



ADELIA JEZEK

*A Curse of
Stone*

A Curse of Stone

A Kingdom of Stone and Starlight
Book Two

Adelia Jezek

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To my dearest Darling. I could not have done it without you.
To my friends who encouraged me every step of the way.

A Curse of Stone

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Chapter One

I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. My room came slowly into focus and I glanced at my sister's empty bed across the small gabled attic bedroom we had always shared. Until last night.

I bit my lower lip to stifle the welling of tears in my throat and turned away. I'd never slept alone before, and part of me had hoped that the previous day had been only a horrible dream that would be washed away by morning's first light. A furious combing of my hair allowed me to attempt to sooth the tumult of anger and grief that boiled in my stomach, threatening to rise up into my mouth. I could feel my hands shaking with each stroke.

I took a few deep breaths. After all, tearing my hair out would not berate the village elders for their decision or punish them for their actions. Nor would my pain bring Rose home again. Twisting my hair into a haphazard braid, I piled it on the top of my head in a somewhat orderly crown of brilliant gold, secured with two curved hair pins. After throwing on my dress and a clean pinafore apron for the day's chores, I dropped lightly down the ladder into the front room of the cottage. The house was quiet and chilled, the sunlight still barely peeking through the windows that faced eastward, away from the dark, still sleeping forest. I tiptoed to my mother's bedroom door and looked in, noiselessly edging the door open a few inches.

Mother slept peacefully on her low, narrow cot. Her long black curls spread over her shoulder like a cape of curling night, and the dawn's light made her skin glow deep golden as she breathed slowly. She had not changed from the dress she'd worn the evening before, but her boots were kicked off toward the door, mud still caked an inch high on the low heels. My gaze lingered on my sister's delicate summer shawl, the red and gold silk threads glinted in the morning sunlight as though made of precious metals and spun gemstones rather than silk. It was draped around my mother's shoulders in lieu of a blanket, giving her the comfort that I scarcely knew how to offer. If I had been sworn to the beast, if Rose had not taken my place, she would have known exactly what to say to Mother, how

to let her grieve. But no, all that was left of her comfort was her silken shawl, a gauzy bit reminder of the hole she'd left in our home. I swallowed back a pang of regret and heartbreak.

I slipped away without a sound, going to the kitchen. I placed a few cuts of cured meat and cheese on a plate which I carried out through the back garden. The dew was thick on the newly unfurled leaves that had just burst from the tangled growth of roses. The vines seemed to shiver in the morning breeze as they climbed over the stones of the cottage toward the eaves. Slowly, I picked my steps through the glistening, dew-strewn flowers toward the oak tree which overhung the low stone perimeter of my mother's garden, the new green leaves a vibrant green against the darker firs and pines of the forest. A few nearby birches and willows were putting out their own spring leaves, but their branches were still starkly bare against the gradually lightening sky. I climbed onto the lowest branch which had formed a natural bench long ago and I laid my head back, resting against a smoothed area of the trunk.

Breathing out a long sigh, a mix of sorrow and weariness, I tucked my feet up onto the branch and balanced my breakfast on my knees. I ate half-heartedly, pausing between each bite as I watched the sun rise up from over the jagged outline of the Golden Peaks. Their needle-like summits turned pink and gold as the light cascaded over the ridge and yellow light flooded down the slopes and filled the valley. The forest remained dark and solemn, a nearly black shadow amid the gentle rolling hills that opened toward the plains.

I wished my sister would come out of the kitchen door, one hand on her hip and a teasing, patient smile on her lips to remind me to come inside. To bring me wool to card or a bobbin of spun thread to ply into yarn for market.

But Rose was gone now. The nearby town had finally managed to break into the cozy, contented world that Mother had made for us in the wake of my father's death. The men had come, full of fear and distrust, and Rose had been given to a Spell-Touched. An offering to appease his hunger for spreading curses to the land, or to sate his appetite for devouring wandering livestock, or whatever other half-wild superstition they had persuaded themselves into believing he meant to do if they didn't give him a sacrificial bride. Not that there had been any signs of the land being

cursed, or any reports of missing livestock since the Spirit Bear had come to Ravutsa. Not that they cared, or would listen. After all, we weren't their daughters, their kin. We didn't even live within the bounds of the town, nor were we included in almost any other aspect of their lives if they could help it. Until they needed us. Until they needed someone offered up to protect them.

No. The men of Ravutsa — the frail elders and the malicious magistrate and the spineless priest — had sacrificed Rose to protect themselves, despite no real danger having come their way to merit such a decision.

I felt anger bubbling in my stomach again and I slipped down from my seat, feeling the cool grass underfoot. I steadied my half-eaten breakfast on a smooth portion of the tree limb, no longer hungry. Kneeling, I placed my hands on the ground as I tried to steady my racing thoughts.

The priest had mentioned the necessity of averting a curse before it came. I wondered if anyone in the valley had ever actually seen a curse from a Forest Spirit or if they were just another tall tale that had lingered from ages past when magic was wild and Minalorea was a new kingdom. Stories of the spirits who held mystical power over the untamed regions of the world were often shared over and over again in the long winter nights after too generous mugs of spiced brandies and tea, and I suspected that the brandy often increased the powers attributed to the capricious spirits. I knew that some of the older inhabitants of the valley had grown up when worship and reverence to the spirits had still been part of a wider, though dying, practice. But those beliefs, and the fears that accompanied them, had faded over the last hundred years. Or at least, so I had thought.

Not that the existence of real forest spirits made any difference why she was gone. She just was. And now I was alone with my mother, and my dreams.

Shaking my head, I tried to banish the memories of the vision that had come to me again in the night.

The pale yellow-stoned tower, shining and shadowed, surrounded by the impossible golden red thorns, clawing and rending the stones until it all fell away and the tower crumbled beneath the mass of gold and green that blossomed with roses as red as blood, and the world around me trembled, convulsing with the grasping vines. My sister was near me, her

expression wild and radiant, and she took my hand as we ran through forests that shifted around us, the moss turning to shale below our feet. And he ran after us, Rose's Spell-Touched Bear, with the light of stars shining in his monstrous eyes as we fled from the ruin that tumbled after us. The destruction of the tower seemed to drag the forest down with its crashing stones, the thorns drawing power and devastation from the earth beneath us. It all ended as we tumbled into a shining pool of moonlight, kicking and fighting to not be dragged under the water, and I cried out for help, seeing only the ominous, distant moon caught in pale white antlers against the darkening, angry sky.

I coughed once to clear my throat and ground me back in the moment, passing my hand over my eyes as if to wipe the memory of the dream away. My dreams were often strange, filled with images I did not understand, but they had always been infrequent. Mother would find answers, explanations for what I saw, and they would fade away without giving me another moment's concern. This dream had come to me for months now, sometimes nightly, and every time, I tried to resist it with no success. I wanted to tell Mother, but every chance I had, my voice died in my mouth, the images refusing to let me find the words to share them with her.

There had been some occasions before when my dreams had come true. A few years ago, I had seen arrival of the knights for the duke's dues and the elaborate fete that the elders of Ravutsa had held in their honor, the trees near the village festooned with brightly colored ribbons and shimmering glass beads. And the time that my mother had given me and Rose our own spinning wheels and first showed us how to ply wool into yarn, teaching us how to earn our living so that we could always make a living for ourselves in any village or town in the kingdom. Or last spring, when Rose had found a thicket of early spring blackberries that defied all the laws of nature that governed the seasons and harvesting, since frosts were still thick in the upper valley fields. She had picked enough to give to Ravutsa's weaver in exchange for matching silk shawls for the three of us, green and gray for our mother, silver-white edged in pale green for me, and red and gold for herself.

Until a few days ago, I had assumed that my dream of the tower and running with my sister through the forest was merely one of my less

agreeable nightmares. Not usually containing any portent of doom or peril, twisted and dark dreams had haunted me as a child and mostly faded away as I grew into a woman.

But then on the road outside Ravutsa, we had met the Spirit Bear. My sister insisted that he was only a Magic-Touched Bear, and not a real forest spirit come down out of the north's mythic past to wreak havoc with the residents of our remote valley. As if that had been my fear.

I'd immediately known those oddly human eyes the moment I saw him waiting on the road outside of town. The faintest hope of escaping my nightmare coming true had faded away when Rose had spoken to him, when she gave him her name. As though she didn't know from half a dozen ballads or more that she was courting fate by doing so. And those eyes, dark and piercing, had seen only her, as if I had been nothing more than a noonday shadow. I had felt as powerless to do anything to stop Rose and the Bear as I was during my visions.

And now he'd taken my Rose away, sea and stars knows where, to do heavens knows what. It wasn't as if the priest had actually obtained any useful answers before deciding to give the bear a bride. Then last night, the dream of the tower had come back to me, sharper and stronger and stubbornly lingering in my mind. I could not reason it away now as a meaningless dream born only of my own fears and night's shadow. Not after seeing the Spirit-Touched of my dreams walking in the waking world. He had looked at us with those dark, magic-filled eyes, had spoken to us, and I knew that his coming had brought our doom.

I stood, swaying in the breeze, and lifted my face to the sun, letting the pale warmth wash over my skin as I breathed in deeply. Somewhere within the forest, a branch snapped and a few birds flew out of the canopy of branches, squawking in protest at the disturbance. I opened my eyes, scanning the line of trees, the trunks dappled gray and brown, and saw nothing. A quiet whisper rose in my mind, urging me to look closer, to cross over the short expanse of moss and grass that stretched between the garden and the forest.

I cast a quick glance back at the cottage, where there was still no sign of Mother stirring, and then stepped past the oak, tentatively picking my step toward the encroaching forest's edge. The wind whispered through

the branches, whether in warning against or invitation to enter the forest, I wasn't quite sure.

"Rose?" I called softly, my heart rising as I scarcely dared to hope that my sister had returned.

I knew the border areas of the wood stretching up past Ravutsa, having spent most of my life foraging for mushrooms and berries and wild greens for my mother. But today, a strange tension had settled into my shoulders, a worry that tugged at my heart. Pushing a scraggly evergreen bough out of my way, I stepped into the cool dark of the wood, the air heavy with the scent of the pine trees' slowly warming sap and the decaying leaves that piled around the reaching roots of the nearby willows. I stopped after I had gone a dozen yards in and turned, making sure I could still see the outline of the cottage if Mother were to come looking for me. After watching Rose disappear into the darkness of the Kingswood, it would be ominous to her if she thought she'd lost me to the forest as well.

A small plume of smoke now curled from the chimney, drifting away toward the valley road that led down to Spalia Dorna. I drew a deep breath as a sad smile spread across my face.

Mother would be baking a tart, humming a small invocation of haleness and strength as she set a pot of tea to brew on the hob. She wouldn't come looking for me for several more minutes, possibly longer, knowing that I would want to be alone after losing Rose the night before. The day's chores still needed to be done, grief or not, and the wool wouldn't spin itself. But my mother had always been lenient when she knew something was bothering one of her girls, and she tried to be understanding of our differing needs and personalities. Rose would have wanted to be comforted, held and sung to and given a hot cup of tea while our mother recalled some old ballad with triumphant, noble heroes and happy endings. Me, though... Mother knew it was best if I was left alone to think and sing and comfort myself, as I had done since our father's death when I was not yet five.

Dismissing my fond musing on the cozy routine of my mother's morning, I turned my attention back to the wood around me, listening for any passing creature pushing through the undergrowth, but the wood was still. Even the birds were mostly quiet, despite the gentle sunshine and warm spring air. After several minutes, I sighed and realized that I'd been

holding my shoulders tense, my body ready to bolt at the slightest provocation.

“It was probably just a squirrel,” I said to the nearest tree with a chagrined smile, my heart thumping against my ribs. “Or it could have been a rabbit, I suppose.”

A flash of something pale and shimmering, almost white, slipped through the wood several dozen yards farther into the forest, catching the corner of my eye. I spun around, trying to follow where it had gone, and I took a few timid steps toward it. Just beyond a cluster of alders, I could see it staying still, alert— shining almost luminescent in the shadowy wood.

I took another couple of steps, picking my way hesitantly from mound of moss to bare earth, avoiding twigs or rustling leaves that shifted underfoot in case the creature would startle and leap away before I could see it fully. I held my breath, each moment feeling like a half of an eternity as I edged closer to the alders. Finally, I came into the clearing, a few yards distant from the creature, and stopped short.

A stag, several hands taller than any deer that I had ever seen within the Kingswood, raised his head, regarding me cautiously. His fur was milky white that was dappled golden brown in spots, and it eventually darkened into a tawny brown coat on its legs. The fur shone faintly moon-touched silver as the stag’s sides moved with his ragged breath. He was waiting, tensed to bound away at a moment’s notice, but remained still as I didn’t dare move any closer.

My eyes caught on his antlers, spreading wide over his head, branching like the roots of a tree, and they glimmered in the faint sunlight that drifted down through the thinning canopy above us. It had more prongs than I’d ever seen on a deer before, a dozen at least, appearing to be more like a crown of bone than a real rack of antlers.

My mind flooded with a tumult of thoughts. Part of me was overcome with wonder at the strange animal, stepped straight from one of the ballads of chivalry and adventure and enchantment my sister had loved so dearly. But another voice deep within me seemed to be crying out a warning, reminding me of the valley’s stories of the Forest Spirits of old, of the spell-touched creatures that lured young, innocent girls and foolish, brash boys into the woods to their doom. The ones who could weave a curse over your fate with a single look, could ensnare your mind with a word.

Mother had always found those tales worth little more of her attention than a knowing, wry smile and an amused roll of her eyes. But the stories had persisted in these parts. And now, I couldn't help but feel there possibly may have been truth behind them at some point, if the fear and belief had been strong enough to rip my sister away from our family.

He snorted, his breath curling into little wisps, and I caught a glimpse of his eyes.

Deep gold irises glinted beneath the white brows, and the whites of his eyes picked with flecks of silver that shimmered like stars at moonrise. Without thinking, I took another step, coming closer to the stag. A dry alder branch cracked under my foot, shattering the silence and stillness between us. He reared his head back, sunlight catching in his antlers, blinding me for a moment. I stumbled back, falling onto a mossy mound in the center of the clearing, my hands digging deeply into the damp, cool leaves that cushioned me as I fell.

Blinking, I looked up, my heart racing and breath catching in my chest. The stag had gone, leaving no trace of his being there just moments before, and I heard only the faintest snap of twigs that faded away as the stag bounded into the depths of the forest.

Chapter Two

“Callia?” Mother peered over her cup of tea at me as I stamped in through the kitchen door, trailing dead leaves and tendrils of moss from my skirts and shawl. “You haven’t been out wandering in the forest all night, have you?”

I shot my mother a confused look and then shook my head dismissively. “Of course not. I was just in the garden for breakfast. Why would I have been out all night?”

“We don’t have swan’s neck moss in our garden, my dear,” Mother said, setting down her cup and folding her hands together. She was still wearing Rose’s shawl, the corners caught in her fingers as though she were trying to hold on to my sister somehow through the cloth. “I thought you may have been trying to follow Rose.”

“Ah, of course,” I said, a knot forming in my stomach as I sat down across from my mother. Rose should have been at my side, lounging in her chair with a cup of tea nestled in her hands. I could see her tousled, curly hair catching over her shoulder, her skirt gathered around her knees in defiance of any admonitions of propriety. She and Mother would have been speaking about the garden and the morning’s new shoots, about drying herbs and mushrooms, and what wool needed to be carded or spun for the day. I shook myself abruptly. Thinking about the empty space that should have been filled with her just made looking at it all the more painful.

“Were you?” she asked quietly.

I rested my elbows on the table and cradled my chin in my upturned palms. I could still smell the damp forest floor on my fingers and I breathed in deeply, wondering if I should mention the strange pale stag to Mother. “I have no idea where the bear might have taken her. I wanted to follow her... but he moved so quickly. And Father Gadrel warned against trying to bring her back, after all. I’m sure they’re miles away from us by now. Do you suppose he’ll ever let Rose come back to us?”

“I can hope that he does, but I have no real answers. No more than Father Gadrel or you do,” Mother said quietly, drawing Rose’s shawl closer around her shoulders as though it might bring my sister back to us.

We sat in silence for a few moments, Mother sipping distractedly at her tea while I was lost in my own thoughts.

The Magic-Touched Bear who had taken Rose away with him into the Kingswood had been flesh and blood, although able to speak through some unknown enchantment that also gave him human understanding, of some kind at least. He had certainly not been a wisp of ethereal, incorporeal light, the way that the forest spirits were described in every ballad or story I knew on the subject. The stag had also seemed to be a creature of bone and breath. Only the white fur had given him any hint of other-worldliness or an appearance of mystical import.

“Mother,” I said, standing to retrieve a chipped green teacup from the nearest cupboard. I traced my finger over the edge, the familiar smoothness of the faded glaze that then dropped away to the rough sharpness of the chipped rim. Rose’s favorite from the set Mother had been given for her wedding. “What do you know of Magic-Touched creatures?”

Mother drank the last of her tea and carefully refilled it from the white and green porcelain pot that still plumed steam from its swan-curved spout. “Not much, though more than most I dare say. Especially more than those who live here in the valley, perhaps Father Gadrel excepting. If you’re wondering, the bear was Spell-Touched, not merely Magic-Touched.”

“I know,” I sat down, taking the pot from my mother and pouring the remaining tea slowly into my cup. “That means that a spell was placed on him by some wizard, yes? Not that he has magic of his own?”

“Yes, to the first question, and as for the second, I do not know,” she answered. She regarded me curiously. “Why do you ask, my sweet?”

“Idle curiosity, I think,” I said, flashing a smile at Mother. “It’s part of our life now, isn’t it? The bear is... my brother by law, I suppose.” I could not suppress a slight grimace as I spoke the words aloud. After all, I thought wryly, they’d only considered it necessary to force the vow from my sister and bear had merely been asked to accept her plight of marriage without any promises of his own.

Mother nodded, sighing, and stood up from the table. Taking her teacup in her hand, she went to her spinning wheel and looked out the window, staring down the valley to where we could just make out the haze of gray and brown that was Spalia Dorna.

“Perhaps I should never have come here, never brought you two to grow up under the shadow of the forest,” she said softly. “I couldn’t have stayed in Astantria, but perhaps there was some other way...”

“Mother, stop.” I came up behind her, wrapping my arms around my mother’s waist and burying my face into her thick, glossy curls. The comforting smell of her cookery mixed with the earthy, green scent that clung to Rose’s shawl. “What place was there in the world where you could always keep us safe from everyone? At least here, you could make a living as the village witch.”

“Even you believe I’m a full witch now?” Mother laughed a little in spite of herself. “An herbalist is not a witch just because she happens to be a woman, you know. Even Rose was asking just yesterday...”

“Ah,” I said with a coy smile, happy to hear her laughter, even if it was faint and short-lived, “but you know they are afraid of you and thus do not cheat us of your due. Being a witch might have its benefits. Even if it is only a baseless, ill-willed assumption.”

“Then I am sorry I am not a better witch for you,” Mother said as she kissed my cheek fondly. “Perhaps then I could enchant the wheel to spin the wool for us. Or spin wool into something more valued than just wool.”

“I do have a question about dreams again, Mother,” I said, settling into my chair and picking up a basket of cream and gray roving, wound loosely around my polished hawthorn spindle. Rose had always taken the time every evening to make our baskets ready for the next day, while I helped Mother in the kitchen. A little smile fluttered over my face as I thought of her long, slim brown fingers arranging the wool for me.

“Having more of them again?” Mother asked gently as she set her wheel spinning, her foot keeping a gentle time on the treadle. “Tell me what you are dreaming and I will give you whatever answers I have.”

“What do you know of stags?” I asked, watching my mother’s hands as she drafted the roving rhythmically to the whirring hum of the wheel. It calmed me to see the steady, fluid movement and I felt a knot of worry dissolve in my stomach as I was lulled to comfort by Mother’s spinning. “Or what the implications are of seeing towers and thorns in my visions?”

“Towers? Just a tower, not a castle or keep?” Mother asked, tilting her head toward her shoulder without pausing her spinning. I nodded and curled my legs under me, readying my spindle. “Well, most seers and oracles say that they are signs of safety, security, and some think they also are a symbol of wealth, of stored up treasure. Also, they are a portent of war and ruin. As for thorns... well, protection and warding mainly. Ziphara says in *What Dreams May Hold* that they may also be a sign of growth, of climbing in rank or power. Demetrius of Tyrzinnian counters that thorns instead merely show tenacity and guardedness, or can convey a sense of barrier, or a source of division.”

I sighed, mulling over my mother’s words and not finding anything that seemed to fit with the dream.

“If you tell me more, my sweet,” Mother began, “perhaps then I might...”

“It’s nothing, truly,” I said, smiling fondly at the line of worry that appeared on my mother’s forehead, the warm glance of concern and tenderness that shone in her dark chestnut eyes. “Tell me about stags, please.”

“Well, they symbolize strength, wildness...” she sighed, the sound blending with the soft whir of her wheel. I watched as the roving twisted into a single, fine thread as it passed through her fingers.

“And if they are white stags?” I asked, breaking the silence that had fallen between us. I pressed my lips together as her wheel came to an abrupt halt, her fingers gripping it tightly. I did not dare to look up to meet my mother’s eyes.

“White ones?” Mother asked, her voice tense and careful. “What kind of dreams are you having, Callia?”

“Just... does it mean anything?” I tried to keep my gaze lowered and my voice light.

“Well, Demetrius did say that it could portend a loss of power. Perhaps the vision came to you because we lost Rose yesterday when we were so sure that they were going to choose you and...” Mother let her words trail away as a single tear slipped from her eye, her gaze lingering on Rose’s empty chair beside me. My heart thudded heavily in my chest. I wished again that Rose had kept quiet when the priest had made his way to us over the shrine’s green. I’d been prepared to accept the decision of the

village to offer me up to the beast, hoping it would keep the doom from finding her.

“It didn’t feel powerless,” I muttered under my breath. “What does Ziphara have to say on the subject of stags, white or otherwise?”

Mother took a deep breath, her eyes nearly closed. “They are a creature of myth, of magic, of wonder. That they are a sign of fate, good or not, and can bring prosperity to those they favor. She obviously took its meaning very differently than Demetrius.”

“Maybe one of them actually met a white stag,” I said, trying to keep my tone light and calm. “Or one of them had better dreams about them anyway.”

“Dreams are strange things, and it’s hard to know what is important in them, and what they are actually showing you. Some invoke fear when they are merely showing you the path of your fate, others may seem to promise the fullness of your heart’s desire while holding only warnings of what is coming.”

I sighed and set my spindle spinning, watching as the wool twisted and coiled around it. “I wish I could decide when to have them and when I’d rather just have a restful night’s sleep.”

Mother laughed lightly, the worry fading from her face. “Well, my sweet, then who would ever have visions if allowed to choose which ones and when?”

“I’m sure there’s someone out there who doesn’t mind. Demetrius has always struck me as the sort who felt that he was important and wise because he had them,” I said, grimacing. Mother resettled herself in her seat and began to spin again. “Ziphara is a little more relatable with her added notes about exercising prudence and finding calm answers to the fears that come with having visions.”

“Do you fear your dreams, what you see?” Mother asked softly, her words scarcely more than the hum of her wheel.

I swallowed hard. I’d always wanted to be free of my dreams, able to move through my life without wondering if something was a sign that portended either reward or ruin. But the visions had rarely been truly unpleasant, let alone frightening. Until now.

“I... I fear them less than I fear the prejudice and superstitions of other people.” I answered. It was truthful enough, especially after Rose’s

bonding to the monster.

Mother nodded and continued to spin. “I think that is wise. Do not fear the tower and the thorns, my darling girl. Not until you know more, should the dream return.”

“And should I fear the white stag?” I whispered, but Mother did not seem to hear me. I decided it was better that way. After all, I was certain that I hadn’t dreamed the stag, and I wasn’t sure if real stags meant something more powerful, or more ominous, than dream ones might.

Chapter Three

I set my basket in the moss, picking the driest spot I could find for a seat. Taking my small shears from my apron, I began to cut bundles of nettles that had begun to push up through the forest undergrowth with the past fortnight's descent into spring. Careful to avoid being stung, I arranged them in my basket in tidy fans of green, humming under my breath.

It had been at least a fortnight since I'd seen the stag, and I kept finding myself wandering out into the forest more often, every morning and most afternoons. I told myself it had nothing to do with wanting to see the stag again, that it was merely a desire to be out of the cottage after a cold winter, to be away from the places where I was accustomed to seeing my sister's face. There were plenty of things for me to forage in the forest's edge as well, and Mother did not press me for answers when I slipped away in the early mornings.

After exhausting the largest shoots of nettles in the patch, I sprawled back onto the moss and stared up at the bright green canopy that shielded me from the rays of the mid-morning sun. The clear azure sky peeked in around the new-grown leaves, and the light that filtered through to the mossy woodland floor gave the forest a warm, comforting glow. The ground was still cool under me, but the nearly still air of the wood was warm enough that I didn't feel the need for even a light shawl as I had wandered in search of wild greens and fresh roots.

I watched the leaves dancing overhead for a while, content and calm. In the forest, it felt as though no strange dreams could harm me, no terrible fate waited for me beyond the clusters of dandelions or wild garlic. The dreams still came in the night when I drifted to sleep, though somewhat less powerful and strong on the nights when Mother made me drink a cup of chamomile and dandelion tea before we went to bed. We had not spoken about it again, but I knew Mother was watching me carefully, though somewhat more quietly than her usual wont. That I attributed to her lingering grief at losing Rose, and not because she was avoiding talking to me about the recurrence of dreams being a likely sign of their showing me the fate that waited ahead.

In the days since my sister had been married off to the Spirit Bear, I wondered if I should have told Rose about my ability to see visions long ago, but they had always seemed so unimportant, vexing even. They were a private gift, wanted or not; the one thing that I'd turned to Mother for answers and guidance that was just between the two of us, and an ability that was just mine alone. We shared everything else. We both had learned together to spin and knit and sew and tend the garden. But visions had been mine to have, to handle, and I didn't have to share them if I didn't want to. Rose would have teased me, called me a seer witch, and made me laugh. I wanted Rose to make me laugh now, to hold me and tease me and call me pet names to remind me that she loved Mother and I fully and without reserve.

Rose. She should have had a normal, full life. To be married to a wealthy, landed farmer, or perhaps to a merchant from Astantria or another of the Plains cities. But she had never sought out a sweetheart, always staying by our side. She had refused to leave the life that Mother had carved out for our family in Ravutsa, proud and defiant to the townspeople who kept us at a distance. Rose was fierce in her love for me, protective of our life, and content to stay always in the circle of mother and sister, even when I had sometimes dreamed of a life of my own.

Then came the Bear. I had seen the twist of fate the moment he'd stopped us in the road, had seen how he had watched Rose with such curiosity and intensity, and I had known in that instant that our world would be shattered. I wanted to be chosen instead of my sister, and I knew the elders of Ravutsa would select me—I was an easy choice. I was golden-haired and fawn-skinned, my delicate features marking me as different from the sturdy, ruddy folk that lived in the Golden Peaks. I had no father to speak for me, and no betrothal on the horizon. Mother knew it as well, and we'd been prepared. With me gone, sacrificed to an ensorcelled Spirit Bear to save the valley from his curses, perhaps Rose would finally receive, or accept, an offer from an eligible prospect. But no, Rose had done what she always did—she had volunteered to be given to the demon, she had taken that fate from me, and the Bear had taken her away. The moment she thought our circle was threatened, she had leapt in to save me, without a second's consideration as to whether I wanted to be saved.

I wanted to be angry at Rose but I knew it was her nature, that nothing I did or said would have changed her mind. So instead, I was angry at the elders, at Father Gadrel, despite the display of his crippling remorse in the wake of the binding. And I was angry at the Bear.

A branch snapping jolted me out of my thoughts and I pushed myself up from the mossy bed. Leaves clung to my hair like a rustling cloak and I shuddered despite the warm breeze since my back was now somewhat damp with the morning's dew.

"Mother?" I called softly. No answer came, and I held my breath, trying to listen for another step, a shift in the forest floor to tell me where the sound had come from. "Rose?" I asked, my heart rising into my throat as hope welled up suddenly. Perhaps the Bear had been lenient, or had no real use for her and had sent her home to us?

A faint sound of leaves shifting over roots came from deeper within the woods, and I scrambled to my feet, wiping away tufts of moss from my skirt. Pocketing my shears, I took my basket, watching the wood for any sign of another person coming close to me. A vague hint of worry rose in my mind.

This was the Kingswood after all. Commoners were not permitted to hunt in the wood, but the duke's steward had been forgiving of those who were found foraging for roots and wild greens before. He probably would not have permitted laying snares if someone was brought to him with a charge of poaching, but those who infringed on that decree were seldom caught. Those who were found seemingly disappeared, and whispers spoke of their deaths, or worse, their likely fates within the duke's mines.

Father Gadrel had promised that Rose would not be punished if found within the wood, since a Spirit Bear was considered beyond even the decrees of the King of Minalorea, and her life had been sealed to his. That was a cold comfort when the darkest tales spoke of trespassers being shot from horseback before having a chance to explain themselves. I was told that such things were merely rumors meant to dissuade foolhardy young men from wandering too easily into the depths of the wood. But it was hard to shake the niggling fear from my mind when I knew my sister was trapped somewhere in the far reaches of the unknown forest.

I stepped past an ancient oak, its gnarled roots rising from the forest floor like long arms that reached out for light and water before

digging deep into the loamy earth, and I placed my hand on its trunk to steady myself. I decided to leave my basket hanging on one of the lower branches, assured that it would not fall and scatter my bundles of greens for the squirrels and woodland mice to carry away. With a small shiver, I took my shawl from the basket, leaving the shears in its place. I tucked the knitted cloth around my arms, less for warmth than for the comfort of feeling something around me, a gentle embrace from my sister.

I entered a clearing, wide and mossy, and I could hear a stream gurgling not far from me. The sun filtered through more here, the light catching on slow floating dust motes that drifted through the still air. The stag stepped out, crossing over a tiny rivulet that forked from a woodland stream, engorged with spring's melting snows, and stopped a few feet away from me, seemingly watching me intently. I held still, scarcely daring to breath, and he took one more step toward me, hoof raised as though considering whether to bound away or close the space between us.

"I mean you no harm," he spoke at last, placing his hoof down gently, making no noise on the mossy carpet. I felt my mind blank for a moment, though not in fear, I realized with a curious jolt. Instead, it was surprise, mixed with a note of pleasure and desire. I knew then that I'd been hoping to chance upon him again, to cross paths and see the gentle magnificence of his pale coat and the soft velvet sheen of his impossibly broad and branched antlers. "You do not need to be frightened of me."

"Are you not frightened of me?" I asked, surprised at the words coming from my mouth.

"You're a peasant girl, armed only with a pair of scullery scissors. What threat do you pose to me? You are no hunter, no knight, and are certainly not a wild animal that could harm me," he replied calmly. His voice was soft and deep, smooth like a sun-dappled stream in the heat of summer, and gentle as dawn's first light.

"They're foraging shears, not scullery ones," I said, flushing as I wrapped the shawl tightly around my arms, hiding my hands shyly in the folds. "Are... are you a forest spirit?" I asked, flicking my eyes up to meet his. They glimmered with pricks of starlight and the stag gave a short barking sound that seemed to pass for a kind of laughter.

"No," he said at last, bending his head down toward me. "You may touch my face and see that I am real. Are forest spirits really so

prevalent a concern for the Golden Peaks then? I'd always assumed they were nursery stories meant to amuse small children."

"And drunken farmers," I said, a smile beginning to grow on my face. I reached out hesitantly, wanting to touch him yet also feeling suddenly shy in the presence of a magic-touched creature. To meet two creatures with the gift of human speech in the space of a fortnight was strange, I thought. I tried my best to compose myself before I realized he'd come closer again, now just an arm's reach from me. "Have you been watching me then?" I asked, thinking of the shears in my basket.

"I have seen you before," the stag said, bringing his face close to me. I could feel his breath on my hands but my eyes remained riveted by the shimmer of light that emanated from his antlers, warm and milk-white and soothing. "You come into the forest often, and even when you do not enter it, I have seen you at its edge."

"You've been watching me?" I asked. Something about him was calming, gentle, and I felt a small surge of something similar to bashfulness in my voice. I realized with a bit of surprise that the notion of him having watched me gave me no jolt of concern or apprehension.

"Yes, I have spent some time wandering the borders of the wood in recent weeks. You live in the cottage with the herb witch, do you not?"

"My mother is not a witch," I countered quickly, feeling color rising in my cheeks, "at least not really. She merely understands plants and knows how to use them to help others."

"And that doesn't mean she's a witch to you?" the stag asked curiously.

I shifted nervously from foot to foot. I knew Mother's secret—I had long ago found her notes and read some of the books in her room when I thought she wasn't looking. While it was true that she had some small magics that helped her, she wasn't a full-gifted witch who could have been trained by the Sutrae Lyentari or even the Antha Arcanium.

"Are you... are you a sorcerer?" I asked after a moment as he watched me patiently.

"What?" he blinked, shaking his head in confusion. "Not exactly," he said after a moment. "There's magic of a sort in my bloodline, but no. I was not born in a position where it was possible for that part of me to be... expressed and developed. Or acknowledged."

“Deer have such restrictions for their young?” I quirked my brow at him inquisitively but he did not offer any further explanation on the subject.

“Have you a name?” he asked, settling down on the ground as though preparing for a long discussion. Following his lead, I settled onto the ground beside him, careful and uncertain of what to expect. He regarded me calmly and I gave him a bemused shrug.

“Calanthea Kovalic,” I answered. My full name tasted strange in my mouth, the sounds twisting around my tongue awkwardly. I flushed at his knowing glance. “My family calls me Callia though,” I added.

“Ah, yes,” he nodded, “I have heard that name being called out. It is your mother-name, I take it? There was another who lives in the cottage with you and her, until recently at least. Your sister?”

“Rose, yes,” I said unhappily. I wondered just how long the stag had been in the woods, watching us. He did not seem to carry any hint of threat in his gentle bearing and soft glances, but the weight of magic on him did hold a faint sense of foreboding to me.

“Married, I suppose then, to be gone so suddenly,” the stag said, his tone matter-of-fact, though he gave me a gentle look of condolence. “I take it from your face that you do not like her husband.”

“I do not,” I said, giving a short laugh of contempt. I really did not like the Bear, not that I knew him at all, but he was responsible, at least in part, for Rose leaving me. Most of the blame I was willing to lay at the feet of Ravutsa’s magistrate and his puppet of a priest. “Not really a husband, and not really a marriage if it’s against her will,” I added under my breath.

The stag gave a strange grunting noise of agreement. “I understand that marriages are often arranged so, with little consideration to happiness or desire,” he said softly. “It shouldn’t be so. I am sorry.”

I plucked at a newly budded lily of the valley, running my fingers over the delicate white blossoms.

“Do you have a name?” I asked. “Is that a thing animals give their young?”

The stag barked another rough laugh, and his eyes began to shine again, this time with merry amusement. “You may call me Soren,” he said.

“Though I cannot speak to the naming habits of animals, as I was not born in this form, I can tell you that is my mother-name.”

“It’s lovely,” I said, curling my legs under me a little more comfortably. He gave me a curt nod of appreciation before resting his head on the moss, content to watch me. Two spell-touched creatures in the Kingswood then. I drew a stiff breath, looking him over questioningly. He didn’t seem to have the same sense of foreboding, the same prickle of doom that I’d felt from the bear. “I take it you are cursed then?”

“Well,” the stag said, jerking his head up sharply. He regarded me with a scrupulous curiosity. “That’s a rather pointed question, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry if I’ve offended you...” I began but he shook his head.

“No, not at all, just hardly what I expected. I am accustomed to young ladies being very circumspect. Your directness is refreshing, if unexpected,” he said, his voice smooth and reassuring again. I suppressed a small laugh at the idea of anyone using the term ladies in regard to any of the village women, young or not. “But no, I am not forced to be a stag, if that’s what you’re asking. Not exactly anyway.”

“It was,” I said softly, glancing at the flower in my hands. I pulled a blossom off and tossed it away from me, watching it roll into a pile of browned, mouldering leaves. “You just seem so... human.”

“Because I am human,” he said simply. “Or rather, I was. I chose to change to keep myself safe, and there was bit of...”

He strained suddenly, as though struggling to breathe. His sides heaved and his hooves dug into the ground, pulling long dark gashes into the soft loam. The spots on his fur seemed to glow dully, and he grunted loudly in agony as he writhed against the forest floor. After a few moments, he settled again as he regained his breath, his eyes wild and darting and a few flecks of foam gathering in the corners of his mouth. He regained his breath finally and laid his head down wearily between his forelegs. I felt my heart pounding in my chest, and a tightness in my throat as I reminded myself to breathe again.

“I am sorry,” he said finally. “That was also unexpected. Let me try to explain a little more vaguely, in the hopes I won’t run into another restriction on what I am allowed to say. I ran into trouble some time ago, and thus I am here, wandering the Kingswood of the Golden Peaks as a stag. I cannot leave the forest, and as time goes on, my memory of my life

before has become... weakened. I am afraid that if I do not find a way to return to my home soon, to rid myself of what binds me here, I will lose that part of myself forever.”

“Why can’t you speak about what happened to you?” I asked, confusion needling my mind. “Is it a curse after all, even if that isn’t why you’re a stag? What, or who, is binding you here?”

He shook his head, his eyes darkening for a moment, and then turned his head away. I swallowed, concern and pity tugging at me as I tried to find words to speak my thoughts. I wanted to comfort him somehow, feeling a little guilty that my question had seemingly caused him so much pain. Silence stretched between us, broken only by birdsong that filter through the shifting leaves overhead.

Chapter Four

“Why did you seek me out?” I asked after several minutes had passed, placing my hand over the closer of his hooves. He did not pull away, and I traced one finger gently over the pale tawny fur on his foreleg. His fur was warm and silken soft against my skin. “And why are you telling me all of this?”

Soren sighed and turned his gaze toward me. His eyes were sad and dim, no glint of stars in them now. “I... I have been lonely for months and when I saw you before, it felt as though you might understand that kind of loneliness as well. As for telling you everything, I suppose it’s because I’ve had no one to say anything to since autumn turned to winter, and it felt nice to be able to speak to someone again. You don’t seem as though you’re going to report me to the village wizard for cleansing.”

“Ravutsa doesn’t have a wizard,” I said sheepishly. “There’s a priest, but he’s not exactly adept with those kinds of rituals.”

He gave me a sharp, hungry look, full of curiosity and appraisal. “No wizard? But there is an abundance of magic in these woods, in the mountains. I can feel it, can’t you?”

“Why should I be able to feel the magic?” I asked, glancing away. I’d already stripped four more blooms from the stalk I’d plucked, and I found myself pulling them apart, separating them into quarters with my fingernails.

“Your mother is a witch, even if only enough to be an herbalist, and you clearly have some kind of special gift,” he said, his voice calm and assertive without being accusatory. “I had often heard it said before that magic is wild and abundant in the border lands, so I suppose it’s no wonder that those who live in the kingdom’s remote corners should have some natural access to that.”

I pulled back, knitting my brows together. “No one in Ravutsa has any magic, or special gift as you call it, and no one in Spalia Dorna has any for that matter either. The closest wizard I’d ever heard of lives at the baronet’s estate in Astantria. Maybe there is some kind of wild magic out

here in the Kingswood, but it's not just something that everyone can control. It's not like the magic seeps into folk just by breathing it in."

"I have upset you," Soren said softly. "I am sorry, I did not mean to offend. But you do not deny some power in your own bloodline?"

I blushed, my heart quickening. Visions hardly seemed enough to be considered a power. "It's nothing much, just enough to unsettle my sleep and place my family outside of society. Mother says I shouldn't speak of it to others."

He laughed again, this time gentler and with a kind of warmth that surprised me. "I would ask a favor of you, if it is not too much? I understand if you wish to decline. I will not force you."

"You haven't asked me," I said, smiling. "So how could I give you my answer?"

Soren gave a smooth nodding gesture with his head, acknowledging my point. "I realize that it's a little ridiculous of me to ask this, given how little magical education is available outside of the universities in the coastal cities or the Sutrae Lyentari," he paused, drawing a deep breath that rustled over the fallen leaves. "Do you know about the lore surrounding the existence of celestial pools, or the significance of possible magical convergence points in the world?"

My brain searched for a moment, trying to recall Mother's lessons from long ago about the magic of stars and moons, of their influence on water and wilderness, over dreams and thoughts.

"Do you mean the Starlight Waters?" I asked hesitantly. I wasn't certain what he meant by magical convergence points, but celestial pools had long ago been seen as powerful sources of magic, and a conduit to clarifying visions and strengthening a seer's connection to their dreams.

"Yes, that is one of their names," Soren said brightly, his ears perking in excitement.

"There were eight, or maybe it was thirteen, of them, long ago," I said slowly, as a hazy memory of a chapter in Ziphara's book on the elemental and celestial magics influence over dreams and visions. Mother had given it to me for my tenth birthday, and I'd read a few times, but all the same, it had been years since I'd recalled anything about the Starlight Waters. They'd never seemed particularly important, and Mother never pressed for me to study more about them. As far as I could tell, my visions

had nothing to do with the stars or the cycles of the moon. “They allowed a pure connection to a witch’s magic source, rendering protection to the witch while in its waters, but also a weakening of certain enchantments and spells, including those cast by the witch herself.”

He seemed to smile, his eyes flashing with renewed light and understanding. “You have read from Ziphara then? Well, she wasn’t far off on most of that, or so I’m told. There are four of them from what I know. And supposedly, one of them lies within the Golden Kingswood.”

I felt a wave of curiosity wash over my mind. Ziphara had spoken of their purported ability to clarify visions, to show a seer the truth behind their dreams and reveal their desires. She had doubted this, but added that many myths about the Starlight Waters contained some aspect of this power.

“Have you found it?” I asked, trying to contain my eagerness. “Is it far?”

“I have been looking for several weeks now,” he said, giving a short sigh. “The Kingswood is vast, and much changed in the centuries since Ziphara wrote about it, though in all fairness, she admits that she never went to the pools herself. Olandrus of Semphyre was at least a century before her, and he seems to at least have had first-hand accounts to draw from when writing his theories on the convergence of magic within the pools.”

“I haven’t read Olandrus,” I said, tilting my head to one side, trying to remember if he had been mentioned in any of Mother’s other books. Certainly not one of the seers that Demetrius listed as having made academic contributions about dreams and their portents, and his books were nearly exhaustive on the topic of the notable vision scholars.

“My mother has possibly one of the only remaining copies of his work outside of the libraries of the Sutrae Lyentari, and they’re not likely to lend out theirs, if they even let students near their rarer scrolls,” Soren said, gazing up at a beam of light that drifted down, setting his coat ablaze with golden fire. “But I think I am close. I feel the pull of it as the new moon approaches.”

“Then what is your request? I don’t think it was just to verify that the celestial pools existed at some point in Minalorean history.”

Soren gave a throaty laugh, nearly a chuckle. “No, my request isn’t about an obscure detail of long-forgotten magic. Olandrus mentions

that there were rituals, rune carvings and spell channellings, that kept the pools pure, that rendered them a place of protection and power. They needed to be renewed, to be sustained from generation to generation, or the pool would fall into decay.”

“I can’t imagine then,” I said, sighing, “that the pool in the Kingswood, if there was one here at all, would be useful for anything anymore.”

“It can be restored, brought back,” he said softly. “That magic can be accessed again. At least that is the hope. I know some of the rituals required, but I cannot do it all on my own. I need someone to perform the magic with me. Should I discover the celestial pool within the Kingswood, may I come to you for help?”

I drew a deep breath. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as I took in what Soren was saying, what it could mean if there was deep, ancient magic hidden somewhere within the Kingswood, just within my reach. Just waiting for someone to channel it again. Magic that perhaps could free Rose from her troth to the Spirit Bear. The power to enable my family to leave Ravutsa forever. Soren was offering me the chance to change our fates. The world seemed to slow and still around me for a moment, and then I nodded, releasing my breath. “Yes, if I can be of service, I would love to help you.”

He stood, casting a shimmer of pale golden light over me. “Thank you, Calanthea. I will return to you when I have found it.”

“Soren,” I said as he turned to go. “Wait.”

“Yes, Calanthea?”

“First, you could just call me Callia,” I said, my face burning at the appraising glance he gave me. “And you said you were lonely... I am too. Without my sister, it’s been difficult to stay indoors. No one will notice if I’m spending a little more time in the verge of the wood, if you’d like someone to talk to. As it is, I am frequently in my mother’s garden on my own. Anyway, you know where to find me.”

“Thank you, Callia,” Soren said, bending forward so that our faces were mere inches apart. “I will see you again soon, I hope.”

He turned and lept away, leaving the clearing in three long, graceful bounds. I watched for a few moments longer, until he was merely a glistening white shadow that disappeared into the green gray haze of the

forest. I returned to my basket and quickly found the trail that led me home. I was unsure how long I'd been gone, but was certain Mother would be waiting for me, with a long list of chores she needed me to complete before evening.

As the garden wall came into sight, just beyond the thinning line of trees, I resolved to not mention Soren, or his search for the pool, to her. After all, he hardly seemed likely to upend our lives the way that Rose's bear had. No one in Ravutsa had even mentioned sighting a white stag, so it wasn't likely that they'd be looking to sacrifice another girl anytime soon. And Soren seemed hesitant to venture close to the village out of fear of their reaction to him, so his going there for help as the bear had done seemed to be a very remote possibility.

As I'd expected, Mother was already sitting at her spinning wheel, several bobbins of creamy wool at her feet, and a large basket of roving that she was drafting with steady, swift flicks of her fingers.

"Ah, Callia," she said, without looking up at me as I came through the kitchen. I set the basket on the table and came to her side. "There's a plate of lunch for you, and the tea is probably cool by now. I've already set soup to simmer on the hob."

"I'm sorry if I was out too long, Mother," I said as I bent down and kissed the top of her hair. I could smell the earthy sweetness of carrots and turnips on her. She smiled, not taking her eyes off her spinning, but she tilted her head to give me a reassuring nudge.

"It's quite all right, my sweet, foraging in spring cannot be hurried, just as plants cannot be forced to grow faster than their wont," she replied. "But now, this yarn needs to be plied. I have promised the weaver that I will deliver all this to him in the morning for five silver. Rose always did it for me, but I'm afraid that without her running market day errands for me, I cannot manage it all alone."

I smiled and picked up the bobbins of yarn. "Yes, Mother. I could go to town for you, if that would help."

"Oh, my dear girl," Mother sighed. "I know you don't like going alone either. I'll manage the trip just fine, as long as you help me finish the work. Maris has offered to help deliver the wool if I need her help."

"That is all right," I said with a nod, sitting down behind my wheel. "Would you tell me a story to pass the time?"

She smiled, her eyes sparkling. “Of course, my sweet.”

As she began to recite the words of my favorite nursery tale, I set my wheel spinning, letting my thoughts wander to Soren.

To the tantalizing promise of seeing one of the Starlight Pools, of finding the magic that had once flowed wild and free throughout all Minalorea and the Crystal Waste beyond.

Chapter Five

I settled on the cool ground, feeling the glow of excitement wreathing my face with a rare smile. Blueberries clustered thick and dark, newly ripened despite the early season. I knew fresh jam would bring Mother a pretty purse at market if I could gather enough of them for her, and it would give me a better excuse to wander the Kingswood more frequently. The forest was unusually bountiful this spring, I thought. I seemed to find new growths of mushrooms and berries every few days, and sometimes, Soren came to me as I worked in the garden with news of a patch he'd discovered while looking for the celestial pool.

My heart thrilled, thinking of his visits. He never stayed for more than an hour, and he never left the shade of the forest, even to cross over the garden wall. Still, I had grown accustomed to seeing his phantom-like form flitting about the Kingswood and it gave me something to hope for, to look forward to, during my lonely chores. His company helped ease the ache of losing Rose and he filled my thoughts with stories about life in the coastal cities, of tournaments and festivals. Sometimes his mind seemed to wander and he fell silent, but the quiet was easier to bear with him than it was with Mother.

As if summoned by my thoughts, I heard a cracking branch from deeper within the wood, and I turned, my fingers still clutching a cluster of the firm, tart berries. A moment later, Soren pushed through a tangle of alders, their leaves catching on his gleaming antlers.

"I'd hoped to find you today," he said, kneeling in the moss beside me. I flashed him a welcoming smile and held out the handful of berries for him.

"I'm glad to see you," I said as he swallowed, his eyes on the rest of the bramble.

He rested his head between his front legs, watching me with contented look shining in his golden eyes. "I've missed your company," he said softly. "I wish you could come with me into the forest."

"Have you found the Starlight Waters yet?" I asked, trying not to appear too eager.

He sighed, his long lashes flicking over his glimmering white fur. “No, but I could almost taste the magic of it last night. I think I am close. It’s drawing me closer, but it’s been such a long time since the rites were performed there. The magic must have faded greatly over the centuries.”

“Too bad your mother didn’t have a map for the pools in her library,” I said, shrugging as I resumed picking berries.

He snorted. “Then I don’t suppose they would really be the lost pools anymore,” he said wryly. “And I’m sure she would have sought them out long ago if she’d known where they were.” He nudged closer to me.

I smiled, finding comfort and reassurance in his presence and in the warmth of his body against my own. “Tell me more about the books she did have though. You were telling me about the containment and magical preservation theories of Beorusch of Navedine last.”

“Will there be anything left for you to study and read when I take you to Menastel if you keep asking me to recount all of the books in my mother’s collection to you?” he said with a huff of laughter.

I shot him a playful look. “Have you really read them all?”

He looked suddenly solemn, as if I’d given him a severe reproach. “No. Not nearly as many as I should have. There was always something to distract me from my studies, some duty that called me away, requiring my time and attention.”

“I thought that Menastel’s libraries were supposed to hold unimaginable tomes beyond count, a source of unrivaled wonder and unequalled knowledge.”

“Well,” he said, his tone lightening a little, “I sure that you will find them so.”

“So,” I said, shifting my seat to where another patch of berries hung in thick clusters. “Will you tell me more about Beorusch’s final thoughts on storing magical essence in stone?”

“I don’t remember much more,” he said ruefully. “Things are growing distant in my thoughts again; details of my mother’s books are fading from my recollection. I... I fear that the longer I stay within the Kingswood, the more my memory goes dull. All I can recall right now is a book of children’s stories that Mother would read to my brother and me on the nights when the full moon rose over her rose garden.”

“That sounds lovely too,” I said, stroking the fur of his ruff. His ears perked up and he eyed me questioningly. “Tell me one. I haven’t heard a good heroic tale for far too long.”

He placed his head on my knee, his eyes glinting. “Very well, I think I can recall all of her favorite at the very least. It’s an old story from the Crystal Waste.”

The afternoon passed gently, the sunlight casting a golden glow around us. I finished picking the last of the ripened berries and then curled up against Soren’s flank as he lost himself in recounting the story of a princess kept within an impenetrable wall of thorn and vines.

The day grew hot, and I wiped my brow with annoyance. My basket was almost overflowing with morels but I didn’t want to return home just yet. Mother had been singing songs of heartbreak and sorrow all morning, crooning tragedies to her spinning wheel as it kept time for her. I sat on a fallen log with a sigh, watching as a damselfly flitted by. In the distance, I could hear the loud rush of the Ravutsa river, still overflowing its banks with the waters of the spring melt from high up in the mountains.

I did not expect to see Soren again, he had promised it would be a few days at least, but some part of me hoped to chance upon him anyway. The cottage felt strange, empty, without my sister and I hated feeling alone there. Mother glancing behind me as if she still expected to see Rose there was certainly not helping me want to spend more time indoors than strictly necessary.

I’d always been comfortable being by myself, out by the tree, spinning or reading or daydreaming of far-off places and hallowed libraries, but I had Rose there whenever I wanted. Mother said we’d been inseparable since the moment I was born, always drawn back together no matter what. I’d thought she was being sentimental, seeing us as a pair that belonged matched, like a set of candlesticks or a briar and its thorns.

Rose had seemed to feel that way at times as well, the way she’d mocked the idea of potential suitors, or the fierce glares of defiance she’d given to anyone who paid either of us any degree of interested attention. All she had wanted was for our family to be whole, safe, and she had done everything to keep us together. If she’d ever wanted marriage, she had never spoken of it to me, and never asked me in return. I hadn’t thought

much of our prospects in Ravutsa, or even in Spalia Dorna, but she had made it so I never had to give much thought to my future.

A sound of thumping disturbed my thoughts and I sat forward, my feet barely grazing the ground as I listened intently. There was a shuffle, like earth being dug up, and every now and then, there was a clang of metal against stone.

I knew it couldn't be Soren, and that there were only a few from Ravutsa who would be comfortable out in the Kingswood at all. I could imagine Maris, or one of the twin Jarisek girls, out in search of morels as well. But for someone to be wandering the Kingswood and be digging for something? That made no sense at all to me.

I slipped from the log, brushing the decaying bark from my cloak half-heartedly. It left a deep brown smear on the already stained cloth, and I gave up. Cautiously, I went toward the sound, and realized that I was almost on the riverbank as the sound grew louder.

The river bent sharply toward the mountains as I came around a boulder twice as large as I was tall. Mother said that once, a sheet of ice like an ocean wave had come down the mountain sides and left tumbled boulders behind in its path, as a monument to the power of the Crystal Waste's winter curse. The story had amused me as a child, although some part of me had doubted whether or not there had ever been sorcerers powerful enough to blanket the Golden Marches in rivers of ice and snow.

I crept timidly around the stone, hanging back cautiously. At the river's side, I saw a man, short and stocky, digging under a few large stones that clustered together like a group of men playing at dice. He wielded a broad shovel awkwardly, with more frustration than skill. He stopped every minute or so to wipe at his forehead and mutter oaths loudly at the stones.

Despite his labors, he was well dressed, with an elegant hat that had gone askew over his whitening, yellow hair. It held a long, yellow feather, which drooped with every stroke of the shovel, and seemed to mirror his state of growing frustration. He wore a curiously long beard, braided in the manner of the very oldest inhabitants of the valley. The end of his beard was tucked into a dark leather belt, which was set with pale bronze grommets shaped like bursting stars. His tunic was a deep golden color, with butter-cream yellow cording at the hems. I knew that the tailor

in Ravutsa would have charged a pretty penny for that kind of work. I studied the man's face for a moment.

He did not look as old as his beard seemed to indicate, perhaps closer to mid-fifties than eighties or more. I had never seen him in Ravutsa, or even heard of anyone matching his description. I briefly wondered if he might be from Spalia Dorna, although that did not explain why he was in the Kingswood this far up the valley, digging a hole by the swollen riverbank.

After several minutes, he paused, the shovel buried in the dirt, and he looked around, his face a sour mix of annoyance and apprehension.

"You can come out, whoever you are," he called out, his voice coarse and sharp. "No need to spy on me."

I flushed a little and swallowed, composing my face to an expression of friendly neutrality. Finally, I stepped around the boulder and came within a few yards of him. He glanced me up and down.

"Another foraging girl," he said to himself, nodding as though he'd been expecting no less. "You're from the village, are you not?"

I nodded. A strange sensation crawled over my skin, dry and scaly, and I shuddered despite the warmth of the day. It took me a moment to recognize it as some kind of magic, searching and sliding over me. Mother's magic was warm like soil in midsummer, gentle as an unfurling leaf, flourishing in vigor and tenacity. I didn't know if mine had a feeling to it, but I'd always imagined that it was calm, golden, and soft. Like Mother's, except brighter and less earthy. This prickle of magic was rough and I could feel his aggravation pulsing through it.

"Can I help you, sir?" I asked, careful to not meet his gaze. Mother had told me that it was considered rude to look directly into the eyes of the wealthy and lesser gentry. I wasn't sure if the yellow-clothed man was of genteel birth, since he didn't look the slightest bit dignified or refined despite his fine attire. But I felt that erring on the side of caution was safer than offending someone who emanated such hostile magic around him.

"A village girl?" he scoffed dismissively. He turned back to his shovel, muttering under his breath about my interruption to his work as though he did not expect me to be able to hear him. "As if she could be of

service when... no, of course not. It was a simple offer, though thoughtless.”

I shifted from foot to foot awkwardly, picking at the handle of my basket where a reed was beginning to fray. “Shall I go, sir?” I asked after he seemed to have stopped speaking to himself.

He gave me a keen look, his eyes narrowing and darting over me several times. “Tell me, girl, when was the last frost?” he asked suddenly, running his hand thoughtfully up and down the shovel shaft.

“Nearly a month now,” I said, taken aback. “There was a small frost on the higher fields above Ravutsa about three weeks back but...”

“Thank you,” he said shortly. “And have any riders come out of the mountains near here? In black or brown leathers, with no markings on their horses?”

I shook my head in surprise. “The only riders who ever come through Ravutsa are from the Duke of Chartrin, and they only come to gather in the taxes at Harvest, or at Candle Lighting if some farmer had been unable to pay their full due before. Spalia Dorna would be more likely to have travelers pass through, but news of strange riders would have made it up to us within a day or two.” I faltered as I finished speaking. Travelers came up from the Plains. No one came out from the mountains that I’d ever heard of. Certainly no one came back who was taken up the valley into the mountains.

He nodded, digging the shovel deeper into the dirt with a spiteful shove of his boot. “Yes, of course,” he said, waving me off. “You may go, child.”

I lingered a moment as he turned his back on me, and then I picked up my skirts and ran back along the forest path, keeping close to the river until I saw the break in the trees where the Ravutsa cut through the fields around the town. I slowed my step then and turned toward home. A few morels had fallen while I ran, but I didn’t want to go back for them. I found several more growing along the trail, and I stopped to pick them. My mind mulled over the stranger, returning always to the question of why he was in the Kingswood at all.

There was no law against digging in the Kingswood, I thought, although I couldn’t come up with any reasons why someone would. He wasn’t hunting, or laying traps, and his clothes were too fine for him to be a

vagabond. And then there was his magic. While I had heard that possessing magic wasn't considered that uncommon a gift in the more populous regions of Minalorea, the glittering royal cities of the coast, let alone in the distant, foreign cities of Uhorath, I had gone most of my life seldom encountering anyone outside my mother who had even the smallest talent for magic.

I wiped my hands on my apron and stood, shielding my eyes as I tried to gauge the hour by the sun's slow descent toward the west. Grimacing, I realized that it was nearly time for supper, and that Mother would be expecting me. I tucked a cloth around the mushrooms and set off, the man in yellow banished from my thoughts for the time.

Chapter Six

I bent over the garden bed, my shears snipping quickly at the clustered overgrowth of chives. They threatened to spread beyond their pot and overtake the neat and orderly fronds of carrots and still small radishes. I could hear Mother singing, and I assumed that she was still busy at her wheel. She had been quiet and thoughtful the last few days, and had been watching me carefully, but I had no new dreams since our talk, and this seemed to give her comfort.

After a moment, I stopped and scanned the forest, hoping to catch a glimpse of Soren. Instead, there was only the predictable and familiar gray-brown of tree trunks and the rustling mass of green leaves interspersed with even darker evergreens. I sighed and set my shears down. The morning heat was growing strong and I longed to be deep in the forest, where the ground would still be cool from the damp moss and the thick canopy of leaves.

“Callia?” Mother stood in the doorway, her hands on her hips. “Are you finished out there?”

I straightened up, nearly pitching backward into the bed of knee-high cucumber vines. “Almost. Is there something you need me to do for you?”

She stepped out onto the path, the sunlight brushing gold over her light umber skin as the shadows of the house released her. She pulled at a wayward rose cane which tried to catch at her skirts and bent it back away from the path, tucking it into the lattice alongside the rest of the briar. The cluster of barely unfurling crimson buds nodded at her like a flock of scarlet birds who’d just been given a fistful of seeds.

“Master Jarisek has promised me several fleeces, and said they would be ready by noon,” she said as she knelt beside me, her fingers brushing over the carrots as though petting a stray cat. “I have to spin for the rest of the day if I’m to have these bobbins ready for the weaver by tomorrow eve. I need you to go to the Jarisek farm and bring back the fleeces today.”

I stifled a groan. Master Jarisek himself was nice enough, and his twin daughters, a couple years my junior, were amiable and I enjoyed seeing them and hearing their tales from Spalia Dorna if they'd recently been to visit their eldest sister and her ever-multiplying brood. But Dama Jarisek was unlike her husband in temperament and geniality, and I'd always thought it rather fortunate that their children had always taken more after him than their mother. She especially harbored a dislike of my mother for living outside of town, for not remarrying, and for not giving my sister and I over to the priest as vicar's wards or even to a foundlings' home after my father's death. Dama Jarisek had transferred her vitriol to Rose and I easily enough the moment my sister had turned fifteen. I had always wondered if this was because one of her seven boys had intentions toward us, or if it was the general principle of hating women who did not fit her idea of humble and contrite outcasts from society. Either, or both, explanations seemed fitting and I regularly changed my mind about which was foremost in her mind when I saw her.

"Do I have to go by the house at all?" I asked hopefully, but the look on my mother's face did not seem particularly promising.

"She may well be busy with her garden, or with Olesa's newest baby," Mother said softly, a smile playing at her lips as she guessed my real question. "But there is certainly no need for you to stop in and give regards, as the fleeces will be in the shearing barn. I believe Aleks is supposed to have them ready for you."

I stood and brushed the bits of cut chives from my apron. "I hope he isn't too talkative today or I won't be back in time for supper," I said, rolling my eyes.

The second Jarisek boy had a problem with behaving as though incessant talking counted as conversation, never taking a moment to pause as he told story after story that never seemed to quite reach their conclusion before he'd begun the next that somehow was connected to the one before it. Unless someone came to my rescue, it could sometimes take up to seven hours before I found a way to politely disengage. Rose could do it before he got close to starting the second story, and I was never sure how she managed to do it.

"There's no need for you to hurry home if he is, you know," Mother said, rising and placing her hand on my elbow. "But perhaps Demir

will be there as well, and you can ask him about the books that have come in recently from the valley.”

I flushed. Mother had suspicions about Demir’s intentions toward me, and had never been exactly subtle about her approval of him as a potential suitor. I think it was because he was the only one my age who took any interest in reading or the world beyond Spalia Dorna. “I could ask the same of Jelina and Irena, and still be home before supper,” I said, careful to keep my tone light and cheerful. “Unless you’re trying to get me out of the house for the day.”

“Calanthea Kovalic, why would I try that?” Mother laughed, pulling me close to her as she placed a kiss on my cheek. I slipped my arm around her and walked her back toward the house.

“Because you like the quiet after all, and because you wish to see me married off and taking the high house from Dama Jarisek, if I could land her eldest son?”

Mother laughed again, pushing me ahead of her as I set my basket of chives on the table. “The quiet is too much,” she said, as she put a small piece of oak kindling into the stove, “and more than one daughter married in a season would be too much for me. I need time to get comfortable with the idea.”

My heart thudded in my chest as her words sent the smile off my face. She still spoke in a jovial tone, but I knew she meant it, at least partially.

“I’ll try to be back before supper,” I said, turning away from her. “And I won’t accept any proposals while I’m gone.” While marrying a wealthy farmer was at least a less horrifying prospect than being bonded to a magic-touched creature who roamed the Kingswood, it still would disrupt her life yet again. It would leave her completely alone in the cottage, removed from the town and any friendly near neighbors, under the shadow of the forest.

“Very well,” she said. She busied herself at the stove, filling the copper kettle with fresh water and inspecting a pot of recently chopped vegetables that was slowly simmering down into mouth-watering soup. I watched her from the corner of my eye as I gathered my things and pinned my hair up tidily. If there was even a chance of crossing paths with Dama Jarisek, I wanted to look as presentable and respectable as I could manage

so that at least she couldn't speak badly of Mother's ability to provide for and rear my sister and me.

Not that she wouldn't find something else to critique, but at least it would likely be after I was out of ear-shot. I shrugged and ducked out the front door, breathing in the smell of the newly bloomed roses that climbed over the door mantel and the honeysuckle just beyond the roses. After a moment, I turned toward Ravutsa and the Jarisek farm and pulled the door closed behind me.

The road to the Jarisek farm was caked with dust, and the sun beat down on my face as I cut across the lower portion of the small hill that rose up to the main farmhouse. It was an impressive two-story house, with real glass windows and doors on each of the four sides, red to the south, green to the east, yellow to the west, and blue to the north. They seemed to be freshly painted, and the eastern one stood open. I could see a figure sitting in the door frame, a large basket at their feet, and they were occupied with whatever task was at hand so I passed by unnoticed. The fields behind the house were planted in neat, orderly rows that stretched away toward the ridge that cut off our valley from the next one over. A scant line of trees loomed as a single hazy mass at the end of the farthest field, and I could guess that it was where Master Jarisek would be, planting rye or barley.

There were four different barns that clustered around the main farmhouse, and two smaller dwellings between the larger pair of the barns. It had been several years since I'd called at the farm proper, but I knew each building and its use well enough to remember where to go. It was strangely quiet as I walked toward the smallest barn, with no animals clustered in any of the four enclosures that opened out from the long sides.

"Jelina? Irena?" I called out hopefully as I stepped over the dark stone threshold and my eyes adjusted to the low light of the sheep barn. My nose and mouth were filled with the smell of newly washed wool as I went farther in.

"Calanthea?" a boy's voice called back. "Dama Calanthea Kovalic?"

"I've come for the fleeces," I said loudly, looking around for the speaker. A boy with tousled black hair tumbled down from a pile of dirty fleeces at the far end of the barn, a half-eaten pastry in one hand, and his face covered in strawberry jam.

“Father said you’d be along soon,” he said cheerfully, stuffing a large bite of the pastry into his mouth as he walked toward me. I searched my brain for his name, almost certain that I’d seen him around the farm or at market before, but came up blank after running through the first seven Jarisek children’s names. “Father also wanted to ask if your mother would bring him the salve for his knees again. Demir says hello and the girls will be along if they can.”

The boy stopped a few feet away from me, looking me up and down with a candid curiosity and friendliness that I found amusing and refreshing.

“I’ll be sure to mention the salve to Mother. Where are your sisters?” I asked as he took another bite of his treat. “Holed up in the house?”

“Nah,” he said, wiping at the liberal dusting of crumbs that clung to his faded and patched work shirt. “Aleks says he saw a strange deer in the Kingswood this morning, and Demir called him a liar. So they and the girls went out to the river to see if they can see it again. I had to stay behind because Father said someone had to be here waiting for you. Not that I mind waiting, mind you. Didn’t seem like the deer would stick around for hours so close to town, if it ever was there in the first place and not a just another story to explain why Al forgot to buy flour from the miller for Mother.”

“Did Aleks describe the strange deer?” I asked, a prickle of concern climbing up my spine.

“Just big and white,” he said with a shrug, giving up on cleaning up his appearance with a final dismissive rub. “Well, he said a bunch of other things but they didn’t seem important. Something about antlers like winnowing forks. As if Aleks has never seen a real deer before to know what antlers are supposed to look like. I’ve got your fleeces ready, if you’d like.”

“Thank you, young master...” I bit my lip. I realized with a twinge of embarrassment that I knew only half of the Jarisek children’s names and none of the youngest ones.

“Feodyr,” he said with a nod. “I’m not a master yet, Dama Calanthea” he added a moment later, reddening. “I’m closer than Anton, but I’m still only eleven. Just big for my age, Demir says.”

“Well, Feodyr, I’m not a dama,” I said as I followed him toward an unharnessed cart that stood near the back doors of the barn. “Just Callia.”

He looked up at me and wiped off the last smear of strawberry jam with his sleeve. “Oh good,” he said as though I’d passed some evaluation. I quirked my brow at him with a smile and he grinned back sheepishly. “Demir will ask me,” he said after a moment. “And so will Jelina. She had it in her head that you were married off to the Spirit Bear too, like your sister was. Not sure what a bear would do with two wives anyway.”

I laughed a little at the face he made, and he shrugged nonchalantly as he jumped onto the squat driver’s box on the cart. “Have they been down the valley recently?” I asked as he dug through the bundles of fleeces that were wrapped in heavy canvas cloths.

“Last week,” he said, sticking his head up for a moment. Little tufts of cream-colored wool stuck to his face, flying away as he moved and then catching again at his shirt and the remnant of jelly on his sleeve. He rubbed at his cheek thoughtfully. “Mother’s leaving tomorrow though, going down to stay for a few weeks, and Father’s out trying to plant the fields now that he’s sure the frosts have finally passed.”

“And you’ve been left in charge of the house?” I said, leaning over the side of the cart as he hauled a large bundle out, holding it above his head.

He grimaced and shook his head. “Irena. She says I’m not going to be allowed in the kitchen or the pantry while she’s running the place.”

“I won’t tell her about the tart then,” I took the fleeces from him and he slipped down to the floor.

“Thanks,” he said, picking fluff from his shirt with an expression of distaste. “She’ll likely catch me out later for it. She says I’m a terror and teaching Anton all my worst habits.”

“I hope it was worth it then.”

“Callia?” he asked after a moment, giving me a sidelong glance.

“Yes?” I asked, shifting the bundle into the knapsack I’d brought with me.

“Demir says that you and your mother live under the eaves of the Kingswood,” he said, pressing his lips together as though gaging my response. I nodded and he continued. “Do you often see the forest spirits?”

he asked. "Is it true that they wander the edges at night, waiting for those who come too close?"

"Just the bear that I've ever seen," I said, shaking my head. "And even he wasn't actually a real forest spirit, you know."

"No Spirit Deer then," he said, sighing. His smile wavered for a moment and then he shrugged. "Demir was right that we shouldn't get our hopes up."

"You're hoping that there really is a Spirit Deer?" I asked as we came out into the daylight and he blinked owlshly up at me as though surprised.

"The fields are slow to grow this year, and the plows turned up more stones than usual," he said simply. "The frosts were late and harsh. Spirit Deer are supposed to bring blessings back to the fields, to work against the curse of stone and winter. If there really was a white deer and we could catch him and gain his wishes..." he looked out over the field and his face seemed troubled for a moment.

"I don't know if a white deer can grant wishes," I said, thinking of how this would probably amuse Soren.

"Then I don't suppose there's any hope for Ravutsa at all," he said glumly.

I wanted to cheer him up again, but my mind refused to sort my words into anything resembling comfort or encouragement. Feodyr turned to me as I shouldered my pack.

"Thank you, Feodyr," I said smiling. "It was lovely to make your acquaintance."

"You'll come tell me if you do see a spirit, won't you?" he asked brightly. "Jelina said Grandmother told her that there was once a spirit owl that lived in our part of the Kingswood, but it was a long time ago, before our farm was even built."

I knew the story well enough, as it was featured in one of Ziphara's collections of important omens, although the exact location of the owl seemed dependent entirely on who was telling the tale. "Of course, I'll come to tell you if I ever see one," I promised and he smiled at me warmly. He turned back toward the barn as I returned to the road, staying the shade of a long line of oak trees.

“Callia, wait!” I heard him shout after me after I’d gone about twenty yards. I turned to see Feodyr running over hill, rummaging through his pockets. “For the road,” he said, holding out a small bundle of plain white muslin, tied with a bit of brown string.

I took it from him carefully and he gave me a conspiratorial grin, his cheeks flushing. He ran off again before I could unwrap the soft package, and I saw that a corner of the cloth was beginning to dampen with a sweet-smelling red liquid. The smell of freshly baked pastry wafted on the breeze and I put it in my sack, avoiding placing it where it could possibly ooze onto the fleeces, and turned down the road. I could only imagine Dama Jarisek’s face once she found out that several pastries were missing from her pantry under Irena’s watch, and hoped that Feodyr would not catch too much of her tongue, or her hand, as a result.

Chapter Seven

I was nearly home again when I felt a strange whisper of magic tickle over the nape of my neck, sending a shudder of excitement down my spine. There was no one on the road near me, and I stepped off the path into a thicket of willows that sprawled out from the edge of the Kingswood. It was cooler in their shade and I took a deep breath as I wiped at the dust that had settled on my face and arms.

“Callia?” a soft voice called, low and urgent.

I snapped my head up, scanning the road again although it was still empty. Turning toward the wood, I walked a few steps farther into the quiet stillness.

“Soren?” I called out, keeping my voice low. A branch broke several yards away, sending a squirrel scurrying over the dead leaves and up a nearby elm, where he turned and gave me an angry, shrill scolding. I left my pack beside the willows, retrieving the gifted pastry, and went toward where I’d heard the branch.

Soren was curled up in the roots of a massive maple, his head resting over his front legs as he watched me approach.

“I’ve had a time of trying to find you today,” he said as I knelt beside him. He seemed wary and tired. He hardly glanced at me at all as his eyes keep darting around the surrounding wood.

“I was home most of the morning before Mother sent me on an errand,” I retorted. “And I heard that you were seen near the Ravutsa river today.”

He lifted his head, giving me a reproachful look. “There’s a strange scent in the woods today. Something... I know it somehow.”

“Are you all right?” I asked, worried at the distress in his voice.

“I should return to the Starlight Glade before long. It’s the safest place for me right now.”

“You found it?” I asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Soren said, a note of excitement edging in his voice.

I felt the prick of magic pulling at my stomach again, like a fishing hook inexorably dragging me closer to Soren, calling me deeper into

the Kingswood. “Do you want me to come with you?” I asked hopefully. “I’d need to return home for a moment and...”

“I must go now,” he said simply, beginning to rise to his feet. His legs shook as though he’d been running for hours.

“What happened?” I asked, reaching up to touch his flank. He sighed and bent his head down, resting it against my shoulder. I stood, trailing my fingers over the velvet soft fur of his neck. “I heard that you were seen along the edge of the forest today. Are you hurt?”

“There is nothing for you to worry about,” he replied, his voice soft and calm as he bucked his head against my hand reassuringly. “Will you come to the pool with me this afternoon? It is wild, overgrown, and I do not know if I can clear it on my own.”

“You still want my help?” I asked, feeling the surge of excitement building in my chest, my heart racing.

“Of course, I do,” he said, giving me a gentle nudge with his nose. “That’s why I’ve waited for you instead of returning hours ago.”

I smiled despite myself. I wanted Soren to stay safe, but it made me happy that he’d sought me out so determinedly, and been willing to wait for me. “Do you know the best way from here?” I asked, glancing around. I wasn’t far from the cottage, but the mid-day shadows still warped around the trees strangely and gave them a feeling of newness and unfamiliarity.

“Go home with your things,” he said, his voice cracking as it fell to a whisper. “Meet me near the clearing where we first met. I know this part of the woods well enough, but there’s no reason for you to avoid the road.”

“Are you sure you are all right?” I asked, reaching out my hand to set it on his flank. He shied away, then stopped and brushed his antlers against my hand. They were softer than I’d imagined, and the glistening velvet was almost warm beneath my fingers, as though the light that emanated from them gave off a gentle heat like a candle flame.

“I will be, soon,” Soren said, pushing me toward the road. “Don’t take long, please. I... I will wait but I have to return to the pool soon.”

I nodded and shouldered the bag of fleeces. My mind spun a hundred half-thought-out questions for him as I walked back to Mother’s cottage and, just as quickly, I rejected each one of them for their implications or invasiveness. Finally, I settled on his having been chased by

Aleks Jarisek, or at the very least, cornered by one of the other Jariseks who'd gone looking for him.

As I approached the cottage, I decided to not go inside, knowing my mother would ask me about my visit and delay my return to the Kingswood. I left the pack beside the kitchen door. My eyes fell on the ax we used for chopping our firewood, and I picked it up, careful to place the leather sheath over the ax head. Soren had mentioned that the pool was overgrown and I hardly felt that my foraging shears would be enough to do much good. And, with the shuddering recollection of the man in yellow, I felt just the smallest bit reassured to have something with me that I could use to defend myself. I retrieved my uneaten lunch from the knapsack and turned away from the cottage, running toward the forest. I felt as though a pair of watchful eyes was on me as I entered the reassuring coolness of the wood, but I saw no one as I found my trail. The feeling subsided after a few minutes, and I ran on, hoping that Soren would still be waiting for me.

Soren was pacing nervously as I entered the clearing. The sunlight broke through the leaves overhead, washing everything in a golden glow and setting the delicate forest blooms afire as though they were made from gemstones rather than fragile petals. The trees quivered as though dancing together, enraptured with the sweet scent of nectar that the wind threaded through their uplifted branches.

"I'm sorry if I took too long," I panted, trying to regain my breath. He glanced up as though startled, then gracefully bounded across the clearing to meet me.

"Not at all," he said, sounding a little more like himself. There was still a note of apprehension in his voice, but he no longer seemed as if he were running from a hunter.

"I brought Mother's ax, it's only meant for splitting firewood, but I thought..." I began, placing my hand on his side.

"Excellent. There's still time left to begin the work before sundown, I think." He turned away from me and plunged down the trail that led through the heart of the Kingwood.

I followed after him, pushing aside branches that snapped back into my face as he deftly found his footing over the faint trail.

“Soren!” I called out after him as I ducked and ran, trying to keep pace with his hooves. I found myself falling far behind him, only able to keep track by the sound of snapping twigs and the occasional flash of white against the gray green haze of the woodlands. “Soren, please wait!”

But he was long gone ahead of me and I realized I did not know where I was within the Kingswood. I stopped after a moment, resting my hands on my waist as I caught my breath. Mother had long ago told me how to tell directions within the woods, although I’d never actually used her lesson since Rose had found it easier to remember than I had. Soren did not reappear, and I felt an unease creep over my skin, remembering the man in yellow who had been wandering the wood, the unfriendly, unsettling prickle of magic.

Swallowing, I turned toward what I thought was east and began to walk, stopping now and then to listen for any streams that might lead me to the river. A cracking of a larger limb against a stone sounded close by and Soren reappeared, his nostrils flaring as he came up short by my side. I caught my arms around his neck to keep from losing my balance.

“Why on earth are you wandering off?” he asked exasperatedly. I jerked my head back in surprise.

“I don’t know these woods, you know,” I replied tersely, releasing him and taking a step away from him.

Soren blinked, studying my face intently. He drew a deep breath as he stepped close to me again and I could feel the warmth of him against my neck, brushing against my arms. “I did not mean...” Soren trailed off. “I need you.”

“Well, so does my mother,” I said. A sudden pang of guilt seeped into my thoughts. The image of her working over her spinning wheel alone, of her tending the garden and mixing her salves and remedies, flashed before my eyes. Alone. She’d already lost Rose and I’d been little aid to her for weeks now. Because I was preoccupied with avoiding the reminders of my sister that lingered in every part of our home. Because I was spending time with Soren instead, distracting myself from my family and my grief. I tried to reason that it was because I didn’t want him to be lonely. That I wanted to help him with renewing the celestial pool to help him be rid of his curse, but it felt hollow to say it to myself.

Why? I asked myself. Why did I care about helping Soren so much? My thoughts spun around me like leaves torn from trees in a storm, never settling before being carried away beyond my reach. I wanted to bring Rose back, and I wanted to be free from the valley, just as much as Soren wanted to be freed of whatever spell bound him to the Kingswood.

“I could carry you.” Soren’s gentle words jolted me out of my thoughts and I shook my head, dispelling the last swirling question from my mind.

“What?” I asked, feeling color rising in my face.

“I think I’m strong enough, even in this form,” he said musingly. “I could carry you, and once we are back onto the path, it wouldn’t take long for us to reach the pool. And I wouldn’t lose you again.”

I began to protest but he knelt down beside me patiently and looked up at me, his eyes shining again. Heaving a sigh, I swung my leg over his back and he slowly got to his feet. I lurched forward, grabbing around his neck. He huffed in protest as my knapsack slipped from my back and swung against his hind legs.

“You needn’t strangle me,” he said, gritting his teeth. “Mind the ax shaft as well,”

I pushed myself upright, trying to adjust my seat on his back. I slipped my fingers through his thick, short fur and adjusted my pack to avoid it hitting his hind flank again. “I am sorry,” I said as he took a cautious step forward. I felt myself slide a little to one side and I leaned forward again instinctively, stopping just short of throwing my arms around his neck again.

“Have you never ridden a horse before?” he asked, snorting a little as though laughing.

“Never. When would I have had the chance?” I asked, struggling to sit.

“Clutch my sides with your knees,” he said with a sigh. “This may take longer than I thought.”

After a few minutes, I found myself steady on his back, my perch there feeling less precarious, and he began to walk with a faster rhythm, still graceful and careful. It seemed to take more than an hour for us to finally reach the glade, but the sun had not yet gone more than two hours past its zenith. I slipped down from Soren’s back, grateful for the soft

cushion of moss beneath my feet, and I breathed a long sigh of relief. He glanced sidelong at me, his nose twitching.

"I hope that wasn't too terrible," he said, lifting his face toward mine. "It was my first time carrying anyone on my back."

"No little sisters clamoring for rides then?" I laughed, rubbing at my thighs to return feeling to them.

Soren shook his head. "No sisters at all. Just my brother and I, and we certainly would never have been allowed to ride each other like horses."

"You missed out then," I said with a shrug. Rose and I had many romps when we were young, pretending to be knights going to war, though Mother had put a firm end to our games after we'd tumbled into her spinning wheel a little too roughly and broken the spindle and snarled a good length of finely spun wool.

"On having sisters, or on giving rides like a horse?" he asked.

"Both, perhaps," I answered. "Didn't you dream of learning to ride as a small boy?"

"I was forced to learn to ride as a small boy," he said with a huff. "I didn't much like it until I got older and my falls from the saddle became more infrequent."

"At least I didn't fall then," I said. Everywhere felt a little sore from riding, but the tension melted away as I stepped out into the gentle sunlight.

"I was doing my best to not let you be hurt," he said softly. I felt him following at my back as I wandered toward the pool.

"This is the pool, the Starlight Waters?" I asked skeptically. The glade was wide, circled by ancient beeches and oaks and hawthorns, and in the center was a still pond, nearly a perfect circle. There didn't seem to be anything mystical about the pool, although it was unusually clear of pond scum and algae, and no fish or frogs disturbed the stillness of the water.

Soren snorted in frustration. "It fits, doesn't it? A perfectly round pool, ringed by a perfect circle of powerful trees. And there's a feeling to this place. A faint thrum of something faded away."

I looked up, surveying the even spacing of the most ancient growth of trees. Wild roses grew thickly around their lower trunks, with a profusion of pink and red blooms. I didn't know much about the ancient

Starlight Waters, but Ziphara at least had spoken of them as mystical, wondrous places. This glade was beautiful and serene, I thought, yet all but the pool of water at the center was completely wild and overgrown. I couldn't find a hint of the power or sanctity in the tall grasses and wandering shrubs and fallen limbs of the past century. Soren seemed to pick up on my reaction and he nudged me forward.

"What do you need me to do?" I asked. He seemed to take that as encouragement, and he ran down the grassy sward toward the pond.

"We have to clear away the debris, the branches that are in the water, and I'll take care of the trees that need to be thinned, or removed," he said, stopping just shy of the water's edge.

"Does it really need to be pruned and tidied just to restore the magic?" I asked, feeling a little disheartened at the thought of how long it might take to access the magic if we needed to clear and trim away a few centuries of overgrowth.

"Magic likes order, and it will be easier to renew if we aren't battling through decades of debris and distorting the flow of magic around snarls of trees and wild plants," he answered, as though this were obvious as a part of any magical rite.

I set down my things and followed him carefully. The ground was strewn with thick drifts of fallen leaves and broken branches, showing the passage of the long years and not a small number of winter storms. Soren knelt down, examining his reflection in the mirror-still surface. As I came behind him, I caught sight of the reflection and gasped.

There in the water, looking back at me, was a young man with a handsome, elegant face, maybe a few years older than I, with pale honeyed skin and bright, starry amber eyes. He had shoulder-length golden brown curls which seemed to give him a subtle sunlit glow against the darkening depths of the pool.

"Soren?" I asked hesitantly.

He rose and looked at me sharply. "So you saw that too?" he asked. His voice was soft, almost a whisper, and heavy with a kind of sadness that felt familiar. It was the way Mother had sounded when we had been told the elders wanted to give a village girl to the Spirit Bear. It was the way that Father Gadrel had spoken to us after he had finished the binding ceremony, as we watched the Bear carry Rose away.

I put my hand out to touch his flank, wanting to give him comfort despite having no words that would suffice. He turned his face toward my hand and I slipped closer to him.

He sighed as he closed his eyes, long lashes flicking over the milk-white fur of his face, and I felt him come beside me, his body warm against mine, reassuring and gentle. After a moment, he pulled away, looking up at the sun, which had risen to the middle of the sky while we walked through the forest.

“We don’t have long if you wish to be home in time for supper,” he said. This time he sounded more like himself again, calm and assertive. “The first thing is to clear the glade.”

I nodded and began to gather armfuls of branches and dead grasses, hauling them up the bank to a relatively flat part of the glade, far enough from the tree-line to be safe for a fire.

After several trips, I paused to look for Soren. He was inspecting the trees, weaving around their trunks and nosing at dead undergrowth. I watched him for a moment, the sun blazing down on the back of my neck, and then began pulling another armful of dead grasses free of entangled, broken branches.

Chapter Eight

I realized with a jolt that I was kneeling at the brink of the pond, fascinated by how still the surface was, uncertain how long I'd lingered there while the sun blazed down on my back and arms. I found that the clear, dark waters calmed me as I gazed into the pool. I could see only about a foot or so of the pond bed under the clear water before it sloped away sharply into black, seemingly bottomless, depths. It was like no other pond or lake I'd ever seen, and I felt a strange desire to dive into it, to try to swim down and find its source.

"Soren?" I called out, turning toward him. He lifted his head, a perfect white outline against the dark greens and browns of the tree trunks. After a moment he came down to me, picking his way carefully through the long, tangled grass.

"How were the celestial pools formed?" I said, shielding my eyes from the sun.

He took a deep breath and looked at me intently. "You feel it pulling at you too, then?" he asked finally.

I flushed. "It's just fascinating," I said sheepishly. "I've never seen anything like it."

"No one has, if the stories are true," he said. "Not in centuries. And even then, they were ancient, older than Minalorea, older than the Kingdom of the Crystalling Stars. Olandrus says that there were legends that the pools are as old as magic in our world itself, or perhaps the source of it."

"Was that the old name of the Crystal Waste?" I asked. I knew that there was once a great kingdom there, when Minalorea was no more than a wilderness boasting a mere scattering of savage war-barons and a few sorcerer princes, with only wild and battle-torn provinces to their name. "And who was telling Olandrus these stories?"

Soren laughed and bent down, his nose nearly touching the water. "That's the name my mother told me belonged to the Crystal Waste. It's found in a few books, but I don't know if that's what they called themselves or if it was a name given by the first lords of the Minalorean Court. As for

Olandrus' sources, he was well traveled, and the foremost scholar of his day. I always assumed he heard about the pools from the people who lived near them and maintained them."

I sighed, wishing that Soren's answers would have appeased my curiosity instead of sparking a half dozen new questions. He turned, pushing at my shoulder with his nose.

"Stay out of the water," he said, a sense of urgent warning in his words. "Until we have cleared the glade and righted the stones, I don't think it's wise to touch the pool."

It made sense, but the draw toward the water was strong. Soren watched me for a moment, and then seemed content that I was not about to ignore his advice.

He stepped away, his ears forward and alert, and he sighed. "It is safe, and quiet, and he would not dare come here," he said to the wind, as though he'd forgotten I was there entirely. "It is safe."

Soren bent his head down and a shudder ran through his whole body, a slow glow of shimmering yellow and white building around him. I paused, my arms full of reeds, and watched as it began to build around him, shimmering and bending the sunlight so that he seemed to be made of light. I saw his body outlined sharply, white against gold, and then a flash sparkling light blinded me, sending me stumbling back onto the ground with surprise.

I rubbed at my eyes, the reeds scattered around me, and I looked toward Soren. The light was gone, and I saw nothing where he had stood.

"Soren?" I called out, a ball of fear forming in my throat. I scrambled to my feet and ran toward the spot where he had been.

There on the ground was a young man, naked and unmoving. I felt rooted to the ground for a moment before I fell to my knees and turned him over onto my lap. A mess of golden-brown curls caught over his face like a net, and I brushed it aside as best as I could. He was still breathing but his eyes were closed, long black lashes damp against his flushed cheeks. I shook him, and slowly, he opened his eyes, glancing around as if stunned and unsure of his surroundings. His gaze flicked around us nervously, as though trying to find something to hold his attention or assuage some fear.

"Callia?" he spoke at last, his voice cracking and weak.

“Soren?” I asked, breathless and confused. I glanced at him questioningly, taking in the broad shoulders and well-formed muscles of his chest that heaved under my fingertips. He blinked and pushed himself up with a long exhale, still on edge but seeming less ready to run at a moment’s notice. His body shook slightly and I tried to steady him with one arm around his shoulders. “Are you...”

“Of course I’m Soren,” he said dismissively, a faint smile on his lips. “I am fine.”

“You didn’t tell me that you would... that you could...” I trailed off, feeling at a loss for words as he sat up fully. He settled on the grass next to me, drawing his legs to his chest as he watched me intently.

“It appears to be safe,” he said, nodding. “The transformation was contained and controlled and there is no way for him to be alerted to it.”

“Who won’t be alerted?” I asked, crossing my arms and watching him skeptically. He was lithe and fit, his arms and legs well-muscled, but not in the way of a farm hand. Where they had bulging arms and ropey, thick thighs, Soren was lean and sinewy. The farm boys had burly, scarred backs, built for bearing heavy loads and drawing plows beside their oxen, while his back tapered from shoulders to waist, with pleasing lines of muscles that drew my attention. The only mark on his skin was a faint outline of four tear-drops radiating out from a small circle that centered just below his shoulder blades. Much like a deer, he seemed built for graceful agility and speed instead of backbreaking work.

“Ah,” he looked at me, his face still and quiet. He flexed his arms twice, extending his fingers thoughtfully as though sensing for something I could not see. “Callia, I wonder, do you know much about the Fortress of the Golden Peaks? The Tower of Chelady?”

“You mean the Duke of Chartrin’s household?”

“Yes, the Golden Duke. Lord of the Golden Peaks, Earl of the Celandine Kingswood, and Duke of Chartrin. What is known about him, or said here about his household and estate?”

“Almost nothing,” I said with a shrug. “He stays in his tower, and no one goes there that I’ve ever heard. He sends out his steward, and occasionally a few knights, every year to gather in the taxes at Harvest. The steward makes rounds every six years for the major festivals of the year, but no one has ever seen the duke himself. Not in twenty years or more.”

He furrowed his brows together, a shadow of question and concern passing over his face. “The steward surely has spoken about what goes on at Tower of Chelady?”

I shook my head. “He only tells us what is owed, takes it, with an eye to what more he can ask of us at next harvest, and then leaves. What has that to do with your... transformation?”

“The duke... well...” he began, his shoulders drawing together tightly as he winced, his back seeming to convulse slightly at his words. “I am...” Soren sighed, shaking his head as he passed a hand over his eyes. His hand shook a little, and he coiled his fingers against his palm in a fist, as though trying to control a surge of pain from overtaking him. He was half turned away from me, but I could still see most of his face clearly.

He reminded me of the illustrations of the First Gods and of the celestial-born sorcerers of kingdoms long dead and forgotten that had occasionally been included in books on the history of magic in Minalorea. I had little money to spend after Mother gave us our dues for our part of spinning, and I tried to reason that the books I bought had always been to sate my desire to learn, but some choices had been influenced by the presence of such drawings. I’d always marveled at their physical beauty, their elegant forms that had never been bent or broken by field work or the strain of the smithing crafts.

“So you would not have heard if he keeps a wizard in his employ then,” Soren said at last, looking out over the forest.

“I am afraid not,” I said with a grimace and he nodded. “Is that so unusual for the gentry and aristocracy?”

“No, not exactly,” he said, with a frustrated huffing grunt. “But he also is seldom at Court, and has never mentioned keeping one in his employ. That’s the sort of thing most would brag about, so it’s curious he didn’t.”

“How do you know he has one then?” I asked.

He looked at me, as though confused by my question. “Because there is wizard who wanders the Kingswood. Can’t you feel the magic? It’s grown stronger almost daily for a few weeks now. There must be one.”

A wizard in the wood? I shook my head. I couldn’t fathom what one would be doing in the Golden Peaks at all, let alone wandering in the Kingswood without anyone seeing him and asking questions. One person

had seen a large bear in the wood once and it was all people spoke of for weeks before he'd come to town and spoken to my sister and I. A stranger with magic would surely...

My breath caught in my chest. The man in the yellow tunic was unknown to me, but had seemed perfectly at ease in the wood. Why would a wizard be digging holes in the bank of the Ravutsa river? None of it seemed to make any sense at all. What duke would send a wizard to wander a forest anyway?

"Soren, what is he like?"

"The wizard? I..." he groaned, clutching uncomfortably at his throat as another spasm shuddered down his back. "I... I don't know much but it's deeply unpleasant to try to say the little I know. He's powerful and..."

"I meant the duke," I said, shaking my head. "I've lived in his duchy almost my entire life, and I know nothing about him."

Soren drew a deep breath, encircling his legs with his arms as he seemed to consider his words. "I don't really know. He came to the Menastel Court last summer, and left just as quickly, and I never saw him. The last time he was in attendance before that was when I was very young. Too young to be allowed anywhere without my nursery maid at least. I am afraid he is almost as much a stranger to me as he would be to you."

"Were you raised at court?" I asked, tilting my head to the side. My eyes wandered over his body again. He certainly looked and spoke the part of a nobleman's son, if the stories about them were truthful in regards to their physique and eloquence.

He pressed his lips together, his gaze staying on my face. "I was often in the company of the broader Court of Minalorea. But more often, I was in lessons with tutors, in the study with governesses, and in the garden with my mother and brother. And then later when I had come of age to leave governesses and play hours behind, I was frequently left to myself in my mother's library, or taken to train by my father's retainers."

"You have a library?" The words slipped out quickly, and I flushed. I'd always dreamed of such a thing, but couldn't really imagine what owning hundreds of books, or more, would be like.

He smiled, the guarded vigilance of his face fading for a moment, replaced by a fond sort of regard for me mixed with recollection. "My

family has one in our home, yes. I was unquestionably spoiled and unaware of the excess and privilege I was born into. I don't suppose Ravutsa has a library at all."

"Ravutsa doesn't even have a real bookshop," I said, heaving an exasperated sigh. "Occasionally, the bookseller from Spalia Dorna comes up the valley with whatever he hasn't sold there and sells them for half-price at our busier market days."

"You'd love Menastel," he said softly. "If I can find a way to go back, I'll take you there to see the libraries." My heart thrilled at the thought, at the promise of a world beyond Ravutsa. Soren seemed to catch the glint that shone in my eyes, the flush of excitement that lit my face, and he smiled at me. "But first, we have to restore this pool."

After a moment, he rose shakily, as though somewhat drained by the magic that had changed him into a human again. He swayed, breathing heavily, and began to walk toward the nearest oak in the ring around the glade.

"Where are you going?" I asked, running after him and catching at his elbow.

"To do the work of clearing out the trees that aren't sacred to the pool?" Soren said. He spun, stumbling toward me and almost knocking me over. I lost my grip on his arm as I took an unexpected step backward. I felt his hands on my waist, catching me before I fell. He held me against his side for a moment, looking down into my eyes with an expression of almost fierce intensity. I felt my cheeks redden, suddenly aware of the firmness of his muscles, his thighs pressed against my own legs. His face warmed with a soft smile and he released me. "I am sorry, Callia. I'm still unsteady, it seems, after spending months as a stag now. I have no idea where my legs and arms end anymore. I did not mean to hurt you."

"You didn't," I said, stepping back and glancing away. It seemed difficult to catch my breath properly and I could feel my heart beating faster in my chest when his eyes were on me. Mentally, I chided myself for acting like a sun-dazed girl in her first courting season. After a moment, he walked away and I watched him go, wanting to follow him, to be close to him again. I shook my head, reminding myself that I needed get back to clearing the debris-strewn banks of the celestial pool if I wanted to restore the magic Soren was certain was still here.

Chapter Nine

By the time that I'd finished an entire circuit of the pond, carrying armfuls of brush and dead grasses to my pile farther up the bank, almost under the edge of the forest, Soren had chopped down a half dozen trees and cleared back a thicket of alder that threatened to overtake a stately beech. As I drew closer to him, I saw that he'd put on a pair of loose, wide-legged trousers. They seemed at least four sizes too big for him, although more than a hand's length too short, and he wore a tattered leather belt to keep them in place over his trim hips. He sat, leaned against the tree, resting the ax by his feet, and he beckoned me over as I paused, my gaze lingering on his broad shoulders and glistening arm muscles.

"I have to be getting home soon," I said, gesturing toward the sun which had grown red gold with the late afternoon.

"I'd hoped to do more," he said, heaving a short sigh. "But we have time before the Flower Moon is new born in the sky. Will you come with me again?"

"Of course," I said, smiling. Despite my initial disappointment at the sight of the glade, the lure of the waters had stayed on my mind. I could feel them pulling at me, a whisper of mystery and power in my mind. I wanted to know its source, to restore it to what it might have once been. The sensation of magic had grown stronger as I worked, and the promise of magic thrilled me, making me hope against all my fear for the prospect of a new life for my sister and mother. "Where did you find those trousers?" I asked, unable to keep from staring at them again. Their odd bulk only made his trim physique stand out more, his calves curving away into the swath of fabric, reminding me of his figure on the grass just after his transformation. I shook away the recollection, keeping my face composed and free from any hint of rising color. I felt my chest tighten with yearning, to hold him against me again, to feel his skin under my fingertips.

"I found them on a clothesline in Ravutsa, behind what seemed to be some kind of inn," he said, his face reddening. "I wanted to transform if it was safe, and thought that I needed something to wear while I worked.

Their owner seemed like he was a loud bull of a man, coarse and ungentle with his daughter. Too much ale and too little kindness.”

“Soren,” I said, trying not to laugh. “I think you took the tavern-keeper’s trousers.” My smile faded as I remembered the kind of man that Jan Kaczmarek was — and that Maris would be held responsible when the loss of the trousers was discovered. “He’ll be furious, and take it out on his daughter.”

He blinked slowly, clearly surprised by my words. “Why would he blame her when they go missing?”

“He’ll either assume it was intentional to get a rise out of him, or carelessness, and therefore he’ll be angry with her for losing his clothes,” I said, trying to sound patient and understanding. I wanted to laugh at his obvious confusion, but an image of Maris flickered in my mind. Her drawn, patient face and squared shoulders sagging, targeted by one of her father’s frequent outbursts, and I felt a pit of worry lodge in my throat. I knew the man had a nasty temper, and thought little of throwing empty flagons at his daughter or raising his hand to strike her. As long as his usual patrons didn’t notice, at least.

Soren blanched, and I saw a look of panic followed by consternation and anger flit through his starry eyes. “That’s... I am so sorry, Callia. I will return them right away, tonight after I take you home, if you think it might assuage his tongue or stay his temper?”

I gave him a reassuring smile and reached out to touch his arm. “I am sure it will be all right.”

“I had no idea,” he said reproachfully, leaning his head back against the tree’s trunk. “There is so much I just... I didn’t think.”

I made a note to myself to check on Maris the following day, or to ask Mother about her. However, I decided immediately against telling her about Soren, stag or man. After all, I hadn’t even told my mother about him, and Maris, while friendly toward me, had little part of my life. She’d always been more receptive to befriending my sister, and had truly been devastated in the wake of Rose’s binding to the bear. She’d walked us home that night, her face streaked with tears, and she’d stopped by our cottage several times in the weeks since with small packages of food, leftovers from her father’s kitchen. Even so, I did not feel as though this merited telling her about what I was up to in the Kingswood.

No, I thought, Soren and the celestial pool in the Kingswood would stay my secret.

“Is there a clothing shop in town?” he asked musingly. “I don’t know how much a tunic and trousers would cost but...”

“There’s a tailor, but his wares come at a pretty penny, at least for what my mother is able to earn in the village.” He gave me a blinking look of incomprehension. “There’s not much work for a widow, even with her daughters to help her. Well, daughter,” I added. A pang of guilt gripped me for a moment, thinking of my mother, alone and grieving for Rose, while I kept a secret from her. But it wasn’t one that would cause her more grief, I reasoned. Everything else in my life, she already knew.

“Callia?” Soren said, gently taking my hand. “Is something wrong? You look... worried.”

“Just thinking about how to explain my absence if I come out with you again,” I replied. He stroked my skin, his long fingers trailing over the veins and knuckles that stood out on the back of my hand. My pulse quickened with pleasure at his gentle touch. “Or how I’ll explain where I’ve been today. Perhaps she won’t ask at all.”

“You could tell her the truth?” he said, curling the fingers of his free hand under my face, lifting my chin until our eyes met. The stars shone out from under his long eyelashes, as though searching my thoughts and reading my heart. I felt my breath catch a little, and realized I’d leaned closer to him, our foreheads almost touching.

“No.” I slipped my face out of his grasp as I took a deep breath, feeling my ears redden, and shook my head shyly. “She wouldn’t permit me to enter the forest again if she knew where I was going, about the pool, about you. She’d say it’s too dangerous to go in the Kingswood, except to forage along the river, and she’d be right. Everyone knows better than to stray too deeply within the forest.”

Soren nodded, comprehension spreading over his face. “Because commoners aren’t permitted to travel in the Kingswood, I suppose?”

“Not without written consent of the king, or express permission of the Golden Duke,” I nodded, taking my hand away from his. I picked some grass that had clung to my skirts and flicked them away, watching as the breeze made them drift lazily away from us.

“Then why did you come with me, if it is not permitted and you think it is dangerous?” his voice was little more than a breath of wind, and I glanced up quickly. He had leaned toward me again, his eyes searching over me. There was a question on his lips, but he did not speak. Instead he continued giving me a strangely hungry and curious look.

I faltered as my heart began to beat faster again, a heat rising in my cheeks. “Because I wanted to see the celestial pool,” I said, the words sounding flat and unconvincing even to me. His gaze narrowed and I knew he didn’t entirely believe me. “Because... I don’t see a reason not to. It’s considered permissible for me to forage there, and others even harvest wild honey in the wood with little hesitation. The town’s elders had no problem sending my sister into the Kingswood to save themselves from the threat of a curse. Why shouldn’t I go where I like in it? I am not hunting, nor am I breaking any other of the King’s decrees. Not that he’s ever even come to this part of his kingdom to see what happens within the wood that bears his name. You asked me for help, and I wanted to come and help you. I promised you that I would. And I was truly curious about the Starlight Waters. Does there need to be anything else?”

“No,” Soren replied, his voice was gentle and calming, but there was a slight expression of humor that flickered in his eyes, and his smile grew. “Nothing else at all. Living on the outskirts of town has given you a strange taste for following your own rules, Callia. I’ve never known anyone else so determined to do only what they find right for themselves, laws be damned, and have no compunction about society’s expectations.”

“You should meet my sister, if you think so,” I said wryly. He raised his brows for a moment, regarding me with playful fondness. “I’m the gentle and malleable one of the family.”

He laughed, throwing back his head as though the delight was too much for him to contain. “I would love to meet them all someday, if that’s true. But I admit, now I am a little apprehensive of what your mother and sister would make of me.”

I took a deep breath, wondering the same to myself. Mother would most likely find him charming, I decided. Rose? I didn’t dare think what she would say to him after finding that we’d spent so much time together. He was a man after all, and she was self-appointed to be my guardian and protector, to ward away any man from my company. I’d never

minded it much before, but I didn't like to think of her being brusque or disparaging with Soren. After all, he was much nicer, more thoughtful, than any of them, and I had grown fond of his company in the weeks that had passed since Rose was given to the bear.

"We really should be getting back," I said slowly. I didn't want to go back to my empty room and the too-quiet house. "Mother will have supper waiting for me."

Soren's smile faded and suddenly he was completely serious again, his brows drawn in focused thought. For a moment, he seemed more like a well-carved statue of some distinguished nobleman instead of a living and breathing man beside me. He was still attractive, with a fine, chiseled jawline and defined cheekbones that gave him the appearance of elegance and refinement that paired well with his gently curling hair and golden-brown eyes. His lips twitched for a moment, as though he wanted to say something, and then he shook his head, turning away as he picked up the ax.

"I'll be ready in a moment," he called over his shoulder. "I suppose we'll have to return all the supplies."

I watched him walk away; my head tilted slightly. He left the ax by the tree closest to the trail and then turned toward the pool at the center of the glade. "I don't think mother would notice if the ax is gone for a few days," I said after a moment. "If you want to keep it until I can come away again, it'll be fine."

"You can't come for a few days?" he said, pausing mid-step. He did not look back at me, but I wanted him to. I wanted to see what he was thinking as he spoke, to watch his eyes and the starlight within them.

"Mother might be permissive of my wandering away for hours at a time somewhat frequently," I began, feeling a flutter in my throat as I tried to make my words as gentle as possible. "But if I am gone every day, it would be noticed. I have work I need to do at home. I do want to come, Soren. But I'll be missed..."

"Of course," he nodded, passing one hand over his eyes. He walked to the edge of the waters and glanced back at me, a sad hint of a smile playing around his lips. "I was being thoughtless. I forget about the daily work demands of commoners. I will return to you in a few days then."

“You... you are planning on walking me home, aren’t you?” I asked, a small flame of panic rising in my stomach. I had little idea of how far in the forest we were, or even if there was a real trail between the pool and Mother’s cottage.

“Yes, of course,” Soren replied, a note of tired resignation in his words. He bent down and knelt beside the pool, gazing into the waters. I joined him, and he reached up to take my hand. “It was nice to be myself today,” he said softly, still gazing at the silvery reflection of his own face, shimmering against the blackness of the pool’s depths. “To be able to spend the time with you, and for you to see me as I really am. Thank you.”

“I... it was lovely,” I faltered. He released my hand and bent his head down, pressing his palms into the bank as though trying to draw magic from the earth itself.

The reflection shifted, glowing golden and I looked at him with surprise. His skin seemed to shine for a moment, almost blindingly white and gold. I saw the outline on his back grow brighter, and I now thought looked as though it were a drawing of a four-petaled flower. It seared up in dark yellow flame for a moment, before Soren was completely encased in an aura of light and heat. I backed away slowly, wanting to stay close to him, but it was too much. I threw my arms over my face as the light burst away from him, and I was knocked backward onto the grass as though I’d been hit by a falling limb. My ribs ached as I touched at them gingerly, and I glanced up dazed. My head spun and slowly the world shifted back to the right amount of light and color, but my ears still rang for a moment longer.

“Soren?” I rasped. “Soren, are you all right?” I saw a heap of white on the grass beside the pool, still and unmoving. I scrambled onto my knees and crawled toward him.

Soren was a stag again, and his antlers seemed to have grown slightly since the morning. He lifted his head slowly, blinking and shaking as I touched his neck.

“Sorry Callia,” he said, his voice sounding hoarse and worn. “I never really mastered the process of transformation. It didn’t come easily to me, and I never thought I’d have need of it. It’s not supposed to be...”

“Dangerous?” I asked, sitting back and rubbing at my ribs again. The pain was fading, but I knew I’d be sore for a few more hours at least.

“I was going to say unstable and explosive,” he said with chagrin. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Not much. Does it hurt you?” I asked, slowly getting to my feet. “It looked beautiful. Before it knocked me over.”

He huffed with amusement. “Transforming doesn’t give me pain, not exactly. It is draining, though. I’d hoped it would be easier here with the latent magic in the waters and the glade itself, but it’s still more than I am accustomed to.”

I wanted to ask about the yellow outline on his back, but something in my mind stopped me. It seemed different than the magic he used, no gentle light or dazzling brightness to it. I shuddered at the recollection of it, at the image of the flames that seemed to sink into his skin, consuming and never sated.

Soren stood, his legs quivering under him as he staggered through the long grass. I followed after, my mind replaying both of his transformations over and over again. As we stepped back under the cool shade of the forest, I turned to give the pool a final glance. It was still and glossy silver in the midst of the verdant green, and I could still feel it pulling at me, a hook in my stomach that did not relent.

I sighed and forced myself to keep walking. I would return soon; I promised the whisper in my mind that told me to go back. Soren stood a few yards farther into the wood, watching me intently, and he set off again at a moderate pace as I rejoined him.

My thoughts wandered as we walked, sometimes thinking of the pool, or of the forest around us, or of the hermit-like Duke of the Golden Peaks. But most often, my thoughts lingered on Soren’s face, wreathed in silver and light, and the aura of radiance that surrounded his magic.

“The new moon is coming in a few days,” he said as we came within sight of the cottage. “I would have hoped to try to renew the pool at the full moon, but the day when the moon is reborn will have to do.”

I reached out, placing my hand on his strong, slender neck. The warmth of his fur under my fingers was comforting and I drew closer to him. “Will you need me again?” I asked. “To prepare the pool?”

He turned his eyes toward me, golden and shining. “I would be happy for your company, Callia. I will do what I can on my own for now, but I cannot perform the rite to renew the waters without you.”

“So,” I said, rubbing at my arm sheepishly. “Will you come and visit me? To tell me what progress you make?”

“If I can, I will come,” he nodded. “But at the very least, look for me on the day of the new moon’s rising.”

He sprang away, the shining white of his legs blending into the dappled shadow of the woodlands, and I watched until I could no longer hear the slightest shift of leaves in the distance. My heart fluttered, a strange desire to follow after him and a weight of anticipation growing in my mind.

Chapter Ten

Mother glanced up as I walked in the door. The table was set simply, the single candlestick holding a new, dark yellow beeswax taper that she had not yet lit. Our plates were set opposite each other, one spiced roll on the rim of each. A small salad with crumbled goat's cheese filled the bowl she'd set on the center of the plate.

"I wasn't sure when you'd be coming," she said as she watched me set my basket beside the door. "Where were you?"

"In the Kingswood," I said, turning my face away from her as I hung my cloak up and brushed a few stray leaves and bits of broken grass from it. Despite the shade of the forest for the past hour's walk, I felt flushed and hot from the day's labors. But the cottage was cool and refreshing, the light just dimming as the afternoon faded away outside. As I crossed the kitchen to join her, I could smell roasted meats and vegetables from the squat stew pot that sat on the hob. "I was hoping to find dryad's saddle or chicken-of-the-wood mushrooms a little farther up the river than I've been looking the last few days. I'm afraid I didn't find anything but more morels and a few patches of wild garlic."

She raised her brow questioningly, but then nodded. "It may still be a little early for chicken-of-the-wood, I suppose. The morels are more than plentiful this year though, and that will bring in several silvers if I can take them down to Spalia Dorna soon."

I sat down and she handed me a cup of tea, still steaming. "Do you want me to gather more soon?" I asked as she broke her roll and took a careful bite.

Sighing, she placed the roll back on her plate. "I suppose. I don't know what else to do to make up for losing Rose," she said softly. "She had a way with the spinning. And with the garden."

I nodded, feeling a pang of guilt that I had not taken on more of my sister's chores in her absence. Rose seemed to always have the perfect touch of pulling the vegetables at their ripest, at finding wild fruit earliest, and latest, in season. Her flowers bloomed brighter and longer than even the magistrate's wife, and it was said that she paid a pretty copper or more to

have them blessed in the grove down in Azuria when she'd last visited her daughter's household there. Rose had said they'd have done just as well to get seeds and cuttings from the gardener of the Baronet de Astantria, as everyone else who wanted to have beautiful roses did, and skip the costly blessing. But Rose never spared a copper more than she had to for seedling vegetables or a new root or vine for Mother's garden, and it had thrived under her care. I wondered if she missed her garden or if she'd found a place to plant a few vegetables and flowers.

I realized with a sudden flush that I was staring into the tea, tears streaming down my cheeks. I hadn't really thought about Rose, about what she might be facing in the forest alone, for more than a moment or two together for days it seemed. Not since Soren had begun visiting me. Guilt gnawed at me and I tried to push it down, to hush the torrent of self-reproach.

"Callia, my sweet?" Mother reached across the table, taking my hand in hers. "Are you all right?"

"I miss Rose," I said, wiping away the tears from my nose. "I'm sorry, Mother. I didn't mean to upset you. I know you don't like to see us cry."

"It is fine, my girl. Cry if you feel the need," she said as she patted the back of my hand affectionately. "I've known. You've been out wandering so much that I knew your mind must be... well... your heart is too full to be kept indoors. You've always needed to be alone, I suppose, more than we did. You don't need to apologize for that."

I attempted to smile before taking a large bite from the roll. It was sweet and the spices warmed me, settling the knot of grief and guilt and apprehension in my stomach. "Thank you, Mother," I said after taking a sip of the tea. She'd added honey to the pot, and the sweetness mixed with the delicate aroma of the steeped leaves washed over me, comfort and calm flowing down through my body as I drained the rest of the cup.

"Have the dreams continued?" she asked after a moment, her gaze lingering on me before she shook her head as if to clear her thoughts again.

I nodded. I supposed that as long as she attributed my wanderings to the unsettling nature of my dreams, it would be easier to avoid speaking of Soren and the Starlight Waters. She took a long, slender splinter of firewood and went to the fire, holding it into the embers until it burst into a

red gold tongue of flame. After lighting the candle, she shook the splinter abruptly, the blossom of fire extinguished into curling smoke, and glanced at me expectantly.

“The same one of the tower and thorns, or any new ones?”

I sighed, closing my eyes. “They have been less frequent of late,” I said. Soren had taken my mind off the dreams since we first met, so that I forgot about them as soon as I woke each day. I could only think about seeing him, about the Starlight Waters. And now, about the pull that still whispered to me, calling for me to return to the waters and enter them. “But they are the same as before. Thorns and towers, never changing.”

Mother took a deep breath, leaning back in her chair as she contemplated the candle’s flickering light. “Is there nothing about the dreams that change at all? That could give us a way to understand its meaning?”

I shrugged. “I told you. Just thorns overtaking a tower, Mother, and the stones crumbling. Every time. Nothing new, nothing clearer.”

She tilted her head sharply, and gazed at me with an intense look of scrutiny. “That... that could be important,” she said at last. “Are you in the dream at all?”

Her look unsettled me and jagged images from my dreams flitted through my mind, competing for my attention. “I suppose. Not when the thorns take down the tower.”

Mother leaned over the table and I could see her eyes grow unfocused, her thoughts far away. I knew better than to ask her anything when she got in this state- she would not hear me as she tried to recall pieces of lore she’d read long ago. It made me wish that she had not had to sell so many of her and Father’s books after he died. Her recall for what she’d read, even years before, was fantastic, but sometimes it took her awhile to find what she was trying to remember. And if the memory involved Father, she often lingered longer in her thoughts.

I finished my dinner while she sat still, her lips moving silently. Her face was soft, but her eyes seemed sad and my heart throbbed. Now the memories likely also reminded her of Rose, and the recent loss would make such recollections even harder on her. As I rose to go, her hand shot out and took my wrist, pulling me toward her.

“Rose.”

“Mother?” I asked, trying to tug my hand free as I sat down again.

“Was Rose in your dream?” she asked, her voice tight as lines creased from her eyes to her hairline and down over her temples to radiate concern and wariness over her entire face. Her shoulders were tense and she stared at the candle before her with a ferocity of a desperately cornered creature.

“Yes,” I said slowly, pursing my lips together as I narrowed my eyes, trying to read her expression more clearly. She flicked her gaze over me searchingly, the same intensity in her eyes as she drew her breath sharply.

“When?”

“She is in the end of the vision. After the thorns take the tower.”

Mother passed her hand over her eyes, her shoulders slumping forward slightly. “It might not mean anything,” she said, more to the candlestick than to me. “There’s no reason to worry about it more now, my sweet. Do tell me if it comes again, won’t you? If you see Rose in the vision again.”

I nodded and she released my hand. After a moment, she rose and took the candle with her to her room, leaving her door open an inch or so. I watched her for a moment, trying to understand what had unsettled her, but there seemed to be a missing piece she wasn’t telling me.

I climbed to my little room and quickly readied myself for bed. My arms ached from pulling grass all day and my ribs were still sore from Soren’s transformation. As I settled into my bed, I tried to clear my mind of the day.

“Rose.” I said her name out loud, turning to look at her empty bed. Why would Mother assume that Rose was in my dream at all? I hadn’t mentioned the presence of the bear or our running through the wood, only the thorns and the tower. Yet she had asked about my sister because of that. I shuddered.

As I closed my eyes, I saw for a moment the thorns, impossibly long and blood red, climbing over the stones of the tower. Just as quickly, they faded and I saw only Soren’s face, still and calm. I could see him pulled onto my lap, his squared shoulders bare except where his curls fell in a tangled web, his muscular chest that showed years of training and effort.

Was he a knight then? It almost fit the little he had told me of himself. Or possibly a lordling, I decided with a yawn. All thoughts of my dreams and their strange possible portents faded from my thoughts. I closed my eyes and the memories of the day passed through my mind as I drifted to sleep. His back, broad and strong as he chopped through the long-dead overgrowth, and his strong arms catching around my waist.

I sighed, looking down at the basket of mushrooms at my side. I had been threading them carefully onto a strand of linen thread for more than an hour, but I still had two baskets full to go. It had been days since I'd seen Soren, and while my conscience felt less heavy about leaving Mother alone, I longed to see him again. I wanted to be near the celestial pool again. I had dreamed of its strange, dark waters for several nights now, and every day the longing to return to it grew stronger, distracting me from my tasks, occupying my mind every spare moment. Perhaps that was part of its magic that still lingered, I thought, unabated by centuries of disuse and neglect. But Soren had not returned for me, and I did not feel that I could find the Starlight Waters on my own.

Mother had gone to Master Jarisek's after breakfast, taking him a salve of nettle and devil's claw, and left me to string all the mushrooms I'd gathered over the last three days so they could hang from our rafters until they were completely dried. I set down my needle, watching the road for any sign of her return. The morning was growing hot and bright, and the garden flowers were beginning to bloom. There were bursts of pinks and yellows and purples amid dark, tightly furled red rose buds and the air was heavy with the scent of the flowers. Bumblebees hummed close, intent on their labors, and I wanted to close my eyes, to soak in the sounds and the slowness of the day.

"Might I join you, Callia?" a voice came at my left elbow. I jumped up, turning one of the baskets on its side. Morels spilled out onto the grass at my feet, and I whirled around toward the forest.

"Soren?" I said, blinking. He seemed smaller in the full light, and his coat had lost its sheen, now appearing faded white and buff. "I'd hoped that you'd come days ago. Even if only to tell me what progress you've made at the pool."

He gave an embarrassed huff, pawing at the ground for a moment, dragging a few tufts of grass loose. "Time is hard for me to follow now and I was... delayed... I am sorry about that. I did want to come. I see you are busy this afternoon though," he said, with a glance to the spilled mushrooms. I shrugged, bending down to gather them up again.

"It's not more than another hour or two," I said, trying to sound cheerful and happy.

He nodded, casting a nervous glance toward the road. "Will you come with me this afternoon then?" he asked. I looked up, my hands full of the earthy smelling mushrooms. Soren was gazing at me, almost hopefully, but also with a sense of apprehension and wariness.

"Of course," I said, giving him an encouraging smile. "Is something the matter?"

"Only that I was delayed, and I worry about preparing the pool in time to perform the ritual as planned," he said, settling onto the sparse grass just beyond the oak tree.

I didn't quite believe him but I felt that pressing him about it wouldn't get me any closer to the truth. He didn't seem to want to leave, so I sat on the ground beside him and returned to stringing the mushrooms, careful to leave space between each so they would dry nicely. Soren seemed interested in the work, watching me intently and sniffing at the baskets with tentative curiosity.

"How do you pass the time on your own?" I asked a few minutes later, giving him a sidelong glance. His head was resting on the earth and he might have been asleep, except for the occasional twitch of his ears showing that he still was alert for anyone approaching the cottage.

"I try to recite ballads if I can remember them," he said, shaking his head to ward off a fly that had buzzed too close. "Sometimes I try to recall the theories of strategy and the tenants of diplomacy. I'm not very successful at keeping those straight in my head though. My brother would mock me for how much I've forgotten. But those were always his areas of expertise instead of mine."

I laughed at his tone of self-reproach. "But the ballads are easier, are they not? And far more enjoyable?"

"They are," he said moodily, "although I am cursed to have perfect recall only of the ones that I find most irritating. The ones I love

best are the ones that feel like they've faded from my mind fastest."

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling at a loss for what to say. "That sounds miserable."

"It is rather," he said, nibbling at a bit of grass. "Not the worst thing, but it is one of those things that is galling, but it does take your mind off the danger when you're also being hunted by bears or wolves."

"Have you seen those in the Kingswood?" I asked curiously, wondering if there was a possibility that he might have seen Rose's beastly husband. Not that the Spirit Bear was the only monster that was said to roam the Kingswood.

Rose and I had occasionally found the remains of small roe-deer in the forest, a foreboding sign of wolves having come down during a bad winter, but we had never actually seen any of the pack. Rose thought she heard howling as we came home one Candle's Lighting, but Mother said it was merely the cry of the wind over the mountains. All the same, she'd hurried us along and forbidden us from going into the woods until spring returned. Bears were a more common sighting, though they often only took a small runt pig or two from the farther-flung farms.

"I found wolf tracks near to the rising of the Snow Moon," he said with a dismissive shake of his head. "But that was far up into the mountains, in the higher valleys."

"I didn't know there were higher valleys above Ravutsa," I said softly, taking care to keep my eyes on my work. "Are they beyond the Kingswood?"

"Some of them," he said. "Have you never been up in the mountains on the other side of Ravutsa then?"

"Never." I shook my head.

"You spoke of foraging being permitted," he began haltingly. "Not all of the mountains are within the bounds of the Kingswood."

"In the edges and along the river, never farther into the Kingswood. No one goes up the mountains toward Uhorath," I said. Ravutsa was the final town before the mountains reared up from the web of valleys that formed in their roots, and no one dared go through the Kingswood without written permission from the King himself, or at the very least, the Duke of Chartrin. But nothing like that had ever been issued, that I knew, and so Ravutsa was the edge of civilization, the last

outcropping of the kingdom on the border with the abandoned and desolate Crystal Waste.

He tilted his head questioningly, but did not speak.

“Would you sing one of your favorite ballads to me to pass the time?” I asked, looking up at him as I reached for my final basket.

He seemed pleased and settled himself more comfortably on the grass. After a moment, he began to sing softly, slowly, and I recognized the song as one of Mother’s favorites from my childhood. Soren’s voice was gentle and lilting, and his tenor suited the song well. There were a few times when he seemed to be distracted, focused perhaps on recalling the words, but I sat back and enjoyed listening while I worked. My needle seemed to go faster, and the thread tangled less often as he sang, and soon I was finished. I piled it all carefully into one of the baskets and Soren stopped, glancing up at me.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” I said, rising to my feet unsteadily. My stomach growled with hunger as I moved and I rubbed ruefully at it, feeling the empty ache below my ribs. “I’ll hang these and get a water skin and something to eat.”

“And then we can go?” he asked hopefully, his eyes beginning to sparkle again.

“Yes,” I replied, a smile growing on my face. He rose, turning hesitantly toward the forest again. “I don’t think my mother will miss me if I’m back before dark.”

“Of course,” he said, stepping back into the shade of the wood.

I nodded and ran into the house. It seemed dark after being outside all morning, and the air was close. Mother had not yet returned, so I took a small pouch of dried meats and some fruit and placed it in a lidded hamper she’d given me long ago for packing food when Rose and I went apple picking near Spalia Dorna every autumn. My meal seemed rather small and lackluster, so I threw in a small half-eaten round of an herb-filled white cheese that Maris had brought by for Mother the night before. I eyed the wine bottle that had accompanied the cheese but thought better of it since Mother would undoubtedly notice the loss.

Finally satisfied that I had enough to keep me fed even if I had a long afternoon of work ahead of me, I returned to the wood’s edge. Giving one final look to the road in case Mother was returning, I then took a deep

breath, a tumult of excitement rising into my chest, and entered the Kingswood.

Chapter Eleven

The glade was nearly clear of the tall grass and there were no strangling trees fallen past the border of the forest, or sprawling bushes trying to overtake the thirteen ancient trees that stood like sentinels over the Starlit Pool. Each one seemed to be ready, waiting, and I saw that Soren had left the four hawthorn trees surrounded by the wild rose bushes completely untouched. The rose blooms were full blown now, dripping blood red petals onto the moss. I took a deep breath, tasting their rich perfume on the breeze, and I felt a sharp tingle of magic shiver over my skin.

“They wouldn’t cut,” Soren said abruptly.

“What?” I spun around to face him. He was watching me intently, a curious hunger in his eyes.

“The roses,” he said simply. “I tried to cut them back and they grew thicker. Mother taught me long ago to avoid tampering with wild magic, especially in an ancient forest, if I don’t know what it is.”

“Do you think they’re part of the magic of the glade?” I asked.

Soren snorted dismissively. “They could be. Olandrus doesn’t mention anything about them.”

“You said he only had heard of them from others, not that he was familiar with them on his own,” I said, clearing my throat and looking away from the forest.

“Then there is no way for either of us to know,” he said, flicking his ears back.

My gaze came to rest on the pool.

It looked a little larger now, cleared of all the debris and the grass on its bank neatly cropped. The water was calm and silvery, the bottom still obscured from sight, and I took several steps toward it, breathless with curiosity again. Soren came between me and the pool, his starry eyes piercing me with gentle intensity.

“Callia?” he asked softly. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” I said, smiling. The pull toward the water was still there, but it had faded somewhat the moment he’d spoken my name. I glanced around and saw the pile of debris still waiting to be carried away. It

was much larger than when I'd come four days before to help him. "Just thinking about what we will need to do to be ready to perform the rite."

I pushed past him, going to the water's edge. My face shimmered in the reflection, my features somewhat distorted by the shadows of the pool, although the water seemed lit with a silver gleam like moonlight that shone from deep below.

"What exactly did you need me for anyway?" I asked, pushing a stray hair behind my ear. The sun was beating down on my neck and back, making my eyes smart from the light as I looked at Soren. I cast a quick glance over the rest of the glade and I could not see anything left out of place within the circle of the thirteen trees.

Soren stepped away from me, bowing his head almost to the ground. He grunted for a moment, and then sprang away, stopping just out of reach of the forest's shadow. Pausing, he lifted his head for a moment, catching the sunlight in his antlers as though pulling the light from the sky into himself, and then began to transform.

This time I was ready for the glimmering golden light that surrounded him, sparkling and flashing like a wind of light and power. I shielded my eyes from the brightness, ready to tumble into the grass should the magic billow out from him again and throw me back, this time being as cautious as I was curious. The light paled, and Soren stepped out, shining, and dropped to his knees.

I ran to his side as he swayed for a moment, his chin dropping against his chest. He took a deep, quavering breath and toppled forward, his fingers pushing long furrows into the dark loam as his body convulsed with the dissipating magic.

I flung myself down beside him and slipped my arm around his shoulder, pulling him onto my lap as he gasped for air. I could feel his heart racing in his chest. His shoulders continued to heave slightly as the shaking in his body subsided, every muscle taut and tensed against me. After a moment, he rolled onto his side, his head resting on my thighs. My stomach twisted as my heart beat faster, delighting in being so close to him again.

"I think I'm getting better at this," he said, laughing ruefully. His brilliant amber eyes looked up into mine with a dazed expression of relief. "Maybe someday, I won't collapse like a baron's daughter at her first dance."

I quirked my brow at him for a moment. “Do girls often faint at dances?”

He nodded, tilting his head upward and studying my face. “A strong mix of excitement, heat, and not enough food and fresh air seems to be the culprit, according to my brother. I also assumed there was a fair bit of nerves and the expectation that one should collapse, especially near a suitable prospect. Is it really not the same here?”

“Not as far as I have ever heard,” I said. Rose and I had never been invited to any of the festival dances that Ravutsa held every equinox and solstice, but we’d seen girls practicing for them, and heard plenty of stories recounted for weeks after the mid-summer’s traditional courting dances. Kissing and teasing, or even declarations of love or enmity, seemed to be the most common fodder for gossip.

“But at a harvest festival, surely some girl must have felt faint at least, in the arms of her strapping suitor,” he began. “Or even just from getting dizzy after spinning around the fete trees with your sister?”

“Never danced. Not around a tree or with a village boy,” I replied with a shrug. I felt a small twinge of sadness as I thought about the village fetes and festivals that my family had been excluded from attending. I placed my hands on the ground behind me, supporting my weight on my palms. Magic pulsed from the ground, pushing against my skin, and I felt it growing up my arms, wrapping around like plant tendrils climbing toward the sun. “Not like that.”

“That’s a pity,” he said, a smile playing over his full lips. I returned the smile and he placed his hand over mine, his fingers curling around my palm, entwining with the swelling magic. “I think you’d be a lovely dancer.”

“Thank you,” I laughed, watching as the breeze lifted his hair away from his face, changing him for a moment to look like one of the wizard princes from one of my childhood storybooks once more. “I doubt I’ll ever have the chance to go to a dance. I would love to see the balls that are held in Menastel one day. Or any of the cities along the coast, I suppose”

“More than the libraries of the court?” Soren asked, his mouth pulling into an amused grin.

I leaned my head to the side. “That would be a difficult decision, but I would choose the library.”

“Then perhaps we should have a ball in one, in your honor,” Soren said, his voice soft and sighing. “Though I cannot imagine any of the librarians I have ever met being thrilled at the thought of court musicians and rowdy revelers in their hallowed, hushed halls.”

I laughed at the thought and he smiled warmly, setting my heart fluttering. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He might have been asleep, I thought, as his face settled into peaceful contentment, the lines of worry easing between his brows. I watched his chest rise and fall, his breath slowing as we rested together in the midday sun. The golden light showed his lean, well-toned muscles to his advantage, his skin tanned and warm against the newly shorn grass. His legs were tanned from several days of working in the sunlight, and I felt a rising color in my cheeks as I caught sight of his long shaft between his thighs. I glanced away hurriedly, in case he would open his eyes and notice my attention, but he seemed to be lost in thought, unaware of his surroundings.

After a moment, his eyes flew open and he rolled onto his side, propping himself up on one elbow as he studied my face musingly. “Callia,” he said, his gaze dropping to the ground. “The evening will come quickly.”

I sat forward, brushing my hands on my skirt. The magic faded away, dropping from my skin like water falling back toward the earth. “Of course,” I said, getting to my feet. “What do you need from me?”

Soren rose to his feet and pulled me from the ground as though I weighed nothing more than an armful of parchment. His hands were gentle, though small callouses had begun to form over his fingertips and palm, which I surmised were the result of his labors to clear the glade.

“It’s time to reset the stones in their places and renew their magic,” he said, his arm still around my waist. He slipped his hand under my chin, bringing my face close to his. My heart fluttered in my chest again, my body thrilling at his touch. “And then, when the new moon rises as a crescent over the mountains, we will be ready to finish the restoration of the celestial pool.”

Soren hauled another unearthed stone out of the hole in the ground, the muscles in his back rippling as he hefted it to his shoulder with a grunt. We had found eight of them so far, and dug the earth loose around them with the ax. I watched as he carefully placed it at the edge of the water, keeping an even distance from the seven already around the edge. I knelt near the pool, wiping at my forehead with a clean portion of my skirt.

He hadn't found any clothes left on clotheslines in Ravutsa this time and so had borrowed my cloak, tying it in a rough approximation of a loin cloth around his waist and upper thighs. The knot slipped low on his hips and the extra cloth fell in odd bunches around his legs. Despite that, I still found myself admiring his strong thighs, my eyes lingering on the firmness of his calves as he worked to free the stones from the earth.

"And you're certain there are more?" I asked as he paused near me. He cleared his throat and sat beside me for a moment, gathering his breath.

"Five more," he said after a moment, tracing a finger over the top of the stone I'd just finished cleaning. It was completely smooth and rounded like an egg, and the deep gray of the stone shimmered slightly in the late afternoon light. There seemed to be flecks of white and pink and gold caught in the stone and it shifted the light like fire within the orb depending on how I looked at it. Despite the glassy, perfect surface, there was a rune that glowed faintly from within the stone, the marking clear and purple. I couldn't understand how such a rune had been created without destroying the rest of the stone but Soren had no answers beyond a shrug and a sigh, though I could hardly blame him for any lack of knowledge.

I'd finished cleaning the centuries of grime and dirt away from all but the two most recently placed stones. Soren had discouraged me from using water from the pool with a sharp look of surprise and dismay. After a moment, I realized that neither of us knew what magic it held, or if there would be consequences of bringing dirt and decay into the waters. I knew he was right to be cautious, but my apron was running out of clean patches, and I'd apparently only finished half the stones.

"How do we know which order to put them in?" I asked, leaning back onto my elbows. Soren sighed, lounging next to me.

"We hope that I paid enough attention to old books and my lessons," he said, taking my hand in his. I could feel the roughness of the

dirt on his skin as it brushed over mine, his fingers wrapping around my forearm and following the path of my veins over my wrist. “The runes seem to be connected to the celestial houses of power, which each belonged to the most important constellations. My mother knew all their names once.”

“Is she a scholar?” I asked, trying to keep my voice level despite how my heart lept and my skin prickled with excitement at his gentle touch.

His smile was soft for a moment and his gaze grew distant and sad. I knew that he was lost in his memories, having seen the same expression in my mother’s face for my entire life. I studied him as I waited for him to speak. I wanted to lose myself in his golden amber eyes forever, my gaze drawn to his fine, angular jawline and handsome features. The thick growth of stubble on his chin seemed to add a rugged element to the sharpness of his face, and his curling hair glistened in the light. It wasn’t the fashionable style that I’d seen on high market days in Spalia Dorna, but I assumed that it had grown long and wild since he’d come to the Kingswood. I tried to picture him with his hair cut short, the way I’d heard was popular in Astantria, but the wind-teased locks seemed to suit Soren better.

“No. She might as well be,” he said finally, lying on his back with his hands folded under his head. He stared up at the sky with a forlorn, far-away look in his eyes. His skin seemed to glow like polished ivory, radiant in the late afternoon light and I pushed myself up. “But of course, it wasn’t an option.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, plucking a blade of grass and splitting it lengthwise into tiny ribbons. Soren turned his head to look at me, his eyes piercing into my face with a mix of admiration and intensity. I flushed, wondering if I had been impolite, and glanced away.

He leaned back, closing his eyes. “She’s a high-born woman, and they generally aren’t permitted to hold positions in any of the universities or academies, even in the coastal cities. But we always had the best tutors that money could bring, at her insistence, and she once told me that if things had been different...” his voice trailed away. “Well. It wasn’t and she didn’t have much of a choice in that.”

“Did you want to be a scholar then?” I reached out, touching his shoulder gently with my fingers and he took my hand in his, clutching it tightly to his chest. I could feel the warmth of him under my palm, the

strength of his heartbeat as he sighed. My own surged against my chest, a desire to be closer to him washing over me.

“I... I don’t know. My life was never my own to want to be anything,” he said, a strange mix of resignation and bitterness in his words. “My brother might have been allowed, but it was never what he seemed to care about. He was keen on training, on fighting, on strategy and protecting... protecting our family. Better at it than I was.”

“My sister wasn’t much of one for books unless they were practical somehow. She would have made an excellent fighter if that were allowed,” I said with a sigh. “I’ve often thought it would be nice to study at one of the royal universities.”

“Then why didn’t you?” he asked, a smile toying at the corners of his full lips. “Most of them accept girls for entry these days.”

I shrugged, pulling my hand away as I wrapped my arms around my legs. I tucked my knees under my chin as I felt a heat rising in my face, reminded sharply that Soren seemed to have come from a very different world of rank and importance than the one I was born to. I chided myself for forgetting his hints of breeding, of class and standing, due to the easiness and familiarity with which we had come to speak to each other, the fondness that I felt in his gaze when we were together. The breeze cooled my cheeks and I drew a deep breath, willing myself to speak evenly without betraying the chagrin I felt over the clear disparity in our upbringing. “We never had the money to send me, and Mother didn’t want to let go of us. And I don’t have any family connections to sponsor my studies.”

“I’m sorry, Callia,” he said as he pushed himself up slowly from the ground. “I don’t mean to be thoughtless.”

“You’re not,” I smiled. “Not really. I’ve met plenty of thoughtless boys before... They are loud and rude. You’re just...”

“Naive?” he asked, tilting his head to the side as he gauged my reaction. “Unaware of anything outside of my own upbringing?”

I flushed and raised my brows as I tried to find the right words. “I was going to say idealistic. But at least you’re much more refined and polite about it than most would likely be?”

He laughed and the light caught in his eyes, shining like dancing stars. “I should hope I’m better behaved than a bunch of backwoods farmhands and brewers. My mother would lock me away in a tower for life

herself if I disappointed her. She might be disappointed enough to do so if I cannot set the stones in their proper order.”

“I suppose that means we should finish digging them out?” I said, swallowing. I didn’t want him to stop talking to me. I enjoyed listening to him talk about his life, his childhood, however vague he always was. I realized just how much I’d come to enjoy and desire his company in the last few weeks, and how easy it had made the loss of my sister’s company.

Soren stood and extended his hand toward me. “I think the last few aren’t as deeply buried, or at least I hope they are not.”

I followed after him, admiring his broad shoulders. He knelt down beside a small tussock of grass and carefully began to slice away clumps of dirt with the ax. After a moment, a dull thud sounded, sending a small shiver through the earth, and I saw the glint of smooth stone under the crumbling soil. I bent down beside Soren, our arms nearly touching, and began to scrape away the loose earth. A minute later and the top of the rune-orb was uncovered, this one flashing red and gold within a creamy white crystal stone.

Soren swung one leg over to straddle the hole and dug his hands under the stone, pushing away the dirt as he tried to find a grip to pull it loose. I watched his arms tense, the coiled muscles taut and firm, as it began to shift free. A moment later, he pried it up and stood with a grunt. The orb was almost the length of his upper torso, though not as broad as his shoulders.

“See?” he said with a triumphant smile, pushing his hair back from his forehead. “Much easier this time.”

“Why are they so far from the pool?” I asked as I shook the dirt from my hands and extended my arms to take the stone from him. He offered it to me tentatively.

“What do you mean?” He did not release the stone, holding it between us for a moment as though my question had caught him by surprise and rendered him unable to let it go.

I shrugged, dusting the orb off. This one was not as obscured with grime as the others had been, and it was the farthest from the forest so far.

“Is it necessary for them to be at the water’s edge? And if it is, why aren’t they there? Why are they scattered around the glade?”

He sighed, drawing the stone back toward himself. I could see the rune through the stone, outlined against his chest. It glittered and caught the light strangely, as though drinking in the brightness of the day.

“Olandrus was quite adamant that they were to be set around the pool, in the positions of power and order,” he said slowly, biting his lower lip pensively. I watched him intently as his eyes narrowed with thought. “I don’t know why they were scattered. Perhaps they were moved during one of the incursions of the Uhorathi, to protect the waters?” He shook his head as though dismissing the thought. “But it makes no sense how they are scattered here now. There’s no order, no cadence of ritual and rite.”

I nodded. That at least fit what I knew of magical shrines and holy places. Ziphara spoke about the required elements and steps for trying to enter visions, and placement was key there as well. It did make sense that the stones would need something similar. I looked away from Soren as he stepped back, turning toward the pool with his stone burden.

I glanced around the glade thoughtfully. If the celestial pools were still being used— their waters part of rituals and religious observance, their sites a focal point of magic and enchantment— during the time of Olandrus, they had still been lost for the better part of five centuries. The trees that ringed the glade may have been mere saplings when he wrote about the Starlight Waters.

Then shouldn’t everything be... worn away and destroyed or changed at least? How are the stones still intact, and the water untouched and undisturbed?

I paused, knowing that if I kept wondering, I would find more questions, and never a satisfying answer. Soren was already digging up the tenth stone, this one on the other side of the pond from me. I kicked at the loose dirt beside me, sending it crumbling back into the orb-hollowed hole, and went to help him.

Chapter Twelve

The sun had already set behind the trees as I finished polishing the thirteenth stone. My apron was dark with dirt and mud, and I slipped it off, leaving it on the grass. Soren walked widdershins around the pool thoughtfully, pausing beside each stone. He bent down and turned each of the stones twice, always against the sun, and then he nodded to himself and walked to the next one. Finally, he completed the circuit and returned to my side.

“I think,” he said, smiling nervously, “I think they are set properly. They are in order of the constellations dance through their phases of preeminence.”

I quirked my brow at him questioningly. “What do you need from me?” I asked.

He put his hands on his hips, tilting his face back to look up at the sky. The dusk was gathering quickly in the forest, and the first stars had only just begun to prick silver light through the dark canvas of the night sky. There was still no sign of the slender crescent of the new moon over the darkening mountain ridge.

“I found two pitchers when I first began looking for the stones yesterday. I think they may have been used long ago. The pools... they weren’t just for celestial magic, although their power seemed to be bound to it in some way. They were also used for earth and forest magic, and perhaps had power over even stone and water. The pools were where the magics came together, and always, always, there were at least two people to perform the rituals associated with the Starlight Waters.” He held out his hand to me. “I will walk sunwise, and you opposite, and pour water from the pool over the stones. That should be enough to begin to realign the magic here.”

He left me for a moment, going into the forest and disappearing for a moment in the shadows. I looked up toward the sky, watching as a dozen more stars appeared overhead. Mother probably would be looking for me by now, I realized with a jolt.

It's fine, I told myself with a rising taste of worry in my throat. I'll make it up to her soon. Tomorrow. Or the next day. I'll do all my chores and more without leaving her side.

I smothered the guilt as best I could and looked around for Soren. He was bending over the pool, staring into the inky depths.

"Callia," he called over his shoulder. "I think we are ready. Moonrise is coming."

I glanced toward the eastern ridge of mountains, their peaks barely etched in the darkness. A strange excitement pulled in my chest, fluttering and warming my blood. Soren paused, one pitcher hovering inches over the surface of the waters, as he looked at me expectantly.

"Coming?" he asked, his voice low and urgent.

"Moonrise is at least an hour or more away," I said as I rolled my eyes and walked over to him, holding out my hand for the second pitcher. He stepped away from the water and handed the second one to me.

It was heavy in my hand, made from ornately worked silver that somehow was untarnished as though preserved by the magic of the glade. There were patterns etched into the rim, showing the cycle of the moon: beginning with a slim crescent, then waxing, gibbous, full, and then to waning and crescent again. The sequence of the moon was marked again on the body of the pitcher, now in a semi-circle arch over stylized plants that grew around the bottom rim—a root cutting, a growing vine, a full bloomed rose briar. The pitcher gleamed in the brightening starlight, and I found my breath catching in my chest as I studied it, my fingers tingling with some remnant of magic within the artifact.

"Water, earth, and the heavens," I said, my voice breaking in a whisper.

"The three powerful sources," Soren replied, nodding.

"Shouldn't we wait?" I asked, resting the pitcher against my hip and spinning it slowly around so I could see every detail. "Won't the magic be more powerful on the full moon?"

"That's a fortnight away," he said with a shrug, his pitcher still raised over the celestial pool. "I cannot wait that long. I'm hoping to harness that heightened power for... other spells. If it's not already too late."

I raised my eyes, flicking them over him as questions began to grow in my mind. He watched me patiently. "Soren..." I began, "if you would just tell me..."

"I can't. I'm sorry, but I will tell you everything as soon as I can," Soren said with an impatient shake of his head. "I promise."

He had taken off the cloak, and I couldn't help but notice how well-shaped his buttocks and legs were, drawing my attention toward his inner thighs and his bare shaft. I felt sheepish for a moment, telling myself that I ought to turn away and blush, but he did not seem to mind or even notice my gaze. The muscles on his calves stood out, as though chiseled from stone, reminding me of how ready he was to run, to leap away, when he was in his stag form. But now, he stood still, unflinching, waiting for me. I returned my gaze to his face, and was surprised to find a note of sad gentleness in his eyes. He gave a flicker of a smile and held out his hand to me again.

"Please, Callia, I need your help to do this right," he spoke softly, as though his words could disturb the waters and break the tenuous hold of the lingering magic within them. "There is little known about this kind of magic at all, but the priestess who told Olandrus about it was adamant. One sunwise, to remind the earth of the courses of the moon and stars above, and one opposite, to forge the connection through the waters."

My stomach flipped a little, both from anticipation of the ritual and from the scrutiny of Soren's starry gold brown eyes. "And then?" I asked, as he led me to the water's edge. He looked at me askance. I smiled, flicking one eyebrow up as I returned his glance calmly. "What did the priestess say would occur after the ritual is complete?"

"And then," he said, kneeling down and dipping his pitcher into the pool. "And then, we renew the pool, and see what magic still lies within it, what power it may still hold. It was supposed to be done every thirteen years."

"I think we're a little late then," I laughed. He smiled, leaning back as drops of silvery water fell from the spout of his pitcher onto his hands, glistening in the starlight like jewels on his fingers.

"That cannot be helped," he replied. "It's the best we can do."

I knelt beside him and placed my own pitcher into the pool. I could feel the surge of magic over me, cool and tingling over my fingertips.

The desire to enter the water grew, a stabbing ache behind my heart that made every breath I took throb with longing. Soren placed his hand on my elbow and I pulled back, realizing with a shaky swallow that I had leaned out precariously from the water's edge, inches from tumbling headfirst into the pool. He helped me to my feet and nodded, lifting my chin with his free hand.

"We pour it out, entirely, on each stone as we go, and refill it again. When we meet again at the thirteenth stone, we will pour a final offering of the water onto the earth, as the moon rises in the east..." he paused, breathing deeply as he looked at the dark mounds that glimmered faintly around the pool's edge. "Then we wait and see."

He released me and stepped backward, not turning away until he reached the next closest stone to where I stood. I went to the stone to the left of him, this one gleaming faintly blue, and watched as Soren lifted his pitcher as though offering it to the stars above. He straddled his legs over the stone, facing the water, and I mirrored his stance.

Slowly, he tilted the pitcher forward and I did the same, the water streaming down, sparkling silver and white and gold as it fell, splashing over the orbs. I gasped, trying to keep my hands steady as the water poured out, and the stone between my feet began to shine brighter, the blue growing more intense, the flecks of fire-like crystals flashing as though a flame had been lit within the rune itself. At last, the pitcher was empty, and the stone continued to shimmer and glow, the light within it increasing slowly. I looked to Soren and saw that his stone was also glowing, pale orange and yellow light emanating over his bare calves and ankles. He nodded to me and we went to the water's edge to refill the pitchers.

We did the same each time, pouring out the water in unison and refilling from the pool. I realized that the surface of the pool remained still and calm, even as we immersed the pitchers and pulled them out, water spilling over the rims and splashing over our hands. Each time, the allure of the water reached out to me, gentle and tantalizing, and every time I had to shake my head, shoving down my desire to give in. Finally, we stood again on the bank, beside each other, and each of the thirteen stones was alight, their runes giving off light brighter than a dozen of the oil-burning street-lanterns of the Plains cities.

Soren drew a deep breath and set his pitcher down in the grass, gesturing for me to do the same. He dipped his hands in the water and sprinkled droplets over the ground around us. I knelt beside him and he placed his hand over mine. He then turned his face to the mountains and bowed his head, as though waiting for a benediction.

I looked up, watching as the moon crested over the mountains. I could feel his fingers tighten over mine, and my ears were filled with the rush of my own heart. The glade around us began to shift, as though the forest were falling away in the distance, and all the open space was filled with silver and gold light. Soren's skin glowed faintly, the way his antlers often did, and his eyes shone with the brilliance of the stars. I glanced between him and the pool, and saw the waters suddenly clear, the unfathomable blackness replaced by a mirror of white light. I thought that if I stepped out onto it, I would not sink into the water, but only lose myself into the reflection of the slivered moon itself and wander in the stars above. I shook myself, confused by such thoughts, and looked around me again.

The stones were growing brighter as the moon continued to rise. Streams of silver light snaked through the grass, branching and entwining with each other, tumbling over the roots of the thirteen trees at the perimeter. Each seemed alive with magic, their leaves shifting like stars against the night sky. My breath caught in my throat and I found that I had risen to my feet, while Soren stayed kneeling on the bank.

"Soren," I whispered, afraid to disturb the magic. "Have you ever seen anything so... it's just... beautiful."

"I..." he stammered, looking up at me with confusion. "Callia, I don't see anything?"

I reached down to him, pulling him beside me and he looked around, his face creased with confusion and despair. He bent his face down, shrouded in his loose hair and a pang of sadness shot through my heart. Turning his face toward me, I stood on my tiptoes and placed my hand on his cheek. He tilted his head slightly, closing his eyes and resting his cheek in my palm.

A tendril of golden light crept over my arm, following my veins, until my hand was alight. I felt the prickle of magic rushing through me, pulsing with my heart. Soren opened his eyes and blinked in surprise as he took a half step back from me.

I glanced down and saw that my entire body was encased in moonlight, shimmering around me. The glow of his skin increased for a moment, our light mingling and he gasped, turning in wonder as he looked around the glade.

“You see it now?” I asked, a smile beginning to pull at my lips. “The light and the magic?”

“Yes,” he said breathlessly. “I think it worked, Callia. I think the glade is renewing its magic.”

I dropped my hand away from him and he caught it in his own, pulling me to his side. We stood together, unmoving, as the new moon continued to rise in the sky.

We stayed together for several hours, watching in wonder as each blade of grass seemed to be transformed into a sword of silver moonlight. The ground throbbed with magic that welled up, washing over our feet like waves, sending sprays of power around us. Finally, the light began to ebb away, drawing back into the celestial pool, which now showed a mirror of the sky above. Pinpricks of starlight danced in the water, and a tiny ripple spread out from the moon’s reflected bow.

“What do we do now?” I asked finally, my voice sounding strangely loud and hoarse to my ears. “What do you need from me?”

“I...” Soren shook his head. He glanced up at the sky and then blinked suddenly, as though remembering where we were and the world beyond the glade. “Tomorrow night, I will be ready, if you will agree to help me one last time?”

“If my mother can spare me,” I said, the familiar throb of guilt making my mouth suddenly dry.

“Oh Callia,” he said, gripping my hand tightly. “I am so sorry. I... your mother will be worried for you. I’ve been thoughtless.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. I sighed, turning away from the waters. The draw to the celestial pool was still there, filling me with a sense of remorse and loss. Soren slipped his arm around me, walking with me toward the forest. “She’ll be asleep when I return. And if she tries to come up with an answer for my absence today, she’ll likely guess that I am still mourning my sister and cannot bring myself to be near our home until the

grief has abated. If she asks me, I'll tell her as much. It's... it's not exactly wrong anyway."

"You really dislike your sister's husband that much?" Soren asked, raising his brow in surprise.

"He is..." I paused. I knew that my sister had taken a more sympathetic view of the bear, but that had not done her any good when she'd been bonded to him and taken away into the forest to her doom. "Rose was bonded to a monster who took her away from us."

He pulled back in surprise. "And your mother allowed this..."

"We had no choice, Soren," I said, spitting out my words a little sharper than I intended. His face flashed with confusion and regret and I sighed, taking a moment to compose my thoughts. "The town's elders decided to give her away in marriage, and it is done. The rite was said and she was taken away from us. And I... I will never see her again." My voice broke and I looked away, feeling tears stinging at my eyes. Somehow, saying it aloud made it feel as if reality, the world of Ravutsa and Minalorea beyond, had finally found the glade, that I was no longer in some sacred space where the pain could not reach.

Soren placed his hand on my shoulder, turning me toward him. I felt his arms around me, gentle and comforting. I sank my head against his chest, closing my eyes as the tears slipped down my cheek. The magic of the celestial pool clung to his warm skin, comforting and alluring, and the steady beat of his heart calmed me.

"I am sorry," he said softly, resting his chin over my head as his right hand brushed my hair back from my face. "When... when this is ended, if it is within the magic here or if we have to go to the high priests of Menastel, I will do whatever I can to help you. To help her. There are rites to undo a binding. I promise you. You will have your sister back."

"Thank you, Soren," I said as I breathed in, my nostrils filled with Soren's musky scent, mixed with the perfume of the roses and the forest beyond. After a moment, I straightened up and he released me, his face soft with compassion and worry.

"Take me home?" I asked softly, suddenly longing for my own bed and pillow. He nodded and stepped away.

Soren knelt in the grass, placing his hands in the dirt, bowing his head down. This time, the light that encircled him was gentle and warm,

although still shimmering with power that made me step back from him. I flinched, pulling my arms over my eyes as the magic burst and dissipated over the clearing, leaving Soren transformed and gasping on the grass.

A moment later, he rose from the ground, his long graceful limbs glowing in the starlight. He nudged at my arm with his nose and we left the glade, his antlers casting a dim light around us in the forest's darkness.

"If you'd like," he said softly, "you could ride me again." I flushed and nodded.

"I'll try to not hurt you this time," I said, swallowing down a knot of embarrassment as I tried to climb gracefully onto his back. I wasn't successful at that, but I did manage to get myself settled without pulling his fur loose and he set off at a brisk trot through the forest.

"Rose would have loved seeing the magic we did tonight," I said, my mind lingering on the celestial pool's moonlit transformation. "Although she was always touchy about people thinking our mother was a witch, or that we had any magic in our blood."

"Does she not share your gift?" he asked curiously. "Or have her own?"

I sighed, recalling my childhood with my sister. "She... I once thought that I felt it around her. But it never seemed to grow into a gift, into a power she could access. I asked Mother why Rose had nothing when Mother had a small affinity with her herbs and I had my... particular gifting. She told me that Rose held magic within her, but it was buried, asleep. I wanted to help her find her gift but Mother said she'd have to do that on her own. I don't know how she meant for Rose to do that or if she had any idea what kind of power Rose possessed, but it's too late now..."

"Did she not feel left out?" Soren said a few moments later, turning to glance at me quickly. "The only one without power in a family of witches?"

"No," I said, biting my lip. "We never told her. My studies were kept a secret, and she never pried at me about what I was reading. Maybe it was better that way. Mother thought so."

Soren sighed and walked on in silence. "My mother made me promise to tell no one about her magic. Father knew, of course, and my brother. But my own small talents were kept secret, not even my nurses or tutors were allowed to know. I wish my brother had known. That we could

have shared the spell practice, the secrets. She said the day would come when it was right to tell him, but it never did. His own magic, little enough that he had, was also left unspoken as far as I know.”

“Will you tell him when you’re able to go home?” I asked.

He was quiet, his head bent forward. The light that shone from him seemed to grow dimmer as the minutes passed.

“Yes,” he said, barely audible over the rustling leaves around us. “Yes, I think I will. He needs to know.”

As we walked on, he began to hum a haunting melody, and I realized with a jolt that I knew it somehow. The words were lost to me, but the tune was familiar, and I closed my eyes, losing myself within the hazy memory. I could see Rose, not as a full-grown woman as I knew her now, but as a child, her hair wreathed in roses and ivy, her skin golden brown and shining in a late autumn’s afternoon. In my memory, she danced around me, weaving flowered ribbons through the air around us like knight’s pennants and somewhere, someone was singing us a ballad, the voice deep and rumbling. A song of magic and triumph, of power and hope renewed.

Father. That is Father’s lullaby. I blinked suddenly. My memories of him were faint, and mostly came from Mother’s stories about our life before leaving Astantria, or Rose’s wistful recollections about his reading to us or playing games in the garden.

At last, we came to the edge of the wood and I slid gratefully to the ground, my thighs smarting and sore from the ride.

“Callia,” Soren said as I began to walk toward the cottage.

“Yes?” I turned, a strange flutter in my heart at the way he spoke my name.

“Would you tell her?”

“What?” I asked, knitting my brows together.

“Rose. Your sister. If you saw her again, if she came back to you... would you tell her about your magic? Or would you tell her about her own?”

I paused, feeling my heart pound in my chest. Mother had always said that Rose’s magic wasn’t my secret to share, even with her. That mine was for me to decide and that I should allow her the same. Now, my mind rebelled at the secrecy, at the fear that forced us to hide ourselves away from the world and each other.

“Yes,” I said softly. “I would tell her about mine. I would tell her what we did tonight.”

He stepped over the garden wall cautiously, glancing around. The night was quiet except for the sound of a distant owl.

“And would you tell her that she also has a gift?” he asked softly. “Do you think she would welcome it?”

I looked away. The wind blew gently across my face, and I closed my eyes. The image of Mother rose in my mind. She was sitting at her wheel, speaking soft and low as it hummed along, twisting wool roving into a single thread. I knew she would tell me to remain silent. Then I remembered Rose, standing beside the massive hulk of the bear, her hair crowned with small red rosebuds, her face set with determination while her eyes showed sorrow and uncertainty. I remembered watching the bear take her away in the forest, fading into the darkness of its depths.

“I would,” I whispered. “I would tell her a hundred times over if I thought it would keep her safe, if it could protect her from harm.”

Soren sighed, brushing my shoulder with his nose. I leaned against his face, feeling the velvet fur on my cheek.

“And I would tell my brother of his own power, untrained though he is, if it could protect him from a curse like mine,” Soren said. “I wish... I wish I’d told him what I was doing, where I meant to go, before I left home.”

I pulled my face back. “Why didn’t you?”

Soren huffed, his breath flaring his nostrils. “I didn’t think. I couldn’t imagine anyone doing me harm. I was foolish. I thought I knew what I was getting into and that I could handle everything on my own. I’ve paid for that arrogance.” His voice was full of heartbreak, of anger and regret. Remembering how Rose had volunteered to take my place as the bear’s bride, I thought that I understood a little of how he felt.

I smiled. “Then tomorrow, we will break your curse, and you can go home.”

Soren lifted his head, catching the starlight in his antlers. “Yes,” he said, sounding a little more cheerful again. “And I’ll help you get into whatever university you choose; I promise. My family will see to it. You and your family will be taken care of, and I will see if I cannot free your sister from this bond that your village forced on her.”

My heart fluttered again, feeling the hope inside me growing stronger. A life, beyond Ravutsa. Beyond the valley. One more night and it could be mine.

Chapter Thirteen

The next day dragged on for an eternity it seemed, as I waited for night to come so that I could return with Soren to the Starlight Waters. Mother left me to card fleeces early in the morning while she caught a ride on the weaver's cart as he went to the mid-summer market festival in Spalia Dorna. She took with her a large hamper full of fruit preserves, dried mushrooms, and her ointments, each carefully labeled in her neat, flowing script.

I sat in the garden, my eyes drifting to the forest over and over as I contemplated leaving my task and trying to find Soren on my own. Mother wouldn't be back for at least two or three days at the earliest, and the lure of the celestial waters was stronger than my desire to comb the wool into soft, tidy bundles of roving. The quiet of the cottage was stifling, and I kept imagining that every sound I heard coming from the forest was Soren come to keep me company. I realized that I still did not know the way without him, and guilt about how much I'd left Mother alone for weeks kept me working until evening came.

At last, the sun sank low in the west, staining the garden red around me, and I took the wool inside, restless for sundown. I put food into my pouch for later, and changed into a simple, clean dress. Pausing a moment, I grabbed one of my old linen tunics that Mother had made for me to wear when doing any particularly dirty work in the garden or kitchen. I knew it would be snug on Soren's broad shoulders and hardly long enough to reach his knees, but I reasoned that it might be more comfortable for him than going without anything.

I found myself pacing the edge of the wood, my heart racing with anticipation. Soren stepped out a few yards away from the edge of the garden, and I rushed to his side.

"And you won't be missed?" he asked, glancing toward the darkened cottage.

"No, Mother will be gone for a few days," I said as I scrambled onto his back. I imagined that I was getting better at it, finding a comfortable seat a little easier this time. "How long do you think it will

take?” I asked as he trotted into the woods, the shadows growing long around us.

He snorted, picking up his pace as we plunged deeper into the forest. “I have no idea. An hour or two. All night. I’ve never tried to use magic like this before.”

I sighed, contemplating the unknown night before me. The ride seemed to be over before I knew it, and I placed my basket at the foot of one of the oak trees at the edge of the glade. The stars were beginning to prick the darkness but the sliver of the newly reborn moon was still behind the ridge of the mountains.

As Soren transformed, I wandered to the bank of the celestial pool, feeling the exhilaration of magic thrill through me. The stones glowed faintly, casting light on the water, the ground humming with their power.

Soren came to my side and I handed him the tunic, trying not to notice how the light of the rune stones shone on his muscled abdomen or revealed the length of his shaft against his strong thighs. He took the tunic with a smile, shrugging it over his head with a grunt of thanks. It was a bit too small over his shoulders and chest, and much too short to do more than cover his upper thighs. I flushed as he watched me with a curious, knowing smile.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked him softly. “About how to break your curse?”

He nodded once, but his face was tense and drawn. “The water has power to purify, to lift curses and channel magic.”

I glanced over the still water, dark and shimmering in the starlight. The pull was almost irresistible now. I felt myself step toward it, everything else around me fading away. My heart pounded in my ears and my chest ached with every breath. I’d never known such intense longing and desire as I did now.

“Callia?” Soren asked in alarm, grabbing for my arm. “What are you doing?”

I slipped past him, my feet stopping at the very edge of the pool. The water gleamed in the darkness, and the rune stones shone brighter at my approach, giving off a faint hum of power that shivered through the earth. I felt the tingle of magic surge around me, wild and joyous.

And then, without thinking, I stepped forward.

The water splashed cold around me, shocking my skin. I gasped for air as I plunged deeper. There was no bottom under my feet, though I was only a foot or two from the bank. I could hear Soren shouting my name, but my senses were overwhelmed with the wild cacophony of magic that I felt engulfing me. The water dragged me down before I could comprehend what I had done. I could feel my body sinking into the inky depths as the magic pulled me under, and I fought it, kicking and flailing, trying to get my head above the water again.

For a moment, I was in complete darkness, and then a blinding orb of white light surrounded me, emanating from within me. I stopped shivering as the orb of magic gave off a gentle warmth, and the darkness of the pool became clear as day around me. The bottom of the pool was still several feet below me, and I could see silvery stones glittering in the shadowy bed. They began to glimmer brightly as the orb around me grew until they shone like stars falling to earth. I stilled myself, and felt a shift in the magic as it pulled me upward through the waters. Droplets of water shimmered around me like stars, and I was above the pool, floating in the air. Looking down at my body, I was radiant, my skin glowing with the brilliance of the full moon, and every curve and line of my body was wreathed in light and raw magical energy.

You have come at last.

I blinked, twisting around to find the source of the voice I heard, but all that I could see were stars above me, and the pool beneath. My heart raced in my chest, worry building in my throat as the voices echoed through my mind.

“Hello?” I called out tentatively, my voice echoing strangely, as though I were in a great, empty space instead of the forest glade. “What do you mean?”

We have waited for you. Waited for so long. You have come at last.

The words sounded clear and calm in my head, no more a cacophony of many voices, but more like a chorus speaking as one. I bit at my lip nervously, glancing around me again for the source or speakers. I stepped forward, my feet brushing at the surface of the pool, sending ripples dancing out from me like a tremor of enchantment. The water shone as though illuminated by a thousand stars, and my vision was filled with

images of stars and the ascendant moon in all her phases. I saw mountains rising around me, their jagged peaks etched into silver reflections on still waters, before they faded away to show me a stretch of desolate plains, empty of anything but strange crystal rune stones set around a clouded pool. This was quickly replaced by the crashing, stormy sea, gray and wild, and a circle of rocks crowned in starlight.

“What do you want from me?” I asked again. My words fell away from me, coming back in the barest whisper to my ears. “Who are you? What are you?”

Restore them. Take your place. Accept your power. We are your sisters. We are waiting for you.

The world shifted around me again, and I felt the light gathering tightly around me, warm and pulsing with enchantment. It hung on me like a cloak and I drew a deep breath.

I unfurled my fingers, reaching toward the pool beneath me. I could feel the magic trembling on my skin, waiting and ready for me to channel its power.

“I...” I began, my heart beating wildly in my chest. But what was I supposed to be accepting? My mind was shouting at me to resist, to wait until I could ask Mother questions.

No. I told myself firmly. She will have no answers for me. No more than Father Gadrel or anyone else will. Only I can make this decision.

With powers, perhaps, just maybe, I could break Rose’s bond to the bear. I could free my sister. No village elder or rural authority would dare oppose me with magic on my side. I could take my family away, to the coast, or to the plains, and build a new life for us all. One that no priest, elder, or magistrate could rip away from us.

“I accept,” I whispered. The light wrapped around me, absorbing into my skin and hair as I rose higher over the celestial waters.

After a moment, I felt my feet touch the water again, and I stepped forward. I still shone with the light of the moon and stars, and the stones surrounding the pool shimmered as though replenished with magic.

Soren knelt on the bank, his mouth hanging open a little, as I stepped onto the grass beside him. I was soaked from the plunge into the waters, but I was not cold despite the night breeze.

“What...” he asked as his voice broke, his face a mix of shock and concern. “What was that? What did you think you were doing?”

I flushed, placing my hand on his. “I didn’t mean to... It just felt right?”

“I thought you were drowning!” he exclaimed, his brows furrowed together in exasperation. “Before I could think to go after you, you... started shining and then... you just *floated!*”

I shrugged, feeling sheepish at his clear bewilderment and dismay. “I did think I was drowning too,” I admitted. “I’m sorry, Soren. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

He looked away, shaking his head. “That was one of the most horrifying moments of my life, which has been rather full of those for almost a year now. And then... it was one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen. You were... like a star, Callia.” Soren cupped my chin in his hand, drawing my face up until it was nearly touching his.

My heart fluttered as his eyes met mine. His face was illuminated by the silver white glow of my skin, and I noticed how soft his lips were, trembling as he tried to speak.

“What happened?” he whispered at last, running a finger down my cheek toward my neck, sweeping my hair back over my shoulder. His hand lingered a moment at my neck, and his face clouded with concern and curiosity.

“I was pulled down, and then the light...” I stammered, remembering the darkness of the pool and the sudden warmth of the light that I now held inside myself. “I don’t know. The magic saved me.”

Soren shook his head in amazement, and then stepped back, a bemused smile on his lips. “That was amazing. You were...” he faltered, looking away. He sighed deeply, glancing up at the sky. “It was unexpected.”

I felt a faint warmth settling into my skin as I looked at the stars, and the celestial pool reflected their light back at us. Soren shivered as the wind swirled around us and he pulled off the chemise, laying it on the grassy bank. I went to his side and slipped my hand into his, gazing up at the glittering spangle of stars.

He gave me a final glance of apprehension, still holding my hand for a moment longer. I smiled, squeezing his hand reassuringly as I smiled

encouragingly, my heart filled with wonder and excitement.

The celestial pool had filled me with joy, with radiance, with a sense of power and purpose. I could only imagine how he would be transformed, once his curse was removed.

I stepped back, letting go of him and he turned, removing the tunic and placing it on the bank. His back was to me, and I saw the tension in his shoulders as he breathed in for a moment, and then he bent his head down. A moment later, he walked into the pool, pausing as the water came to his knees after the first step.

I saw him flail for a moment as he lost his footing. He threw his arms wildly over his head, as if to swim to the center of the pool. He seemed to rise up for a moment, the water bubbling around him as he thrashed, and then he dropped out of sight into the darkness.

I could feel my heart racing, the acid taste of worry in my mouth making it hard for me to swallow. I ran to the edge, kneeling in the grass as I peered through the depths at the star-stones on the bottom of the pool. I could see those gleaming faintly, as though far away, and a dark form moving swiftly toward them. *Soren*. I tore small bits of grass loose with my fingers as I waited for the light to come to him.

A moment passed. A minute, and the waters remained dark. I felt the panic rising in my throat, a strangled scream climbing its way out of me.

Suddenly, there was a glow, dim and distant, and I saw Soren unmoving in the water. The light grew stronger, closer, and it gleamed a dull yellow, undulating and weak. A moment later, he broke through the surface, water scattering over the rune-stones and grass. I stood, blinking and shaking, wanting to run out over the pool to reach him, but I was frozen on the bank.

He was still and limp, his body wreathed in a sickly yellow glow that arched from his back, pulsing around him. The strange four-lobed outline I'd seen on his back before was glowing brightly, the unsettling magic flowing from it. It took the form of a spectral flower blooming from his skin and it was keeping him aloft, just inches above the water. At its center, I saw a crystalline stone, with a dozen or more facets etched with unfamiliar runes.

Soren spun slowly in place over the water, and I saw his face, drained and taut in pain as though he'd been frozen in the act of crying out

in agony.

“Soren!” I managed to scream his name, and it broke the trance that held me back. I ran out, my feet barely sinking into the water at all, and I threw my arms around him, frantically dragging him back.

For a split second, the magic resisted me, and I screamed his name again, closing my eyes as I tugged him free from the yellow orb of magic that seemed to be consuming him. He went limp in my arms and I felt his body lurch as though being thrown backward by some force within the waters.

He was much larger than I was, well-muscled from years of whatever physical training had been expected of him, but I pulled him through the waters and onto the bank, dragging his body over the grass as best as I could. My heart drummed in alarm at my ribs, wondering if I was too late to help him.

Chapter Fourteen

“Soren?” My heart was in my throat as I cradled him in my arms. I clawed his hair away from his face and bent down, listening for his breath. It did not come. He was completely still and cold, his body limp on my lap. “Soren, please wake up.”

I could feel the tears trickling down my cheeks in tiny, cold rivulets as my chest heaved with a shuddering sob. His hand fell onto my knee, his strong fingers unfurled and lax. I shook him, trying to pull him upright, but he was too heavy for me to hold up. Laying him on the bank, I crouched over him, opening his mouth in the hopes that he would breathe again.

After a moment, I placed my hand on his chest, my skin still shining with light and warmth, and I pressed down, feeling the firm resistance of his muscles against my fingers. A lingering wisp of sickly yellow that encircled his abdomen vanished at my touch, and he gave one swift, convulsing shudder. My heart skipped a beat and I rolled him over again, pulling his face toward me. There was a silvery imprint on his chest where my hand had been and it began to glow steadily, though still dim.

“Let me save him,” I whispered, glancing up at the stars. “Let him live.” As he went limp again, I reached my arms around him, grasping for where I’d seen the strange stone on his back. There was nothing there under my fingers except his skin, but I felt a clamminess and as I drew my hand back, I saw a shroud of the yellow magic still wafting from the spot. I clutched Soren to my chest and placed my palm on his spine over the source of the magic, feeling for the rune stone. There was a throb of magic, slow and pulsing as though pulling Soren’s life away with every beat.

I remembered the rush of magic and life I’d felt as the starlight entered me, when I’d been filled with the celestial light. I took a deep breath and filled my mind with the thought of the light, of the magic and power.

Slowly, the gleam of my skin began to brighten again, and I felt a surge of magic flowing down my arms, into my fingers, and over Soren’s

skin. His skin began to warm where I touched him, and the curse seemed to release its grip over him, at least a little.

He gasped for air, struggling against me for a moment, before curling back into my arms, too exhausted to pull away. A moment later, he glanced up at me, his expression dazed and drained. A flicker of recognition lit in his eyes, followed quickly by a panicked look at the celestial pool.

“Callia?” he whispered hoarsely. “How did I make it out of...” he shuddered, a shadow passing over his eyes. “How did I get out of the water?”

“It’s going to be all right,” I said, smiling with relief. My heart was still racing wildly, but I felt my shoulders ease as I remembered to breathe. “You... I pulled you out. You were out of the water but unconscious and... I didn’t know what to do.” Tears flowed over my cheeks as I stroked his face with my hand, leaving a trail of light on his cheek. The magic grew over him like a radiant, renewing shroud and after a moment, Soren breathed out deeply, as though his mind had cleared at last.

He reached up, placing his hand over mine, and gave a short huff of amazement.

“I clearly wasn’t as prepared as I thought,” he said, grimacing. “Thank you for getting me out, Callia.”

“Of course, I’m only sorry we weren’t able to break your curse,” I said, flushing and glancing at the celestial pool as he stared intently at me. Soren flashed a quick smile of gratitude at me, his expression open and warm, and slipped his arm around my waist as he sat up on his own. He lifted my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze.

“When I was too brash and the magic had taken me, you pulled me out before it was too late. You stopped it from killing me, didn’t you?” he asked, his lips quirking into a knowing smile. “And now,” he said, lifting my hand and turning my palm up, “you’ve saved me again through whatever magic the pool gave you.”

His fingers brushed over my skin as his hand slid up my arm and I felt my cheeks grow hot as I stumbled for words. “I didn’t know what else to do and...”

“Thank you, Callia,” he whispered with a quiet smile, leaning in closer. “I am trying to say thank you for saving me.” His lips brushed over mine. Soft, questioning. Waiting for me to respond.

I blinked in surprise, my breath caught in my throat. Soren stopped, pulling away from me for a moment. He watched me quietly, still waiting.

A thousand thoughts clamored in my head, wanting me to stop, to ask questions before responding, to back away and be cautious. I felt his hand on my back, his touch firm and gentle.

“Soren, I just...” I whispered, brushing back my hair for a moment.

“Of course, I did not mean to offend you,” he nodded and then without thinking, I leaned forward and kissed him.

Soren tensed in surprise, and then pulled me toward him, his arm around my waist, strong and irresistible. I slipped my fingers through his hair as my other hand settled on his shoulder. He kissed me again, his lips soft and yet insistent, as I relented, sinking into his touch, feeling his chest pressed against mine.

His tongue brushed over my lips, parting them for a moment, and I felt a small gasp rising through me. This seemed to encourage him, and I felt his hand on my thigh, settling me onto his lap so that he could encircle my entire waist more easily with his other arm.

I’d never felt a thrill like this, not from anything I’d known or dreamed of, not from books or even magic. My heart lept as his fingers trailed over my back, and I kissed him again. His hand slipped lower down my leg, brushing against my knee. Soren pulled back for a moment, one hand on my cheek as my mind swirled tumultuously with passion.

“You’re soaked,” he said with a note of amusement, his eyes sparkling with starlight again. I glanced down at my dress, clinging to my body, illumined by the light that seemed to shine brighter than it had moments before. “You’ll catch cold if you stay in it. I’m surprised you can still move at all.”

I felt my cheeks burning and I stammered out a string of unintelligible sounds, trying to find the words to excuse myself as a thousand conflicting thoughts tumbled into my mind: warning, chiding, reproving. I shook them all away until only the desire for Soren, for his thrilling, gentle touch and the delightful warmth and firmness of his body, remained.

Soren caught my hand and pulled me back, kissing me deeply as his hand slipped onto my lap, tugging at the fastenings of my dress. With the buttons undone, he slipped it down from my shoulders and I felt him loosening my stays and the tie of my chemise. With a quick, fluid movement, he pulled me to my feet and my dress fell to the grass, his hands brushing over my bare back, as soft and warm as the summer night's breeze. I feel an ache of longing welling from below my belly, coursing through me like magic, giving heat to my skin as his fingers traced over my exposed back and hips. The sensation of pleasure, of heady desire and yearning, was more intense and exhilarating than I had ever imagined it would be. All I wanted was to feel his lips on mine again, to feel his body pressed against my own.

His skin was smooth against mine as he held me close to him, trailing his lips over my neck and shoulders. A moment later, he lifted me up effortlessly and I wrapped my legs around his hips. I let my hands run over his upper arms, marveling in the strength and shapeliness of his muscles as he held me with no sign of strain or weariness.

As his lips brushed over my breasts, I felt a flutter of delight rising from my stomach. As I shivered in response to his touch, he flicked his tongue over my nipples, drawing it between both breasts, circling them both before delicately grazing my right breast with his teeth. I threw my head back, shaking my hair loose as my body ached and my back arched under his firm, deft touch. Encouraged by my ecstasy, he paused to glance up at me, smiling, as he began kissing my breasts slowly and passionately.

Soren gripped my thigh with his hand as he knelt down, his arm holding me securely to his body as he leaned me against one of the rune stones. I felt the throb of magic under my back as he traced his fingers down my side until he reached my knee.

"Callia," he purred in my ear, lightly tugging my earlobe between his teeth. "I wanted to tell you... tonight when you came out of the celestial pool..." he paused, pressing his hand against my inner thigh. He pushed himself up, his body framed against the starlight and the gleam of the rune stones. "You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen." He cupped my face with one hand, stroking my cheek as he smiled. "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever known."

I reached up, pushing his curls away from his shadowed face, my heart fluttering at the warmth of his skin against mine. I watched his chest muscles ripple as he lifted me up onto the stone, the light of my skin giving his body a faint silver glow.

I felt his fingers between my thighs, keeping my legs apart. Each stroke was slow, insistent, finding my folds and slipping between them for a moment before returning to my thighs again and again. I felt an ache of pleasure rippling below my belly and Soren shifted his body, leaving a litany of kisses over my breasts and stomach before placing his head between my legs. The stubble of his chin brushed against my skin, sending rippling shivers of desire cascading down my legs. He began to kiss and lick my thighs, gently and firmly working toward my soft, wet folds.

A low moan built in my chest, as I felt my legs open wider as his hands gripped my thighs, his grasp gentle and yet unyielding. His tongue flicked inside me, as though beckoning my body to dance at his touch. I gasped as the pleasure grew more intense, surging through every part of my body with a tingling heat that left my thoughts swirling and heart racing.

I couldn't keep my hips from rising in answer to his touch, bucking against his lips as he kissed me, and he responded by dragging his fingers down over my thighs and my calves. He pulled my legs over his shoulders, his grip on my thighs firm and passionate. I worked my fingers through his curls, trying to steady my thoughts and breath as my body seemed ready to float away at every touch of his skin, the caress of his lips. Sensations of ecstasy and euphoria broke over me in waves as he stroked and kissed between my legs. A feeling of rapture erupted from below my belly, and I threw my head back, releasing a long, low scream of exhilaration, shattering the quiet of the starlit forest glade.

It felt as though I was once again floating above the celestial pool and the stars had filled me with their light for a second time as the delight rippled through my body. My skin glowed brightly golden and silver under his touch and he leaned his cheek against my thigh, looking up at me with a contented smile on his face.

After watching me intently for a moment, he pushed himself up onto his hands, leaning his body over me as he trailed kisses over my stomach again. He took his time, caressing and fondling my breasts, before wrapping his arms around me, lying on the grass beside the rune-stone. I

laid my head on his chest, trailing my finger down his stomach toward his thighs. Every breath felt as though I might float away from pleasure and contented bliss. I didn't want the night to end or the stars to fade from the sky and force me to return to my ordinary life outside of the glade again.

"Soren," I said, as I placed my other hand on his hip, pulling him toward me until our thighs touched again. "What do I need to do to break your curse?"

He sighed, shaking his head before bending down to kiss my breasts again. "I don't know. I thought the magic in the pool would be enough. But right now, I don't care if the curse never breaks. It brought me here. To you."

He kissed my forehead, and I nestled closer to him, enjoying the warmth and softness of his skin against mine, my body still awash in delight and pleasure from his touch. As he stroked my hair, he began to hum tunelessly, and I fell asleep in his arms under the shimmering starlight.

Chapter Fifteen

The sun was shining golden on the glade, and I opened my eyes slowly. Sitting up, I found my cloak draped across my legs, and I glanced around for any sign of Soren. The glade seemed empty, and all I could hear was the whispering of leaves in the soft breeze.

The celestial pool was completely still, the surface shimmering like a mirror in the midst of the green grass. There was no longer the sense of being drawn toward it, the feeling that I needed to enter the water. Instead, I felt a warmth of power and enchantment, heavy and comforting, resting over my shoulders, encircling my hips and extending down my arms and legs. The same thrilling power that I'd felt from the magic that had filled me from the waters and the starlight.

I trailed my fingers through the water. It was cool, and I could see down to the faint glimmer of the silver stones at the bottom. I watched the ripples distort their appearance for a moment, curiosity needling my thoughts.

"Soren?" I called out, stepping away from the pool. I found my dress, neatly folded on one of the nearer rune-stones, and I slipped into it quickly. Although my stays were still damp, my chemise and dress were dry enough to wear. My heart quickened, making color rise in my cheeks, as I recalled the night before, but I quickly stuffed down the memory of Soren's gentle touch on my skin. I didn't know what his true feelings toward me were, if they were more than just a passing fondness and a moment of passion. My own feelings seemed to have grown beyond what I'd ever known before, and any idle musing might encourage me to imagine more than he had intended. Still, when I closed my eyes, I could feel the warmth and desire of his lips on my skin, and my legs recalled the firm touch of his hands with pleasure.

A branch snapped within the wood, and I spun around to try to identify the source. There was only the mass of green branches that swayed rhythmically above the monotony of brown barked trunks and the deep earthy greens of ferns and moss on the forest floor. Slowly, I peered deeper, waiting for a flash of white that meant Soren was nearby.

I ducked my head to avoid a low hanging branch as I came to the forest's edge. The wood was calm and quiet, and I shook myself.

"A bird or animal, then. Nothing to alarm me," I said out loud, although my voice didn't sound very confident even to me. I wished Soren would return, or that he would have woken me before leaving the glade. A small worry blossomed in my chest about whether or not he would seek out my company at all now that we had failed to remove his curse, now that there was nothing more I could do to aid him. I sighed and swallowed, reminding myself that he had given me no reason to believe this before.

I found my basket, and was grateful for the small bundle of food I'd thought to bring. Leaning against an oak, I stretched out on the ground and made a simple meal of the bread and cheese, watching the Starlight Waters in the glory of the morning light. Images returned to my mind of the mountains and the sea and the plains, and my thoughts repeated back the words that had been spoken to me again and again.

But spoken by whom? I didn't think it was the waters themselves, and the voices had seemed to be filled with powers, holding ancient secrets that had waited... for me? I swallowed a bit of cheese, wrinkling my brows together in frustration. They had bestowed some kind of power, some forgotten magic, on me. But what it did, how it worked, and what I was meant to do with it seemed to be even more of a mystery and a riddle than my previous gift of dreams had been. And that had left plenty of questions that even Mother could not answer.

And I wasn't sure there was anyone who had any answers for me now. Except...

Except the Sutrae Lyentari. I drew a deep breath. Mother had done her best to make sure that I had never drawn the attention of anyone who would send me to the sorcerers. She feared their cloistered reach extending even into the remote corners of the kingdom, their secretive studies into the arcane, their strict control over anyone whose powers went beyond the acceptable levels for a hearth or heath witch or a court or university bound wizard.

"I don't suppose there's anything left?" a voice came at my right, making me jolt. My thoughts scattered like leaves in an autumn breeze.

"Soren!" I exclaimed. Soren, still in human form, came around the tree trunk. He smoothed down the edge of the tunic around his thighs

and stretched out beside me, the leaves overhead dappling his legs with shadowed sunlight.

“I didn’t mean to surprise you,” he said, leaning his head back. Soren gave me a laconic smile, his glance lingering over me, and I flushed. I couldn’t help but remember the way he’d looked at me the night before; the attentive, enraptured expression in his eyes as he had kissed me. “I was attempting to forage for fruit, well berries, in the nearby woods for my breakfast but it’s not exactly a skill I had before... well. It’s harder to satisfy my hunger as a man with what I know how to forage from the forest. I know enough to be wary of mushrooms at least. I don’t know how you can remember them all.”

I tossed him a small piece of bread and he nodded appreciatively as he bit into it. I wanted him to speak, to give me some indication about his thoughts on the previous night. Whether it had merely been a moment of passion, or more. But he simply swallowed the bread and closed his eyes, as if waiting for me to address the tension between us. “What do we do next?” I asked. “The curse is still marked on your back and...”

“You can see it?” he asked, his eyes suddenly bright and alert. He sat up, curling one arm around his raised knee.

“The mark of the four petals is always there,” I started slowly. “But last night, when you came up out of the water, I could see the rune-stone that holds the curse. Or at least a projection of it in light.”

Soren drew a deep breath. His expression seemed clouded, guarded, and he spoke slowly as he reached one hand behind him to feel for the epicenter of the curse’s mark. “I can feel it, throbbing, pulling at me. I thought the waters could remove it but...”

“If there’s a rune stone, somewhere, holding the spell,” I began. “Could that be why the waters didn’t work to remove the curse’s hold over you?”

“I suppose,” he said with a sigh. I gave him the last half of the round of cheese I’d brought and he nodded thankfully. “I know very little about how that kind of wizardry works.”

“I think Mother has a book on spells cast through stones, although I don’t know if curses are part of that,” I said. “But it might be a place to start. Sadly, we don’t have a library to consult.”

Soren pulled his knees under his chin, regarding me thoughtfully. “Would your village priest know anything about such things? Or how to break them?”

I scoffed, feeling my face twist with bitterness. “No, he would be useless to you. Country vicars are hardly the most academic or profound scholars. Father Gadrel is no more ignorant or superstitious than most priests, but he is good only for the saying of the ordinary cycle of rituals and performing the essential bindings and blessings required by farmers and peasants. And that’s when he’s not drinking himself into a stupor to avoid facing the guilt of his recent actions regarding my sister.”

He did not speak but I felt his eyes lingering on me. After a little time passed, I rose, brushing my hands over my skirt. “Perhaps the magic here is now strong enough that we do not need to wait for the moon to be full to try again, if we can find another way to use it and free you,” I said, looking again at the pool. I wanted to hear the voices speaking to me again, to ask for guidance. I knew I should be cautious, but they had felt safe, reassuring, and familiar somehow.

Soren reached up and took my hand as he stood, his grasp firm yet gentle. I relented and did not step away as he pulled me close, his arms encircling my waist.

“I will take you home then,” he said softly, his lips grazing my forehead as his hand lifted my chin, bringing my face up to meet his. “When we find a way to break this, I will fulfill my promise to you of a new life of your choosing, and freedom for your family.”

I faltered under the directness of his gaze as my stomach lurched a little and heat rose on my cheeks. “And then,” I asked, my heart rising in my throat, “will you help me learn more about the celestial waters?”

“What else is there?” he asked. “What do you want to know?”

I flushed. “I just... need to know about their power. About those who kept them pure before. About the power they hold and what it means to be part of that.”

“Callia.” Soren spoke my name softly but his voice was strained with concern. “What happened to you when you were in the pool last night?”

I leaned my forehead against his shoulder, my heart fluttering at the memory of his body pressed against mine, the sight of my skin alight

with magic as his touch sent thrills of ecstasy through my core. “I don’t know. It’s nothing,” I said with a sigh. “The magic just seemed to flow through me and I want to know more about it.” The words sounded hollow as I struggled to find an answer that I thought he would accept. I was hesitant to mention the voices I’d heard from the stars, the memory feeling more like a dream or half-recalled vision in the clear light of morning.

Soren cupped my chin in his hand, resting his fingers against my cheek as he studied my face for a moment. He blinked thoughtfully, pulling his face back slightly from mine. “Of course,” he said, his voice soft. “Whatever there may be to learn from any university in the kingdom, any library we can look to, I will see to it that you will find the answers you seek.”

“Thank you, Soren. I only hope that the answer to breaking your curse is in one of the few books my mother still has,” I said as I smiled up at him, my lashes fluttering as I tried to meet his gaze. His eyes were alight with passion and desire, flicking over my face as if seeking some hint of my own feelings. I felt the heat of a blush spread over my cheeks as my breath caught in my chest. With a small nod, he smiled at me, kissing me deeply and I gave up any display of restraint, pressing myself against him as he slipped his tongue between my lips. I felt a tremor of desire dance over my skin, my legs aching to feel his touch again. His hand curled through my hair, insistent and passionate as he held me. I flung my arms around his neck, my heart beating wildly as I lost myself in the delight of his kiss, his tongue sweet and firm in my mouth. He lingered a moment, his arm around my waist pulling me a little closer to him so that I could feel the beat of his heart against my chest. A bird called out overhead and the moment was broken, both of us flushing as we stepped back from each other.

“Let’s get you home,” he said, letting go of my waist as he turned away to transform once more, “and start finding what answers we can.”

Chapter Sixteen

I sighed, my forehead resting against the smooth worn wood of our table as I drummed my fingers on the open book beside me. I'd pulled all of Mother's books from her shelves and stacked them in orderly piles the moment I'd returned home, eager to find any forgotten references to binding or unbinding spells cast through stones. Soon enough, they were scattered around me, strewn over the chairs and floors as I scanned and discarded them with a disappointed sigh. I'd scarcely allowed myself to hope that one of the books would have any information that Soren did not already know about the Celestial Pool. Soren had left to return to the glade hours before, though he had lingered a while just beyond the garden wall, as though hesitant to return alone. I'd given him his fill of radishes that Mother had thinned out from the garden bed while I ate a more substantial meal than breakfast I'd had in the forest.

I suppressed a swelling thrill at the thought that he had wanted to stay with me, despite his usual discomfort at the thought of coming too close to the forest's edge. Pushing myself up from my dejected slump, I looked out the window, surprised to see that the sky had grown pink and gold, the light burnishing the walls of the cottage with a fiery afternoon glow. My stomach growled insistently, knotting and writhing.

I shut the book and stood with a stretch. So far, my perusal of books had turned up nothing about curses, and nothing about the Starlight Waters.

"I swear Mother had more books about magic when I was younger and she made me study them all," I muttered crossly as I pushed my chair back to my table. Immediately, I flinched, feeling remorse for even having the thought of blaming her. She'd only ever parted with books when she needed the extra silver to buy food or clothing for Rose and me, and I knew how much it pained her to give up anything that remained of my father's belongings. "Though perhaps finding anything about curses was never going to happen. It's not like herbalists can work that kind of spell."

I went to the kitchen, rubbing my arms, and lit a fire in the belly of the iron stove. Mother had left some food for me before going to Spalia

Dorna, which I was grateful to find in the cupboards. I had known that she would still be at market when I arrived home and that she did not plan to return to Ravutsa until three days past the new moon, but it still seemed strange to be alone in the cottage, with no pot of hot tea waiting for me, no embers glowing on the hearth ready to be woken into a blazing fire. I wished Soren had stayed, if only to have company while I read Mother's books. I filled the kettle from a pitcher of water and set it on the hob, hoping the fire would soon be steady enough to heat a pot of tea. After preparing a lackluster meal for myself, I returned to the table and pushed the few remaining unread books into the center. None of them seemed particularly promising, with titles that spoke of poultices and remedies and how to access and preserve the magic within plants and nature to heal or assuage ailments.

At last, the kettle began to whistle and I returned to the kitchen. The tea smelled sweet and calming as I poured the hot water into Mother's teapot, and I smiled softly to myself, remembering how much comfort she'd given me when I'd first come to her about my visions. I closed my eyes, losing myself to recollection of how she would pull me onto her lap, her apron smelling of tarragon and rosemary, or mint and yarrow, and pour me a cup of tea while I whispered my dreams to her and she eased my fears. I carried it to the table and placed my cup at my chair, considering if it was getting dark enough to merit a candle if I wanted to continue reading into the evening.

My thoughts scattered as I jumped up from the table, a rapping on the kitchen door jolting me back to the cottage. A moment of silence was followed by a louder repetition of the knocks. *Soren?* My heart raced, and I hurried to the door. No, I thought, he would not transform, and he had never come farther from the forest than the line of the garden wall. Had Mother returned? *Or Rose?*

"I wasn't expecting you..." I began as I pulled the door open, allowing a gust of the late afternoon breeze to sweep over my bare arms. I blinked in shock, staring down at Maris Kaczmarek's worry-drawn face. Her hair was wild around her face, escaping from under the pale green cap that kept her braids off her neck.

"Callia, is your mother in? Rose isn't planning on coming down from the forest, is she?" The words tumbled abruptly out of her mouth; her

cheeks flushed deep pink as though she'd run all the way from Ravutsa to our garden.

"I..." I felt my words die in my mouth. Maris looked back toward the village, suppressing a small shudder as though some ill wind had followed her. I'd known Maris to cry on occasion, and had seen her truly angry once years ago, but never had I seen her openly frightened before. "Do you want to come in?" I asked, stepping to the side to allow her to pass me.

Maris swallowed and nodded before ducking past. I closed the door carefully, watching as she stood in the middle of the kitchen, her eyes darting around the cottage.

"So your mother is still down the valley at market?" she asked after a moment, turning her large blue eyes on me at last.

"Yes." This seemed to relieve her, as her grip loosened on her shawl, and she gave me a quick smile. "You mentioned my sister?"

Maris pressed her lips together, her feet still shuffling against the smooth worn stone floor. Her wine-red skirt was liberally spattered with mud and her tattered apron looked like it had been doused with the remnants of a pint of beer not long ago.

"Maris, please, what is wrong?" I reached out, taking her arm and guiding her to the table. She glanced questioningly at the books and then shrugged as she sat in Rose's chair. I poured her a cup of tea which she accepted with murmured thanks. She sipped it gingerly, the steam curling around her pale face, and then set the cup on the table and tilted her head appraisingly at me.

"I was worried for Rose, for all of you," she said, her voice soft and timid. "I warned her when she came last that tensions were running high in Ravutsa that they needed to be careful. But now..."

"You've seen my sister?" I jerked my head back. A feeling of anger flashed through my thoughts, twisting into a bitter wash of jealousy in my mouth. "Why would she come see you?" My words sounded snappish and mean, but I didn't care. Rose had never been close to Maris as far as I knew, and yet had sought her out when the beast had given her leave to visit home? No, Rose would have come to me. She would have found me and wrapped me in her arms and made the world right again, even if just for a

moment. And now Maris claimed that she was the one whom my sister sought out?

“For supplies, for news, to have me trade in her stead. I didn’t know if they’d do something stupid or horrible to her just because they are afraid of the bear,” she said, her face unperturbed by my reaction, as though being met with anger and unreasonableness were so commonplace that she hardly expected anything more. Her own expression remained concerned and earnest, but she still seemed to be alert and on edge. “She visited with your mother, and seemed to be sad that you were not at home. But she couldn’t stay all day waiting for you and they left before sunset.”

My heart sank. Mother had mentioned nothing of Rose’s visit to me. I couldn’t fathom why she wouldn’t have told me, why she would have kept a secret from me. Unless it had to do with magic, a small whisper nudged at my thoughts. The way she and I had kept secrets from Rose all our lives.

And I had never asked. Not once had I thought to ask her about her days spent alone at the wheel, or how she was preparing her potions for the farmers of the valley. Not about her garden or going to market. I wanted to say that she would have told me about something as important as Rose coming home without me needing to ask her, if only to reassure me that Rose was well and happy. No, I thought as a wave of guilt welled up from my chest and tightened in my throat. This was another part of our lives she had kept to herself, a secret that divided Rose and I from each other, and from her. Another piece of our lives for her to mull over, locked forever in her thoughts but never spoken of.

Just as she never spoke about the hours I spent away, leaving her alone with only her thoughts and memories. And I was undoubtedly with Soren in the Kingswood when Rose had come home, I realized, my stomach churning with self-reproach.

“I’m glad you were there for her,” I said, trying to soften my words and my expression a little. Maris was far more welcome in Ravutsa than my sister and I were, and if Rose had needed help, Maris was by far the first person she would have trusted outside of our family. “I have not seen her, and Mother did not make me believe that she would come down again. Why does that matter though?”

Maris took a deep breath, clearing her throat. “How much have you paid any attention to the mutterings and news in Ravutsa lately, Callia?”

I flushed. I’d only managed two of the weekly errands since Rose had left weeks before. “I must admit, I never really tried to keep abreast of the gossip. Rose listened more, cared more, since anything unpleasant was usually attributed to us somehow.”

“It’s not much different now that she’s gone,” Maris said grimly. “You’d think everyone would feel a little bit of remorse or indebtedness after they made her marry Tomas...”

“He has a name?” I quirked my brow. I knew he’d given one during the binding, but it seemed too human, too personable to call him something so ordinary.

“I suppose everyone has to have one, even bewitched bears,” Maris replied, crossing her arms. She leaned back in the chair and sighed. “And he’s a decent sort, you know, despite being a bear. Very considerate and well-spoken. Better than the lads who come to father’s tavern and drink their week’s wages before they’ve earned them. Anyway, the duke’s men had come through town, asking about a bear touched by some dark sorcery, talking about a horrid fate that might have befallen the princes...”

“They found the princes?”

“No.” Maris shook her head, a half-smile flitting over her lips. “It’s just rumors and idle talk. But some people believe that a bear, a cursed one at that, may have killed Prince Dacian. The duke must have heard about our Spirit Bear haunting us, and so his men came, asking questions and riling up more fear in the village. There’s a reward out for bringing Tomas in now,” Maris said, leaning her elbows against the table, her eyes focused on my face. “I worry that if they find your sister with him, if they can even find him, that they’ll be too angry and afraid and...” her voice trailed away as she bit her lower lip until it flushed dark red.

“They’d have to know where they are in the Kingswood,” I offered as my mind wandered to images of the frightened, distrustful faces that I’d seen almost every market day of my life. If they decided that my sister was somehow complicit with the bear for the Crown Prince’s death, I could only imagine how little care they would take not to harm her. “They’d

have to enter the Kingswood, and I can't imagine the king has issued any writs of permission to do so."

"But the duke has," Maris replied. She shook her head, the cap falling finally around her neck. Her dark braids slipped down, hanging almost to the floor over the back of her chair. "He wants the bear brought to justice."

"You don't think..."

"That Tomas did it?" Maris asked with a short, dismissive laugh. She curled her fingers around the cup of tea, collecting her thoughts. "Of course I do not. And Rose is adamant that such a thing is ridiculous. I have to agree with her that the whole thing is preposterous. But the point is, right now, the village thinks that their offering isn't enough to keep them safe. That there's a dark sorcerer or wizard in the wood and that he is responsible for the princes' disappearing, or their deaths, and they are more than ready to attribute the bad frosts and flooded fields to him. And they are willing to believe that Tomas is that sorcerer. Or that he is controlled by one at least."

I rubbed at my arms, feeling the agitation rising in my throat. I needed to tell Soren that his fears of a dark sorcerer seemed to be more well-founded than I'd thought, even if Rose's cursed beast wasn't in his service. "Do they think we are all tainted by the association?"

Maris sighed. "You know what they're like. They've never trusted your mother, despite her giving them absolutely no reason to treat her badly. They depend on your family whenever they're ill or hurt. But there's talk... the whole town is more uneasy about magic, and fearful of anyone who might be touched by it, than they usually are."

"And that's why you came to see me?" I asked, glancing at the darkening sky out the windows.

"Yes," she said softly, her eyes falling to her lap. "And... this afternoon, the duke sent a handful of his knights to Ravutsa to wait for Rose and Tomas to return. They might come for you and your mother if they think it will provoke them to show themselves. They are staying at the inn, and Father has been ordered to keep everyone else away until they leave. But..." her face clouded as she shook her head, her shoulders quivering slightly, "there is one other traveler at the inn."

"Who?" I asked. I reached across the table to take her hand. Her fingers were cold and shaking as I closed my hand around hers and she

flashed a grateful smile at me as she lifted her head to meet my gaze. “And does he worry you more than the knights of Chartrin?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “He came down from the mountains at dusk last night, and I saw father let him in through the back. A rider, in blacks and browns, and his satchel has the celandine stones of the duke’s mines at its clasps. He’s been in his room all day, but I can feel that something is wrong. He only comes every few years, and no one sees him, but I remembered him. I could never forget his face, his eyes.”

“What do you mean?” I moved my chair closer to hers. Her face had darkened, and her eyes filled with an emptiness of despair.

“He came when I was a child, and then my eldest brother, Jonas, disappeared a few days later. Then again seven years ago, and my other brother was gone. Each time, they were not the only boys who vanished from the village,” she spoke, her voice rasping a little. I remembered the furor and horror in Ravutsa when Nikolas Kaczmarek and Kasmir Voloden vanished late one summer, and the whispers about Jonas’ similar fate when we had first come to the town. “People said they wandered into the Kingswood and were taken by the forest spirits. Some thought they were taken to mines, except that the duke had not sent his knights or riders to collect them, so it could not be. Father and Mother always said it was a shame I hadn’t been taken in Nikolas’ place. But now, this man is back, and if more boys go missing...”

“They’ll blame Tomas,” I offered.

“And they’ll take it out on you and your mother,” she finished glumly. Tears brimmed in her eyes. “You have to stay away, keep out of sight, until they have cooled their heads.” She looked up at me and I saw the fear in her expression, the weight on her shoulders. “Leave this cottage as soon as you can. We need to send word to your mother not to return yet, to wait in Spalia Dorna until it is safe again.”

I blinked, her words sinking in slowly. “Where do you think I can go?” I whispered. “We have nowhere else.”

“I know you’ve been wandering the Kingswood lately,” Maris said, swallowing back a shudder and squaring her shoulders resolutely. “I don’t know what you’ve been doing in there, and I don’t think it’s best for you to tell me where you’ve been going either, but it might be the safest place for you. Just stay quiet and hidden.”

A pit of worry seemed to lodge in my throat, making it difficult to breath or speak. My eyes stung and I nodded.

“I’ll pack some food for you if you’ll write a letter to your mother. I’ve brought my wages — well, the tips that I’ve kept back from my father — so she can afford a room in Spalia Dorna for a few weeks. Demir Jarisek is going down the valley in the morning to sell their extra litter of piglets and he can take the letter to her.”

“Do you trust him?” I asked as I went to Mother’s room for her writing box.

“He is one of maybe five people in this village that I think has kept his head lately. He and Josef had to clear off a half dozen men from Father Gadrel’s vicarage yesterday after he refused to give his approval to come looking for your mother.” Maris did not look up as she pulled bread, cheese, and fruit from the cupboards, wrapping them in linen towels before setting them into my lidded hamper. She found a few jars of preserves Mother kept for holy days and family celebrations and gave them an approving nod before adding them to the basket. I finished the letter and folded it carefully, adding her wax seal to the outer seam. After giving it to Maris, I gave a final lingering glance to Mother’s spinning wheel before I gathered her books neatly into tidy stacks, placing them back on her shelf.

I’d made it back to the table when a small volume caught my eye in the final glint of sunset. It had not been on the shelf with the others but had been left under the chair that stood beside her bed as though she’d been reading it recently. I sat on her bed as I picked it up and inspected it closely. My heart lept into my throat as I turned it over in my hands. It was bound in a deep blue leather with slanting silver lettering stamped into it and a symbol of the moon’s phases over a depiction of sacred rune stones surrounding a pool of water. A tingle of magic, exhilarating and playful, twined up my fingers and I placed it into my apron pocket.

“I think you’re ready now,” Maris said as she tied a bottle of wine to the outer part of my hamper. The kitchen looked barren and cold after her thorough preparations. “I need to get back before Father gets curious about where I’ve gone. You need to leave this place before daybreak if you choose not to leave tonight. Please, Callia, stay safe.”

“Thank you, Maris,” I said as I took the hamper from her. She gave me a quick nod, her expression somber, and then she pulled her cap

back over the ruin of her braids. We went out into the deepening twilight, the sky pricked by a handful of stars. “For warning me. For helping my mother stay safe.”

She shrugged, wrapping her arms around herself. “I promised Rose that I would look out for you and your mother. I only wish I could...” she shook her head. “I have to go. Stay hidden.” She turned and ran lightly away, her shawl fluttering like wings in the growing darkness.

Chapter Seventeen

I wandered through the trees, scarcely able to see more than a few feet ahead of myself. The pale golden rays of daybreak barely lit the canopy overhead, and the gray forest was cool and quiet except for a few scampering squirrels that ran along the branches above me. I'd left home before the mountains were more than a faint line of white and gold against the deep blue sky of dawn, heading straight toward the heart of the wood before it rose up to blanket the mountainside.

Looking around, I finally admitted that I was truly lost. Somehow when Soren carried me through the wood, it always seemed so simple and direct, but there was no path, no landmarks to guide me.

"I wish there was more light," I spoke to a lichen-covered stone as I took a few more steps. "Or that I could see the stars and the mountains to know where I am."

Let us guide you. The voices tickled at the back of my thoughts, sending shivers down my spine and arms. I stopped, concentrating. *Let us be your light, your way.*

"Take me to the Starlight Waters?" I asked, my voice barely more than a whisper.

I looked at my hands and a strange, soft light flickered against my skin, as though I'd caught an orb of moon glow. Threads of silvery light arced from my fingers, winding their way to the forest floor, bending around tree trunks until it stretched out of sight.

Follow, Calanthea, we are ready. Waiting. We will keep you safe. Follow.

I took a step along the path and it grew brighter, and I could feel the pull of the magic in my bones, leading me forward. Soon, the magic was as bright as starlight, and it thrilled a melody in my thoughts. I felt like I knew the song, though it was too wild for words, and it surrounded me as I continued. The woods came alive as I passed, sunlight breaking through the ceiling of leaves and branches. The warmth and light of dawn woke the animals who nested in and around the trees, and the air filled with birdsong, but I paid them little heed.

“Where do I find you?” I asked the prick of magic that seemed to now reside in my thoughts, strange and wild, but welcome and pulsing with power and promise.

In the waters. In the night. In your magic. In your light. The song crooned over my skin, tender and comforting and intoxicating. *You will learn. You will grow. You will be filled and you shall renew.*

The light abruptly stopped and I found myself at the edge of the glade, which was covered in a blanket of sparkling dew. I stepped forward, almost blinded by the radiance of the early morning sunlight. The pool shimmered like silvered glass and I felt it answering a low harmony to the song of the magic that emanated from me.

“Soren?” I called, glancing around the clearing for any sign of him. Beneath the cluster of roses around the hawthorn trees, I found a depression of matted grasses that seemed to indicate where he had slept, and a shallow trail of hoof prints scored the ground between it and the forest.

I realized I had no idea where he might have gone, and when he would return. I half hoped he would be looking for me at the cottage and eventually give up and return, but I did not know enough of his life in the forest to know if he returned to the Celestial Waters every night or if he had any place within the wood that he considered a home. I knew little enough of his life at all, I reminded myself.

I sat on the bank of the pool, trying to find the least damp spot in the shorn grass. I set my hamper carefully beside one of the rune stones. The magic within it still shone faintly purple and amber, and I could feel the vibration of its power when I placed my hand on top of it, but it seemed to have become steady, slow, solemn since the night when we’d renewed the stones and the waters. A contented smile creased my face and I closed my eyes, letting the warmth of the sun wash over me. The glade seemed serene, a sanctuary from the world beyond the Kingswood. I couldn’t imagine the duke’s knights or even a band of roused and riled villagers ever finding the Celestial Waters, disturbing its peace and purity with their strife.

“Stars? Voices of the Waters?” I asked, sitting up suddenly and staring at the pool. “What should I call you?”

We are your sisters, born of stars and stone, earth and air. We are the keepers of the celestial waters, we who hold their power and guard their

secrets. We, the wardens of the moonlight.

“But what is your name? When I need you, how do I...”

Call us sister, friend, witch, or spirit. We are of the stars. You are of us, Moon Witch. You are the Light-Bringer. You have been called to renew the Starlight Waters.

“How do I learn about... all of this?” I gestured to the waters, feeling small and uncertain. The song grew calmer, slower. “What am I supposed to do? How do I find the other pools?”

Grow. Listen. Renew the waters. You will find all you seek.

My mind filled with silvery, glowing images again. The melody of magic seemed to bring me the memories of the sea-cliff, the desolate plains, the unfamiliar and jagged mountains that the stars had shown me before. Then, like sharp crack of branches snapping in my mind, the song stopped and I only saw the still waters of the pool before me.

I rubbed at my temple. Moon witch. That was what they had called me.

Once, when I was a child, Mother had read a book aloud to Rose and me, a simple collection of old children’s stories that Father had given her, and there had been a few tales about witches who held the magic born of stars and the moon, who had lived before the fall of the Crystal Wastes. They had been wielders of immense magic, the keepers of a wild and terrifying power, with princes and sorcerers waiting on their commands. I could not be more dissimilar to those shining, magnificent witches of old I wished I could recall the stories better, suddenly wishing I’d had Rose’s interest in ballads and legends. I pulled Mother’s book from my pocket, turning it over in my hands.

Hunger gnawed at my stomach and I turned to the hamper. I set the book carefully inside and pulled out a small pink-blushed apple and a half-round of cheese. I’d left the cottage before taking the time to eat more than a heel of bread and my usual time for breakfast had long passed. My simple meal tasted better somehow in the fresh morning air, with the reassuring thrum of magic at my back and the cheerful twittering of birds coming from the forest. A wave of exhaustion came over me as I finished eating and I curled up, resting against the rune stone, and closed my eyes.

A crashing through the underbrush startled me and I jumped to my feet. I scanned the forest as more branches snapped, several birds taking flight in protest of the disturbance. A moment later, Soren bounded into the glade, his mouth flecked with foam as he skittered toward the water. He reared his head back in confusion as he saw me.

“Callia, he cannot find you! Into the water, into the wood, anywhere, now!” he barked sharply. His sides were heaving as he whipped around to face the forest again. “Run!”

“Soren, what is wrong?” I asked, my heart leaping into my throat. I stood rooted by the water’s edge and Soren came close, looking at the water nervously. I tried reaching out to touch him but he jerked away, his eyes darting and wide.

“You must run now,” he said again, his voice cracking and hoarse. “I’ll chance the waters again.” As he spoke, a thunderous roar filled the clearing and a massive hulk of reddish brown hurtled through the trees toward us.

Soren reared, a strangled cry coming from his mouth as he hesitated, weighing the danger of the waters or the thing pursuing him.

“You cannot enter the waters!” I cried, throwing my arms around his neck as he crashed down again, tearing long strips of the grass away in his frenzied thrashing. He took a single leap, breaking free from me, and a long twisting vine shot up from the ground. It caught around his hind legs and dragged him down, binding him as the roaring beast came close. I threw myself on top of Soren, clawing at the vines. I could feel my blood rushing in my ears as I fought to free him, but the vines seemed to swell and grow even as I pulled at them.

The shadow of the beast fell over us and I spun around, thrusting my hands up.

“No!” The word seemed to echo strangely, filled with more than just my own voice, as a brilliant flash of searing white light burst in a thunderclap from my hands. The beast was thrown back and I heard him bellowing in anger and surprise. Soren scrambled to his feet as the vines lost their grip on him for a moment, and he backed away cautiously, shaking his head as his eyes struggled to focus.

The beast, now clearly recognizable as a monstrous bear, rose to its feet, swaying and snarling. “Back away from the sorcerer, girl. This ends

now.”

“Soren’s no sorcerer!” I protested, placing my hands on Soren’s neck. He was panting, and I felt his legs quivering, readying himself to bound away. “And I will not let you near him.”

“Not a sorcerer! I should say... wait. What did you say? Soren? *Soren!* By sea and stars!” The bear bellowed, rearing up on his back legs. He seemed to grow even more massive and my heart quailed at the looming bulk of him. “You mean to say that the ... that this stag is *Soren!*”

I tensed, holding my right hand raised as I wondered if I could summon the light again if the creature decided to attack again.

“Of all the...” the beast lowered himself down, his ruff settling as he tossed his head as if searching for what he wanted to say. Two small, rounded ears were still laid flat against the broad red-brown head, and long, sharp ivory teeth flashed in the sunlight as he took another step closer. His nostrils flared and he lurched forward, jerking his head toward Soren. “... absolutely stupid, arrogant, foolish idiots, you are the *worst*, Soren!”

In an instant, I recognized the bright gleaming eyes as he glanced toward me. “Aren’t you... the Spirit Bear?” I heard the words leave my mouth as I stepped backward from him. “Where is my sister?” I demanded.

“Callia!” I stumbled to the ground as a blur of black hair and red linen flung itself at me from the bear’s back. I felt arms around my neck as I blinked up through a haze of dark curls to the red-brown bulk of the bear and the slender outline of Soren’s tawny legs. I recognized my sister’s voice as Soren grunted in alarm. “What in the heavens are you doing out here? And to find you with...”

Rose disentangled herself from me, our skirts a heap on the ground around us, and she gave me a quick, delighted smile as she kept one arm around my waist, pulling me into a half embrace. Her face seemed more golden brown than usual, and her eyes sparkled as she glanced around the glade. My heart seemed to skip a beat, my whole body thrilling at seeing my sister again. She looked radiant and excited, and my thoughts flooded with relief at being near her. I pushed myself up as my sister lifted her head from my shoulder to address the bear.

“Do you know this creature, Tomas?”

“Better than I would care to admit right now!” the bear spoke, his voice lower and quieter, but filled with a tone of exasperation and

annoyance. He settled against the grass with a huff of contempt. "I will freely admit to having done my share of foolish and brash things, but Soren... this takes the kingdom! Did you think at all about the consequences when you left? Did you spare a single thought? Have you any idea what..."

"Did you say *Tomas*?" Soren rasped, jerking his head sharply as he stepped back, keeping me between himself and the bear. "As in..."

"Yes, you *ass*. I'm Tomas. What on earth are you doing in the Golden Peaks, and how long have you been here?" The bear sat down beside Rose, huffing in irritation, his long claws dragging deep scores in the sward. "And where is this, exactly? And why is Callia here with you?"

"Clearly, I am a stag, not an ass, Tomas," Soren said with a snort of indignation, taking one step closer as he shook his head imperiously. "If you'd paid attention during lessons, you might have learned the difference."

"You might have antlers on your head, but I know an ass when I see one. I don't need a tutor to teach me that, oh most high idiot," Tomas retorted as he nudged at Rose's shoulder. She placed one hand on his paw, patting him reassuringly. As if he were some gentle kind of companion and not a fearsome, cursed beast that had brought her doom and taken her freedom. I wanted to snatch her hand away, to keep her to myself now that we'd found each other again. "Are you going to answer my questions?"

"Will you answer mine?" Soren retorted. "Such as why you are here, apparently with Callia's sister, and why on earth are you a bear? And will you please stop insulting me every other phrase?"

"Fine, I suppose. If you'll sit down and stop looking like you're going to dart off at the drop of a feather. I promise I'm not going to try to kill you again," Tomas said as he let out a snorting sigh, cocking his head to one side. Soren knelt in the grass a few feet away from us, his eyes intent on Tomas' face. I could see confusion mixed with relief in his eyes. "I'm here because of you, you idiot. The bear form is hardly my idea, but circumstances beyond my control have forced me to remain one for some time now."

"You aren't in control of transforming?" Soren sniffed curiously at the air, his tongue darting between his lips as if he were trying to taste the air for any hint of magic on Tomas.

Tomas shook his head. "Are you?" He glanced at Soren, his eyes bright. "This deer form you're in isn't the work of... a dark sorcerer?"

"I can shift if I desire, if I focus on it. It is safe here, the power in the waters is enough to protect me when I change," Soren said, inching forward. There was a sad sort of longing in his face as he watched Tomas, and I could see a desire, fierce and wild, in his eyes. He didn't need to speak for me to know that Tomas' careening into the glade had reminded him of his home, of his longing to be reunited with his family. To return to the world where he belonged. Where I fit in that, I wasn't certain. "Would you like to try shifting here, Tomas?"

Tomas glanced to Rose, who still held me close. She seemed to be watching Soren intently. "Rose?" he asked quietly, his voice soft and gentle for a moment. "What is it?"

"Are you the stag we saw in the forest, up near the peaks?" she asked, her face calm although her words held a note of challenge to them. "A few days before the new moon?"

Soren looked at her, his eyes darting once to me before returning to her. "I... I think so? I don't remember going that far up in the forest but I do remember your face. You stopped him from rushing me then, didn't you? I cannot remember why I would wander there."

She nodded, pressing her lips together as she considered him for a moment. "How did you learn to transform?" she asked, spreading her legs out in the grass. "Are you a witch? Or a wizard perhaps?"

"No, I'm no witch, and never had the chance to train as a wizard. I barely have any mastery over even the smallest bit of magic at all. Our mother taught me what I do know, and showed me how to transform as a child if my life was in danger." Soren said simply. "I was never very good at it but I've had more reason to practice it lately."

"Mother!" Tomas sputtered, a growl building in his throat. "You mean to say... Why didn't either of you tell me?"

Soren stood, his long legs swaying as he bent his head forward to within a few inches of Tomas' face. "I am sorry, Tomas, I really am. I should have told you everything a long time ago and I meant to do so as soon as I could return home. I should never have kept this a secret for so long. Come, let me show you how to shift."

Tomas padded softly behind Soren as they walked away together. Rose turned toward me, a smile wreathing her face.

“Don’t think you’re getting away without answering questions yourself, dearest,” she said, wrapping both arms around my waist and pulling me against her. I closed my eyes, breathing in the scent of my sister, earthy, wild, and sweet as wild berries. “I have missed you so.” I felt her cheek pressed against my forehead and I rested my head against her shoulder.

“I have plenty for you as well,” I said, stroking her face absentmindedly with my free hand.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, pulling back slightly, tipping my face up so that our eyes met. “With him? Maris said you were wandering the Kingswood, but I had no idea you would go this deep into the forest.”

“Soren came to me, after the bear took you away,” I said, pressing my lips together, feeling hesitant to tell her anything but also protective of my decision to help Soren and seek out the magic of the pool all at once. Rose shot Soren a distrustful look before returning to scrutinize me. I felt color spreading to the tips of my ears as she pursed her lips, readying some retort about him, or about my behavior in the wake of her absence. I squared my shoulders and spoke before she could begin. “I was alone, and he was lonely, and it gave me a reason to stay out of the cottage where everything reminded me that you were gone. He asked for help in restoring the celestial pool if he could find it, and then he did find it and brought me here. We never have to go back to Ravutsa, if we can break the curse on him. He promised to help us make a new life, Rose, and that he could help me free you from the bear. He promised to have your binding removed when he takes me to Menastel.”

She flushed and glanced down at her lap, her eyes shining. “I don’t need to be freed from Tomas, Callia. I gave my vow to Tomas and I mean to keep it.”

“But they forced you!” I snorted in exasperation. “It can be undone!”

“Yes, I know that,” she said, tilting her head to one shoulder as she glanced toward the brothers. “At first, I would have wanted that. I did want it for a time, and he promised it to me. But now... our feelings have

changed. Tomas needs my help and our vow holds. I am sorry that you were alone, my darling.” She took my hand, stroking my skin gently. “Now what is this place?”

“That’s something I’d also like to know,” a deep voice spoke from above. A man, almost a head taller than Soren, with broader shoulders and thicker arms, stood above us. His pale skin flushed with a radiance of magic, red gold and sparkling. Soren followed his brother, adjusting the tunic around his waist. He slipped beside Tomas, appearing even more lithe and limber compared to the broad bulk of his brother.

“It worked?” Rose looked up, her eyes alight again as the man knelt beside her. She ran her fingers over his chest lightly as he smiled tenderly at her. “You can control it now?”

“Only here, it seems,” he sighed. She pulled a satchel from her side and dug through it for a moment before producing a plain linen shirt and a pair of simple farmer’s trousers.

“I believe introductions would be helpful just now, Tomas,” Rose said.

Soren gave a quick bow toward Rose. “I am Soren, Tomas’ elder brother. Tomas, this is Callia.”

“We met, briefly,” Tomas nodded toward me. “I perhaps did not give the best of impressions, I fear. Soren, I’d like you to meet Rose. My wife,” he said, a faint note of pride in his voice.

“Your...” Soren glanced between Rose and his brother before looking to me, realization slowly dawning on his face. “This... Tomas is the husband you mentioned being forced on your sister? The monster who took her away from you?”

“There...” Tomas said, clearing his throat brusquely. “There was some confusion and misguided actions on the part of the villagers. But yes, I am Rose’s husband, and hopefully I can change the monstrous impression I seem to have given you, Callia. I am so very deeply sorry for the pain I must have brought to you.”

Rose lifted her right eyebrow at me querulously. “Goodness, Callia, did you bother to mention to him that I freely volunteered to go?”

I shook my head, feeling a heat in my cheeks. “I was still grieving for you,” I said softly. “And it was the truth that you were forced to accept

the bonding. How else did you think I'd feel about your volunteering to go in my place?"

"You left out the part about her agreeing to go," Soren said softly. "Or that it was done to save you."

"It didn't seem to make any difference," I shot back, unable to look Soren, or my sister, in the eye.

Rose took my hand, squeezing it fondly. "It's all right now, Callia dear," she said, her voice sweet and reassuring. "I promise you. I... I do not regret my choice, and you should not grieve that I made it."

"Would you mind giving my idiot brother the cloak you bought for me?" Tomas gestured toward his brother. "He looks like a sleepwalking gardener caught in his shift." Rose carefully kept her eyes on her bag rather than look up at Soren as she held out a teal bundle for him.

"How long are you going to keep calling me an idiot?" Soren asked as he draped the cloak over his shoulders. Once he adjusted it over his shoulders, the cloak came to just below his knees. He fumbled with the buttons that fastened it down the front, to the amusement of his brother.

"Until I stop having constant reminders about how absolutely brash and stupid you were for leaving on your own," Tomas said with a shrug. "So... two or three decades should just about do it."

Soren grimaced but did not reply.

"So, about this pool," Rose said, returning her attention to me. "Why does it mean that Tomas can shift? Why is this place different than the rest of the Kingwood?"

I shifted uneasily. Soren looked up at her and cleared his throat before taking his brother's arm. "Remember the stories about the celestial pools?"

Tomas nodded, narrowing his eyes as he studied Soren's face. "Do you mean to say that you found one? How did you even know what to look for, or that one would be here? Is that why you left home?"

"I felt drawn to it, and after searching for a few weeks, I finally discovered it. Mother once told me that she believed one was somewhere near the Golden Peaks," Soren said, squaring his shoulders. "And no, I didn't leave home looking for it. It's hazy now, when I try to remember it all. I... I thought I could find answers, that I could fix things, and then I

found myself in the mountains. And then..." he broke off, wincing as his body shuddered, convulsing as though struck from behind.

"And then I believe he was cursed," I filled in, seeing his face flinch as his shoulders drew together sharply.

"I cannot leave the borders of the Kingswood, not without pain. I am bound here, until the magic that holds me is removed." Soren rubbed at his shoulders, his face clouding as if the mere thought of the curse had filled him with agony for a second time.

"All these months," Tomas said, shaking his head. "We were worried about you. I followed what I'd hoped was your trail, and then..."

"It was your turn to get cursed," Rose said wryly. "Cursed and shifted into a creature, bound to stay within the Kingswood and unable to speak of the circumstances. I think perhaps you can ease up on taunting your brother on that subject. It does seem to be a family failing." Tomas' cheeks flushed and his ears reddened as he and Soren exchanged embarrassed glances.

"But why are you here?" Soren asked, tilting his head inquisitively at Rose and Tomas. "Why were you chasing me through the Kingswood this morning?"

Rose drew her breath, smiling daintily, and held out her hand to Tomas. He lifted her to her feet easily, cradling her against himself.

"Because," she said, her face flushing with a warm smile, "we are going to break Tomas' curse, and we were following what we thought was the scent of magic that would lead us to the wizard. I suppose instead, we caught whatever hint of magic is lingering on you from your own curse."

"We believe the one responsible for this..." Tomas paused, as if considering his words carefully, "...mischief, the cause of my condition, works for the Duke of Chartrin," Tomas said, pulling Rose into his arms protectively. "If the same man is the cause of your..."

"Just how are you going to face a wizard?" Soren raised his brow at his brother in amusement. "You can't muscle and fight your way through a confrontation with a wizard, Tomas. You have no weapons, no magic at your command. Are you just going to ask him nicely to remove it and allow you to go home?"

"No, I do not have a weapon or magic," Tomas said, nodding, "but she does."

Tomas released Rose as she stepped forward, giving me a quick glance of reassurance. I held myself back from her, suddenly shy and uncertain of the sister I thought I knew. I felt the tension building in my shoulders as she stopped and faced Soren calmly. She held out her hand, her skin bursting with strange reddish thorns as a rose bloomed from her palm and vines lept from her finger tips. In her other hand, she held out a sword fashioned from an abnormally long and thick thorn. My chest tightened as I forgot to breathe, the world spinning too fast around me for a moment.

Rose. My beautiful fierce Rose, always so caring and loyal. She had been born to live in a world of enchanted gardens and heroic ballads of wonder and daring. Now, standing before me, was a different Rose than the one who had gone into the Kingswood with the Spirit Bear a few weeks before. A witch, a warrior in armor made of thorns, seething with magic and purpose that could not be kept secret behind our little cottage's walls.

"I will break his curse," she said, her eyes shining. "Whatever it takes."

Chapter Eighteen

I stared at the rose in my sister's hand, my heart thudding in my chest. She looked triumphant at the astonishment on Soren's face, and the pride in Tomas'.

"When... how..." The words refused to come out as my thoughts swirled like leaves in an autumn storm. My stomach churned, reminding me of the thorns in my dreams. "The vines... the vines that tried to bind Soren... was that you?"

Rose turned to me, her mouth opening wordlessly as she took in the expression of shock on my face. "Oh, yes, I am sorry about that. We did think he was an evil wizard and..." she began, as though the reminder had flustered her.

"You found your magic then," I said. "You're... a real, full-blooded witch, with powers beyond just making simple craftings and potions like Mother does." My mouth felt dry and the sun suddenly seemed to have grown stronger and hotter. I ran my fingers through my hair, trying to make sense of what I saw — the thorns on her skin and the twisting, grasping rose bramble that seemed to flow out of her hand. None of the magic that was known to be taught at the Sutrae Lyentari seemed to fit with what I saw before me. "This is the power that's been lying dormant inside you all this time?"

She blinked, her lips forming a tight, worried line. "You... you knew? Mother told you about my abilities?"

I shook my head. "Only that you had some kind of magical gift but she said that you could not access it yet. That it was up to you to find it someday, and that you would learn how to use it when you were ready."

Rose grimaced and let out a heavy sigh. "I've had words with her on that already. But yes, I have discovered that I seemingly have rather powerful earth magic, and somehow while casting a different spell, I have gained the ability to armor myself with thorns."

I reached out, brushing my fingers over the razor-sharp thorns that still studded her skin. "Does it hurt?"

She shook her head. “No. Now, I have a final question for you, Callia, my darling. The light that threw Tomas back from attacking Soren... was that you? Your magic blinded us all?”

I hesitated, feeling all of their eyes on me. “Yes,” I said, swallowing back the pit of unease that swelled in my throat. “I called down the starlight.”

“Mother outright denied that you were a witch,” Rose said, her expression turning stony. There was a hurt in her eyes that verged on anger that I’d never seen in her face before. “What else has she, and you I suppose, been hiding from me?”

“Mother doesn’t know about that, yet,” I said, shifting in my spot. “I didn’t know I could do it either. If I am a witch now, it is new, only since this new moon.” Rose’s face softened a little as she regarded me earnestly, but Soren was staring at me intently, his expression curious and more guarded than his wont.

“Do you have other magic?” Rose asked, taking my hand and pulling me closer to her. “Please, Callia, you can tell me.”

“I’m... it’s nothing that remarkable,” I flushed. “I have dreams sometimes. But that’s not really anything powerful or dangerous.”

She curled her fingers under my chin and lifted my face up to meet her own. “Then what was the light?”

“I think I have some idea,” Soren said quietly. He had not broken his concentration on me, and Rose turned to give him a skeptical look. “When we restored the magic in this pool, when we tried to use it... she entered the waters.”

“And what does that mean?” Rose demanded, her eyes flashing brightly. Tomas reached out to take her hand and the thorns receded into her skin, fading back to her normal honeyed gold tone.

“This pool is one of four sources of undiluted magic. They are sometimes called the Starlight Waters, or Celestial Pools. They’re ancient sources of power and connection to the magic of the moon and stars.” Soren took a deep breath, suddenly avoiding my gaze. “Something happened, she changed in the waters. I don’t know what it means, or what she is capable of, but I don’t think we’ll find answers by staying here. We have to get her to Menastel, to the libraries there.”

“Are you saying that these waters granted her some kind of magic?” Rose asked, knitting her brows together. “That she is a moon witch?”

“I’m saying that she was filled with light and magic and came out of the water glowing and radiant,” he said. “The Celestial Pool almost killed me when I tried to enter the waters, but she was unscathed. It’s like they transformed her into something... powerful and shining.”

“You just let her be... taken and altered by some unknown, wild, ancient magic? One that could have killed her?” Rose sputtered, her cheeks growing red as she took one step toward Soren. Vines sprang from the ground around his feet, twisting and climbing his legs, holding him to the spot. He struggled against them, but kept his gaze locked with hers as he could not break free of her vines. I felt a wad of anxiety building in my throat as she clenched her fists tightly, the vines entangling him even more. “You just found this place and led her here and stood by while she...”

“I am right here,” I said flatly, stepping between Soren and my sister. I swallowed back the fear that had been building, meeting Rose’s eyes with a cool glance. The vines paused from entwining around Soren’s waist and he stopped struggling against them, though I could sense the tension in his ragged breathing. “And yes, I seem to have gained some magic. It’s nothing to be afraid of, Rose, and I chose to go into the waters on my own. Soren never forced me to do anything. I can decide things for myself, you know. Just as much as you or Mother can.”

“What kind of powers are they? Could they be some kind of celestial magic?” Tomas asked, his voice gentle and calming. He glanced between Rose and Soren, and then turned to face me directly. “Do you have any idea what you can do?”

“Not yet, not exactly,” I said. Rose dropped her hand and the vines vanished. Soren stepped back from her nervously, his face shrouded in thought. “It feels... it feels like the beauty and clarity of moonlight and stars...” The memory of the voices, promising to guide and aid me, rushed into my thoughts. “Yes, I believe I might somehow be a moon witch now.”

Rose spun, her hair tumbling around her like a shawl of shadow. “Callia, you cannot be. Moon witches... that’s a bloodline power.”

I nodded. “I know. I’ve read the stories about them too, Rose. But I think when I went into the waters, and heard the stars...” I trailed off at

the sudden, sharp glance Soren gave me. Desire welled in his eyes, though whether for the magic or for freedom from his curse, I wasn't sure. The whisper of magic in my mind tugged at my thoughts, warning me against speaking about the voices of the long-forgotten moon witches who had called me their sister. "I think it didn't matter whether I belonged to the old bloodlines that once bore the celestial inheritance, it just needed someone to accept the power so that the magic here in this glade could be restored."

"You're right, Soren," Tomas said, his voice low and gentle. "We do need to return to Menastel as soon as possible. She and Rose both... there are answers about their powers that we can only find there."

"Which means we have to find the Duke of Chartrin's wizard and end this," Rose said, giving him a fond look of concern. "And since we weren't tracking him this morning as we thought, the next most likely place for us to find him is at the duke's fortress within the Kingswood."

Soren sank to the ground, nodding. "Yes, yes, I suppose you are right. I just... do you think we can stand against him?"

Tomas knelt down, placing his hand on his brother's shoulder. "Together, we can. I had hoped that with Rose, we could handle him on our own, but if you and Callia join us, then surely... surely, we will find a way to remove what binds us. We can go home. All of us."

"How do you intend to find the duke's tower?" Soren asked, his arms wrapped around his knees. "If all the magic that you sensed led you here, what makes you think you'll find the tower now?"

Tomas rocked back on his heels, his hands resting on his thighs. Rose knelt beside him, her face drawn with worry.

"I can try to feel for the throb of magic, to feel what is in the earth and waters, and find the trail of his magic," she said, putting one hand on Tomas' shoulder and the other on the grass.

"Soren," I said, stepping forward as a hazy memory rose in my mind. "You said that you felt a wizard in the wood, that his power was growing stronger these past few weeks. You wondered that I had not felt it myself."

Soren met my gaze briefly. "Yes, but what if that was just your sister? Or Tomas? In the last few months, I have thought at times that I felt a power here, and it has led me up the mountain, or to the river bank, or to

you. I have never found the Tower of Chelady, although I know that it is supposed to lie within the lower reaches of the forest.”

I sighed, realizing that he had a point. Tomas’ shoulders slumped and he sprawled into the grass at Soren’s feet. I knew that Rose would not know any more than I did about the duke and his residence, and I doubted that we would receive any aid in the village, whether or not we were accompanied by Soren and Tomas.

We will guide you. The voices had promised me their help and guidance.

“Help me now,” I whispered under my breath, careful to make sure that neither of the brothers or my own sister was watching me. “Guide me to the Tower of Chelady, to the wizard responsible for these curses.”

Restore and purify. A light shimmered over my skin, hardly noticeable in the bright noonday sunlight. The tendrils reached to the ground, writhing over the grass toward the forest edge.

“Follow me,” I said, a smile growing on my face as my heart fluttered in my chest.

“What is...” Rose looked up askance. “Where are you going?”

“I’m finding the wizard,” I said, glancing quickly over my shoulder. Soren scrambled to his feet, his face alight with excitement. “Are you coming?”

Rose stood, shouldering her satchel again and adjusting her cloak. “Is this... your lunar magic?” she asked, curiosity mixed with concern in her eyes.

I nodded. “You have nothing to fear for me, Rose, I promise,” I said again, reaching for her hand.

“It’s time to transform, brother,” Soren said, taking Tomas’ arm. “It is not safe to leave this space unless we shift. The magic can twist and harm you.”

“I am aware of how it feels to be ravaged by its limitations,” Tomas said gruffly. He cast a single longing glance at Rose and turned away as he pulled his shirt over his head. A now familiar radiance came from both Soren and his brother and a moment later, a stag and a bear stood in their place, shimmering with dissipating magic.

Rose went to Tomas and he bent low, allowing her to clamber onto his back. She settled herself comfortably, nestling her hands into his

thick red-brown ruff.

“Would you like to ride?” Rose asked, extending a hand down to me. I glanced between the brothers and Soren bent his head forward, nodding.

“He’s stronger in that form and could carry you for longer,” he said, stepping forward to nudge me toward Tomas. “I will be beside you.”

Tomas crouched low and I timidly stepped to his side. Rose looked at me expectantly, her face radiant and smiling. I took her hand and settled behind her, surprised by the soft warmth of Tomas’ fur. Soren gave me a piercing look, his eyes shining bright and starry again. A quiver of doubt seemed to form in my stomach, roiling and anxious. I did not know where the starlight led and began to wonder if I had set us on a fool’s errand, wandering aimlessly through the depths of the Kingswood.

“Follow the threads of silver light,” I said, trying to sound more confident and assured than I suddenly felt. Restoring the magic of the Celestial Pool had been one thing, but to face a wizard who had no compunction against placing curses on anyone who stood in his way seemed a far more daunting task. And I had no idea what magic I was capable of, or how to use it to keep us safe.

I glanced at Soren as we entered the shaded coolness of the Kingswood. His antlers gleamed silver again and I remembered how the raw power I’d felt when the stars had spoken to me. He had agreed with Tomas and Rose that this was the only way to end his curse. To allow him to leave the Kingswood.

Trust us, sister.

I felt my breath catch in my chest and the light in my hand shone stronger, almost burning white with radiance. Tomas grunted with satisfaction as he loped along, following the trail that led to the tower and the ending of the curse. To the promise of our new life.

“Callia, are you all right?” Rose touched my cheek softly, half turned to face me. We had been following the trail of starlight for about an hour or more. My legs felt stiff and sore as I tried to keep my seat behind my sister, who seemed completely at ease as she wove her other hand through Tomas’ fur to hold her place as she regarded me, her gaze tender and curious.

“Yes,” I said, curling my fingers around hers, gently pressing our hands against my face. She was warm, comforting, and my heart thrilled at having her near me again. “I’m just tired I think.”

An odd feeling nagged at my thoughts, unsettling me as I tried to name it. Soren kept pace with Tomas, and they exchanged occasional comments to each other but their words were mostly lost to my ears. A haze of foreboding seemed to cloud my vision as I looked past Rose toward the starlight that stretched out from my hand.

The world went white around me and I gasped for air, feeling as though I was falling from a great height, with no ground waiting for me below. Rose’s fingers gripped my own and I heard her faintly calling my name and it felt as though my body had finally stopped moving. The light turned to glowing shapes, looming over me and I reached out for them, flailing in the thick, cloying mist of my vision.

Stones, cold and smooth, rose up as far as I could reach and I ran along the wall of them, desperate to find some change, some end. At last, I came to what seemed to be a shimmering gate of dark bronze, and I could see Rose, her skin covered in thorns, and a crown of roses in her hair. I ran to her, as a cruel, cold laughter filled the courtyard where she stood, the sound twisting and continuing long past reason in disconcerting echoes and renewed peals of the unsettling cackle. Tomas lay on the stones, covered in long, bloody gashes, and he raised his head weakly as I came to his side. I frantically looked around the barren space, searching for Soren.

A sickly yellow-green light arced through the air, lifting Tomas before thrashing him against the stones as he bellowed in pain. Rose’s face twisted in horror and she looked at me, lost and frightened. I felt the light swelling within myself, and then it was gone, vanished, and I was empty.

Rose was gone and Tomas was unmoving beside me as I lie crumpled on the cold stones. I felt a hand grasp my face, jerking me to my feet.

“You have failed, little star child,” the speaker crooned in my ear. “Just as your kind have before. Just as your father did. You cannot hope to hold this magic you stole; you have no dream of what it can do. How could a child hope to control and shape such raw power? Minalorea shall be mine, child. You have given her to me.”

I felt as though a stone had been thrown against my chest, winding me and I gulped for air, shuddering and convulsing as I felt a pull at my spine that sent me spinning back through the clinging white mists. This time, I was being drawn upward, like a fish on a line being pulled from the water.

“Callia, wake up!” Rose’s voice sounded close and I tried to open my eyes but realized with a jolt that they already were. The world seemed to undulate from total blinding white to absolute darkness for a few moments and then slowly, my vision cleared and I saw Rose leaning over me.

“I’m fine,” I said, pushing her back and sitting up. Everything seemed too defined and too loud as I shook my head, clearing away the last lingering wisps of the vision mist. My heart was beating wildly in my chest and I felt suddenly dizzy. “I’m... what happened?”

We were sitting along the path, shaded by a massive old oak, its branches festooned with garlands of moss. Soren was standing guard at my side, pawing at the ground inches from my right hand. Rose knelt, her hands taking mine.

“You were talking to me and then your eyes went white...” Rose shook her head, her voice tight with confusion and worry. “Your whole body went straight as a fire iron and I caught you as you fell from Tomas’ back. We’ve been trying to wake you for several minutes now.”

I swallowed, trying to settle my racing heart. The blood rushed in my ears and I looked at my hands, the moon-glow now faded from my skin. I’d never experienced anything close to one of my visions before while awake. Mother had reasoned that I would have had to have a stronger gifting with visions, and train with a seer for years, before such a thing could have ever been a possibility. Not that I’d wanted to have my dreams haunt my waking hours the way they did my sleep, so I had taken comfort in the thought that it would never happen to me.

“What was that?” Tomas asked, his face pushing past Rose’s shoulder. She drew me close, cradling me against her shoulder.

“A... a premonition,” I said weakly. “It might not even be true. Sometimes I see dark versions of what will happen, or a possibility that can be avoided.”

“I take it that what you saw was...” he stopped at a sharp look from Rose. I nodded, taking a deep breath. Soren lowered his head, brushing against my hand and I sat up, trying to shove the clammy foreboding feeling down, to silence my anxious thoughts. A strange idea entered my mind. I knelt, placing my hands together on my lap.

“*Stars, sisters.*” I called out in my thoughts, trying to reach for the spot where I felt that subtle glow of power in my mind. A moment and I found it, bright and encouraging, and the darkness of my vision faded from my heart.

We are here.

I let the feeling of their calming power, the reassurance of their magic, fill me. “*The vision I saw... will it come to pass?*”

The notes of song rose around me, wild and joyous, as my skin shone bright as moonlight newly emerged from behind clouds. Tomas stepped back, his ears going flat against his head and Soren snorted as he shied away from me.

It is one of many paths, but that fate is in your hands. Do not fear. Reach for your power, claim it for your own, Moon Witch. Let us fill you.

I will. I felt for the vision again, closing my eyes. This time, I moved through the white mists on my own, pushing them aside as I found my path along the stones. I had to try again. To see another way.

This time, I came to the bronze gate and saw Rose and her crown of roses, and my heart danced with the magic that flowed over my arms and down from my fingers. She had not entered into the courtyard, and the ground swelled with her magic, bursting with vines and life. Tomas shifted beside her, his body wreathed in a shroud of writhing magic as he held a sword of thorn, ready to keep her safe. A long vine of roses, startlingly blood red, erupted from her and I saw them climb over the tower, twisting and clawing into the stones. With a lurch, it all faded like dust falling through the still air of a quiet room.

I could hear my father’s voice, strong and soft, singing to me. A song of magic and longing. Of ancient hopes and newborn strength. His face was hidden from me but his hands were wreathed with a honey-gold light, shimmering like sunlight. He held a length of crystal stone, bursting with tiny shards resembling thorns, and at the end of the stone, strange clear petals bloomed into the likeness of a rose. Throughout the crystal

were tiny imperfections, fragments of silver that caught the light and twinkled like preserved stars.

"They will find their way. They will be safe, if they have each other."

The vision slowly dissipated. I shivered, and the light in my skin and bones faded away except in my hands as the tendril of starlight found the path once more, ready to guide us forward.

"What did you see?" Soren asked as I stood. "Another ill omen?"

"No," I shook my head, wrapping my arms around myself as the warmth of magic receded a little into my bones. "I saw... there is still hope."

He grunted, and Tomas bent down again, waiting for Rose and I to climb onto his back again. I smiled as Rose looked at me, her hand reaching for mine.

"I'll walk with Soren, I think," I said, feeling the ache in my legs throbbing at the thought of riding again. "Just for a little while."

Tomas rose and set off at any easy pace, his paws making deep marks as he scattered last year's leaves from his trail. Soren came close to my side and we followed the winding threads that slipped easily around the trunks of ancient trees and over mossy stones long since buried into the forest floor.

"Is something wrong?" Soren asked quietly, giving me a curious sidelong glance. "Are you well?"

I looked at him and saw a wildness in his eyes that I was not accustomed to. I shook my head, certain that it was only because of the task that lie ahead of us, the renewed hope of destroying his curse. "I am well, I promise. Why are you worried?"

"Because we have no idea what is waiting for us when we reach the tower, if the wizard is even there," he said quietly. "And I think there's more going on with your new magic than you realize. Or that you are telling us."

A pang of guilt ripped through me. I couldn't give a good reason to keep the voices of starlight a secret, but I felt them urging me to stay silent. After a moment, I shrugged, placing my hand on his flank.

"I suppose we will only know more when your curse is broken," I said, hoping that my tone had remained light and easy. He gave a quick nod

of agreement and we walked on. Other than the slight rustle of leaves under our feet as we passed, the Kingswood was still and hushed, the air thick with the scent of new growth warmed by the golden sunlight beyond the waving canopy of verdant green.

Chapter Nineteen

The forest began to thin, the spaces widening between the trees, and the ground was free of the inches of mouldering leaves that had piled thickly through the rest of the Kingswood. Soren began to pull behind, his breathing quickening as he jerked his head. Tomas paused, watching, and sniffed the air as though tasting it for danger.

“Brother?” he asked, one paw hovering above the ground. “What is it? Can you sense him?”

“I feel as though... this place...” Soren snorted, his nostrils flaring wide as he shied away from us again. A light began to grow in his fur, white gold at first, then shifting darker, and I saw the dappling on his back flanks grow bright. Soren reared up, his hooves tearing at the branches that hung overhead, and then crashed back down, tearing through the well-maintained undergrowth.

“Soren!” I plunged after him. Branches caught at my arms and hair and I ducked beneath them, following the flashes of white and gold around the trees. I nearly stumbled on top of him as he came to a halt under a little thicket of alder that clustered around the roots of a long-dead elm tree. His sharp hooves ripped at the mossy ground as he writhed, grunting with pain as he arched his back, as if trying to buck the glowing markings from his back.

He stopped, panting, and I threw my arms around his neck, pulling him down as he began to rear again. I could hear Tomas crashing through the trees behind us.

Soren shook me loose, swinging his head into the tangled alder branches. His antlers caught and he struggled against the snarled grasp. There was no trace of his silver-white sheen anymore, just a pale, clinging yellowed hue that crept over his legs and neck, wreathing around the antlers. At last, he pulled free, his sides heaving from the exertion.

“What is it?” I asked, placing my hand along his face as he stood quivering beside me. Rose slipped from Tomas’ back as he pushed past the trees that ringed the little clearing, branches snapping at the force of his shoulders as he came to his brother’s side. “Is it...” I ran my hand over his

back, feeling a heat coming from the dappled markings. The magic there throbbed, swelling under my fingers, and I pulled my hand back with a shudder. My thoughts pleaded with me to back away, to run from that sickly ooze of dark enchantment, but Soren looked so frightened that I could not leave his side. “What is wrong, Soren?”

“I don’t know,” he rasped finally, his voice breaking as he caught his brother’s eye. His head jerked back again, but he did not bound away. “Something about this place...”

“Soren,” Tomas spoke, his words a low, growling rumble. “Have you been here before?”

“No,” Soren shook his head. “I told you that I never found the tower.”

Tomas sighed and rocked back onto his haunches. “In all these months, almost a year, of wandering the Kingswood?”

“It’s been all of six months, brother,” Soren retorted.

“Nine, at least, or possibly ten by now” Tomas said, watching Soren appraisingly. “It just seems strange, since this part of the forest is not so very distant from the villages of the valley, or high up the mountain. It has been only a little past an hour since we left the Celestial Pool. Do you think you can continue? Would it be best for you to stay in the Kingswood while we go ahead to the tower?”

Soren bent his head down, his antlers brushing against the ravaged forest floor. I could feel a sadness in his voice as he spoke. “No, brother, I will stay with you. I will not leave you to hide, allowing you to protect me while I cower in the wood.”

Rose slipped her hand into mine as Soren turned, following the swath of broken branches and disturbed bushes that told where Tomas had followed after us.

We walked for a few minutes in silence, Soren shuddering occasionally as the magic seeped around him, still pulsing with each step. At last, it seemed to fade and he breathed freely.

“What do you know of his curse?” Rose asked quietly. “Of what it does to him, or how it bound him?”

I shrugged. “Very little. He hasn’t spoken of it much, except that he had hoped that the power of the Starlight Waters would be enough to free him.”

She sighed, her lips a narrow line as she watched Soren and Tomas walking in front of us. “Two brothers, and similar curses...”

“Tomas has a rune stone holding his curse?” I asked, my interest rising.

“What?” Rose jerked her head back, blinking. “No, not that either of us are aware of. What makes you think that Soren has one?”

I told her about Soren entering the pool, and the strange magic that had tried to sap his life away. She listened attentively, her eyes burning with curiosity and wonder.

“What happened after you pulled him out?” she asked, running her tongue over her lips as she considered my words.

“I... channeled the magic from the stars that the waters awoke in me,” I said, feeling sheepish about my still strange and unfamiliar powers. She quirked her brow sharply.

“What did you two do after that? Did you try to use the magic to sever the stone’s connection? Did you try to purify the binding?”

I shook my head, flushing a little. I did not feel like telling her how Soren and I had made love that night, that I had allowed myself to give into passion and desire with no concern for perceived impropriety or consequence. “I didn’t know what I could do with my magic. I didn’t realize that I suddenly had power at all... and I still don’t really know what I can do with it. It has been two days, Rose.”

Rose nodded, placing one arm around my shoulders and pulling me into a comforting embrace. “When this is over, when they are freed, we will have the time to answer those questions.”

“Rose,” Tomas growled, coming to a halt a few feet ahead of us. “Be ready with your thorns.”

I looked up, realizing that we had stepped out from the eaves of the Kingswood onto a grassy sort of meadow that sloped down toward a small lake. A stony path led around its perimeter until it made its way over a well-clipped grassy bank.

I felt my heart lurch suddenly as I recognized the sight I’d already seen dozens of times in my dreams. A stone tower rose up out of the ground, like a warning finger bidding us to stop, and it glowed faintly golden in the midday sun. Beyond it I could see a wall running to another smaller tower. There was no trace of the roses or piercing thorns against the

smooth, golden stone walls, but my mouth felt dry with unease as we approached the tower.

“The Tower of Chelady,” Tomas said, nodding. “The last fortress before the borderlands.” Soren’s head hung low, almost to the ground, and his legs tensed and flexed as he stood quivering on the verge of the forest.

“You are certain?” I asked, the sight of the tower filling me with a sense of dread. “This is where we will find the duke’s wizard?”

“Yes,” Tomas nodded. “I might not have known where in the Kingswood it stood, but I have learned its history long ago, and I’ve seen several depictions of it in the martial texts. It was built to stand as the last stronghold, the impenetrable heart of the Golden Duchy, in the days when the Uhorathi still threatened to overwhelm Minalorea and claim it for their own. It withstood a three-year siege, defended by the seven Knights of Stone who were sheltering the youngest children of the royal court here, before the Uhorathi were driven back over the mountains.”

“As I recall,” Soren said as he lifted his head, as though a weight had shifted from him, “there was a dragon involved in some variations of that story, which might be the only reason you recall it.”

Tomas gave a huffing snort in reply. “I also had to learn the particulars of every fortress and stronghold in the entire kingdom, while you were off... studying poetry or court dances or whatever it was you preferred at the moment.”

Soren shook his head imperiously, picking his way delicately over the stone path. “Some of us had responsibilities to represent our family, duties to perform, regardless of our own wishes and desires. We couldn’t just... carry swords and ride horses all day.”

Rose’s mouth twitched at the corners, her lips pulling back into an amused smirk. “I’m glad you and I have always gotten along, Callia, dearest. Despite our differences, or the secrets between us.” She spoke the final words a little louder and Tomas looked slightly chagrined. He came to her side as we crossed to the farther side of the lake, the water almost perfectly calm in the pleasant afternoon heat.

“Just remember to avoid using our names, when we see him,” Tomas said gravely. He swallowed once. “He knows our real names and has hidden them from us, using them to bind us to him. If he learns of our mother-names...”

“We won’t call you by them,” Rose promised, placing her hand on his ruff. “And we will find a way to break the binding, I promise, Tomas.” He grunted, satisfied.

“Where are the birds?” I asked suddenly, aware of the dead silence of the forest. No birds disturbed the water, or rose singing from the wood, and no sounds rang out from the tower itself. “Where is any sign that anyone even lives here?”

Soren lifted his head as if tasting the breeze, then bound ahead, almost to the edge of the stone wall. “There’s something here... someone...” he called over his flank as he trotted toward the point where the tower jutted out from the thick stone wall of the keep.

Rose closed her eyes, her breathing slowing. “He’s right. There’s a sense of some incredibly strong magic here, but it’s not... it doesn’t feel nice.”

“Nice?” I repeated.

“Your magic was bright, clear, blinding almost, but there was a joy in the power, a sense of purity and rightness. Mine has an earthiness, a living sense of power. Like stone and root and deep waters, it comes from the earth and is renewed there. This power,” she sighed, grimacing, “it is grasping, grating, twisting. There is a shadow and a thirst, dull and aching. There is no thrill of life or radiance of light.” She swallowed, the light fading from her smile. “I think I’ve felt it before.”

“The man in yellow?” Tomas asked quietly. “Does it feel the same?” Rose nodded unhappily, rubbing at her temples.

“You saw the stranger in the woods?” I asked, recalling the man I’d seen by the river. “The odd little man digging at the riverbank?”

“Yes,” she said slowly. Rose cocked her head to one side, her eyes bright and fierce as she studied my face. “He wore fine clothes, far too elegant and costly for a peasant, all in shades of yellow and gold. Did he wear a ring with amber and yellow stones, shaped like a celandine bloom?”

“I didn’t see his ring, if he had one,” I said, shrugging. “I just saw him digging in the woods, and he asked if I’d seen riders from the mountains. I’d almost forgotten entirely about him.”

Her face was etched with lines of worry as her eyebrows knit together tightly. “I think we saw the same man,” she said, biting her lower

lip until it flushed dark with blood. “Though what he was doing at the riverbank still makes no...”

Tomas growled, lunging ahead suddenly. “Soren, get back here!”

Soren slipped around the edge of the tower, disappearing from our view. I took Rose’s hand and we raced across the grassy bank to the tower’s edge. Tomas’ paws tore long strips from the grass as he bounded ahead of us. The slashes into the loam seemed like wounds to the earth, and I felt a tremor of magic quivering under our feet.

“You don’t actually have to always charge ahead on your own like some bold, stupid knight on a noble and reckless quest, brother...” Tomas skidded to a halt, his words turning to a snarl in his throat as he thrashed against the ground in a sudden roar of agony. Rose reached for him, her skin erupting with her thorn armor.

“Welcome to the Tower of Chelady,” a cool, sharp voice spoke, each word seemingly edged with ice. A short man appeared, dressed in varying shades of yellow and green, with a long, intricately braided beard that he kept tucked into his belt. He stepped out of a high arched doorway cut into the base of the tower, the dark bronze gates hanging open. He gestured toward the heap of Tomas, who writhed against the grass just beyond his reach, and then to Soren, who stood a few feet away from the farther gate, his sides heaving and his eyes darting wildly. “Yes, yes, at last. Welcome to my home, my seat of power, if you will.”

I blinked, Rose’s grip on my wrist tightening as she pulled me closer to her. Her breath was ragged and I felt her blood racing. Soren did not meet my gaze and I felt my mouth go dry. My thoughts began to whirl in my mind as I recoiled from the prickly, hostile touch of magic emanating from the man in yellow. I could not hear the reassuring whisper of the stars, but I felt the thrum of magic still in my bones, in my fingers.

“Your... seat?” I repeated, focusing on the man’s strange, hungry expression. “You’re... the Duke of Chartrin?”

“Yes. And I have been expecting you.”

Chapter Twenty

I took a step back, my eyes on the Duke of Chartrin. He smiled and spread his hands wide as Tomas' growls grew louder and his body began to tense and shift in agony. Soren stood motionless, except his eyes, which darted around in panic.

"Come now, no need," the duke said with amused satisfaction. I could feel a shiver running over my skin at the sound of his voice, and unease settled into the pit of my stomach. "I am surprised to see you survived our last meeting. This shifting of yours has been most aggravating, you know. After that troublesome day when you made me lose your brother, I had hoped and believed that you perished some time after you rampaged off through the forest, until the valley started talking about the nuisance of a Spirit Bear haunting the Kingswood. I even sent several good knights to make sure you did not try to cause me more trouble." My mind whirled with anxiety and fear as I tried to comprehend the thought that Soren had somehow been under the duke's influence since long before we met, even if possibly unaware of it due to the curse. My heart ached at the pain in Soren's eyes, for the sorcery that had enthralled him.

Tomas backed away, ripping stones loose from the path as he dragged his claws over the ground. The duke crooked one finger briskly and a yellow shroud of enchantment enveloped Soren, who leapt back nervously, shaking his head as if to clear his thoughts and dispel the magic.

"Leave him," I said, lifting my hand as the starlight shimmered over my skin, forming into a small orb of light in my palm.

"Oh no," he laughed, "have you found a friend in the woods, my pet? A rather pretty one, I must say."

Soren took a step forward, his head hanging low, and his eyes had turned from their usually starry golden amber to a dull, murky yellow brown. He opened his mouth in a long, pained grunt, and then slowly went to the duke's side. Tomas lifted his head, snarling and rising as much as he could, although he struggled to stay up as his paws dug into the earth with each convulsing wave of pain. Rose kept close to me, her skin still prickling with thickening thorns as she began to hum quickly and quietly. The earth

rumbled below our feet, and the duke looked at her askance, blinking with surprise.

“What are you doing, girl?” he demanded but she shook her head, singing softly as the trembling continued.

“What have you done to him?” I asked, trying to keep my voice from trembling. Soren kept his eyes down so that he would not meet my gaze. His antlers were now wreathed in the strange, unsettling glow of the duke’s magic.

“I’ve just made sure he’s not going to try to escape me again. It has been such a nuisance trying to bring him back. And he was getting so close to finishing my task I’d set him,” He snapped his fingers once and Soren jerked his head to attention, his ears flattened as he stepped away nervously. “Clever of you to hide from me in that form, I must say. I didn’t expect you to have that kind of ability, my little lord.”

Soren’s body shuddered, and he let loose a strangled, teeth-jarring cry. His body twisted into the air and he was flung back against the stones of the courtyard, unmoving. Tomas tried to lunge forward, but a rippling blast of energy from the duke’s hand kept him where he stood.

Rose pushed her arm out and long, thick vines with thorns longer than my hands shot forth from her hands, grasping the ground where the duke stood. He stepped back, his brows coming together in consternation, and flicked a lash of yellow-green light at her.

I swung my arm up around her, sending the orb that I’d been channeling toward him. Rose cried out impatiently as her vines faltered for a moment as the lash cut several deeply as it fell short of her. My light hit the duke in the shoulder, forcing him to retreat through the gateway as he stumbled back with a sharp cry of anger and pain. A smell of burning cloth, thick and cloying, filled the air. The vines oozed a strange, vibrant red sap, and I saw them begin to mend as Rose resumed her chant. Tomas stood up, his body seemingly no longer wracked by the effect of the duke’s magic. He gave a quick glance at Rose, a gentle expression of concern filling his still human eyes. She flicked a smile at him, nodding grimly, and he rushed toward the gate.

“Wait, sister,” I said, grabbing for her arm as she stepped forward to follow him, remembering Tomas’ warning about using our names if the

wizard could hear us. I could feel my heart rising into my throat as she struggled to free herself from my grip. “Do not go into the courtyard.”

“Why not?” she asked, pausing a moment.

“I... I think he’s stronger within the walls of his tower,” I said. “If we fight him there... we will not be able to overcome his power. It is his fortress still.”

She nodded, and turned back to face the duke. He had stayed just beyond the bronze gate, and his eyes now burned with hatred as he caught sight of me.

“So my runaway pet found the celestial pool after all, I take it,” he shrieked, pulling a pendant from his belt. It was a pale yellow crystal about as long as my littlest finger, flecked with tiny shards of a deep brown stone. “Fool probably hoped to use its power himself, I suppose. That was unwise. As if he could hope to attain such a gift.”

Soren stood up from the stones, his body shifted to human form again, and he rubbed at his head as he looked at us. He seemed dazed as he took one halting lurch forward, catching himself against the wall.

“Where... why...” he began, wincing as he caught his breath. He pressed a hand against his chest as though just realizing that he was no longer a stag. Soren stared in horror at the duke.

“Good to see you looking more like yourself, my lord,” the duke said, his tongue hissing between his teeth. “I have been so worried about you these past few moon-risings. Now do something useful and take out the girl. I’ll take on your dear bear brother.”

Soren’s eyes clouded, his expression now blank and vacant, and he stumbled forward, reaching for a sword that hung on the duke’s belt.

“Sister, what is your stag boy doing?” Rose called out as she flexed her fingers into a star burst shape around a rose bud. The ground burst with thorns, like a thousand lancing spears, and drove Soren back farther in the courtyard. The duke growled with annoyance and half of the thorned vines withered away, shuddered into brown ash as he swung the crystal.

“I don’t know!” I shouted back, trying to concentrate on building more light in my hands. “Don’t let him near your bear!”

She pressed her palms together, singing faster now. A song of growing and protection, sung with a fierceness that seemed more sharp than

anything I'd ever known from her before. The ground convulsed again, this time with ivy, creeping and trailing over the stones, latching on to the gate. Soren cried out in alarm as his legs were pulled wide, covered in leafing green.

Remember your light, remember. Renew and restore, purify and protect.

I blinked, a flicker of hope lighting in my chest. My skin shone bright again as I felt the magic coursing in my veins.

"Sister," I said, coming close to her. "We have to destroy the crystal shard. If he cannot cast without using stones, if he must have something to channel and hold his magic..."

Rose nodded, a triumphant light in her eyes, and she flung one hand out toward the duke. A whip of green shot out, knocking the crystal from his hand. It skittered away from him, but did not shatter. His face turned puce with rage and he dove after it with a snarl.

"Now! Shatter the stone!" I shouted as Rose ran to grab it. The duke stumbled, coming to his knees, and he pulled a small rune stone of smooth, polished amber from his sleeve. Rose yelped with sudden pain, her body thrown back against the gate, and her face seemed to drain of any color.

"Meddling child!" he shrieked. As he reached for the crystal, Tomas barreled into him, his teeth bared and they rolled away together into the courtyard as Soren finally cut himself free of Rose's grasping vines. I ran to Rose's side and she shuddered as she fell limp to the ground, still breathing, but her thorns had faded away from her skin. Tomas bellowed in sudden pain, and I saw Soren slashing at him with the duke's sword. The duke had gotten free of Tomas and dashed for the crystal.

"Stars, restore her now!" I shouted and a billowing haze of white light domed over Rose and I, before bursting out and sending everything around us spinning away from the force of the magic. Rose's eyes opened and she gave me a quick, questioning glance before she saw the duke.

A wave of green sent the crystal rolling as the stones of the courtyard heaved. She caught the crystal in one hand as the duke rushed at us.

"To me!" I shouted as she slammed her hands together, another wave of stone sending him stumbling before he could grab her. She tossed

the crystal to me as she ran lightly forward, the earth trembling with her every step.

I pulled all the light I could find in my thoughts, the memory of starlight and the rising moon, the brilliance of the rune stones and the Celestial Waters, the feeling in my heart when Soren first kissed me, the ecstasy of that night, and I formed an intention as I wove them together in my mind. *Dispel the darkness, restore what has been bound. Free the magic from its depths.*

The brown bits of stone shone brightly, the shadows fading within them, and then the crystal cracked, shattering in my hand as light poured out from the stones. The duke screamed and a burst of crippling heat sent me sprawling onto the ground, clutching at my stomach as the magic seared over my skin.

Rose whipped a thorn out of her bag, a long shimmering thorn. “You do not get to touch my sister,” she hissed as the blade sung through the air, slicing neatly through his sleeves. Blood poured out, deep red over the yellow silk.

Tomas let out a rumbling snarl as he fought free of Soren, who still swung madly at him as he rushed to Rose’s side.

“It’s gone, I can feel that it is gone!” He roared as he swung around to face the duke, his teeth bared. The duke stepped back, lifting one hand to cast a spell, as Tomas pounced on top of him. The duke let out bone-rattling cry, slamming his spell into Tomas’ face. “You cannot bind me now, traitor,” Tomas said, tossing the duke into the courtyard with a swipe of his massive paws. A moment later, the air around Tomas seemed to snap outward like a sudden burst of wind as he shifted into human form. Red gold light dazzled around him, and he took the thorn sword from Rose’s side with a triumphant smile.

Soren cried out, shrill and full of rage, lunging for Tomas with his sword held out, ready to thrust the blade through his brother. They tumbled back together, out of the gate and onto the grass as the wizard retreated into his courtyard.

“What is that on his back?” Rose asked, pulling me up from the ground. The four petaled mark on his back glowed with the sickening yellow magic, pulsing and throbbing as though drawing the life out of Soren.

“I think,” I said breathlessly, “I think that is where the curse hit him, where it is bound to him.”

“The ring!” she said, her face alight. “The duke has a ring on his right hand, a four-petaled blossom. Yellow gemstones and amber! Could those be channeling stones?”

A hope surged in my chest. “Yes,” I nodded. “Rose, stop him from killing his brother. I’ll stop the wizard.”

She pulled me close, kissing my cheek, and then turned back toward the brothers. Her skin flushed with thorns and she sent a quake out from a single stamp of her foot, stones leaping under the brothers and throwing them apart.

I turned and entered the courtyard.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Duke of Chartin ran ahead of me, weaving around the columns that edged the courtyard. A bolt of greenish light shot toward me and I crossed my arms over my face, sending a wave of white light from me and washing it away. At last, I found him, and he whirled to face me. Suddenly, I could not move, my very breath felt as though it had been pulled from my chest.

“I will not release my hold on him,” the duke snarled, showing irregular, yellowed teeth. I struggled against his spell that drew my breath from me, my bones shuddering with pain so that I could hardly think. “The vacant throne shall fracture the lords of Minalorea. The kingdom will fall into ruin and war, and ancient power will wake again. The Starlight Waters of the Forest are just the first to be renewed, reborn! It is merely by accident and meddling of a bullish headed fool that you stole the moon magic, and I will take your power just as easily as I will take Minalorea and beyond. The power of stars should have been mine!” His eyes flashed with hunger as he curled his fingers into his palm. “It will be mine. The magic and might of the moon and stars does not belong with some dewy-eyed peasant girl who happened to have caught our little lord’s attention with her pretty little nut-brown face and golden hair...”

I choked, gasping for air. He cleared his throat, bending his fingers toward me as though summoning me to join him. Light began to twist in small tendrils out from my skin, pulling together like plied wool, and he held out his right hand to grasp my magic. I saw the ring on his fingers, just as Rose had said. The little flower glimmered, and I felt the throbbing flow of magic in the gemstones, keeping time with the pulse on Soren’s back.

“*Stars, how...*” my thoughts scattered as I felt my eyes flutter, shadows creeping into my vision as my body faltered. “*Help me...*”

A gentle glow warmed my skin, vining down my arms, strengthening me. *Purify.*

“It cannot... after all this time...” he said, tilting his head curiously and stroking at his beard. “But I know your face, though... surely not.”

“Now, sister! You must stop him now!” I heard Rose scream, her silver voice clear as an icy stream. The stones of the courtyard heaved and I fell forward a step as air rushed back into my lungs.

The duke snorted with rage, his brows coming together angrily. I felt the singeing of his magic as it hit my shoulder but I shook it off, focusing on the ring on his hand. I reached out and a beam of pure moonlight arced from my fingertips, flashing white as it hit the center of the stones. He bellowed in pain, pulling his hand away from me as his skin blackened from the magic blast. The gems fell to the ground at his feet but he recoiled from me, eyes wide.

I reached for the gems as I fell to my knees. The world seemed to spin around me as the duke grasped my hair, yanking me up. But it was too late and I held the gems in my fingertips.

“I’m more than a pretty face,” I whispered through cracked lips as I scrambled to my feet. With a sharp twist of my head, I pulled free of his hold on me. “I am the moon witch, and you will never take my powers from me.”

I turned and ran, clutching the stones to my chest as the duke followed after me. I felt the lash of his magic at my back and I flung myself out of the gate, rolling onto the ground. I slammed my hands down, feeling the weakened pulse of magic in the gems between myself and the paving stones. The gates swung shut, vines growing over them, weaving and knotting, so that the duke could not force them open. Repeated blasts of magic set the gate quivering, but the vines only wove tighter, denser, as deep red buds as large as my hand bloomed thickly over the wall.

Rose knelt at my side, her hand on my shoulder. A warmth, gentle as sunshine, eased the pain in my back, and I breathed deeply of the rose-laden air.

“You have to break the place of the binding,” I said, pushing myself up quickly. “The center of the mark on his back. And I will break the channeling stones.”

Rose nodded, her jaw set firmly as she stood, still holding my arm gently. She held one hand out before her and began to sing, the sounds blending together into a melody of strength and determination.

I looked up, seeing Soren locked in combat with Tomas. The thorn blade was light and quick in Tomas’ hands as he withstood the slashing

blows of the well-fashioned steel in Soren's hand, but the thorn showed no sign of damage or dulling. Rose took her hand from my shoulder and pressed her fingers together as though pinching dead petals from a spent blossom. A lancing thorn of deep wine red erupted from the ground near Soren, long and slightly curving to the needle-sharp point. Tomas saw it and glanced to Rose, a question in his eyes. He then nodded grimly, pressing his attack on Soren so that he was forced back.

Rose stomped her foot once more, and the ground rose beneath Soren's feet, sending him staggering away from Tomas as he tried to keep his balance. The thorn pierced into his back as I crushed the gems against the paving stone, sending a blinding flash of moonlight into the stones. I felt them shatter into dust, the magic in them fading on the breeze, as Soren cried out, blood spilling down his lower back and over his thighs. The four petaled mark seared hot and angry, welting his skin as though a fire brand had been pressed into his flesh. A vapor of yellow green smoke billowed from his back, and he howled in pain.

"Go to him now. Help Tomas," Rose said breathlessly, pulling me up as she stood. "I'll handle the duke and his tower."

I picked myself up and ran to Soren. Tomas had lifted him down from the thorn spear, his hands red with blood as Soren went limp.

"Roll him over!" I said as Tomas' face grew haggard with shock. "On his side at least!"

Tomas held his brother cradled against his shoulder, Soren's legs draped over Tomas' lap. I put my hand to the wound, feeling the faint traces of the malignant spell within him.

"*Let me save him.*" I begged the magic. My skin remained pale brown against the impossibly bright red that streaked Soren's back.

The waters shall renew and restore. My head snapped up. A tendril of yellow coiled around my fingers and I pulled at it as Soren took a shuddering gasp of air.

"Can you heal him?" Tomas asked, his eyes wide as he watched me.

"I..." I faltered, feeling my shoulders slump as I sighed. "I am no healer, Tomas."

Tomas cleared his throat, pulling his brother closer against his chest. I summoned what magic I could into my fingers, channeling a

cleansing light into the wound. The flow of blood slowed and I could no longer feel the clinging traces of the duke's curse. Soren stirred, taking a single long breath.

"He'll need to be purified in the Starlight Waters," I said quickly as Tomas looked up with hope in his eyes. "I've done the best that I can. We have to get him there as soon as..."

"What..." Soren's voice was weak as he blinked dazedly. "What is she doing?"

"I'm trying to remove the remnants of your curse!" I sputtered, clenching my fist in exasperation.

"I meant your sister," Soren said, raising a finger to gesture to Rose.

She stood with her head flung back and her arms lifted high. Her fingers flicked rhythmically as the wind carried a song to my ears. A moment later, a briar sprang from the ground around the stone wall of the fortress, climbing over the tower in a rush of green like a ray of light at dawn stretching over the valley. Thorns scraped against the pale golden stones, dragging long gashes as thick as my arm on the wall. Stones buckled and cracked as the briar grew and swelled upward, and I felt a tremor in the ground although Rose had not moved.

"I think..." I began, remembering the image of the tower, covered by thorns, in my vision. "I think she is bringing down the tower."

Tomas blinked once in surprise, although a smile of intense pride immediately creased his face. Rose looked over her shoulder at us, nodding, and then brought her hands together in a tremendous clap as she flung her head back and yelled.

The world seemed to shatter in an instant, the echoes of her shout throwing us back onto the grass. My ears rang and I scrambled to my feet. Tomas had already lifted Soren to his shoulder and was dashing for the forest. A thunderous crash came from inside the fortress, and a stone, larger than Tomas' bear form, thudded to the ground near me.

Rose turned on her heel and ran, taking my hand as more stones began to fall, tumbling on the grass near us. Some rolled into the lake, sending water splashing over the path. The tower continued to crumble, the vines pulling and ripping at the walls, and the earth convulsed. We pitched onto our knees as the wave of magic hit us.

“We have to run!” she screamed, yanking me to my feet again as she stumbled forward. “The magic has been set loose.”

I felt the earth under my feet as I ran along, my ears pounding with the beat of my heart. “Rose, wait!” I managed to grasp my sister’s hand, slowing her only slightly. “What is happening?”

“I felt something when I brought the stones down. There was magic stored within the tower, and it’s been released.” She turned to look at me over her shoulder. “I think the earth is going to send another wave outward as the rest of the fortress falls.”

“We don’t have time!” Tomas growled, whirling around on the trail ahead of us. He tossed the thorn blade to Rose lightly. “Put that back in your satchel.”

He bent low, dropping Soren on the trail. Soren looked up, his eyes still unfocused.

“You have to change,” Rose hissed. “Shift back. You’ll be faster that way.”

Soren nodded and stood, his legs shaking. Leaves clung to his body as he closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. A moment later, he and Tomas had both transformed to stag and bear again and Soren bolted ahead, his white fur stained with his drying blood.

“Will he be able to make it?” Tomas asked me, his voice a low rumble of wariness and fear.

“I hope so,” I said as I summoned the last hint of the starlight in my thoughts. *To the waters.*

The silver trail appeared again, and Rose swung up onto Tomas’ back. She caught my shoulder, dragging me after her, and Tomas tore off after Soren as he passed through the trees ahead of us like a silver phantom shadow.

Trees around us heaved, their branches lashing over our heads and grasping at our sleeves and hair. Rose bent low over Tomas’ neck and he ran faster, diving over stones and fallen logs. I tried to hold the threads of light in my thoughts, focusing on wanting to return to the Celestial Pool, to the safety of its reassuring magic. Where I could restore Soren completely and finally end the curse.

The ground beneath us seemed to leap and buck as the tremors built in strength and violence. Tomas stumbled, trying to keep his feet. Several times, I heard Soren cry out as he fell, tripping against the stones or mossy-carpeted logs that fell in his path. His antlers caught in the wild swinging branches of low hanging willows and ancient elms, but he tore loose and plunged deeper in the forest, out of sight.

“Why is the earth continuing to tremble?” I shouted to Rose as she ducked away from a reaching birch limb. I cowered into Tomas’ back, his fur warm and full of the scent of battle and roses mixed with the musk of the forest.

“I don’t know,” she called back, shaking leaves out of her tangled curls. “The tower should no longer be falling... it must be some kind of dissipating magic from the destruction. It has to be.”

“How was he able to gather so much?” I asked. “Surely it would take a vast treasure of channeling stones to do all this?”

“Better to ask what he wanted to do with it,” Tomas bellowed, clearing a large boulder that rose like a giant’s fist from the forest floor. Rose grabbed onto my arm, keeping me from being flung off his back.

“He wanted the kingdom. He wanted...” I swallowed, remembering the venomous hatred that I had seen seething in the duke’s eyes. “He wanted to take our magic, to pull it out of us so he could use it. He said the kingdom would fracture into war and ruin because the throne is empty.”

Tomas growled. “That will not happen. I will not let it.”

The words had barely left his mouth when the earth rose up like a sheet being snapped taut over a bed, trees cracking and falling around us as Tomas lurched to his knees, rolling forward as the ground crashed back down under his feet. He flung Rose and I clear of his body. A thick beech had fallen across his back and he struggled free, groaning and snarling with pain.

“Run!” he bellowed, as Rose tried to stand, ready to run back to him. “We are close! Get to the water!”

The forest floor rose again behind him, ancient trees tossed into the air as the ground shuddered and convulsed. I took Rose’s hand and pulled her after me and we ran on through the wood, heedless of the branches that whipped at our faces and the branches that caught and

snagged our skirts. We stumbled again and again but we did not stop, hearing the chaos of the wood still raging behind us. The moss of the forest floor tore as the ground raged. Shards of gray shale and other broken stones pierced through tree roots, slashing at our feet.

The sunlight was blinding as we tumbled into the clearing. The pool was serene, smooth as glass, untroubled by the destruction beyond its perimeter. I turned, seeing that Tomas had nearly caught up to us, his eyes wild and his breath ragged as his tongue lolled out of his mouth.

“To the water,” Rose hissed in my ear. “Go, be ready to use your light.”

Nodding, I ran to the water’s edge, my heart almost in my mouth, and I turned to take her hand. Rose had not followed me.

She stood, her feet firmly planted in the grass near the briar hedge that surrounded the cluster of hawthorns. Plucking a rose, she squared her shoulders and threw her head back in determination as Tomas tumbled into the clearing.

“Get to Callia,” she called out to him as he bounded toward her. “I think... this is mine to handle.” She turned on her heel, striding forward to the forest’s edge. The trees began to sway, their branches snapping against each other.

“Where is Soren?” I cried, scanning the forest for any sign him, white stag or man.

“He was following the trail,” Tomas said as he fell onto the grass beside me, panting. His sides heaved and quivered, and I saw long thin gashes of blood in his fur, matted now with moss and forest bracken. “He will come.”

My heart thudded in my chest and I stifled the urge to cry out and run back into the forest.

“Get him in the water now!” Rose shouted as the forest rose up in an undulating wall of green and brown. Thick vines, riddled with thorns as tall as saplings, reached through the forest like grasping fingers. The vines blossomed with thick, fragrant roses, the blooms bursting open as they tangled in the tree branches. Their impossibly large, blood red petals caught and hung from oak and ash and birch trees like freshly laundered blankets until the Kingswood smelled like a rose garden at midsummer.

Rose threw down the bloom she had plucked, and planted her feet wide. “No more,” she cried, throwing herself down and plunging her hands into the earth. Loam ridged up over her fingers and the ground shuddered as the forest heaved back from her in a long, rippling wave. “Be still.” Her voice was clear as a hawk’s cry, and the Kingswood fell silent before her. She tried to stand, her arms shaking and her hands caked in the thick, dark loam of the glade, and then dropped back to her knees as she sank into the grass.

“With me,” I said, nodding to Tomas. His eyes widened slightly as he glanced at the water, the bottom of it still hidden from sight by the shadowed stillness of the water. Then he gave a short growl of acknowledgment and lept.

Tomas and I plunged down, the water cold and shocking on my skin. I fought to keep my head above the surface, but Tomas sank down, helpless against the pull of the stones below. I dove down, pushing at the magic that tingled over my body as my skin began to glow again, silver and white. My lungs burned as I longed for breath.

At last, my fingers found Tomas’ paw just as the moonlight billowed out from me again, pulling him into the orb of the water’s power. He blinked in confusion as I took his other paw.

“Purify him, restore him to what he was before the curse,” I said, marking one paw with a symbol of the waxing crescent moon, his head with the full, and on the remaining fore paw, the waning crescent. The stones that lined the bottom of the pool began to grow in light, their rune markings bursting to life. His body began to change, his red-brown fur fading into his skin, revealing his arms and legs. He was dressed in a fine tunic of red velvet over dark brown woven riding trousers. On his head there was a cap of the same crimson colored velvet, slashed with gold braid and embroidered with silver stars. A heavy hooded winter’s cloak hung over his back, lined with dark red-brown fur.

“I need to get back to her!” Tomas shouted, although the water distorted his words, dragging them away from my ears. He struggled against the pull of the water, trying to swim upward. I drew a deep breath, feeling the strange thrill of magic entering my lungs in place of the water, and we rose together, my magic lifting us up from the depths.

He ran lightly over the surface of the pool toward the green bank, his feet leaving only the faintest ripples of sparkling silver in his wake. I looked up, seeing Soren, still in his stag form, standing at the edge of the pool, his antlers and fur shimmering radiant in the sunlight. For a moment I saw the moon shining faintly in the branches of his antlers. I went to the bank, waiting for him to enter.

“Callia, I...” he spoke, stepping back hesitantly. I held my hand out to him and he paused, tilting his head questioningly.

“Purify him,” I said, raising my other arm toward the sky. My arm wreathed with moon-glow, spinning threads of light that shot out from my palm and tangled around Soren’s body, knotting around his antlers. He reared as the light touched his back, letting out a scream of agony and anger. Beneath his fur, I could see veins of the curse glowing bright, reaching over his bones like a deep-rooted weed. A hideous hissing sound came from his wound, the green-yellow light of the duke’s curse smoking and writhing as the moonlight drew it out of Soren’s body, leaving no trace of the curse’s infection in his blood and bones. The air filled with a smell of pungent burning moss and mold mixed with rotted fruit and decayed, withered flowers.

I held my breath as Soren collapsed on the bank, all traces of his curse gone at last. He was spent, his long legs stretched out over the grass, and I bent down, sinking to my knees as I threw my arms around his neck.

“It’s time to restore you now,” I said, giving him a hopeful smile as he looked at me, his eyes full of exhaustion and pain. I stroked his face gently, feeling tears pricking at my eyes as his eyelashes fluttered closed. The starlight had gone from his eyes, and the golden dapples on his fur had vanished with the last remnants of the duke’s curse. I swallowed back the fear that I had not broken his curse in time, that the duke’s magic had weakened him beyond all hope.

“Callia,” he said, his voice little more than a whisper of the wind. His body shuddered, all light gone from his fur. “I cannot take anymore. It is too late to save me now. I am sorry. I cannot endure... Leave me...”

“I promised I would break your curse. Trust me,” I said, and I pulled him into the water.

He bucked and struggled against me, but my magic surrounded him as he began to shift, his skin glowing golden as his magic and mine

mingled together as we hung suspended just below the water's surface. As he looked at me, his face filled with wonder, free from the exhausted pain of moments before. *Restore and renew him. Heal him from all wounds.*

Starlight burst out of me and surrounded him like a cape, whirling and shrouding him as it pulled him out of the waters. I pushed against the water, willing myself to rise, and stepped out of the pool.

Soren stood at the water's edge, his eyes shining as he turned toward me. There was no pain or shadow of reservation in his face, only joy and openness and relief. He was dressed in a similar fashion to Tomas, except that instead of riding trousers, he wore a finely embroidered doublet and hose of dark green velvet. His tunic was a pale green, trimmed with silk in a matching shade. A thick green cloak lined with silver silk and edged with white furs draped over one shoulder, far too heavy and warm for the early summer's afternoon. He had always seemed handsome before with his fine, angular features and startling eyes, but now my heart seemed to stop in my chest from how beautiful and elegant he looked. I felt suddenly shy and timid as I tried to catch my breath. Soren took a step toward me, tilting his head curiously as though dreaming.

"Is..." he started, gesturing his hands wide, "is it over? Truly and fully over and gone?"

"Yes," I smiled, taking his hands in mine. I felt a flush growing over my cheeks as my heart thrilled at the feeling of his fingers entwined with mine. "You are free of the wizard's curse now."

He smiled and pulled me close to him, his arms strong around my waist. My body trembled against him as desire and hope surged over me. I lifted my face to meet his gaze, relief flooding my mind as I touched his cheek gently. I brushed my fingers gently over the thick stubble on his chiseled jawline.

"Yes," he said, nodding affectionately. "We are free. My curse-breaker."

He bent his head down, kissing me deeply. I flung my arms around his neck, giving into his kiss as he lifted me up. He carried me up the embankment from the pool and I felt as light in his arms as a wisp of thistledown. Sunlight flooded around us and the world seemed to glow golden and warm as I lost myself in the comfort of Soren's embrace, no longer restrained by the threat of curse and ruin.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“What are we going to do now?” Rose asked, picking herself up from the ground and shaking dirt from her fingers. Tomas helped her to her feet and she leaned against him as he held her close, her breath still coming in ragged gasps.

“We need to get to Menastel as soon as possible,” Soren said, his hand still on my waist. “You said it’s been nine moons since... well, I cannot go back in time and amend my mistakes. I suppose the Court is in uproar. We can take you to the high priests there and have your binding undone. Father will understand of course, and no one needs know about the forced marriage once the priests have annulled it...”

“What are you going on about?” Tomas asked, his brows knitting together. “Unless she asks for it, I have no intention of rescinding my vow. Rose is my wife, sworn and promised, my chosen and beloved. That vow was not undone by the breaking of my curse. Didn’t you see what she did with the thorns and stones? Why on earth would I give her up?” Rose looked up at him, a smile playing on her lips, and he leaned his head against her leaf-strewn hair.

“At least you can talk about the curse now,” she said, patting his hand affectionately. “And you can shift at will?”

“Yes, I believe I can shift still, although I have much to ask my mother in regards to that. And I can talk of my curse freely, it seems,” Tomas said slowly. He looked at Soren and me appraisingly, until Soren stepped away from me as color flooded his cheeks. “And as such, I do believe formal introductions are in order. Shall I go first, or would you prefer to honor your duty as the first-born son, Prince Dacian?”

Soren made a muffled protest and then composed his face, avoiding his brother’s gaze. “Well, clearly you can use my name now without causing either of us intense pain, my dear brother.”

I looked from Tomas to Soren, and then to Rose as we both drew our breath in sharply. “Prince... you are the Crown Prince?” I asked, looking up into Soren’s golden amber eyes. He smiled, biting at his lip nervously as his ears flushed to match the crimson on his cheeks.

“Yes,” he said, clearing his throat. “I am Prince Dacian, Crown Prince and heir to the throne of Minalorea.”

My heart fluttered a moment in my chest as Soren kept his eyes on me, waiting for some response. I swallowed back a dozen half-thought-out questions, my mouth dry. “Why didn’t you...”

“I couldn’t speak of it without almost killing myself. I tried to hint around the edges as far as I felt was safe, and I thought perhaps you’d recognize me when I shifted the first time. I suppose that was a bit silly of me, this far from the coastal cities.” Soren shrugged, his dark golden eyelashes catching at the sunlight as they fluttered over his reddened cheeks. “I wanted to tell you so many times.”

“You forgot to mention that you’re also the Grand Duke of the Jeweled Cities,” Tomas said, his eyes alight with merriment. “I suppose perhaps you’ve discovered some modesty during your months in the forest. At least as regards your rank, if not the state of your attire during shifting,” he said suggestively, glancing between Soren and me.

Soren shot his brother a withering stare. “And this, of course, is my beloved younger brother, Prince Emilian, Grand Duke of the Semphyre Coast, Lord Commander of the Seaward Armies.”

Rose stepped back, looking almost shyly at the brothers and Tomas’ face furrowed with concern. “You... you don’t mind, do you?” he asked softly. “I know that this isn’t what you thought I was, that a prince isn’t who you fell in love with and I understand if you don’t want me...”

She looked up at him, her lashes brushing against her flushed cheeks. “You’re Tomas. My Tomas,” she said softly, letting him take her hand. “But I’m... nothing. You are a prince. Will they allow me to marry you?”

“You are mine,” he said, pulling her close. “I’ll make them allow it.”

“You’re a witch who can topple towers. I don’t think anyone is going to try too hard to come between you two,” Soren added, giving her a kindly smile. “And Tomas is a grand duke after all. Other than Father and Mother, no one else really could tell him whom he is allowed to marry. Well, they could try. He just wouldn’t listen.”

“We won’t be princes or grand dukes of anything at all if the kingdom is torn apart by power hungry nobles vying for Father’s throne,”

Tomas said pointedly. "We need to get back to Ravutsa now and find Dama Kovalic. Then we will have to find horses and ride for Menastel as quickly as we can. I have many questions for my mother when we return." His face clouded for a moment, glancing sharply at Soren who bowed his head, his expression full of remorse and frustration. "I hope that she has woken at last, now that the duke's meddling and curses have been ended."

"I was a fool to go off," Soren said softly. "You were right to call me an idiot."

Tomas grunted in assent. "I know. We will make things right. First, to we need to go back to the cottage. I'm sure Rose and Callia would like to pack their things and help their mother prepare to leave Ravutsa."

I shook myself, gathering my thoughts. I'd expected them to be lesser noblemen, and the duke had referred to Soren as a lord, but my mind could hardly comprehend the fact that I'd spent weeks as the companion to the lost Crown Prince. "Yes, well, she might be in Spalia Dorna still... Maris did say that she'd send word that Mother should stay there, given the fervor in the village over wanting to hunt you down, your highness."

Tomas winced, shifting under the weight of his thick cloak. "Please, as your brother through my marriage vows, I must insist that you never call me your highness or anything of that sort, or I will have to call you Sister Moon Witch. Or is it High Lady of Starlight? Tomas will do just fine for us. Emilian if you have to, around others I suppose. We can sort that out at Court, I am sure there will be a lot of explanations ahead. But honorifics are completely unnecessary."

"Callia is fine," I said. "I don't think being a witch gives me a rank. Certainly not one like a High Lady."

"Oh it will," Tomas said, laughing. "Father will be eager to give you and Rose titles of your own. And I'll insist on it if you call me 'your highness' outside of court."

Soren laughed, taking my arm. "He never liked it when I called him that either. Come, let's get to the village before sunset, shall we?"

"Why would Mother have to stay away from home because of Tomas?" Rose asked, reaching for my hand as we entered the Kingswood. Soren led the way, carrying my hamper of belongings that Maris had so carefully prepared for me. Tomas stayed beside Rose, his arm around her waist, seemingly unwilling to be parted from her for a moment.

“The duke had started a rumor that he killed the Crown Prince and people were getting upset. They all think war is coming. Maris believed that if they thought that using Mother or myself as bait to draw you and Tomas out would work, they would do so. And then they would turn him over to the duke’s men,” I said simply. “She came to the cottage last night to warn me. I don’t suppose we are in as much danger now, but I think we owe her our thanks, and an explanation before we leave Ravutsa.” Tomas made a low grunt in the back of his throat.

“Cowards, all of them,” he said with a disapproving shake of his head. “I think Maris deserves better than to be left in this town. I will see to it that your mother is kept safe and given a new home, just as I promised, Rose. And perhaps we ask Maris to travel with her.”

She nodded, her face creasing a little with worry. “If Mother is not at home,” she said softly, “should we leave Ravutsa tonight?”

Soren looked over his shoulder. “I don’t think one more night under the eaves of the Golden Kingswood is going to bring Minalorea to ruin and destruction. Unless of course Father has already announced a new heir.”

Tomas laughed. “He’d have to leave Mother’s side. And as of just a few days before the new moon, Maris assured us that he had not done so.”

Rose stopped suddenly, her eyes alight as she turned to me abruptly.

“Callia, where did you say you saw the Duke of Chartrin in the woods?” she asked, tilting her head as though trying to piece together parts of a puzzle in her mind.

“By the banks of the Ravutsa, where the morels grow thick after the lightning fire three years ago,” I said. “By the cluster of stones that juts out into the waters when the spring melt floods the river.” She furrowed her brow as she bit at her lower lip thoughtfully.

“I saw him along the riverbank, not far from there,” she said after a moment. “If water can contain magic, keeping it sustained and preserved for years...”

“What are you saying, Rose?” I asked, taking her hand again.

“Soren, lead us to the Ravutsa, just outside of the village,” Rose said, dragging Tomas and me forward as she sprang down the path, almost at a run. “I have an idea of what he might have been doing there.”

Soren ran alongside her, giving her short directions to guide us out of the forest. Soon we came to the still flooded banks of the river. It shone bright and clear, the sunlight filtering through the verdant canopy of leaves above. The green-hued light dappled over the rushing water, and I felt the refreshing spray of droplets off the rocks as it crashed along the course through the Kingswood.

“Here,” Rose said, nodding emphatically. “This is near where I saw him. The place you describe is maybe a five minute walk downstream from here, isn’t it, Callia?”

“Yes,” I said, watching her intently. “What is it?”

She knelt in the moss, placing her hands on the ground as she closed her eyes and began to sing softly. A beam of flickering light, pale mossy green and amber, shone out from a place on the bank near a short, flat boulder that sat half submerged in the river. The moss showed signs of having been roughly cut and then placed back down around the stone. Rose looked triumphantly up at the three of us.

“It’s here, I can feel the power in them,” she said. “Look for a spade or an ax nearby.”

“Rose,” Tomas began, crouching down beside her. “Why would the duke leave such a thing in the woods?”

“Because he doesn’t want to carry it back through the forest if he’s going to need it in a week or so,” she replied coolly, crossing her arms over her chest. “Remember how I told you that the Duke of Chartrin took men and boys to work in his mines, and that none who are taken ever come back from the mountains, except those in his employ when they require new workers? You said that the duke’s mines were depleted, that his resources had dwindled and nothing was left. Well, I think I have the answers.”

“In a muddy riverbank?” Soren asked, sitting on the stone. He glanced at me, quirking one eyebrow.

“Find a spade, and you will understand,” Rose said. Tomas smiled and pushed himself up.

“Shall we, brother?” he asked, extending a hand to Soren. “Or you can shift into a stag and dig it up with your nice sharp hooves,” he teased playfully.

Soren pushed his sleeves up and shot him a glare. “You could shift into a bear and dig it up with your paws, instead of trying to maul me

for once.”

Tomas laughed. “As you command, your highness,” he said, closing his eyes as though readying himself to shift.

“Why couldn’t Rose just do it?” I interrupted, glancing questioningly at my sister. “If you can make the earth tremor with a single stomp, or pull stones down with your vines, and stop the convulsion of the forest, couldn’t you just make the earth shift away from whatever is buried in it?”

She blinked, her mouth opening wordlessly for a moment and then she nodded. Rose placed her hands over the disturbed earth and dug her fingers into the moss. The ground shuddered and Soren lept back as an iron-bound chest rose under my sister’s hand, the mud and debris of the forest falling away in sodden clumps.

“Well, it’d probably help if we had a key,” Soren said, inspecting the chest. It looked mundane and hopelessly commonplace, with no sign or sigil of importance, and a massive lock hung at the heavy, ungainly latch.

Tomas drew the thorn blade from Rose’s satchel and swung in a wide, red-hued arc, striking the lock with a single, resounding blow. The metal was sliced cleanly apart, and the latch fell open with a dull thud.

“I am never using any other sword if I can help it,” Tomas said, giving Rose a beaming smile. He heaved the lid open and stepped back with an expression of consternation. “What in hellfires...”

Rose took a velvet pouch from the chest and poured it into her lap. Twinkling yellow gemstones looked like a pool of sunshine on her skirt, and she held them up in wonder. Soren lifted another bag out and pulled out a handful of deep blood-red stones.

“Rubies, I believe,” he said thoughtfully. “And there’s garnets and citrine and tourmaline and more. I think Father will be most interested in this.”

“Depleted mines indeed,” Tomas nodded as he helped Rose return the stones to their bag. I leaned over, counting eleven more large velvet pouches of gemstones still inside the chest.

“Rose, how many chests like this do you suppose the duke buried here in the woods?” I asked. “And how many more did he keep at the tower?”

She cleared her throat, shifting a little from her seat on the ground. “I don’t know, honestly. There could be a vast fortune buried in Chelady after my spell brought the tower down. They certainly could have been used to store and channel power for the duke, if they were prepared properly. As for how many lay within the Kingswood...”

She leaned forward, her eyes closed, and placed her hands on the riverbank again. A series of lights flickered along the path, some a short distance from the river, and others right beneath its overflowed banks. I heard Soren’s breath catch in his throat. He ran along the river a little way, a flitting shadow of green against the sparkling, leaping river.

“Tomas, it’s as far as I can see into the Kingswood,” he said, clenching his fists to his side as he returned a few moments later. “A vast fortune, if they are all like this one.”

“There must be dozens of chests just like this, tens of dozens perhaps,” Tomas said, nodding. He set his jaw, grim and determined. “We cannot dig them all up and carry them all out of the Kingswood tonight. We would be far too slow on our journey if we thought to bring them back to Father now.”

“Then is there a way we can mark the places where the treasure is buried?” Soren asked, rubbing at his temple. He stepped back, his shoulders tensing sharply as if bracing for some unseen burden. “So that we can come back for them? The court will go into a fury over this discovery. We will probably have to take Chelady’s ruin apart, stone by stone, to find all the answers.”

Rose nodded and held out one hand to me. “Cast with me, Callia, let me weave your starlight into my spell. No villager will dare touch the plants when I am finished, until we can return for the duke’s treasure.”

I concentrated on the gentle song of starlight that hummed in the back of my mind and formed it into a thread of silver, sending a tendril of it unfurling from my hand. Rose caught it deftly, twisting the light around her fingers as though it were roving to be spun into wool. She took a deep breath as she threaded the light into the ground, as though it were a root seeking new life in the dark, dampness of the earth.

Briars of pale thorns pushed up where the light shone out of the earth above the buried treasure. The new-formed leaves were a shimmering silver-green, and the roses that bloomed from the vines glowed like

moonlight on a clear night. The air filled with the scent of sweet honey and anise, sharp and intoxicating.

“They will never cease blooming, never wither with cold, until we return and release the spell,” she said, looking up at me as she finished singing the melody of her spell, weaving the final threads of my starlight into the earth. I could hardly believe the magic that she had spun, that we had created together so seamlessly. I glanced up, and Soren met my gaze, his eyes shrouded and sad. He opened his mouth slightly, then shook his head, turning his eyes toward the ground. “And I will help with unearthing the secrets of the tower, Soren. I think I could rebuild it if I could bring it down.”

Soren cleared his throat, shifting anxiously from foot to foot. He looked askance to Tomas, who merely shrugged, although his face shone with pride. “No one will dare touch them for fear of the magic. If any pluck the blooms, the briars shall grow and thicken, the thorns become sharper and fiercer.”

“Marvelous, my little witch. Now, let’s get you home,” Tomas said, holding out his hand to help Rose to her feet. He pulled her into a quick kiss, his eyes alight as he gazed at her with admiration. “We will set out for Menastel in the morning.”

“Lead on, Callia,” Soren said as he shouldered the chest of gemstones with a grunt, turning away from me quickly. “I’ve been bound within this forest long enough. It’s past time for me to return to court.”

I felt a knot form in my throat as he pulled away, a sudden distance and coolness in his expression and tone. I wanted to reach out and take his hand but something held me back, silencing any reply on my lips. I wasn’t sure if it was the reminder of his duty at court, or the unsettling question of the duke’s buried gems that was bothering him and causing him to withdraw from me.

Wordlessly, he followed me down the path that led out of the Kingswood toward our cottage while Rose and Tomas walked behind.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Rose sat in her chair, sipping at a cup of tea that Tomas had poured for her after we had finished packing up the kitchen. Her face occasionally tugged into strange grimaces as her eyes stared vacantly out the window to the front gate. The afternoon had faded into early evening and the flowers over the door were washed with a red gold glow. The princes had busied themselves with gathering Mother's books into her trunk of clothes that she had left behind, Tomas occasionally coming to the main room for bundles of papers and her scattered belongings. I'd thought to return the book I'd taken from her bedside, but after a moment's consideration, I'd stowed it back into the roomy pocket of my pinafore. The magic felt stronger now, urging me to read it, the song in my thoughts joining in with the longing for the book. Rose cleared her throat, passing one hand over her eyes wearily.

"It's strange to see our home look so barren so quickly, isn't it?" I said, resting my hand on Rose's elbow. She blinked, stirring in her seat as she heaved a long sigh.

"Yes, I suppose," she replied, her brows knitting into a single, worried line. "I should go to Ravutsa. I need to thank Maris, and we owe her an explanation of why we are leaving."

"I don't know if it is wise for us to be seen in town," I said softly, rising from the table.

"Especially not covered in forest bracken not long after the whole Kingswood was raging this afternoon," Soren said, poking his head out of Mother's room. "Perhaps Tomas and I could call at the tavern and..."

"No," I shook my head. "Jan Kaczmarek is turning everyone away. The duke sent several of his knights to the village in order for them to hunt Tomas and Rose. And... Maris mentioned another rider staying in secret as well. Anyway, it will do you no good to go to the village in our stead."

Rose's shoulders sagged a little as she looked at Tomas grimly. "Two well-dressed strangers would be almost as distrusted as we are if the village is as fraught as Maris described."

“Perhaps... I could run to the Jarisek farm tonight,” I offered. “Demir’s younger brother would not attract any attention if he were to go asking for Maris, and I think he would do it if I promised him a sighting of the white stag.”

“Using me as a bribe?” Soren flushed, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched me curiously. “Would you trust him with a message? A child, in a village like this with rumors swirling, whipping people into madness?”

“I think it might be our best chance,” I replied. “I’d send Demir or the twins, but I feel that they all would ask more questions than he would. And he would be so thrilled to see you.”

A series of urgent, frantic knocks came at the front door and Rose jumped to her feet, giving me a questioning, panicking look. I shrugged and she carefully went to the latch.

“Dama Kovalic!” a muffled voice came through the thick wooden door. “Flora, please let me in!”

“That doesn’t sound like Maris,” Tomas said, his hand straying to the thorn blade where he’d pushed it through his belt beside a beautifully worked silver dagger. Soren stood beside him, his hand straying to his own hunting knife, still laced into its elegantly embossed leather sheath.

Rose pulled the door open and Father Gadrel slipped through before she could step aside. His face blanked with surprise as he looked around the room. His hair was disheveled, matching the state of his clothes, and he shook with ragged, hard-won breaths.

“Philanthea? Where is your mother?” he said at last. His voice was tight with caution and exertion, and his gaze seemed fixed on Tomas and Soren. “I need to speak with her.”

“Father Gadrel, I believe?” Tomas said, tilting his head at the priest. “You have much to answer for. Why do you seek Dama Kovalic?”

“Excuse me?” The priest’s voice rose high, breaking a little as he backed against the wall as though trying to keep as much space between himself and Tomas. “I don’t believe I have ever...”

“I came to you for aid in breaking a curse, and then you gave me a bride in a bid to placate me,” Tomas said imperiously, his voice filling the room. Soren’s face creased with an amused smile as he watched his brother. “You and the men of this village hid behind a girl, with little regard for her

life and certainly no care for her fate. And now, you're ready to do the same for her mother and sister?"

"You're... the bear? The Spirit Bear of the Kingswood?" Father Gadrel sank down to the floor in a crumpled heap. "Well, it seems you've found the answers you sought then."

"Do not make light of what has been done." Tomas stepped forward, a rumbling snarl building in his throat, his hand firmly grasping the hilt of the thorn sword.

"I am here to warn the Kovalics, not to give them over to the magistrate," he said as he cradled his head in his hands. Rose crouched next to him, her eyes burning brightly as he drew into himself more.

"What happened?" I asked, going to his side. He glanced through his fingers at me, shaking his head. "What happened in Ravutsa that made you leave your home and come here, seeking my mother?"

Soren leaned on the table. "I'd suggest you speak, priest, and answer Callia's questions, because my brother's temper is rather legendary at court and he is rapidly losing patience."

"Court?" the priest asked, his voice breaking again. He looked wildly between Rose and me, trying to read our faces, but Rose just rocked back on her heels, regarding him with as much warmth as though he were only a particularly interesting mushroom she'd just discovered.

"Talk." Soren commanded coolly. "Then you get to ask questions at the end, if my brother and I decide that you've earned our answers."

Tomas pulled a chair from the table and gestured to it abruptly. Father Gadrel stood, his body shaking as he shuffled to the chair, his eyes not straying from Tomas' sword.

"Early this morning," he said, licking his dry, cracking lips as he laced his fingers tightly together in his lap, "early this morning, the blacksmith came to me, distraught. Josef, his foundling boy that he'd taken on as his apprentice, his heir, was missing. The young man's things were left untouched in his room, but he was gone. And not a half hour after I sent the smith home, Jelina Jarisek burst into my home with a similar tale."

"Aleks?" I asked as I took my seat at the table, still watching him intently.

"No," he said with a dismal shake of his head. "Feodyr. None of his things taken, but no trace of the boy could be found in the house or

anywhere else on the farm. She was in a state, worrying about the forest spirits, about a white stag that her brother claims to have seen a fortnight or so ago. Her brother Demir spent the morning searching for him, but nothing.”

“What has this to do with Dama Kovalic?” Tomas said, placing one hand on the table. The priest gulped, his face going bone white.

“Not long after, everyone in the village seemed to know that two boys had gone missing. And no one could find Demir, and Maris vanished at midday as well. Then the forest... it was like nothing anyone has ever seen. The trees rose and crashed together, the ground swelling under foot, and then suddenly all was still, calm again. No one can understand why, but they say that the spirits are angry and no one would go into the Kingswood to search for Josef or Feodyr after that. Master Jarisek is in a state, torn between going to Spalia Dorna to sell his extra piglets in Demir’s place and staying to search for his missing sons on the other side of the valley. The Kaczmareks are furious, demanding answers and raging at anyone who comes near them. No forest spirit has ever taken a girl before.”

“They have more honor than men, it seems.” Tomas shook his head with a disparaging growl. Father Gadrel nodded, hanging his head to his chest.

“There is talk that your mother is to blame,” he said, flicking a quick glance at Rose. She pressed her lips together, breathing in deeply. “I told them that was preposterous. But they would not listen to me, not when the magistrate was there, urging them to place all the blame for the missing boys, for the way the forest raged, on her, on both of you, or on the Spirit Bear. Someone said that they’d seen smoke rising from the chimney, a sure sign that she had returned from Spalia Dorna, and they were preparing to come and turn her over to the magistrate to be charged for malicious sorcery. I couldn’t stand by... I couldn’t let your family take more harm.”

“So you came to warn her off?” Rose asked. “Or to ask if she had some responsibility over any of it?”

Father Gadrel shook his head violently. “I only wanted to warn her, to tell her to flee. I too saw the smoke and feared that she’d returned already.” He reached into his pocket, producing a crumpled bit of parchment. “I also found this as I was leaving my home. I believe it is yours, Calanthea.”

I took it, turning it over in my hands. I saw the seal I'd placed on the letter to Mother only the evening before. My name and Mother's were written in a tidy hand, the dark blue ink almost black against the page. A piece of paper had been folded into the letter and I pulled it free. *To Callia, I'm sorry. I must leave Ravutsa and cannot stay to give this to you. I hope to return someday and make my amends.*

"There was another note with it, asking me to take that letter to your mother first thing in the morning. I do not know who left it for me, but I meant to do it if your mother had not come," the priest said, looking up apprehensively. Tomas and Soren still stood across the table, regarding him with distrust.

"Do you mean to say that you are here to make some atonement for your actions this spring?" Tomas asked appraisingly. He looked the priest up and down skeptically. "What do you think, brother?"

"If he wishes our good will, I think I have an idea of how he may do so," Soren said, clearing his throat. "You are going to town and finding us a cart and two strong horses." Father Gadrel opened his mouth to protest, but a swift glare from Tomas left him unable to speak. "Or oxen if that's all this village can offer. And then, you are going to come back and help us leave Ravutsa tonight. When we reach Spalia Dorna, you will help us find Dama Kovalic, and then we will decide your fate from there."

"As you say," Father Gadrel said, rising from his chair with a quick bow toward each of us. "I will be return as soon as I may."

"See that you do," Tomas said, smiling. "Or my brother and I will shift again and come find you."

Father Gadrel blanched and backed out of the door, almost running down the path to the front gate. Rose stood, giving Tomas a slight remonstrative look despite the smile that spread over her face.

"Let's finish packing then, shall we?" she said, going to the mantel to take down Father's candlestick. "He might return within the hour after that threat."

Chapter Twenty-Four

I awoke the next morning, my body aching and sore from the night's journey in the back of the lurching cart. Father Gadrel had returned as dusk turned to night with a cart he'd borrowed from Master Jarisek. He seemed to be almost too frightened, of Tomas especially, to ask any further questions of any of us, although he protested that the Jariseks would require an explanation when their cart was returned. After the brothers had loaded the cart with everything Rose and I had deemed most necessary, the priest and Soren had taken turns driving in mostly stony silence through the night. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and sat up, looking over the duke's chest to where Soren sat, his back turned to me. Tomas and Rose had fallen asleep in each other's arms, wedged between Mother's spinning wheel and her trunk of books and belongings.

"We are just about to enter Spalia Dorna," Father Gadrel said, turning in his seat as he heard me stirring. He looked even more disheveled than the night before, and his dejected eyes drooped with exhaustion. He gave a hesitant, questioning glance at Soren, who gave him a disdainful look. "I believe the weaver frequents an inn, the Golden Flagon, near the edge of town. I will try to find your mother there first. If not..." he sighed, spreading his hands wide.

"The marketplace would also be a reasonable place to find her," I said, opening the hamper and pulling out a round of cheese and a knife. Father Gadrel's face flushed and he retreated to his seat, although his gaze remained on the food. I fished out the loaf of bread and gave him a thick slice without a word. He nodded his thanks and I laid back against the chest of gems. The morning was warm and golden, and I watched as the rolling meadows and tilled fields of the lower valley faded behind us, giving way to clusters of tall, gray stone buildings that rose up to meet the road.

Soren handed the reins to the priest, who flashed a quick, nervous smile at the both of us. As Father Gadrel turned the cart down one a new street, just beginning to bustle with merchants and tradesmen finished with their breakfasts, Soren crouched down in the cart beside me.

“I think it’s best if we continue straight for Menastel as soon as we find your mother,” he said softly. “There’s a castle, one of my mother’s favorites, not far from Astantria. I don’t think anyone will be there at this time, except those left to tend it throughout the year. We can leave your mother there, with this priest given strict instructions to stay with her and keep her safe.”

“Why wouldn’t she come with us?” I asked, a flutter of worry stirring in my stomach.

Soren drew a breath, glancing around us before taking my hand in his. “I have been gone from Court since last autumn at least. I cannot remember a good deal of that time well. My brother tells me that things were... in uproar and confusion when he left to find me. I can only imagine that things are more divided, more unsettled now since we have both been missing for so long. Your mother will be safe at my mother’s castle, I promise.”

I bit my lip. “But you still want Rose and me to come with you? To Menastel?”

He smiled, a faint blush of red on his ears. “Well for one thing, I don’t think my brother would hear of leaving your sister behind. And I promised to take you to Menastel in return for breaking my curse. And you are the Moon Witch, the first one in centuries perhaps, so Father will want to have you at Court the moment he hears of you. Don’t you want to come? I have so much I want to show you... I want you to meet my mother and see our library and... you will come with me, won’t you?”

“Of course,” I smiled, my heart beating faster as he gazed imploringly at me. “I just hate the idea of leaving my mother alone.”

“Only until I know that it is safe to bring her to Menastel to join us. I promised you that I would provide a new life for your family and I mean to make good on my word, Callia,” he said, folding my hand into his.

The cart slowly stopped, and Father Gadrel clambered down from the driver’s box and handed the reins back to Soren. A weather-worn sign bearing the name of the inn, the faded yellow and green paint chipping away, hung a few feet past the horses. The priest gave a short bow to Soren and hurried inside.

A moment he returned, his face splotchy with agitation. “The keeper says that she went this morning to the mayor’s manor, delivering the

last of her preserves and mushrooms to his cook.”

“Do you know how to get us there?” Soren asked, his voice sharp with impatience. The priest nodded meekly and turned the cart back onto the street, the wheels heaving over the rutted stones. Soren settled on the cart bed beside me again. I almost protested that he should speak a little more kindly to Father Gadrel after the priest had been awake all night to guide the cart away from Ravutsa. My gaze fell on my sister’s face, resting against Tomas’ shoulder, and my mind filled with the memory of the binding he had spoken over the two of them. I said nothing.

A little more than half an hour later, we had passed through the last reaches of Spalia Dorna, and Father Gadrel slowed the horses down as a large stone wall rose up, covered in ivy and bryony. Rose sat up, glancing around us in a sort of dream-like wonder, and Tomas watched her contentedly. Soon enough, I saw Mother walking along the side of the road, picking wildflowers and braiding them as she went.

The cart slowed, and my sister jumped over the side, light as a leaf. Tomas followed a moment later, his boots thudding solidly on the packed earth beside the road. He took a deep breath, giving one nervous smile up toward Soren and me. Both brothers flushed slightly as Mother looked up at us in shock, her eyes wide as though unsure of what she saw.

“Mother,” Rose said, running to her and taking her hands.

Mother embraced her, and then gestured questioningly toward the cart. “You... escaped from the Kingswood, my dear? You got away?” she asked shakily, her head still drawn back in confusion. “But the bear and the binding...”

“Yes. Well, we are no longer bound to stay there since we broke the curse. There... there is so much to tell you. I’m not sure the best place to begin.” Rose led Mother back to the cart, her face flushing scarlet like a new blossom at dawn.

“I think I would like to speak first,” Tomas said, sinking into a low bow as he knelt. “Dama Kovalic, I would ask for your formal blessing of my troth to your daughter. I understand that our first meeting was less than ideal or desired, for any of us. I am sorry for any grief I may have caused your family; it was not my intention in the slightest. There was a rather terrible misunderstanding, due to the features of the curse that had

been placed upon me. I do hope you will forgive me for taking Rose away from you.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand what you mean,” she said, her forehead furrowing into deep lines. “Who are you, my lord?”

“Mother, this is my trothed husband Tomas,” Rose said, pressing her lips together as she watched Mother’s face carefully. “Or rather, I suppose, Prince Emilian. We managed to lift his enchantment. He’s not a bear anymore and I think you’ll actually come to like him if...”

“Prince... Emilian?” Mother’s mouth hung open a little, and Father Gadrel made a strangled squawking noise in his throat. Soren gave him a sharp, reproachful glare and the priest cowered and whimpered into his seat, his eyes bulging.

“Will you grant us your blessing?” Tomas repeated, regarding her with an earnest smile.

“I don’t think I could do otherwise, your highness,” she said haltingly, as though the words felt strange in her mouth. She glanced at Rose for affirmation, a lingering question still hovering at her lips. Rose nodded, her face alight with joy.

Tomas rose, giving her a smaller bow again and lifted her into the cart beside me. A moment later, Rose was sitting on the trunk, holding Mother’s hand, and Tomas had taken a seat beside her.

“Where are we going?” she said, blinking up at Father Gadrel and Soren as the cart lurched forward again, the horses straining at their harness.

“To a summer castle near to Astantria,” Soren said. “None of the family will be there.”

“A castle? And who are you?” she asked, her face wrinkling in confusion.

“I’m Prince Dacian, of course,” he said slowly, looking at her and me in surprise. Mother and Father Gadrel made the same muffled protest of surprise. He shrugged, coughing lightly. “I was the white stag, from the Kingswood, that Callia has been spending time with these last few months.”

“Callia?” Mother spun toward me, shaking her head in disbelief. “What on earth have you been up to? The Crown Prince too? Why didn’t you tell me that... a white stag? You said that was a dream!”

“Mother,” I said shyly, as she reached over, patting my hand. “Please don’t be angry. Soren... Prince Dacian I mean, well, I didn’t want to alarm you.”

“We will not reach Astantria until well past noon,” Tomas said genially. “More than enough time for us to tell you everything you wish to know.”

Servants rushed out to greet us the moment that Father Gadrel turned the cart up the honeysuckle-lined path to the castle. A single, slender tower crowned with golden tiles rose up behind a skirt of white and gray stone walls. After a fuss had been raised and the castellan of the castle had reassured himself at least a dozen times that the princes had truly returned, we were led inside to a cool, spacious hall. A pair of footmen led the horses and cart to the stables and a flurry of maids rushed around us, bringing food and drinks.

“Welcome to Astantria,” Soren said, smiling. “Mother loves coming here in late spring.”

“She likes the reprieve from Court, you mean,” Tomas added, clearing his throat. “Not enough room for a bloated retinue to bother her every moment of the day.”

“What do you mean to do now, my lords?” Mother asked, keeping her face lowered as she bobbed a quick, nervous curtsy. Father Gadrel sat behind her, glancing nervously around as he shrank back into the chair, his fingers blanching almost white against the ivory satin cushion. “When can I return home?”

“I’m not sure Ravutsa is an option anymore,” Soren said as he tossed his cap onto a low marble table and ran his fingers through his hair. “You can stay here for several weeks; I will give the servants strict instructions to take care of you while we ride ahead. We need to know what has gone on these past months, before we rush to back to Menastel. And how are we going to explain Rose and Callia to the Court?”

Tomas intertwined his fingers with Rose’s, drawing her close to him. “Well, she is now a grand duchess, by marriage, so they’ll just have to accept her as my wife and treat her with the respect due to their princess. I know there’s the matter of the conferring my title on her, but I’m sure Father will not stand in the way. Besides, he’ll be thrilled that there’s

another witch in the family, without ties binding her to the Sutrae Lyentari at that. Not to mention she could pull down the towers of Menastel if she wanted. Mother will love her.”

“And what of Callia?” Mother asked, reaching for me. “Will she stay with me?”

“Mother,” I said, drawing my breath as my chest seemed to tighten. Soren smiled at me, nodding encouragingly. “I am... I’m a celestial witch now. I cannot stay. There are things I have to do. There are three other pools that I promised to restore. And I... there are things I need to tell the King myself.” I could feel the song of the stars in my bones and blood, bright and jubilant. With the other pools of celestial magic renewed, I felt that perhaps I would find more answers about my new powers, or at least be given a place of my own at a royal university or even the high court of Menastel.

“I promise you, I will look after her,” Soren said, his expression warm and open.

“Are you two... have you two also...” she blinked as she tried to gather her thoughts. “Did Father Gadrel make you give...” I looked up at her, startled. Father Gadrel half rose from his seat, protesting weakly. Soren’s eyes grew wide as his face blanched and his mouth dropped open. He struggled to speak, looking at me with dismay.

“No Mother,” I flushed, my heartbeat accelerating as I became aware of Tomas and Rose staring at us intently. “There is no understanding or betrothal between us. Only a promise of a better life for us in Menastel or one of the other royal cities, if you would like that.”

“Very well,” she said, relief flooding into her smile. “That would please me greatly. But you will take care of my daughter, your highness?”

“On my life, as she has saved mine,” he said, nodding solemnly. “And please, your daughter already knows my mother-name, there is no need for titles here.”

Tomas bent over Father Gadrel. “And you, our good priest. You’ve lost your folk, your parsonage, to the magistrate’s furor, they will not listen to you again while he remains. You will stay with Dama Kovalic here until we send for her, and then the clerics of Semphyre will decide where to send you.”

Father Gadrel nodded, looking a curious mix of grateful and relieved and terrified.

“We will be together, all of us, as a family again soon,” I said, taking her hands in my own and pulling her down into a chair beside me. She smiled, her eyes shining softly. “And then I think Rose and I will have a good deal of questions for you.”

“Yes,” she said, sighing. “Yes, I suppose that is fair.” Rose leaned over Mother’s shoulder, embracing her fondly.

“Now,” Soren said, drawing an expectant breath as he walked to the broad oak doors at the end of the hall, “let us find the castellan so we can be on our way. I will not be able to rest until we are home and can put an end to the chaos running wild in Minalorea since I left.”

“Yes,” Tomas said, his face lit with a longing smile. “I want to see Mother. I am ready to go home.”

Sunset’s first red gold rays lit the castle stones with a rosy flush as we walked toward the flower-shaded drive. Mother watched us from the high-arched door, shivering in the evening chill despite the fine, silky wool shawl that Soren had given her. Four gray horses were saddled, waiting for us, with provisions in their bags. I patted my pocket, reassuring myself that the little book I’d taken from Mother’s room was still there and felt the exhilarating twinge of magic under my fingertips.

Tomas and Soren both wore dark blue riding suits, much more suited for travel in the summer heat than the clothes that had been restored to them by the Starlight Waters. Rose and I had been given beautiful gowns of silver and crimson, each embroidered with golden star-flowers.

“Your highness,” the castellan called out as he bustled through the door, his genial round face creased with concern. “Please, will you not stay the night? A few hours will hardly matter now.”

“No,” Soren said, giving him a dismissive shake. “If what you say is true, that Father is planning to name an heir before the next rising of the full moon, I would rather return even a few moments sooner if I could prevent him doing so.”

“But my lord, you will feel more rested in the morning. And you will not get to another palace or castle before night has fallen completely.

Where will you stay?" The castellan pulled at his thinning mustache pleadingly.

"We've just spent half a year or more in the Kingswood," Tomas grunted in frustration, his face clouding for a moment. Rose touched his arm and the tension eased in his shoulders. "A few nights spent on the road, in inns or taverns we find along the way, will not be a terrible hardship to us."

"We have been gone for months as it is," Soren added softly, waving the castellan back from his side. "And it is time we gave our father answers, such as we have."

The castellan bowed, backing away as he twisted his hands together anxiously. He gave Mother a curt bow before disappearing into the castle again.

Soren held out his hand to me, guiding me down the stairs. Tomas and Rose walked together, her arm tucked in his, and she glanced back to Mother with a hopeful look of reassurance in her eyes. Mother raised one hand in farewell before slipping away like a shadow fading at dawn, lost to us in the depths of the castle door.

"At least we have something to show for it," Tomas said gruffly as we turned to go. "A chest of gems from a mine not quite so depleted as was believed. News of a ruined tower and a traitorous lord. And a witch of stone and vine, and another of moon and starlight. The Sutrae Lyentari is going to be furious when they aren't able to gain control over Rose and Callia."

"That's a diplomatic problem for another day," Soren said with a grimace. "One I'd rather not dwell on until I have to. Perhaps if Father is truly relieved and glad to see us, he won't make me face the Sutrae."

"I thought diplomacy was your most valuable skill, preparing you for your eventual role?"

"Dealing with courtiers and emissaries is far more palatable than irritable, power-hungry witches and sorcerers. At least you could bring a sword to the meeting."

Tomas laughed, a cheerful and easy sound that filled his chest. He held Rose's horse as she cautiously pulled herself up into the saddle, and then swung up onto the back of the horse closest to her. They set off at a

gentle pace, Rose sitting rigidly upright and Tomas leading her down the path.

Soren lifted me into the saddle of one of the horses, his hands gentle on my waist, and he smiled up at me as I adjusted myself nervously. His eyes shone with stars as he looked up at me for a moment, and then he stepped away, gracefully mounting his horse in a single, fluid motion that spoke of long training and a degree of familiarity with horses that I'd never seen in Ravutsa or the other valley towns.

He guided his horse to come up beside me, reaching out for my hand as I tried to mimic his hold on his reins. My horse did not shift or shy under me as I felt my body tense with uncertainty.

"It'll be far easier to ride her than when I carried you through the forest," he said softly, his hand folding around mine tenderly. "Mother's horses are bred to be gentle and docile and easy to ride. I'll hold the reins if you'd like until you've gotten used to riding."

"Will we have to gallop?" I asked, feeling my throat grow tight with worry.

"Not all of the way, I am sure. But if we ride hard, we should make it to Menastel within a few days. And then, I promise, you will not have to ride for weeks unless you want to." He flicked the reins lightly and both of our horses began to walk sedately toward the castle gate.

I smiled, my heart fluttering in my chest as he continued to hold my hand as we rode. "Thank you, Prince Dacian."

"My pleasure, Moon Witch."

* * * * *

About the Author

Adelia Jezek grew up on the west coast of the United States, surrounded by forests and mountains and fantasy books. She began writing at an early age and her love of words and the magic of storytelling has continued to grow and transform every aspect of her life. She now lives with her family in a rural town in the northern midwest, nestled between serene lakes and picturesque farmland. She enjoys crafting, reading, and studying folklore in her spare time.

If you'd like to learn more about Adelia Jezek's work, go to heartleafpress.com for information about her upcoming projects, sales and other special announcements, and a free short story full of magic and reigniting old flames!

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