond comfortably as a couple, but anything more, even a third, would mean a constant struggle to stay out of the water. A small stream, meant to allow any overflow, spilled into the next tier. The last tier wasn't really below the pond but more of an extension, furthest from the palace. It was a moon garden full of flowers and trees best observed and experienced in the moonlight. The garden had been designed

to look like a crescent moon with a black marble pergola at the center. Vines grew across the top, adorned with dainty, tiny white flowers that bloomed at night. This tier had many plants and flowers that flourished more so at night than during the day. The flowers slept when the sun rose and woke when the moon took its position in the black sky. The stream from the pond curved, avoiding the black granite pergola. A small red bridge arched over the stream allowing access to this small structure, a place she spent many nights watching the moon with her mother and hearing the stories from Maharlika and the earlier years of when her parents met. A story her father had used to rehash frequently until Malaya's passing. Stories she missed more than she would like to admit. Stories that had brought her not only closer to her mother but to her father, someone she hadn't really spent any time with due to his busy schedule. He too often felt like a stranger.

"Look at her hair." Hiraya heard someone whisper.

She turned to her right, not realizing she had an audience. Not a lot of people came out here. People often considered it "creepy," making jokes that her mother's spirit still lingered, watching, observing. She found Bre and two of her sister's friends sitting at a black marbled table and bench. Bre stopped giggling when she noticed Hiraya's gaze. She slapped her friends' laps, indicating they should stop. "Hey sis. You look better than you did earlier," she said sweetly. Hiraya couldn't tell if Bre was being authentic or joining in on her friends' judgement.

Hiraya gave her a small smile, one that could easily be interpreted as annoyance. "Aww, thanks Breonna."

"Yeah, but that hair. You trying to be a creature?" Bre's blonde friend spoke. Hiraya couldn't remember if her name was Stacey or Kathy. Either way, Hiraya had an immediate

dislike for her. Her aura always felt draining, almost heavy, which made Hiraya want to keep a distance.

“Maybe I just like the color blue,” Hiraya replied with a shrug. She knew they were antagonizing her because they were bored, something it took her too long to catch onto.

“Ew. Gross,” the brunette friend spoke. Maybe she was Kathy. Bre cycled through groups of friends like seasons changing, so Hiraya never committed their names to memory.

“Kath!” Bre exclaimed with fabricated shock.

Yep. She was Kathy. Hiraya imagined her getting pooped on by a bird just flying overhead. These girls were so blatantly rude, but it reminded Hiraya why she never hung out with her younger sister. Alone together, Bre was pleasant, but around friends...nope. Just nope.

“I could definitely just throw you off the side of the mountain with ease,” Hiraya muttered to herself. She immediately pressed her lips together, realizing she spoke her thoughts aloud.

“Hiraya!” Bre said

“What’s wrong with you!” Stacey added.

Kathy’s dark chestnut eyes were wide with terror. Tears built at the corners and the color drained from her face.

“I think you broke her,” a familiar voice said from behind Hiraya.

The princess spun around to find a man and woman in their mid-to-late thirties. She knew them instantly. “Em! Finn! What are you two doing here?” She ran to them and wrapped an arm around each of them at once. Finn grunted in response while Emtu merely chuckled. Kathy ran past them, face covered, tears pouring, and disappeared into the palace. Bre and Stacey chased

after. Hiraya and her surprised guests watched the scene before the princess shrugged and returned her focus to the two she considered her childhood mentors.

“Well, we were simply coming for the ball but—” Em started and Finn continued, “—we came early because we heard that not only did you lose the Hunt, but you were unconscious for days!” By the way they finished each other’s sentences, people often confused them as twins, but they weren’t. Emtu was a few years older than Finn. Her pale blonde hair and bright eyes made her seem younger. Many thought her sweet, but behind her quiet nature lay a temper that any one who knew her liked to ignite, including Hiraya.

“I didn’t think Hunters would get news that fast in Roanoke,” she lied. She knew they had ears everywhere, but she never thought they would check in on her if something were to happen. They had better things to do, protecting people or traveling to complete assignments set by the Head Hunter.

“Eh. Eh.” Emtu waved her finger at Hiraya. “We are no longer referred to as Hunters but Sentinels.”

“Oh yeah! I’m still getting used to the change,” Hiraya said, clasping her hands together.

“So are many of us,” Finn grumbled. She couldn’t tell if it was because he disapproved of the change or if it was the reaction of the more traditional hunters who spoke out against it.

Emtu hit his arm. “It’s been a year, and I think it sounds better. More helpful than threatening.” This statement made sense from Emtu. Emtu was never one to be a fighter. She always liked making people feel better, feel comfortable rather than go out and kill creatures, as was the original intention of the settlers of Roanoke. Ever since the first hunter family came from the Old World or also known as Earth and found themselves in the Darkling Plain, fighting strange creatures never seen before.

He scoffed. So maybe he didn't like the name change. "Okay sis." Finn was quite skilled as a Sentinel. His agility and nimbleness made him a formidable adversary. Hiraya had learned many tricks from him when she was younger, and how to avoid attacks or even just manipulating the flow of an opponent's attack to throw them off. He had learned these skills more so out of fun and dismantling any pride his opponents had left before finally going on the offense, at which he was skilled in many of the smaller weapons, something he learned from his eldest sister, a most prominent Sentinel known across not only this area but even to other worlds. Although Finn didn't seem to like the new name, Hiraya enjoyed it. She agreed with Emtu. Plus it wasn't always creatures that were the villains that needed to be hunted.

"Hey, since you two are here, you wanna spar?" The princess swung her arm in a circle, warming up her muscles. "I need to let off steam and I need a good workout." A spar would clear any rigidity in her slumbering muscles and let her know the extent of her injuries from the Hunt. So far, she felt sore and tired but nothing serious enough to take her out of commission.

"One or both?" Finn asked.

"One for a warm up and then we shall see." She didn't sound confident near the end of her statement. Taking on one Sentinel, especially one from the Head family was difficult, but two...Hiraya knew she was skilled but she acknowledged her limitations. She wasn't a creature or a spiritually inclined human like a warlock or priestess. She, like the Sentinels, was a mere human.

Emtu smacked her brother's back. "It's your turn." She flicked her loose, yellow curl back and sat down at the table the three girls had previously sat at. "I came to enjoy the splendor not battle it out."

Finn pulled off his pack and set it on the table by his sister. "It is a good thing Crevil forces us to always carry our weapons." He rummaged through everything he had brought. "Even when it's something like a little dancey-dance."

Emtu shook her head and peaked inside the bag.

Hiraya wrapped her fingers around her pendant. She didn't feel like using Kita, nor did she want to wield anything else. "I was thinking of just hand-to-hand combat."

"Oh!" He raised a light brown eyebrow. "You promise to not use Kita," he said, remembering the name of her axe.

She nodded. "No Kita. Just what we are born with."

He gave her a crooked smirk. With that smirk, Hiraya knew he was just jumping into the duel. He attacked, fist reared back. She wasn't quick enough to jump back and avoid him all together. She leaned to her left and reached for his right fist. When Finn and Emtu first trained her, she could barely dodge, now she mastered the art of redirecting which was useful for any opponent stronger or faster than herself. Finn definitely had speed on his side. He saw this redirection, using the momentum to turn his attack from a punch into a spinning, backwards kick. Hiraya absorbed the brunt of the force with her stomach and wrapped her arms around his leg. She planted her feet firmly on the ground and activated all her leg muscles. This was the time she loved having large, sturdy thighs (or tree-trunk thighs as her sister put it). She used all her strength to throw the grown man.

As he flew through the air, he waved his arms around like a baby bird learning to fly. He had to have misjudged her strength levels, thinking she was weaker from her bedridden state the last few days.

Emtu's laughter echoed in the background. Finn skidded across an empty table and used it to somehow land on his feet on the opposite side. This wasn't the first time he'd been thrown around, although, usually it was by some sort of creature or witch. "Did you just throw me!" he shouted.

Hiraya shrugged, but a broad smile formed on her round face. "I yanked a Bulgae mid-air and threw him into the ground the other day too."

He straightened his posture, no longer ready to launch another attack. "Wait." He raised a hand to signify a pause to their battle. "You met a Bulgae? All the way out here?"

Why did he sound so surprised? "Yeah. Actually, I was going to ask if you have any writings on it. We didn't have much in the library here." She hadn't looked too hard, but she already knew most of what the library here held. She had read most of it already, except the books on boring topics like governmental structures or some of the old pamphlets that were only meant for adult eyes that she had seen Ashirya sneaking off with a few times. Something she would rather forget to have ever witnessed.

"I've only met one, a Shikari, which is something similar to a hun-er, I mean, someone like us." He walked around the table towards Hiraya. "And then only heard a few when a few comrades went to Goguyrao, where the creatures are from. Bulgae are quite rare to meet."

"I know that face. I think your battle is now over." Emtu appeared beside the princess. "You've given him a task he must fulfill."

"Oh. Whoops."

Finn continued to mutter to himself as he searched through his memory for more information. Emtu clicked her tongue. "He's probably going to want to return to Roanoke, go through the library, and then return later. Probably will be late to the event this evening." She

didn't sound too happy. For a Sentinel, she really didn't like traveling but more so relaxing. It was what made Emtu different from the rest from her village.

"Double whoops." Hiraya didn't mean to interrupt their trip here. She didn't need the information right away. She had time, but she had to admit, she definitely wanted to learn more about this creature sooner rather than later, especially since she had caught him following her twice now.

Em walked back to Finn's pack and picked it up. "We will see you tonight." She brought it over to where her brother began pacing. She held it up, causing him to stop. "Let's go now so we can come back quickly. I don't want to miss tonight."

"Ah yes! I can bring my findings." He took his bag and threw the strap over one shoulder. "A Bulgae! How fascinating!"

Emtu sighed, her blue eyes full of annoyance from this minor inconvenience. She directed her brother to leave the way they came. "See you later, Hiraya."

Guilt rested on Hiraya's pursed lips. She ignored it, knowing that although Emtu seemed a little annoyed by the sudden change of plans, it wouldn't impede their plans too much. Roanoke wasn't too far away, being a neighboring village to Croec more inwards into the mountains. If necessary, they had other means to help them travel faster, and by other means, she didn't mean horses. She knew the hun—sentinel village had several creatures as pets or companions that could transport them much faster than on foot.

Her excitement to know more about the Bulgae overpowered any taste of guilt. Any information would help her figure out not only to find the hellhound's weaknesses, but to also figure out who those other people were after her, especially the man with the glowing sword that

somehow didn't kill her. She needed to figure out who that man was above all of them, but for some reason the Bulgae piqued her curiosity the most.

The large puffy sleeves of her crop jacket squeezed her biceps. Although puffy, the openings were tight and she hated it. The mahogany color of her jacket and sash around her waist accentuated her honey, almond skin tone, but the pale yellow made her look pale. Plus, it did not blend well with her newly colored hair. Not one bit.

Aashirya smoothed out the wrinkles while a maidservant braided half of Hiraya's hair. Once the half up rope braid was complete, a gold crown resembling the rays of the sun would be adorned.

"I hate it. Atatiana and Bre's traditional dresses are so gorgeous. Mine is ugly." It almost felt intentional at this point.

"You must celebrate your heritage," Aashirya said, focused on fixing the dress.

"I don't know my heritage." Which was true. Her mother told her some things, but they were more apt to celebrate her father's traditions rather than her mother's.

Aashirya scowled.

"I'd rather wear a sari!"

"The queen would dismiss me if I allowed such!" Her tita peered up at her, brown eyes serious.

"Tita, she would never. You are my family. I would riot. I would not rest!" Hiraya lifted a fist for emphasis and to lighten the mood a little bit.

Aashirya lightly slapped the princess's raised arm. "Hush." The maidservant stifled a giggle, causing Hiraya to grin. Her tita continued, "And you better not bring that beast. Leave him here."

They all glanced at the slumbering hyena. "But then who will I talk to and hang out with?" Hiraya asked, imagining herself awkwardly sitting in the corner as people danced and mingled.

"Bhanji, if you want people on your side, you must fill their ears with honey."

Hiraya grimaced as the picture in her mind transformed from the ball to honey dripping out of her ears. It would not only be grotesque but also quite uncomfortable. "Can't they just love me for my hard work, education, and morality?"

"Has that worked thus far?"

Aashirya had a point. The princess sighed and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Although she hated the puffy sleeves and the pale yellow color, the sleeves made her shoulders look less masculine and broad. She appeared slimmer. The dress itself accentuated her curves, making her waist seem much smaller than her wide hips, but there was no avoiding her round butt. The skirt hid her stocky, thick legs. She wore her thong sandals instead of her knee-high leather boots. As she absorbed everything, she couldn't help wonder if she were thinner or even a man, would people take notice of her? No one ever seemed to take her seriously, only those who were close to her, those who really knew her through and through. When she was younger, she tried to mingle, but her invisibility remained her loyal companion. Eventually, she used it to explore, to discover, to know, to learn.

"No! But nothing has. It is exhausting to play pretend." And lie. Honey in other's ears felt like bitter venom in her mouth. Venom that only she ended up swallowing.

“Arē! You play pretend?” Her tita gasped over-dramatically as a means to toy with her. The maidservant snickered this time.

“Hey! I tried! A few times.” She frowned. Aashirya only smiled in the reflection. “Tita! I’m just not good at lying. I cannot pretend.”

Her aunt nodded. “I am aware, my child. It is who you are. Now sit down so Suyi here can paint your face.”

“But I hate that stuff.” It was the stuff all the young girls liked to do. Paint their eyes different colors to be more noticeable. She didn’t like the way it felt on her skin.

Aashirya pulled up a chair. “Queen’s order.” She pushed the princess down into the seat.

“I thought I was an adult?”

“You are still a princess.” Her tita paused and took in a deep breath. “I will return shortly.”

“I despise this.”

“I think you look beautiful without it,” the maidservant said, leaning over the princess’s shoulder.

“Thanks,” she replied, even though that’s not what she wanted to hear. She just wished she had control of even a part of her life. What was the point of being both a princess and an adult with no power in directing her life? Sometimes she wanted to be a vagabond, travel around with no responsibilities like her family used to before inheriting Croec. She could experience the world. She could go around gaining the answers to all the questions she had piling up inside her mind.

Chapter 8

Light pierced the darkness causing Abigail to groan. She pulled the covers over her head. She wasn't ready to wake up. She just wanted to sleep a few more minutes. All the drinks from the night before felt as if they piled on the forefront of her head.

Suddenly, the covers disappeared, allowing the light to irk her once more. Whomever had the audacity to wake her up had better start running. No one was allowed to mess with her slumber. Not even her Nibira, or grandmother, risked experiencing her groggy wrath. She opened her eyes. "You've gone too far! Now get—" She paused, realizing it was her friend Minwoo, and not the little dragon, Kaida, who had been pestering her the last few days in Minwoo's absence.

"Please tell me you searched New Calusa while I followed the intel to the Boldine Forest," he asked, his black brows furrowed and arms crossed. His long black hair was pulled into a half-ponytail, a more casual style than in a tight bun. Around his forehead was a black cloth. He had said it was to absorb sweat but she thought it was more to hide his big forehead. He wore what he had called a hanbok, whatever that meant, which looked more like a black robe reaching to his shins and a wide waistband to cinch the robe at his torso. He wore pants beneath and leather black boots that blended into his black pants. To Abigail, it just seemed unnecessarily hot in the humid weather of Calusa. She even suggested he wear something more local, but he refused, adamant about keeping to his roots, wherever that was.

She yawned and stretched her arms. “I went to the gardens there, but it wore me out.”

“Abi! It’s been almost a week!” Minwoo sighed and began cleaning up her messy room. Annoying him meant she wouldn’t have to do the cleaning. “And you know Reva would not be at the gardens. She would be at the bars and casinos!” He paused, scanning the room. “Where’s Kaida?”

She shrugged. As the slumber started to dissipate, the memory of the little dragon mentioning his departure yesterday came back to her. She hadn’t been paying too much attention as a cute boy bought her drinks and gave her much needed compliments. “I think he left yesterday or this morning.” Her memory was not only terrible but even more so when she drank and slept.

Minwoo scoffed and threw pants at her, already knowing she slept only in a loose tunic and some undergarments. The pants hit her in the face. She had very little reflexes, even for something as simple as catching a piece of clothing. This was why she needed Minwoo around to keep an eye out for her. “The oracle said you were to stop chaos from lifting the seas and bringing down the moon. Reva knows where to find the artifacts that will help us. We need to find her.”

She groaned. Reva, Reva, Reva. That’s all she had heard from Minwoo before he traveled to the Boldine Forest. When she first heard she was “destined” to be the one to bring peace between the moon and the sea and stop chaos, she was excited. To be destined meant she didn’t have to make a decision on what to do with her life. Now, she was starting to second guess it. It wasn’t so fun. They had to find these artifacts and deities and only one of the first four creatures could help. With two of them dead and one missing, Reva had been the easiest to track down, even though it really wasn’t that easy. The stupid bird was evasive. Why was being destined so

difficult? Wasn't it supposed to be simple? A god would appear and then boom, here was an artifact to help along the way. Isn't that the hero's journey?

"I know. I know!" She pulled on her pants and tied her light brown hair into a messy bun. She tucked the front of her tan tunic into her pants, leaving the rest out. She didn't care if she looked a mess. She *was* a mess.

"We need to find Kaida. We can cover more ground with him." Minwoo grabbed her pack and held it out to her.

She sighed. "He'll find us. Let's just go. I'm starving. I want some ramen or pho." She walked past him, ignoring the outstretched pack. He shook his head and threw it over his shoulder, following close behind.

They walked out of the small, brick house that stood close to its neighboring house. There wasn't much room in this part of Old Calusa when it came to housing, not like the quaint village she was from in the outskirts of the Calusa territory. They walked along the streets, seemingly calm and quiet at this time of day. At night, the streets were full, bustling with life. As they headed closer to the Fishmarket or even at the town center where you could find the casinos and other shops the crowd would become more dense and livelier. They were now headed to the Fishmarket, where small vendors sold food both raw and cooked. Abigail knew the best spots for food, especially noodles. She had gone to many vendors and shops when she was younger and her mother still lived. They would meet for lunch. These lunches were the only memories she had of her mother. She didn't actually live in Old Calusa and never had. Her mother had married the ruthless King Rothbert after her birth. The marriage lasted only the first half of her life before her mother died, a death that occurred at the precipice of the Crimson Tides, a revolution brought by the Crimson King, who ruled Old Calusa to this day. She had lived ten summers when this

unfolded and had no idea of it, living with her grandmother in the village her mother had left for the city. She had only recently returned to Old Calusa a month ago on this journey, leaving the comfort of her childhood home, Acuyobo Village. It was somewhat of a reprieve from the stifling place.

They finally made it to a small shop owned by an elderly couple who once were merchants from Van Lang, a territory across the seas. With their pick for seating, they sat down at a small table near the window, a habit of Minwoo's so he could keep a lookout for Reva and just in case someone dangerous came in. Abigail didn't understand the paranoia.

The cook came over and took their order. Minwoo turned to look at Abigail. "Have you visited The Grackle?" he asked, sparing no time to just sit and enjoy the moment.

"You're always about the mission. Can we not speak about something else for once?" She scanned his face. He still looked like a boy even though he was tall. He often had a stern expression, which deepened when he read one of his books or scrolls. They were the same age and yet he seemed so much older with all his seriousness. If it wasn't for his clumsy nature, she would have thought he was at least a few years older than her, but he wasn't. They were both nineteen summers, his birthmoon during the Harvest Cycle near the end of the hottest season and hers almost in the middle of the Flower Moon Cycle in the middle of the rain showers and when seeds begin to take root. She found him cute and even handsome, and although he took care of her, he never tried to pursue more. This threw her off a little. So many young men would have confessed their profound love by now, a trait inherited from her mother...but not him.

"Fine." He crossed his arms across his chest but gave her the faintest side smile.

The cook walked over to their table and set down their order. Abi picked up a spoon and sipped on the hot creamy broth. “Ah,” she said with a satisfied exhale. “How was the Boldine Forest? I hear it’s large and dense.”

“And beautiful.” He picked up his chopsticks that had yet been broken apart. He pulled on them causing one of the chopsticks to break in half. Abigail stifled a laugh as she handed him her chopsticks. She wasn’t going to use them. He thanked her and continued, “I thought if Shiro would be anywhere, it would be there. None of the Shadeu had seen him.” He slurped down a noodle. “Did you go anywhere else to look for Reva?”

“It only took you three sentences Minwoo!”

He stirred the noodles with his new, unbroken chopsticks. “What? I’m sorry. It’s a habit.”

“You know, it’s odd,” she said, changing the subject. “I never thought I’d leave home nonetheless with someone like you.” It was true. Although Abigail had gotten along with Minwoo, they hadn’t been companions for very long: a little over one moon cycle. Her mother instilled in her to trust no one. Even a cute boy who rescued her.

“It helps I saved a damsel in distress. It makes it easier to trust me.” He winked, but instead of looking suave, it seemed awkward, almost child-like.

Abi chuckled. “To think it really is a thing to have a villain attack someone because of some silly prophecy.” A prophecy she still didn’t quite believe.

“You’re still calling it silly after those creatures tried kidnapping you?”

She thought about the moment the firedog and the tiger came after her on her way home from the fruit forest near the village. The two creatures came out of nowhere. Luckily, Minwoo had been traveling nearby to rescue her and then the oracle thing. She shook her head. “I mean,

I'm still suspicious. There's nothing special about me. I'm just an orphan of a dead queen with no spiritual abilities."

"You're special enough to attract a hellhound and a tigress."

The image of the tiger and fiery dog chasing after her crossed her mind. She even had warning of the situation from her Nibira, a dream that came days before the incident. Abigail thought nothing of it. Dreams were just worry wrapped in speculation. "I still think everyone has the wrong person."

"Why are you so hard on yourself? Everyone has something that makes them special."

She leaned forward. "Doesn't that mean no one's special?"

He leaned in, close to her face. "You are definitely special." She wanted to believe him. She wanted those words to be true, but again, he still hadn't confessed any feelings. It almost seemed like he protected her out of duty or some sort of unspoken pact to himself. He did say he was trying to become a warrior or that he was a warrior. She couldn't recall exactly. Damn her memory for failing her.

Her gaze fell to his luscious lips. A blush surfaced on her round cheeks. "I am not special enough for a prophecy and to be chased by some creatures." Nothing he said would change the fact that she still didn't believe the whole destiny thing. Yes, she was excited to have something to do, to get out of her home, but that was just an excuse to do something different and new. To actually believe that she was the hero of a story, some dire prophecy. It seemed a little far-fetched, even in a world of creatures and deities.

"Abi. You are special enough for anything." He leaned back and took another bite.

“Sure. Whatever you say.” He didn’t know the real her. Once he did, he probably would just leave. The only person to ever stick around was her grandmother, and even then, they didn’t have the best relationship, always harping on what she was doing and who she was with.

He pointed his chopsticks at her as he finished chewing. “You can’t know everything in the present. You told me yourself you have no idea who your dad is. Even the Crimson King was a son of the slums before learning he was the long lost heir to Calusa. Never say never.”

She knew he was right. The Crimson King had actually been the son of a prostitute from a brothel. He even owned The Grackle before finding out the truth of his heritage. Even knowing all this, Abigail doubted her role in the prophecy. Not once in her life did she feel special nor did she think she was meant for anything special. She thought herself ordinary, mundane, meant for nothing just like most of the population on the Darkling Plain.

“Yeah, okay,” she muttered. She didn’t want to argue. Minwoo was stubborn and she hated fighting.

“Once done here, let’s go to The Grackle. Reva had to have visited it. It’s the most popular casino.”

She nodded, only worrying about her food.

“Maybe we can find a warlock or witch to show us what Reva looks like in her human form. We probably should do that first. It’ll be more useful.”

“Sounds good,” she muttered. Minwoo always made the best choices. She was glad he decided to accompany her. He protected her and she wasn’t good at traveling alone. She hadn’t done it before. It scared her. But...weren't people who were “destined” or “chosen” supposed to be the one to take charge or even make a decision? She had been lost her entire life and even with the prophecy, nothing felt different. She still felt lost.

Chapter 9

The hall filled with music and voices. King Ronald and Queen Atatiana sat, watching their guests dance and mingle. Bre stood in one corner, gossiping with her friends and flirting with anyone who gave her attention. Hex and his friends stood near the finger foods and drinks, munching while laughing at anyone who they thought beneath them. Hiraya grabbed a drink and moved near the edge of the hall. She wanted to dance, loved it actually, but she knew all eyes would be watching her. She didn't want to mess up and become a humiliation. Plus, her father and Hex wouldn't let her live it down.

Instead, she searched the ground, seeing if she could tell who was human, who was a creature, and what type of creature they were. She spotted a pale woman speaking to a small group of men. When the woman smiled, fangs appeared. The woman didn't have the features of a Shadeu, so she had to have been a vampire. A shorter man with a beard, horns on his head, and goat legs walked by. He was most definitely a satyr, not a hard one to identify.

She continued to scan the crowd. There weren't as many creatures as she had hoped. Bored, she moved to the yard where a few entertainers had set up. Her father had wanted it. He had hired a firedancer, a weather witch, and even a dragon trainer with small dragons. Acrobats remained inside, dancing and twirling above.

A girl around Bre's age and excitement beaming walked up to Hiraya. "You must try the seer! She was spot on. Now I know what to do with my girlfriend!"

Hiraya nodded, a little thrown off by the interaction. She wasn't expecting a random stranger to walk up to her like that. "Oh, okay." She glanced back at the multiple open archways leading into the hall. She needed a distraction from the announcement about to come.

The young woman patted her shoulder and left. Hiraya peered in the direction the guest had come from and found a woman with dusky-colored skin that reminded her of the end of the day when night arrived after a golden sunset. The woman wore dark blue robes and a sheer scarf around her head. A silver headdress adorned her forehead and a chain hung from her ear to her nose. A beautiful flower painted her chin.

As if knowing Hiraya was debating whether or not to visit, the woman beckoned the princess with a wave of her hand. "Come, Princess. I have been expecting you."

Hiraya obeyed and closed the gap between them to sit down across from the seer. "Is there something I need to do for you to...um...read me?" the princess asked, not sure if she should place her hands on the stone table top or in her lap.

"Let me see your hands." The seer wiggled her ring adorned fingers. Hiraya set her hands on the table palms up. The seer's long, red nails traced the lines on the princess's palms. She leaned in close, examining how each line creased. "Interesting."

"Is it bad?" Anxiety welled in her chest. She didn't really want to hear the bad news if that's what it was. Ignorance was bliss...right?

"You will fall in love thrice. The first deep, yet distant. The second more in love than you, and then the third. It will be fiery. They will help heal your inner child."

The princess examined the lines. She didn't really care about her love life. Well, she did and she didn't. She had more things to worry about right now. "Does it tell you about my future?" She wanted to ask about the man in the woods, the Bulgae, the future of Croec, but she didn't want to say too much, just in case. What if there were ears listening? What if this seer was just a fake wanting to get information out of her? She had heard many born of royalty being tricked by someone's claim to their insight in the future. The problem with such was that no one could confirm the future until it was the present.

"You will travel a lot. You will not live in one place for long."

What about Croec? Would she leave Croec behind? Would she just let Hex take over? There was no way she would let her brother become king. The seer had to be wrong. "Anything else?" the princess asked.

"I am no oracle." The seer picked up a small bowl with a few coins. She set it in front of Hiraya. "This is all I have for your future."

"Oh." Hiraya patted her clothes, but she carried no coin for a tip. "I have nothing."

"What of the necklace?" The seer indicated the axe pendant.

Hiraya instinctively held Kita. "No. But I can give you this." She took off the gold hoops Aashirya made her wear. "This should do." She dropped them in the bowl. The seer nodded, satisfied. "Thanks." Hiraya got up feeling a little duped. She expected more from the seer, something spectacular...specific. These were all generalizations.

"Oh, and Princess." Hiraya paused and peered down at the seer. "One other warning. It seems you attract ghosts of the past," the seer warned.

Hiraya furrowed her brows. Should she be worried? Is this a warning? Did the seer mean literal ghosts or figurative ones? She hated dealing with the spiritual realm. Give her a human or

a creature any day, but those existing beyond sight like ghosts, djinn, or the kumakatok... She'd rather fight off a dragon, Lycan, or Bulgae over them.

"Hello Sleeping Beauty," a man's voice said. She found Landain behind her, arms crossed and a boyish smile on his face.

"What do you want?" Her voice remained stiff and bored. She was in no mood for his jests or degrading comments. She also hated that she had fallen so deep in thought that he startled her. She had let her guard down.

His blue eyes darkened. "Listen. I just—" He glanced back at the hall where Hex and the rest of their friends resided. Was it Hiraya's imagination or was he checking to ensure Hex wasn't watching? "—I just wanted to see if you were all right."

His sudden sincerity jostled her. She didn't know what to think. "What?"

He rubbed his hands against his tunic. "I'm actually the one who found you. Then Rekia showed up."

She scanned the crowd. Rekia hadn't even crossed her mind. She hoped Atatiana went easy on the guard. "Oh."

"You were feverish and we couldn't wake you. I am actually surprised to see you here. Hex said you just woke up this morning."

"That's so unlike Hex to know how I am doing." She scoffed.

"He cares. In his own way."

Such a simple excuse Hiraya thought to herself, zoning out as Landain continued talking about the state she was in and how they brought her back to the checkpoint.

"I'm sorry by the way," he finished.

She blinked, returning to the conversation. “What?” She heard him but she was still processing the last sentence.

“I’m sorry. For Hex.” Shouldn’t her brother be the one apologizing and not the henchman?

“Then you should tell my father he cheated.” She crossed her arms across her chest.

He peered back at Hex. “I-I can’t do that. Look. I gotta go. Glad you’re okay.” He left before she could shame him into talking to the King. She did find solace in the fact that Landain had some miniscule of a conscience. He wasn’t a complete arrogant asshole.

“Ugh. Boys,” a woman’s voice said from behind Hiraya. She turned to find a young woman, no, a teenage girl probably around Bre’s age. Her long wavy black hair fell into a thick and wild frame around her face. Her dark, golden brown skin made her copper colored eyes pop. What was even more astounding was the shape of her pupils. They weren’t round like a human’s but thin diamonds like a cat focusing on its prey. The girl grinned, revealing sharp teeth, similar to a feline. She wore a black sari with orange threading. Unlike everyone here, she wore no shoes. She had to be some sort of creature, but Hiraya didn’t know what kind. The princess had not met one like this girl before. “This is why I prefer girls.”

“And who are you?” Hiraya asked.

The girl’s grin broadened as she set her hand on her pronounced hips and scanned Hiraya. “Straight to the point. I like that.”

“Yeah, well I hate when people avoid the questions they really want to ask. Who are you?”

The girl walked around Hiraya almost as if she glided across the ground, never taking a step. “Just curious.” She ran a finger across the princess’s back, flicking a blue strand of hair.

“Wanted to see the damage done.”

“I’m not going to ask again.” Hiraya clutched her pendant, ready to call upon her weapon. “Who are you?”

The girl stepped back, hands raised. “No need for that. I’m not here to harm.” She crossed her arms across her chest and scanned the yard. “Although, I’d like a rematch with your beast.” Beast? Did she mean Brin?

Hiraya’s eyes narrowed. “Wait.” The pieces were falling into place. The feline characteristics, the orange and black clothing, no shoes... “The tiger?”

“Otouto said you were smart. But one lucky guess doesn’t mean you *actually* are.” She snickered.

“Where did the Bulgae go? Is his name Otouto?”

“I’m not supposed to be here. But I don’t listen.” She raised her chin proudly. “Cats are curious.”

The aversion to answering Hiraya’s questions was beginning to annoy her. She wanted to grab the girl and force her to answer, use Kita as leverage, but what would the guests think if she openly started a fight with one of the guests, if this tigress could even be called that. “For someone who likes straight forward, you aren’t.”

The girl shrugged and began backing away towards the edge of the yard. Hiraya wondered if she should try and stop the tigress, as if she even could. “Why don’t we sit and chat some more?” Hiraya stepped cautiously forward. She had a lot of questions including why that blade didn’t kill her.

The tigress shook her head and waved a finger. "I may be young, but I am not stupid." She jumped backwards, never taking her eyes off the princess. With ease, she landed on the short stone wall encompassing Laho Palace. She turned her back to Hiraya and flicked her thick, black hair. Was she trying to make a dramatic exit? By the smirk and wink, this girl just wanted to make her leave memorable. Hiraya shook her head. She definitely would remember the tigress, more so because she never met a person or creature that could turn into a tiger. Maybe the girl was a shapeshifter, but normally in human form, they didn't have characteristics of an animal. This girl did. She still had those feline eyes.

Hiraya wondered what was going on. In her twenty-two years, she had never met so many mysterious people or creatures that not only she had never met before but also monitored her closely. Invisibility had always been her constant companion, but it seemed that wasn't the case anymore. It wasn't like she was someone of importance, just another person within Laho Palace that merged into the background. Even now, with everything happening with Hex, she had no leverage. She hated how little weight her words held here. It seemed hopeless. Any time she spoke louder, people (including her father) labeled her obnoxious and angry. She hated it. It felt like her father and Hex could be righteously angry or passionate but her... absolutely not. She needed to calm down and quit being emotional.

Hiraya shook off the haze that came with her profound thoughts and glanced around. Somehow, she had made it back into the hall. She scanned the guests for anyone she would want to talk to. There weren't many. She found Emtu off to the side. The Sentinel let her straight, blonde hair down for once. She wore a light blue dress made of silk and silver lacing. It was strange seeing Emtu all dressed up. Hanging off her shoulder was a leather bag, an odd addition to her wardrobe.

“Why didn’t you leave that with one of our servants?” Hiraya asked as she approached.

Emtu glanced down at the bag. “Oh. This is the records of the Bulgae we have. Finn wanted me to bring it to you.” She took a sip of wine that the princess hadn’t realized she was holding.

“Where is he?” Hiraya peered around the room for him. Emtu pointed her glass towards her brother across the way. He stood next to another gentleman, a smile on his face. “Oh.”

“He’s too busy flirting to make the delivery himself.” She took another sip.

“Well at least he remembered to bring them.” The princess paused, not thinking of Finn’s distraction but the fact that maybe Emtu would know about the tigress she had just ran into.

“What creature can form into only a tiger?”

Emtu turned, her attention completely on Hiraya. “Where do you keep running into these creatures?”

“It’s Croec. Creatures coexisting with humans is sort of the thing here,” Hiraya said, not really wanting to divulge in all the strange things that kept occurring at a regular frequency. She wanted to figure out the big picture before she started involving any friends. Plus, she had the whole issue with Hex to resolve too.

“There’s a lot of different types. Have you narrowed it down any?” Em questioned.

“I haven’t looked. I’ll do it later. Anyways—” the princess pointed to the bag. “Can I take that or—”

“Oh yeah.” The Sentinel pulled off the strap, careful to not let any of her wine spill. “Just take the whole thing. There’s quite a few books in there. Didn’t realize we had so much on it but I guess Mae went overseas for a mission once and picked up a lot of information there.”

Mae. Hiraya had only met their older sister a handful of times. Her fear for the woman never wavered. “Your sister amazes me.”

“No. She scares you. Not sure why. She’s a big softie deep down.”

“*Deep* down.”

Emtu choked on a laugh. “Well then.”

The music suddenly stopped. King Ronald stood up, cheeks rosy from meade. He probably would pass out in the next hour if Queen Atatiana didn’t sober him up. He raised a large chalice made of silver and sapphires. “Thank you all for joining in this celebration,” he said. Queen Atatiana appeared at his side and grabbed his left arm, more likely to steady him than to show solidarity. “I want to announce who I have chosen as my next heir.”

Hiraya’s breath caught in her throat. She knew what words would come next, but she hoped they would never come. She watched from the crowd as Bre moved to stand next to her mother while Hex positioned himself to the right of the King. All eyes were on the royal family. All eyes, including Hiraya’s. She realized someone was missing, that someone being her. She didn’t know if she should join them or just stay put. The announcement wasn’t about her. Would it be weird to stay amongst the crowd, blended in?

“As you may all know, my son, Hex—” King Ronald slapped his son on the back, almost causing Hex to stumble forward. Hiraya decided it was best to remain where she stood. It would be awkward to shuffle through the guests. Everyone would notice that she had no idea they were supposed to gather like some unified family. A total lie that Hiraya didn’t want to partake in: a unified family.

Emtu nudged her with a bony elbow. “Shouldn’t you be up there?”

Hiraya shrugged.

“I think you should go up there.” Emtu’s family was close, so of course she would lean towards a strong familial front. The princess shooed away the Sentinel and kept her focus on her family.

“—due to this, Hex will be the next crowned King of Croec!” A large smile formed on both her father and brother’s face. Their smiles disgusted her. The whole situation made her nauseous. How could her father let a cheater lead? And how could a King live with himself knowing he cheated? Why did Hex even want to be King? He always complained about Croec and their dad. He often whined about leaving and never coming back. She wished he would.

The King chugged his drink and then squeezed the back of Hex’s neck with pride. Hex glared at him, but tried to hide it with a chuckle. The hall scarcely clapped, whispers resonating louder than any cheers. People turned their heads, until finally stopping to face Hiraya.

“I told you,” Emtu mumbled while taking a step away from the princess.

“Why isn’t she up there?” a gargoyle asked their companion.

“Maybe she disapproves?”

From the opposite side, another person said, “Does this have to do with the hunting incident?” Was that question for her or for her father?

Suddenly, Hiraya felt small. All eyes were on her or at least it seemed like it. She hugged herself as if it would shield her from the rumors that were already forming.

“Come now. Let’s dance the night away!” her father interjected, saving her from the loathsome attention. “Send your congratulations to the prince!”

The music began to play again. People slowly returned to what they had been doing before the short little speech. Hiraya took this break to dissipate. She slipped into the bodies and made her way down the hallway that led to the Moon Garden. She needed to breathe and her

mother's garden was the perfect palace to do so. Guests packed the hallway making it difficult to navigate through. A harpie turned, almost smacking the princess in the face with a feathered wing. She dodged, but bumped into a short man that resembled a toad.

“Oh sorry.”

He clutched her wrist with thin, bony fingers. “You must help her,” he croaked, staring past her.

She turned to see what held his attention but only the wall resided behind her.

“Uh...what?”

“Help her. You must save her.” The sweat from this toad man made her uncomfortable. She writhed out of his grip and gave him a quick nod before fleeing. The hallway shrank and she no longer could handle it. She needed to be alone, away from people.

She exited to the rear, where a few stragglers found themselves. Most people only came to this tier. Hiraya passed a couple by the pond and entered the garden. The air was crisp, but it did not chase away the choir of crickets. She immediately plopped down on the steps in front of the pergola. Even though a perfectly welcoming bench sat beneath the black marble frame and tresses of vines, habit and comfort placed her on the steps. It was the palace where her mother had brushed her hair and told her tales from Maharlika, her favorite being how the village protected the last moon from Bakunawa's obsession.

“Mom.” Her fingers spun the jade beads wrapped around her wrist. “I miss you.” The loneliness weighed heavy on her. Normally, she could repress it, push it so far down...or at least be too busy to really notice it. But with her dad's decision and no one really validating her anger, the loneliness shrouded her mind. She just wished she had someone...anyone that she could genuinely trust. No one made her an important person in their life, and she had made too many in

hers to end up being used as a resource when they needed what she had to offer. If only she had a friend to talk to, to be angry with her. Maybe even to devise a plan to stop her brother from inheriting Croec.

A whimper caught her attention. She turned to see Brin sitting near the edge of the garden, staring at her. Hiraya gingerly smiled and waved him to her. "Come Brin." The hyena obeyed. He laid down at her feet. She leaned forward and patted his side. He glanced up at her, his black eyes worried. "I'm okay." She hugged his thick neck, the wiry hair tickling her skin. She hid the hot tears in his coat. She hated crying, especially over something as silly as Hex and her father or the constant companion of loneliness. There were so many others that had it worse than her. She had the title of princess. She never went hungry or worried about her purse. She had Brin and Aashirya. A lot of people in this world, on the Darkling Plain, had no one, had nothing. Her tears were childish and selfish. And yet, she let them fall into Brin's spotted coat while the moon hovered above and the music gently floated from the palace.

Chapter 10

Abi shoved fried onions into her mouth as she searched the faces. The witch or seer or warlock or whatever Minwoo spoke to had mentioned Reva would be easy to spot. They said her icy, crystal blue eyes would grab anyone's attention. Abi noticed many women with blue eyes, but nothing that stood out. How were they supposed to identify a spiritual creature, normally a white bird, in its human form that no one ever really recorded? This was a hopeless task.

She turned to Minwoo who had littered the table with scrolls and parchments from his pack. He stared at a small, leather journal and was currently jotting down notes. Thankfully, there weren't a lot of people in this small restaurant, Tapola Tastes, to stare at Minwoo's studying instead of eating a meal with her.

"What are you doing?" she asked, not really curious but bored.

"Just information or clues so we don't forget anything." He didn't look up from his writing.

"You act more like a scholar than a warrior." He had introduced himself as either a warrior in training or just a warrior (she still couldn't remember which) when they met with some minor spiritual abilities: he could mold glass. Nothing amazing like creating an energy shield like the monks or transferring spiritual life force into an arrow that would obliterate any

opponent like an Agracia, a master of all spiritual styled attacks and defenses...just making simple glass figurines, similar to gifts you give to a grandparent.

He shrugged. "I don't want to forget even the most insignificant thing. It may become important later on."

"Do you have the prophecy written down?" She didn't want to know about it. She just hated silence and wanted to fill it.

He nodded, flipping through the pages of his journal. "Here it is." He pressed a finger to the page. "You want to read it?" He slid the journal towards her. She shook her head, and put more fried onions in her mouth.

"Oh. Okay. I'll just read it then." He pulled the leather journal back to him. "There lies a princess unseen. She shall find herself cornered in a locus of silence and solitary and deliver chaos' shadow, ancient death. Raise the tides to the highest peaks, pull the skies to the deepest valleys, summon the dark side of the moon. Only can the world be saved when warmth guides the seed and the sea sings its lullaby and the moon opens its eye and what was unseen is now seen."

Minwoo pressed his pen to his lips. "I'm still not sure what the second part of this prophecy means."

She swallowed her food. "I don't see how I'm the unseen princess."

"Your mom was the Thief Queen. That makes you a princess."

It was strange hearing her mother's old title. The Thief Queen was given as the unofficial title to those ruling Old Calusa. "Yeah but King Rothbert wasn't my dad and if he found out about me, he would have killed me." It was true. Her step-father had no idea she existed. He was ruthless. He had killed the previous Thief King who had been his best friend. What would have

happened if he found out his queen had a secret daughter in some distant, small village? It wouldn't look good and he wasn't one for sharing. It was the whole reason he had usurped his friend and took over Old Calusa.

“Doesn't change that you are in fact a princess.” A smug smile formed on his thick lips.

“I know, but I really don't think that's it.” She wanted to believe it, but at the same time, it just seemed unfathomable.

“I think it's you. I have a feeling. Plus, those people wouldn't be after you if you weren't it.” He had a point, but the seer could have been mistaken just like those who had attacked her: a tigress and hellhound.

“Yeah, but—”

“No buts.”

“Where did they go? Why haven't they attacked since?” She wondered why they had become taciturn, when they were so adamant weeks ago. He pointed to the pendant he gave her after the first few run-ins with the hellhound and tigress. It had a blue eye on it, partially closed. The blue was made of a stone with swirls of royal blue. It was specifically meant to protect and with the help of a witch, spelled to do the same. The necklace accentuated the heirloom given to her by her Nibira: a foggy, translucent crystal wrapped with black metal wires. It had originally been on a leather string, but broke during one of the ambushes. Minwoo quickly replaced the leather with black wires, which provided more security for both his pendant and her grandmother's heirloom. Abi actually liked it more this way, and liked how easily Minwoo fell into the role of taking care of her.

“That necklace I gave you makes it difficult for any supernatural creature to find you. I wasn’t going to leave unless I was sure you were safe.” His fiery bronze colored eyes darkened with the sincerity of his words.

“Ah.” She averted his gaze and examined the crowd for Reva. When he looked at her so profoundly, it felt like he saw right through her, notice something she didn’t want to share. “I’m bored,” she whined. “Can we not go back to the apartment?”

“Abi! Being a hero doesn’t mean exciting battles all the time.”

“Wouldn’t want that either.” She just wanted to lay down and read or even sleep. All this running around and doing research had her exhausted and just bored.

You must quit your complaining, a voice echoed in both Minwoo and Abigail’s minds. They turned to each other, speaking simultaneously, “Kaida.”

The little dragon could not speak actual words like them. Kaida only communicated through his mind. He had to have permission of course and only had access to simple communication. Serpent dragons didn’t want to hear the stream of consciousness. Kaida had said it would make him go insane.

Abi and Minwoo spun in their seats, searching for the rodent sized dragon. He appeared on the bar in front of them. He wasn’t the normal size for a serpent dragon. They normally were much larger, enough to fly a human or two around. Their miniature size had to do with a curse placed on his tribe centuries ago. The curse had once turned them into actual rodents, but the curse had been partially reversed to make him only a tiny version of his true self. His orange scales shimmered in the dim light. His emerald eyes shifted from Abi to Minwoo. The tuft of hair that ran along his spine seemed black in this light, but it was actually a deep purple. The

scales down his stomach were a pale lilac pear color. His bird-like feet pattered against the bar top while his long whiskers whisped around.

You are so pessimistic, Abigail. The dragon tilted its wolf-like face to the side.

“Where have you been Kaida?” Minwoo asked.

I’ve been looking for Reva.

“We got a new clue. She has crystal blue eyes,” Abi announced before the not-scholar-but-warrior could speak.

I believe I located her.

“What?” Both exclaimed in response to the dragon.

A few nearby patrons turned. They immediately faced their back to the trio, noticing the dragon. The bartender appeared. He scanned Abi with a charismatic smile. “Hello,” he said to her.

“Hi.” She blushed.

The bartender then turned to Minwoo, his smile fading. “You can’t have that—” he pointed to Kaida. “—in here. No pets.”

Pets?! I am no pet! Kaida said, his thoughts only reaching his companions. *How dare this—*

“Oh. Um. Yeah. Sorry.” Minwoo collected his parchments and other materials, shoving them in his satchel.

The bartender returned his attention to Abi. “But you are more than welcome to stay.”

“Uh. I think I’m good.” She pushed her plate of food towards the bartender. “I’m done with these. Thanks.” It made her uncomfortable how this random guy was treating the dragon, her friend.

You should tell him off for me, Kaida said as he climbed his way to perch on Abi's shoulders.

The bartender grimaced at the sight of her being cozy with a creature. He grabbed her plate. "Make sure that thing doesn't shit on the floor." His tone lost all charm.

His tone also made her skin crawl. She didn't want a fight to break out, and she didn't want any more hurtful words to be said about the dragon. "Let's go Minwoo." Abi hopped off her barstool and led the way to the exit.

Dragons are peaceful creatures. I don't see what his problem is. We do not just shit about like some random stray. How dare he!

"Not everyone leaves the places they were born, so their prejudices remain the same. It's not like that everywhere you go. Many people revere dragons," Minwoo informed dryly.

"Even my grandmother said the Niji find them sacred," Abigail said.

"So, you said you found Reva? Where is she?"

There is a tavern down the street. I believe Reva is there.

"Really?" Abigail asked, more surprised that Reva was so close and they hadn't even realized it.

"Ai ya! You should have started with that!" Minwoo said, adjusting his satchel and struggling with the scrolls and papers falling out.

Abi ignored his struggles. "How do you know it's her? You just learned of the clue we got."

She was the only one whose mind I couldn't feel. It is like a void in the middle of a crowded area. It is very strange.

“I thought you couldn’t enter people’s minds without their permission?” Abigail started down the street. “This way?”

The dragon nodded. *Us dragons follow a law. We must get permission to communicate with humans, but there are no rules to dabbling.*

“Dabbling?”

It’s a practice where I just stick my mental foot into someone’s mind briefly and see what they’re thinking.

“Mental foot?” Minwoo trotted up next to them, somewhat winded. Neither Abigail nor Kaida had noticed his absence. “That doesn’t sound just.”

It is frowned upon. Our Magi, our leader, doesn’t believe we should do it but I see no harm. We are facing the end of the world.

“I don’t know about that,” Abi said. She didn’t like it when he put their situation to be some sort of dire end of the world battle. She didn’t want the weight of the world on her shoulders. She may be the “chosen” one or the “unseen princess” but it didn’t mean she was equipped to be such. Who wants their next choice to decide the fate of everyone on the Darkling Plain? That sounded terrible and seemed one wrong direction could lead to a life ridden with guilt.

Plus, I didn’t say I read her mind. I simply couldn’t feel it. She must be protected. Some circumstances can provide such a shield.

Abi scowled. “Let’s just worry about finding Reva. Where is she?” She glanced at Minwoo to interpret his expression. He shook his head and gave an uncertain shrug.

She’s at the Bandit’s Brew.

The Bandit's Brew stood just three buildings away. Unlike the red clay structures, this was made of wood that had aged, dried out from the sea's salt. Faded white paint chipped on some of the planks. The only thing that seemed intact was the small, wooden sign hanging over the door with the tavern's name burnt into it.

"Ew." Abi halted and scrunched her nose in disgust.

"It's only another bar," Minwoo said, stopping a few steps ahead of her.

This is the place.

"Do we really have to go in there?" She was fine to go into some pretty questionable places, but even she had standards. Not only did this place look like she could pick up a terrible infection, but the name also screamed criminals love to gather here. Why would one of the Anun want to step in a place like this? With all that power, Reva could just find a clean, higher class tavern that probably had better drinks and better clientele.

Come now Abigail. We must. Reva may be in there.

"Let's go Abi."

She shook her head. "It looks like criminals go here."

"We are in Old Calusa...what did you expect?"

"But look at it." She waved a hand the width of the building. "It's just...gross."

"Abi. Really?" Minwoo sighed. He pursed his lips together, raised a brow, and tilted his chin down. She hated this expression of disappointment, like she was being dramatic. She most certainly wasn't.

Why must you fight your destiny? Let's just go inside.

"Nope. I'm not going in there." She crossed her arms and turned away from the bar.

“Your room is probably messier than this.” She hated his point. Yes, there was clothes everywhere but there weren’t bugs and critters feeding off the crumbs falling from nasty beards.

Abigail. You are being silly.

“I don’t care. I’m not stepping one foot in there.” She took a step back.

Minwoo groaned. “Fine. I’ll go in there. You just keep a look out for anyone leaving.”

I shall join you. Kaida leapt from Abi’s shoulder to Minwoo’s. They headed towards the entrance only taking one last glance at her before disappearing inside. She could see the judgment in their eyes. She wouldn’t let that bother her though. She never went places that made her uncomfortable. This included messy, disgusting places like Bandit’s Brew. Yes, her room was messy, but it was *her* mess. She knew what lay on the floor in those piles. Here, who knows what covered the doors and tables.

After a few minutes, the boredom began to set in. A thirst came, probably from eating the fried onions from earlier. She scanned the shops and found a little bakery that sold breads, pastries, teas, and coffee. A tea sounded perfect. She walked over to it and ordered a citrus tea mixed with local honey. The shop owner gave her a mug. She sat at a small table outside the shop, in the perfect position to see the entrance of the tavern. She sipped on the tea and waited for any sign from Kaida. Even at this distance, he could communicate with his mind. She wondered how far she could go before he no longer reached her. She needed to ask him later when things settled down.

She eyed the door intently, ignoring the drunkard stumbling her way. Abi sat the mug on the table just as the drunkard knocked both the table and her tea over. Abi jumped to her feet, causing her chair to fall over. The noise caused a few bystanders to pause and watch the scene unfold.

The drunkard draped over the fallen table, inert, and back towards her. For a moment, it seemed like alcohol took the drunkard to the underworld. Abi stared, shock keeping her still. The drunkard hiccuped. Black braids mixed with colorful braids underneath blanketed the drunkard's face. The drunkard wore sandals, loose black trousers, and a loose sleeveless, light blue shirt. What stood out beside the rainbow colored braids were light pink clouds splotches in contrast with the drunkard's smoky quartz brown skin. Abi had never seen anything like it. She wondered if this too was a creature.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" Abi said, leaning down to assist.

The drunkard rolled off the table away from Abi and stumbled into the street. They landed on their behind with a thud. The braids fell away, revealing a woman with sharp features. She smacked her thin lips and pointed randomly amongst the bystanders. It didn't help that the drunken stupor kept her eyelids nearly closed. "I'm purfecally fine." The words strung together as if one continuous word.

"Here." Abi moved around the table and reached down to grab the drunkard's arm. "Let me help you."

"I said I'm fine!" The woman pulled her arm close to her body and staggered to her feet. "I just needa drink," she said while stumbling away.

The shop owner suddenly appeared, picking up the furniture and returning it to its rightful spot. "I do apologize." He picked up the broken mug. "Would you like another cup?"

Abi gave the shop owner a small smile. "No thank you."

"I sincerely apologize. This normally doesn't happen...at least not during the day." He set a hand on her shoulder. She hated that he was touching her. She hated physical touch even from family or friends, let alone a stranger. "Are you alright? You have no injuries, correct?"

She shrugged him off. “I’m fine, thank you. I need to get going.” She gave him another smile in hopes he wouldn’t get upset by her abrupt exit. He gave her a quick nod and hurried back inside. She took this opportunity to walk to the shabby tavern. It shouldn’t have taken them this long to search the small area. As she thought this, Minwoo came out of the Bandit’s Brew, arguing with the dragon.

“What’s going on?” Abi asked.

“The dragon here says he must have been mistaken. Said he sensed a presence that wouldn’t let him in but then lost it.” Minwoo glared at Kaida.

I truly believe Reva was in there. His mental voice sounded forlorn.

“Are you sure it wasn’t some other creature? How do you know it was Reva and not like a vampire or a Lycan or even one of the gods.” Minwoo pinched the bridge of his nose. She hadn’t seen him this frustrated before.

The dragon shook his head. *Chresto, our leader, once spoke about meeting the first creatures. He said they were the only ones that felt strong but like a void. It was like meeting emptiness. It felt similar to that description. A vampire or lycan or the gods just feel invisible to me.*

“Oh. But you didn’t find her?” Abi asked.

Minwoo and Kaida shook their heads in synchronicity.

“Wonderful.” She groaned, suddenly feeling Minwoo’s frustration. She was definitely ready for a nap.

Chapter 11

“What in Ragnarok’s fires were you thinking?” King Ronald asked, the hall now empty except for the servants cleaning up the palace.

Queen Atatiana yawned, sitting on her throne. “Mpenzi, it is late,” she said sweetly. She only called the King “mpenzi,” a term of endearment, when she really wanted to persuade him to do something.

“No. We will discuss this now!” he shouted.

Hiraya winced while her two younger siblings whispered to each other. They were amused by their father’s anger and the fact that she was getting in trouble and not them. This irritated Hiraya more than her father’s scolding.

“The sun will be up soon,” the queen informed. “Let’s sleep.”

“No! I will address it now! I am the King!” His face turned red, so red, Hiraya thought blood would seep from his pores. “You have set a tone in this kingdom. They now think we are not united in this decision!” Spit sprayed from his chapped lips. The smell of liquor made Hiraya grimace.

“We aren’t,” she said, trying not to yell back, but she knew it wouldn’t be long before his shouting triggered her own anger. “He cheated and you refused to look into it.” She waved a hand towards Hex.

“Hey! I did not cheat. You’re just upset I beat you!” Hex replied. “It’s not my fault your fat ass passed out. Probably ate too much.” He laughed at his own joke as if it were the best insult he had ever created. Bre chuckled softly with him.

“Heya!” Queen Atatiana pointed at them. “That’s enough.”

“I was attacked by a Bulgae and this powerful person that had to be something like a vampire or maybe even a god! Thank you very much!” She still wondered who could wield such power. She had never met such a person, not even a Sentinel. What could appear out of thin air and lift her off the ground with such ease?

“Sure you were.” Hex crossed his arms across his chest and huffed.

“Enough! This is not what we are talking about. You—” The King jabbed a finger at his eldest. “You should have joined us. What act of rebellion is this?”

“It’s the fact that you’re handing the city of Croec to him only because he is a male!” She hadn’t really thought about this before, that Hex was the only male heir and this could be the reason for her father’s lack of motivation into investigating the situation, but now...it seemed more likely. Maybe the king saw himself in Hex in a way he couldn’t see himself in her. Either way, the words had slipped through her lips.

Her father scoffed. “That is not the reason. You know I support you equally.”

“He just knows I’m the better option,” Hex muttered under his breath.

A heat rolled down her spine and then back up, exploding in her chest. If she were closer to him, she probably would have punched him in the nose again. Instead, she let go of the words she told herself she never would...but now it slipped out, “He’s not even legitimate.”

She took in everyone's expression. Bre's mouth fell open, her father looked disappointed, her step-mother just gave a subtle head shake. Hex smirked and let out a small chuckle as he stepped towards her. "What the fuck did you just say?"

She pushed back her shoulders and lifted her chin to show him she wouldn't back down. "You aren't legitimate." Her voice was steady and even, as she didn't break eye contact. "Your mother wasn't even a queen." Not like her mother nor Queen Atatiana. She had been a random woman on a drunken night.

"I think we should—" Queen Atatiana stood up.

King Ronald held up a hand, stopping her. "You know I have always treated him like you and your sister."

Hiraya finally broke away from her brother and peered at her dad. "More like let him get away with whatever he wanted. He's done so many terrible things that you have overlooked and even covered up."

"How do you—" her father stumbled over his words. Did he really think her that naive? She was an observer. She observed each time Hex was called into his office, when the Queen gave her council but he never listened. She heard the yelling on days they thought she was out exploring. Her invisibility amongst the family coming with such ease she didn't even have to try.

"It's not like I'm the only one," Hex said.

"What do you mean?" Was he saying that she had misdeeds to cover up? Or was he talking about Bre? Her father's face paled. What did her father have to hide?

"Hex, don't you dare," the King warned...or was he pleading?

Hex took this as a challenge, never obeying but revolting. "You think everyone needs to be perfect. The Hunt was rigged anyways."

Hiraya furrowed her brows. What was he talking about? They were just talking about illegitimate children...now it's the Hunt? "Wait. What?"

"Dad has been releasing rogue creatures during the Hunt the last three years. You really think Rogue creatures just magically show up each year?" A pretentious grin formed on his thin lips. "You're so fucking stupid."

She had never questioned it. She had trusted her father's explanations. How did she not realize it but Hex knew? Is that why father was okay with leaving Croec to her brother? And she thought it was a fair competition. It wasn't...at all. She really *was* naive.

"Bre. Go to bed," the Queen ordered.

"What? Why?" Bre whined. "It was just getting interesting."

"Now!"

She whimpered but trudged off down the hallway. Queen Atatiana followed close behind to ensure the youngest made it to her room.

"So you are mad at me for not supporting your lies? You are mad that I didn't know we were supposed to stand together at your speech, but it's okay that you deceive, lie, and your golden child becomes a lying king just like you? I see now."

"Don't forget that I am not the only illegitimate child either," Hex rubbed in.

"And you have another—What!" Her eyes widened, his words finally sinking in. She had another half sibling out there? She had another half sibling!

"Hex!" The King's voice echoed through the palace.

Hex laughed like none of this was a big deal. He had everything handed to him so why would he take any of this seriously. "He's got another child running around."

“Shut your mouth boy.” Their father raised his hand like he was about to backhand her brother. But he never did. It was always an empty threat.

“What is he talking about?” She looked at her father who used his raised meaty hand to clutch his chin in what he must have thought looked like profound consideration. “I deserve to know the truth. And why does Hex know things I don’t?” She was the eldest. She was the one that had been an adult the longest. She was always the one they came to when they needed help with something. So why not confide in her?

“I loved your mother.”

“Do not bring her into this,” she growled. Hiraya didn’t know the exact details but she knew that her mother and father had an agreement that he could have other women. A sickness cursed her mother’s bloodline, affecting many, and her mother had early symptoms. She knew her lifeline would be taken by this illness and wanted the King to live happily. Were illegitimate children a part of that compromise? “Just explain it. No excuses.” She was exhausted... exhausted from his excuses. It was always some made up tale rather than the truth. There had been times she wished he were dead instead of her mother, but immediately regretted it. The guilt always ate her up afterwards, even though the thought was short-lived.

“I had a brief affair with a woman, one that could have put us in danger,” King Ronald explained.

“For Woden’s sake, we have a sister somewhere near New Calusa. She’s what?” Hex glanced at their father and then back at her. “Like nineteen?”

“Hex!” The King stepped between the siblings, turning his back to Hiraya and facing Hex. “You may go to bed now.”

“Fine.” He peered at Hiraya and then rolled his eyes. “Damn.” He disappeared quickly.

The King turned towards her and held her shoulders, rubbing his thumbs up and down.

“Baby girl...listen.”

“I understand you and mom had an open relationship. You’ve always been honest and direct about it, but hiding you had a child? That I have a sister?” It showed her how much everything she knew could be untrue. What was real? What was a lie?

He sighed. “Why does it matter?”

“It matters.” It mattered to her that she could believe people when they told her something. It mattered that her father had easily lied her entire life about a sister. It hurt that he told Hex of all people before her, and that she couldn’t be trusted. It hurt that he didn’t want her to be Queen, even if she hadn’t really wanted it. It hurt that he just didn’t believe in her.

“You don’t even hang out with your siblings here. It won’t be any different with her,” he said confidently.

She stepped away from him, out of his grasp. “What happened?” She should have left, gone for a walk, and thought about these new discoveries, sort out her feelings, but she didn’t. The curiosity got the better of her. It always did.

“We all just thought it best to keep it a secret. After Abigail—”

“Abigail?” Hiraya paced back and forth, her anxious energy needing an outlet.

“Your sister.” He inhaled. “After she was born, her mother married a dangerous man. He would have killed her, her mother, and us...if he found out.”

“Is this man still alive?” Did she have to worry about her life now?

“Thankfully, no.” He yawned. “Let’s talk about this tomorrow.”

“One more question.” She had to ask. She would forget tomorrow. She didn’t want to forget the questions forming at the front of her mind.

“Hiraya.”

She wasn’t tired. She just found out about her long lost sister. How could she sleep with this news? “If it was supposed to be a secret, why did you tell Hex before me? Or why not just tell us all at the same time?” Especially since there was no danger in telling us now that the “dangerous” man was no longer a threat.

He let out a deep, frustrated breath. “Hiraya. It’s not what you think.”

She crossed her arms across her chest and sent daggers with her mismatched eyes. “And what am I thinking?” She wasn’t thinking that if he told Hex first, it was because her brother truly was his favorite. She already knew that. She just wanted him to verbalize it, admit how his bias affected the way she was treated compared to her little brother.

“I didn’t tell you because I simply forgot.” This wasn’t the answer she wanted. This answer hurt worse. “My memory isn’t what it used to be.” He moved to the wall and leaned against it. “I need to sleep. I have a terrible headache.”

“Bre and I deserve to know even if Hex doesn’t really care.” Hiraya hated being treated differently...especially by the ones she loved. She knew not all would be treated the same, but it always felt she got the short stick...that no one listened to her. She just wished people saw that they were doing it. But then that would mean acknowledging her as an equal.

“Bre already knows. She was there when I mentioned it to Hex,” he said it so nonchalantly, like he had no idea he emotionally stabbed his eldest daughter in the back. Everyone knew. *Everyone*. Everyone knew of Abigail. Everyone but the invisible Hiraya. No one cared to include her.

“Bre knew?” How could Bre of all people know before her? Bre was the youngest and had the loosest lips. How did Bre even keep it a secret for so long? Or even Hex?

She released all the anger in her shoulders and imagined it seeping into the ground. There was no point. Why was she even here? “And now you know why I didn’t stand with you today. I’m not really a part of this family, now am I?” She stormed off, just as he called after her. She didn’t want to hear it. She was okay with being independent. She was okay with being alone. Her father had always bragged about her being the “good” child, the one he never worried about. She took pride in that, but now, she realized it meant he didn’t have to consider her. He only had to deal with Hex and Bre. She could be forgotten.

She barged into her room, waking Brin from his slumber. She kicked her sandals across her room, hitting her desk and knocking over a few books. She leapt into the bed face first. The anger and frustration piled on top of itself until it became an unsteady tower. What toppled it over was the disappointment from how much her family didn’t care for her. No one considered her. No one.

Brin licked her arm, checking on her. Hiraya let out a scream into her blankets and then looked at the hyena. “You and Aashirya are all that I have.” She wrapped an arm around Brin’s thick neck and pulled the beast into her. “Why does my family suck?”

Suddenly, the collapse of the emotional tower weighed heavy on her eyelids. She closed her eyes and matched Brin’s slow, even breaths until the weight of sleep stole her away. When she opened her eyes again, the hyena was gone and the sun shone through her balcony doors. Words from her memory came to the forefront: *the only way to stop anything is if I had another child.*

Her father not only lied but told her exactly how to stop Hex from becoming King. She needed a plan. She needed her *sister*.

Chapter 12

Bre sat in front of her vanity, using a conditioner the Royal Sage had mixed for her small tight curls. She peered at Hiraya through the mirror, probably as a means to hide any more secrets that Hiraya was still not aware of. “I don’t know anything. I’m not lying,” Bre said too quickly.

“I didn’t say you were but now I think you are.” Hiraya stared intently, meeting Bre’s dark brown, almost black eyes. Bre tried to maintain eye contact, but not very well. Some lies were hard for her to tell, at least once Hiraya knew about them. The lies were often transparent and childish...so childish that it made no sense to do so in the first place. “Spill it. What do you know about Abigail.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know anything.” Her voice raised a few octaves. “I just found out when you did.”

“I’m not sure why you’re lying nor do I really care. Dad told me you were there when he told Hex. Now spill.”

She turned in her seat, worry animating her expression. “Are you mad at me?”

Hiraya rolled her eyes. She hated when Bre asked this question. It usually led to Bre making this about herself and then a pity party full of tears to follow. It was a distraction, a means to take away from the current subject. “Just tell me what he told you two,” Hiraya said, ignoring Bre’s question.

“Are you sure you’re not mad? You seem mad.” Hiraya just stared, not giving a verbal response. The worry left Bre’s eyes. “Fine. Hex pretty much said it all last night. He also said her mom was married to the Thief King, whatever that means.”

“You’re of no help.” Usually Bre loved to share information. It gave her the attention she wanted. But today it seemed that information was dismal.

“Hey!”

“Nevermind.” Their dad probably wouldn’t answer questions either and right now, Hiraya wanted nothing to do with him. For once, she chose to make her own decisions and do it without running the idea by her dad. She dreamed of traveling and refused to let Hex win. She had to go find her sister and redo this stupid competition for Croec. She would be meeting two goals at once. But first, she needed to know exactly where her sister was located. Keya Island was a big place and the Darkling Plain even bigger. Nineteen years is a long time and not everyone remained as stagnant as her.

“See you around,” Hiraya said.

“Wait. What are you going to do?” Bre asked.

Hiraya left the room without giving an answer. Brin trotted beside the princess as they returned to her room. She immediately went to her desk and quickly wrote a letter to Aashirya. She didn’t care to leave a note to any of her family. They probably wouldn’t even realize her absence. Aashirya would notice though. She would be furious and would definitely beat Hiraya with a sandal. The letter allowed the princess to communicate her whereabouts while providing space so she wouldn’t get beaten until she returned home...hopefully with Abigail.

She left the letter on her desk and grabbed her leather pack. She stuffed a few changes of clothes, the writings on the Bulgae and a few other things. She already wore the clothes she liked

to travel in: dark blue shorts with a long midnight blue sash wrapped around her waist and hanging from her belly to reach her mid thighs, a tan short sleeved shirt tucked into her shorts, and dark brown leather boots tied to her knees. A dagger already hid in each boot. Even with Kita, she always carried hidden weapons. She grabbed the small pouch of coins beside her bed and tucked it into the pockets of her shorts.

She walked to her door and paused, taking in her room one last time. Besides the time she lived in Old Calusa, this room had been her home for over half her life. She hadn't strayed far from it. This was a big step...for her to leave.

Brin whimpered. Hiraya smiled at the hyena sitting next to her bed. "You need to stay here baby Brin."

The hyena puffed out a strange grunt and shook its head.

"You have to."

Brin approached Hiraya and rubbed his head against her leg as if asking permission to join the journey.

Hiraya smiled. She couldn't say no when Brin acted so lovingly. "Fine. You can come. But you must listen to me."

Brin yipped in reply, and Hiraya could almost see a grin on his face. "Let's go before anyone catches us leaving. We need to go to the Emporium," she informed. She then furrowed her brows, realizing Brin had no idea what she was saying. She really needed to get herself some human friends.

The Emporium was quiet, even though it was past the sun's peak in the sky. The events of last night went well into the early morning. Many shops and stores closed down for the day except a

few. Hiraya knew exactly where she needed to be: the Waverly Witch. This shop had a few witches that dealt with small scale spells and curses. One spell they sold was a location spell. The owner knew her well, visiting to get minor spells and other supplies. They made a wonderful candle that not only smelled fresh but kept away the bugs. Aashirya lived by them.

When Hiraya entered, the smell of flowers blooming on a rainy day greeted her. Shelves and tables were covered with candles, jars full of herbs and other ingredients, crystals, and more. The princess loved coming here. It always energized her. She loved holding the stones, examining its details. She loved the little jars made for different purposes: luck, love, protection, and so much more. She never bought them, just loved taking in all the concoctions.

“Hello,” a voice called from the back. “I’ll be right with you dear.”

“Take your time.” She moved to the area that held all the locator spells. There were so many! Jewelry paired together to find each other when separated. Rings that pointed a light to what you searched for. Mirrors and orbs which revealed whomever or whatever you wanted to find. Those were quite pricey and more than what Hiraya could spare at the moment. She needed something cheap yet accurate.

“Are you needing to find something dear?” A witch with thick, black hair in a single braid appeared beside Hiraya, startling her.

“Oh. Yes.” She cleared her throat.

“Hiraya! I didn’t realize it was you!” The witch set a hand on her wide hips. Her long, purple nails stood out against her pale green skirt.

“Hey Mykle. I didn’t see you last night.”

The witch waved her hand, revealing a wrist heavy with crystal bracelets. “You know I’m not one for crowds. I did hear it was quite eventful. Your brother...” She shook her head. “I

thought it would be you.” She leaned closer and whispered, “No one really likes him, especially in the spiritual community.”

Hiraya responded with an uneasy chuckle. She didn’t want to get into it. One, because the emotions, especially anger were still fresh and two, because she would overshare, saying too much about everything. She didn’t need to inadvertently start drama. “Yeah. I was just actually here to search for someone.”

“Oh. Who is this someone?”

“Um. Well—” She didn’t want to say her long lost sister. That would definitely get the city buzzing, but simultaneously, that would get her father to finally confront his secrets. “My sister.”

“Did your sister run off again?” Mykle grabbed a bottle and a ring. “A ring may be the best—”

Hiraya shook her head. “No. I have another sister somewhere near New Calusa.”

“Another...Oh.”

“Yeah. I need something simple and cheap. I don’t need a fancy mirror or jewelry.”

Hiraya flicked a necklace more out of boredom than anything.

“New Calusa you say?” the witch asked as she moved to a section with books, scrolls, and parchments.

“Mhmm.” Hiraya wondered what could be useful in that section of the store.

“Let’s see.” She rummaged through the parchments, pulling one out. “Here we are.” She showed the princess, rolling it open. It was a map of New and Old Calusa. “I assume you have nothing of your sister’s?”

“No. Not really. What is it you need?” Maybe she could find something.

“Saliva. Hair. Blood. Something to mix with the ink that will reveal your sister’s location.” She moved to a table with mixing bowls and other supplies. She laid the map down.

“Well, we share a parent so can we use my blood.”

“Hmm. I’ve never tried that before.” Her face brightened. “Wait. I think I remember Bisan doing a spell for this boy. He was searching for his brother. If only Bisan was here.” She walked over to the counter where a large book sat. “I can’t remember what the spell was called. Let me see. I only helped gather supplies. Maybe that will trigger my memory.” She opened and then closed the book.

Hiraya returned to gazing at the shop items. She knew the witch needed some time to gather ingredients. “The boy had said his brother stayed with their mom while he traveled with his father.” Hiraya wondered if Mykle told the story as a means to trigger any memories or was it to make small conversation. “When they came back, the mother had died and the brother gone. So terrible how easily someone can disappear in this day and age, even with all the spells and enchanted artifacts. But there’s always someone out there with more spiritual powers. Ah! I remember now! The Sibling Seeker spell! How’d I forget such a catchy name?” Mykle opened the large book and flipped through the aged pages. Hiraya had seen it so many times before and yet never looked inside. Her fingers itched to go through it, not to see what was inside but to examine the pages and artwork. She loved old books. Something about old books and scrolls lured her in. The artistry and beauty of it just astounded her. She knew she could never look at this book though. It had been magicked, locked so only the witches of this shop could see the contents.

“So was it your mother or father’s child?”

Hiraya paused and turned to see the witch holding an egg. She furrowed her brows.

“Um...my father.”

“Oh. Okay.” Mykle set the egg to the side and picked up a handful of black seeds. She added it to the mortar and pestle and crushed it. Next, a jar of water labeled “moon.” She poured it into a bowl and then dumped the seeds in it. Her lips whispered the spell as she mixed things. She met Hiraya’s curious gaze and waved the princess over, never pausing her incantation. Hesitant, Hiraya obeyed. The witch grabbed the princess’s hand and without warning poked a finger. A yelp rang through the shop. Hiraya tried to recoil but Mykle’s grip was strong. Yes, blood was necessary, and the princess knew that, but a warning would have been nice.

A few drops fell into the concoction, causing it to glow a blood orange. The witch mixed in a few more herbs and finished off the incantation. She moved the map close to the bowl.

“Now say her name and spit into the mixture,” she ordered.

“Oh. Um. Abigail.” Hiraya spit into the bowl. She wondered what would have happened if she hadn’t known the name. Would the spell still work?

“Perfect.” The witch walked over to the collection of crystals and stones. She searched through a basket of clear stones. She found one filed down into a flat, oval shape. If Hiraya hadn’t witnessed the witch searching through the stone, she would have thought it glass. “This’ll do.” The witch returned to the bowl and dropped the stone into it. She glanced back at the spell. “Oopsie.”

“What?” Hiraya didn’t like the sounds of that. Would she have to do the whole spell again and poke another finger for blood?

“Now you’re supposed to spit and say the name. Go ahead and do it again and hopefully it works.” She plastered on an uneasy, large smile as if that would ease the princess’s mind.

Hiraya squinted her eyes at the witch but repeated the steps again. The concoction glowed more orange this time as it steamed.

“This part takes a little bit. Is there anything else you need? I can work on another spell while this is—” she wiggled her fingers at the steaming bowl. “—does this.”

Hiraya chuckled and then shook her head. “This is all I need.”

“Are those new bangles?” Mykle said, not letting anything get past her.

Hiraya lifted her left arm, showing off the two bangles Aashirya had gifted her. A pang of guilt struck her, the jewelry reminding her she told no one of her exit, even the woman who was the closest thing she had to a mother. Yeah, she left a note, but maybe she should have told her Tita. She wondered if Bre ever felt this way when running away.

“Those are worth a lot. Hand crafted. Cleansed. The energy from these are beautiful. These are quite old. I would not expect anything less from a princess. Perhaps you’re selling them?”

Hiraya yanked her arm down and hid it behind her back. “Like Ragnarok would I sell these!”

Mykle shrugged nonchalantly. “It is always worth a try.”

“Are you sure you aren’t a con artist?”

“I run a business. Selling and buying is what I do. You should know this by now.”

Hiraya remained silent, unsure how to continue the conversation and feeling too lazy to move it towards small talk. Instead, she picked up a tower crystal of an opaque color and examined it.

“I normally do not pry but I can’t help but notice the pack and how full it is. Are you traveling to Calusa to find your sister?”

Hiraya nodded. “Yeah.”

“Does this have to do with the King naming his heir?”

A chord struck inside her. The anger from the last several days heated her core. “Hex is not the best for Croec.” She had planned to keep this opinion to herself, but Hiraya had a problem with oversharing, especially when asked directly.

“I totally agree with you there. Him and his lackeys are always stirring up chaos when they come to the Emporium. Always pick on us spiritual conduits or peaceful creatures. I see them often throwing rocks at the sprites near the lake.”

Hiraya tried to hide the utter disdain for this type of behavior. She always wondered where the little brother she had once known as sweet and emotional went. When did he become so distant? She never thought he’d turn out so...mean. That’s the nicest way she could describe it.

“Ope. It’s ready.” Mykle picked up the stone, it was completely dry. Where had the concoction gone? Did it completely dissipate with the steam? Oddly enough, the stone appeared more translucent than when it entered the mixture. “It looks like it worked.” She held it out towards the princess. “Look through it at the map. See if anything pops up.”

Hiraya hesitantly took it and hovered over the map of Calusa. It had been one territory until a hurricane destroyed the old city and the royal family rebuilt New Calusa. Hiraya and her family had lived briefly in Old Calusa but moved to Croec at her uncle’s passing. She didn’t remember most of the time there, being about six summers when they moved. The desire to be near the ocean was the reliable yearning which lingering from that place.

The princess peered through the stone and searched for anything that stood out. “What am I looking for? How will I—” She spotted a dark orange triangle moving through Old Calusa. It moved towards the Fishmarket. “Oh. I see it.”

Mykle clapped quickly and energetically. “Oh goodie. I was worried I mucked it up.”

Hiraya chuckled. “How much do I owe you?” The princess reached into her shorts to pull out her purse.

“How about one of those bangles?”

“You’re funny...no.”

“Just three and the promise you’ll make sure Croec never falls into Hex’s hands. We like Atatiana. She may be crude but she’s fair to creatures and humans alike.”

Hiraya handed over the coin. “If I have anything to say about it, it won’t happen.”

“Don’t lose that Looking Glass.” Mykle’s expression softened. “Good luck, Hiraya. And by the way, I absolutely love your hair.”

Hiraya smiled. Finally, someone complimented her blue hair. “Thanks. See you around.” She took the map and stone, storing it in her pack. When outside, she gave a wave of her fingers. Brin trotted towards her, having waited patiently out of sight. “Let’s go on an adventure.”

The hyena yipped in response with its round ears perked.

Chapter 13

The road seemed bare as she traveled. It was close to dusk and would need to find a place to stay soon. She had already spent three days walking and now the urge to sit down to rest caused her to drag her feet. Hiraya thought exploring and setting off on a quest wouldn't be so daunting, but walking all day did a number on her feet. She was also surprised she didn't come across more creatures. From all the tales and warnings her father told her, it seemed like the peril would occur at every moment. Her father had been so cautious he barely traveled even with the guards and servants readily available.

Brin's low laugh pulled her from her thoughts. She peered down at the hyena. "You tired too?" she asked. Finding places to stay that allowed her pet had posed an unwarranted obstacle. She had to pay more for a room. She even chose to sleep in a stable stall instead of a room without her Brin.

His laughter grew louder, finally raising concern. She had learned when she was younger and a boy had been bullying her that the laughter wasn't a response to humor but a warning. She glanced around. Everything seemed normal. Silence usually meant danger was near. But there was none. The birds still chirped.

“We need a place to sleep,” she muttered to herself. The nights were perilous, but she hadn’t passed a tavern in a while. Sleeping in the woods seemed the only viable option during this part of her trip.

Brin bared his teeth and leapt into a sprint. Hiraya scanned the trees. Nothing. “Brin!” She decided the only way to find answers for this odd behavior was to follow her pet. “My feet hurt Brin!” she shouted as he disappeared around a bend in the road. The curve made it difficult to see ahead as she chased after him. Once it straightened, she finally saw Brin with a group of men in front of him. The men encompassed a wagon being pulled by two donkeys. In the wagon were barrels, probably what the men were wanting to steal. But what caught Hiraya’s attention was the little girl to be only a few years old, huddled close to a tall, elderly man wearing a red and white scarf around his head. He had a long arm around the little girl as the men held up their weapons and approached slowly. Bandits.

“Just let us take a look, old man,” a young man with shaggy blond hair and crystal blue eyes said.

The old man pulled the little girl into him, shielding her from the weapons. “We just need to go home. We have nothing,” he told the bandits.

“I’m getting tired and annoyed, old man. You really know how to set me off.” The blonde gazed around at his comrades who muttered their agreement. He chuckled. “We’ve been patient with you and...kind. Now let’s see what gift you bring to us.”

Brin paced back and forth, unsure if he should attack or wait on her command. The hyena looked back for her approval, letting out a charged laugh. She didn’t give it to him...not yet.

The bandits turned as Hiraya came to stand beside Brin. The blonde held up a mace and set it on his shoulder. He casually scanned the princess and her pet. He ran his tongue across his

top teeth and lifted his chin, as if that made him more threatening. "Move along heifer." He smirked. "This isn't your business."

Hiraya scoffed. "Like I haven't heard that before." She set down her pack as Brin peered up at her. Countless times she had been degraded to an animal. Was even told to go back to the barn once. Bullies were always so very original.

"I call it how I see it." He swung the mace around, showing off how well he could wield it. Such a spectacle. Why did men like him seem to fit a script? They were always trying to show off to prove capable they were...which only meant how incapable they were. Hiraya smirked, realizing how much this guy resembled Hex. Beating him would be a pleasure.

"Sounds like you're afraid." This statement would definitely get him riled up.

"Excuse me?" He stopped his showcase, focusing more on her. "There are nine of us and one of you."

"Yeah. You needed nine men to steal from an old man and a child. So brave."

Brin whined.

"I think you need to take a walk, shed a few layers before telling me what to do, you fat bitch." A few men echoed his sentiments.

"Name calling, very classy." She glanced down at Brin and patted his head. "Enough chit-chat." She reached up, clutching Kita. She could fend a few off using no weapons, but not nine.

"You really got some nerve. What ya gonna do? Eat me to death?"

Hiraya sighed. This deserved no response, just action. Anything she did say would fall on deaf ears anyways. She stared into Brin's pleading eyes. "Salakay," she commanded.

Brin charged the bandits. They screamed in shock. Brin was large and scary, especially combined with his haunting cackle.

She whispered Kita's name and pulled it from her neck. It began to expand in size. The blonde's eyes widened as he saw this. He raised his mace just as she brought the axe down. He stumbled backwards. She didn't use full force, knowing it could split him in two, after shattering his weapon. Although she knew she had the ability to kill, she had never found a reason to do such. She knew she couldn't handle the emotional and mental repercussions from such an act.

"What the fu—" the blonde said. Hiraya didn't give him a chance to finish. She took the crescent moon at the top of her axe and shoved it towards his throat. He managed to slide his hand between Kita and his neck, but sacrificed his mace to the ground. She pushed, causing him to frantically step backwards, eventually being pinned to the side of the wagon. A bandit hit her on the back with a baton in hopes that would help. She winced but kept pressure on the leader. The bandit came in for another hit. She raised one leg and thrust a foot into his stomach. He flew back, taking down a bystanding comrade. Two more bandits made their way to her, weapons ready. She couldn't concentrate on the leader with two onslaughts coming. She swung her axe to the left, forcefully throwing the blonde in that direction and turned to shield herself from the attack. Once they gave her an opening, she whispered Kita's name and then held the pendant in her fist as she started her offensive attack. The confusion of her axe disappearing gave her enough time to grab one bandit and throw him into another.

A loud squeal and a low whine made her turn just in time to see the blonde's ass captured in Brin's large jaw. "Get your mutt off of me!" he bellowed.

Hiraya held back a laugh, hiding behind her fist. "You didn't say please."

"Just do it!"

She glanced around. All the men who weren't trying to recuperate had already fled. "You have no one to really help you so I'd mind your manners if I were you."

His brows knitted together in a desperate plea. "Please! Please, just do it!" He squirmed, but not too drastic in fear the teeth would rip flesh.

"Brin, palayain." Brin released him and backed away a few paces. "Good boy!"

The leader leaned against the wagon, rubbing his butt. Hiraya walked over to him and clutched the collar of his shirt. The confidence he had before had dwindled into uncertainty. She examined him more closely. He had to have been around her age. He was handsome too, handsome enough that he probably used his looks to avoid accountability.

"If I see you again, I'm going to beat you till you're like the soil beneath our feet. Got it?" She used the stern tone she often heard Atatiana use with her guards. She hoped she sounded at least half as intimidating as the Queen.

He nodded quickly and urgently.

"Now go and do something to help society or I'll tell everyone a fat bitch took you and your little followers down." She tossed him to the side. He ran to the last of his men before disappearing into the trees.

"Ya 'tik al-'afiya." A voice came from behind Hiraya. She turned to find the old man as he held the little girl. She had forgotten their presence with her focus on the bandits. Sometimes, she would focus too much on the battle that she'd forget about anything else around her.

"What?" she asked, not understanding his words.

The man smiled. "Thank you. My granddaughter and I appreciate you helping us." The old man stood tall and strong with swarthy colored skin paled from the winter season. He wore a red and white headscarf around his head. At the corners of his eyes were deep creases, revealing

a long history of smiles. He kept a long, curly beard peppered with age. This man reminded her of a large sturdy tree basking in a golden sunset.

“Oh. No problem. I just hope they don’t bother you again.” Hiraya gave her attention to the granddaughter and wiggled her fingers in a friendly hello. “I hope they didn’t scare you too badly.”

The little girl leaned into her grandfather and tugged at his beard. Her expression remained timid and her dark brown eyes wide with caution. Her brown curly hair was pulled into two puffs on either side donned with pink ribbons. She wore a beautiful pink and purple tareez dress, which contrasted her grandfather's simple robes of browns and tans.

“Say hello Reem,” the old man said.

“Hi,” the little girl said, hiding her face behind his head.

“Hello Reem. My name is Hiraya and this here is Brin.” She pet the hyena between his ears causing him to lean into her hip.

“Does he bite?” Reem peaked around her grandfather’s head.

“Only bad guys. Right Brin?” The princess glanced down at the beast. He pushed a quick breath out of his black nostrils in agreement.

“Such an interesting animal. What is it? Is it a creature?” the grandfather asked.

“Oh no. Brin here is just a normal creature. My father bought him from a merchant who traveled the seas. They aren’t native here.”

“Jiddi, can I pet it?” Reem asked.

He chuckled and nodded. He set her down. She walked slowly over to the sitting Brin. The hyena reached forward, its nose moving, taking in her scent. She paused, the fear stopping her. Brin was taller than her and his sharp teeth weren’t very welcoming. Many people feared

him, even though all he wanted was a little love. He was just a big cuddle bug when it came down to it. She loathed how many feared him because of his appearance.

“It’s okay. Brin loves children. He actually led me to you. He knew you needed help.”

“Really?” Reem’s little voice squeaked. This fact prompted the courage to pet Brin on the head. Brin remained seated, only tilting his head towards her. His gentleness moved Hiraya every time she witnessed it. He knew when to be still and when to be aggressive. She often wondered what thoughts were going through his head and if he actually understood her.

An owl whoed in the distance. A coyote’s yip replied. Night life was waking up. She needed to find some place to rest and these two needed to hurry home.

The grandfather crossed his arms across his chest as Reem moved closer to Brin. “We had a young man staying with us when we traveled north. He protected the shipment. Such a quiet, kind boy.”

“How about I escort you two home since it’s getting late?” Hiraya offered.

“I have no way of paying you. I gave an Amaroq-pup hybrid as payment to the young man. It was the last thing of value I had.” He sighed. “We cannot ask that of you either. You won’t make it home before nightfall if you do that.” The old man picked up his granddaughter and set her in the wagon.

“I’m actually just passing through, so I’ll just find a place nearby once we’re done.” Even though she doubted she’d find anything right now. They were in the middle of nowhere, on the outskirts of Calusa.

His expression darkened. “Any nearby inn is quite a ways.”

“Oh that’s okay.” She didn’t want to be a hassle and tell him she probably would stay in the woods. She didn’t want him to worry when it was unnecessary. She could handle herself and

Brin would wake to any nearby creatures. She had camped many nights in the forests encompassing Croec without any troubles.

“You can stay with us on our little farm. It’s not much but it is better than the woods.” He smiled. He knew exactly her plans.

“What? I wasn’t—” Her shoulders fell in defeat. There was no reason to lie. “Okay. I was gonna do that.”

“Then it’s settled. Mashallah!” He climbed into the wagon and picked up the reins. “Come. I’ll cook you a meal.”

“Thank you.” She looked at Brin. He almost seemed to be smiling too. “Let’s join them. Magbanlay.” She commanded Brin to stay alert and on guard. Brin stood and positioned himself on the opposite side of the wagon across from Hiraya’s position. “We’re ready when you are, Jiddi.”

The old man let out a deep laugh. “Jiddi means grandfather. You can call me such, but my name is Khaled.”

The horror of this mistake struck her, harder than even the bandit with the baton. “I’m so sorry.” She hated when she made the wrong assumption. It made her feel idiotic and ignorant.

He shook his head, but his smile remained. “My home is just down the road.” He snapped the reins, notifying the donkeys to move forward. Hiraya walked alongside the wagon as she donned Kita around her neck again. She instinctively reached to adjust her pack and realized she had dropped it before the fight.

“I’ll be right back.” She hurried to her pack, which remained untouched. Thankfully, none of the bandits snagged it as they fled. She grabbed it and ran back to her place beside the wagon. “So what were they trying to steal anyway?”

“Empty barrels. I already delivered the olive oil,” Khaled replied.

“Really? They really didn’t think it through.” She peered at the barrels rattling with the bumps. “So why do you have empty barrels?”

“I take the empty ones from my buyers and give them the full ones.”

“Ah. I see.”

“You are a curious one.”

Hiraya blushed. It felt strange to be seen, to truly be observed, especially when the observation was accurate. “I just like learning things. I like knowing things.” It was true. She loved asking why and how. She needed to break things down, figure them out. Knowing this information helped her be more creative. “So do you own like an olive tree farm?”

He nodded and looked down at Reem. “Isn’t that right, habibi?”

She giggled and enthusiastically nodded.

“Will the rest of your family be okay with us staying the night?” She checked on Brin who kept his eyes on the trees as he followed along.

“It is only Reem and I.” His small smile stayed fixed on his face but his eyes darkened.

“May I ask what happened?” She didn’t want to overstep. Sometimes it was difficult for people to share the trauma...the loss. Not everyone was like her and had already mourned the passing of a loved one.

“They all died.”

“I’m so sorry. My mom passed away when I was a child too. Of sickness.” A silence grew between them. Maybe she should not have asked. “Was it a creature?” She wanted to slap her mouth. Why did she let her curiosity get the better of her?

He shook his head.

“Can Brin sleep with me?” Reem asked.

“That’s a question for Miss Hiraya.” He glanced down at me.

“Can he?” Reem scooted to the edge of the wagon closer to Hiraya, eager for a yes.

“Um. Well, only if your grandfather says yes. Brin loves to cuddle.”

“Jiddi?” Her large brown eyes widened even more, although Hiraya didn’t believe that to be even possible. No one could say no to that cute, pleading expression, not even her grandfather.

“Yes, habibi. You can sleep with Brin.” He turned the wagon down what looked like two parallel trails worn down by wagon wheels. The narrow path made it difficult for Hiraya to walk beside the wagon. Khaled pulled on the reins, stopping the donkeys. “Would you like to ride in the wagon?”

“Um.” She did want a break from walking, but she didn’t want to make it uncomfortable for them. “I think I’ll just walk behind you guys.” Plus, the only spot to sit was on the front with them and it would be quite crowded. She didn’t want to deal with that awkwardness.

He nodded. “It is only a little bit further.”

“Gotchya. Yell if you need anything.” She moved to the rear with Brin and followed close behind. He was right, it didn’t take long before the trees and brush opened up to a clearing. A small house made of stones stood at the front of the clearing with rows of thick twisting trees behind it. Those trees must have been the olive trees that Khaled and Reem took care of. To the left of the house, a wigwam sat, a traditional home the Niji often used for seasonal housing in the area. It had a wooden frame with sheets of birch bark weaving through forming a long dome-like shape. Khaled drove the donkeys right up the wigwam. “Let me put the wagon up and then I will start the stove,” he told Hiraya. “Reem, please show them our home.” He grabbed his

granddaughter and placed her on the ground. Without a breath, she sprinted towards the house. He chuckled. "She hates sitting for long periods."

"Same." She too hated staying put in one spot for long periods. This had been the reason she always kept herself busy. She never knew how to rest and relax. Even the meditations Aashirya made her do, she had to make it into a game to even calm herself for those tortuous grains of sand just falling away at such a slow pace, she thought time had become stolid.

"Our home is small but it keeps us warm."

"No problem. Thank you for letting me stay." Even though it was tiny, she was grateful for his hospitality. She wasn't always a princess of Croec with a palace. There were times when she too lived in a tiny apartment. It had been brief along with the memories of it, but she still remembered the experience.

Through the opening, they could see Brin lying on the small mattress. Reem laid against him like he was her personal cushion, sound asleep. If Hiraya hadn't witnessed it herself, she would never have guessed the little girl was running around, squealing and screaming just moments ago. Reem had even tugged at her grandfather's beard whilst sitting on his lap. The energy of a child surprised the princess. Was this the same when Hiraya was that age?

Hiraya walked into the room and pulled a blanket over the little girl. As she did so, she noticed Reem holding a small doll that mirrored the child: hair pulled into two tails on either side of its head, wearing a simple pink dress, two eyes sewn into a round brown face, and a tiny smile made of black yarn.

"Her mother made it for her," Khaled said from outside the room.

“That’s sweet,” Hiraya replied softly and walked back into the main room. There were three rooms, the main one with a short square table, the one Reem slept in, and a slightly bigger room Hiraya assumed the grandfather owned. In the corner of the main room sat the stove, at which Khaled made taboon for dinner. It also kept the house warm on cold winter nights.

“It is strange,” Khaled said, setting more flat bread from the oven on the table.

Hiraya grabbed a fresh piece, tearing off a part of it and using it as a spoon in the farmer’s salad: a mix of finely chopped tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, and a few spices tossed in olive oil. “What’s strange?”

“Reem hasn’t slept in that room since her mother’s passing.” He sat down on the floor across from the princess and peered into the room. The candlelight caused shadows to dance across the two slumbering bodies.

“I’m sorry.” Hiraya didn’t know what to say to ease the pain from such a loss. This condolence had been the phrase people repeated to her after her mother’s death. And now, it was the only thing she could think of. How do you show sympathy with words? Especially when losing a child? No words surmount to the pain of losing someone close to you.

He smiled, but his eyes held the shadows of nostalgic memories, the only thread to his past loved ones. “I am just happy that she feels comfortable sleeping in there. I thank your friend.”

She returned the smile. She was just glad he and Reem didn’t fear Brin and that the hyena could provide some comfort. Brin only ever wanted to love and be loved. “Brin loves children.”

A brief silence fell between them as if he contemplated on his next words. “It wasn’t creatures...that killed my daughter and her husband and...it was humans.”

Humans. Not creatures. It was humans that also threatened them earlier. Of course creatures never made her feel lowly, worthless. It had been humans...more specifically her acquaintances and family that made these feelings flare. It made sense that humans were the culprit. They seemed more the cause in stories told or the ones she read.

“She seems to be doing well.” Hiraya couldn’t think of anything else to say. Her mother didn’t die from humans. Her mother died of disease. She didn’t suffer something traumatic as someone murdering someone she loved. She considered herself lucky in this aspect.

“We strive. Together we live day by day.” His face brightened as his eyes warmed. “She is the soul of my soul: rohu al-ruh”

A knot formed in her chest as he said this. To him, these words were everything and she felt the weight of them. He held so much adoration for the little girl. The love was apparent in the way he watched Reem, how he absorbed her presence and just sat in the present with her. It was as if nothing existed outside of now and he just wanted to enjoy his time with her.

“It’s time for sleep.” He stood up and turned away from Hiraya, but she knew those were tears he hid. “You can take my room. I will sleep on the floor near Reem.”

“Oh no. I can sleep on the floor.”

He shook his head. “You are my guest.” He went to the room without any other objections. She sighed and finished the last of her flat bread before going to Khaled’s room. It was only a little bigger than the other room. A mattress covered in blankets of wool and deer skins sat in one corner. On the other side, a rack stood where robes and other clothes hung. An old book in a language she didn’t know lay on the bedside table. The edges were curled from excessive use and yellowed by time. It must have been important to Khaled.

She laid down on the bed and pulled a blanket over her legs. It felt strange for her to sleep in someone else's bed. At least at an inn no one owned the bed. This was different. She felt as if she took advantage of his hospitality. Such a kind, peaceful man to have lost so much and now she's taking away his room.

Hiraya closed her eyes and tried to force slumber to come. It denied her request. After a while, she decided to get some fresh air. She quietly made her way outside. The night greeted her with a deep hello from an owl. Hiraya wrapped her arms around herself as she headed towards the olive tree grove. The thick trunks and thin branches reminded her of short stout humans. In the moonlight, the dark green leaves seemed to be dipped in silver paint. If she could capture this image, she would and hang it on her wall. She wanted to remember it forever, store it into her core memory along with the images of the moon setting on the ocean's horizon.

As she continued to walk, the rows of trees stopped at the base of a small knoll. At the top of this hill, a thick olive tree stood, much larger than the rest. It had to have been the width of three of her. Its trunk knotted and twisted, seeing many natural and unnatural events in its lifetime. It stood beneath the moon as if a majestic queen sitting on her throne. It almost reminded her of Queen Atatiana, fierce and stoic, something that cannot be swayed easily. Stone steps led up to its roots. To Hiraya, it felt like a magical gift nature had given Khaled.

She slowly climbed the steps to take a closer look. A pile of moss covered rocks greeted her. A name carved into one of the larger rocks: Shireen. Was this Khaled's daughter? She walked around and found another grave marker. The name Balal etched into another rock. This must have been Reem's father. Hiraya squatted down and began clearing sticks and leaves so the name was easier to see. If she could do one thing, cleaning up their graves was the least she could do.

In the distance, wings flapped slowly and steadily. She stood, her hand immediately going to her pendant. By the speed and tone, the wings were large. This could be anything from a winged creature like the manananggal to something as simple as an owl. The flying creature landed on one of the higher branches above her, revealing a simple owl. She sighed and released Kita. The owl's head twisted in a way that made it parallel to its body. Hiraya instinctively mirrored the bird, leaning her head to the side. "Who are you?" Hiraya asked, giggling at her own joke. The owl shifted on the branch and chirped, as if informing its name. A little introduction.

"Nice to meet you." She yawned, the exhaustion finally bringing with it sleep.

It leapt into the air. The thuds of its flapping wings echoed through the night. Hiraya took this as a sign to leave as well. She continued around the tree, but stopped when something pink caught her eye. A third grave marker sat. She would have missed it if it weren't for the doll with pigtails and a pink dress. The doll leaned against the pile, slightly discolored by weather. The princess examined the largest stone. There was no name, just a single phrase: rohu al-ru. Such a beautiful phrase. She moved the doll so it sat up more abruptly and didn't obscure the words. The words weren't in a language she knew but Khaled's voice resonated with her: *Soul of my soul*. In her mind, the picture of Reem's doll popped into her head. Reem's doll, the identical one lying next to this grave stone.

They *all* died. Realization struck her hard. Some ghosts stayed to be with their loved ones, to watch over them, not being able to let go and move on. They all died...including Reem. Inside, it felt as if a glass jar holding all of Hiraya's emotions exploded. Tears poured from her eyes. She fell into a squat, clutching Kita, and sobbing like she had when her mother passed away. How could that little girl with the sweet smile not be alive? She saw Reem, spoke to

Reem. Brin played and cuddled with Reem. Had Reem died by human hands too? Had she passed away with her parents? Did Khaled know? Of course he did. Someone had to have made these. He had to bury them. He knew. He had to know.

To live on without the ones you love. How tortuous. How...lonely.

Chapter 14

The orb embedded at the center of the ceiling of the room lit up, causing Abi to wince. She covered her face with her blankets and groaned a few expletives. “Turn off the orb. I’m trying to sleep!”

“Oh sorry.” A girl’s small voice came from the doorway. “I didn’t mean to upset you. The door was unlocked. I knocked a few times, but no one answered.”

Abigail frowned, taking in the girl’s appearance. “So you just let yourself in?” Who was this person? The girl didn’t seem like a threat. She was small in stature. She didn’t seem like she wanted to steal anything and based off her attire, shorts and a short sleeved shirt, she wasn’t very threatening. There couldn’t be any weapons hiding in such tight and minimal clothing.

The red from her blush was apparent even against her brown skin. “Oh yeah. Sorry.”

“So who are you?” From the look in the girl’s almost charcoal eyes, it seemed she wasn’t the brightest person, even for a teenager. And where was Minwoo or Kaida? What were they doing that a random person wandered into her room without being stopped?

“Are you by chance Abigail?”

The girl still hadn’t answered Abi’s question. Irritation began to simmer inside. Either this girl was really good at deflecting her question or the idiocracy was heavily apparent? “First, who are you?” She normally never showed her anger, but this girl was about to be one of the privileged.

“I’m so sorry. Yeah. Uh. I’m Breonna. I’m looking for Abigail. I... uh used a spell and led me to this house. I checked all the rooms and stuff.” Breonna pointed her thumb over her shoulder. “No one else was here. You’re the only one here so I thought it may be you. You look a lot like my brother too.”

“And what does that have to do with me?” Shit. She let it spill that she was Abi. Hopefully, this stranger didn’t pick up on it.

“I’m her half-sister.” Breonna pointed at herself.

The words reverberated through Abi’s ears. Half-sister? *Half-sister*. She was even though she could have a sibling out there. She never even thought about her absent father. Were there more siblings or was this the only one? She hoped she wouldn’t have any more surprises. She hated surprises. She hated having strangers invade her life when she didn’t want them to. She was fine where she was at. She liked the people here now.

But was this even true? Could this be a ploy by those trying to distract her? The enemies? Could they be trying to get close to her? Maybe this girl would lead her right into a trap and take

whatever they needed. Anything was possible. She had seen people steal for the most minor of reasons.

“You’re my what?” Abigail finally said. Her fingers clutched the necklace Minwoo had given her. Wasn’t it supposed to protect her? How did this girl find her when she was supposed to be invisible? She didn’t want unannounced visitors. She hated intrusions whether an enemy or a friend.

The girl gave an uneasy grin and shifted on her feet. Her eyes peered everywhere except Abigail. “It’s kinda a long story.”

That wasn’t the answer Abi wanted. She wanted the truth, but she knew anything could be a lie. Humans lied. Friends lied. Family lied. The ones she loved had lied. But she would rather hear a long lie and find small pieces of truth than be left in the dark.

“First, get out so I can get dressed and then we’ll talk.”

Abigail chugged a shot of liquor and stared at the teenager in front of her. Kaida laid on her shoulders, wrapped around her neck. He almost resembled a snake in this position. She didn’t mind it either. It kept people away so she didn’t have to socialize. But now she was forced to talk to a stranger claiming to be her half sister. The irony of it.

So far, she has yet to lie. The dragon had joined her after she had called for him loudly and demanding with her mind after the shocking intrusion.

Abi waved him off and took another shot. She wasn’t worried about the girl lying. She was more worried about what this girl wanted from her. There had to be a reason to seek her. Was she prepared for the reason? Did she really want to know?

Do you think intoxication is the brightest idea?

“Shush,” she mumbled through loose lips.

The girl glanced around, not hearing anything Kaida had said. Not understanding a conversation occurred in their thoughts. “I didn’t say anything,” the girl said, pointing at herself.

“Breonna, right?” Abigail had barely caught her name on their way down here. If she were right, she would be surprised.

“Yes. But you can call me Bre.” The girl grinned, energy beaming in her tone.

“So we’re half-sisters through our father and our father is a king in some city up north?” This was all news to Abi. She had never searched for her father and never asked her mother. But her mother probably wouldn’t even answer even if she did. Their conversations never got deeper than small talk. “Our older half-sister is on her way here in search for me? Is this all correct?”

Bre nodded enthusiastically. “Sounds ‘bout right.” There was just too much excitement radiating off her for Abigail. She needed another shot.

“Then how did you get here so quickly?” By the sounds of it, if Bre left after the older sister, then the older sister should have been here already.

“Oh that’s easy. My sister didn’t think it through. She’s walking. I flew on a pegasus.”

“Pegasus?” Abi’s eyes widened. She had heard of them but never actually heard of anyone riding one much less owning one. They were rare and lived across the seas. They weren’t normally found here.

“Oh yeah. My mom has a few in her stables. I borrowed one.” Bre waved her hand as if this were just an everyday accessory she had donned that morning.

“You just have a pegasus at your beck and call?” Abigail still couldn’t believe it. Such a privilege to live this girl’s life...much different than how she had lived her’s. She couldn’t even

tell anyone who her mother was without risking death by her “step” father. Even though she could say now, the habit of fear lingered.

They once were almost extinct but have grown since under the protection of the Elementals. I am surprised that someone owns them. I thought only the gods were permitted to domesticate them. Kaida would have kept going, but Abi nudged him with her shoulder.

“Yep. Isn’t it awesome? I can show you later once you’re done drinking.”

Abi held up a full shot glass. “Want one?”

Bre shook her head and hands. “Oh no! I don’t drink. I’m too young.”

That’s strange. Why’d she lie about that?

Abi ignored Kaida’s observation. “So why did you come down here?”

“I was curious. I just found out about you and to meet you.”

The second part is a—

“Stop it!” Abi smacked the table top.

Bre’s eyes widened, frightened by Abigail’s abrupt shout. “What did I do? I didn’t mean to upset you. I just—”

Abi pointed at her half-sister. “Not you. I just need to think for a second.” She took another shot. She did need to think or maybe not think. There was just so much suddenly happening. Is this what it was supposed to be like to be the “chosen one”? Was all this supposed to happen at once? First being attacked, then meeting Minwoo, then chasing an Anun, and now having not one but two siblings searching for her?

This doesn’t look like thinking. Kaida added a little venom to his voice.

Get off me if you’re gonna be like that, Abi said to him with her mind so she didn’t confuse the girl again. She shrugged a few times in hopes he understood her request.

He slithered his way to the countertop. *Why must you be unbearable when you're stressed?*

Dizziness began to settle in. "Hold on. This is just too much." She slid off her barstool, stumbling sideways. Maybe she did drink too much. She should have paced herself a little bit instead of rushing to ease her anxiety. A strong hand wrapped around her arm, stabilizing her. She stared down at the hand and followed it to the man's face. Minwoo's thick lips stretched into a straight line, the thinnest she'd ever seen them. His brows furrowed, causing creases to form on his forehead. "Minwoo," she breathed. He always appeared right when she needed him.

"Are you drinking? In the middle of the day?" He glanced at Bre and then brought his gaze to the orange dragon. "You didn't talk some sense into her?"

What would you like me to do? I can see into minds. I can't control them. Abigail imagined Kaida crossing his arms right about now, although he didn't have such a capability in his little dragon body.

"Hey Minwoo." Abigail's lips felt heavy and tingly. "Meet my little sister, Breonna of—what was it called again?"

"Croec."

"Croec!"

Bre gave an uneasy smile. "Hi. You can just call me Bre."

He nodded, still not amused by the situation. "Okay. Well, I need to get this drunkard to her room." He encompassed her waist with his long arm, giving her support. She leaned into his arm, the ground not swaying as much. She could trust Minwoo. He was always so reliable.

"Hey! That's a little rude," Abi said to Minwoo. She turned to her sister, feeling a little bit more at ease with his presence. "Forgive him. I'm just not the 'chosen one' he hoped for."

She didn't mean to say those words. She knew Minwoo didn't really think that, or at least she hoped not. But sometimes her lips became loose with her insecurities when she drank around people. This was why she chose to drink alone more often than with people.

He scoffed. "Aya. Do not be daft Abi. I just think you aren't taking this seriously." So he slightly believed she wasn't the best fit? Those words would hurt worse once the alcohol faded.

"Chosen one?" Bre's gaze darted between Abi and Minwoo. Her dark eyes registered nothing of what they spoke of. "What does he mean?"

Abi opened her mouth to explain, but Minwoo cut her off, "We need to go. Get you sobered up."

"What crawled under your skin?" Minwoo directed Abi away from the bar. "Bye Bre!" Abi waved. "We'll talk later," she said, even though she didn't really mean it. She wanted this moment to dissipate and be swept out to sea. Bre seemed nice enough, but Abi had no interest in reuniting with the family her father chose to keep. She'd rather stay in her own world, away from whatever Bre and the family she came from had to offer.

"Oh okay. Bye." Bre sat there, somewhat befuddled. She even resembled an abandoned puppy as they took their exit.

I do agree. You were quite rude. Kaida appeared on Minwoo's shoulder. Abi wondered when he had gotten up there. She didn't remember the dragon leaving the countertop.

Minwoo rolled his eyes and clenched his jaw. Was he mad? "We really need to find Reva. We barely made any progress and it does not help that Abi here keeps delaying her searches. And you're not helping Kaida." He spoke fast and forcefully, a habit Abi noticed when he got frustrated.

“Why do you despise me, Minwoo?” Abi whined. “There isn’t a guide to finding one of the first four creatures or stopping chaos and stuff.” He shouldn’t be mad. She was doing her best with what she had. She had no idea how to do any of this chosen stuff. It was not like there was a handbook or guide on how to do it. Just some stupid prophecy that brought her more anxiety than clarity.

“I know this isn’t the way. You have to be doing something, other than sleeping and drinking.”

“But what if we leave before my sister gets here?” She pouted. Although she would have been fine never knowing about them, she was kind of curious. But simultaneously, she just wanted to change the subject.

“What do you mean?” He stopped in his tracks and stared intently down at her. He didn’t seem happy by this, like another obstacle they would have to face. His jaw became more pronounced as if he were chewing back his irritation. He released her, scanning the people as if searching for the right direction to go. Finally, he grabbed her waist again. “Wasn’t that girl your sister?” He continued guiding her through the people, heading for their temporary housing.

“Not that one. The other one.”

“What?” He sounded short. Was she not clear enough? Did he not hear her? Did her drunken stupor make it difficult to understand?

Yes. An older sister, Kaida clarified.

“Why is she coming here? Does she not have better things to do?”

Abi paused and peered up at him. “Why are you so snappy today?” He seemed a little more on edge than usual. Was he mad about her drinking or was he mad that people were

searching for her and may distract her from their goal? Either way, she was the one at fault for his quick temper.

I second that.

He averted her gaze. “It’s just...I am getting antsy. I feel like we are getting nothing done and now we will have this distraction. We need to focus.”

“I’m sorry.” Abigail pulled away from his grasp. Guilt ate at her. She knew she hadn’t been helping like she should. Minwoo had been the driving force behind locating Reva. She just tagged along. She had no investigative skills nor did she have some specialty she could bring to the table. She felt useless and shameful. It felt like the title “chosen” was only that with no backing. There was no weight to her title because she had nothing to support such a claim. “I know I need to do better. I really have been a disappointment lately.”

“I did not mean—I mean yeah, but just act like you want this. It seems like you really are not invested.”

“I am!” Her voice went higher than expected. “I just get overwhelmed and stressed. I just don’t see why I’m the one. I’m not good at anything. I’m not special.”

Don’t say such frivolous things.

“You are special.” Minwoo grabbed her shoulders. She didn’t know if he did this to reiterate his words or to just steady her. “And you may have a secret power you just don’t know it. It may show in a time when you least expect it.”

I assume so. Most of the human lore I’ve read has similar themes of such.

“Really? You believe I’m special?” Some of her anxiety washed away with their words, yet still not dissipating completely.

Yes.

“Yes.”

“Awe! You’re so sweet. How about we get something to eat?” She walked away from them as if she weren’t heavily intoxicated just moments before.

“She is really something.” She heard Minwoo say behind her.

I second that, Kaida said.

Abigail dipped her flat bread into the sweet yellow curry. For someone who ate enough in a day for two, she never gained weight. In fact, she was quite thin: her arms, skin and bones. She definitely held herself like royalty, and ate like she could afford it too. But Abi knew most of her meals were free. If Minwoo didn’t cover the costs, usually a soft smile and a flutter of her long lashes could persuade a discount or even a free meal. She learned this trick by observing her mother.

“How are you so hungry all the time?” Minwoo asked, eating his rice and red curry. His eyes scanned the restaurant. They had not chosen a table to his liking due to the many occupants craving the same meal as them.

“I just love food.” It wasn’t a lie. Her grandmother made the best foods. Her favorite had been pumpkin seeds cooked in butter made from fish oil and dried snapper fish. Times like these made her miss her grandmother.

“I do too, but not to such quantity. Where do you even put it all?” He scanned her body, making her feel self-conscious.

“I don’t know. Guess I need the energy being the ‘chosen one.’” She shoved another piece of naan into her mouth.

He chuckled. “Don’t get ahead of yourself.” He paused. “You think Kaida will be long?”

Abi shrugged. “Who knows. You know him. He likes to fly around. Hates being cooped up. We’ve been here for a while and he can’t fly here without stirring the Blood Guard.” Abi knew she was right. Although Old Calusa had less conservative and traditional ideals than those living in New Calusa, the presence of creatures still unsettled residents. Dragons weren’t as frequent in these areas. Seeing one flying over the city would put Old Calusa’s defense, the Blood Guard, on high alert.

Someone bumped into Abigail’s chair, pulling her from her thoughts. She looked up at the culprit, immediately recognizing the drunken woman from the other day. This time, she got a better look at the woman’s face: sharp features and thick lips. The drunkard seemed more sober and coherent compared to before.

“Sorry.” The woman’s voice sounded like silk, deep and smooth, a voice that could easily lure her into a slumber.

Abigail met the woman’s eyes, eyes that startled her. She had never seen someone with such a dark complexion have such crystal, icy blue eyes. It felt like those eyes pierced into her past, present, and future. A chill ran across Abi’s skin. “Oh. It’s okay,” she muttered but something told her this was the person they had been seeking. This was Reva. Those eyes gave it away. Those were the clearest eyes, the ones Minwoo and Kaida had spoken of. The seer was correct: she could notice Reva by the eyes.

The woman turned towards the door. Abi peered at Minwoo. “I think that’s Reva.”

He looked over his shoulder. “You mean that woman with the colorful braids?”

Abi slowly nodded, the astonishment from meeting those eyes keeping her in a daze. It felt strange, like she couldn’t quite snap out of it. “Yes. You said her eyes were crystal blue and hers were. It felt like she saw my entire life from that one glance.”

“What?” He glanced back at the exit, the woman now vanished. “Ah! You should have said that quicker!” He leapt to his feet and sprinted towards the exit.

Abi sighed and took one last bite of her food before chasing him. When she went through the door, she found Minwoo on the ground, having accidentally collided with a young woman and landed there. “What—”

“Go Abi! Don’t lose her,” he shouted, trying to recover.

She nodded and found the woman walking around the corner. Abigail took off, although lacking the speed of Minwoo. Her lungs started to burn and her legs felt heavy. She really needed to work on her endurance. She spent too much time in bed or in restaurants eating, not enough moving.

She rounded the corner to find the woman gone. There was no sign, except a single white feather floating down in front of her. Abi plucked it from the air and examined it. It was much larger than any bird native to here. This had to be Reva’s. She felt confident that that woman was the mythical bird.

Chapter 15

The rest of the journey, Hiraya's mind could not stop thinking about Khaled and how he continued living with little Reem's ghost. Even when she entered Old Calusa, her mind only focused on them and how her heart continued to mourn for them. She couldn't enjoy seeing her old hometown. She even forgot to look through all the reading material she carried with her that would give her answers about the Bulgae.

She noticed all the eyes on her, more specifically on Brin, and so she immediately found an inn that would allow the hyena: with a small bribe. She left Brin in her room and began the search for Abigail using the map and the spelled Looking Glass.

As she walked through the streets, she noticed all the eyes on her, more specifically on Brin, and so she immediately found an inn that would allow the hyena: with a small bribe. She left Brin in her room and began the search for Abigail using the map and the spelled Looking Glass.

Now she was walking down the street, trying to juggle said map and stone. At first, her half-sister moved through Old Calusa, but now, the little triangle remained still...thankfully. But it had been so long since she lived here that she couldn't remember any of the streets. It felt as if she were a newborn fawn just born in a strange land.

She peered up at the cross streets near the triangle signifying her sister's location, and then at the surroundings. Restaurants and shops made of red and tan bricks lined the streets. Her sister probably resided in one of these. It wouldn't be a store, because the symbol hadn't moved since the beginning of her search. It must have been one of these restaurants or taverns. Even if she searched each one, would she be able to recognize Abigail? To Hiraya, Abigail was a faceless stranger.

She held up the map with one hand and pressed the clear stone to her eye. She almost ran into someone and muttered a quick apology. Multitasking usually was her strong skill but throwing in the act of walking seemed to tip the scales for the worst. She paused and decided it would be best to roll up the map and stow it away in her pack. Abigail was somewhere nearby, and the map wasn't going to pinpoint where.

Hiraya looked up from her pack just as someone slammed into her. She fell onto her back with a thud, knocking the breath from her lungs. Someone laid on top of her, someone much taller than her. She peered at the person...a man. His long black hair tickled her face. She brushed it off as he rolled to the side. He paid her no attention as he focused on something else. "Go Abi!" He waved his arm at someone out of her view. "Don't lose her."

Footsteps sounded, fading into the street noises. Hiraya sat up and groaned. Her back itched from the impact with the rough ground. And her lungs were still recovering from the sudden force. Plus, with all the walking and lack of rest, her body cried with fatigue. She hadn't felt this exhausted since her relentless training days with Finn and Emtu.

The young man crawled on all fours, picking up items that had been in her pack and expelled from their collision. She wrapped around her stomach, suddenly a sharp pain striking through her. She held back a groan but couldn't help but wince. Maybe he had hit her harder than

she thought or maybe it was her body's way of telling her she needed to eat. She often forgot when her mind was focused on something else and this morning it had been solely focused on Khaled and Reem and wondering what would happen to them.

"Are you okay?" the man asked as he put things into the pack she still wore. She hadn't even noticed him doing this until he asked her the question.

She looked at him, finally realizing that he was probably younger than her. His bronze eyes flashed like embers from a dying fire in the sunlight. She nodded. "I'm fine." Her voice sounded strained.

"Okay. Good." He got up and left, not even offering to assist her to her feet.

"Seriously?" She readjusted her pack, a little peeved by his lack of respectability, and stood up. "Oh no. I don't need any help, but thanks for the offer." She brushed off her butt and the back of her arms, ridding of the dirt and gravel sticking to her. "I accept your apology. So kind of you to stick around to help—"

His words echoed in her head, an epiphany ringing bells. *Go Abi...Abi...* which could be derived from Abigail.

"Shit," she grumbled under her breath. Hiraya had been too focused on the man running her over to take in the person who he ordered around. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

She spun around and jogged after them but they had vanished. She did so until she realized it took too long for her to have the stupid epiphany. Sometimes processing information came to her like a snail. Atatiana always said it was because she was gullible. For once, Hiraya agreed.

The map would help her figure out her next step. She grabbed it from her pack and then rummaged for the Looking Glass. It was nowhere to be found. She pulled her pack off and

dumped it onto the ground. She searched through the clothes, scrolls, books, and other things, finding no sign of the translucent stone. She piled everything back inside and hurried back to the spot where all of her stuff had been rudely knocked out of her bag. People passed by as she searched every crevice of the street. She even went inside the nearby shops just in case it had gotten thrown inside. No sign of it. She ended back in the street, sighing in defeat. How could she lose the one thing that would help her find Abigail? She needed her half-sister to stop this whole thing with Hex. Abigail was the answer.

With this new obstacle, she decided to take a break. She needed to relax, not having done so since leaving Croec. The frustration welled up inside and Hiraya could feel the oncoming hot tears. Maybe she should return to the inn and take a nap. Yeah. A nap would suffice.

Brin licked her face, an unwelcome means of waking her up. He whimpered in her ear as she wiped the drool away with her blanket. Sitting up, Hiraya glared at the hyena. "I would have preferred a howl, some laughter even, over that," she said, her voice cracking. She was parched.

He pushed his nose into her side, making her squeal and causing some of her earlier aches to return momentarily. "Okay! Okay! I get it. You wanna go outside." She climbed out of the comfort of the blankets and stared at her outfit in the mirror. She wondered if there were any cloth cleaners. She had already gone through her spare clothes. She missed the days of just reaching into her closet for a fresh clean outfit. She threw her head back and groaned. She wouldn't have the time to clean her dirty clothes.

Brin pushed his muzzle into her hand. Hiraya grinned sympathetically at the beast. "I know." She grabbed the leash hanging from the mirror. He stepped back at the sight of the

restraint. “I’m sorry Brin. But you have to wear it. It’s the law here. They weren’t going to let you in otherwise.”

He stretched his front legs forward, pushing his butt into the air. He exhaled and stepped closer to her as if accepting the leash.

“Thank you. I love you.” She wrapped the leash around his neck. He huffed in response while she grabbed her pack. They made their way out of the inn, Siren’s Call, and to the beach where Brin could find a palm tree to urinate on.

The sun had already disappeared behind the horizon, her nap lasting longer than she had originally expected. People still remained with Old Calusa’s nightlife being the busiest time. Couples held hands as they walked the beach or held each other against the wind coming off the bay. Hiraya rubbed her arm, realizing she should have worn a jacket. Although summer was coming soon, winter still rode on Spring’s wings.

Brin tugged at the leash, lifting his nose to the air. Something caught his attention. He yanked her in the direction of the pier. The pier reassembled the Emporium, or more like the Emporium like the pier due to her father’s past experience here influencing the Emporium seen today. The pier inspired many attractions her father requested in Croec: entertainment, exotic animals, food, games, and even rides on creatures like griffins and unicorns.

The hyena pulled her through the crowd, sniffing the ground and people’s shoes. No one seemed to mind him here. They must have thought she was someone who was walking one of the exotic animals from one of the attractions.

Brin paused his hunt. “What is it Brin?” she asked.

His ears perked up and his lips retracted into what Hiraya knew as a smile while others probably saw it as a threat. He lurched forward, dragging the princess. “Whoa!” she said,

although it had no effect on the hyena. Brin finally stopped, jumping on a random stranger. Embarrassment ran through her as she pulled the leash, tearing Brin away. Brin had never acted so comfortable with a stranger before. “I’m so sorry! He doesn’t get out much.”

The stranger turned. “Brin? Is that really you?”

Hiraya recognized the voice instantly. “Breonna?” Her eyes narrowed in on her little sister. Breonna wore her curly black hair in a messy bun. She wore a cropped top held up by strings and a short skirt, definitely something the Queen wouldn’t approve. Yep. This definitely was Hiraya’s little sister.

“Where ya been? It took you forever to get here.” Bre accepted a kebob of grilled meat from the vendor and stepped out of the way for other customers to get their food. Bre appeared to be awfully comfortable here, like she had lived here for ages when in actuality this had to be her first visit.

But Bre was the last person Hiraya expected to see. “What do you mean? What in Ragnarok are you doing here?”

Bre offered one kebob to her. She accepted, realizing she still hadn’t eaten today. She had trudged into her room and fell asleep on the bed. “After you left, dad was in an uproar. He was furious you left only a letter to the nurse.”

“Aashirya. Her name is Aashirya.”

Bre shrugged, tearing a piece of meat off the stick.

“No. She has a name. Use it. You’re being rude.” Bre knew Aashirya her whole life. Hiraya didn’t understand why she acted like she wasn’t a part of it.

Bre rolled her eyes. “Maybe I shouldn’t have come.”

Guilt shooed away her moment of criticism. She probably shouldn't have been so strict about Aashirya. She just felt so protective of her tita. "How'd you get here anyways and why are you here?" she asked.

She grinned, like a child completing a task without any assistance. "Well, mom said she knew where Abigail was. She has connections, you know? And the palace was so boring. And with dad yelling and screaming, who wants to be around that? Have you met Abigail yet?"

"Wait. Does your mom know you're here?" Queen Atatiana would definitely kill both of them if Breonna snuck down here.

Bre slapped Hiraya's shoulder. "Of course! I'm trying to be more honest. Plus, I wasn't going to do what you did and deal with mom and dad."

She glared at her sister. Bre had done exactly that in the past, so it wouldn't be anything new. "I'm an adult Bre. You're still young." She already felt bad about her earlier critique that she refrained from furthering her inquiry.

She gave another unbothered shrug.

"Wait. Did you ask me about Abigail?" Hiraya asked, all of Bre's questions finally resonating in her brain.

Bre nodded.

"You met Abigail?"

Another nod.

"You met Abigail!"

Bre laughed. "I've been here since yesterday. Flying is much quicker than walking. I don't know why you didn't just fly." She took a bite of the meat.

“I couldn’t since I had Brin with me. So you really met Abigail? Do you know where she is?” This could actually work. Such great news at a time when she had lost the only thing that connected her to her sister. The goddesses were smiling down on her for sure.

Bre swallowed her food and handed the kebob to Brin, who eagerly accepted. “I met her this morning. I can show you where she’s staying, but it would be better to do it tomorrow.”

“No. I have to see her now. I didn’t walk days just to delay.”

Bre peered down at Brin, brows furrowed. “It might be best if Brin doesn’t come. She’s not big on surprises.” She patted the hyena on the head. “Do you have a place to stay?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh wow. Really?”

“Yes. I’m at the Siren’s Call.”

Bre scrunched her nose. “No. You need to stay with me. Kath’s parents have a beach house that I’m staying at. It’s quite large and not too far from here.”

Hiraya liked the idea. She didn’t have to go back to the inn. She carried everything with her. It was just easier that way. Did she need to tell the inn she wouldn’t be returning or would they get the point when she stopped showing up? She only paid for two nights, not expecting to be here long. She shook off her doubt. Who cared? It hurt no one to check out of the inn. If anything, they received extra money.

“C’mon. Let’s go. The servants are there and can take care of Brin for you,” Bre said. Hiraya had never seen Bre so pushy before. Bre usually just went with the flow, which made her quite the follower instead of a leader, not the best assets for a princess.

“Yeah. That sounds good. And then straight to Abigail’s.”

“Got it Hiraya.” Bre waved for the princess and beast to follow. They moved further down the pier and onto the boardwalk. The boardwalk continued between the beach and a neighborhood of two story houses built close to each other. These houses weren’t around when Hiraya lived here or at least she had no recollection of them. It almost felt as if Old Calusa had become more of a location to travel than it had before. Many people had feared the place due to the previous Thief King and his ruthless laws meant for those he didn’t like or care for. But now, it seemed more of a traveller’s attraction.

“Kath and her parents come down all the time. Guess he runs a merchant company and imports.”

“And here I thought you were just a socialite,” Hiraya muttered to herself.

“Did you know that Kath’s dad has a weird interest in vampires? He wants to become one. If dad knew!” She gasped, covering her mouth and realizing she spilled a secret.

“More power to him” Hiraya didn’t feel the need to feed into these types of rumors. If the man wanted to be a vampire then so be it. It hurt no one.

“Can you believe it?” Bre shuddered. “Who would want to be a creature, especially a blood sucker?”

“You never wanted to be a creature?” Hiraya asked as Bre turned down a street, entering the neighborhood.

“Well, I mean—” Bre lost confidence in her previous conviction towards creatures. She was probably so used to being around people who condemned them that she didn’t really take into consideration that Hiraya of all people didn’t judge creatures nor those who were interested in them. “What creature would you want to be, if any?”

Hiraya had thought about this a lot growing up. She would even pretend different scenarios and act them out. Sometimes, a friend or two would join her, but then they would outgrow it or consider this type of play too strange and eventually end the friendship. “I love the ocean. It’s what I miss most living in Croec. I’d love to be a mermaid or siren and travel the depths of the ocean.”

“Really? That sounds fun.”

“Research and lore suggests they can travel between worlds.”

“Really?”

Hiraya nodded.

“Any other creatures?”

“Well, I love the moon, so maybe a shadeu or maybe even a Lycan. Not a werewolf though. Werewolves are ugly and can’t control themselves on the full moon. A Lycan can change into their true form any time.” Not to mention, Lycans were born such while werewolves were created after being infected with a lycanthropic virus.

“You know a lot. You’ve really thought about this. I really wouldn’t know what I’d want to be. I just never really thought about it.”

Hiraya always thought Bre would make a good vampire or succubus...or even the water spirit, a Jengu. “I can’t believe you never thought about it. Living for eternity like some, having power over the elements like others, or even just being stronger. It’s fun to imagine the possibilities.” She knew some possibilities couldn’t be true. A vampire was attainable for humans but a Lycan or Shadeu? One had to be born of such lineage to be a part of it.

“Okay.” Bre stopped in front of a two story home made of stone. A short wall surrounded the small front yard. Bre opened the iron gate and crossed the yard on the stone path. “This is the place.”

The wooden door opened before Bre had the chance to reach the doorknob. A woman stood at the entrance. “Welcome back my lady. Would you like us to start dinner?”

“No. My sister here will be staying with me. We just need you to watch her pet.”

Hiraya gave a wave and then patted Brin’s back. A shiver rolled through his body in response. The servant gasped at the sight of the hyena, the usual reaction.

“He won’t harm you. He’s a big cuddle bug.” She slapped his belly.

“He’s a royal pet. Kath has been around him so much,” Bre reassured.

“Yes my lady.” The servant came forward with an outstretched hand. Hiraya gave up the leash. “Would you like me to take your bag?”

“Oh. Um. Sure. Thank you.” Hiraya handed over the pack of clothes and material on the Bulgae. She wouldn’t have time to read it until later on tonight. “Would you be able to wash the clothes?”

The servant gave a curt nod and a small bow of the head. “Of course.” The servant headed towards the house.

“Excuse me.” Hiraya’s voice caused the woman to pause. “What’s your name?”

The woman’s gaze shifted around, taken aback by such an unorthodox question. “Veera, ma’am.”

“Thank you Veera for watching Brin. We’ll be back shortly.” Hiraya smiled.

“Of course.” She bowed a little more deeply this time and took Brin inside.

Hiraya turned to Bre. “Show me to our sister, sister,” she said, using an overtly serious tone as a joke.

Bre shook her head. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 16

Abigail's home was closer to the Fishmarket and the shopping district. Hiraya had probably even passed it on her way to the Siren's Call. The house was a little larger than Kath's home but lacked a yard. Steps lead to the front door, a crimson red. "We're here!" Bre announced and waited at the base of the steps.

"Great!" Hiraya clasped her hands together, ready to meet her half-sister and ask for assistance to stop Hex from inheriting Croec. She peered at her younger sister, waiting for Bre to knock on the door. Bre intimated towards the door. "Fine. I'll do it." The princess climbed the steps and knocked three times. Muffled murmurs sounded before the door finally opened. The man that had run into her earlier today leaned against the frame, arms across his chest. His long straight hair was pulled into a half ponytail, while the half down reached to his chest. He had an oval face with high cheeks. His piercing bronze eyes reminded her of a dragon, especially the way he glared down at her currently. Hiraya tried to plaster a confident smile, but she knew it probably looked strained. She wore her emotions in every expression she made. "Hello. My name is Hiraya. I was wondering if there's an Abigail here. I'd like to speak to her. It's urgent."

"You realize how late it is?" he replied, his voice deep and stern.

She looked away. She should have taken this into consideration. She always wanted to do things right then and there. The anxiety settled in if she didn't. Plus, if she got distracted, it would be a while before she got back on track. Forgetfulness often followed distraction.

"What are you willing to pay?" he asked, scanning her intently. It felt strange to have someone staring at her so closely. She felt exposed...perceived.

"Pay? Bre did you have to pay?"

Bre shook her head. "He wasn't here earlier."

"I'll take that bracelet." He gave a curt nod towards the jade bracelet on her wrist, the one her mother had gifted her.

She immediately covered it and met his glare with her own defiance. "Absolutely not."

"Then what can you give me?"

She looked around, thinking of how to pay him. She forgot her purse in the pack and she didn't have anything else she'd be willing to part with. She clutched the pendant hanging from her neck, a habit done while contemplating. "A spar. Spar me. If I win, you'll take me to see Abigail now, and if I lose, I'll come back tomorrow." He held himself like a warrior or someone who knew how to fight. He also seemed arrogant enough to take the bait and then underestimate her. This always gave her the upperhand in a duel and it made it easier for her to win whatever bet. She learned from her father to only bet when the margins were in your favor.

He peered at her for a long silence. Would he agree or send her away? She desperately wanted to meet her sister. He pushed off the door frame, dropping his hands to his sides. "No weapons," he muttered and for a moment, she thought he glanced at her pendant. Was that because she held it? He couldn't possibly know that her pendant transformed into a large axe.

She nodded vigorously. "Yeah. Yeah. Yes."

“Follow me.” He walked inside, giving no time to register anything or respond. He led Hiraya and Bre down a hallway to the kitchen. They went through the kitchen to the backyard, which looked more like a courtyard. Three other houses had access to this area. A small garden occupied one corner while a firepit and chairs sat in another. The rest of the area was open, plenty of room for a quick fight. Bre took one of the chairs by the firepit as the man stopped to face Hiraya.

“One of us must admit defeat for the sparring to be over,” he told her.

“That’s usually how it works,” she blurted out, not meaning to sound rude, but obviously sounding exactly that.

His right eye twitched, a sign he was suppressing his irritation. “No tricks.”

“Got it.” She fiddled with Kita, starting to feel anxious about the match. She had confidence in her skill, but sometimes the stress leading up to a battle with someone she had never fought before overwhelmed her. Sometimes it even made her falter, make mistakes she wouldn’t normally make. She liked knowing her opponents before fighting or at least a practice round before an official match. But she knew that wasn’t an option right now.

“Remember, no weapons.” He pointed at her. “Hand-to-hand combat only.”

“Okay! You said that already.” Hiraya warmed the muscles in her arms and hopped up and down. The nap helped alleviate some exhaustion but between the travels and the recent events from the Hunt, she still felt a little sluggish and stiff.

“Let’s go, Princess.” He widened his stance and brought his hands up.

She readied herself, expecting him to attack first. Most men attacked first, especially young ones like this guy. He looked to be younger than her, not by much, but definitely had room to grow into an adult.

“Ladies first,” he said, his expression stoic.

She dropped her hands, relaxing only slightly. “You know, that’s actually quite refreshing.” Someone who actually treated her like a woman with some respect. She liked it.

“Just go,” he muttered impatiently.

She obeyed, coming at him straight on. The easiest route to learning someone’s style was to dive right in. She started with a short, quick stroke. He dodged. Now a left hook. He ducked and wrapped his arms around her waist in hopes to tackle her to the ground. She planted her right foot back and engaged her large, muscular thighs. She had yet to meet someone that matched her leg strength. His feet slid backwards as he tried to push her back. “Shit,” he murmured.

Hiraya held back her laughter. Everyone always underestimated her strength. From this point, she had several options to counter. One of her favorites was wrapping her arms around her opponent’s waist, picking them up, and using her weight to slam them down. This maneuver took her opponents by surprise and knocked the wind out of them, but it also took a lot of energy. She didn’t have that much. Her nap earlier helped, but she could have slept another day at most.

Another move would be to bring him down into the ground for some wrestling moves. Less energy, but still expended more than what she desired. The final option was the one she’d try but had more room for this guy to counter, depending on his level of hand-to-hand combat. She reached back, peeling his left hand from his arm, pressing down on his pressure points. He grunted, fighting her grip and coming face to face with her. She gained power over his left hand, twisting it inwards and backwards. He howled in pain, his face skewered in agony. He brought his right hand across her left cheek. The smack resounded throughout the courtyard. Silence followed immediately afterward.

Hiraya kept her grip on him, but her mouth fell open in utter shock. She was gobsmacked. He covered his open mouth, eyes wide and just as flabbergasted as she was. “I—that was—the pain— ” He pointed to his still captured hand. “And I just...” He paused. “Shit.” His cold demeanor from earlier had become completely dispelled by his flustered response.

If this were a friendly sparring session, then she would have laughed and assured him everything was okay. This wasn’t though. She had to win to meet her sister. She had to win. She tightened her grip around his hand and brought her other hand to clutch his wrist. She turned and yanked him over her shoulder. He landed square on his back with a dull thud. He coughed, trying to catch his breath. Similar to how she was earlier today in the streets when he had tackled her to the ground...accidentally. She pressed her foot on his chest. “I win.” She grinned like a child victorious in a game.

He smacked his lips together in frustration and then blew a strand of hair from his face. “Fine. You win,” he grumbled.

“Yay.” She removed her foot and stretched a hand out to him. She wasn’t a poor winner.

He propped himself on his elbows. He scanned her, making her self-conscious again. Her fingers twisted a blue strand of hair to keep herself busy. “How are you so strong?” he asked.

She shrugged and as she did so, the world began to spin. Her head felt light. Maybe she had pushed herself too much in the last week. Between the Hunt, being stabbed by a sword that apparently didn’t physically harm her, the ball, the traveling, fighting bandits, and...that was it...right?

She forgot in her dizzy spell that she had offered to help the man up. He grabbed her hand and pulled. The force caused her to stumble forward and trip over his feet. She hit the ground

away from him just as he fell back once again. Hiraya groaned as she rolled onto her back, moving closer to him. “Sorry.” She wasn’t used to feeling so tired...and weak.

“I take back my previous inquisition.” He propped himself on his elbows once again.

Hiraya remained on the ground, resting her arm on her forehead. She peered up at him, worried she had pissed him off even more. His thick lips slightly smiled, in such a way, she thought it had to be a mistake. “I’m Minwoo.” He stood up and held out a hand to her.

“You’re not going to act like you’re helping me but then take revenge by letting go?”

Her little sister suddenly appeared in Hiraya’s view, hovering above her. “Are you guys okay? That was insane!” Bre stood opposite of Minwoo, peering downwards with complete astonishment on her expression.

“We’re good,” Hiraya responded, still suspicious of Minwoo’s assistance.

“Just take my hand,” he ordered.

She obeyed, praying he wasn’t about to drop her. He didn’t. “Oh thank the goddesses.”

“Not the gods?” Minwoo asked.

Bre shook her head and mouthed the words Hiraya spoke, “Why thank the men when women are so much better?”

He stared a little befuddled. “So you like women?”

“What? No. That’s not what I meant.” Hiraya didn’t mean it as her choice in a partner. She just had a history of dealing with unbearable men. “I mean...” She was rambling at this point. “It doesn’t matter to me. I’m about personality, not gender. It’s just—” She sighed, giving up on any and all explanations. She just sounded like an embarrassed fool now.

“What my sister is saying is she has never been in a relationship so she doesn’t really know who she’s into,” Bre answered.

Hiraya slapped Bre's arm as her cheeks reddened from humiliation. How did they even get on the topic of her nonexistent lovelife. And she had a relationship in the past. It lasted only a few days before she freaked out and called it quits, but she still considered it a relationship.

"Plus, all the guys are afraid of her." Bre grinned.

"Breonna!" And the embarrassment continued.

Minwoo shook his head. "Let's go see Abigail before she falls asleep."

Chapter 17

The words in the book began to blur. Abigail decided it was time for a break. She shut it and yawned. The story had become boring regardless. It had become too cheerful and cliché. She liked raw, unfiltered and depressing love stories, not this cutesy one. She set it on the night stand and walked out of her room. She really wasn't that tired. She had taken too long of a nap earlier, and now sleep evaded her.

She walked into the common area where a couch sat. The short wide table had books and maps on it: Minwoo's research. If they couldn't find Reva, they needed another way of figuring out what they needed to do. How could they stop this ancient thingy that could destroy the world? Minwoo had learned a few things. She couldn't remember what. He often went into speeches, info dumping on her. She always ended up drowning out his voice with her thoughts.

She moved to the table and scanned some of the parchments. The words and drawings bored her. Just looking at all this irked her. The more they failed at whatever they were doing, the more she wanted to go back to her grandmother's village, Acumatte, and just live like she used to: unbothered. She slept in, ate, and just did whatever. Those were the days she missed.

Footsteps notified her Minwoo was coming from the courtyard. He probably trained there like he usually did when the research wasn't giving him any answers. As he entered, a smile formed on her thin lips. "Get a good—" Her voice trailed off as Bre stepped out from behind him

along with another woman she had never seen before. The woman was short and seemed young, maybe even younger than herself. The girl was on the larger side with wide hips and thick thighs, but even being larger, she looked somewhat fit. She wore a brown short sleeved shirt tucked into blue shorts. A silk tan sash wrapped around her waist and hung in the front center. This gave her an hourglass figure. Dark brown leather boots reached over her rounded calves just below her knees. The girl met Abi's gaze and those eyes shocked her. One eye reassembled a caramel cream color while the other was an umber color that seemed to have a blotch of the cream in it. It reminded her of wet sand contrasting dry sand. What bothered Abigail the most was the dark brown, almost black, hair faded into a royal blue and finally into a lighter blue at the tips. For living on the Darkling Plain, she hadn't actually met a creature (that she knew of, excluding Kaida) up close and personal like this, but she heard that sometimes strange hair colors were an easy identifier of one. Either this was a creature before her, or someone trying to look like one, which both unsettled her.

“Um. We have guests? It's kinda late.” Abi crossed her arms across her chest.

Minwoo grimaced and scratched his head. “Abi, this is Hiraya.”

“Hiraya?”

“Yeah. She's the one I mentioned this morning,” Bre interjected.

“Oh yeah.” Abi's expression softened, although inside she still had no idea what emotions were twirling about. She would rather not deal with these emotions and just continue her life without ever interrupting it. “Not to be rude, but you weren't what I was expecting.”

Hiraya's face scrunched in confusion. “Um. Okay.” She shook it off. “So I came here because...hello—” The princess gave a small wave. “—I'm your sister and I wanna meet you, and two, I need your help.”

Abigail sighed. Normally, she would tell them to leave, that she needed to sleep but she wasn't tired and she didn't want to be overtly rude. "This is a lot to learn in one day. How about we go out and you get me a drink?"

"Yes!" Bre said.

Hiraya gave the girl a sideways glare, definitely a trait of the oldest sibling, although if Abigail wasn't aware of the sibling order, she wouldn't be able to differentiate who was the oldest and who was the youngest. "Yeah. I guess. Can we pick somewhere with food? I'm famished," Hiraya said.

Abi scoped her new found half-sister. Definitely not what she expected although she hadn't had the time to even think what her older sister would look like before now. "Yeah, sure."

"I know a place," Minwoo offered. He patted Hiraya's back, and although he didn't smile, Abi saw a friendliness he had only shown her since their first meeting. Even when people were flirting with him, he had been indifferent. His focus to find a solution to whatever this prophecy warned them about was the only thing on his mind. Even Bre got the cold shoulder this morning. So why was this girl any different? She didn't like it...at all. Plus, he didn't seem too thrilled that Hiraya was coming and now he acted like this?

"Great. I'll follow you." Hiraya went to follow Minwoo, but Abigail stepped in front of her. Abi grinned at her friend. "So why were you coming from the courtyard and not the front door?" she questioned. They didn't just magically appear in the courtyard...did they?

Minwoo led them out the entrance and glanced at Hiraya. "Oh. I wasn't going to let her see you tonight if she lost to me in a duel."

So he was protecting her? Maybe she was reading too much into his friendliness. "Oh." But if he brought in her sister... "So she won?" She pointed at the girl on the other side of

Minwoo. But how? She couldn't imagine Hiraya beating Minwoo...not even the slightest. Just look at Hiraya.

"Yep. I did." Hiraya grinned broadly, making it difficult to see her multicolored eyes.

"Yeah. She's quite strong." He puffed out air.

"Oh. That's a shame." Hiraya raised a brow, but Abi ignored it and continued, "So you thinking the Hoop-Snake Wateringhole?" At this point, Hiraya moved behind them along with Bre, giving Abigail some space with her friend. This also made it easier for them to move through the streets. But Abi was somewhat relieved by the space.

Minwoo nodded. "Exactly. They have the best dishes and alcohol."

"So what do you think?" She leaned in closer, glancing back to ensure her sisters were distracted by conversation with each other. Sisters. That sounded strange to her. She had always been alone. Kaida had been her longest companion besides her grandmother.

"What do you mean?" He leaned down towards her. She often forgot how tall he was.

"Of my sis—of them? Think they can be trusted?" Minwoo always seemed to know more than her, even about people. Maybe it was all the reading and research he did.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know, but they are a distraction. We need to find the moonrock necklace."

"The what?" Maybe this had something to do with the ceremony he had found that would release death and chaos upon the world? She couldn't remember. He always went into these monologues of information that she tended to tune out.

He groaned. "Abi! Do you ever listen to me?"

“I do!” She did...sometimes. He scowled, knowing her words weren’t true. He knew her too well. “Most of the time. Okay. I just get bored. You’re the brains. I’m just here for show.” She batted her long lashes at him, something she learned from her mother.

He rolled his eyes. “We’re definitely talking about this later.” He suddenly stopped, reaching for something at his back but only finding air. “Aish!”

“Forget your hyeopdo?” she asked. The hyeopdo was a pole with a long blade on the end of it. It was a traditional weapon from where Minwoo’s father had come from, at least that’s what he told her when she asked about it. See, she did listen.

“Hello. We meet again.” A tall man with sharp features stood in front of them. His long straight hair was pulled into a ponytail just like it had been before. This had been the man who attacked her almost a month ago, before she knew who she really was: the chosen one.

His lackey, the girl with long, wild, wavy hair and strange cat eyes, wiggled her fingers at the group. “I see you made friends.” She met Bre’s gaze. “*Cute* friends.”

Bre blushed and moved closer to Hiraya, similar to a child hiding behind their mother.

“What do you want?” Minwoo asked.

The man chuckled. “Abi, Abigail, why not just join us. I can make your life easier.”

The offer was tempting. She had thought about it once or twice, but she just didn’t trust him...not like she trusted Minwoo. “No thanks,” Abi answered.

“We are on our way to enjoy our time with our friends so—” Minwoo stepped forward. The man raised a sword to Minwoo’s throat.

“Let me—” Hiraya began.

“We’re fine. Minwoo can handle himself.” Abigail still didn’t see how this girl beat her friend. There had to have been some extenuating circumstances. Maybe Minwoo had one of his

clumsy moments and lost that way. Plus, she didn't trust the girl. Who was this girl to suddenly butt into their lives?

Minwoo pushed the blade away. "I—"

The cat-eyed girl held up her hand, revealing long, sharp nails the color of night. "This is boring. Let's have some fun." She launched herself at Abigail. Minwoo tried to intercept but the man stopped him again.

Abi squealed and covered her head. She had never been a fighter. It wasn't because she thought she couldn't hurt another person, no. Fighting took too much effort that she didn't have the energy to invest in. Why learn it when someone else can do it for her?

The cat-eyed girl stopped before her nails could tear through flesh. "You really aren't going to fight?" she asked Abi.

"No. I don't know how." What more did this girl want from her?

"What about you? I've seen you fight." The girl peered past Abi and to Hiraya. "You can at least defend yourself."

Abigail looked back at Hiraya who raised her hands in response. "Listen. I'd love to do a little back and forth, but Abigail here said that Minwoo can handle it. I'm just respecting her boundaries." Abi didn't realize her sister could be so petty. She thought Hiraya was there to ask something of her, not the other way around. She would have been fine if those two hadn't shown up. Now all of a sudden, her half-sister wanted to respect boundaries. They wouldn't have even been out here if it weren't for them coming out here so late.

"Hiraya. Just help her," Bre pleaded.

One corner of the cat-eyed girl's lips lifted, revealing sharp incisors. "Would you like me to make you a damsel?" the girl said to Bre.

Abi moaned with disgust. Not only was this girl being so obviously gross about hitting on Bre, she hated asking for Hiraya's help. But Minwoo was distracted. "Please." The words felt like tar on the back of her throat. "Hiraya. Help."

Hiraya grinned, making this decision all the more gross. "Since you asked so nicely."

Abi sighed with regret as Hiraya pulled the pendant from her throat. The princess brought it to her mouth, speaking into it. Suddenly, a ginormous axe appeared in her hands. She swung it with a surprising amount of ease. Although this should have impressed Abigail, it only irked her more. Hiraya was supposed to be her sister, but it now felt more like they were rivals. Abi hated fighting, especially for attention.

Chapter 18

Hiraya stumbled backwards, her back pressing against Minwoo's. She inhaled deeply and rested the axe's blade on the stone street. She really needed a break from all this fighting. She needed to recuperate. But she didn't want to show anyone the extent of her exhaustion. She hated appearing weak in front of people. Even Aashirya never got the privilege. Just her best beast Brin.

Her free hand caressed her stomach. It ached with the memory of the man's glowing sword. It had hurt when it sliced into her, as if it were a real blade. Even now, the ache was more a phantom ripple from her memory rather than actually being sore. It could have even been caused by her lack of eating.

The tigress took this moment of hesitation and attacked. Her talons ripped down the length of Hiraya's bicep. Hiraya let out a scream and then brought her axe upwards to create some space. It felt like she was merely fighting defensively rather than offensively. Her movements were slow...treacherously so.

Minwoo turned to provide some aid. This left him open for the man to grab him and throw him backwards. Hiraya turned, facing her ultimate enemy. Her blood ran cold as the memory of the icy hot blade searing through her torso haunted her. She had thought death was near. It felt real. It felt present. Would it come now? Would he finally finish what he started?

The man glided towards her, like he was flying. His palm hit her square in the chest. Instead of hitting the ground or a wall, it felt as if she stumbled backwards through a doorway except her feet sunk into sand. She fell onto her butt and Kita landed with a thunk next to her. She tried to pick it up, maybe use it as a shield for a follow-up attack, but her depleted energy didn't allow it. She whispered Kita's full name, causing it to shrink back into a necklace. As she donned it, she peered up to see a portal leading to the street she had only recently been at. She frantically glanced around, hoping she didn't get transported to a whole new realm. Sand surrounded her. Behind her lay the ocean...but which ocean?

The man stepped through the portal, closing it behind him. "Don't worry. We're just at the beach in the bay. Not too far off." He stared down at her as if this were just another casual sparring session. He didn't even look somewhat winded.

"Who are you?" She tried to stand, but he raised a hand to still her. Why fight when it seemed he only wanted to isolate her from the others? She sat back down in the sand.

"I'm Tsuneo." He raised a brow as he scanned her with those steel-like eyes. "You seem well."

She caressed her left bicep, a profound ache reverberating from her wounds. She'd need to see a healer later. "Are you surprised?" she said through gritted teeth.

He scoffed. "I am never surprised." He peered out into the bay and lifted his chin. Did he think that pose made him more foreboding? To her, it just seemed like arrogance rather than but what was he?. He had to be a creature of some sorts. He could be a lesser god with limited power. Lesser gods had less power for they did not have the following and the belief to power them. She had never heard of a god named Tsuneo. Zeus...Woden...Bakunawa...Mayari...and many others, but never Tsuneo. Maybe he was one of those rich aristocrats that found a weapon

of the gods like that lightning sword and pretended to be a god because of the power it provided. Who knows. She just didn't quite believe him to be an all powerful god. Aristocrat...yes. A creature...maybe...but a god...not so much.

"Um...okay," she grumbled through a wince.

He drew the glowing sword from his belt, the one that had sliced into her days ago. "But Hantei normally inflicts more damage. How long were you unconscious?"

This line of questioning was somewhat confusing. "What?"

"It sent you into a slumber, did it not?" He stared at her as if she were an idiot. And right now, she sort of felt like one.

"Yeah...and?" The tone of this conversation confused her. Weren't they in the middle of a fight? It felt like an interrogation now.

"How long was it?"

"Three days." And why was she answering him so willingly? Why did she have to be such an oversharer?

"Ah." He examined the sword. What had he called it? Hantei? That was it. He stowed it back in its sheath. "And what message did she send you?"

"Message?" The world began to shift beneath her. Luckily, she remained sitting. She glanced at her right palm, now covered in her blood.

"The dream she sent to you." He waved his hand around as if that would better help her understand. This whatever-he-was was awfully expressive with his limbs.

She thought about it and realized she did have a dream. It felt real, like she was reliving a memory with her mother. "My mother. I saw my mother." It suddenly hit her that maybe these questions were the reason for isolating her. "What's it to you?" She wasn't going to give him any

more information until he provided the same. What did her dream have to do with him? Why did he ask all those questions? She was a bit lost. What did he want? Why was he here?

He shrugged, not phased by her sudden line of questioning. “I am merely curious. But now—” He sighed heavily. “—I am bored.”

“What? You’re the one to attack us!” Was this guy just toying with them?

“Oh yes. Abigail. Thank you for the reminder.” He turned, as if ending their conversation. So Abigail was the target? Not her. Why would it be her? She remembered now that he had said it wasn’t her when he made his abrupt entrance during the Hunt.

Hiraya leapt to her feet, combatting the swaying of the world beneath her. “I’m not letting you go anywhere. Why are you after her? Why did you attack me? And why didn’t the Hantei kill me?”

He blinked a few times in response to her bombardment of questions. “I’m sensing something.” He wafted the air as if he were pushing a scent to his nose. “Are you jealous?”

“What?”

“You ask that question quite a lot. You must lack intelligence.”

She scoffed. “Excuse me?” She had no idea what he spoke of. Jealous? What? Of who? Abigail? For what reason? This man spoke in circles. Why couldn’t he just be candid? She hated when people weren’t just up front. Can’t people just be honest? Straightforward?

“You are beginning to annoy me.” He turned his back to her again and grabbed a different sword. This sword had a black blade with a wavering line similar to the green and blue lights of the skies farther north. The stream light moved as if it were not painted on but alive on the blade. He cut the air in front of him. A rift appeared, revealing a location separate from their current

one. When Hiraya peered into it, she saw Bre holding onto Abigail's arm as they watched Minwoo fight off the tigress.

Hiraya sprinted forward and wrapped her arms around the god's waist. "I'm not done with you!" The rift slowly began to mend itself. "Answer my questions!" It was more of a plea than a demand.

Tsuneo tried to step forward, but her strength held him back. He glared down at her in disbelief. "How?" he uttered.

Normally, Hiraya wouldn't go to such desperate lengths by just grabbing the enemy by the waist and demanding answers, but she was tired. She knew he could easily stop her and she should have probably given up, but she needed a win. She needed some answers. She needed to stop him whatever his plans were with Abigail. What if he wanted to kidnap Abigail? How could she live with herself if he succeeded? Also, she hoped her determination would cause a slip of his tongue. It could work...right? Maybe her fatigue was causing her intelligence to be lacking. Just maybe...

"Just answer me."

The god thrust the sword into the ground and peeled her arms away from his torso. She stumbled backwards, barely catching herself. She sprang towards him again. He grabbed her by the throat and lifted her off the ground. A lightning bolt of fear struck her as *deja vu* presented itself. Was he going to stab her again? Did death await her? Did she push him too far?

"You are in my way," he growled as he brought her closer to him. "I'll let the sharks have you." He threw her towards the bay.

It felt strange, flying through the air as if to freefall. Is this how it felt when her father used to throw her in the air as a child? The memory of such sensation long forgotten...

The water engulfed her like a blanket, still cold from the winter's glacial hug. She swam upwards, finally catching much needed air. The fatigue shortened her breath and her muscles yearned for a break. She floated on her back, giving herself a short break. The salt stung her wounds, but she knew that it would only help the healing process. With her wound, should she worry about sharks? She knew the cold waters meant sharks would be farther away in warmer waters. She'd be safe for now, hopefully.

She peered up at the crescent moon. A few clouds were illuminated by its light. This moment of peace felt refreshing. Of late, the universe had been throwing so much at her. She couldn't complain though. So many people had it worse than her. She had never wanted for anything. She let out a deep breath and repositioned herself upright. Her left arm screamed in reply, the rigidity already setting in her muscles.

The lamps of the beach reassured her she didn't have a long way to swim. It still was a distance she didn't expect from the maybe-god, maybe-aristocrat, maybe-creature. She wasn't light. She must have annoyed him enough for proper motivation. At least he didn't kill her.

Oh shit. Abigail. She swam to the shore. She needed to find them, to ensure everyone was alright.

Hiraya found the trio back at Abigail's apartment. It was the only other place she thought to look when the street they had been ambushed at had no sign of them. When she entered, Bre sat on the couch next to Abigail while Minwoo sat across from her, sitting on the short table. Minwoo applied an ointment to a small scratch on Abigail's round cheek.

“Are you okay?” Bre asked, her voice trembling with worry. But the worry wasn’t for Hiraya and how she had been missing from the battle after being pushed through the portal. No. It was the worry for Abigail. “I can’t believe you shielded me. You’re amazing! Thank you.”

Abigail waved her hand as if chasing away the compliment. “It was nothing. That girl really wanted you.”

A blush rose on Bre’s light brown cheeks. “I don’t know why.”

They didn’t notice Hiraya. Hadn’t heard her open the door and walk in. Were they even wondering where she had gone? Were they not worried about her?

“It’s no longer safe here. They know where we are,” Minwoo said as he examined her limbs for any other wounds.

Hiraya cleared her throat, announcing her arrival. She hadn’t expected Abigail or Minwoo to care, still strangers to her...but Bre? She thought she meant enough to be a little worried. Plus, didn’t they see the tigress shred her arm? The princess glanced at her bicep, now wrapped in the sash that had been around her waist. It pulsed with a manageable level of pain. She had experienced deeper inflictions before and so this was nothing in comparison to those previous instances, but she still didn’t enjoy it. She’d visit someone tomorrow to speed up the process...if she had enough coin.

“You can stay with me and Hiraya,” Bre offered. Apparently, Hiraya clearing her throat did not gain their attention.

“Are you sure?” Abigail asked.

Bre nodded fervently. “Oh yes! Plus, Hiraya wanted to get to know you.” Bre’s chestnut brown eyes widened. “Oh my! Hiraya! She’s not here!”

“Actually—” Everyone turned to the drenched princess. “—I’m right here.” Hiraya gave a small wave. “Guess no one really missed me,” she mumbled more to herself than to them.

Bree stood up and rushed over to Hiraya. “Where did you disappear to?”

They didn’t notice the rift Tsuneo tore open and tossed her through? How did they miss that? Yeah right. It’s so easy to miss two full grown adults disappearing into thin air...

“I was fighting Tsuneo,” Hiraya answered.

Bre stepped back. “Who?”

Hiraya noticed Minwoo freeze as he gathered his supplies, but did not look at her. For a brief moment, she wondered if he already knew the man’s name and that’s what made him pause. Maybe he knew information about the guy. He peered down at the table and picked up a small jar, as if he found something he had lost. Maybe it was Hiraya’s imagination. Could be nothing.

“The guy with the long hair. The main villain dude,” the princess explained, her attention now on Abigail.

“Oh him. He was hot. Did he go after you cause he liked you?” Bre patted her sister's shoulder, but immediately recoiled from the moist sleeve. “Ew. Why are you wet?”

“I got thrown into the ocean.” Hiraya stepped closer towards Minwoo and Abigail. “What happened after I left? Did the guy return? Was anyone hurt?”

“Just a scratch.” Abigail reached down to rub her left ankle. “And I strained my ankle but I’ll live.” She peered at Minwoo. “You weren’t hurt, were you?”

He shook his head. “I’m good.” He collected all his medicinal tools and ointments, putting them in a small leather pouch. “But we should probably pack up. They could show up any moment.”

“So what happened?” Hiraya inquired again.

Abigail nodded, ignoring Hiraya. “Yeah. I should. Bre, can you help me?”

“Of course.” Bre sounded excited, more excited than she ever had when spending time with Hiraya.

Hiraya walked over to the couch as Minwoo cleared the table of books and parchments. She plopped down, the relief intoxicating. “I guess I died and became a ghost since no one seems to hear me.”

Minwoo met her gaze. “We hear you. We just need to hurry. As you can see, we fought them off. There wasn’t much more to it.”

“But like what happened when Tsuneo returned? He could easily have taken Abigail. Why didn’t he? And how did you fight off the tigress *and* a maybe-god, maybe-creature. No offense but you aren’t the most skilled warrior.”

He returned to collecting his things and putting them into a pack. “I think I am a better warrior than you give me credit for. So I do take offense.”

She sighed. She had met many warriors and none of them would have walked around without a weapon, even something as simple as a dagger would suffice. From what she had seen, he had nothing. “Listen, you are slow in your reaction, and you’re not always sure what your next move is when something unexpected happens.”

He set a hand on his hip and stared down at her, unamused. “You got all of that from our one sparring session?”

She shook her head. “No. I saw it when you were fighting earlier too.” She leaned forward, resting an elbow on her knee. “Anyways, what I don’t get is where is the Bulgae.” She hadn’t realized it until now, but the hellhound had been missing. “If they were coming after Abigail, why not bring everyone? Also, why are they after her?”

“That’s a long story, one for another time. First, let’s pack up and get out of here.” He handed her the partially full pack. “I need to get the rest of my things from my room.”

She watched him leave and then packed the last of the written material. When done, she set the pack on the table and laid back to relax. She hung her head back and closed her eyes. She’d take a short nap while she waited.

Chapter 19

Abigail picked at her honey biscuit as she watched Hiraya and Minwoo bond over weapons. She sat at the head of the table while Hiraya sat on the other end. Minwoo sat between them. His hyeopdo lay on the dining table as Hiraya leaned her axe in its full form against the table. She explained in great detail the stones and patterns on it as if it really mattered. It was merely for aesthetics, nothing more. The stones couldn't ward off evil or provide protection like her half-sister explained. A stone was merely a stone. Hiraya's tales made her feel she was back at the village as her Niribia told another farfetched story about ceremonies that brought good luck. She never saw the luck.

From her seat, she could see the door directly in front of her, the common area to her left with a couch and small center table and the side door that led to the beach. Behind her was the hall that led to Bre's room and Abigail's room, with a narrow staircase that led to the second floor which had three more rooms. Minwoo chose the one across from Hiraya's.

"Do you guys have to do that at the table?" Abi set her food down and sipped on her hot, herbal tea mixed with goat's milk.

"Oh. Sorry." Hiraya picked up her weapon and shrank it back into a necklace. She pulled her plate to her and worked on her barely touched breakfast.

“Hey Minwoo, you heard from Kaida yet? He should have been back by now,” Abigail said.

“Who is Kaida?” Hiraya asked.

Minwoo faced Hiraya. “Well, Princess, he’s a friend of ours, a serpent dragon.”

Princess? Since when did Minwoo call her that? Abigail didn’t like this nickname. It felt like Minwoo had already distanced himself with it and moved towards her half-sister. Why couldn’t the older girl be more like Bre, someone she could relate to a little more? This “princess” was too much, like trying to overcompensate for any flaws or...maybe just trying to get people to like her. Abigail just didn’t like her. There was nothing special about her. So why was Minwoo chatting with her with more interest than he had ever done with Abi? It was always Reva this and what we needed to do to save the world that.

“A dragon! That’s amazing. I’ve never met a real dragon before.” Hiraya clasped her hands together, her two toned eyes wide with excitement.

“I had rescued him a few years ago and we became inseparable,” Abi added, more to be seen and a part of the conversation than to brag that she was the reason Kaida was around. “Do you think he will be able to find us?” she asked Minwoo.

Minwoo finally looked at her. “Yeah. He’s found us before. You know he sends out feelers with his mind to find us.” He gave her a befuddled expression. She knew the answer to her question. She just wanted him to talk to her instead of focusing so much on Hiraya. Last night he was normal, acting as if Hiraya was a stranger, but today, it was like something clicked between them. Abigail was the friend...not this new addition.

“Oh right. It’s early. My brain hasn’t woken up yet.” She took a sip and tried to hide her annoyance behind the cup.

“He speaks with his mind?” Hiraya’s intrigue and enthusiasm made it hard for Abi to hide her current utter disdain. How could someone be so adamant about learning this early in the morning?

“I had read something about it.” The princess stood up and grabbed something from her pack lying on the couch. It was a book. “One of my friends, a Sentinel, gave me this book. It talks about Serpent Dragons. They used to know one as children. I think he’s the Magi now.”

“Wait. You know Sentinels? Did you train with them? I heard they no longer hunt creatures. Is it true that the Head Family had a curse on them?” Minwoo spit out his questions with rapid urgency.

Hiraya laughed and began to answer all of them. Abigail rolled her eyes. She had no interest in learning about creatures and the Sentinels. Why did she? It had no effect on her. She set her biscuit down, her appetite vanished. She stood up and went to the back porch. It was small, allowing enough room for a small gathering around a tiny fire pit. An iron gate led to the beach. She walked over to the short stone wall and leaned against it. The ocean breeze whipped at her light brown, almost blonde hair. Even though Old Calusa was like her home, she rarely visited the beach. She remembered it being crowded, windy, and cold, but seeing it now, it wasn’t so bad.

She peered over her shoulder through the open door. Minwoo held the book Hiraya had grabbed. His fingers delicately ran down the page, reading the words. Abi knew he liked to read and learn. He *was* the one doing all the research for the prophecy, but she didn’t think he was this much of a bookworm. She had thought it determination to find answers, to find a solution to the impending evil...not that he actually enjoyed the research. Who really liked doing all that work?

She sighed. Maybe she still hadn't met the real Minwoo. They had only known each other for a little over a moon cycle. But she had felt like she met him in another life. His aura didn't scare her, and he seemed genuine. He immediately fell into the role as her protector. Having someone she could depend on and be there had been a novel sensation. She'd been alone her whole life and now she had someone sworn to protect her, watch over her. Her grandmother was there, but not always, having more responsibilities amongst their clan and unable to keep a close eye all the time.

Her eyes fell on the newfound sister. But now, that relationship was at risk. Could this girl cause a rift between them? She didn't like the idea of it. She loathed that their relationship could be disrupted by someone so trivial.

Abigail shook her head. No. Hiraya couldn't win him over easily. Plus, she shouldn't underestimate Minwoo's loyalty to her.

What brings you out here? Kaida's voice sounded in her mind.

Abigail scanned the area in search of her dragon friend. He floated down from the sky, landing in the sand in front of her. She stared, amazed to see him in full size. She'd seen it before but it always reminded her of how grand her friend was. He wasn't always the miniature dragon sitting on his shoulder. No. His true form stood taller than her, even taller than Minwoo, with a long body and tail. In this form, Kaida could offer a ride to two, maybe even three humans. But this form didn't last. The curse only allowed a short period before returning to the tiny version. Kaida would have to return to his territory to experience unbridled access to his true size.

A cloud of smoke appeared, clouding any view of him. Abi waved it away as the miniature version remained. He hopped onto the wall beside her. *You normally never come outside, nonetheless, in the morning,* he added.

She turned her back to the wall and leaned against it. “We’ve met my other sister.” She nodded towards Hiraya.

Oh wonderful! Is that why you are here instead of the apartment?

She forgot that he had missed the part where they relocated. “No. Actually that guy and his minion found us. Minwoo thought it best to stay here.” They could have really used Kaida’s help last night. They could have fled instead of fought.

What? How’d they find us?

She shrugged. “But Minwoo and Hiraya chased them off.” Her tone sounded less than happy.

Do you not like your sister?

“I don’t really know her.” Of course she didn’t. She knew nothing of Hiraya but she was confident Hiraya would make sure she learned everything about the princess before they parted.

If you do not, I will not either.

Abi smiled, feeling a little bit relieved and validated. “Thank you. It’s just..there’s something off about her. I can’t put my finger on it.”

It is strange.

“What do you mean?”

I cannot access her mind. Not even to request permission. It is as if she has shielded it. Normally, only those well-trained in spiritual matters can do so. Or gods. But humans..humans are easy to infiltrate. She is not.

“You think she’s hiding something?”

I am unsure. I’d have to investigate even further but I first need permission. I also must abide by the rules. Chresto gave me a warning. He says I must return if he learns of me dabbling.

“How would he know you’re doing it?”

The Magi has access to a talisman that informs him of such things. It is a security measure he put in place for the neighboring dragon tribes. In return, those neighbors are providing aid to reversing this curse making me like such.

She nodded. “Well, I guess I should introduce you to her and get permission. We need to figure out what she wants and why she’s here.”

I concur.

“Well, I really need your help. My father—our dad—” Hiraya made a circle with her hand, indicating herself, Bre, and Abigail. “—has said Hex would be heir even though he cheated. But since you didn’t get to participate in the Hunt, he has to redo the challenge. He just has to. And that’s why I’m here. I need your help.”

Abi sat back in her seat and stared at Hiraya and Bre. She then looked at Minwoo to see what he thought. He shrugged, providing no assistance whatsoever. She glanced down at Kaida who stood on the table.

What do you think? Abi asked the dragon within her mind. She didn’t want the others to hear.

I don’t sense any lies. But I also haven’t received access to her thoughts.

“Okay,” she said. “But I’m busy at the moment. We have this prophecy that like I can stop some ancient evil from destroying the world.” Abi didn’t feel like meeting a man that never bothered to meet her. “Right, Minwoo?”

“Yes. That’s our priority,” he agreed.

Can you get permission? Kaida interrupted.

Abi ignored the dragon and continued, “See. So we don’t have time to do the challenge thingy.” It was settled. She’d avoid any issues with whatever going on in Croec. She had never set foot there, so it really had nothing to do with her.

“What if I help you stop this evil from happening and then you can help me. Does that sound good?”

“I can help too!” Bre added enthusiastically.

Abi glanced back and forth between their eager expressions. She really didn’t want anyone else to join them. She liked the trio: her, Minwoo, and Kaida. She turned to Minwoo for help. “Um. Can we talk amongst ourselves really quickly?” he asked.

Bre nodded. “Yeah.”

“Brin needs a walk anyways.”

“Brin?” Minwoo asked, looking around.

Hiraya stood up, grabbing the leash Abi hadn’t even noticed draped over the back of the couch. “Oh yeah. I forgot you guys haven’t met him. Hika!”

Nails hitting the stone floor resonated through the house. Abigail tensed. She hated dogs. She saw herself more as a cat person. Down the hall came a large beast similar to a dog, but not a dog. It was nothing she had seen before. Its light brown coat had spots painted on it. Its ears were perked and more rounded than a dog’s. It had a thick neck attached to a head small in comparison to its body. Black eyes peered at her as it stopped in front of Hiraya.

“What in the river Styx is that?” Abigail had never seen an animal like it. Was it even an animal? Maybe it was a creature. She really could not tell. “Is it a creature?”

“It is a hyena,” Minwoo and Hiraya said simultaneously. They glanced at each other surprised.

“You know about hyenas?” the princess said.

Minwoo nodded.

“Hold on. That still doesn't tell me what it is,” Abi interjected. Their distractions with each other annoyed her.

“It's an animal that is not native here. They usually live in warmer climates and in a group. They have a powerful bite. Fun fact, they laugh when threatened,” Minwoo explained.

“Laugh?”

Hiraya clapped in response to Minwoo's informational briefing. “I can't believe you know that! Most people have never heard of hyenas!”

“I didn't know you were such a bookworm,” Abi grumbled. She just thought he was doing the research because that's what he was supposed to do as her protector. So he actually enjoyed reading all that information?

Minwoo forced a stern expression as he straightened his posture to make himself seem more like a serious soldier. “Information is power,” he said in a deeper voice.

This is true, Kaida said.

“Well, we need to discuss some things,” Abi said.

Hiraya nodded and turned to Bre. “Let's go.” They left out the back and disappeared down the beach.

“So what do we think? Do we really want them joining us? I don't get a good feeling from that Hiraya girl.”

She seemed honest to me.

Abi sent daggers towards the mini-dragon.

I still say no, he added quickly.

“What about you Minwoo?”

Minwoo picked up the book he had been examining earlier with the princess. His hesitation worried Abi. There was no way he was unsure about inviting this stranger. “She does seem to provide some help. We need another warrior.”

“But her? She can’t be much of a warrior. I mean look at her.”

Minwoo’s eyes darkened. She’d never seen him look so serious before...no. This was anger. “What does that mean?”

Abigail here probably is just saying that—

“You weren’t there to see her fight, dragon,” he snapped. “She can fight.”

“Why do you care so much?” The hurt cut through her deeper than she thought it would. She had truly thought Minwoo would have been on her side. She was the Chosen One. Didn’t that mean anything...everything? Wasn’t her opinion what mattered most?

“Isn’t it obvious? We need someone else who can fight. She’s also well educated. Now, I’m not sure about the younger sister, but you seem to like her.” Minwoo sat back, throwing the book onto the table. “I thought you would want to get to know your sisters.”

She sighed. Arguments weren’t her thing. She hated confrontation, so instead of standing her ground and saying absolutely not, she caved. “Are you sure? I thought you didn’t trust anyone?”

He shrugged. Why was he acting so cavalier? “Like Kaida said, I don’t get any bad energy from her.”

“Okay.” She drew out the word, still showing her doubt.

Oh by the way, I found Reva. Kaida paused. Again.

Both humans turned to face the little orange dragon. That would have been news he should have started with. Had he not learned anything from the previous incident with Reva?

Chapter 20

Hiraya felt relieved that Abigail and her friends agreed to allow the two sisters to join them. Bre thought they would surely say yes, but Hiraya wasn't confident. Based on the indifference from her long lost sister, the yes didn't sound sure. It almost seemed like she was an intruder to Abigail, like someone uninvited and the host using passive aggressive remarks and side glares until finally agreeing.

It was strange though, like jumping into a powerful river and playing catch-up. They were trying to find Reva, one of the first four creatures, in order to find guidance in solving the prophecy, a prophecy the content of which she had yet to know. The details were vague, and really no one heard her inquiries. Based on information from the dragon, he had sensed Reva in New Calusa at some new elite casino. They, except Hiraya, all decided they needed to go to the Fishmarket to get new clothes and travel to a well-known elite casino in New Calusa called the Makopiinag or also known as the Water Lily. This casino housed the rich and many of those who considered themselves an elegant class compared to those in Old Calusa. Hiraya didn't understand why they needed to go shopping though, but everyone else thought it was a necessity...a must.

Hiraya slowly unwound the bandage she had donned last night. The cloth stuck to her gashes, causing small boughs of pain to spread down her arm. She grimaced, seeing how terrible

it looked due to the moisture almost giving it a gooey texture. Maybe she could find a healer at the market. She had hoped the salt water had cleaned it, but she didn't know if there were any other factors involved like poison in those claws that deterred any progression to it mending.

She plopped onto her bed and grabbed her pack. Brin hopped up behind her, whimpering at the sight of the open flesh. "I know right?" Hiraya said through clenched teeth. "I should have brought some balm, but I left so quickly and forgot. Does it look that bad?"

Brin sniffed it and huffed. It almost seemed like he grimaced too.

"Yeah. It feels as bad as it looks." She tossed the soiled bandages into the wicker basket and picked up a clean bandage the servant had retrieved for her this morning. She paused. Maybe she should clean it first. She winced at the memory of cleaning it last night and the pain it would bring. She despised pain. Yes, she had a high pain tolerance, but knowing pain would come presented itself as an obstacle, even if agony was necessary for good results.

"Aya! That looks terrible." Hiraya turned to find Minwoo standing in the doorway. He held up some bandages and a small glass jar. "I brought supplies."

"Oh." It felt strange for someone to notice she was injured. No one regarded her injuries, but she was great at masking any inconveniences or discomfort. Something she learned at a young age. Her father always told her to 'walk it off' or 'rub dirt in it.' Now, she never asked for help.

He walked in and set the bandages on the bed. "I saw you favoring your arm. I have this balm that accelerates healing." He opened the jar.

"Should I clean it first?" she asked.

He smacked his lips together as he examined the wound. "I don't think so. This should be fine." He dipped two fingers in the salve. "Can I?"

She nodded and looked away. The idea of seeing him touch it made her want to flee. Her feet would only remain planted by not watching him apply the medicine.

“What are you doing?”

“I just can’t watch you do it. It’s just a thing. It’s hard to explain. Just do it.” She kept her eyes averted.

“Do you want to put it on?”

She shook her head. “Nope. You got this.” She closed her eyes and held her breath. Would it help? No. But she didn’t know what else to do to prepare for the pain about to come.

He chuckled. “Alright, princess.”

The balm felt cool and soothing against her throbbing arm. Her muscles relaxed, her shoulders dropping. Immediately, she could tell the medicine was working.

“Wait. Why do you keep calling me princess? I have a name,” she told him.

“You’re a princess right?” He finished spreading the balm and capped the jar.

“Yes, but you haven’t called Bre or Abigail that.” She paused, replaying previous conversations in her head. “Yeah. Not once!” She turned, meeting his gaze. She scanned his expression for any answers. Instead of answers, she felt something familiar about him, like she had met him before. “Have you been to Croec?”

“Um. Where did that come from?” He looked away, out the window.

“I just feel like we met before.”

He scoffed and reached past her for the bandages. This closeness gave her the opportunity to examine him more scrupulously. “I’ve been to Croec, but I was just traveling through,” he answered and turned to peer at her. The intimate proximity of their faces sent Hiraya into fawn mode. She couldn’t move. “Are your eyes a different color?”

She nodded slowly, so slowly she wondered if she even gestured yes in the first place. He gulped as they stared for what felt like another few minutes. The condition of time still moving hit him first. He thrust the bandages into her hand. “You got that or do you need help?” he said, taking a step back.

“I am good,” she replied, still processing what happened. Did they just have a moment or did she have something on her face?

“Ah.” He rummaged through his pockets and pulled out the clear stone that had been missing from her bag. “I have this. I forgot to give it back to you before taking off the other day. I didn’t know if you needed it or not.”

“The Looking Glass!” He handed it to her. “Thank you.” She didn’t really need it now and tossed it on her pack. She had found Abigail.

He paused, scanning her over. She wondered what he saw and what he was thinking. He opened his mouth to say something, but stopped himself with a simple nod. He left without saying anything else. She shook her head and turned her attention to Brin. He cocked his head to the side. “What? Nothing happened. It’s not like anything would.” He cocked his head in the opposite direction. “He’s probably into Abigail and I’m not here for that kind of stuff so stop asking.”

Brin crawled forward on the bed and licked her cheek. She laughed. “You’re too sweet. How about a walk before we have to leave.” She itched under his chin. “I hate that you have to be cooped up. Maybe you should have stayed at the palace. You’d have more freedom.”

He huffed and shook his head dramatically.

“You’d miss me, huh?”

He stood up and shifted on either front foot. He gave a chirp in response. She smiled. Talking to Brin always made her feel not so alone. None of her friends really stuck around except for the hyena.

“You’re the best Brin.” She tackled the hyena onto the bed. He squirmed in her grasp but found a way to lick her face.

“Are you ready?” Bre asked, stepping into the room.

Hiraya rolled off the hyena and laid on her back, lifting only her head to see her little sister. “I gotta walk Brin first, and then we can go.”

Bre stomped her feet like a frustrated child. “C’mon. The servant can do it. Let’s go. I want to find a new outfit for Mako.” She paused as if a stray thought caught her attention. “I wonder if there’s any hot guys there. I bet they’re loaded.”

Hiraya turned over onto her stomach and then sat up on her elbows, baffled. “You do realize you’re loaded. You’re a princess.”

“Huh?” Her dark brown eyes lit up. “Oh wow! You’re right! I am.” Without another breath, Bre added, “Hurry up. I want to go shopping.” She skipped out of the room before Hiraya could respond.

The princess peered at the hyena. “Teenagers.”

Brin sighed with her.

“Alright, let’s go for a walk.” She hopped out of the bed and grabbed the leash. She paused, realizing the pain from her arm no longer bothered her. The wound, once gooey and moist, had hardened into healthy scabs. The balm really did wonders. She’d have to thank Minwoo later.

She walked downstairs to find everyone in the living room conversing. Even the little orange dragon seemed to be saying things she couldn't hear. She wondered if he would ever speak to her. No one had said anything to her about it yet, and she feared she'd be intrusive if she asked.

Instead of announcing her departure, she led Brin out the back and to the beach. She would make it quick so they didn't notice her absence. When she returned, Minwoo sat at the dining table while the living room was vacant. Hiraya released Brin and met Minwoo's gaze. "Where is everyone?" she asked.

"They were antsy about shopping so I told them we would meet up with them." He stood up and straightened his black shirt. "You ready?"

Hiraya patted her sash, feeling for the small lump of her purse. She didn't want to forget her money. She had a habit of doing that and in Calusa, she wouldn't be able to put it on a tab. They didn't know her here.

She nodded. "We are good." She gave him a thumbs up.

"Did you know that on the other side of the Darkling Plain, there's an empire that sees a thumbs up as bad," he said, moving towards the front door.

She followed him. "Wait. Really?"

He nodded, opening the door and giving her a small bow to indicate she go first. "Yes. It means death. A thumbs down means one can live."

"Interesting." She nodded solemnly, not meeting his gaze. After their "moment" earlier, she felt a little self-conscious, especially when it was just the two of them. She hadn't thought of him more than an acquaintance, someone who was friends with her sister, but they only had just met yesterday. It was a little early to tell.

“You’re awfully quiet.” He pointed out.

“Oh. Well, although I like shopping, I’m not sure why we need to buy new clothes.” She really just wanted to hang out, read about the bulgae since she hadn’t had a chance to do so, and cuddle with Brin for a little bit before going to New Calusa. “Oh. By the way, thanks for the stuff. It really helped.”

He chuckled. “No problem.” He glanced down at the now scabs, since she hadn’t put a new bandage on them. She thought it would be too daunting when the scabs provided enough protection from the elements. “Whoa. I never seen it work that fast.”

She started to skip with a satisfied grin. “I’m just special.”

“I’d say.”

Her skipping halted as she squinted up at him. “Is that a compliment or an insult?”

“Ah.” He looked away and picked at the edge of his sleeve.

She shrugged. “I’ll just take it as a compliment.” She knew it was probably an insult and decided she no longer wanted to know his truth. She’d settle with her ignorance and heightened optimism.

He shook his head. “You remind me of my brother.”

“You have a brother? What’s he like?” she asked, not realizing how invasive this question may be. Her curiosity often overrode her sensibility.

His eyes darkened. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen him.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.” Every family had their dark history. She never thought she had her own until finding she had a long lost sibling. She had thought her family pretty typical but open...now her opinion had wavered.

He waved a hand. “No. It’s okay.”

The sound of the growing crowds on the streets filled the silence between them. Hiraya was relieved. She didn't want to ask another insensitive question. Minwoo moved to walk in front of her, leading her through the people. His long strides outmatched her short ones, causing her to struggle to keep pace. She clutched the back of his shirt so she didn't lose him. He glanced back at her, stopping. This caused her to almost run into him.

"Did you need something?" he spoke loudly to ensure she heard him.

"Oh." She dropped her hand and scanned the shops and vendors. "No. I—" her voice trailed off, noticing the familiar slender man with three swords. On either side of him were the tigress and a hooded figure. That had to be the bulgae. So he didn't disappear? The crowds opened up for them as they walked, as if they were royalty.

"Oh! It's-It's-" She slapped Minwoo's arm.

"It's what?" He turned to see what caught her attention, but couldn't find it.

She pointed at the trio walking in the direction away from them. "The villain person and the girl tiger. The Bulgae is with 'em too."

His eyes finally landed on the trio's back. "Oh good. Now let's meet up with Abi. We need to hurry."

She kept her focus on the maybe-god, maybe-creature, and his minions. "Let's follow them." She took off before he could object.

The trio moved down a less crowded street. The shops and vendors dissipated as the buildings turned into stone and brick warehouses. Hiraya remained at a distance, knowing with less of a crowd, she'd be easier to spot.

"Hiraya," Minwoo whispered forcefully. "Hiraya!"

She ignored him and tiptoed to the next building corner. The three entered a warehouse made of black and tan stones and a thatched roof.

“Hiraya. We—” Minwoo said from behind her.

She turned, almost running into his chest. She forgot how much taller he was than her. It didn’t help that her genetics came from Maharlika, known for being of shorter and smaller stature. She definitely inherited the shorter part, maybe not so much the smaller part. She stepped back, avoiding an unwarranted collision. “We should see if they leave and then check what’s in there. Maybe we can figure out what they want.” Her heart reverberated like the patter of rain from a raging storm. The excitement of discovering their plan gave her a lightning bolt of energy. If she could help find a foolproof solution, then maybe Abigail would trust her or at least warm up to her. Right now, it seemed Abigail only enjoyed Breonna’s company. What made her any different?

“Hiraya. We—”

“Minwoo, this could be our only chance. We can figure out what they’re plan is.” When she put her mind to it, nothing else mattered.

Minwoo grabbed both of her shoulders. “Hiraya! We know they want Abigail and are trying to find a way to bring ancient death back into this world. Abigail is the key to do that.”

Her brows furrowed, confused. Ancient death? What did he mean? She hadn’t heard of that before. Was this like a plague? A person? A demon? A god? What was it?

“It is in the prophecy. You think I didn’t already do my research.” He released her. “Let’s head back before they spot us. I do not feel like fighting them again. We need to find Reva.” He turned to leave.

Hiraya sighed. He was right. She didn't know everything about their journey. It was silly of her to hijack their quest before knowing all the information. She always got ahead of herself. But ancient death sounded pretty final. It sounded like something pretty dangerous. "Okay, but I want to see that prophecy. Maybe I can help." She peered back at the warehouse door. Tsuneo and his henchmen exited, turning opposite from the way they had come and disappearing down another street. This had to be a sign telling her to go inside. Universal validation. An invitation to help solve the riddle and fight against this evil.

She sprinted across the street so urgently, she hit the door with a thud. She glanced around, hoping none of the villains came back. In the clear, she jiggled the door. Locked. Of course it was. A villain wouldn't just leave a door unlocked for anyone to enter the premises. Maybe she could use Kita, use force to break open the door. She knew how to pick it, but she had no pins nor the time.

Footsteps echoed, startling Hiraya. "Seriously, Princess." Minwoo stopped beside her and reached into a pouch on his belt she hadn't noticed before. He held his hands together as if holding a ball she couldn't see. "We need to be quick."

She nodded, stepping back. Abigail did mention he was a novice warlock as well as a warrior. She wondered what tricks he held up his sleeve.

He removed his top hand, revealing a glass key. She gasped. "So you can manipulate glass?"

He nodded, inserting the key into the lock. He sucked in a deep breath. The glass turned a shade of orange, indicating it was a seething temperature. He was forming the key to match the lock! Such an innovative way to use his powers! She didn't expect anything less from Minwoo. The color faded, leaving the clear glass key. He turned the key, the glass key shattering. He

grimaced and reached in his little pouch to form another one. He repeated the steps to form the key to the lock. This time, he turned it cautiously, trying not to break it, as the lock clicked. It worked!

Hiraya smacked his shoulder, ecstatic by his success. “That’s outstanding!”

He rubbed his shoulder and grimaced down at her. “Why do you hit so hard?”

She ignored him, only focused on getting inside. When she entered, the warehouse was vacant save a cabinet lined on the opposite wall and a wooden tower the size of a person. It had wooden pegs protruding from it. Hiraya had seen one of these before, used to train in hand-to-hand combat. To the right, on the backside of the warehouse, wooden steps led to a second story office. From where she stood, the office seemed small. Beneath the office, two cots lay with blankets strewn across them. The princess thought it strange there were only two and not three.

The slam of the door behind her caused her to jump. Minwoo raised a brow. “We need to make this quick. I don’t want to fight them.”

She nodded and pointed at the office. “I bet what we need is up there.”

He scratched his head. “Maybe we should look around down here. You know, we do not want to miss anything.”

Her shoulders drooped as she stared at him a little disappointed. This area was bare. It looked more like a sleeping area or just a place to train and relax. It appeared to be nothing more. “Yeah. Down here definitely looks like they use the most important documents and information.” She rolled her eyes and headed to the stairs. “Let’s get the cabinets on our way out, Mr. Investigator.” It was as if he didn’t want her to go up the stairs, like he just wanted to meet her sisters to find an outfit for the Mako and ignore all this readily available clues they could use to

figure out exactly what Tsuneo wanted and why he wanted to bring ancient death upon the Darkling Plain.

“Listen—” He met her pace. “Sometimes the most mundane places have the most important piece of information.”

She went to respond, but some invisible force caused him to trip. He caught himself and glanced at her nervously. “Did you just trip on your own feet?”

He straightened his back as if it would erase the momentary lapse of coordination. “Absolutely not, Princess. Something was on the ground that made it slick.”

She hurried up the first few steps. “Yeah sure. And I told you not to call me princess.” She paused, peering down at him, or more like eye level with him. The steps had made their height almost equal.

“You’re a princess, are you not?” He waved an arm, ushering her to continue climbing the stairs.

“But you haven’t called Abigail or even Bre that.” She crossed her arms across her chest. This was the same conversation they had before, but she really wanted him to listen. She hated being called nicknames. She wanted to be called by her name: Hiraya. It was the name her mother gave her and she wanted him to use it.

“Well, Abigail doesn’t care for it so I don’t call her that.”

So she got the label because he didn’t respect her enough? She sighed. Of course that’d be the case. The moment earlier today was just him being nice. He probably was nice to everyone. She had just overthought it because she thought too profoundly on the littlest interactions. “Nevermind.” She moved upwards until coming to the office door. She opened it, the hinges squeaking as it swung inwards. Guess this one didn’t need a lock like the outer door.

She gasped, surprised at what she found. Peering inside, it seemed like the doorway had been magicked to either appear small and dull or the entry way led to another location. Based on the mountain in the window across from her, she guessed this office lay in another location. The office itself was large and spacious. A massive table carved from a redwood tree sat at the center of the room. To the right a closet stood with bookshelves beside it, running along the remainder of the wall. A raised bed lay in the back left hand corner. Another door stood to the left, probably leading to a whole new place.

Hiraya spun around to face Minwoo. “Do you see this?”

He peered past her. “Shit.”

By his exclamation, she was indeed not delusional but in fact saw the spacious office. “Have you—” The sound of the warehouse door opening interrupted her. Minwoo shoved her into the office. Both Panicked, searching for somewhere to hide. The table wouldn’t do. Under the bed? Maybe out that other door? No.

“Hiraya,” Minwoo whispered as the voices downstairs filled the warehouse. He waved her over to the closet. She stepped inside, only a long leather coat resided. She pushed it over and faced Minwoo as he entered the enclosed space, shutting them inside.

Even in hiding, Hiraya heard the murmur of voices. The echo of shoes against stone changed to shoes against wood. They were coming upstairs. What if they caught the two intruders? Could she and Minwoo fight off all three? She doubted it.

Chapter 21

Abigail smiled at the outfit Bre had picked out and now was asking for approval. The girl added it to the pile of dresses to try on, taking Abigail's smile as reassurance. But her focus wasn't on clothes or what outfit to pick. Instead, her mind filled with a string of questions as to where Minwoo and Hiraya had gone. She told Minwoo to stay behind, more because Bre wanted to shop and it seemed like the only logical option. She didn't think they'd be taking this long. Did they get distracted? Were they discussing another one of their books? The urge to pick at her shirt strings made her fingers twitch. Why did Minwoo have to get along with that girl? He had started off cold and distant. What in the underworld was going on?

Can you find Minwoo? Tell him to hurry up, Abigail asked the little dragon perched on her shoulder.

It's strange. I'm not sensing him at the moment.

What does that mean? Abi glanced at Bre who now tried on the dresses and were examining them in the full length mirror.

It could mean anything. They may just be out of reach.

Well, how far is your reach?

It depends. I did fly back this morning, depleting my spiritual energy. My reach may not be as far. His tail tickled the back of her neck.

What's taking them so long? The question was rhetorical. It felt strange, as if something had changed on this journey as the “chosen one.” It felt like the attention had slipped from her and she hated it. She spent so many years invisible to her mother...nonexistent to her father and just a nobody. She finally felt seen and had someone she called hers...Minwoo and Kaida. They were hers. She didn't want to hand them over to some random stranger, this girl who claimed to be her sister. This girl that only wanted to tear her from her journey to help with a city she's never called home...let alone visited.

Don't be worried. Minwoo can hold his own.

“Yeah,” she said aloud. She wasn't worried about him being attacked. She was worried about him being stolen.

Bre turned, but Abi ignored her younger sister.

Chapter 22

The clamminess of his palm against her lips suffocated Hiraya. She wanted to reach up and tear his hand from her face, but with the closet being small, she didn't want to accidentally bump something. She had a bad habit of doing something utterly humiliating. Of course, she wouldn't admit it, at least not until the embarrassment had worn off. Plus, any movement would get them noticed, and after the fight last night, she knew her body needed a break. She needed a break and she knew with all three present, there would be no victory in battle.

So her hands remained at her sides, squished between her hips and the walls.

He tried not to press against her, but it was difficult. Smothered voices grew louder behind the door. Footsteps resounded as their words became clearer. "Did you not lock the doors? This is the second one now." The deep melodic voice of Tsuneo came.

"Oh please. Why is everything my fault?" the tigress snapped. "You're the one who forgot the thingy."

"The totem," he scolded. "The audacity of your ability to learn nothing of what I've been doing is both offensive and outstanding."

"I try."

"We need to go," Tsuneo said. "We're late."

"Late?"

A frustrated sigh came. “Just go.”

The door shut. She removed his hand and opened her mouth. Minwoo silenced her by pressing his finger to his lips. This gave her pause, noticing how short her breath was with anticipation that they still may get caught.

The distant echo of a second door shutting allowed both of them to relax, the tension dissipating in their muscles. Minwoo pushed open the closet door with his back and stepped out. The air refreshed her lungs and thinned the thickness around her she hadn’t realized had filled the closet with them.

She stepped out and headed straight for the large table. As she moved closer, papers, books, and drawings started to appear. She hadn’t even realized it was bare at first glance. She peered down at the drawings, all of different types of necklaces. Her fingers run over all the papers painted in words she understood and words she didn’t. There had to be literature from all different territories, different cultures. A few texts were even in her mother’s native tongue, characters she recognized but did not understand. An itch of regret so slight, but still bothersome, nagged at her. She should have stuck with the lessons after her mother’s passing. But the language had been a terrible reminder of the crack that had formed in her life. She only knew the commands she had taught Brin and maybe a little more. Nothing that could help her if she returned to Maharlika today.

Her fingers brushed a small, circular mirror. It looked ordinary with no border or design...just a piece of reflective glass. The hair on her hand stood up as if to tell her this wasn’t any ordinary mirror. Her fingers picked up the edge.

“Hey. Look at this.” Minwoo hit her shoulder with the back of his hand.

Hiraya dropped the mirror and turned. Minwoo pointed at the open cabinet doors. Instead of it being a normal cabinet with shelves, it was flat, where pictures and small notes hung. Even the inside of the cabinet doors had pictures. A map hung from the wall at the center. Pins marked several locations. Each pin had a string attached to it that connected to a drawing or note. She followed one string from a pin at the top of the map to a picture of a necklace made of round black gems. On the gems were the stages of what Hiraya could only guess as the moon cycle. Above the necklace were the words, “moonrock necklace” and a quick description of it being owned by the moon goddess, Mayari. Hiraya had heard stories about the goddess many times when her mother tried to get her to sleep. It only awakened the curiosity more, hungry to hear everything Queen Malaya knew about the mystical world of the gods and goddesses from their ancestry.

“It looks like these are the artifacts needed to release ancient death,” Minwoo stated, standing so close to her, she felt the heat from his body. He examined the information, reading the notes.

“Yeah. But why do they need Abigail is the question—” She scanned the image: the Moonrock necklace, a comb, and fire next to the image of a bulgae. A note marked with a question mark led to the center of the map. Beneath the question mark was a list of words in another language, except for one: Abigail.

“We really need to get going before they return,” Minwoo suggested. He set a hand on her back and pointed towards the door.

“Yeah. I guess.” She stared at all the information. She wanted to copy it all down, examine and decipher it later. That would take too long.

Minwoo walked to the door. “Let’s go,” he said, his impatience growing.

“Yeah. Just one second.” She took in the pictures and the map, trying to memorize as much she could. Any information was better than nothing.

“Hiraya. We need to go.”

She waved at him to go on. “I’ll be right there. Promise.”

“Don’t touch anything. We don’t need them knowing we were here.” He left, disappearing down the steps.

Why did they need to hide they had been here? Who knows if this place would remain here after they left? There had to be some protection spell or incantation of this place. She reached up and yanked the list from the cabinet door, ignoring Minwoo’s words to leave things alone. She then pulled off the picture of the comb and Moonrock necklace. She folded the papers and shoved them into her pocket.

She turned on her heels to leave but paused and glanced down at the mirror on the redwood table. Something told her to grab it.

“Princess!” Minwoo shouted.

She snapped back to the realization to urgently leave and ran out of the office, leaving the mirror.

Hiraya flipped through the pages she had stolen. All she wanted to do was go back to the house and search through the books for more information. But instead, they met back up with the rest of their group. Bre and Abigail had found dresses to wear, but nothing either fit Hiraya or it looked bulky on her. The downfall to her body type was not being the size of most women in society. If only they had more time, she could get something handmade and tailored to her specifications.

“Hiraya, are you done?” Bre asked from the other side of the curtain of the changing room.

“Uh. Yeah.” Hiraya folded the papers and stuffed them into her shorts that lay on the stool with the rest of her clothes.

“Let us see,” her sister said.

“Oh. Um.” She peered down at the white and black dress. She hated it with the long sleeves and tight torso. “It doesn’t fit.”

“Oh wow.”

“I’ll be out in just a second.” Hiraya untied the bodice and slipped back into her clothes. It felt like she was back in her skin again. She stepped outside and found only Bre waiting for her. “Where is everyone?”

“They’re waiting outside.” Bre set down a bracelet she had been admiring. “I really like Abigail.”

“That’s good.” Hiraya moved towards the exit.

“Do you like her?”

“Well, she’s really not given me the chance to get to know her.” It was true. It seemed like Abigail was avoiding any interaction with her. She thought maybe her long-lost sister put up walls for protection, but with how Breonna was invited in easily, that didn’t seem the case.

“Yeah. I did notice that. Want me to talk to her?”

Hiraya shook her head. “It’s okay. I can do it. Thanks though.” She didn’t want to play games. She wanted the relationship to develop naturally.

When they stepped outside, Minwoo was the only one waiting for them, arms crossed and a sour expression on his face.

“Uh oh,” Bre mumbled. “Where’s Abigail and Kaida?”

“They headed back to get ready,” he replied. “Did you find something to wear?”

“Nope. Nothing fit her,” Bre said.

Hiraya’s cheeks burned with embarrassment. Bre was too quick with such a blunt reply.

“Yeah. But if you guys want to go back to get ready, I can just meet you at the casino. I think I know a place that will have something in my size.” And a style she would approve.

“I mean, I do need some time to get ready. I wanna fix my hair.” Bre tugged at a loose curl.

“Are you sure?” Minwoo asked. “I can stay with you.”

“Minwoo, please come with me. I’m not sure how to get back. I’m terrible at directions.”

Bre hooked her arm around his, batting her lashes at him.

“Yeah. I’ll be fine. You help out Bre.”

“Okay,” Minwoo spoke slowly as if still giving himself time to commit to being Bre’s guide.

“Yay. Let’s get dressed up.” Bre lightly hit Minwoo’s arm. “I’m so excited.” She tugged at him to leave while wiggling her fingers in farewell to Hiraya. “See you in a bit, Sis.”

Hiraya waved farewell.

Chapter 23

We need to get permission, Kaida said.

Abigail sighed as she stepped into an enclosed carriage Bre had rented. Bre thought it would seem more appropriate and reiterate their importance.

Minwoo held her hand, steadying her. “You haven’t gotten permission?” he asked. “Why not?”

I tried but she’s protected. I’ll have to have verbal confirmation and Abigail hasn’t found the opportunity to ask.

“Don’t blame me,” Abi responded, shocked that he would try to shift the fault to her. Yeah she was partly to blame, having changed her mind to get Kaida’s permission, especially with Minwoo warming up to the princess.

Bre looked back and forth from Abi to Minwoo, nodding as if she understood the conversation. Abi plopped down across from her half-sister while Minwoo leaned against the carriage. “It would be really beneficial to have her communicate with Kaida. What if we split up?”

“I wish,” Abi said under her breath.

“What?”

Abi smiled. “Oh nothing. Where is she?”

“Where’s who?” Bre chimed in. Abi had forgotten about the girl across from her.

“Your sister,” Abi answered. “Shouldn’t she be here.”

“Oh. She said she’ll meet us there,” Bre said, shifting in her seat. “Are you sitting with us?” She directed her question at Minwoo.

“I was going to sit with the driver.”

Bre’s smile faded. “Aww. You should join us.”

Abi nodded. Minwoo had been too distant. She needed to reel him back in. She patted the seat next to her. “Join us. We haven’t gotten to hang out.”

“But—” Minwoo started to reject but Abi’s pleading gaze worked. He sighed. “Fine.” He climbed into the carriage and told the driver to go.

“So...what are we doing tonight?” Bre asked.

Abigail scanned the girl, wondering if the question was sarcastic. The emptiness in those dark brown eyes told her it was sincere. Was Bre not listening during their discussion this morning? “We’re looking for Reva. She has thin braids with colorful tips and crystal blue eyes. She can help us figure things out.”

“Oh. And what kind of things?”

Abi turned to Minwoo. He understood it was his turn to fill in the blank spaces, knowing the details more in depth. “She can help us figure out this whole situation with ancient death, and how we can stop the release of this creature that could destroy the world.”

“Wait. How dangerous is all of this?” Bre’s complexion waned.

“Well, hopefully, we can stop it beforehand. I am the chosen one,” Abi joked.

“Oh. Okay.” Bre didn’t sound too confident.

Abi set a hand on Bre's knee. "Do not worry Breonna. We can do this," Minwoo reassured.

Are we there yet? Kaida interrupted.

Minwoo glared down at the dragon that had taken a spot on Abigail's lap. "You're such a child."

Technically, I am still quite young within my community. So you'd be correct.

Minwoo scoffed. Abi laughed, relief easing her tense muscles. The playful banter brought her back some comfort. She hated talking about the end of the world stuff. She honestly did not quite believe in. If every prophecy out there were true, wouldn't the Darkling Plain have ceased to exist already? She had thought that if she went on this journey, they would eventually realize that she had nothing special and they could stop this trivial prophecy stuff.

"Erm. I had a question," Bre interrupted.

Abi met Bre's gaze. She blushed as all eyes peered at her. "Um. Well Hiraya said you didn't like her, is this true?"

"What?" Abi gasped. She had a minor dislike for the new addition to their group, but she thought she had been keeping her slight disdain to herself. That she had masked it pretty well. Maybe not so much now.

"Did you say you didn't like her?" Minwoo asked. This question sent a pang of hurt through her. How could he question her?

Abi shook her head profusely. "No! We really haven't had any time to hang out or talk. I've not said much to her. But I never said that." And she hadn't...at least not out loud.

"Oh okay. That's good," Bre said with a small smile. "She can get a little insecure sometimes. It's just who she is."

“Really?” Abi asked. She didn’t really see it. Hiraya just seemed to fall into Abigail’s world without invitation, almost in a way that felt like crossing her personal boundaries.

Bre nodded. “Oh yeah. She doesn’t have a lot of friends. She kinda keeps to herself, you know? Goes off on her own with her pet.”

“That’s shocking,” Abi said. She thought Hiraya would have a lot of friends, especially the way the princess carried herself.

“Agreed.” Minwoo nodded.

“Yeah. She doesn’t really get along with our crowd.” Abigail wondered if Bre meant the royal crowd or was it just a generalization?

“I heard she’s pretty close to the locals,” Minwoo spoke with arms crossed. Abigail took in her friend. It sounded like he had a spark of...what? Anger? Hurt? Why did it sound like he was defending Hiraya? He was her friend...not her older sister’s.

“She knows some of the local shopkeepers and street vendors.” Bre scrunched her nose. “But I think that’s about it.”

“Hmm.” Abigail didn’t want to commit to any opinion just yet, whether it came to Hiraya’s personality or Minwoo’s emotions towards the princess. Or maybe she just didn’t want to face it.

The carriage came to a halt. *I think we’re here*, Kaida stated as he moved to Abigail’s shoulder.

“Oh, really?” Minwoo spoke dryly.

Kaida flicked his tail around like a cat irritated with its master. The end of his tail smacked Minwoo’s cheek.

“Seriously?” Minwoo glared at the little dragon as Abigail hid her smile.

Kaida curled closer to Abi's chin as if that would protect him. But it did give him some protection. Minwoo wouldn't go after the dragon when in such proximity to her. Abigail held back a laugh. She really needed to quit worrying about everything and just appreciate these moments. Minwoo and Kaida were her friends. She needed to remember that.

Abigail watched as Minwoo stepped out first and then offered a hand to assist her down. She wondered if they would really find Reva in this place. It had been said that many people lost time when they visited this casino, similar to those who visited The Grackle in Old Calusa. Abi thought it strange that an Anun, an ancient creature, would visit such a place, but simultaneously, if she had been living for so long, she probably would spend some time in a place like this.

Although the sun had begun to set, light reflecting off something blinded Abigail. She raised a hand to shield herself. Her eyes adjusted to find a two story circular building sitting before her. It rounded at the top with a statue of a man. The statue held a sword in its right hand and what looked like a lily in his left. Abi wasn't sure. She had little knowledge about flowers but she knew the palace in New Calusa was named the Lily Blossom. If she weren't mistaken, the statue was probably of King Talon, the recognized ruler of Calusa.

Columns encircled the building as if to protect it. Floral patterns and swirls carved into the tops. Tall windows hid behind the pillars and reflected the orange from the sun. She wondered when the Makopiinag Casino had been erected. She remembered hearing about it from travelers, but she thought it was still under construction. She guessed the excitement of the first casino in New Calusa hurried the construction's timeline.

"Have you ever seen this place?" Minwoo asked.

She turned to find him also admiring the architecture with arms crossed. “No. You?” she said.

He shook his head and grinned down at her. “It’s my first time. I hear it’s been open less than a year.” He clasped his hands together.

What are those guards checking? Kaida asked.

Abi scanned the building and found the entrance to her right. Two guards stood on either side as guests showed them something before being allowed to enter.

“Let’s go find out.” She led the group to the entrance. The line was quite short. They made it to the front in little time. The guard to the left of the entrance waved Abigail over. He looked like he had fought many battles, etching a long term scowl into his face. “Sigil,” he almost grunted out.

“Sigil,” she repeated softly and glanced back at Minwoo. She didn’t think to bring anything. She had her papers, but those were left back at the house. Most casinos in Old Calusa let anyone in unless it were obvious they were too young.

Minwoo reached into his pocket and pulled out a small rolled up parchment. He leaned forward, handing them to the guard. Abi knew she could count on him. He always came prepared. Always reliable.

The guard glanced at the parchments and nodded. He returned the papers and then gazed at someone behind them. Abi turned to see Breonna, unable to make eye contact, as if every sound distracted the girl. “Bre? Do you have your papers?”

“Oh well...” Bre fidgeted with the edge of her shirt.

Did she not have her papers? “Bre?”

It seems she doesn’t have her papers.

“Do you have your papers or not?” Minwo spoke slowly and a little aggressively. Bre resembled a doe-eyed fawn facing a predator.

“Oh wow. Um. I just—”

“If you don’t have your sigils then get outta the way,” the guard said.

Abigail sighed as Minwoo cursed under his breath. They moved to the side, out of the way of other guests.

“Why don’t you have your papers?” Abigail asked softly, in hopes not to startle her younger sister.

“Don’t tell Hiraya but I forgot to bring them,” Bre said.

“She’s going to find out. You do realize that?” Minwoo sounded harsh. He could be sometimes.

Tears formed at the corners of her eyes. Abi reached out, patting her arm. “Don’t cry. It’s alright. We will figure it out.” She hated seeing people cry.

Bre nodded, wiping the tears before they could roll down her cheeks. Abi glared at Minwoo who merely shrugged and turned his back to them.

“Figure out what?” Abi spun to find Hiraya standing a few steps away. She scanned the princess. The outfit was nowhere near what anyone else wore. Hiraya wore her usual lace up boots and high waisted black shorts. She got rid of the sash and instead wore a royal blue half shirt with a train at the back. The sleeves resembled petals of a flower, fitting for the setting, but the blue contrasted the white and black elegant styles.

“What are you wearing?” Abi asked.

It looks to be a blue—

“I see that. It’s blue and not elegant. They won’t let us in with you wearing that,” Abi said, not understanding why Hiraya couldn’t follow simple guidelines.

“We can’t get in,” Minwoo pointed out.

Hiraya glanced around. “Why not?”

Abi met Bre’s pleading gaze. Why was this girl so afraid to share the truth with family? Maybe their relationship was strained. Maybe she had yet to see a side of Hiraya that only Bre had seen.

“Your sister didn’t bring her papers,” Minwoo grumbled.

“Minwoo!” Abi hit his shoulder with the back of her hand. How could he just sell Bre out that way?

“What?” His voice cracked. “It’s true.”

Abi ignored him and noticed Hiraya staring at Bre. “If Atatiana knows you’re here, why don’t you have your papers?”

“Well.” Bre’s focus shifted, never settled on one point. This was the first time Abi saw Bre’s age. She knew she had a few years on the young girl, but Bre’s personality seemed more mature. Now, Bre was the image of a teenager caught doing something their parents strictly frowned upon. “Mom doesn’t really know I’m here.”

“Bre. Are you jesting with me?” Hiraya’s voice rose.

People began to notice them. Abi hated disturbing others or making a scene.

“What? You ran away!” Bre argued.

“I’m twenty-two. You’re fifteen!”

“Wait. She’s twenty-two?” Abi whispered to herself. She really thought they were closer in age, maybe even the same age.

“Atatiana is going to kill you! I can’t believe you ran off again!”

“This is the first time!”

“Oh don’t even.” Hiraya’s voice deepened, surprising Abigail a little.

Bre pointed at herself. “*I* never left the city.”

“You—” Hiraya stepped menacingly closer to Bre, her eyes burning in the sunset’s light.

Abigail took this chance to interrupt their spat. Too many eyes were on them and although she found this argument revealing of some family dynamics, she did not want to be escorted off the premises. “Okay. Let’s all just calm down,” she said.

Hiraya sucked in a deep breath. Abigail didn’t feel their argument was bad enough to result in such levels of anger. “We’ll discuss this later,” Hiraya warned.

Bre gave the smallest of nods that it could have been missed if one wasn’t paying attention.

We still need to figure a way in, Kaida reminded.

“Maybe Breonna should wait outside while we go look for Reva,” Minwoo said.

“What?” Bre whined. “No. I don’t want to be left behind!”

“Should of thought about that before running away,” Hiraya muttered under her breath.

Abigail felt the comment a little unnecessary. The dejection on Bre’s face told her how much Hiraya’s comment dug into the girl’s self-esteem.

“We can figure something out,” Abigail stated as she wrapped an arm around Bre’s shoulders in hopes it would bring some comfort. There had to be an alternative solution. She peered at Minwoo. He always had a plan. He was smart and organized. He glared back at her.

I don’t think he wants to solve this problem, Kaida said.

Chapter 24

Hiraya couldn't believe Bre would just run away like that. No. She could believe it. She just didn't have the time to address it. She had been so focused on Abigail and Hex that she ignored to ask such an imperative question. Bre had done this before on a much smaller level, going off with her friends to party. The worst scandal had been Bre's absence for almost half a moon cycle. She had run off with her best friends, Stacey and Kathy. All of the parents, including the king and queen, wanted this to be forgotten. Thankfully, only those closest to the royal family knew of the incident. Even Hiraya was never informed of the specific details. Her loose-lipped father even pursed his lips to a point that resembled an ancient seal yet to be broken.

The princess watched as Minwoo glared at Abigail and Abigail returned with large, pleading hazel eyes.

"You know, we—" Hiraya started.

"Yaya? Is that little Yaya?" A male voice came from behind her.

She pulled her shoulders in close and cringed, as if hearing a sound that pained her ears. The nickname had been long buried when she left Old Calusa. There wasn't anything particularly wrong with it. Her father and his friends assigned it to her and overused it in playful jest. They said it was out of love, but when she requested a halt to the nickname, it only increased the

frequency of it. It had been a small blessing to move to Croec and forget the name, yet now it haunted her.

She spun around to see which of her father's friends recognized her and if she could even recognize them. A man stood before her with two men, in traditional Royal Guard uniform stitched with the sigil of the Lily Blossom, behind him, . The man smiled, showing off pearly white teeth against a tanned face. His dark hair peppered with age was styled in a way that reminded her of a controlled mess. Hiraya knew him instantly, although creases had formed on his face and that sheepish grin had become more resolved. "Prince Talon?" She shook her head. "No. It's king now, right?"

He opened his arms, an invitation to a friendly embrace. "It's been so long! Ten years!" he exclaimed.

She accepted the invitation. "It's been a few more than that."

King Talon had been an old childhood friend of her father's. Her father had even served under Talon as a Royal Officer before becoming King of Croec. She remembered visiting the Lily Blossom a few times and riding on his shoulders.

The King of Calusa held her at arms length and raised a brow. "Interesting choice of hair color." A mischievous smirk crept onto his lips. "Ronny must be ecstatic." He gestured towards her hair.

She grinned, reminiscing about the times her parents and the king had visited the beach. She considered him her favorite uncle out of all of her father's friends. "He'll live."

"Where is the old man?" He stepped back, finally taking in all those accompanying her. "What brings you and your friends to my lovely casino?"

“He’s at home.” She paused. Maybe she could use their relationship to get them into the casino. Her father certainly would, so why not her? “Well actually, we are in a little bit of a predicament. We’re trying to get in but my sister forgot her papers.”

Talon pointed at Abigail. “So this is your younger sister? She is the spitting image of Ronny.”

Hiraya peered at Abigail. Sometimes, she forgot about her newly found sister and the status of their bloodline. The information had yet settled into her mind, in her routine. “Oh. I meant Bre.” She waved a hand to her youngest sister.

He clasped his hands together, realizing his mistake. “Oh. Oh! You must be the daughter of—” He snapped his fingers a few times as if the sound would snap Atatiana’s name to the forefront of his memory. “—Queen Tiana? No. Tati? Nope.”

“Atatiana. It’s Queen Atatiana,” Hiraya said. She knew he wouldn’t remember, probably only coming to the wedding and meeting her once in Croec. Even Hiraya wouldn’t remember a name after such a short introduction.

“Aha! Yes! Queen Atatiana. Beautiful woman. Fiery attitude. A little too fiery for me, but definitely queen material.”

Hiraya knew he would keep going, speaking of the past. She needed to redirect him back to the current obstacle at hand. “So Uncle Talon, could you help us out?”

“Oh yes!” He laughed. “Follow me.” He wrapped an arm around Hiraya’s shoulders. She glanced at the uninvited hand. Even though they had known each other since her childhood, the gap between their interactions should have limited his entitlement to her body. She wanted to shrug him off, but she needed his help entering the casino. She didn’t want to offend him.

“So tell me, who is the other one? She is the mirror image of what I imagined your father would have looked like as a woman,” he whispered low enough so that the others couldn’t hear.

She peered over her shoulder at the group as they all entered through large double doors, away from the main entrance. Only one guard stood here. Her companions scanned their surroundings as they followed close behind. The noise of cheers and coins rattling from the games washed over them like a warm gust of wind. It disrupted Hiraya’s string of thoughts. Talon’s questions completely escaped her. She returned her attention to him. “What did you ask again?”

“Oh nothing.” He finally released her. “I must be off, business to attend to. Next time you’re in town, do call upon me. I’d love to visit. Maybe even bring your father. I miss that old man.”

She nodded. She doubted she’d return to Calusa. Yes, she was born here, and she did miss the ocean, but Calusa had transformed after Rothbert rose to power in Old Calusa, pretty much holding a noose around King Talon’s neck until finally being slain. Thankfully, Hiraya and her family resided in Croec by then. Her father had sent some of his men in assistance. She remembered Queen Atatiana refusing to send the Zarians. Her response: “my guardswomen will not be sacrificed for two squabbling men.” This had been the first seed to bloom into the respect Hiraya had for the queen. It didn’t show a mother-daughter relationship, but it gave Hiraya new insight into her step-mother that made her feel at ease. There was someone, especially a woman, who spoke up when necessary. Maybe that was her source of courage to stand up to her father.

“Who was that?” Bre and Minwoo asked simultaneously.

Hiraya turned to them as they gave each other a surprised glance. Crimson rose on Bre’s brown cheeks. Minwoo nonchalantly returned his attention to Hiraya and said, “Was that King

Talon?” Before she could answer, Minwoo continued, already accepting the response to be a yes, “And how do you know him?”

Abigail interlaced her arm with Minwoo’s “Guys, we really need to locate Reva. How ‘bout we split up?”

The answers Minwoo wanted wouldn’t come. It seemed Abigail thought there was no time for it and Hiraya felt there was no reason to override the new direction of the conversation. She agreed that they needed to find Reva quickly. From the sounds of their previous encounter, the Anun could disappear rather abruptly.

“Ooo. Can I go with you Abi?” Bre chimed in as she moved to stand on Abi’s vacant side.

“Oh. Um. Yeah. I guess.” Abigail didn’t seem confident in her response.

Hiraya shifted on her feet, suddenly feeling very singled out. She had thought she’d grown accustomed to this dejection, the whole point she kept to herself, but apparently not. Anytime she tried to connect, she ended up standing alone and...abandoned. A weight like a foot pressing down on her chest grew, causing strained shallow breaths.

Minwoo pulled his arm from Abigail’s and came to stand next to Hiraya. The nostalgic pressure on her chest lifted, allowing her to breathe with more ease. Maybe her fixed loneliness was changing.

“One of us needs to go with the princess—” Minwoo said.

“Hiraya,” the princess corrected.

“The *princess*.” He pointed at the orange dragon who appeared more brown in the casino’s dim lighting. “I can communicate.” Hiraya realized she had yet to invite the Serpent Dragon into her mind. She had wondered earlier about it but forgot. She wanted to invite Kaida

in, ask him questions, and satiate her curiosity. She opened her mouth to voice an invitation, but again, Abigail spoke, “Fine. We’ll go this way.” Abigail turned on her heels, almost dragging Bre with her.

Hiraya peered up at Minwoo, holding back the smile creeping at the corners of her lips. “Thank you.”

He raised a black brow and tilted his head, a familiar gesture, one Brin often did. “For what?”

She wanted to reveal how meaningful his momentary partnership was to her. She wanted to tell him how she didn’t actually desire to search alone, although she could. “Oh nothing.” And yet, she dismissed the urge. “You could have gone with them. It wouldn’t have bothered me.” If she showed how appreciative she was for this small gesture, would he think less of her. She didn’t want to risk it...at least not yet. Maybe at a later time, if their friendship evolved and solidified.

He shook his head and started walking through the tables of games where the house won more often than the player. But addiction ignored this facet of gambling, piling coins freely for the casino, making King Talon richer.

“We need to stay in groups. Reva is one of the first creatures, an Anun,” he answered dryly, minimizing his offer to join her.

“Oh yeah.” She thought of Reva and what she had learned from Emtu. Their older sister had met the creature once or twice and even travelled with another Anun, Shiro. “Remind me what she looks like again.” She had forgotten the description from earlier, only hearing it a quick conversation before transiting into other topics. She wondered what it would be like to meet one of the Anun and what they looked like. From the first-hand stories, Delta and Anan appeared

human while the other two were animal-like, but apparently, they could change into human forms too.

“I didn’t get a chance to see her but Abigail was chasing her when I ran into you. Maybe you got a glance at her.”

She thought about the time he ran into her, knocking the wind from her. It had only been yesterday. She had been too enthralled in the map to really notice the person they had been chasing. She shook her head. “I didn’t see anything and someone did knock the shit out of me.” She stared up at him. He looked away, focusing on his search for Reva. “So what does she look like?”

“Oh yeah. Abigail said she’s got dark braids with a rainbow of colors beneath.”

She scanned the patrons, searching for someone with braids. Nothing. As he kept describing the Anun, she focused on the bar. It was still early, leaving empty seats, but one person caught her eye. A woman already unsteady on her stool, waving an empty glass around. The woman had braids, but in this lighting, Hiraya couldn’t tell if there were a range of colors or not. She altered her route, honed in on this drunkard. All thoughts spilled from her mind as she approached.

The drunkard stumbled off her stool, almost colliding into Hiraya. The princess steadied the woman as she peered into Hiraya’s eyes. Icy blue eyes. A blue that freezes the warmest of places. And now it froze the princess’s entire being.

“You. You’re the one.” The drunkard giggled and straightened her posture. This. This was the one of the most powerful creatures on the Darkling Plain? It couldn’t be.

It is, the drunkard’s voice spoke in Hiraya’s mind.

Hiraya stepped back to add space between them, space that'd provide comfort and safety, but the woman held onto her forearms. All the drunkenness had faded. The distance between them disappeared as if a secret was about to be shared. With this proximity, Hiraya noticed the pale pink patches over the woman's left eye and the area around her mouth. Her hands were completely this color, contrasting against the dominant portion of mahogany skin.

"You—" the woman began.

"Princess." Minwoo's deep voice interrupted. Hiraya only saw him from the corner of her eye, still held hostage by the icy stare.

The woman's head turned, trailed by her gaze. "Ah. Minwoo."

"Do you know..." His voice tapered off. "You're Reva."

Reva.

"You will be sick," she said. "Two are not better than one. One is strong." Reva's voice felt like warm honey to Hiraya's ears...luring her into a trance.

"What?" Minwoo asked as Hiraya finally turned to look at him. "What do you—" His movements slowed. All the sounds of the casino melted away. Hiraya scanned her surroundings, all the people had come to almost a complete halt. She faced Reva once again, unable to completely process everything going on. Did time stop? Was this Reva's doing?

"It tires me to slow time." Reva caressed Hiraya's round face. "Let's meet elsewhere." Reva pulled the princess's forehead to her lips. A grogginess infected Hiraya immediately. Darkness followed shortly after.

Chapter 25

Abigail smiled at the girl, although inwardly, she was slightly perturbed. She wanted to spend more time with Minwoo and less time with these two surprise guests. She had no interest in connecting with them, even if they were her sisters. More specifically, the eldest. She just wanted to travel with her friends and explore. It didn't matter if Minwoo thought she was the "chosen one" as long as he accompanied her. Having him around had been the blessing she had prayed many nights for. An out. A reason to leave the small, mundane village and get away from her overbearing grandmother. But how was she supposed to enjoy Minwoo's company when they rarely spent time together? It seemed Breonna wanted all of her attention leaving Minwoo with the other sister. The youthful eagerness was a little pushy for her and Abigail needed a break from it.

Bre squeezed Abi's arm in response. "You're so much funner than Hiraya. Should we check the dancers first? I heard they're amazing! Kathy always talks about how colorful and amazing the dancing is in Calusa!"

"Oh nice. Remember, we're looking for Reva." In her mind, she asked the dragon, *find anything?*

There are so many voices. It is making it difficult to reach past this vicinity. Plus, there are wards I'm fighting against. She felt Kaida shiver and move closer to her neck. *It's tiresome.*

Don't overdo it. She returned her focus to her younger sister who guided her to an area with a 'u' shaped stage. At the center, the stage was larger. Three performers wearing white masks with red lips danced on stage. Different colored ribbons hung from their arms, making it seem like a rainbow flew with each movement. She had seen something similar back home, minus the masks. These dancers weren't donned with the skirts like her village either.

Anything?

No, Kaida replied weakly.

The wards must have been strong. Kaida was a young, vibrant dragon and had the endurance of one. If he was feeling this weak, then King Talon had hired someone pretty powerful (monks, priests, or priestesses) to ensure no spells or spiritual powers were used in the casino.

"So would you?" Bre finished.

Abi had forgotten the girl was even speaking. "What did you say?"

"Would you ever come to Croec? It's pretty fun. I can show you around."

Croec? She had heard about the city, one of the first to openly accept all creatures, not just ones that had human appearance. There had been many stories floating around. Some she thought outrageous, like creatures that were trafficked to Croec. Creatures were strong. They could fend for themselves. But she had never thought about visiting there before. Would she want to go somewhere with creatures freely roaming the streets? Is it better they hid, out of sight? That didn't matter. She didn't mind creatures. Heck, Kaida had been her constant companion. But there were more types of creatures out there than water droplets in the sea. She knew how dangerous some could be. Not all were like a sophisticated Serpent Dragon.

"I don't know," she finally answered.

Bre tugged on her sleeve. “Oh, come on! It’ll be fun! There’s nothing really to worry about.”

Was this girl telling the truth or was it ignorance? “I’ve heard things about Croec.” Yes, Abi had heard things, but really, she didn’t want to commit...not yet. She hated making plans with no intention of keeping them...or at least when she still wasn’t sure if she wanted to keep them.

“It’s not scary. The creatures there aren’t bad. You’ll be fine. Plus, mom and dad can just assign a guard to you.”

Dad? Abi wondered what he was like. She had never thought about her father...at least not what his personality would be like. She had thought about how it felt to have a father but never how he would act. Now that he became more real, she was curious about more things. Even though she tried to stifle these curiosities. He never thought to come for her before, so there was no reason to open that door now.

“I have Minwoo to protect me.” She was only curious. Reality could wait until she wanted to meet it.

“Oh yeah. Who wouldn’t want a cute guy protecting them? Anyone would be better than Rekia.” Bre scrunched her nose and crossed her arms across her chest, giving Abi’s arm some reprieve.

“Rekia?” Abi merely wanted the subject to change. She didn’t care for the background of this stranger.

“Er...um. She’s the guard assigned to me. She obeys every word my mom tells her to do. She doesn’t have a mind of her own. I can’t stand her.” The glowing excitement from moments ago slipped into an ominous cloud.

Abigail wanted to ask more but Kaida's voice stopped her. *Minwoo found Reva!*

"We need to find Minwoo," Abi told Bre.

"Wait. What?" Bre wasn't quick to understand. Maybe it was because she hadn't been included in hearing Kaida's voice. Abi wanted to hold off on letting either sister in for a little while longer, until they could trust them. She knew Kaida could choose who he spoke to, but letting them in also felt like she had to share another one of her friends. She didn't really want that. It was a little bit childish, but Abi didn't care. Kaida was hers.

Without answering Bre, Abigail hurried back the way they had come, knowing Minwoo would be on the opposite side of the establishment. She searched for him, diligently, until she caught sight of him running by. She wasn't one for chasing but based on his urgency, she thought she would give it a try. She sprinted after him, following each turn. It almost seemed like he chased a ghost. No one fled from him. No one ran through the casino but her and Minwoo. What had gotten into him?

He's not responding to my calls, Kaida said, reading her thoughts.

"Minwoo!" She managed to shout. Minwoo finally stopped, allowing her to do the same and to catch her breath. She wasn't used to all the running. She needed to get in shape if she were going to have to do more chasing. She inhaled one deep breath and made her way to stand in front of her friend. He stared into the distance, his bronze eyes glazed over and dull, unlike the usual bright, shining gaze. It almost seemed as if he were in a trance. Abi waved a hand in front of his face. No response.

"What's going on?" She shoved his shoulder. Nothing. No cognisance. "Minwoo?" The worry began to creep into her mind. Was this the damage Reva could do? She had heard of

bedtime stories of Anan and Reva: Anan ravaging with brute force while Reva incinerating the logic within the mind, but she thought they were just stories to put ornery children in their place.

It's strange. Like a cloud is wrapped around his mind. I can't reach him. Kaida's voice sounded quiet.

She clutched Minwoo's broad shoulders and shook him. "Minwoo!" Fear started to trickle into her gut.

People turned and watched to see what was unfolding. Feeling their eyes, she released them. *Is there anything else you can do?* she asked the dragon.

Nothing.

She peered at her hands. She couldn't manipulate "ni" or the life force like Agracias, warlocks, and witches. She couldn't fight. She couldn't even run without becoming utterly breathless. What could she do that would save Minwoo from this trance? What power did she have? None. She was useless. Was she really the chosen one?

Minwoo blinked the glaze away. Her heavy doubts dissipated, seeing him become coherent once more. He looked everywhere but her. "Where did she go?" He spun around. "She was just right here."

"You were running around but there was no one in front of you. Are you okay?" Maybe Reva really did put him in a temporary psychosis.

"Wait. So I wasn't chasing Reva?"

She shook her head, just as confused as he looked.

I couldn't reach you either, Kaida added.

He rubbed his eyes. "But where's the princess?"

Princess. It hurt that he asked about Hiraya, but Abigail took some pride in the fact he didn't call the princess by name. It meant he didn't take Hiraya seriously. He didn't have the same level of respect for her as he did for Abi.

"She wasn't with you." She didn't even think to look for Hiraya.

He clutched her shoulders. His touch felt warm through her tunic. "We need to find her. Reva's with her."

She nodded, although all desire to find the Anun turned into specks of dust in the wind. She'd rather go back home and sleep, let Reva and Hiraya disappear with each other.

He glanced around again. "We're at the entrance so that means..." He released her and began searching. She followed after, irritated by his desperate need to find Hiraya. She just told herself it was all due to Reva, nothing more.

Chapter 26

The crickets chirped as a soft breeze toyed with the willow's draping branches. Hiraya found herself standing on the small, red bridge arched over the thin stream from the pond. It wound through the lunar garden her mother had curated every restless night. Hiraya scanned the garden. Everything was in its place and yet she had been in New Calusa moments ago. Was this a dream or had Reva teleported her here? The Hunters—no, the Sentinels—had said Reva could cross over into other worlds, then teleporting to different locations in the same world would be simple. To have such power.

“This is a lovely place,” Reva's voice echoed.

Hiraya searched for the woman. The sound of wings flapping brought her attention to the black marbled pergola. Reva stood, hands on her hips and white feathers floating softly downward. Were those hers? Reva had always been described as a bird in writings and tales.

“Did you take me back home?” There was no way they were still in the casino.

Reva shook her head. “No. We're in your mind. This is the place you feel safest.”

Many questions began to form in her mind. If she felt safe in other places, would the scenery change? Did her body still reside in the casino? And if so, was she standing or passed out? Was time still stopped? What about everyone else? What were they doing?

“You're a curious one, aren't you?”

Could Reva read minds?

“The answer is yes.” Reva’s crystal eyes stared, unwavering. It sent chills through Hiraya.

“Why did you choose to speak to me and not someone else? Abigail and Minwoo have been trying to find you. I’m just helping them out.” This mission didn’t belong to Hiraya. She didn’t want to take what was rightfully Abigail’s. Wouldn’t Abigail be mad? She had no idea how her half-sister would react. They barely knew each other, but she did have a feeling that Abi wouldn’t enjoy the idea of Hiraya meeting Reva first.

“I sent the guard dog away, and—” Reva rubbed her temples with her fingers. “—I think I’m still tipsy. It has been a while since I’ve entered someone’s mind. I’m a little rusty.”

Hiraya knew she should be worried about herself, but she didn’t feel she was in peril. “Are you okay?” She took a few steps, stopping on the stone path leading to where Reva resided.

“I am fine. No need.” Her pale blue eyes met Hiraya’s, this time less cold. “I’m only here to help.”

“Why me?”

“Because you remind me of an old friend and—” She peered up at the moon. “—I have seen your path.”

All the questions disintegrated, leaving only one question in Hiraya’s mind: did she want to know?

“The Moonrock necklace will be simplest.” Reva slowly made her way to Hiraya. “And I can get you there.” She reached up, pushing her braids away from her shoulders to reveal a pair of beautiful earrings. Each earring had two sets of feathers dangling from gold chains: one white and one of another color. The right one was blue and the left yellow. She removed the left. “Each

feather will transport you to a new place. Two feathers. One to get you there, one to get you back.” She dangled the earring in front of Hiraya.

“Why not give this to Abigail? This is meant to help her.”

“Because I choose you.”

That couldn’t be right. It couldn’t...right? Hiraya hesitated. “I—” Reva stepped closer, again proving that she chose the princess. If Hiraya accepted, did that mean she was overstepping? Did that mean she was trying to replace Abigail? Did she? Did she want to be the chosen one? No. She didn’t. If she wanted the attention, she would have been more eager about being the heir to Croec. This was just her accepting something on behalf of Abigail. “Fine.” She took the earring. “I still don’t—”

“Hiraya, princess of Croec, listen to me.” Reva spoke, her tone deeper and the silkiness transformed into stone. Hiraya gulped down her thoughts as the Anun’s gaze tore through her. “When the time comes, you must accept it. Do not fight it.”

“What?” Reva’s words only confused her. It could mean literally anything, and she definitely would be overthinking it from this day forth. This was the same ambiguity that many low level fortune tellers beheld. Even the one during the ball had made some vague statement about her love life. A fiery love could mean anything: passion, heat, etc. It was up to the person to interpret what it meant. Same went with the words of this first born creature.

“You will know when the time is right. These words will resonate with you.”

Hiraya expected Reva to smirk with an all knowing attitude, like a child knowing a secret that no one else knew. But the Anun didn’t.

“I—” she began. A gust of wind caused her to blink. When she opened her eyes, the casino greeted her, followed by the rushing sounds of voices, music, and coins clanking.

Everything continued, unaware of the visit between her and the first born, Reva...Reva, who was now gone.

Hiraya brought her fist to her face and uncurled her fingers. In her palm lay the gold chain earring with two feathers. If it weren't for this, she would have thought the whole conversation a made-up fantasy concocted by her imaginative mind. She blamed the many stories she read and heard growing up.

She stared at the jewelry, registering the gravity of what just happened. Reva. She met *the* Reva. She met one of the Anun. And she got to live to tell the tale! A broad grin stretched across her face, soaking in the astonishment that energized her. She turned to tell Minwoo of her experience, but the spot he had occupied was vacant. She stuffed the memento into her pocket. Some time must have passed. She spun around, but nothing seemed out of place. Everyone continued to play their games as if an Anun didn't just transport her to a memory and had a full blown conversation, not to mention that she took an object from her mind into reality. She couldn't even begin to break that concept down. She didn't have the time.

She needed to find her group. She searched for them, wondering where they may have gone and how much time had passed. Was it a few minutes or was it hours? It couldn't have been days, and most definitely couldn't have been years...could it?

When she came to the entrance, she first noticed Minwoo. His height made it easy to spot him, being taller than most. He spoke to someone...Abigail. She hurried over to them. "Hey! What—"

Minwoo caught her off guard, abruptly grabbing her shoulders and examining her. "Where'd you go? She do something to you? You alright? What happened? Are you—"

Hiraya glanced at Abigail who stood with irritation written all over her face. Hiraya brushed Minwoo off. "I'm fine. No worries." She stepped back to show him she was in one piece. "But why'd you leave? You were gone when I returned."

"Returned? Did you go somewhere? Did you pass out?" He still sounded rattled, speaking hastily.

"He's just recovering because Reva put him into a daze where he thought he was chasing her when he actually wasn't," Abigail said.

"Wait! What?" Hiraya had so many questions she wanted to ask, but knew it wasn't the right time. She wanted to know everything that happened while she was gone, which seemed like only a few minutes, nothing more. "That's crazy!" She scanned both Abigail and Minwoo for any more answers and realized someone was missing...Bre. "Where's Breonna?"

Abigail and Minwoo looked around. "She was just with me."

Hiraya sighed. Of course her little sister wandered off. "We need to find her." A casino was the last place she wanted to leave her little sister in, especially with the age restrictions. Plus, if the Queen knew of this, it would be her neck on the line. "Let's split up and meet back here," she said and left before anyone could add any other input. There was no time to make negotiations or argue.

Hiraya found Breonna in a small tavern built near the opposite side of the entrance. It wasn't too far from a small stage meant for entertainment. Bre sat at the countertop with much older men on either side of her, broad grins and deep chuckles interlaced with the hope of a young, drunk companion tonight. By the powers of the goddesses, Hiraya would never allow it. She may not get along with her little sister, but that was *her* little sister. She stepped in between a balding man

with a long peppered beard and Breonna. Her sister gave her a toothy grin. “Hiraya!” Bre outstretched her arms as if expecting a hug. “You’re here!”

“How in the Darkling Plain did you get drunk so quickly?” Was Breonna really that much of a lightweight? How long had Hiraya really been inside her mind with Reva?

The man behind her grunted. “Who are you?”

Hiraya ignored him and waved at Bre to follow. Bre shook her head. “I’m havin’ fun with—” She squinted up at the bald man. “Who are you again?”

“Charce.”

“Charce. And?” She spun on the stool, almost tumbling over. Hiraya held out her arm, ready to catch the girl. Bre slapped the man to her left, a man with a thick mohawk braid on the peak of his head.

“Sev.”

“Sev! They bought me drinks. We’re friends!”

Hiraya glared at Bre. She knew Bre had partied and drank. She had even woken up in the middle of the night to Queen Atatiana ordering servants about, cleaning the messy trail Bre left behind: vomit, clothes already torn off, furniture out of place, objects toppled over or broken. But she never actually witnessed her sister intoxicated. The Queen had done a good job covering that part of the mess up. Plus, Bre knew such a lifestyle wasn’t really Hiraya’s taste and so left those experiences unsaid between them. This side of her sister was a novelty: the buoyant personality, the friendliness. It was completely opposite of her stepmother: stoic, stern, stiff.

The bald man laid a rough, stubby hand on Hiraya’s shoulder and shoved her to the side. “Move.”

Sev set a new glass of some cocktail with sliced oranges wedged on the lip. Bre squealed and took a large sip. Sev leaned back and waved his hand as if to shoo Hiraya. “She’s safe with us.”

A heat rolled through her as if igniting the hair on her arms. She was in no mood to fight. She just wanted to go back to the house, research the Moonrock necklace, and go to bed. She should be sharing her interaction with one of the most powerful creatures. She should be revelling in the splendor of it, the elations, but she had to retrieve her drunk little sister...and based on the welcoming demeanor of these lovely gentlemen, she’d have to forcibly remove Bre.

The way these men dismissed the princess meant she would have to go big if she wanted to resolve this quickly. She yanked Kita from her neck and brought the pendant to her lips, ready to speak its full name. Out of nowhere, Minwoo leaned forward between Bre and the mohawked man. He laid a hand full of coins on the bar. “We really appreciate you taking care of our friend, but we must go,” Minwoo said.

“Minwoo! Hello!” Bre exclaimed.

The stern expressions on both men’s faces relaxed, but only minutely. Their focus was on counting the coins Minwoo had offered. Minwoo took this opportunity to pull Bre from the stool and drag her away. Hiraya remained, watching as the men seemed unphased by their “friend’s” absence.

“Hiraya. Let’s go,” Minwoo called after her.

She snapped out of her utter disbelief. As she donned Kita around her neck, she trotted after Minwoo and the wobbling Bre. “I could have handled it myself,” she said. She was thankful, but she didn’t want Minwoo to think she couldn’t take care of herself.

He wrapped an arm around Bre's waist to steady her. "I'm aware." He didn't sound very convincing.

"No really. I can." She looked for any clues in his expression that said he really understood. Instead, he peered down at Bre, trying to keep her from falling.

He groaned. "Listen Princess, you were about to pull that axe out. And I saw you wield it last night. I know you can handle yourself. And don't forget, you beat me sparring."

She smiled inwardly, validated that at least he knew her capabilities and didn't doubt her. "Good."

"See, you would have pulled out your weapon, a fight would break out, and then we'd get kicked out. It would be a disaster, not to mention a headache. I'd rather not." He stopped as Bre tried to touch his face. He lightly pushed her towards Hiraya. "Since you can take care of yourself, how about taking care of her."

Hiraya caught her sister. "Wait. " Minwoo walked away. Was he mad at her? But why? "Minwoo. Minwoo!"

Bre's finger pressed against Hiraya's nose. "Boop. You're pretty."

"Um. Thanks." Hiraya put Bre's arm around her shoulders. "Let's get you home and sober you up."

"Abigail seems nice. I like her."

"That's good." At least Abigail was getting along with one of them.

Chapter 27

Abigail's stomach grumbled, disrupting the silence that had filled when Hiraya left and Minwoo dug into his research. She picked up one of the many books strawn out on the table and flipped through the yellowed pages. "Can we just eat and get some sleep?" she asked, although she wasn't really tired. It was still a little early for the night.

"I have a lot of research to do." Always research. "You can get something."

"I don't want to go alone." She would've gone with Kaida, but the wards had drained him. He immediately crawled into her bed and passed out. What she really hoped was some time with Minwoo, and she wanted to go before Hiaray took a break from taking care of the drunk Breonna.

"You've gone before." His eyes remained on the pages.

"C'mon Minwoo. It's good to take a break." She set the book back down.

He inhaled and peered up at her. "I'm not really hungry."

"Maybe we should cook something then." If he wasn't going to come with her, maybe she can stay and hang out with him. Even though he wouldn't be paying attention to her, at least she would get some time with him.

“I don’t know how to cook.” He reached over and grabbed the book she had been fiddling with. It shocked her that he didn’t know how to cook. He naturally fell into the caretaker role so she assumed he could cook.

“What? Not even a simple dish?” Even she knew a few dishes, due to her grandmother’s constant harping to pitch in.

“No.”

“Then how’d you survive?” Everyone knew how to cook something.

He flipped open the book, accidentally ripping a page. He grimaced and slowly turned the pages, ensuring that he not tear anymore pages. “Well, my mother did the cooking but then...” His voice trailed off as a shadow of a memory darkened his eyes. He cleared his throat. “My little brother actually did the cooking.”

“You have a younger brother?” Abi said, more loudly than intended. It made sense though, the way he easily took charge and made decisions. He was protective and caring, all traits of an older sibling.

“Who has a younger brother?” Hiraya’s voice came from Abi’s left.

Abigail swallowed her disappointment, trying to keep it to herself. “Oh just Minwoo here,” she said.

“What? Oh yeah. I remember.” Did Hiraya already know about his brother? How did she learn about it so quickly when she had just arrived here just a day ago. Hiraya sat down next to Abigail, who tried to hide her annoyance. “I can see that though. Oldest son, responsible, smart, and independent.” It frustrated Abigail more that her half-sister thought the same thing.

“So what’s his name?” Abi asked, wanting to take back control of the conversation.

He hesitated to answer.

“You know I have a younger brother,” Hiraya said and met Abigail’s gaze. “Well, I mean, we both do.”

Abigail already knew this. It was a conversation they already had. “So your brother’s name?” she asked Minwoo again.

Minwoo clasped his hands together and rubbed them as if warming them up. “Oh well—” He gestured to Abigail. “Abi wanted to get something to eat. Maybe you can join her,” he told Hiraya.

Abi straightened her posture. Minwoo was being evasive, not a character trait she had seen before. But she didn’t dwell on the anomaly long, because the disdain for such a suggestion masked all inquiries she had. “Oh. I’m fine.” She didn’t want to be alone with Hiraya. She knew it would be a barrage of questions about her life and more, something she didn’t feel like confronting right now.

“Yes! Let’s go. I’m starving and I haven’t gotten to spend any time with you.” Hiraya’s eyes were large with an eagerness that struck Abigail. Why did she have to feel guilt? It was such a useless emotion. “I’d love to get to know you.”

Abi glanced at Minwoo who gave her a small smirk. It caused a subtle dimple to form on his right cheek. She couldn’t say no to those dimples. “Fine. But you’re paying.”

“Yay! Are you going to go with us, Minnie?” Hiraya asked.

When did that nickname come about? Even Abigail didn’t have one for him. She had never even thought about giving him a nickname, but she had never given anyone a nickname.

He glared at her half-sister. The nickname wasn’t welcome. “Absolutely not.” His voice was flat and threatening.

She only smiled sheepishly. “Why not? I think it suits you.”

Was she flirting with him? Abigail rolled her eyes. Couldn't Hiraya get the hint?

"You sound like my brother, and I never allowed him to call me that either."

Abigail hit the table. "I'm hungry. Let's go." She stood up.

"What about—"

"He's in the whole research zone. He's gonna stay here. Plus, you wanted to get to know me. So let's go." She just wanted to stop whatever was going on between Hiraya and Minwoo. She despised the way Minwoo was casually opening up to her half-sister, and how Hiraya was openly just flirting with him like she wasn't there watching. She needed a breath of fresh air and since Hiraya said she would be paying, a free meal didn't seem so bad now.

Abigail scanned the restaurant. Although the interior held nothing special, the prices were higher than any of the noodle shops around due to the individual grills to cook raw meats. The grills sat in the middle of the table with a fan, powered by what Abi could only guess as spiritual energy from a low-level warlock, hanging above it. These fans were used to filter out any smoke. Normally, she wouldn't choose such a place, conserving her coin as much as possible, but Hiraya insisted on a meal with more meat portions to gain energy. She assumed it was because of the fighting and traveling.

A young man brought over a tray of dishes, including picked vegetables and white rice. Hiraya grinned and picked up her wooden chopsticks, falling into the role of cooking the meat on the seething grill. "So tell me, Abigail, about your family," Hiraya said, jumping straight into things.

"Oh well..." It was such a loaded question. Where could Abigail begin? Did she even want to tell this stranger her life story? Not really. "Just the usual, except the dad part."

“Oh, yeah.” Hiraya’s eyes darkened. “Do you know anything about him?”

Abigail shook her head. Her mother never mentioned him and her grandmother knew nothing of the situation. She was never curious herself. She wasn’t the first child with an absent parent, let alone a father.

“Well, he’s a—”

“I’m not really interested in learning about him. Thanks though.” And she wasn’t. She made that decision long ago and made peace with it.

“Why not?” Hiraya appeared surprised.

Abigail gave a small shrug. “He hasn’t tried to see me once, why would I want to see him? I’ve done fine without him.”

“Totally understandable.”

Hiraya’s response annoyed Abigail. Her half-sister probably said that just to appease her, make her like the princess even more. For what? She wasn’t even sure what she agreed to. She didn’t care for anything in Croec. She just wanted everyone to stop asking her to make decisions. Being destined meant she didn’t have to choose.

“So here’s the situation that I need help with, well at least more about it,” Hiraya began as if reading Abigail’s thoughts. She knew the princess had already proposed the issue in a quick short summary but it seemed like there was more that Abi didn’t really care to know about. But Abigail didn’t want to go back to the heavy questions and so she remained silent, allowing Hiraya to continue, “Our dad made my brother, our brother I mean, compete in the Hunt to decide the heir for Croec.” Hiraya set cooked meat on Abi’s plate and then her own. “Before the competition, we made a bet per se and I won. He was supposed to denounce any pursuit in the crown, but my brother-our brother-didn’t keep his end of the bargain.”

Abigail wondered what this had to do with her. This sounded like Hiraya's familial problems and not hers.

"Well, then during the Hunt, which is this thing we do every year..." Abigail tuned out Hiraya's voice, examining the side dishes more closely. She picked up shredded seaweed and set it on a slice of meat. She then stuck it in her mouth. A table beside them laughed, drawing her attention. An older couple sat, a man feeding a woman, smiles on their faces. If only she had that, maybe she wouldn't be on this journey to stop the end of the world or whatever.

"...but anyways, the whole point is for you to come with me. My father—our father would have to retract the previous competition and allow me to participate in a new one. This way, it's fair."

"So I just need to go there with you?" She still wasn't sure. Did she really want to get involved in their drama? Not really. It didn't matter if her father was the king of some small city days away or if he was just a random man on the street. She had no interest in him. Yeah, she thought about him from time to time, but that was normal for a young girl growing up without parental figures. She wasn't even the first person to have no parents consistent in her life. Being an orphan raised by her grandmother was just another classic tale in the Darkling Plain.

"Yeah. You wouldn't have to do anything else. I just want a fair fight." Fair? From the way that Hiraya fought, Abigail wasn't sure it was quite fair. That axe had to be something endowed by the gods, like the Moonrock necklace or Hermes gifting his shoes to Perseus. There's no way a normal princess could wield a weapon that large without it being magicked in some way.

“Oh okay.” Why did Hiraya even want to be the queen? She didn’t seem the type. She didn’t look like a leader, at least one that controlled adults...maybe children, but definitely not adults. People would run all over her and they probably wouldn’t take her seriously.

“It would really help. I just don’t want my brother to be king. He would be terrible.”

“Oh that’s not good.” Abi felt nothing towards this faceless brother. She didn’t even feel obligated to the sister in front of her. But she didn’t want to be rude and just not respond.

“So will you go with me after we finish your journey? I know you said you would think about it, or at least I think that’s what you said. But I just want to be sure.”

Abigail didn't really want to answer that question...at least not yet. “Oh. Well...I’m not sure.”

Hiraya sat back looking almost deflated. “No rush.” But it sounded like she was in a rush for an answer, almost anxious for one.

Although Abigail had been annoyed with uninvited guests, Hiraya had been useful. She got them into Mako, knowing the king. She fought off the villains. Minwoo was decent at fighting but being outnumbered meant he could get hurt. With another fighter, they had more of a chance to win than before. With all this, even though Abigail hated to admit it, they sort of needed her. Also, Minwoo would probably be upset if Abi rejected her. They seemed to get along...too well. Maybe Abigail could just say no. She loathed making decisions on the spot.

“I mean, sure. I guess it won’t hurt anyone.” She could just change her mind later, or just say such.

Hiraya clapped her hands together a little too energetically, almost knocking her chopsticks onto the grill. She caught it in time. “That’s great! I’m excited to get to know you and then I can show you around Croec. I know all the best spots.”

Abigail shoved more food into her mouth so she wouldn't have to respond. Instead, she nodded, trying to placate the non-stop exuberance Hiraya had since joining. She was exhausted just being in her sister's proximity. She already missed the days she slept in and stayed up late. Now thinking about it, she hadn't even seen Hiraya sleep. Hiraya was awake when she went to bed and was awake when she came out for breakfast. For some reason, this fact irritated her more.

"Abi?" Hiraya asked, her multi-colored eyes of dry sand mixed with darkened wet sand wide and curious.

"It's Abigail." She didn't like that the princess was using Minwoo's nickname for her.

"Oh okay. But—" Hiraya paused, returned to eating, but then paused again. "Do you not like me?"

The question struck Abigail harder than the oracle's words designating her the chosen one. This felt worse than when her antagonist and his minions popped up in hopes to deter her journey. She felt vulnerable, bare, like she was pinned to a target ready to be hit by a throwing axe.

"No. No." Abigail dragged out the last no, but then realized it could be interpreted that she indeed did not like her newfound half-sister. "I mean yes. Yes. I do like you...at least what I know." Her voice didn't sound convincing, but she knew herself. Hopefully, Hiraya thought each word genuine. But the lack of Hiraya's normally bright expression said otherwise.

A silence grew between them, one that probably only lasted a quick breath for onlookers, but felt like the long moment before Abi's mother said farewell and returned to the world without her. Abigail turned and ordered some more meat. At least the act of cooking could fill the void

and was better than pausing and staring awkwardly. Plus, she probably had two or three more rounds left in her to eat.

Hiraya returned to cooking and remained focused on the food instead of making conversation. Abigail preferred this. The barrage of questions made her uneasy. She really hoped Hiraya would ramble about one of those topics like with Minwoo. There were many things she did not want to share, not yet. And why should she? She owed nothing to this girl in front of her. Blood did not make them friends...comrades...family. It didn't even deepen their bond, making them more than strangers. Her father didn't think blood meant anything. If he had, she would have an image of the man that she attached to the title of father. But the word only had a shadow...no. An echo. A whisper. She had no family and she wasn't looking for one, either.

Chapter 28

Hiraya followed behind Abigail, her steps sluggish. Her body felt exhausted even though no fighting occurred today. But she had this problem in the past, always doing...learning...training. Luckily, she could allow herself to rest in Croec with no true responsibility or job requiring her to report anywhere. But here...they just started the journey. There was no time for rest. She still hadn't explained to everyone what happened with Reva even. The earring still hid in her pocket yet to be examined.

She paused at the gate as Abigail reached the front door. She expected her half-sister to stop, look back, and wait for her, but that never happened. Instead, the door shut, leaving the princess alone. The dinner was not what she had wished for. She wanted to get to know Abigail, but her sister's lips remained closed. No information nor stories to share, something to build a connection with. Nothing that Hiraya could cling to. She wanted to understand Abigail, put the pieces together to see the whole picture. Hiraya loved seeing how each memory molded the person before her, and she really, really wanted to know her sister. She hoped their relationship wouldn't reflect the tenuous kinship with her other two half-siblings. But the reflection appeared to be an exact replica. Why did no one want to bond with her? Why did she feel like she was always chasing after these relationships to no avail?

Hiraya sighed and walked inside. The house was quiet except for the sound of glass touching stone. Abigail held onto a cup of half drank water, her back to the counter. Their eyes met awkwardly. “Um. I was curious.” Hiraya had this thought earlier, but it slipped the forefront of her consciousness, just like so many other thoughts she didn’t voice or act upon. “Should I just ask Kaida or invite him or whatever the process is tomorrow?”

Abigail took one last swig and set the cup next to a few other dirty dishes that were left for the maid to clean tomorrow morning. She shrugged. “Sure.”

Hiraya scanned the open books and scrolls on the table, noticing Minwoo’s absence. “Where’s Minwoo?” He hadn’t said anything about leaving and he wasn’t one to go to bed early.

Abigail shrugged again. “Probably asleep.”

Hiraya found Abigail’s indifference to Minwoo odd. She always seemed aware of his presence, but now she didn’t care? Was this because Hiraya was the one asking...or was it because she knew confidently that he was in his room asleep? The princess found this behavior strange.

Abigail yawned. “I’m beat. I’m going to bed.”

Before Hiraya could respond, Abigail turned away and disappeared down the hall. Hiraya brought her attention back to the table covered in books. She should investigate more on the Moonrock necklace and the bulgae, but the weariness of her travels were pulling at her consciousness and strength. From this level of exhaustion, her body would be stiff. A bath was probably the best option.

Hiraya sank into the hot water, soaking in the salts and herbs to help ease her weary muscles. It astounded her how much Old Calusa’s plumbing had improved. She remembered her parents

buying charms to warm water or even doing it the old fashioned way by fire. A soldier's salary didn't give them the perks of their current title. She could have only imagined such a steady plumbing system where she could turn a knob and immediately get hot water. Even the soap contrasted what she used as a child. Before, it was odorless, rough, and misshaped, but now it had a flowery scent and felt smooth against her skin.

Even though poor, she enjoyed those days. She had been free of the restraints of a crown. She got to explore their neighborhood and the beaches. Her parents spent time with her, taking her on all their trips, hiking to secluded beaches. She kept that boundless spirit but her parents, they had other duties to attend to...royal duties. And then Hex arrived in their lives...her life. Not even two and just a tiny thing of skin and bones. Her mother had prepped her with the idea of another queen, another mother to join their family, but never a surprise sibling. Even though a surprise, she welcomed him. She wouldn't be alone anymore. She had a friend. She never thought their relationship would turn out like this...so strained.

She inhaled and sunk under the water before finally ending her long soak. She dried off and donned an oversized button down tunic. Unlike her travel clothing, she didn't tuck it into her silk shorts, but let the shirt flow freely. She wanted to go downstairs, feeling a little overheated and dehydrated. Aashirya's voice echoed in her mind to drink some water. "Lack of water was the easiest way to injure oneself." She chuckled to herself but it faded with the sudden weight of her aunt's absence. Although Breonna had joined her, Aashirya had been the one constant person in her life she confided in. It was strange not being able to share the day's adventures with her Tita.

Brin caught her attention. Instead of going downstairs, Hiraya plopped down on her bed, resting her head on Brin's belly. The hyena huffed in objections to the extra weight but the

princess knew if she were to get up, Brin would whine. Brin curled around, setting his snout next to her face. “At least I have you to talk to.” She scratched the top of his head. She wondered often what the hyena would have said if he could speak. Was there a charm or spell out there that could help her with that? “What do you think of Abigail?”

Brin grunted with disapproval.

“She’s not too bad. She’s just really guarded. I get it.” But it did feel as if Abigail didn’t want her around, as if she were an annoyance, and Hiraya couldn’t understand why. She wanted to change that. She wanted to prove to Abigail that she could be trusted. But maybe she was just overthinking things. Maybe she was just reading too deeply into the small mannerisms.

Brin shoved her shoulders with his large paws, telling her he was ready for sleep. She sat up and scowled at the hyena. “It’s not like you get to laze around all day.”

He peered up at her with his round dark brown eyes as if to tell her to leave him alone. She smiled and ruffled the hair on his head. “Fine. I’ll leave you alone. Love you.”

She jumped off the bed and began picking up the clothing she had left on the floor in her hurry to meet with everyone at the casino. As she grabbed her shorts, papers fell out, the papers she had taken from the hidden office in the warehouse...the papers that would help her understand what the enemies wanted.

She threw her shorts onto her pack and retrieved the papers. Any symptom of slumber was chased away by this puzzle she had to solve. She had enough pieces that she could determine some sort of overall picture. Using clues and a little bit of her imagination, she could fill in any missing pieces with possibilities. Without opening the papers, she knew what was on them: information on the artifacts that would release ancient death. She hurried downstairs ready to search for answers, knowing full well she wouldn’t get sleep until she did.

Elation spread through her chest like a building wildfire, already making her fingers tingle.

Hiraya had found some answers, not all to the ritual or even the bone comb. All she knew about it was that it belonged to Nulia, a sea goddess from the Niji tales to the northwest. But the Moonrock necklace, she had identified its location. It was on the most northern part of Keya Island only a day's travel from Croec but about four days from Calusa. Thankfully, she had the gift from Reva that would transport them to the artifacts location: a cave near a small tribe. She picked up a feather earring, examining it for any clues on how to use it. Reva's riddle wasn't exactly helpful.

She sighed, laying it on the drawing of the Moonrock necklace, and picked up a picture of the bulgae. It was drawn with black ink strokes and characters she had yet to learn. The dog curled around the moon. The drawing wasn't the most accurate depiction of what she witnessed. This made the dog seem more wolf-like when in actuality he had looked very much like a dog, with a shorter snout and shorter legs that didn't take away from its size. What had the tigress called him? Otoké? Otto? She whispered the names to herself in hopes to trigger the memory. "Otouto?" She snapped her fingers. That was his name! "Otouto!"

"Wha—where did you hear that?" a deep voice said. It was Minwoo's voice.

Hiraya peered up at the back door where he stood. It looked as if he were just coming in. Which meant he wasn't in his room and he had been out before getting home from the awkward dinner. "Oh. I believe it's the bulgae's name." She paused, taking in his expression. His pallor waned and dark crescent shadows formed under his eyes. "Are you just getting back? Where have you been?"

He set his weapon against the wall, remembering to take it with him. "What's with the interrogation? Did the dinner not go well?"

His words struck her hard, knocking any coherent thought from her mind. “Oh. Uh.” She didn’t know how to respond to his question nor did she want to. She started to roll up a few scrolls as if she needed to clean up this mess now instead of waiting till morn.

He must have understood her silence and replied, “I was just out for a walk and got a little lost. I’m not the best at directions.” He came over to the table and peered at the research she had been studying.

“Oh. I’m surprised. You don’t look like someone to get lost.” For the first time meeting Minwoo, she wanted to run away and hide. She knew he didn’t purposefully snap at her, but it still threw her off her axis enough that she needed to recover. Her weariness only added to her disharmony.

“Otouto isn’t a name per se.”

She peered up at him. Their height difference was even more prominent with her sitting and him towering over the table. “What?” She heard what he said, but still didn’t know what he meant by it.

“It isn’t a name. It means “little brother” in Nihongo. It’s a nickname they probably call him.”

Nihongo? She had heard about the language very briefly. It came from islands not too far from the Maharlika islands, but she hadn’t studied anything about it...at least not yet. “How many languages do you speak?”

Minwoo counted on his fingers. “Four. No. Five and a little bit of conversational in a few other languages.”

This fact reminded her that Minwoo was still a stranger no matter how well they got along. “Wow. I know two and a little of two more.”

“Did you find anything else on the bulgae?” He walked around the table to stand beside her. His closeness made it difficult for her to think. It reminded her of earlier when he gave her the bandages. Was he comfortable with being this close to her or did he do this with everyone?

She shook her head. “Nothing that tells me why he’s with a tigress and that...” her voice trailed off. Although death wasn’t what the powerful man or god or whatever seemed to want of Hiraya, just thinking about him made her face how vulnerable she actually was. She hated not knowing whether or not she’d be harmed. She hated not being able to control a situation.

“Anyways, all I keep finding is that it’s a dog that chases the moon and sometimes takes a bite of it, which is the cause for the crescent moon.” He raised a brow, an expression of disbelief written on his face. She chuckled and continued, “A little silly I know. The moon just goes through phases.”

He didn’t laugh. “Where my father is from, they speak of the bulgae as a demon, a servant of the Underworld.”

“So they are similar to hellhounds?” Assuming both creatures were one in the same could lead to a fatal mistake, so Hiraya avoided any assumptions. Plus, there could be different breeds of dogs amongst the Underworld, just as there were many breeds within their current reality.

He nodded and picked up the Moonrock necklace sketch. “Did you take these from the warehouse?” His voice sounded more stern than proud, the opposite of what she desired.

“Yeah. I thought it would help. Plus, who knows if we would stumble across that place again. So I stole it. We needed the upperhand.”

“Taking these was stupid.” A second time tonight his words struck her. Her knee began to bounce as the urge to flee grew even more so.

“Oh.” How was she supposed to respond to such harsh words? She knew he could be confrontational but this was to the point of hurtful.

“You do not know if these were cursed or spelled. You do not know who you are messing with. What if these papers cursed anyone who stole it? What if it were to hurt you?” He waved the paper around before slamming it on the table. She winced in response. He sighed and straightened his robes. “Listen, I am just tired. It obviously did not harm you. You got lucky. How about we get some rest and then go over everything tomorrow?”

Was this him being tired? Or was this worry...or did he really think her stupid? “Yeah. Sure.” She scanned him. He felt off, like something happened while he was out to set his temper aflame. “I’m just going to clean up and then I’ll go to bed.” It was early morn now and if she stayed up any longer, she’d sleep half the day away or be extremely ill-tempered tomorrow, just like Minwoo appeared to be now.

He nodded. “Okay. Zou dau.”

“What?”

“Oh. It means early rest, like good night.”

She nodded. “Yeah. Good night,” she replied, but it felt forced, awkward even. It felt as if something shifted in their new friendship, and it didn’t feel as if it were for the better. Was it what she did? She ignored her internal question. Overthinking this interaction was the last thing she needed to do before sleep. If she let the thought linger, then she wouldn’t get any rest. And she already had a lot on her mind with everything going on...Hex, Croec, this prophecy, and ancient death.

She stacked a few books as Minwoo remained inert. She avoided glancing his way in fear he would notice how awkward she felt or worse, she may see how annoyed he was with her.

He sighed again. “Good night...” His voice softened this time around. “Princess.”

She internally sighed. Using her nickname meant the annoyance wasn’t for her...right?

Chapter 29

The house was quiet when she woke. Abigail had been surprised. Usually, Minwoo had already risen and purchased breakfast. She rarely, if even at all, woke first. Even Kaida remained asleep, still exhausted by the oppressive charms from the casino and his many trips the last week in his full fledged form. So she had to retrieve breakfast herself. She didn't mind. She needed the air and being out of the house meant she'd less likely run into her half-sisters. She was in no mood to talk to them so early.

After breakfast, she took a short walk on the boardwalk. The emptiness refreshed her. It reminded her of the stillness whilst growing up around the village: a gift nature had to offer. It was her grandmother's harping and the fact that the stillness eventually led to a frustrating itch she could not scratch that made her leave. Or at least take the first opportunity to leave. But a few moments of silence, of tranquility from time to time felt...well...nice. And Abigail loved seeing the ocean. She loved the sounds and smells, but no one would ever catch her swimming in it. Too many creatures lurked beneath the surface. She'd rather stray in the realm of humans than deal with a creature of the deep.

Once done with the beach, she finally decided to return. By the position of the sun, she had wasted away the entire morning. Minwoo and the others most definitely were wondering where she had gone off too. She hurried back, entering through the back door. She found

Minwoo and Hiraya at the table examining texts and eating whatever meal they had prepared during her absence. Kaida curled himself on the table, his eyes scanning a scroll. Behind them, Abigail could see feet propped up on the couch's arm. Those feet had to belong to the most-likely-hung-over Bre.

"Oh. Hey, Abi." Minwoo furrowed his brows and glanced down the hall. "I thought you were asleep."

This assumption disappointed her. So no one realized she was gone? "Yeah. I went for a walk."

"If you're hungry, I made breakfast," Hiraya said, holding up her plate of what looked like eggs, potatoes, and sliced fruit. "Well I guess it's lunch now, but there's more than enough."

"Thank you. I already ate." She suddenly felt like she didn't belong as if she were the one interrupting an exclusive group meeting. Hiraya had taken her spot and captivated her friends. Wasn't she supposed to be the chosen one? Not this strange girl with blue hair and an odd way of butting into people's lives disregarding if they want Hiraya there or not.

Hiraya has found the location of one of the artifacts those people are after, Kaida said.

Abigail nodded. Of course Hiraya found crucial information to help their mission.

"Now, we're just trying to figure out how to use this." Minwoo held up an earring with two feathers: one yellow, one white.

"What do you mean?" How was an earring supposed to help them? Were they special or something?

"Reva told me each feather could transport us. One feather to get us there, one to get us back, but she declined to tell me how." Hiraya took a bite of her food.

“These feathers are to just magically transport us there?” Abigail asked, a little doubtful. It looked like an ordinary piece of jewelry. How was something so normal looking do something so special? She just couldn’t believe it.

“Yeah. I’m not sure how to activate it,” Minwoo said as he examined it more closely.

“Isn’t it just an ordinary piece of jewelry?” Abigail pointed out.

“Aren’t all things ordinary until they aren’t?” Hiraya added, standing up.

That is surprisingly profound, Kaida said to Abigail.

I thought you were my companion? Abi snapped back mentally. Even Kaida liked Hiraya? Seriously?

“I’m going to grab my pack and see if I left any books in it,” Hiraya announced, setting her plate on the counter.

“Do you have any medicine for my aching head?” Bre called from the couch.

“Drink the tea I brewed for you,” Hiraya said as she walked upstairs, her beast close on her heels.

Abigail took this chance to sit across from Minwoo. “Did she really see Reva? How do we know?” She set her chin in her hand and searched his expression for any clues of what he thought of her half-sister. His attention remained on the earring.

Her questions weren’t unreasonable. Reva should have met with Abi and not Hiraya. Plus, they didn’t know Hiraya and maybe she was lying to get everyone on her side. Based on Hiraya’s inquiry about Abigail not liking her, it was plausible that she now tried to undermine Abi’s friendships in order to gain power in this group. Wasn’t that what most girls did who had insecurities and were lonely? Abi had seen it many times and even received the brunt of it.

“Yeah. I told you Reva was with her before they both disappeared. Hiraya said Reva took her to some place in her mind.”

“You two have gotten close,” Abi murmured, unable to mask her disdain for such a statement.

Minwoo set the jewelry down and looked at her. “We converse when we’re doing research so it’s natural.”

I never thought someone could be full of such random information, but she sure is, Kaida added.

“Has she invited you into her mind—”

“No,” Minwoo cut her off.

Strangest thing. We tried, but I couldn’t access her mind.

“Strange,” she muttered, but she wasn’t upset by it. She was relieved. She really didn’t want him having access to her mind. She wanted Kaida to herself. She wanted something to be solely hers without Hiraya touching it.

“We’ve concluded it may be the bracelets she wears. They must be enchanted.”

Of course Hiraya had enchanted objects. She was a princess. Wasn’t it a prerequisite or something? Abigail fiddled with the simple necklace from her grandmother, untangling it from the necklace Minwoo gave her. It was old and looked old. It wasn’t enchanted like many of the gifts Hiraya had. Yes, it was supposed to protect her, but it wasn’t like Hiraya’s axe or bracelets. She had never asked her grandmother about it, now she was.

She grabbed the earring and peered at it. Even under close inspection the adornment appeared simple. Two feathers dangling from a delicate gold chain. She wouldn’t even look

twice at it if she saw it at the Fishmarket. Nothing really stood out to her. Was this really jewelry from the all powerful Anun, Reva? This couldn't be true.

Hiraya plopped her pack onto the table causing Abigail to jump. Hiraya didn't even notice her intrusion and rummaged through her bag. "I guess there wasn't anymore in my pack." The princess met Abigail's annoyed gaze. "You have any ideas how to use it?" Hiraya asked, completely oblivious to the annoyance. It surprised Abi a little bit, especially when the princess had been so forthright in asking those questions last night.

Abi glanced at the earring she still held up. "Uh. No. Why would I know?"

"I didn't mean it—I was curious if you had any ideas. We've been trying to come up with some but nothing sounds good. Maybe you had different ones."

"Oh." Now she felt stupid...and small. "I don't know."

"Let me see." Hiraya pinched one of the feathers of the earring. Abigail refused to let go of it, even tugging it away. This caused Hiraya to accidentally yank the yellow feather from the gold chain.

"You broke it!" Abi exclaimed. She stood up and laid the now broken earring in her palm. She glared at her half-sister. Guilt darkened Hiraya's expression. "Why did you try to snatch it like that? What if it doesn't work now?"

"I'm sorry. I—"

"It was an accident," Minwoo said. "I doubt it could be ruined so easily."

Minwoo's words irritated Abigail more than Hiraya detaching the feather. Why did it always seem he defended the princess? Was there an attraction? What made him side with someone they barely knew?

"Just give me the feather." Abi held out her empty hand.

Hiraya nodded and stretched out her hand, releasing the feather to drop in Abi's hand. Abigail moved her hand ever so slightly, allowing the feather to float past the edge of her palm. She didn't know why she did this. Maybe it was to regain control of the situation. Maybe it was to make Hiraya look like a fool. Whatever it was, it eased her frustration.

But it didn't matter how she felt because the tip of the feather began to glow. It tore through the space between them, like a crack forming messily after an earthquake. Abigail stepped back, afraid to be sucked into the widening crack that blocked Hiraya from her view. It spread until it was not only taller than her, but also wide enough for her to go through. When she peered inside, she saw a few longhouses made of white birch. People walked around wearing thick fur coats, some carrying bundles of sticks, others dragging a sled of supplies. Children were the first to notice the tear between locations, squealing and pointing at the portal to another, strange place.

"We don't know if this will close soon. We need to hurry through," Minwoo announced as he grabbed a few books and papers.

Let's go through, Kaida said, landing on Abi's shoulder.

She nodded slowly, gulping down her doubts. She leapt through the crack just as she heard Hiraya call after Breonna. Her feet landed on the hard, solid surface. She expected it to be soft since the ground resembled the color of Calusa's beaches. But this place was different and the utter realization came when she felt the painfully dramatic change in temperature. She hugged herself as bumps rose on her arms. Unlike the hot humid weather of Calusa, the air still resided in what felt like winter. She had never felt such cool weather, only knowing Calusa's warm winters and never experiencing the beauty of snow. She wondered if this place even experienced the heat Calusa had to offer. Probably not.

A crowd had accumulated in the short time they all crossed over. The people stared with their dark eyes, mumbling a similar language to the one her grandmother would use but she never picked up. She never wanted to. It was one aspect of her life she could control and her mother and Niribia always tried pushing it on her. This act of defiance gave her some semblance of power when she had none.

“Where are we?” she asked more to herself than anyone else.

I believe this is a Niji village called Aika. It is a village of the Thule people, Kaida explained, somehow knowing this information. How did he know?

Aika? Thule? She had heard of them from her grandmother. There had been travelers from this village, those who were sent out to learn the world and return with their newfound wisdom. This was a tradition performed by most, if not all Niji tribes and people, as a means to stay connected and unified. Her grandmother had hosted a few of these travelers, although not all from the same tribe or clan. She hated it. She always had to prepare meals and do extra chores during those visits. It was exhausting.

“Wow,” Hiraya said from behind her. “By the way, do you still have the earring?”

Abigail peered down at her hand, the second feather still intact to the chain. “Yeah.” She turned around and shoved it into Hiraya’s hands. She didn’t want to be responsible for such an important artifact. What if she accidentally activated it before they were ready? She wasn’t going to be the source of another mistake like Hiraya had. A mistake would surely upset the group, especially Minwoo.

“Ew. Why is it so cold?” Bre whined.

“We are very far north. It doesn’t get hot like Calusa,” Minwoo informed.

As they continued to converse, Abigail watched the crowd grow, the expressions a mix of fear and curiosity. A child stepped forward wearing a coat of animal skins and furs. The child poked Abigail's leg with a mitten and then jumped back with their friends. She smiled softly in hopes to show she didn't want to harm anyone.

"Guys. We have attracted some attention." And she didn't know what to do with it. She had no means of communicating with them and she didn't know what to tell them. Minwoo and Hiraya seemed to have everything under control. They could handle why they had travelled so far north into a frozen tundra...right?

The crowd's murmurs rose to a dull roar on the precipice of becoming a panicked roar. A voice rang out, saying something Abigail couldn't translate. The crowd parted as an elderly woman with silver hair in a single plait laying over one shoulder came forward. The elder walked slowly, using a short staff carved out of white wood. The head of the staff was designed to resemble a bear. A man faced her muttering a single word.

"He just called her grandmother," Hiraya said under her breath.

"How would you know?" Abi glanced over her shoulder. There's no way that Hiraya would know more about the Niji than Abi. Her mother was of the Temucua Tribe, one of the main Niji groups living around Calusa.

"I know some words. We have a lot of people passing through Croec. I pick up on some things." Hiraya shrugged as if it were no big deal. This irritated Abigail even more.

"The spirits warned me of newcomers," the elder spoke, her voice powerful and low. "Why do you journey here?"

Minwoo stepped forward and gave a small bow at the waist. "Sorry for our intrusion. We are seeking an important artifact."

She raised a thick brow and peered up at him. Only now did Abigail realize their height difference. But the grandmother had a strong presence, one that replicated her own grandmother's. It was a presence not to be messed with. "Come," the elder commanded and shuffled away before anyone could question it.

Minwoo peered back at everyone. "I guess we should follow." He was the first to fall in step behind her. Bre came next.

"Go ahead. I'll take up the rear," Hiraya said beside Abigail.

"Okay."

Aika had many longhouses with small yards enclosed by short portions of wood. The village bustled with their season of spring that Abigail refused to believe. This couldn't be their season of new life. It was too cold. Thankfully, villagers offered them coats to keep them warm. Cold weather did not agree with her one bit.

The Thule, like most of the Niji groups, were a peaceful group of people that protected Keya Island. They were welcoming to their unexpected visitors. This was how most tribes and clans worked, including Abi's own village. They knew how to be kind while being wary of strangers, still watching and ensuring Abi and her group didn't do anything unsavory or suspicious. They believed in community and uplifting everyone.

The grandmother, or Aana they were told later, resided in a different home with a few others, including a few children. This home was larger than the single family longhouses and made of stone and sod. It seemed to be equipped for harsher weather than simple wooden homes. A totem pole stood out front with a few benches nearby and a fire pit. Here is where they sat now, a fire already burning and warming Abigail's frigid fingers. Aana had already asked them a

bunch of questions, at which Minwoo gladly and respectfully answered. Abi was surprised Hiraya didn't try to take over the conversation but remained taciturn, only listening. Even with a submissive Hiraya, she had wished Kaida hadn't taken a quick flight to look around and stayed to converse. She wanted someone to keep her busy and someone to talk to.

"You have quite the task." The grandmother rested her hands on top of the other on her staff's head. "Do you know of how the necklace came here?"

Minwoo glanced over to Hiraya who sat to his left. Hiraya leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "I found that a little strange. The Moonrock necklace belonged to Mayari, the goddess of the moon, but when I saw the last known location was near here, there was no explanation. I know Mayari was fleeing Bakunawa but why here?"

A smirk formed against Aana's wrinkles and wan brown skin. "It was a gift."

"To the Aika village?" Minwoo asked.

Bre yawned to Abi's right and then stretched. Under her breath, she said she was tired and walked into the stone home Aana had called a Kashim. She still suffered from her alcoholic adventure from last night.

Abigail returned her attention to the elder. "No. It was a gift to the sea goddess of us Thule people. Her name is Nulia."

"Wait. I don't understand," Minwoo spoke. "How did those two meet? They're from different parts of the Darkling Plain"

The grandmother raised her staff and pounded it back into the dirt. "Listen. Young ones, so eager for answers you delay your goal."

Hiraya chuckled. Abigail let out a sigh. Why were elders all the same?

Minwoo shrunk in his seat and gave a bow of his head. "Sorry."

“During Mayari’s plight, she grew exhausted and fell into the sea. Nulia sat at the bottom combing her hair and speaking to the sea animals, like she did most days. When she saw Mayari sinking towards her, she swam quickly and brought the moon goddess to the shores. Nulia watched over the slumbering goddess until Mayari finally awoke. But the moon goddess was weak. Nulia nursed her back to health. During this time, the two grew close. The depth of their bond reached beyond even the deepest parts of the ocean. Yet, their happiness would not last.”

Abigail saw that twist coming all the way from Calusa. There was no such thing as a happy ending. Her mother’s life and ultimate murder was a reminder of this. Even the tales of those around her served as a notice to never get too attached to anything or anyone. It led only to disappointment and heartache.

“The sea serpent eventually found the moon goddess, his obsession leading the way. As a means to remember each other, Mayari gave Nulia the necklace and in return, she gave the moon goddess her comb. After Mayari’s leave, she waited and waited, hoping that one day the moon goddess would return. This never happened.”

Abigail didn’t see why this story was relevant. They just needed to retrieve the necklace before that trio did. The old woman could have just pointed them in the right direction and they could get it.

“Nulia went in search of Mayari but ended up empty handed. She came across our people where she told us of her travels. It was then we realized we needed to connect with other tribes. Learn of the outside world.”

“And the necklace, why did she leave it with you?” Minwoo asked. Did it really matter though? They just needed it. This was the time Abi wished Minwoo wouldn’t let his curiosity get the best of him.

Aana laughed, deep and full. “Yes. Yes.” She cleared her throat. “She entrusted us with it. Told us to protect it and to never give it to the sea serpent. She said only those that are untainted may witness the beauty of it.”

“Have anyone else asked about it?” Hiraya finally spoke. Abigail was beginning to wonder what had gotten the princess’s tongue.

“Anyone who has tried has disappeared beneath the bay to the Qallupilluit. And those who do reach the cave lose their way, never to exit.” Abigail had heard of this creature before: some creature that stole children away if they played by the shores at night.

“There has to be a way to get it. Did she leave any clues?” Minwoo said, his eyes dark from all the thoughts in his head. Abigail had never seen him with such determination for answers.

Aana spoke in her language first and then translated it, “Fear naught darkness but the shadows of your soul. Only then will you see the path. These are the words passed down each generation.”

Minwoo leaned back, the words absorbing into his thoughts. Abigail watched him, nothing else mattered to him anymore. The way his jaw tightened as if chewing on the riddle made him even more attractive.

“He is definitely pleasant on the eyes,” the old woman whispered to Abigail.

Abi ripped her gaze from Minwoo. Was she that obvious with her stares? “What? No.”

“Young love is beautiful.”

“Minwoo?” She pointed at her protector. “No. No.” She stressed the second ‘no’ for emphasis.

“What about me?” Minwoo asked, hearing his name.

“Beautiful—” the elder began.

“Me. I am beautiful. That’s what we’re talking...” her voice trailed off, feeling like an explanation was useless at this point and would only add to her humiliation.

He crossed his arms across his chest. “Really?”

Abigail met the grandmother’s gaze, pleading for assistance. If Minwoo found out about their conversation, it’d be embarrassing. Something glinted in the woman’s dark eyes.

“Sometimes the most beautiful flowers need more attention,” she spoke to Minwoo.

Abi buried her face into her hands, hiding the crimson on her pale cheeks. This was not what she intended. She knew she was attractive, but she didn’t like to brag about it, especially in front of Minwoo. He thought her simple and modest. She didn’t want him thinking she was arrogant. She wasn’t.

“But do beautiful things need to ask for attention?” She peered through her fingers as Minwoo said this. She noticed his quick glance at Hiraya before meeting Aana’s gaze. Was he implying that Hiraya was beautiful? Or was he saying the opposite, that she sought out attention, always intruding conversation with information or a personal story.

“You don’t see me asking for attention,” Hiraya said, a sheepish smile on her face. She shook her head and waved her hands. “I’m just kidding.”

The humiliation dissipated and was replaced with agitation. She regretted allowing Hiraya to join them on this journey. If only Hiraya would just return to Croec and stop butting in, everything would be perfect.

“Um. I’m gonna take Brin for a walk,” Hiraya suddenly said, standing up. It was almost as if she felt Abigail’s disdain. Was it obvious? That Abigail didn’t want her there?

Minwoo stood up too. “I’ll join you.”

Abigail opened her mouth, ready to ask him a question...anything that would keep him around. Hiraya shook her head. "I'm good. Thank you though." She left before he could object.

Abigail smiled inwardly. Maybe she worried over nothing. Hiraya wasn't competition. Her sister wasn't even in her league.

"Can you tell me more about Aika?" Abi asked, wanting to return the attention back to Aana.

Chapter 30

Fear naught darkness but the shadows of your soul. Only then will you see the path.

The words echoed in Hiraya's mind. What could it possibly mean? Did it mean that they can only find the cave in darkness or maybe they need to go at night? Wasn't that too obvious?

She sighed and looked down at the hyena, except Brin wasn't at her feet. Panic struck her as she searched for her companion. She worried someone would harm him or worse, back him into a corner where he harmed someone else.

She finally found him chasing a few children. They laughed and giggled as they played tag with him. Relief chased away any anxiety she had. These children didn't fear Brin, not like the eyes in the streets of Calusa or even the small villages she passed through on her journey there. Her heart sank a little remembering Reem and the affection for Brin. No. She needed to see the bright side. That's what her mother always said. See the light. Queen Malaya said this as much as saying that she must take the most righteous path because if Hiraya didn't, who would?

A shadow passed over her, causing her to look up. Kaida flew overhead in the direction of where Abigail sat with Minwoo and Aana. His orange scales flickered in the sunlight, almost giving him a yellow tint. This was the first time she saw him in his true form and not miniaturized by his curse. She found his "regular" appearance astounding. Too bad it only lasted in short spurts.

She shook her head. Focus. She needed to focus. Her mind always ran a muck. What was the clue again? *Fear the darkness*. No. *Fear naught darkness but the shadows...* Hiraya sighed and continued walking through the village. It was strange that the moon goddess from her mother's culture met with the sea goddess of the Niji people. She never thought about the gods meeting each other, which was an outlandish misthought. It never surprised her to meet creatures from all over the Darkling Plain at Croec, why would the gods and goddesses be an exception?

"Tizheruk." Hiraya turned to the sound of the old grandmother's voice. "You wander too many places." Aana fell in step beside the princess.

"I was just thinking about the clue...and Mayari...and Nulia."

The elder chuckled. "Have you thought of her?" She pointed to Hiraya's torso.

Hiraya was confused. Was the elder insinuating her weight or maybe it was about eating. She never did finish her late breakfast. But with all the excitement, she hadn't felt the pangs of hunger. Being busy often distracted her from meals. Sometimes she would go all day without eating. "You mean have I eaten? Not since we got here," she finally answered. "I don't have coin to give to you. But I could give you a hand." Hiraya raised her arm and flexed to show she could provide her strength to barter for food.

Aana threw back her head and let out a roaring cackle. She wagged a crooked finger back and forth. "Such an enjoyable young woman. There is no coin here."

Hiraya stared at the elder befuddled. She wasn't trying to be funny. She thought her answer was pretty candid.

"I mean your intuition."

"Oh!" Hiraya's round cheeks burned with embarrassment. She should have just asked for clarification instead of assuming. Why didn't she? Now, she appeared a fool like she always did.

“You must listen to your intuition. It will save you more than your wandering mind.”

Hiraya nodded. Trust her intuition? How would she do that? It sort of led her on this quest where she failed miserably at bonding with her long lost sister. She even committed to this mission. But she had something she needed too. Abigail’s help. Was she being selfish? Maybe that’s why her half-sister still had so many walls up.

“There your mind goes,” Aana spoke.

“I just don’t know what to do.” She didn’t. Not about Abigail, not about this ancient death situation or Hex and Croec. There was just so much going on that she didn’t even know where to begin and what to do to figure out the resolution. These were all problems she couldn’t do on her own, even if she wanted to. But what happened when people didn’t disagree with her. What if Abigail refused to come to Croec? What if her father never changed his mind? What if they didn’t figure out any of the riddles? What happened when this ancient death came to ruin the world? So much was on her mind.

The elder stopped and pushed the end of her staff into Hiraya’s stomach. “What does this tell you, Tizheruk?”

But she didn’t know how to listen to her intuition, unless it was blatantly telling her not to do something. It was quiet for trivial things.

“I don’t know—wait...what does that mean? Tiz-hoo-Tiz...” She had realized the grandmother had called her the name twice now.

Aana grinned. She pointed at Hiraya and continued, “Remember, water is life.” She paused. “Even the sea.” She gave a small nod as if she completed a task that needed to be done and slowly walked away, leaving Hiraya alone to once again overthink.

As the day went on, the people of the village fed them suaasat, a soup made from a seal hunted and boiled with onions and potatoes. Not yet entering Spring, the villagers didn't have a variety of vegetables to add more flavor. Hiraya actually enjoyed the taste. The meat would give her enough stamina for whatever came next.

They had decided as a group to wait till almost dusk to find the cave. Minwoo suggested the answer had to be at night, especially since the artifact had to deal with the moon. It made sense but Hiraya still felt like they hadn't quite discovered the answer. She kept her doubts to herself, just in case she was wrong.

"Does anyone want the rest of mine?" Minwoo muttered lowly in hopes none of the villagers heard him. "I don't want to be disrespectful but I am not really a fish person."

"But it's seal." Hiraya pointed out.

"It has a fishy taste. Abi?" He held the wooden bowl towards her.

She shook her head. "I already dumped mine under the bench."

Anger flickered inside the princess. The Thule shared the food they worked hard to find, hunt, and prepare. Dumping the food on the ground was blatantly disrespectful.

"I'll just sip what I can." He grimaced and gulped down a few more sips.

Hiraya held out a hand, "I'll eat it." She was already full but she didn't want anything to go to waste.

He smiled so big it made his eyes disappear and the dimples on his cheeks to deepen. "Great! Thank you." He gave the bowl to her a little too eagerly. "By the way, do we have everything? When we leave, we may not make it back here." Minwoo and Abigail turned to Kaida basking in the sun on the bench. He must have been saying something, something she

couldn't hear. It felt awkward almost like Hiraya still wasn't a part of their trio. She understood Kaida tried to communicate with her but failed. It wasn't his fault. Maybe it was the bangles Aashirya gave her. Even so, she felt a wall between her and everyone else...and ever since last night, Minwoo just seemed off...distracted. Maybe she was just reading too much into it.

"Oh yeah," Abi replied.

"Minwoo, did you bring your weapon?" Hiraya asked not because she doubted he brought it but more so to be seen.

"I did!" He scanned the area around him. "I made sure it was the one thing I grabbed." His brows furrowed as his small smile faded. "It was just here."

"Are you sure you are a warrior?" Hiraya still questioned it, him a protector. For his age, he should have had the innate urgency to have his weapons with him at all times instilled in him. Even if he didn't, he should know where it was. But he often misplaced it...a lot.

"Ah!" Minwoo shouted. He reached behind him revealing his long staff, ending with a short, wide blade. A beaded tassel hung from one of the curves of the blade. The tassel reminded Hiraya of soft flames on a cool night. He leaned it against the front of the bench, a small smile of victory on his face.

Hiraya shook her head. A heavy silence grew between them. Hiraya hated silence when around others. It always made her uncomfortable, made her more aware of herself and how she didn't fit in. "Um...So...what do you guys think about the tale Aana told?" she asked.

"What about it?" Abigail crossed her legs and leaned forward. This had been the most attention she gave Hiraya since the argument earlier this morning.

“Like...I don’t know.” Hiraya hadn’t thought about what she wanted to know. She just wanted to fill the void. “Oh.” She clapped her hands together. “What do you think of love? Does it conquer all or does it end like Nulia and Mayari?”

“You think they were lovers?” Minwoo interjected.

“I doubt that.” Abigail looked away.

“There was something there. Nevermind that.” Hiraya wanted to avoid a debate. “Do you believe in that one person for you? I’d like to think so.” She hoped so, but simultaneously, she felt she would not have the pleasure. It was just a gut feeling she had since she was young.

“I don’t really believe in that stuff. It’s not for me,” Abigail said.

Minwoo raised a brow. “Really?” He seemed to know something about Abigail that Hiraya had yet to witness.

Abi’s cheeks reddened more so than when they were shopping in the warm, humid sun at the Fishmarket. Then it dawned on the princess. Did her half-sister have feelings for Minwoo? Was this the reason Abigail had so many walls up? No. It wasn’t that simple. Or was it? Was this why Abigail seemed perturbed by Hiraya’s presence on this journey?

Abi waved her hand. “Whatever. What about you? You never speak about love.”

He immediately grabbed his weapon as if it would protect him from the question. “I—” He fiddled with the tassel. His eyes darkened. “I believe it is not enough. It wasn’t for my father...” He looked up not meeting Abigail’s curious gaze but Hiraya’s. She glanced at her half-sister, finding the morose stare too intimate. “...and my mother.”

She met his gaze again, noticing the gloss of a nostalgic sadness. Something profound had scarred him and weighed heavy on his broad shoulders. She could feel the pain. These were the truest words he had said since their first meeting.

“My mother didn’t believe in love,” Abigail added, a little too loudly as if his heavy vulnerability was too much for her.

Hiraya tore her eyes from Minwoo’s as he cleared his throat. She gulped down this odd heaviness and scanned the surroundings for anything to lighten her sudden heart wrenching mood. As if sensing the shift, Brin laid a paw in her lap and leaned his head forward, implying he needed head scratches. The heaviness vanished just as quickly as it arrived. She scratched Brin’s head first and then his chin. Suddenly, he turned his attention to something in the distance behind her. It had to be quite intriguing to take him from her head scratches. She turned, peering over her shoulder to find Breonna returning from what appeared to be a walk and not a nap in the Kashim.

“Were you not asleep?” she asked as Bre tried to slip by unnoticed.

Breonna froze like a rabbit being spotted by a fox. She spun on her heels. “Oh um. I woke up and just—” Her gaze scanned the houses as she waved her hand in no particular direction. Hiraya took in Bre’s attire in hopes to get a better idea. She had learned to do so, growing up watching...observing...seeing how words did not always match actions. She learned this well from her father. The way he claimed her as his favorite yet always gave his trust in other men when she spoke her opinion. She saw this with Hex when he complained everyone was an idiot yet his actions were mediocre. And with Bre, confiding to Hiraya of wanting connection with the family, wanting a home, and yet fleeing any chance presented before her.

Now, Breonna’s curls frizzed from slumber. Her brown cheeks reddened, possibly from the walk but what stood out was the taint of red on her lips. They had no paint with them to adorn their faces. It was a miracle Hiraya was able to pull Bre off the couch to come through the rift. So where did it come from?

“I just needed to walk, you know?” An uneasy smile formed on Bre’s red tainted lips. “Nothing much.” She walked away hurriedly to avoid further interrogation.

Hiraya’s gut told her something was off. But she couldn’t figure out what. Maybe it had something to do with her being a little too hard on Bre. She had high expectations for herself and often she pushed those standards on others, including her sister. Bre was still young and mistakes were bound to happen, like lying and trying to avoid the consequences of it. Bre rarely got to travel with Queen Atatiana, stuck in Croec just like Hiraya, and maybe that’s all the girl wanted...to explore the world.

Hiraya stood up and chased after her sister. “Bre!”

Bre paused near the entrance of the long house and turned. “I told you I just needed a walk.”

The princess shook her head. “That’s not it. I just wanted to apologize for being hard on you. It’s been kinda nice that you’ve been here. We haven’t spent this much time in quite a while.”

Bre’s shoulders seemed to relax, knowing she wasn’t about to get an ear full of criticism. “Oh, yeah. It’s been since my birthmoon at the beginning of winter.”

“It’s been that long?” A pang of guilt struck Hiraya. She had no idea that it had been a whole season since they’ve had any alone time. She just stopped trying after so many declines to hang out. Plus, Hiraya differed from Breonna. Their interests were vastly different and Breonna loved to socialize. Hiraya felt it easier and more tranquil to go out and explore on her own. “I guess I have been slacking as a big sister.”

“It’s okay,” Bre said. “Thanks.” Bre stepped forward, wrapping her arms around Hiraya, who was not much of a hugger. “I’m going to lay down some more. My head still pounds from the drinks.”

Hiraya nodded as her sister disappeared. Maybe she could do a little more when it came to Breonna...be a better sister to her.

Chapter 31

The sky had finally turned a dark grey-blue color, much later than either Croec or Calusa. Here, Aika had longer days, but during the winter the sun disappeared for longer periods lasting moon cycles even. Hiraya found this fact fascinating. To think, people lived in total darkness. She wondered if this happened in other places on the Darkling Plain. There was so much she didn't know that urged her to discover it.

Now, Hiraya stood on the coastline staring at what Aana had called their umiaqs, boats made of stretched animal skins. The grandmother offered them a boat since the princess had declined a ride from Kaida across the bay to the cave. She said she didn't want him making two trips but secretly, she was a little self-conscious about her weight. What if the dragon didn't realize how heavy she was and would struggle. It would be humiliating! And Brin couldn't ride either. He had to take the boat. Plus, he needed to conserve his energy just in case the magical trio showed up. They needed an escape route...for what ifs.

Her hand innately patted her hip. She couldn't feel it through the thick coat but the feather earring resided safely in her pocket. This too could be used as a means to leave hastily.

"Do I really have to ride in this?" Bre complained behind the princess.

"I don't mind taking the boat," Minwoo said, a small distance away.

Hiraya immediately looked at Abigail. Her hazel eyes darkened with disapproval, but she remained silent. Hiraya shook her head. “No. It’s fine. Plus, one warrior should stay with Abigail.”

“I think that’s very reasonable,” Abigail finally chimed in.

Minwoo slowly nodded as if he were working through the logic. “Yeah. Okay. We should probably put our stuff in the boat though.” He took Abi’s pack and his own, putting them in the umiaq, along with his weapon, the hyeopdo. “I don’t think I’ll need it while we’re flying.”

“We’ll meet you there. Aana said it shouldn’t take too long by boat.” She peered out at the water. For it being such a large body of water, the surface resembled obsidian glass, smooth and black. This straight led right to the sea. The inertia made Hiraya uneasy. A calm before the storm. A chill ran down her spine and expanded on her skin like a sticky spider web. She peered down at Brin, who had his ears perked and fixed on the water. He too was tense with anticipation. Should Brin stay here? No. They needed all the back up. Who knew what obstacles lay ahead. She ordered Brin into the umiaq and began pushing the boat into the water. Breonna trailed close behind before hopping in to avoid touching the glacial water. Hiraya leapt in behind her sister and quickly grabbed the oars to paddle. She peered back just as a cloud of smoke appeared and Kaida transformed into his true size. She wondered what it would be like to fly through the sky on a dragon. She had ridden one of Atatiana’s pegasus before but gliding through the air on a Serpent Dragon’s back had to be amazing, boundless.

“Do you think Abigail and Minwoo are together? Sometimes I think so but then—” Bre said.

“What? I don’t know.” This wasn’t the time to gossip about relationships.

“Personally, I think Minwoo and you would make a better couple.”

“What? No. Stop.” She scanned her little sister. She had to remind herself that Bre was only fifteen. Relationships and gossip were the norm at this age. “Did you see anything interesting on your walk earlier?”

Bre looked away and gave a small shrug. “It was good. Got to see the village. I don’t see how anyone could live in such a cold, boring place.” She tugged on the coat so it hugged her tightly. “What is that in the water?”

Hiraya peered out and saw chunks of ice. Bre was probably just trying to distract her from the light interrogation. “It’s just ice.”

Brin paced from one end of the boat to the other, causing it to rock. He panted heavily, the anxiety apparent. “Ilagay,” Hiraya ordered. The hyena obeyed, lying down near the center of the boat.

“No. I think I saw something.” Bre moved closer to Brin.

“It’s probably a seal or maybe a whale,” Hiraya said more to calm the anxiety that had been internally growing alongside Bre’s visible fear. They rowed in silence, more to listen for anything approaching than awkwardness.

After a few minutes of the oars going in and out of the water, the princess relaxed. “That’s probably what it was,” she said.

“Are-are you sure?” Bre peered over the side without getting too close.

Hiraya scanned the obsidian waters. “Yeah. I think so.” Steam started to float off the surface, which she found a little odd. The ocean normally was colder than the air temperature due to the winter’s glacial touch, lingering in the dark depths.

Breonna suddenly gripped each side of the umiaq. “Did you hear that?”

Again, Hiraya heard nothing, so she shook her head.

“There it is again!”

Hiraya didn't even hear the lapping of the water on the beach shore. “What do you hear?” She looked at her pet. He too seemed unphased, not hearing anything. Maybe it was Bre's imagination.

“It sounds like knocking.”

“Maybe it's the ice—”

Breonna let out a high shrill causing Hiraya to almost drop the oars in the water. “Get it off! What is—oh my! Hiraya!”

Hiraya pulled the paddles into the boat and searched Breonna, trying to figure out what was on her. Bre turned and tugged at her left arm. Hiraya finally saw it, the long, dark fingers wrapped around her sister's wrist. The fingers led to a long, thin hand and up to a slender arm covered in seaweed and scales. This had to be the creature the grandmother had warned them about: the Qallupilluit. It had captured many before that had searched for the Moonrock necklace. Hiraya jumped to her feet and tried to pry the fingers off Bre. Its grip didn't budge. This wasn't what made the princess pause though. No. It was the combination of the pungent odor and the pair of wan yellow orbs floating just beneath the surface...watching her.

“Use your axe! It's hurting me, Hiraya!” Tears fell from Bre's eyes. “Hiraya!”

“I just can't wield Kita. It may sink the boat.” The princess needed to find an alternative. She reached for the concealed dagger at the small of her back. It wouldn't do significant damage but maybe it would stun the creature enough to release Bre. She threw the blade into the water at the glowing orbs. They dodged and slowly blinked. Was it taunting her?

“Release her!” Hiraya's voice boomed.

The creature obeyed, withdrawing its arm into the water as quickly as it came. Bre sat back caressing her arm as Brin sat up and licked her cheek. Hiraya took a quick scan of her injuries. It was difficult with the night almost present. Hiraya quickly picked up her pack and pulled out her spelled orb. She ran her fingers across the etched symbol, turning it on. She cast the light on Bre's wrist. Red marks twirled around Bre's forearm, but nothing deeper. "We can tend to that once we get on shore. We need to get out of here." She stood up and grabbed one oar. She set it on the edge of the boat using one hand and then glanced at the orb. Before she could even make the decision of what to do with it, something yanked the paddle into the water. All that went through the princess's mind was she didn't want to row with just one. Instead of releasing it, her grip remained and so she too was pulled into the water.

The frigid temperatures knocked the wind out of her chest. Even with the protection of the coat, Hiraya knew she wouldn't survive long here. She forgot about anything and everything, flight taking her towards the surface. But a scaled hand wrapped around her leg, halting any upward gains. She peered downwards, meeting those glowing eyes. Slowly, the orb she had previously held sunk by the captive and captor, providing enough light to finally see the characteristics of the creature. Hiraya would have screamed if she had any air left. All she could do was stare: the grey, dead-like eyes, the downward mouth set with needle-like teeth, scales and bumps on greenish-brown skin. Its two arms almost seemed the length of the body. Although its round face sent terror into any witness's heart, Hiraya noticed the large hump on its back with an opening big enough for a child to fit. The tales were true. The Qallupilluit had a pouch to store the children it lured into the sea.

The creature peered at her and brought her close. It plucked the orb from its descension and examined it, curious of a novel object. Did these creatures collect treasures of the sea like a

siren? Its free hand moved to her right arm, squeezing hard and encompassing her entire bicep. It floated closer and closer, uncomfortably so. She didn't know if she should call on Kita or just give the creature one good shove before swimming back to the surface. Could Kita even be activated underwater when she couldn't accurately voice the full name? A feeling told her to remain inert as the fish-like face opened its wide mouth. She raised her left hand, causing it to pause. Its eyes widened as if that were even possible. It squeezed tighter, dropping the orb and clutching her wrist. Was this where she was going to die? Did it want to eat her? How would those needle teeth tear through her flesh? An agonizing death.

Chapter 32

They made it to the cave in a matter of minutes. Abigail didn't notice anything special about it. It didn't dazzle in the moonlight. There was no shimmering or it disappearing and magically reappearing. To her, it seemed like any other cave, although she had only seen one or two in person, and a few drawings in books. It was just a cave fitting two maybe three people in its width at the base of a cliff and a rocky shore leading up to it. Again, nothing special.

Abigail sat down on a boulder near the entrance. Kaida shrunk back to his tiny stature and found a spot next to her. "How long do you think it will take them?" she asked him as she watched Minwoo stand at a distance near the water's edge. He paced back and forth. Why was he so nervous?

I'd say not too long. I feel Hiraya's anticipation will prove ample motivation, he said.

She leaned in closer to the dragon. "Do you think he likes her?" She couldn't fathom why he would, but it seemed like he preferred the princess over her recently. Hiraya may be a princess but she had nothing special, just like this stupid cave. There were ample amounts of princesses out there, just like there were ample amounts of caves. She may be the descendant of royalty but she still was no princess.

Why yes. I do believe so.

“No.” She knew he understood the question on a literal level, but it didn’t seem he truly understood the weight of the question. “Like do you think he has stronger feelings for her?” Dragons were pretty literal, especially Serpent Dragons. She wondered if this had to do with their similarly scholarly outlook.

Oh. I haven’t noticed. But I have noticed he doesn’t really care for the younger one.

“I saw that too. I don’t get it. Breonna seems nice.” Breonna acted as any other teenager.

“I don’t like this.” Abigail brought her attention to Minwoo hearing his voice.

“They’ll be fine. Hiraya has taken care of herself.”

He shook his head. “But this fog just came out of nowhere. And we don’t have any of the torches.”

“Why not use some of the magic you know? Do a little spell?” He hadn’t used it much but she knew he had a few tricks under his sleeve.

He clasped his hands together. “Right! I forgot.” He searched the surroundings as she shook her head. How could he forget? For someone so intelligent, he acted so brainless sometimes.

“I can—” Minwoo began.

A shrill ripped through the fog.

“Kaida,” Minwoo said, his voice deep and stern.

Kaida leapt into the air, a cloud of smoke covering him. His full form flew from it and landed by Minwoo.

“Stay here. We will be right back.”

Abigail stood up. “You are not leaving me by myself.” If a creature attacked her two half-sisters then it could definitely come after her. Plus, wasn’t she supposed to be the important one, the one they should protect at all costs? How could they leave her defenseless?

She is safer with us. Thank the gods and goddesses for the dragon’s reason.

“Very true. Let’s go.” He mounted Kaida. “Come on, Abi.”

She moved quickly, climbing onto Kaida’s back and wrapping her arms around his waist. He smelled of a campfire, but in a good way...not just of smoke. Kaida’s muscles flexed between her legs as he took flight. She closed her eyes. She loathed the take-off. Once gliding at a higher elevation, she would open her eyes.

Do you see any sign of them? Kaida asked.

She opened her eyes, reluctantly, and peered downwards. She never enjoyed looking at the ground. She’d rather take in the view above or in front of them. Now, fog blanketed what lay beneath. *No*, she replied.

I sense Bre, but not Hiraya.

What did that mean? Was Hiraya dead? But this happened before...twice to be exact. Maybe it was similar to what happened before.

“I see the boat!” Minwoo shouted, but the wind made his voice seem like a stifled murmur.

Abigail followed the direction Minwoo stared intently. With the combination of the looming fog and the night arriving, she only made out the outline of the boat and a single profile. She was shocked that he even spotted it. I didn’t really stand out.

As they approached, Kaida lowered himself as Minwoo moved her hands to the dragon’s mane to hold. What was the point of that? Did her protector not worry about her safety anymore?

“What happened?” Minwoo asked.

Abigail peered down into the boat where she noticed the tears streaming down Bre’s face. Bre’s curls were even more frazzled than when she woke up earlier. Her eyes were like large moons eclipsed by fear as she wrapped her arms around the hyena’s thick neck. Something had happened, and it wasn’t good.

“Where’s Hiraya?” Minwoo commanded, his voice sounding almost...earnest. “Where’s Hiraya!” he shouted.

Both Abigail and Bre slightly jumped. Abi thought he was being aggressive, a little too aggressive. “Minwoo,” she muttered softly in hopes he would tone it down.

Bre pointed to the paddle floating a distance away. Her hand trembled as she did so. Minwoo took off his jacket and threw it into the boat. “Take me over there,” he ordered Kaida.

“Minwoo, it’s freezing. You’ll freeze to death!” she objected.

“And Hiraya won’t?” he growled, which took Abi off guard. She had never heard him sound so...cruel towards her. He didn’t even wait for Kaida to hover over the oar. He rolled off and fell into the water.

If she still lives, the cold may end her; Kaida said, frankly.

Abigail ignored him and turned to look at Bre. “Are you all right?”

How long do we wait? Abi asked Kaida through thought. “What if Minwoo doesn’t come back up?” Panic began to set in as she realized Minwoo could perish along with Hiraya.

An orange glow suddenly came from below. It grew larger, coming to the surface. Before breaking the obsidian glass-like water, the glow disappeared and was replaced by Hiraya and Minwoo. Abi patted Kaida’s side and called out his name. The dragon dipped down, clutching

the backs of the two soaked companions and dragging them to the boat. He lifted them gently into it with ease.

“Thank you,” Hiraya spoke through chattering teeth.

“Here. I’ll dry you off.” Minwoo clutched her shoulders. He closed his eyes as steam drifted off their clothes. Abi had never seen a spell like that, drying through heat, but her exposure to the spell casting and use of bending spiritual gifts were limited. The fanciest trick she ever witnessed was a light show a mediocre warlock put on in the square at Old Calusa. She wondered what other tricks Minwoo knew that he had yet to share.

“Wow. That’s amazing!” Hiraya said, watching the process in action. She acted as if her life wasn’t just in danger or that she put Minwoo’s life in danger too. Tactless.

“Are you guys okay?” Abigail asked more to check on Minwoo’s condition than Hiraya’s.

“Oh my goodness! I’m so glad you came and got me.” Hiraya patted Minwoo’s arm. “My clothes were making it hard for me to swim up for air.”

“Where’d that thing go?” Bre interjected.

“It ran off. It was so weird. Like—”

“We really should get going,” Abigail cut Hiraya off. She didn’t want to be sitting around waiting for the creature to return to claim another victim.

Minwoo nodded in agreement. “Yeah. Is there any way you can drag us to the beach Kaida?”

Of course. The dragon moved to the bow of the umiaq and grabbed it with his hind talons. *We should have done this to begin with.*

“We should have,” Minwoo replied.

“What did he say?” Hiraya questioned.

Abigail sighed and turned her attention forward. At least everyone survived...

I wonder why the creature left.

“Who cares,” she murmured. It had nothing to do with their journey and it seemed to have fled...for now.

Kaida continued, not hearing her discontent, *Maybe it's due to her being an adult and not a child.*

“Yeah. Maybe.”

Are you all right Abigail? You do not seem relieved by Hiraya's rescue.

“What? No.” Was she relieved? Or not? “I’m glad she’s safe. I just—” She paused, trying to find the best words that wouldn’t make her seem like a complete villain.

We're here. Kaida halted and gracefully landed on the pebbled beach. Abigail dismounted and took a few steps back to allow Kaida space for his transformation. She instinctively watched Minwoo as he helped both the girls out of the boat. Bre walked over to Abigail as Hiraya and Minwoo grabbed the packs, weapons, and torches. “You doing okay girl?” Abi asked.

Bre nodded. “I think so. They had it worse off than me. I hope they don’t get sick.”

“You seemed pretty rattled. Hiraya looks like she already recovered.” Hiraya was already gathering supplies as if she were a loyal soldier following orders.

“Yeah. She can handle pretty much anything. Nothing phases her.” Abigail couldn’t tell if Bre’s voice held admiration or abhorrence.

The crunch of oncoming step falls on rocks grabbed Abigail’s attention. Minwoo held out a pack for her. From behind him, Hiraya cradled two unlit torches with her pack already on her

shoulders, her pet close on her heels. “I dropped my orb into the water so we only have these torches,” Hiraya said to no one in particular.

“Who’s gonna carry them?” Abigail didn’t feel like holding one up while stumbling through a cramped, wet cave.

“I’ll do it!” Bre stepped forward.

“Great!” Minwoo grabbed a torch from Hiraya. He snapped his fingers. Flames burst brightly, casting shadows on everyone’s faces. “Here you go. Be careful not to burn yourself.”

“Or anyone else,” Hiraya added as Bre accepted the illumination.

“I’ll carry this one at the front,” Minwoo said. “Let’s go.”

Minwoo scanned the cave opening. Abi wondered if he was nervous like herself. The fact they were finally in front of the cave, going inside, and facing the gods know what...it was setting in and making her chest tight. Being the “chosen one” was all too real. It was different when Minwoo and Kaida did their research and she helped. It felt like a fun adventure in theory...but now. Someone could get hurt. More importantly, she could get injured.

Are you ready? Kaida’s voice tugged her from her worries.

Yeah. She fell in step behind her protector with Bre close behind and Hiraya taking up the rear with her dog thing. The cave was narrow and had a low hanging ceiling. Minwoo being the tallest had to crouch, hitting a few protruding rocks every now and then. Moisture blanketed the walls. Abi clutched the back of Minwoo’s jacket to keep her from touching something slimy. It was also a perfect excuse to be closer to him.

I’m just going to curl in the hood of your coat, Kaida informed.

Okay.

The tunnel finally widened into a small round area. Abigail released Minwoo and took in a deep breath. She didn't feel so cramped. "Maybe we should take a quick breather," she suggested as Minwoo moved the torch around to examine this area. He cursed under his breath as he did so. "Is something wrong?"

"There's three different routes," he answered.

She peered at the different openings, one straight ahead and then one perpendicular to them on either side. Of course there would be three routes. Finding a goddess's gift from another goddess was never going to be easy. But what could they do now? Would they have to split up again and if so, who was going with her? She hoped it wasn't Hiraya.

"What are we gonna do?" Bre asked, worry straining her voice.

"I think—" Hiraya started, only now entering the cavern.

"Maybe we should split up." Minwoo shook his head at his own suggestion. "We can go in pairs?"

I can go down one to cover the one not chosen.

"Yes, but we don't know if there are any traps. If any of us fall into one, we may not be able to reach each other," he countered. This was true. How would they call for each other if this were to happen? This was why Minwoo did all the thinking for their group.

"Well—" Hiraya said.

Abigail glared back at the princess. "Just let him work through this," she whispered as Minwoo muttered through more possible solutions.

Hiraya pursed her lips together and peered upwards, not meeting Abigail's hazel eyes. Abi shook her head and crossed her arms across her chest. Sometimes the princess could be so

pushy. A loud smack of wood hitting rock bounced off the walls. Abi peered at the ground where the torch lay, still aflame.

“I’m so sorry,” Bre said, bending down to grab it. “It slipped.”

“Ah! Can you keep it down? I’m trying to think.” Minwoo’s voice was low and stern. His eyes reminded her of a predator facing down its prey.

Bre squeaked and stepped behind Abi. Abigail would hide too if Minwoo glared at her like that.

“Wait!” Hiraya shouted, bringing all attention to her...like usual. “I think I figured it out.” She plucked Bre’s torch without any communication. Rude. Hiraya thrust it into a tiny pool of water Abi didn’t even realize existed.

“What are you—” Abigail spoke.

“Hold on Abi.”

The nickname threw her off. She hated Hiraya using it so casually. That name was only for those close to her. The princess didn’t make that list.

“So you know the riddle, the one the aana told us about earlier.”

Minwoo nodded as Hiraya moved towards him. Couldn’t she just make her point at a clear distance from him? Hiraya reached for the torch but Minwoo held it above her out of reach.

“What are you doing?” he asked, a small smirk on his lips.

“We’d all like to know,” Abi added, her voice short and snappy more because of Minwoo’s expression than the fact that Hiraya was taking her sweet time just to make a show of whatever the point was.

“Listen, the riddle said...”

“This happens all the time. My mom would just cut her off and change the subject,” Bre informed quietly.

“This is a regular thing?” This would drive her manic hearing such ramblings.

“But what does that have to do with the solution?” Minwoo’s voice brought Abigail back to the ramblings.

Hiraya sighed. “You really know how to ruin the surprise. The riddle wasn’t saying we find the cave in darkness because Kaida had told you he saw it along the shore during his scouting.” When did they discuss that? “So it’s not talking about the cave.”

“Get to the point, Hiraya,” Abi blurted out.

“If you put out your torch, I think the darkness will show us which tunnel to take,” Hiraya said, unphased by Abigail’s candidness, which irked her even more.

“Ah! Brilliant.” Minwoo snapped his fingers, extinguishing the fire. Black consumed them. Abigail couldn’t even see the slightest outline of Hiraya or Minwoo directly in front of her.

“What are we supposed to be—” Abigail’s voice trailed off as a blue glow lit up the ceiling and scattered down the tunnel to the far left.

“That’s amazing Hiraya!” Minwoo said, head tilted up at the beautiful trail leading them to their destination. Abigail could only see their outline and some faint characteristics in the dark.

Abigail liked it better when he called her half-sister princess. Why did Hiraya have to always be the one with the solution?

After what felt much longer than a few minutes, the tunnel opened up to a large room reaching high...so high, only Kaida could fly to the top. Abigail couldn’t believe a cavern so gigantic

existed under the ground. It baffled her what natural architecture the Darkling Plain had to offer. She had never seen anything like it. The blue glow covered the ceiling to provide minimal light, but at the other end, a glowing pool sat with a silver, white circle that mirrored the moon above it. This false moon lit up the cavern like a full moon would on any clear night. A stone bridge led up to the moon almost as if the round, glowing rock sat upon it.

Minwoo wedged his burning torch in a fracture of a nearby boulder. Bre tried to do the same, but it fell over. She tried again and failed once more. “Just leave it,” Abigail told her. Bre obeyed, staring down at it disappointingly.

“Wow!” Hiraya’s voice echoed. “Even if we don’t find the necklace, this was definitely worth it.”

“Even with almost drowning?” Abigail said more for herself rather than for her sister to answer. But an answer came, “Of course! I’m alive aren’t I?” Hiraya’s reply added to Abigail’s disdain. How could someone be so optimistic? The real world, the Darkling Plain, didn’t take optimism lightly. Maybe the princess was given the luxury with such a title.

“I’m guessing the big giant moon is the way to the necklace,” Minwoo said.

I would believe so. Only other possibility is the pool of water beneath it.

“Hiraya and I should go and check it out, to ensure it’s safe,” Minwoo suggested.

“Wait. No. Why?” Abigail said. She didn’t want to be left alone with no way of defending herself. Bre, and herself, had no fighting skills whatsoever. Kaida could fly them around but that solution was only temporary. “You can’t just leave us here defenseless. What if those people just show up?”

“She’s right,” Hiraya agreed. “It should be you and Abigail to go inside. Abigail is the chosen one.”

“Yeah. Shouldn’t she go?” Bre added.

Minwoo’s eyes darted between the three girls. For once, they were all in agreement, the most sisterly thing they had participated in. This feeling felt odd to Abi. She didn’t know if she liked or loathed this novel emotion.

He nodded. “Mmm. Abi will go with me.”

“Can I go too?” Bre asked, stepping forward.

“Uh.” Minwoo peered at Hiraya first and then Abigail. Why was Abi second? Shouldn’t he be searching for her approval first and not the princess’s?

“I’ll stand watch. Just in case,” Hiraya volunteered with a solemn smile on her face.

“Plus, I have Brin.” She patted the creature’s head.

He clasped his hands together. “Great. Ladies first.”

Abigail took the lead and walked over to the steps carved out of the whitish yellow stone. Kaida’s body wrapped around the nape of her neck. *What do you think is in there?* he asked.

She had no idea. She hoped that everything would be simple, just go in and grab the necklace, but nothing was ever that simple...even for the chosen one.

Chapter 33

Hiraya sat down near the pool's edge but then stood up again. If she were to be attacked, she needed to be standing. She glanced down at Brin who watched her, worry knitted into his little dots for eyebrows. He knew her anticipation was rearing its ugly head often before she did.

“What?” she said, the cave’s walls catching her voice and throwing it back at her.

The group stalled in front of the large moon. It had to have been some spell to clone the moon down here and naturally illuminate the entire cavern. They all turned and looked at her.

“Everything good?” Abigail asked, almost looking annoyed than concerned.

“Oh. Sorry. I was talking to Brin.” She smiled sheepishly and patted the hyena between his perked, round ears.

“Um. Okay.” Abigail reached forward to touch the moon but stopped. “You go first, Minwoo.”

He nodded, his jaw clenched and ready for action. He stepped up to it and paused. Hiraya’s anticipation began to melt into frustration. They were getting themselves worked up. They just needed to do something other than sitting and thinking. “Can you touch it?” Hiraya asked, seeing if that would get them to take a little bit of decisive action.

Minwoo pointed his weapon towards it. The edge of the blade went through the surface as if there weren’t a large moon sitting in front of them. Was it an illusion? Maybe she should

have at least followed them up there to see for herself. The curiosity of the moon and how it could lead to the necklace ate away at her. She had to remind herself this wasn't her journey. She shouldn't overstep. Support. She needed to give support and being the look-out seemed the best option.

Minwoo stepped forward to enter the illusion but softly bounced off as if it were protected by an invisible forcefield. The shock caused him to drop his weapon. It fell forward into the moon, completely disappearing. Could Minwoo not go inside? He tried again and again he bounced off, this time making him stumble back a few steps.

"Abigail, you try," he told her. Her face waned but she obeyed. Abigail stepped through without any rebound, vanishing just like Minwoo's weapon. "Abi?"

Hiraya's breath caught in her throat as the next few seconds seemed like forever. Did Abi just disappear into the abyss or was she all right?

Abigail exited the moon, holding Minwoo's weapon. "There's a tunnel," she said, giving him back the heoypdo.

"Oooo. Let me try!" Bre exclaimed and entered the illusion. "I can do it too!"

Minwoo peered up at the false moon. "I guess I can't go." He spun around and peered down at Hiraya. "You should try."

Hiraya shook her head, but she had already moved to the base of the steps. She wanted to go inside. She wanted to see everything, soak it in, but again, this wasn't her journey. This was theirs.

"C'mon. The girls need someone to protect them."

Abigail stared down from behind Minwoo. "Yeah. Since Minwoo can't come." She laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Okay.” Hiraya climbed the stairs, passing by Minwoo and Abigail, and stood at the center. She rubbed her hands together and glanced back at Brin who was waiting patiently where she left him. “I’ll be back, Brin. Just wait there.” Her heart resonated in her chest and echoed to her ears. She walked forward, ready to see what lay on the other side. A force hit her like a tsunami and launched her from the platform. This had been the second time in the last few days she had been thrown through the air...and she didn’t really like it.

Her back hit the water, which consumed her like a cool blanket. Visions popped into her mind...images of things she had never seen before. They moved quickly from one to the next, making it hard for her to absorb any details from them. She only remembered a few: seeing a woman with an eye patch over her left eye glare menacingly, a symbol that looked like two lines intersecting to make an incomplete hourglass with two dots on either side close to the center, an orb of water floating and moving like it were alive resembling a rain drop floating in the air, something in the shadows similar to the outline of what looked like the outline of a dragon’s head and had glowing golden eyes piercing her like nothing she had ever seen before, and more. She couldn’t capture the rest, because a sensation resonated through her, stealing all her attention.

This water was different from the ocean. It made her skin tingle. She could feel any soreness or ache dissipate, like it was healing her, pouring energy into her. Her feet instinctively found the ground beneath her and she broke through to come up for air. She immediately found Minwoo, squatting on the platform staring at her. “You just can’t stay out of the water, can you Princess?”

“Well now we know I can’t go in either.” She saw that Minwoo was alone. The two must have decided to go on ahead. “Will they be okay?” She trudged through the water to where Brin still sat.

“We will find out, now won’t we?” He said as he moved to meet her. She dropped her coat on the ground. “Want me to—”

Brin’s tense laughter interrupted Minwoo. The hyena stood on guard to Hiraya’s left. Both of them turned to find the man they had been trying to beat in retrieving the necklace with the wild tigress standing behind him in her human form and still barefoot despite the extreme icy environment. Their third was missing. Hiraya found this disappointing. She had grown to enjoy the banter with the Bulgae.

“What are you doing here?” Minwoo asked.

The question was strange. The tone of it was strange. Weren’t they all sort of expecting that the trio may show up at any point and time?

The maybe-god, maybe-creature gave a small shrug and stared intently with his chin down and grey eyes looking up under his thick brows. His lips crept into a lopsided smile. “I got bored.”

Sweat began to roll down the side of Minwoo’s face, soaking his long, black hair. She didn’t understand why he would be perspiring this much when they had yet to fight. Was he nervous? She was too, but not to the point of being drenched in sweat. “We’re not giving it to you,” he said.

Tsuneo straightened and the lopsided smile transformed into a full grin. “Oh.” His voice sounded pleasantly surprised, like something fun happened that he wasn’t quite expecting.

“Where’s your firedog?” Hiraya interrupted.

“Ah. The princess. Otouto really likes you.” He pointed at her. She yanked Kita from her neck. He raised a hand and smacked his lips together. “You miss him?” Was he toying with her?

Behind the two intruders, an orangish yellow glow lit up the exit. The Bulgae sprinted out in his dog form, his paws and tail aflame. He kept his pace, passing his comrades. She activated Kita and widened her stance, ready for the hellhound’s attack. But it leapt into the air, going after Minwoo. He blocked and redirected the creature. The banter between her and the hellhound must not have been that memorable for her to be passed up.

She sighed and faced the other two, knowing Minwoo could hold his own against the beast. The tigress sat on the ground, her eyes closed and legs bent open and horizontal. Her hands rested on her knees. A phantom of a tiger materialized from the core of her body and solidified in front of her. Was the tiger a form of her soul? Hiraya had never seen anything like it. She always thought the tigress morphed into the feline form like the Bulgae and not creating it from inside, sending it outwards.

Brin lunged forward at the tigress, using this moment of transformation to get the upper hand. Hiraya met the god’s gaze. “Must we fight?” He waved a hand as if done with the situation. “I’d rather just wait and steal the necklace once your chosen one arrives.”

She decided to play into his need to not battle, giving her a little breather. She didn’t want to end up in the pool again. This man had tossed her around too easily one too many times. “I do have one question. Why didn’t your sword kill me?” This was a question on the back of her mind. Would she finally get the answer?

He chuckled and drew the lightning sword. She flinched ever so slightly, remembering the way it tore into her body. “Ah. My sword of balance, Hentei. It injures you by bringing your darkness to light. The more darkness in your heart, the more you suffer. I quite like how it cuts

through people. You were a little unsatisfactory.” He sheathed it again and grabbed the middle sword. This one appeared to be a normal blade. “All this talk is boring.”

His answer didn’t clarify what she wanted to know. She had to think over his words, decipher the undertones and fill in the missing information he wasn’t willing to offer. But she didn’t have time to think. He glided at her with great speed, a speed she knew all too well. She raised Kita and blocked. The empowerment of the pool made his hit more manageable. She barely moved by his blow, giving her a little hope. Maybe they had a chance against these three.

Chapter 34

Abigail turned the corner of the tunnel. The darkness made her nervous and Bre had left the torch in the cavern. So they had to travel without light. Kaida's keen eyesight would warn them of anything approaching or even an obstacle, but it still didn't alleviate the fear that these tunnels stirred inside Abigail's chest. As she finished the turn, her feet splashed into water and the sound of silence engulfed her. But this silence was strange, like all sound was absorbed. The whole world had become mute.

The tunnel opened up to what reassembled the night sky. Stars decorated the dark purple sky and the water covering the ground reflected it. The surface remained so flat, Abigail didn't know where the sky met the horizon. Had they left the cave? Where were they? This cavern seemed like the open sky and not a cavern. There were no boundaries, no borders, just the night sky.

"Wow! This is amazing," Bre whispered, or was that her voice being absorbed? Abigail couldn't tell here.

Abi stepped cautiously, afraid one step would lead her to sink into the water. But she didn't sink. She took in the tranquility, the quiet. It eased her mind and muscles.

This is magnificent. I've never seen anything like it, Kaida said.

"Me either."

“What is that?” Bre’s muffled voice came.

Abigail turned and saw a white glow beneath the night sky’s reflection. Her body told her to flee, but something in her heart told her to stay. So she watched as the glow protruded through the water’s surface. A white aura shone off long black flowing hair. Pearls, seashells, and coral adorned the hair. A woman continued to rise, the space between them dwindling. Her pale brown skin shimmered like the pearls adorning her. A simple light blue dress draped her body. Her hips were wide and swayed with each stepfall. She had a round face and thick lips. On her chin were markings similar to the Niji people to the north.

“Nulia?” Abi whispered as she noticed a black, beaded necklace around the woman’s neck. The larger beads were partially a pale silver, each bead representing the phases of the moon. One bead at the center of the necklace mirrored the full moon. This was the Moonrock necklace they had been searching for.

“I am a mere reverberation of Nulia. I am the keeper of her most prized possession. She resides elsewhere.” She walked in a circle around Abigail, examining the girl closely. “You are of the untainted, simple. You are one of us.” Her voice felt like a cool splash of water on a hot Calusa day.

“Um.” Abi began. She wasn’t sure how to ask for the necklace without sounding rude.

“We actually—well, we—um.”

“I know your request.” Nulia’s cool fingers trailed across Abigail’s shoulders. It almost felt as if the apparition touched her skin. “Your request has been granted.” The goddess finished the circle and stood directly in front of Abi. Immediately, Abigail noticed the necklace no longer hung from Nulia’s neck. She opened the front of her coat and reached into it. Her fingers touched

the beads. They were hard, smooth, and made of stone. She peered at the full moon. Staring at this instilled a confidence she had never experienced before.

“What does this do?” She looked up at the goddess but the apparition had vanished.

“Where’d she go?”

“Where’d who go?” Bre spoke.

Who do you speak of? Kaida said simultaneously with Bre.

“The goddess. She was just here.”

We saw the light and then it faded. What happened?

“Did you get the necklace?” Bre asked earnestly.

“Yeah.” She pulled the necklace over her head and held it up in the dim light. The beads almost glowed just like the moon against the shadows of night.

Bre grabbed it. “This is the Moonrock necklace? It’s pretty.” She donned it without hesitation. Abigail would have objected but she didn’t see any harm in it. They were both going to the same place and the teenager couldn’t lose it in a matter of minutes. Plus, it was probably better if she held onto it, just in case those three showed up to take it. They may have assumed Abigail had the necklace and not Bre. A great decoy.

“How does it look?” Bre asked with a large grin.

We should probably get going.

“Yeah. We do need to go.”

“Oh. Okay.” Bre reached for the necklace.

“No. It’s fine. You carry it out.”

Bre nodded. “I promise I won’t lose it.”

“Okay. Follow me,” Abigail said. She was ready to get out of here. The quiet now unsettled her as if warning her to leave before the ghost of the goddess decided to take back the necklace.

Chapter 35

Hiraya swung her axe with all her might. She hoped this last maneuver would land, hinder her opponent. She needed him off kilter to give her some respite. The blade sliced through the bottom of his sleeve but never met flesh. He puckered out his bottom lip. “This one was my favorite.” He was not taking their battle seriously and why would he? His power resembled that of the gods, untouchable.

“What are you?” she asked. “Why release some ancient creature that will bring chaos to the world?”

He chuckled, thrusting his blade into the ground and leaning on it like a staff. She took this slight reprieve to pinpoint her companions. Minwoo faced the Bulgae on one knee, trying to catch his breath. Brin stood on the shore of the pool, the tigress slowly forcing him into the water. They were losing and quite pathetically at that.

“Did you know with my lineage, I cannot enter those sacred grounds? Nulia wanted no one to enter with special blood...” He paused as if searching for the best words. “—like creatures.” He clicked his tongue and waved around his sword. He stopped, pointing the blade towards her. “This includes the gods.”

Was he calling himself a god? Was he a god? He appeared out of nowhere. He had magically enhanced weapons. His strength exceeded hers. And his attitude...definitely had the

confidence of one. It always seemed like he knew something no one else did, and because of this, thought himself better than others. Maybe he was a god.

She blinked. A *god*. The realization of the gravity of her situation suddenly dawning on her.

Suddenly, he appeared directly in front of her, just like he had when she first met him. He bent down to be eye level with her. He brushed her nose with his long slender finger. “Correct.”

Could he read minds too?

He stole Kita from her grasp and lifted it with ease. She thought she was the only one who could wield it? She suddenly felt bare, light, as if he cut a limb from her. “Give her back!” She growled through clenched teeth.

“Wonderful craftsmanship.” He tossed it away from her. She scoffed in disbelief. He smirked as he stared at something behind her. “Ah! They have arrived.” He clapped. She turned to find Abigail and Bre at the base of the phantom moon.

“Abi!” Minwoo shouted, grabbing everyone’s attention. Movement to Hiraya’s right caught her attention. The tigress ran up the steps. Kaida transformed and quickly lifted Abigail into the air. The tigress halted at Bre’s feet and instead of attacking, lowered her head. Bre smiled tenderly at the beast.

“What—” Confusion caused Hiraya’s thoughts to scatter.

“No hard feelings,” the god said close to her ear. A shiver ran down her spine. She wanted to look, but also didn’t. She kept her eyes forward.

Another blink and he was with Bre but the tiger was gone. “It’s time for us to leave.” He whistled. The Bulgae came to his side.

Someone breezed past Hiraya and landed next to Bre. The tigress wrapped an arm around Bre's waist and tugged her close. "We're gonna have so much fun."

Bre blushed and averted her gaze to the ground. "Jaya."

"Isn't she the cutest." Jaya took a long black fingernail to lift Bre's chin to peer into those feline eyes. Those red lips brushed against Bre's. When did they become a couple? Hadn't they only met briefly...just once? There was no way they built a relationship in a matter of days. How?

Hiraya couldn't move. Her mind still struggled to process this. How could she not have seen this? There were always clues. The sneaking off. The red smear on Bre's face earlier today. Messy clothes.

"We shall see each other again," the god announced before a door appeared and he walked through it. The last person, Bre, paused and peered at Hiraya. "Sorry girl," she said, before disappearing with the door.

Hiraya knew Bre was capable of many things. Her sister was never reliable and lied when wanting something that not everyone approved of, but to betray her, it felt personal. It hurt. The pain lit a flame inside her. Anger ascended into a roaring beast. She stomped over to Kita, picked it up, and brought it down into a boulder, cleanly slicing it into two. She felt somewhat better, but knew another swing would help calm her.

"Is this a bad time to say Bre was wearing the necklace?" Abigail's voice echoed from behind her.

Hiraya spun around and shouted, "What?" Abigail's words had yet to fully sink in.

Abigail shrunk in her spot, having returned to the ground once more, and Kaida in his usual place. Hiraya rested Kita on her shoulder and briskly walked over to her half-sister, the

daughter of another. “Explain yourself.” A new rage filled her, or more so had been there the whole time...small pebbles of frustration piling one on top of the other until her makeshift restraints could no longer hold back the weight.

“Uh. Well.” Abi glanced at Minwoo.

“Maybe we should just set down your axe. Just in case,” Minwoo suggested.

Hiraya glared at him. He didn’t look good. His skin had paled and the sweat made his hair stick to his face. He had even shed his coat too. She relaxed, realizing he too tried to fend off the trio. He was probably frustrated too.

“So Bre was wearing the necklace when she left,” Abi repeated.

The necklace? Breonna had the necklace when she left. Which meant...they were empty handed. It meant that the princess’s younger sister not only betrayed them because of some fleeting relationship but also took the prized possession they had been working for these last several days.

“What!” Minwoo bellowed. His exclamation echoed over and over again. It was his turn to be angry by Abigail’s words.

Hiraya needed a mountain to split in half to get rid of this frustration. How could this have happened? What were they going to do now?

She paced back and forth, having returned her axe to its rightful place. Something hot filled her chest, rising up her throat, and reaching her eyes. This had been the second time a sibling had betrayed her since her birthmoon. She thought Bre would be a little different. She thought they were getting along and that finally, maybe something would give way. This betrayal made her feel even more isolated. It made her doubt the connection she tried to build with Abigail. It made her doubt why she even came out. Maybe she should give up, go home, and not

only let Croec fall to Hex, but let Minwoo and Abigail continue their travels. If it weren't for Hiraya's decision to find her long lost sister, Bre would have never followed suit. The princess was to blame.

Glossary

Aacha - “really” or “okay” in Hindi

Aana - means “grandmother” in Inuit language.

Arē - Oh! In Hindi

Baba - means “father” or “dad” in Mandarin.

Bhanji - Hindi for niece

Dabbling- the act of entering someone’s mind for a brief moment without their permission. This is frowned upon by the dragon community although not against their laws.

Habibi - Arabic for “beloved” or “my love”.

Hanâ-hanâ - Tagalog meaning “seek” or “search,” used as a command for Brin.

Hika - Tagalog meaning “come here” used as a command for Brin

Ilagay - Tagalog meaning “lay down” and used as a command for Brin.

Jiddi - “grandfather” in Arabic.

Kashim - a large lodging area used for sweat baths, meetings, and other ceremonies in Inuit culture.

Keya - the term comes from Lakota language meaning “turtle”. This is an ode to the term “Turtle Island” which refers to North America (and sometimes even the world) and the origin story of the land on the turtle’s back.

Lambanog - Coconut Vodka or also known as “Philippines’ Vodka”.

Magbantay - to guard in Tagalog, used as a command for Brin.

Maharlika - This term in Ancient Tagalog refers to a feudal warrior class in the Philippines. In 2019, there was a suggestion of changing the name Philippines to Maharlika, but lost momentum due to the switch in leadership.

Makopiinag - also known as “The Water Lily.” It is the casino built by King Talon. The first one to ever be created in New Calusa.

Moti - a pearl representative of the moon. It keeps one healthy and helps one control their anger.

Mpenzi - a deep and profound term of endearment used in Swahili. Queen Atatiana uses it.

Niji - Ojibwe word for “friend” or “brother” and a term to use for the multiple tribes and groups that live on the Darkling Plain which reflects the decolonized version of North America in a fantastical sense.

Niribia - Timicua word for grandmother or step-mother.

Nnui - The Bamum, also of the Western region believe in Nnui (also Njinyi or Yoruban) a supreme deity who is invisible, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. The name Nnui

translates to "...he who is everywhere, he who sees and hears everything." [vii] Nnui is believed to operate through local deities such as gods of the mountain, sun, stone and hills [x] Rekia uses it as an exclamation.

Palayain - "release" in Tagalog, used as a command for Brin.

Pukhraj - yellow sapphire meant to bring balance and blessings to the wearer.

Rohu al-ruh - Arabic for "soul of my soul" which refers to when someone you love feels like they are a piece of you and so you resonate with each other on a more profound level.

Sacmuc - means "really" in Hindi

Salakay - Tagalog for "charge" or "attack," used as a command for Brin

Suaasat - a soup made from a seal hunted and boiled with onions and potatoes that was often made by Inuit tribes in North America.

Shikari - a hunter from Gogury

Tita - Tagalog for aunt

Tizheruk - comes from Inuit folklore.

Umiaqs - boats made from animal skins used by the Yupik and Inuit tribes near Siberia and Greenland in North America.

Ya'tik al-'afiya - Arabic for "may [God] give you health," this phrase is said in recognition and appreciation of someone's hard work.

Month Names

Old Moon - January

Snow Moon - February

Broken Snow Moon - March

Sap Moon - March

Pink/Sugar Moon - April

Flower Moon - May

Blossom Moon - June

Thunder Moon - July

Sturgeon Moon or Green Corn/Rice Moon - August

Harvest Moon - September

Hunter's Moon - October

Frost Moon - November

Cold Moon - December