

Light of Vengeance

by

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Processing Grief with Fantasy

My senior project titled *Light of Vengeance*, is a fantasy YA novel that follows two protagonists — Noel Aldan and Andreas Molinaro — across the kingdom of Philuca. As a result of witnessing her father's assassination, Noel must flee her estate with her bodyguard, Kallian. Her grief turns into anger as she vows to find her father's killer, all while harboring the secret that she is worshiped as a highly powerful mage priestess, yet she cannot cast magic. Andreas is the prince of Philuca, and in a turn of events, he discovers a dark secret about his lineage and reluctantly teams up with his mother in order to dispose of all who she views as a threat. Both characters cross paths and face betrayal from those they trust most, as well as discovering their own hidden truths. Noel's story is something that I developed during my early teen years in high school. She had a completely different name, backstory and appearance. It was an angsty, sapphic, star-crossed lovers short story that I never intended to show anyone. I still have that old document backed up, and it's amusing to stare at it from time to time when I feel as though I haven't grown as a writer. Looking back on all my experiences as a writer and in life, it has greatly influenced the trajectory of how this project has come to fruition.

Before my time at Purchase, I attended another college for one semester. I was away from home for the first time, majoring in something that I didn't want to do, and would go days without talking, unable to make friends. I was severely depressed, with my college mandating that I return home on weekends as they feared that I would be a danger to myself. To pass the time on the train rides home, or to comfort myself when I was feeling lonely, I would make up short fantasy stories in my head. I wouldn't write them down on paper, as writing felt stagnant and foreign to me. I would become overwhelmed, and reading and writing felt like a chore to me; not something done for pleasure. However, my love for fantasy fiction has been around since I was a child. Books such as *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* by Howard Pyle, *Earthsea* by Ursula

K LeGuin and the *Deltora Quest* series by Emily Rodda were my escape to different worlds, and I wanted to be just like those characters — going on adventures with swords and magic. Fantasy was and still is my escape into other worlds when I'm facing a difficult time.

My time at Purchase thrust me into the unknown. I hadn't written fiction in a very long time when I got accepted, and it goes to show as my portfolio is all poetry — something that's not really my forte. I was still managing my depression, afraid of opening up out of fear from my previous college, and dealing with imposter syndrome — it's safe to say that I was rather prickly for my first few months here. Workshops were foreign to me and it felt as though everyone knew what they were doing and exactly what they wanted to write, meanwhile I just went with the flow. Writing felt more like doing it for a grade rather than from the heart. Inspiration finally struck me in Fiction Writing 1, when I suddenly had the idea to write a chapter of a gothic romance between a human and a vampire. It was all I talked about for about a year and I had every intention to make it my senior project. However, I shelved it. I was afraid that it wasn't as compelling or high-stakes as any of the books I read and that no one wanted to read it. Afraid of the unknown, afraid of failing. I feel as though when I'm a bit older, I can revisit that story. Yet, my time in-person at Purchase came to a halt, as COVID-19 began. Right when I felt as though I was doing so well, I returned back to square one. Alone, quiet, only leaving my room to eat dinner, on my laptop 24/7, Zoom and assignments were the only things that occupied my brain. It was cruel.

Back in April of 2020, my aunt passed away. It came to a shock at the time — for I had just spoken to her the day before, only for her to pass overnight. It's still somewhat blurry at times, yet deep down, I know she wouldn't have survived the COVID-19 pandemic. She was severely immunocompromised and had an oxygen tank due to respiratory issues in the last few years of her life. I don't really talk much about my aunt after her death, only with my family. Coincidentally enough, when she did pass, my assignment for Poetic

Techniques was to write an aubade, and I wrote it about her. I haven't looked at it since then. It was an abrupt loss, and I never really got closure from it. It felt as though there was no end in sight. Why have I been suffering for so long? My depression would constantly bounce back dealing with my loss, what I dealt with in my old college, and having to navigate a world where everyone was dying due to a pandemic. I felt so angry and confused, and my slow transition into enjoying writing once more quickly progressed into me disliking it again. So, I stopped.

Light of Vengeance came about during Alternate Worlds. I was going to create a different world and story but I had no idea where to start. I stumbled upon the old document from my teen years. As I began to re-read it, all these thoughts and ideas came flying. I quickly jotted them down and after the workshop, I would just talk and talk about my story. It felt nice to be passionate about something again, something that hadn't happened in years. My classmates and friends pushed me to new limits during workshop — asking questions and encouraging me to keep writing. I was slowly returning to my old self and I will forever be grateful for that class. Rereading *Earthsea* as an adult made me fall in love with the fantasy genre all over again. While developing the story, the big question came to mind: “What was the catalyst that would have Noel start her journey?” I knew the plot twists and the ending, but not the beginning. As I pondered over it for weeks, it finally clicked in my head — Noel's father would tragically die in front of her. It was such an “aha” moment, inspired by one of my favorite manga, *Yona of the Dawn* by Mizuho Kusanagi. However, Noel's reaction to this death isn't influenced by it. She was angry, unlikeable, and powerless. I had to look deep within myself, and in doing so I extracted my worst traits and placed them into her. I joke around a lot and say that “She has my temper but cranked up to a thousand” and it's true, to an extent. I view Noel as what I would still be like if I didn't have a great support system and therapy.

Upon telling my mom how I viewed the start of Noel's journey, she immediately asked if it was a way of me coping with my aunt's death, or did I write it subconsciously. I denied it at first, telling her that I don't write self-inserts, but in recent months, I've come to terms that she is a lot like me, but she's also different. Her worst trait is lashing out at others, something that I would do a lot to my family when I was at my lowest. Like Noel, I would lash out because I didn't want anyone to see me at my worst. I wanted to be alone, yet I so desperately craved affection and wanted others to be concerned over me. Noel is my anger, grief and sorrow. She can pick up a sword and declare revenge on those who killed her father, while I'm still confused about the death of my aunt two years later. Sometimes I find it unfair yet I'm the one in control of her story and her actions, although at times, I find that writing about her journey can be therapeutic. She's going to make it out of that dark place. Andreas' character stems from my fear of failure. He is a tragic villain, manipulated by those around him for their own gain, and the reason why he so readily says yes to things is due to being somewhat of a people pleaser. He succumbs to his mother's will, and it's an interesting dilemma to navigate, as I have to really dissect the nature of a mother and child relationship and turn it into emotional abuse, something that's challenging as I've never been in that situation before. I hope that I can do it justice and make it more multi-faceted, and not so much "good vs. evil." He also goes through a parental loss — the loss of everything that he knew about his mother was a lie.

The worldbuilding stems from my love of all things nerdy; anime and video games. The continent of Philuca is vast, ranging from plains to mountaintops and southern, island-like regions. The world when first picturing in my head was vague, completely blank like a canvas. To help myself visualize it, I drew a very crude map from a geography prompt given to me in Alternate Worlds. I had to sit and wonder, where would a carefree girl like Noel, and a reserved prince like Andreas live? Andreas lives at the top of Galle's Peak, named after the god of time in this world. The castle looks more like a fortress, heavily guarded and blocked

by many mountains. It is frightening and far from the rest of the world, much like Andreas. He's naïve and small, even though he could have everything he wants. Meanwhile, Noel's estate is in the southern region called Luceo, where the tropical climate brightens everything around. It's free and inviting, much like Noel's character at a surface value. It made me reflect on how these areas that these two characters live in also shape their character, it's not just something in the background. Noel's struggle to find her father's killer is uphill and treacherous, like a mountain, and Andreas' own goal to become free and less attached to his mother.

Light of Vengeance is my passion project, one that I intend to publish in the future. It is a very vulnerable work, and although readers who don't know me won't really pick up as to how or why it is. I want readers to know that with anger and loss, hope can come out of that. It's cliché, but when you're really at your lowest, the only place that you can go is up. Both Noel and Andreas react in different ways — whereas Noel has a support system and learns how to manage her anger, Andreas is rather multi-faceted. He's someone who can receive help, but he doesn't necessarily want it. I'm also very interested in feminine rage, something that we seldom see in characters of color. So having Noel be an example of that is something I want to write with the utmost care. My ultimate goal for this novel is to allow readers to understand that healing isn't linear, and that you don't have to do everything alone.

Chapter I

Noel

Noel Aldan knelt in her estate's temple, as the statue of the progenitor goddess, the Divine Mother—which loomed over her, clad in a hooded robe, brandishing a staff in her hands. She stood tall, eight feet tall, and her gaze was focused. At her feet, an offering of grain, sugarcane, and mulled wine. The temple's stained-glass windows were illuminated in the morning sunshine, dazzling, colorful light cast onto the white marble statue. Noel clasped her hands together, shut her eyes, and recited her prayer.

“O Divine Mother, may you bless the realm with your grace and wisdom, may you wash away the sins of man. Bless us with your strength and love, for mankind sacrifices all for you. May your light shine forevermore.” This was the formal prayer that she'd uttered daily for years in gratitude to the goddess for her very existence. Yet it didn't feel genuine anymore, just something that she compelled to say. Scowling, Noel pushed forward, conversing with the statue of the Divine Mother as if it could hear. “Tomorrow is Holy Mother Day. Your followers from all over the continent will be here, and the royal family to boot, treating Papa and me like if we were a spectacle. Every year we go through this mockery with all eyes on me.”

The Aldan family came from a long line of sages, able to cast the purest form of magic: light. They were descendants of the progenitor goddess, looked upon by the people as her vessels and leaders of the continent of Philuca's religion. Tomorrow is Holy Mother Day, the day when the goddess made the world and mankind, and Noel's family estate will be filled with people from all walks of life, from the Veritas Plains in the east, the treacherous hills of Galle's Peak, and the Coastlands, celebrating with dancing, singing, and

feasting. It would be a joyous occasion, if only Noel could cast light magic, which, at the age of twenty, she still could not, though she could feel it coursing through her veins, especially stronger so close to the holiday.

Besides her parents and a select few, no one knew of this secret, carefully protected these past fifteen years, as those with magic in their blood usually cast at the age of five. If the public found out, then her family's reputation as sages would be questioned. It was stressful, but it was her duty. Magic lineage was known for skipping generations, but never for light magic. If descendants of the goddess could not cast the purest form of magic, who is to say that the Divine Mother even existed? Their religion was the backbone of their society, on which the monarchy relied, a careful alliance between the Sages and the royals that was strengthened from the time of her father's boyhood.

Deep down, she knew that it was foolish to talk as if the Divine Mother could respond or react. But there was no one to whom she could express this anger, no one that would understand. Noel completed her prayer and stood, still staring at the statue. It was everything she wanted to be but also everything that she hated. She felt sheepish before it, almost sinful for expressing how she truly felt. Mumbling a small word of forgiveness, she bowed quickly and then left the temple and made her way to the main hall.

Preparations for the holiday were already in full swing. Servants were clearing out furniture from the reception hall while others cleaned quickly. The aroma of food and spices wafted in the air. Noel paid little mind to it all, as the yearly chaos of holiday prep being something that she had become used to, and it felt rather therapeutic. She knew that she needed to begin spiritually cleansing herself for the holiday, but it was too much of a hassle. Humming to herself, she wondered how she'd go about the rest of her day, away from her parents' eyes.

"Your father sent word for you," a voice called out. "He's in the council room."

Noel turned around to look for the speaker only to find her bodyguard, Kallian, leaning against a wall with his arms crossed. His tall physique, white hair, and glaive in hand were easy to spot, and he gave Noel a small smile as he approached her.

“You’re everywhere, aren’t you?”

“It’s my job. I almost lost you for a second, you slipped right past me.”

The two walked in tandem to the council room, and Noel felt a pit in her stomach. She knew that her father had a warning or some lecture about tomorrow, so as not to arouse suspicion, yet a small part of her wished it was something else. They reached the large, wooden door and Noel held the knob, hesitating. “Did my father tell you what he wanted?” she asked Kallian.

He shook his head. Sighing, Noel opened the door and entered. The council room always made her feel as though she were suffocating. Placed on the dais were three chairs, with the one in the center being the tallest. It was where her father, Gartra, was seated. He’d discarded his typical white robes for the more casual black tunic and trousers, a rare sight. To his left and right were his advisors and confidants, Lumen and Celeste. The three of them conducted any affairs pertaining to the religion, with advisors in-training going through strict mental, physical, and spiritual training at the head temple in order to be at equal standing with a Sage. Even though they did not possess light magic, advisors were valuable within the religion, practicing the goddess’ teachings and able to take on the role of Great Sage as a last resort if something were to befall them.

“Greetings, Noel,” Celeste gave her a small smile. “The council has been waiting for you.”

Noel returned her a smile in kind. Celeste was the more guarded of her father’s advisors, formal and precise. She wore an emerald robe adorned with a golden head chain, her strawberry blonde perfectly coiffed and in a long, singular braid.

Lumen chimed in. “As you know, tomorrow is Holy Mother Day. We were discussing how to go about your predicament.” If it were any other person, Noel would’ve scoffed. Unlike Celeste, Lumen was brusque and cynical, and with whom Noel had argued often, and yet he had her father’s respect. He wore a dark blue robe and glasses, his black hair slicked back wildly.

“What do you propose?” Noel asked.

“That you go about the Dance of Creation alone.” Her father spoke up. He drummed his fingers along the armchair. Noel bit her lip, realizing that his decision wasn’t easy and left him restless as that was one of her father’s nervous tics.

The Dance of Creation was considered a rite of passage for a young sage. Once they turned eighteen, they must perform it alone, the most important ritual on Holy Mother Day. The intricate steps showcasing the story of how the goddess created the world through the flourish of a sage’s powerful magic. At twenty, Noel was still performing with her father; two years of excuses had piled up. If Noel didn’t prove herself a true sage soon, suspicion would spread among the acolytes.

“But what about the end?” Noel asked. “You know that I can’t...”

“I will cast for you, Starlight,” her father interrupted. “All you need to do is perform without me.”

Noel gritted her teeth. Her wants and needs didn’t matter as long as she was able to cast magic. She’d be up there alone, with so many people staring, expecting her to be and do something she wasn’t capable of doing. Taking credit for something that wasn’t hers. Time and time again her father had told her that if her secret was revealed, people would lose faith, unable to believe that the goddess would have a defect in her line.

When Celeste spoke, her voice was reassuring. “We know that it sounds frustrating, but this is the best course of action for you. This decision did not come lightly.”

“If it is the best course of action, why do you have these meetings without me?” Noel spat. “I’m not a child, I deserve to be in a conversation that pertains to me. I’m just as important as any of you.”

“It is because of your temperament that we must have these conversations without you,” Lumen condescended. “You let your emotions cloud your judgment and refuse to listen. When you are older, you will learn to make wise decisions.”

“Maybe if the three of you wouldn’t make decisions behind my back, I wouldn’t have such a temper.”

“Enough,” Gartra raised a hand, silencing the two of them. He turned to his advisors. “I’d like to have a word with my daughter.”

Celeste and Lumen nodded, rose, then quickly departed. Noel rolled her eyes. So much respect for her father, but so little for her. She never got along with them—Celeste was more tolerable than Lumen—though she knew that in time, they would become her advisors, until the head temple selected new ones.

“Sit,” her father said once the door shut behind them, patting the chair beside him.

She looked at her father, taking in the sight of him: the area near his eyelids were creased, revealing crow’s feet, and there were a handful of grays in his curly black hair, as well as his beard. The dark circles under his eyes grew, for he seemed gaunt and tired. She knew that the two of them weren’t getting any younger, and yet each time she had truly stared at her father, it made her feel remorseful about the fact that she couldn’t cast magic.

“I know that doing this every year is difficult for you,” Gartra sighed deeply. “But know that everything I do is to protect you.”

Noel bit her lip, contemplating her father’s words. Every year the two of them had this conversation, and she pushed her feelings aside for her father, for everyone else. It was because of her that the Council and

her mother worked tirelessly and she should be grateful for their help. Yet a small part of her felt so angry. Angry for having to hide who she was, angry for the Acolytes picking and choosing which parts of her to admire. She felt utterly hopeless.

“You look upset. You can speak freely to me, you know.” Her father stared at her and rested his chin in his hand.

“I’m tired, Papa. I’m so tired,” Noel pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’m grateful to you, truly, but...why can’t we just tell everyone that I can’t cast? We’ve been doing this since I was a toddler.”

“We cannot. If word got out, the entire continent would break out into chaos.”

Noel rolled her eyes. “It can’t be that bad, there have to be some people who don’t lose faith. If we just—”

Gartra raised a hand, interrupting her. “Our entire life’s work, my father’s, our ancestors, will all be for naught. You may take this religion lightly, but I do not. Our reputation and influence throughout the continent and with the royal family will be questioned.”

“You all act as if I am Null, masquerading to be a Sage. I have light magic, you know that,” she pointed at her father, her temper rising. “Any minor injuries, my body heals rapidly, just like yours. That’s proof enough.”

“That’s not what the people want, Noel. What they want is what the Divine Mother has given all of mankind — light,” he opened his palm, a small orb of light emerged. “This is what you must strive for, and if you cannot, then I will do it for you.”

She wanted to shove his hand away. “It does no one any good. We can’t do this forever, and I can’t hold onto all of this pressure. If you just stopped being a coward—”

“Enough, Noel!” her father’s voice echoed in the room. “Tomorrow, I will cast for you. That is final.”

Noel’s eyes widened and she felt her heart sink. She had never heard her father raise his voice before. It felt strange and terrifyingly new. She slowly stood and stepped off the dais. If this is how he wanted things to go, so be it.

She gave her father a small bow. “As you wish.”

Her father strained to say something, anything, but nothing emerged. Noel turned to leave, tears pricking at her eyes. He acted as if he cared, but if he did, why would he put so much pressure on her? She opened the door, and there in the hallway stood Lumen, Celeste, and Kallian, their faces in shock. Seething to herself, Noel pushed past, not meeting any of their eyes. But Kallian followed her, keeping a few steps behind and waiting to say something. The last thing she wanted was his pity. She made her way past the main floor and upstairs to where her bedchambers were. Sighing, she stood still, desperately trying to hold her tears in — the last thing she wanted was for him to see her cry.

Unable to face him, she said, “You are dismissed until I call for you,” her voice barely above a whisper.

“...Understood.”

Noel knew that she had hurt him, the hesitation in his voice was clear. But she didn’t care. She didn’t watch as he left, afraid for him to see her like this. Constantly relying on him when she was at a low point made her feel as though she was a child. Once he was out of earshot, she entered into her bedchambers and shut the door behind her. She leaned against the door, then slowly slid to the floor, and sat and hugged her knees. It was foolish to think that expressing her true thoughts would have her father change anything. Just for one night she wanted to be free from her burden. It was silly to think that it would be that easy. But she

knew it wasn't just one night. It was foolish to think that it would ever go away. It just kept piling up — the yearly pilgrimage to the Head Temple, the monthly sermons, Acolyte visitors who have traveled so far in order to receive a blessing from her and her father, ordaining funerals, it never ended. Constantly performing, being the picture-perfect Sage. Would she have to rely on her father for the rest of her life?

Anger, sadness, and guilt flooded her heart and soul. She hated herself for being so defective. Surely this was a cruel punishment from the Divine Mother for something her ancestors did. It was the only way to justify it. She groaned as scenarios of what could happen tomorrow played in her head. One mistake and it would all fall apart. She silently prayed, hoping that the goddess would show mercy on her during the festivities.

Chapter II

Noel

The estate was abuzz once more as the final preparations for Holy Mother Day were completed. Noel was already dressed in her ceremonial garb, a hooded white robe with red seams. It was breathable and easy to move around in, something she was grateful for due to the hot climate and the fact that she'd be performing tonight. Holding a spare robe, she made her way to the temple for her morning offering, chewing and sucking on a piece of sugarcane as she went, something small to hold her over as the estate's kitchen was practically barred from entry due to all the foods being prepared today. Kallian was not beside her and it felt strange. Her parents had notified her that his duties would start later today, and that they had something to discuss privately with him. Noel knew it had something to do with her, a conversation behind her back once more. Yet she complied, not wanting to face her father's anger like yesterday.

She stood at the washbasin in front of the temple and slipped her sandals off and washed her feet. Opening the door and shutting it behind her, she made her way to the statue of the Divine Mother. Even though it was marble, sometimes it looked as if she could come to life, especially today. Noel set the robe down and bowed, feelings of shame and insecurity loomed over her. If she was what everyone wanted her to be, there would be no need for her father to be stressed. She would be powerful and confident, every part a Sage, proud to be her father's successor. Her ears perked as she heard footsteps enter the temple, and she quickly walked behind a column, not wanting to be seen.

"O Divine Mother, may you bless my daughter, your servant Noel, on this day. Tear my flesh asunder if you must, but I beg of you, help her."

Her breath hilted as she heard her father's prayer. It was considered highly disrespectful to listen to the private words of one praying, but Noel couldn't help but listen. She had always thought that his prayers

were selfless, for the betterment of those who were suffering. Never in her wildest dreams did she think that he would pray—almost beg—to be able to access her magic. A small part of her felt so ignorant, why did it take so long for her to see that her lack of magic affected him, too?

“Noel has worked for this moment her whole life,” Gartra continued. “I know not why you neglect her, but please, try to reach her.”

Twenty years of pleading to a goddess and it got him nowhere. It left him constantly hoping for a day that would never arrive, a defective daughter, and a body that was beginning to slow down. She watched as her father finished his prayers, groaning as he stood due to the stress on his knees. How long before he couldn't kneel at all, Noel wondered. Would he still pray for a pipe dream? Noel knew that self-pity did more harm than good, but at times, wallowing in her misery was all she knew. It was their fault and the goddess' that she was like this, so why did she need anyone's approval? And even if she did somehow activate her magic, would it be something that she wanted for herself, or just to please everyone else? Her father turned and she yelped as they made eye contact. Noel raised her hands in the air as if surrendering.

“I didn't mean to eavesdrop, I promise.”

Gartra chuckled. “I felt your presence a long time ago, I knew that you were there the entire time.”

“Is that because you have magic?” Noel asked, curiosity edging her voice.

“No, it's because I'm your father.” He held his arms out for an embrace. “Come, Starlight.”

She made her way towards him and into his arms. Her father hummed as he hugged her, stroking Noel's curls as he rested his chin on the top of her head. Hugging him so tightly reminded him of when she was a child, bright-eyed and so curious about everything. How she would follow him around constantly, hoping that she could become a powerful Sage just like him. He and her mother had always made time to

spend with her, with the three of them sleeping together every night. It was a simpler time, then, when all she had to worry about was being a child.

“I’m sorry about yesterday.” Gartra loosened the embrace and stared at her. “It was unfair of me to raise my voice at you.”

Noel blinked. The two of them have had their arguments, but it never ended with an apology. It always ended with the two of them never addressing it and moving on. The way her father asked for forgiveness was usually with gift-giving or acts of service — surprising Noel with her favorite dessert after dinner, or with Noel offering to get up earlier in order to provide the statue with dawn offerings. It felt strange to receive an apology so openly.

Gartra let go of her. “I had to think about it from your perspective. There has never been anyone like you. I’ve told you the story of your birth numerous times — when I held you for the first time, you were cascaded in such beautiful light magic, that you created,” He smiled fondly at the memory. “And even if you were able to cast magic now, it wouldn’t change how much love I have for you.”

Her heart fluttered at her father’s declaration. All those years of thinking that she wasn’t good enough, the constant self-loathing. Why did he wait so long to tell her how he truly felt? A part of her felt as though it was too late.

“You are to be my successor, whenever that time comes,” Gartra held her shoulders and smiled. “It will be a difficult journey, but know that even when I am gone, I will still help you. You’re extraordinary.”

“Thank you, Papa.”

She sniffled as her father laughed and hugged her once more. He planted a kiss on her forehead and Noel smiled, yet she felt selfish. Here her father was, expressing her love for her, and all she could think about

was the fact that she wished this conversation had happened sooner. She felt ashamed, wanting to push these feelings down. Her father cared and understood, and that was what was most important.

“Pardon the interruption,” Noel’s mother, Terra, knocked on the temple’s doorway, “but the Molinaro family has just arrived.”

“Yes, of course,” Gartra led Noel to her mother. “Shall we go together?”

The two women nodded, and followed suit. Terra’s locs were tied back into a ponytail, adorned with gold hair pieces. She held Noel’s hand and the two followed Gartra, making their way through the courtyard. Noel squinted as the sun hit her, and she wondered how the royal family would perceive her. It had been a decade or so since she had seen them, and memories resurfaced of the last time she had seen Prince Andreas. She remembered how painfully shy she was, crying when he pulled her away from the adults and took her to the gardens. It was out of fear of being alone with someone of the opposite sex, but she was such a blubbering mess that she couldn’t explain it, and still now she grimaced with embarrassment at the memory. A servant opened the front doors of the estate. Noel and her family stepped out as the carriage slowed to a halt before them.

The coachman yielded the horses’ reins. The carriage completely encased in golden adornments, and the royal family’s coat of arms of a Pegasus and a king wielding a sword beside it decorated the carriage door. The footman stepped down from the carriage and curtsied to Noel and her family before announcing the royal family of Philuca: King Ymir, Queen Elena, Prince Andreas and Princess Wren.

He opened the carriage door, and King Ymir stepped out first, wearing a silk red tunic and breeches, with a heavy surcoat on the top. The surcoat depicted the royal emblem and had belts and jewels of gold and other gemstones, radiating in the strong sunlight. At his waist laid a sword of state, and a few daggers.

Adorning his intricate crown on his head, his icy blue eyes darted towards Noel, and then her father. His gaze softened at the sight of his old friend, bearing a boyish grin.

“Gartra, my brother,” King Ymir’s voice boomed into a hearty chuckle. “It’s been so long, friend.”

King Ymir extended his arms for an embrace, and Noel watched her father firmly hug him.

“It’s been over a decade since I saw you last,” Gartra teased. “Some brother you are.”

Ymir’s large hand grasped at Gartra’s shoulder. Noel wondered if the two men felt thirty odd years younger, growing from boys to men in a fortnight. Her father’s tales of growing up in the palace often made her feel jealous, for she longed to have a sibling when she was younger. Her father looked back on his time in the palace fondly, being the king’s exact equal in every way. Gartra was his advisor and commandeered the religious side of the kingdom, while Ymir was trained to be king. She often asked him out of curiosity why did he move to the other side of the kingdom, and if Noel had grown up in the palace, would she have that sort of relationship with Prince Andreas? Yet her father would avoid answering her, leaving her dissatisfied.

“How do you do, Great Sage Aldan?” The queen swiftly made her way to Ymir’s side, her long, black hair reaching her waist, flowing as if it were a cape. The king and queen wore matching red outfits, with the queen wearing a long, red dress that reached her ankles, accompanied by a white shawl, topped off with her crown. It was modest enough for the holiday, and Noel admired her for trying.

“Come now, darling,” King Ymir chuckled. “There’s no need for formalities around Gartra, you know that.”

Queen Elena offered her hand to Gartra to shake. “It’s been a while.”

“That it has.” Gartra took her hand and shook.

The two locked eyes, and Noel felt as though the world stopped around them. Both of them had their lips pursed, their expressions unreadable. She could see a scowl beginning to form across her father’s

brow and she wondered why. Glancing over at her mother, she noticed that she was preoccupied with greeting Ymir. Elena rolled her eyes.

“Are you going to let go, or am I going to have to pry my hand off?” She drawled.

“Pardon,” Gartra murmured as he let go. “I just noticed that you weren’t wearing your usual gloves.”

Elena hummed and gave him no response as she turned to follow her husband. Noel made a mental note to ask her father about his relationship with the queen, and why did it feel so hostile.

When Prince Andreas and Princess Wren finally emerged from the carriage, Noel was pulled from her thoughts. She hadn’t seen the prince since the two of them were children, and it felt rather odd to see how much he had grown. He was taller, his chubby boyish face had slimmed into a one with a regal-looking and angular jaw. He had his father’s blonde hair and blue-green eyes, but they were a bit softer, like his mother’s. He adorned a smaller crown that matched his father’s, with a navy tunic and black trousers. He looked like he was leaving for a hunting trip rather than a prince. Princess Wren was the spitting image of her father, with his eye and nose shape, but had her mother’s gray eyes and long, black hair. She was Noel’s exact height and build, much to her surprise.

“Noel Aldan,” Prince Andreas said, grinning. “We haven’t seen each other since we were still children.”

“It’s good to see you, Prince Andreas,” Noel smiled.

“Likewise. Like our fathers, there’s no need to use formalities with one another,” He reached over and wrapped his arms around her, embracing her in a hug.

It was a firm embrace, not soft like her father’s or Kallian’s. It almost knocked the wind out of her. She slowly raised her arms and embraced him back, hoping it’d end quickly. Something about his hug

unnerved her. Andreas stepped away from the embrace, and she fidgeted, rocking back and forth on the heels of her feet.

“My apologies, did I do something wrong?” Prince Andreas asked.

Noel shook her head. “No, it’s just that I’m not—”

“She’s the second most important figure in a religion separated by gender, and you just hugged her,” Princess Wren giggled as she made her way to Andreas’ side, offering Noel’s hand to shake. “It’s no wonder she’s shaking like a leaf.”

Andreas’ face flushed. “Forgive me if that was too forward.”

“Let us not dwell on trivialities,” Noel’s lips pursed into an awkward smile as she shook Wren’s hand. Gods, she wanted to drop this discussion altogether. “Let me present the two of you with a tour of the estate.”

“A tour?” Princess Wren squealed and roughly linked her arm with Noel’s. “Lead the way.”

Noel was subsequently dragged by her into the estate, as Andreas followed close behind. Wren walked around in awe, but quickly commented on how modest all the decor was. Noel rolled her eyes and was quick to realize that the young princess was spoiled rotten. Noel stopped in the grand hall, in front of the portrait of the Divine Mother. The progenitor goddess wore a blank expression as she commanded light to come forth from her hands. She stood proud and tall, wearing a robe exactly like Noel’s. In the background of the picture there were depictions of bloodshed and famine. She was the light amongst men, able to bring them out of their suffering.

“Is there anything interesting to do around her?” Princess Wren asked as she stared at the portrait, bored. “If you ever get tired of all this religious nonsense, you can head to our castle to spend time with me and my court.”

“Don’t do it, Noel,” Prince Andreas approached them and ruffled his sister’s hair. “This one is a horrible influence.”

Wren pouted and Noel laughed, the banter between siblings amusing her. When she was younger, she had begged her parents for a sibling, but to no avail. It wasn’t until Kallian came into her life that she had some type of companionship, but she still longed for an actual sibling. She couldn’t compare her relationship with him to that, it was naturally different.

“Would you like to pray with me?” Noel offered. It was the only thing that she could have offered that didn’t take up too much time. “It’s relaxing.”

“I’ll pass.” Wren removed herself from Noel’s side and gave her a mock salute as she found a servant and asked where her bedchambers would be. She took off once more, boundless energy pouring about. Noel could commend the girl for her brutal honesty.

Yet that left Noel alone with Prince Andreas. She watched as he stared intently at the portrait of the Divine Mother. She didn’t know what to say or do, overthinking every way to approach this situation. Would it be easier if Kallian were here? She doubted it, considering his standing. Shaking her head, she realized that she needed to deal with this on her own. She had to stop acting like an innocent schoolgirl. There would always be scenarios in which she needed to deal with a man, and she could trust Andreas. He was quiet with a regal air about him, a bit more reserved since the last time she had seen him. It was just catching up with an old friend, nothing more.

“It’s a lovely portrait,” Andreas smiled sheepishly. “The Divine Mother was a selfless woman, and here I am, standing in the presence of one of her descendants. Thank you for having me, Noel. This is an honor.”

“Thank you.” Noel said. Her words felt heavy. If only he knew half of what she went through.

The two walked side by side in silence as they made their way to the temple. She had dealt with the average Acolyte wanting to engage in prayer, but never someone who was of equal standing as her, or who knew so little of the religion. Noel stopped as they reached the temple doors and turned to Andreas.

“No shoes or headdress. And wash your feet before entering.” She pointed to the basin next to the temple doors.

She watched as Andreas gently took off his crown, and some wisps of his blonde hair began to fall into place. He looked more like a young man now and less like a prince. It made her wonder if he also felt the weight of his place at times. A man like him had no reason to be insecure, what with his power, wealth, and Seer magic. With Andreas, surely there were no secrets. Noel liked that about him, but she was also envious. The world did not watch the monarchy so closely, they lived out of the public eye. What she could give to live a life so carefree. He made his way towards Noel but was stopped, as Gatra’s footsteps came rushing from the corridor, her mother close behind.

“Gatra, compose yourself,” Terra cried out.

Ignoring her, Garta roughly grabbed Andreas’ wrist, and the prince cried out in pain. Royal sentries were immediately pointing their swords towards him, ready to strike and Noel flinched. She hadn’t noticed that they lurked in the shadows this entire time. It made her feel uneasy.

“What is the meaning of this?” Andreas cried out.

“Papa, let go of him!” Noel rushed over to where the two men stood, and tried to pull at her father’s hand. His grip was deathly tight. “What has gotten into you?”

“Unhand him,” a royal sentry declared.

Noel's eyes widened, she glanced over to Andreas, who looked just as shocked as she was. She had never seen her father look like this, so bewildered and filled with bloodlust. A lump formed in her throat as she was afraid of what would happen.

"Lower your weapons." Ymir's voice and footsteps echoed throughout the hallway as he made his way towards Gartra, Queen Elena standing behind him. The sentries did as they were told, albeit reluctantly. "I trust Gartra's judgment."

The same sentry spoke up again. "But Your Majesty." The king scowled and the sentry stopped talking and bowed his head.

Gartra let go of Andreas roughly, staring at the prince as he stumbled. "I thought I detected..." he stared wildly at the king and queen, trailing off. "I don't understand. You two are both Null, so why am I sensing it?"

"Sensing what?" Elena asked.

"Nothing," Gartra mumbled, cursing to himself. "Forget I did anything. Forgive me, Andreas."

King Ymir scowled at Gartra's ambiguity. "You cannot accost my son and then state no reason. Speak freely."

"Dark magic," Gartra said. "My body and spirit knows, my magic calls out to me whenever there is a threat of dark magic. It is my duty as a vessel of the goddess to exterminate it without hesitation."

Silence fell over everyone in the room. Noel's eyes widened in horror as she stared at her father. She knew that Sages could detect dark magic, even the most miniscule drop of it. Her father had taught her to always be wary of dark magic, and that it was her duty to expel it at all costs, no matter the consequences.

"How *dare* you accuse my son of having dark magic?" Queen Elena cried out. "That is slander, Great Sage. Where would it even come from?"

“We all know that magic can skip generations,” Gartra pointed a finger accusingly at Elena. “Do not play coy. Seers your children may be through Ymir’s line, but you...”

“My entire family is Null, the records state that.” The queen’s voice was haughty.

“Enough,” King Ymir said as he turned to Gartra. “If you detected it, why didn’t Noel say anything?”

Noel bit her lip. Suddenly, all eyes fell on her. She glanced over at Prince Andreas who fidgeted, with sweat glistening at the top of his brow. From one accusation to another, she suddenly felt small and helpless. She had to say something, anything. Or else the questions would continue. She opened her mouth to speak, yet her mother stepped forward.

“Noel, go inside the temple,” Gartra turned to her. “This conversation does not involve you.”

“But it involves you accusing my son, does it not?” Elena cried out. “Stay and answer the question. I command it.”

Noel flinched, yet she stood her ground and followed her father’s orders, entering the temple. She faintly heard her mother’s voice as she shut the door.

“My daughter’s magic is latent in that regard. She’s not as powerful as Gartra.” And while that accusation was one that should not be taken lightly, we apologize.”

She felt a pain in her chest as she stood in the temple, so many questions unanswered. She trusted her father’s judgment, for her lack of magic made her unable to detect what he felt. Yet the question of whether Prince Andreas actually had dark magic whirled in her mind. It meant that the very structure of the monarchy could collapse if word got out. She saw how her father glanced over at Elena, glaring at her. The bloodlust was in his eyes once more, and it sent a chill through her spine. Noel had hoped that whatever her father detected wasn’t true.

Noel heard vibrant chatter from beyond the front doors of the estate. She, Kallian, her parents, and the royal family stood at the top of the steps of the estate, facing the entrance. The air between both families was still tense as only a few hours had passed between them. Noel didn't know where the royal family ran off to after that, for she was too ashamed to face them. She had felt Andreas staring at her from time to time as they waited, yet he would quickly look away once she made eye contact with him. Bringing her attention back to the front doors, Noel let out a small sigh. Once the doors opened, the Acolytes would flood in, singing their praises about who is in attendance, and she'd have to play her role. She wondered how Andreas and Wren would react to all the attention, as they don't participate in events such as these.

The clock struck state the hour, indicating the start of the evening's festivities. The servants opened the doors through which entered the Acolytes in a single-file line. They wore robes of various colors, ranging from the purest of white to imitate the Aldans, or from the jarring shade of pink. People from all walks of life gathered—the sick, the elderly, young children—to pay their respects. Holy Mother Day indicated the start of a new year, and being in the presence of the Sages as well as the royal family led them to believe that good fortune was among them. The Acolytes gasped at the sight of both families and bowed, kneeling to the floor. It had been so long since the royal family attended Holy Mother Day, and it was a rare sight for the monarchs to be out of the palace in the first place. Noel knew that they attended Tithe Day, as well as other holidays, but it was less in comparison to so many public events she and her father attended in a year. To the public, the Sages were humble and grounded, and while they were worshipped, they weren't so out of reach in comparison to the royal family.

“Gods, bless us,” one Acolyte exclaimed. “Gods bless us for presenting us with both Sages and the royal family.”

Cheers, wails, and sobs elicited from the crowd, and Noel smiled. From the corner of her eye, she saw that Prince Andreas and Princess Wren fidgeted about. It seemed all too overwhelming for them, and she couldn't help but wonder if she grew up alongside them, would they be used to the public, or would she be closed off, just like them?

“We thank you for making such long journeys to be here.” Her father's voice commanded the room, as all eyes were on him. To Noel, he looked more like a king than Ymir did. “Tonight, we have two special announcements. My daughter, Noel, will perform the Dance of Creation alone. And as you have all noticed, Their Majesties King Ymir and Queen Elena, as well as their children Prince Andreas and Princess Wren, have blessed us with their presence.”

“What a momentous occasion,” one Acolyte cried out. “The goddess has blessed us with good fortune to ring in the new year.”

“The night will begin with the Dance of Creation, followed by a feast and dancing throughout the night. Please, follow us.”

Noel and the others made their way into the reception room, beautifully decorated for the holiday. Numerous tables lined with white tablecloth with a golden trim, golden carts with food and drink stood idly by, a chef double-checking if everything was correct. Flowers hung around the walls, and at the end of the room lay a large wood platform with drums. That would be Noel's stage for her performance. The chatter of the Acolytes followed closely behind as they made their way to the reception room, taking their seats. The royal family sat at the largest table in front of the platform, as they would be sharing with Noel's family.

Her father turned and addressed the crowd. “A moment, please, as we prepare Noel.”

Noel, her parents, and Kallian, made their way backstage, huddling behind the curtains. Lumen and Celeste were already there waiting, and Celeste paced back and forth, nerves overtaking her. Terra patted

Celeste's shoulder to calm her down, and Celeste bit at her nails. Noel had never seen her in a state that wasn't calm and composed, so this unnerved her.

"Don't mess this up, kid," Lumen snorted. "Or Celeste will go into shock."

Kallian rolled his eyes and gave Noel a gentle nudge. "You'll do great out there. You have every year."

"Kallian's right," her mother cooed. "You can perform this flawlessly. And we'll be right here watching. Just pretend that we're on stage with you."

"It's time, Starlight," Gartra said. "Remember that I will be right with you."

Noel nodded and slipped her sandals off. Lumen and Celeste lifted the curtains and Noel looked back before making her way to the stage, waving to her family and loved ones. Her mother smiled and Noel made her way to the center of the stage and exhaled. All eyes were on her as the Acolytes' chatter came to a halt, and they waited with baited breath. She nodded to the drummers and exhaled.

The drums began, and she kept her eyes on her feet. Slow and steady she began. She whirled her arms above her, her breath trembling as she fought with herself to avoid the looks of the crowd, to avoid her father's masterful gaze, her mother's disapproval. Foot forward. Back. She twirled, watching the hem of her robe spin along with her. The drums grew louder and Noel spun faster and faster, chanting along the ancient language with the crowd about how the continent came to be. The Divine Mother split her vices in order to make herself into a perfect being, and thus her vices became other deities. The chorus began, a slower, steadier progression as Noel slowed, her movements fluid and precise. She was the goddess, creating the world and mankind out of compassion, wanting to nurture and love for eternity. Noel suddenly stopped, and stood perfectly still and straight at the center, and the drums crescendo resumed, back to a slow and rhythmic pounding.

She slowly raised her arms above her head and out emerged a glittering ball of light, bright and warm like a star. The glitz of light flew up and up, until it dispersed above the ceiling, shimmering the entire room in bright light. The acolytes gasped and applauded the display of magic, and she sheepishly curtsied, playing the part of a humble Sage. She glanced at her father, who had his hands already tucked away in his sleeves.

Gartra made his way back to Noel's side. It was only for tonight that she'd remain in his shadow. All she needed to do was make it past this one night and it'd all be over. But why? Why would she go through such lengths to please her father and the entire continent? Even though the Divine Mother's blood ran through her veins just like her father, the public wouldn't care about her. If they truly had zero doubts about the religion, they would care more about her heritage and the Aldan legacy, not about her lack of magic. Her father and the Council were wrong, no matter what they said. Noel clenched her fists hard, her nails digging into her palms. It was foolish to think that she could spend the rest of her life fooling everyone and hiding. She wanted to scream, to tell all the Acolytes, to tell the world that she could not cast. It would finally release her from this burden. Slowly lifting her hands, she exhaled, bracing herself to reveal it all.

She flinched in surprise as her father's large hand swiftly grasped at her wrist tightly. He loomed over her, his expression unreadable. With his other hand, he patted Noel's head. A warning and praise all in one, something that was already second nature to her. Gartra turned to face the crowd and smiled. "Now, we feast!"

Noel stepped off the platform with her father, and made her way to the table that she shared with the royal family. Ymir sat on one end of the table, and her father made his way to the other end. The most powerful men in the kingdom commandeering the entire room. Noel felt herself worry less, as attention would be focused more on them rather than her. Sitting to her father's left, and her mother sat to his right. Kallian stood nearby, watching for any signs of suspicious activity. She noticed that across from her, the seats

that Elena and Andreas were supposed to be in were empty. In the midst of all her concentration for dancing, she must have not noticed that they left. She turned to Wren who sat next to her.

“Where are your mother and brother?” She asked.

Wren waved a hand dismissively. “Mother is sickly, she had one of her fits.” The princess looked around and shrugged. “I’m assuming that Andreas went to look for her, he was just here for your dance.”

Noel nodded. There was so little that she knew about the royal family, and she had more and more questions. Her father seemed to distrust the queen, yet remained loyal to the king. And for all the reminiscing her father subjected to about growing up in the palace, she wondered why he father left, and to the other side of the kingdom, no less. Sighing to herself, she leaned back in her chair, not caring if it was improper. All she wanted was to eat, drink, and have a wonderful night, but some feeling she couldn’t quite place lingered in the air.

Servants arrived with individual platters of food, setting them down neatly on the placemats of the table. There were stations for people to serve themselves their own food, but it was customary that everyone’s first meal was served to them. Noel’s plate consisted of rice with shrimp and chickpeas in a creamy, curry-like sauce. She tried to restrain herself from eating, as Andreas and Elena had not yet returned. The aroma of food wafted in the air, and Noel grimaced. All she ate to curb her appetite today was a piece of sugarcane. She glanced over at Wren, who sneakily ate forkfuls of her own plate. Tapping her fingers on the table, Noel wondered when the queen and prince would return. She glanced over at the crowd of Acolytes who ate and drank heartily, yet one stood and walked over with something in his hands. His visage grew closer and Noel realized that the Acolyte was headed in her direction. He walked skittishly, glancing over his shoulder a few times as his hands tightly gripped what he held.

“Great Sage,” an Acolyte said sheepishly as he approached the table. “Pardon my forwardness but I present you a gift.”

The Acolyte’s hands trembled as he held a bottle of wine. He was lanky, wearing a dark blue robe that fit him poorly. His russet brown hair was shaggy and unkempt. His eyes darted around, unable to make contact. Noel watched as her father turned and smiled.

“Come now, lad,” Gartra stood from his chair and clasped a hand on the man’s back. “What’s your name?”

“Rowan,” he mumbled. “My family comes from a long line of winemakers, and it is an honor to present you with this gift.”

The man placed the bottle of wine into Gartra’s hands. It was a slender, clear bottle, the liquid a dark red. It sloshed around as the bottle was transferred to Gartra’s hand. Noel smiled, amused at how the Acolytes were so deferential to her father because of his status.

“Thank you, Rowan, I treasure this gift.”

The man bowed timidly, his robes sinking into him as his body lurched forward. He bit his lip, and bowed once more, scurrying away. Gartra sat back down and grinned. He set the bottle on the table and reached for his goblet.

“I would offer to share with the both of you, my loves,” he smirked at Noel and Terra. “But the Acolyte only offered this gift to the *Great Sage*.”

Noel rolled her eyes and she noticed her mother do the same. “I have my glass of palm wine here, so I’ll pass.”

Gartra chuckled as he poured himself a glass, eager to drink. The chairs to Ymir’s sides scraped along the floor, and Andreas and Elena sat in their respective chairs. Elena pushed back wisps of her hair, and

folded her hands neatly on her lap. Andreas looked pale, and Noel considered saying something, but chose not to.

“Oh thank the gods you’re here,” Wren said, covering her mouth with the back of her hand as tried to conceal her chewing. “We were all starving.”

“My apologies for being late,” Elena said. “I hope that your meals aren’t cold.”

Terra grabbed her wine glass and smiled. “What matters is what we’re all here now. A toast to the royal family and Aldan Sages for this lovely reunion.”

“Here, here!” They cheered and raised their glasses in the air.

The seven of them clinked their glasses together and drank. The bitter yet pleasant taste of palm wine did little to wash away her anxieties. Her father drank plentifully, letting loose for the holiday. She watched as he joked with the king about how he was missing out as no one offered him a quality wine, much to Ymir’s chagrin. Gartra raised his glass once more, downing the other half of the cup. The wine was so sweet that Noel caught a whiff of it once the glass was lifted, and she wondered how fermented and ancient the bottle really was.

Suddenly, her father coughed. It was small, in between laughs. Her mother chastised him for drinking so quickly. The coughs turned into an entire fit as he wheezed, unable to form words.

Noel turned to him. “Papa, what’s wrong?”

Gartra raised a hand, and Noel thought that he was choking. His coughs echoed, drowning out the music and chatter of the Acolytes until it was all that one heard.

“Oi, what happened?” Ymir asked.

Blood emerged from his mouth and the table gasped. The coughing grew harder and harder, and Gartra turned to Noel and wheezed, unable to speak. His hands reached for her and she trembled. Her

mother called for help, but it was too late. With one final cough, a giant blot of blood landed on Noel's robe and Gartra fell on his side, crashing into the table, clattering glass and utensils. The first to scream were her mother and Ymir, until it echoed from the entire banquet hall.

In a flash, Kallian swept Noel off the chair, his grip tight around her wrist. She noticed that in his other hand he wielded his glaive, ready to cut through anyone or anything. The crowd surged through the large oak wood doors and screams echoed throughout the entire reception room. Noel turned and watched as her mother was seized by Lumen and Celeste, sobbing towards her father's body. The royal family's sentries were armed, surrounding them in a circle. As they grew further and further away from them, Kallian's hand was what brought her back to what was in front of her.

"Don't look back," Kallian shouted. "Do you understand?"

Through the chaos of it all, Noel could not process the words. Her head was spinning, and the screams of the crowd grew louder, invading her ears. The emergency bell tolled, its slow and repeated rings made her body sway. She saw that the doors were pushed open and Acolytes flooded out. Kallian followed suit, shouting and pushing past. While the rest of the crowd turned towards the main entrance, Kallian led them to the staircase and up to the grand hallway on the second floor. They rushed past doors until Kallian suddenly stopped and opened one, locking it once they were both inside. Noel realized that this was his room.

He led her down gently on his bed. Noel stared blankly at her vestments, in a daze. Her father's blood caked the clothing, ranging from small splotches on her sleeves to a large amount on her midriff. The smell of blood invaded her nose, and she began to rub her hands at her sleeves, a futile attempt to remove it. His hands cupped at her face and his eyes darted around her body checking for any injuries. Once he was sure she had none, he sighed.

“We need to leave as soon as possible,” Kallian said as he paced around. “I’m not sure if we can leave with the crowd, but we need to get out of here by morning.”

“Leave?” Noel choked out. “Where?”

“The Firelands,” he answered. “It’ll be a long trip, but we’ll be safe there. We’ll be staying with my family.”

“What about...” she trailed off, distracted by her stained sleeves, frantically rubbing them, tears stinging her eyes. “Forgive me, this just won’t come off...”

Kallian knelt down and grasped her shoulders. “You need to rest, okay? Forget I said anything, we’ll talk about it in the morning.”

Ignoring him, she kept rubbing at her sleeves, groaning in frustration as the stain began to grow bigger. What would the Acolytes say if they saw her in such a state of disarray?

“It won’t come off, Kallian,” Noel cried. “Why won’t it come off? I have to talk to the Acolytes about Papa.”

He said nothing, gingerly holding her shoulders in place. He watched as her eyes gazed about frantically from her vestments and back to him.

Exasperated, Noel threw her hands into her lap. “Just burn it.”

Kallian’s brow furrowed. “What did you say?”

“I can’t appear like this. You can just burn it and I can retrieve another set.”

She began to untie the sash and shrugged the sleeves off her shoulders. Kallian’s eyes widened at the sight of her chest, and he reached over and placed his hands over hers.

“If you need help changing, I will call a servant for you,” Kallian said. “I will burn them if that is what you wish, but not now, and not in front of you.”

He slowly stood, watching her eyes for any sign of uncertainty. "I'll be right back, okay? I'm going to call for the physician."

The door shut and Noel sat in silence that was deafeningly loud. The drowning screams of the Acolytes, her father violently coughing up blood, her mother and the royal family being pulled away by sentries...it all played over and over in her mind. What would become of her now? Someone may have killed her father, but was she next? If she had magic, could she have healed him? Questions raced through her mind. It wouldn't have been like this if she wasn't so incompetent. Day in and day out she trained and prayed, and this is where it left her — with the goddess taking away her father.

Hands trembling, she began to shred her vestments, tearing up her sleeves, throwing the bloodied rags onto the floor. She pulled at the large bloodied spot on her midriff, using both hands to rip it open, exposing her skin to the air. Throwing it to the floor, she stamped her feet on the cloth and screamed. Why couldn't it have been her? Her whole life she prepared to uphold her father's legacy and those before him, and she had nothing to show for it. It was all a waste, and she was the one who remained.

She whimpered, staring at her midriff. There. That was where his blood had marked her very core. It was the last remains of her father, and she hated it. Slowly bringing her nails up, she dug them deeply into her skin, piercing into it. The pain was brief, but she managed. Clawing more and more, until her nails chipped and cracked against her skin. Small slits of blood dripped down, and tears trailed down Noel's cheeks. She brought her hands to her chest and pierced at it. Her hands were talons mercilessly striking at its prey. Her flesh was something that she needed to tear asunder.

The door whipped open and Kallian rushed to her side. His eyes widened at the sight of Noel curled up on the floor like a wounded animal as she mutilated herself.

Noel thrashed about on the floor. "Papa's dead. And it's all my fault!"

Kallian held her wrists firmly and glanced down at the large hole in Noel's vestments. He *tsked* as he saw her blood trail down her midriff and stared at her hands.

"Let go of me," she struggled in Kallian's grasp. "I'm ordering you."

His voice was stern. "I need to let the physician tend to you."

The physician stood before them, a small vial in one hand and the rest of his supplies in another.

Noel gasped in horror and she shook her head repeatedly.

"Kallian, can't you see? He's going to poison me! Remove him!"

"It's a sleep syrup, it'll allow you to rest."

The physician popped the vial open and handed it to Kallian. With his free hand, he held it over Noel's face.

"Trust me," Kallian said softly. "You have to trust me. You're hurt and we want to help you."

Noel trembled. She knew that Kallian would never hurt her, but she was afraid. Afraid that she would never wake up and leave her mother all alone, afraid that she would enjoy the lull of sleep so much that she would want to stay there forever and drift away, to see her father in her dreams. Still, she nodded, signaling for Kallian to give her the syrup. He let go of her wrists and tilted her chin upwards with his fingertips, pouring the liquid into her mouth. It was sickeningly sweet, and Noel immediately felt her body wanting to reject the medicine. She looked over to Kallian, who was saying something to the physician but she couldn't make it out. She felt warm and swayed, feeling the rough palm of Kallian's hand over hers. It was the last thing she felt before the abyss of sleep crept over her.

Chapter III

Noel

Noel waded into the ocean up to her waist. She giggled as she leaned back to float along the gentle current, the sun shining brightly as her dark skin glistened. The ocean was her second home as the estate was right along the coastline. Every year after Holy Mother Day her parents would spend the morning swimming, to wash away the stress of the holiday and to enter the new year with positivity. She floated and shut her eyes, letting the current take her. What would the year be like for her? It was full of so many questions, the unknown loomed over her. As she floated, a faint voice called out to her.

“Don’t go too far!” It was her mother, and Noel opened her mouth to respond, but her words failed her. She tried once more and her voice strained and cracked, but nothing coherent came out. Stopping her floating, she stood, and gasped. There was nothing surrounding her except the sea. The shore was out of sight, and the current suddenly picked up quickly, pushing and pulling her against the tide. As she fought to swim, her limbs felt as though they were on fire. She tried to call out for help while her head was afloat but the waves roared.

“Try to stay put,” her mother’s voice shouted from beyond. “Your father will help you.”

Struggling to stay afloat, kicking as much as her legs could, Noel groaned as salt water invaded her eyes, mouth and nose. Couldn’t her mother have just used her magic to lessen the current? She saw her father swimming, his powerful strokes and formation on his way to rescue her. Relief washed over her. Gartra inhaled and dove underwater, circling below Noel. She felt his hands wrap around her ankles and she cried out, unable to kick. Her father pulled at her roughly, dragging her down into the water.

Noel screamed as she plunged underwater, quickly covering her mouth so as to not lose her breath. She tried to kick at her father but his grip was too strong. With her free hand she tried to swat at him but she

could not reach. He dragged her farther and farther down, and she felt herself losing more and more air. Panic set in and Noel tried to swim with one hand, but she lacked the strength and grew disoriented. Her lungs felt tight and she went further down, the ocean water growing darker. The sun's rays were now a tiny speck of light above her.

Gartra looked up at her, wearing an oddly joyful expression on his face. Suddenly he coughed, and Noel wondered if the lack of air was getting to him and she could swim back up. The cough grew louder and larger still, and suddenly blood pooled rapidly out of his mouth and his eyes were dull, lifeless. Noel screamed in horror at her father's corpse as she fell further into the abyss of the sea below.

She woke to the sounds of her own screaming and instinctively reached for the dagger that she kept under her pillow, except it wasn't there. Blinking, she allowed her eyes to focus on her surroundings. She was in a bed, clothed in a plain white tunic and black trousers. Confusion set in, as Noel knew that these were not the clothes she had on last. Where was her robe? Her eyes darted wildly, the room was plainly decorated save for a few pictures on a vanity, and weaponry. A chair sat beside the bed. She was completely and utterly alone, and fear crept over her. Kallian. Where was he?

She stood, seething as a sharp pain shot at her chest and stomach. Lifting her tunic up, she saw that her entire torso was covered in bandages. What had happened to her? Shaking her head, she kept on. She needed to find Kallian. The door knob rattled and her eyes widened. She was unarmed, in a room she didn't recognize and someone—friend or foe—was trying to open the door. Shifting her feet and arms into a fighting stance, she made her hands into fists and exhaled. The door opened and the person made no sound. Noel glanced as the footsteps were soft and featherlike, and as the person made their way into the doorway, she saw their physique and hair. It was none other than Kallian, carrying a breakfast tray.

“You’re awake,” he said as he walked towards her, setting the tray on the nightstand. “How are you feeling?”

Noel dropped her guard and stood still as words failed her. She gasped as Kallian reached for her and pulled her small frame closer to his, embracing her tightly, knocking the wind out of her. Hands trembling, she hugged him back. “Kallian, you’re hurting me.” Her voice was muffled.

He let her go, examining her face for any concern. “Sorry, I was just so worried. Here, eat.” he gestured to his breakfast plate containing bread, water and various fruits. “You need your strength back.”

She raised her hands defensively. “Slow down. What happened? Where the hell are we?”

Kallian’s nose twitched. “We’re in my room. What’s the last thing that you remember?”

Noel strained, feeling a throbbing pain in her head. The feast played back in her mind, the nervous Acolyte offering wine and her declining. The toast, and her father... she fell to her knees and retched. Oh gods, her father.

Kallian knelt beside her and rubbed at her back. The bile was hot and it stung at her throat as she let it out. Her father was truly dead, the last few days with him just a giant misunderstanding. If she had magic, could she have helped him? Was there anything that she could’ve done other than watch him die?

“The Acolyte that did it,” Noel growled. “Where is he?”

“We took him in for questioning,” Kallian’s hand stopped. “He won’t talk, but we think that he did not act alone. Other Acolytes vouched that this behavior is out of character for him.”

“Make him talk! He killed my father, the Great Sage, and he still walks freely? Kallian, make him talk or I’ll do it—” she retched again, sobbing as it took over her.

“What you need to do is rest. You went through a lot. We all did.”

Noel wiped the back of her mouth and breathed heavily. She felt Kallian rise from behind her and return with a glass of water. She took it from him and drank needily, not realizing how hoarse and dry her throat had become. Her legs gave out as she tried to stand up and make her way back to the bed. Kallian's hand rested on the small of her back, keeping her upright.

"What's gotten into me?" she asked.

"Your body is still in shock," Kallian's free hand gingerly reached under one of Noel's arms and straightened her out. "You were out cold for two days. Even when asleep, you weren't resting properly. You kept screaming and thrashing."

The nightmare of her father's corpse dragging her down plagued her over and over, and Noel wondered if it would haunt her even when she was awake. She let Kallian support her weight as he led her back to the bed, walking slowly. One foot in front of the other. They made their way and Noel sat on the foot of the bed, with Kallian next to her. Mumbling a thank you to him, she hastily reached for the breakfast tray and grabbed at the bread and bit down. The bread was hard and somewhat stale, yet she still ate. The bread that she had grown up eating and smelling from the kitchens was fresh out of the hearth, hot and fluffy. It was warm and inviting. She wondered if even the cooks were in disarray at the loss of her father. Everything that reminded her of him had died as well.

"How's my mother?" Noel asked.

"She and the Holy Advisors have been working nonstop. Your father has already been cremated."

It was a good thing that he was cremated so quickly, Noel thought. Less time seeing him as that bloodied husk of a so-called man, and now seeing him free and back with the Divine Mother. Traditionally, Sages are cremated to prevent Druids from reanimating their corpses. It was a careful process, about three days were given to the Sage's loved ones in order to sort out funeral plans. Sages had a public funeral to allow

Acolytes and anyone from across the kingdom to pay their respects. But Noel figured with so many Acolytes witnessing her father's horrific death, no one wanted to attend. It left a foul taste in her mouth. Her father had spent so much time selflessly devoting himself to the Acolytes and family, upholding his religious duties, and yet, even his wife wanted his body cremated so quickly. Yet deep down, if she had to organize it, Noel knew that she would do the same thing. She couldn't bear to see his body in that state — even if he was embalmed, it would do little to help her forget. The more she dwelled on it, the more suffocating it became to stay anywhere.

Neatly folding a napkin onto the bread, Noel stood. Her legs were still wobbly, but she could make it on her own. She wrapped a thin blanket around her shoulders as Kallian raised an eyebrow.

“Where are you going?”

“I need some air,” Noel turned away. “Alone.”

She heard him sink back into the mattress, a sigh escaping his lips. He knew that there was no stopping her. She still felt dizzy, but she made her way to the door and left his room.

Everything looked the same. The grand hallways, the movement of servants about, the plain decor. It was all the same. As if the master of this household had just announced that he was going on a small vacation, and not that he up and died. Life moved on for everyone else, but not for her. As ludicrous as it sounded, a part of her wanted to get over her father's death quickly, anything to relieve her of this pain. She made her way downstairs and walked aimlessly, until her feet suddenly brought her to the courtyard. Its open-air layout allowed for sunlight to burst through, with flowers, trees and birds flying freely about. Noel often retreated to this space when she needed to clear her head.

She made her way to the stone bench and sat, listening to the water fall from the fountain that faced her. At the top of the spout, an adornment of the Divine Mother was displayed. Noel grimaced at the sight.

The goddess was all-powerful, all-knowing, yet she allowed her father, one of her most loyal subjects, to suffer. She had known that fate was unpredictable, but this was cruel. How could she in good faith, call herself a Sage, if the goddess took away her father and her ability to use magic? She heard footsteps and turned towards the source. It was Andreas. She was surprised to see that he was still here. He was without his crown or formal attire, and Noel glanced upon the dark circles under his eyes.

“My condolences,” Andreas said softly. “The loss of your father is immeasurable. He was a wonderful man.”

“Thank you, Prince Andreas.” She tried to steady herself, afraid to let her tears flow in front of royalty. “Where is His Majesty?”

“My father is beside himself, I’m afraid. I’m sure that he’ll be composed by the time we bless the urn into the afterlife.”

Once a Sage is cremated, the urn must remain untouched and unseen for twenty-four hours. This signifies that their soul is exiting their body and must be spiritually cleansed. After that, family and close friends of the deceased Sage pass the urn around and provide eulogies. The urn is then transported to the Head Temple in Central, Philuca’s capital district. The Head Temple holds all the urns of Sages within the basement, only accessible to a select few. During her summer pilgrimages to the Head Temple with her parents, Noel had recalled seeing the room of urns, her duty weighing heavy on her. Her father had shown her the urn of her grandfather, and she would silently pray to him, not knowing what to say other than thanking him for upholding their legacy.

Noel nodded, still dazed by the fact that her father was really gone. It replayed, over and over, his last moments on this earth. Andreas sat next to her and gave her hands a small squeeze, bringing her back to the

present. “Know that my family and I will assist you in any way that you need,” Andreas said softly. “We will see to it without hesitation.”

His blue-green eyes bore into hers. His declaration was just a formality, Noel thought, something he felt required to say. Right now, she felt as though the two of them wanted their positions gone, to live normally. No more Prince Andreas or Sage Aldan. Just two old friends whose reunion was sullied by circumstances out of their control.

“Thank you again, Prince Andreas. My family is forever indebted to yours.” Her reply was automatic, her voice hoarse. Nothing about this made sense. How could she just expect to move on normally as if her father’s death didn’t happen? Why was everyone fine on the outside, whereas she felt so fragile? She let go of his hands and stood, taking a step back.

“Forgive me.” Tears began to flow down her cheeks. “I just need time to myself right now.”

Without giving Andreas a chance to say anything, Noel rushed out the courtyard and back to Kallian’s room. The estate was too quiet. She longed to hear her father’s laugh or make up a song as he walked about. She opened the door and saw Kallian sitting in the alcove next to the window, staring aimlessly out. The sight made her sob uncontrollably. Kallian turned to look at her. Noel threw herself onto him and felt his arms wrap around her, his hold strong and firm. It was selfish, but she didn’t care. He hummed and rubbed at her back, letting Noel’s wailing echo throughout the room. Her tears stained his tunic, and she clung to it tightly, pulling him closer to her. She curled up into his lap and felt small yet safe.

“You’ll be okay,” his voice was soft and low, as if speaking too loudly would shatter her. “I’m here.”

Noel let herself go; it was all that she could do as she wept, her voice hoarse. She wanted her tears to run dry already, for the image of her father falling over to stop replaying in her head. But the grief ran outwards, fresh and raw. What was there left for her to do now?

Noel didn't remember falling asleep. Her eyes fluttered open as she felt something stir about roughly. She was staring at the ceiling and turned, realizing that she was in Kallian's bed once more. She blinked at the chair that was next to the bed and the feeling of guilt washed over her. How selfish she had been, asleep for two days and making Kallian use a chair if he wanted to rest, piling her grief onto his. She had yet to ask him how he was taking in everything, and used his kindness over and over again. A glass of water was left on the nightstand and Noel reached for it and drank. What she longed for to give Kallian his freedom back. He still sat on the alcove, engrossed in a book. Noel cleared her throat to indicate that she was awake.

“How are you feeling?” He set the book down and stared at her.

There were dark circles under his eyes, restless from constantly watching her. How else was she supposed to feel, considering that in the blink of an eye, she had lost everything? They both knew that it was a silly question. “Fine.”

“It must be the side effects of the sleep syrup that's causing you to be so drowsy. I gave you a lot since you were in so much pain, I'm sorry.”

The memories of him holding her down to give her the syrup played in her mind, and how he looked so hurt when he saw what she had done to herself. He was always there for her, yet she was just a thorn in his side. She drank more water, unwilling to face him. A knock on the door made her jolt, some of the water splashing onto the bed sheets. She turned to Kallian who shrugged, not knowing who it could be. He got up from the alcove and made his way towards the door. Noel followed close behind, curiosity getting the better of her. Kallian reached and opened the door, and Lumen, Celeste, and Terra loomed in front of the door frame.

“Oh, thank the gods, you’re awake,” Terra pushed past Kallian and ran for Noel, hugging her tightly.

“Kallian told me that you had hurt yourself — I was the one that dressed your wounds and changed you — but are you doing okay? You’re not in any more physical pain?”

“No, Mama, nothing hurts.” Noel’s voice was monotone, and she didn’t embrace her mother in return. She was afraid that she would slip out of reach, just like her father. “Kallian told me that the cremation process happened.”

“That’s correct,” Terra pressed her forehead against her daughter’s. “I should’ve done it once you awoke, but your father was suffering.”

She nodded in understanding. Pulling away from her mother, she watched as Lumen and Celeste stood in silence. They had dark circles under their eyes, restless and gaunt. Both wore black robes to mourn, and it clicked in Noel’s head that it was the two of them that began the funeral procession and anything to do with Sage duties in her absence. She knew that she would always have their guidance until their successors were trained, but what about formal appearances that required magic? What then? Thoughts of the religion falling apart crossed her mind, Acolytes shunning her. Noel bit her lip. Without her father, she was worthless bearing the Aldan name.

“We need to speak with you,” Celeste said. Her tone wasn’t sweet like always, but it was shaking, almost as if she was afraid. “The both of you.”

Noel sunk into herself and she and Kallian stepped aside and let the three of them enter the room. Terra shut the door and locked it, which made Noel worrisome. Was there another threat being made that was exposed?

“Starlight, this decision is one that we do not make lightly,” Terra reached for Noel’s hands. “Your father also had a hand in deciding this.”

“Papa did? What exactly are the four of you deciding without me?” Noel stammered.

Everyone stood still, the room so silent that you could hear a pin drop. Noel looked over to Kallian, who could not meet her gaze.

“The two of you must leave immediately after the funeral to the Firelands,” Celeste said. “You’ll be staying with Kallian and his family.”

Noel flinched. “For how long?”

“Indefinitely,” Celeste pursed her lips. “Lumen and I will tend to your duties, and your mother will formally announce your hiatus.”

“And when will I return?” Noel’s voice hitched, uncertainty washing over her.

Celeste’s head hung low and she turned to Terra. Terra bit her lip and squeezed Noel’s hands.

“Mama? When am I returning?”

Terra sighed and released Noel’s hands. “The plan is for you to return when you bear a child with Kallian.”

Noel’s legs gave out from underneath her and Kallian reached to steady her. She swatted his hand away and growled, tears forming in her eyes. She stood on her own and leaned against the wall for support.

“It’s not what it looks like, Starlight,” Terra exclaimed. “Please trust me when I tell you that.”

The gears in her mind began to turn. When her father had told her two days ago that even if he was gone, he would still help her. Kallian’s guarding duties starting later in the day during the holiday, Kallian telling her that they needed to leave for the Firelands during all the chaos. Everyone knew. They all knew and acted as if her opinion didn’t matter. She blinked repeatedly and anger crept over her. She felt so weak and pathetic, filled with so much hurt.

“This plan was going to be in effect regardless if your father passed or not,” Lumen stated matter-of-factly. “After careful discussions, we decided that this was the best course of action to take due to your powers not manifesting.”

“I don’t give a damn about what was the best course of action,” Noel spat. “You all decided this without me.”

She stared at Kallian, who stared at the ground and clenched his hands into fists. Kallian, her bodyguard. No, he was more than that. He was sole confidant and best friend, her only friend, and he took her trust and broke it into pieces.

“You’re not going to say anything?” She sauntered in front of him. “I’m supposed to believe that you’re okay with this?”

Silence was Kallian’s answer. Noel scoffed and turned to her mother, Lumen and Celeste.

“And what if the child is born with Kallian’s fire magic? What then?” Noel said haughtily.

“Then you’d carry out your duties,” Lumen pushed his glasses back up to his nose. “Until there is a child that inherits your magic.”

“How *dare* you?” Noel’s voice was low and venomous. “I am the Great Sage, the one blessed by the progenitor goddess, I am the most powerful person in this room and you treat me as if I am a mule?!”

“Starlight, just—” Terra began.

Noel pushed past her mother and made straight for the door, unlocking it roughly. She heard everyone call out for her, but she didn’t care. She ran down the hall and made her way to her bedroom, locking it shut. Everything was slipping away from her fingers like sand. First her father, now her agency. Did everyone just expect her to follow her father’s final orders without question, as if she wasn’t an adult? Her father had lied to her, acted as if he understood, but here he was — dead and still disappointed in her.

Her room was vast: a large bed, a small shrine for the goddess laid against the wall with a painting of her and candles. She snorted at the sight of that, how many times she would light those candles and pray for her magic to manifest. None of it mattered. She made her way to her desk, where copies of large tomes and scrolls about light magic, ancient spells, and how the world came to be sat neatly. All those years of training and praying relentlessly, all for it to be tossed aside as if she was nothing. She seethed and roughly pushed the reading materials off her desk, watching them clatter about on the floor. It made her sick to even look at it, and all she wanted was to disappear. If it had been her that died, there wouldn't be a reason to continue going like this. She had merely a fraction of what he'd accomplished.

Opening one of the desk drawers, Noel rummaged about until she came across numerous small, round glass bottles. It was a Flask, an item that could artificially recreate magic. Everyone Null or not always carried them about, mainly healing ones. But anything associated with light magic was the last thing she wanted. She kept rummaging until she found what she was looking for, the flask with orange liquid. Her fingers reached for the cork stopper and she pulled it off, and she felt the glass warm up in her hands. She threw it at the tomes and scrolls, glass spreading across the floor and fire erupted. The flames were low, and then they grew larger, the paper kindling the fire. Noel moved her hand and reached for the flames. It didn't hurt as Flasks allowed any user to manipulate the artificially made magic. The flames danced around her fingers and she stared at it in awe.

This is what it felt like to have magic and power. This is what it felt like to be Kallian, who commanded flames to do his bidding. Except, it wasn't real. It was fake, just like her. A fake Sage, a fake vessel of the goddess. As much power as she claimed she had, it was taken away from her just in an instant, just like the Flasks. She screamed in anger, reaching for more Fire Flasks and throwing it on her books. The flames roared even louder, and smoke began to engulf the room but she didn't care. It burned and burned, and

Noel stood, making her way to her wardrobe. She opened it and flinched at the first article of clothing that hung there, her white Sage robes that she wore for the holiday, stained with her father's blood and ripped due to her ministrations. She remembered asking Kallian to burn it and he refused. Yanking it off the hanger, Noel returned to the fire and threw the robes into the pile. She didn't want his help anymore. Light magic was her entire identity and look at where it got her: fatherless, defective, and *weak*. Kneeling down, she banged her fists onto the floor and wailed as the fire crackled. She had renounced it all, rebuked any traces of it. She didn't want to carry her father's legacy, to believe in some goddess that made her this way.

If this final act of defiance made her selfish and childish, Noel gladly welcomed it. Tomorrow she'd leave for the Firelands, uncertain and unknowing. *Just for one night* was something that she would say to herself like a mantra during every Holy Mother Day, and Noel snorted as to how naive she used to be. It would be like this for the rest of her life, trapped in the cycle. Forever bonding and unchanging.

Chapter IV

Andreas

A leader must never rest, never surrender, and must never stop learning. That is what it means to be king, a motto that Andreas Molinaro firmly believed. It had been instilled in him since birth that a kingdom is nothing without its people, and a leader to support them. His whole life he had been prepared to rule over the kingdom of Philuca. Training in swordplay and honing his magic, the abilities to scry and deduce visions of the past and future, Andreas had molded himself into what he believed to be a leader. That is, until public appearances arise. The image of the royal family of Philuca was in a weakened state in the past few years. The Aldan Sages had been gaining favor with the public, and the number of followers of their religion, or Acolytes, as they are called, has skyrocketed. With yearly festivities and pilgrimages to temples in the kingdom, the Aldan Sages were more known, more respected. They did not strike fear into the people just for their status, but were worshiped.

And so, at King Ymir's behest, his family would be leaving the palace to travel all the way to the southern region of the kingdom, Luceo, to celebrate Holy Mother Day. Ymir had said that the reason was to visit High Sage Gartra Aldan, his old friend that he hadn't seen in over a decade, but Andreas knew that it was all a thinly veiled lie. It was to show that they, too, were just as important and within reach to the common folk. The trip would also reunite him with Garta Aldan's daughter, Noel. When the two were young, Noel was timid and closed off, under constant chaperonage while about in her own estate. He couldn't run off and play with her like the daughters of nobles and court officials, for the religion is separated by gender. He wondered what she would be like now, if she had grown into a wise woman, someone to be his equal. The stories that his father had shared with him about his childhood and growing up alongside Gartra, having him as an advisor, made him long to have someone like that by his side.

Closing his book on the Sages teachings and rituals, Andreas stretched in the leather chair. A throb in his head and eyes arose and he rubbed at his forehead, perhaps a headache coming on from all the reading he had done in the past few hours. He was in his study, an average-sized room that had an oak desk clad with a stack of papers and a quill pen, a bookcase with texts ranging from war tactics or from a collection of sonnets, and a divan in case he dozed off. The room was cluttered and dusty, on account of the fact that he specifically did not allow maids to enter. He wanted his privacy, time to himself. A knock at the door pulled him out of his thoughts and he groaned. It was either his parents or his sister, ready to chastise him for always being cooped up. "Enter," Andreas said.

The door opened and in came his younger sister, Wren. She had decided to wear her long brown hair up in a bun, forgoing her large and puffy dresses for a slimmer, navy blue slip that showed off her shoulders. She scowled as she entered Andreas' study.

"We've been looking everywhere for you," Wren spat. "You and your maids are supposed to be going over your things for the trip. We leave in a few hours."

"Ah yes, the trip," Andreas said, feigning surprise. He had procrastinated on gathering his belongings, deeply engrossed in his reading. "How could I forget?"

"You were in here reading again, weren't you? Don't you get tired of it?" She pushed aside some of his papers and sat on his desk, her feet dangling above the ground. "Gods, it's so dusty in here."

He took the papers from her, making sure that they weren't creased. "It's better than gossiping with court ladies over tea all day like how you do," Chuckling at his sister's pouting, he continued. "Chin up. Why do you look so worked up about this trip, anyway? It'll be nice to leave the castle for a change."

"You and I both know that Father's just doing this to get on the people's good side. I don't care for some stupid holiday with stuffy Sages," Wren groaned and tilted her head back. "Besides, all the dresses I

wanted to wear were deemed immodest, and we didn't have time to tailor up something new. Mother said that Sage Noel and I are the same height and build, so I'd have to share with her."

Andreas laughed, eliciting a shove from his sister. His head throbbed once more, and a small wince escaped his lips as he watched Wren kick at the air in frustration as she went on about her plight.

"Can you believe that? Me in those rags?" she cried out. "It's positively dreadful."

"I think that this could be a learning experience for you. To teach you to be a bit more grateful for what you have."

"You bore me with all that talk of goodness. You don't have a selfish or evil bone in your body, do you?"

"I wouldn't say that, I just think about things logically. Come now, I have to finish up here and prepare my luggage." He stacked his books neatly on his desk and placed his documents under a paper weight.

Wren stepped down from the desk and stood, patting at her skirt to remove any dust particles that stuck on from Andreas' desk. She watched Andreas collect his things and said, "Are you alright? You look tired."

"Ah, I have a bit of a headache coming on. Probably from all the reading."

His sister rolled her eyes and waved goodbye to him and left his study, taking off down the hall, most likely to complain about this trip to anyone that would bother listening to her. Andreas left his study with the book about Sage customs in hand and returned to his bedchambers. He watched as servants scurried about, with tunics, trousers and capes of various colors in fabrics in hand. His luggage lay about in the center of his room, a medium-sized, brown chest. As he peered inside, he saw that some items were already packed

for him, such as undergarments and nightwear. His face flushed; surely, he was old enough to gather his undergarments.

“Your Highness, just a moment and we’ll be out of your hair,” a servant girl curtsied to him nervously. “Forgive us for preparing your things so late.”

“Take your time.” Andreas smiled as he sat at the foot of his bed.

The servants carried on, showing him apparel in various colors, telling him what clothing would be best for the hot climate. He’d only be there for a few days, and the constant fussing over how to present himself slightly annoyed him. The pain in his head grew and grew as the servants shoved more clothing into his trunk, growing more frantic as time was not on their side. Andreas reached for a pitcher of water by his nightstand and drank, hoping that the cool water would calm his nerves. Trying to distract himself from all the movement in his room, he decided to open his book once more.

His eyes strained as he glanced at the passage, and as his fingers glided across the page to turn it, he winced. He moved too quickly, resulting in a papercut. The blood trailed down his finger and he rolled his eyes, bringing his tongue to the cut and licking the blood off. He’d bandage it later. As Andreas grasped at the page again, and stared at it curiously. This specific sheet of paper felt too thick compared to the rest of the pages. Flipping through the rest of the book to double-check, he knew that he was right. Upon closer inspection, the pages were glued together, the adhesive old and loose. Gingerly slipping a finger toward the end of one page he went upwards and broke through, releasing one page. The same strategy worked for the other two pages, and the three pages were unbound.

What could be written here about Sages that it was so poorly hidden, he thought? *While Sages are pacifists, steel yourself! Anyone with dark magic must be exterminated. Dark magic corrupts and it is within the Divine Mother’s will that all Sages carry out this duty. Do not allow dark magic users to flee and hide their*

nature, for a Sage's ability to detect dark magic is their greatest asset. Elimination is a noble sacrifice, forever and unto a Sage's dying breath.

Andreas' eyes widened. A Sage killing someone? It was something unheard of. Dark magic users were scarce throughout the kingdom, so he couldn't even think of a Sage crossing paths with one, much less eliminating them. Goosebumps pricked at his skin and the pain from his headache now grew throughout his entire body, as he felt hot and nauseous. Would it be out of his place to ask Head Sage Gartra about this? About killing someone?

The hairs on the back of his neck stood, and his body grew hotter. He stood, and his vision failed him, swaying. The servants turned towards him and gasped.

"Prince Andreas!" One of them called out. "Are you okay?"

Andreas held a hand in the air to stop them from approaching. "I'm fine, just a migraine from all the reading," he noticed that they still looked amongst themselves with concern and chuckled. "You are dismissed, I can handle the rest here."

"But you look unwell. We cannot—"

"That will be all." His voice was stern, the severity of it foreign to his lips. What was going on?

The servants curtsied and hurried out quietly and Andreas locked his door. That damned book. The headache started as soon as he opened it, all because he wanted to know more in-depth about the holiday without imposing on Noel. He picked it up once more and stared at the pages that he unbounded, and gasped. Droplets of blood scattered across the pages, more blood that would come from a mere papercut. He stood up, stumbling and his vision blurred. His steps felt heavy as he made his way to his vanity.

He retched, the sensation coming deep from his throat. It felt tight, and he reached for it trying to see if it was inflamed. His eyes widened as he stared at his reflection. Shadows were emerging from his body. Small, like ink droplets, as if someone poked him with a quill pen.

“Am I seeing this right?”

The shadows grew in size, appearing akin to snakes. They slithered throughout his body, feeling coarse and rough. He reached with a finger, trembling, and touched it. It responded in kind. The shadows wrapped around him, coiling his neck. They whispered faintly, speaking in an old and archaic tongue

“No, no,” he murmured, running a hand through his hair. “This isn’t right — I *can’t* be,”

Everything had been laid out before him since birth: he was to marry a wealthy Null woman and succeed his father when he came of age. Heirs would come and the cycle would repeat itself. To live and die as a Molinaro, just as his grandfather and all his ancestors have. And now it felt as though it was slipping away from his fingers like sand. Andreas wasn’t supposed to have dark magic. No one in his family was. It was a miscalculation that no one had the answer for.

Who could he tell? Wren was too much of a loose cannon. One could never confide in her as she would most likely twist it to her own agenda, and if that failed, she just simply wouldn’t care. Surely not his father, the man was already insecure that he was Null in comparison to his children, although deep down he would never admit it. If he found out that Andreas was also a Taboo, much less a Druid, there’s no telling what he would do, and that was what terrified him the most.

All that was left was his mother. Cunning with a mixture of hot and cold. She favored him but still kept part of herself at a distance, always saying too little. A sickly but powerful woman, able to make split-second decisions on the fly, with slightly more acumen than her own husband. Everyone closely familiar with the royal family knew that Elena called the shots, and Ymir was wrapped around her finger. Andreas could

hardly remember the last time he had seen his father make a decision without consulting her. A small part of him knew that his mother had an answer, there was more to her than it seemed. But how could he prove it? She had always been Null; her family records had stated as such. It was an intricate decision when arranging a marriage with a prince consort and his future bride, with records going back at least three generations. Yet it was the only thing that made sense about him having dark magic. Could she have forged the records?

Control. What Andreas needed right now was to regain control. Breathe in through the nose, and out through the mouth. Giving into the dark magic that coursed through his veins was the last thing he needed. He could control what was right in front of him and worry about the rest later. What mattered most was not letting the mask slip, to present himself at his best for the holiday. He was a prince before he was a son or brother, the betterment of the kingdom mattered first. He was made to serve and to protect, to cast aside all otherworldly desires for the sake of his lineage.

As his breathing slowed, so did the intensity of the shadows. Slipping away, as if they were never there. Andreas stared at his reflection once more; he looked paler than usual, his brow thick with sweat. The heat that surged through him had lessened into an uncomfortable warmth. He held himself upright by bracing both arms to his vanity and stared at his reflection. He was a walking sin, those who possess more than one magical ability, a Taboo. Taboos were historically kept hidden or killed, hunted by the royal family via their informants, in fear that they would rise up and reach power. Andreas chuckled ruefully at that fact, and a small part of him didn't believe what he was experiencing.

“Andreas?” He heard his mother's voice knocking on the door. “Are you still in there? A maid said she was worried about you.”

As he jolted, the shadows emerged once more, bursting out of him. They ran rampant, crashing into everything that they touched, shattering the mirror, removing the sheets from his bed, and knocking over his books. He had to keep it together, to control the magic. It was wild and unpredictable, and it frightened him.

“What is going on in there?” His mother rattled the door knob and opened the door. “Andreas, what —”

“No!” Andreas shouted. “Mother, it’s not what it looks like, I swear—”

He watched as his mother stood, frozen, her gray eyes widened in shock. Panic ensued. She would tell his father and he’d be murdered or exiled, unable to look him in the eyes once more. Elena shut the door and slowly made her way to her son, who stood, trembling.

“Keep away from me.” Andreas cried out with his arms outstretched. The shadows pointed in Elena’s direction, mere inches away from her face, but they did not attack. “Mother, I can’t control whatever this is, please, don’t tell Father.”

“I’m not going to tell your father,” Elena whispered. She reached out her hands and cupped Andreas’ hands. “My son, you’re like me.”

Andreas blinked. Certainly, he had misheard his mother. This magic wasn’t from her, the records stated that she was Null. He pushed her hands away and he watched as his mother smiled at him. He didn’t know what frightened him more, his mother’s smile or confession of who she really was. He stepped away from her and he noticed that the shadows pushed and pulled as she grew closer. With a wave of her hand, the shadows dispersed, and Andreas let out a choke in shock. She was a Druid.

Andreas shook his head. Surely, he was dreaming. Why hadn’t he seen his mother’s powers before? So many questions ran through his head, but all that came out of him was.

“You’re the reason why I have dark magic?”

His mother nodded and hugged him. “I know that you have so many questions, but I’ll have to answer them once we return from Luceo. In the meantime, try to keep it under control.”

“Wait,” he stammered. “But how do you maintain it?”

“Nullsbane, my child,” she cooed. “But that method might be too harsh for you now. All I can tell you is to take control of your emotions. Andreas, don’t you see? This is a *good* thing.”

He had read before about Nullsbane, an illegal and man-made plant made to subdue a person’s magic if consumed. Enough of it can leave one’s magic untraceable. But his parents had led campaigns to remove production of it, yet she still had access. For how long had she moved in the shadows, so carefully and calculated? How little did he know about her?

Elena noticed the state of disarray that his room was in and she made her way to his bed, smoothing out his sheets. Her calmness about the situation scared him, yet he could do nothing but watch. Andreas Molinaro was a Taboo, a Seer and a Druid. A leader must continue, even if it means that all odds are against him. If it was a good thing like she said, then he must carry his duty without question.

Chapter V

Andreas

The leather seats of the carriage ride were soft, but after long hours of sitting, it grew to be uncomfortable. The journey to the Aldan estate in Luceo hadn't always begun on the carriage ride, however. The royal family used their personal Pegasus in order to travel to Central, a halfway point between Galle's Peak, the northern, mountainous region of Philuca, the castle at the very top of the mountain. The king and queen insisted on traveling via carriage once they had arrived in order to take in the sights and sounds of nature, but Andreas wondered if his parents only suggested it for the attention. To see the royal family in public would surely thrill the commoners. And so, here was Andreas, fidgeting within the final stretches of the carriage ride. The road was smooth, unlike the bumpy cobblestones of Central, and roughly four hours had passed. He wanted to get out and stretch his legs already as the journey would have been much faster if they had traveled via a Pegasus the entire time.

He still felt rather dizzy from earlier, but he noticed that the shadows had calmed, but as he got closer and closer to the estate, the feeling whirred in his body once more. Even though his mother had told him that ingesting the Nullsbane elixir was too harsh for him due to side effects and how he was unaccustomed to it, yet he wished he had something to suppress this feeling other than control. The book he'd read said that Sages can detect dark magic, and he wondered if keeping the feeling down and inward would be enough. Throughout the carriage ride his father had asked him if he was okay, but Andreas lied, saying that it was a bad bout of motion sickness.

"We're here," Wren squealed as she made her way to the carriage window. The Aldan estate was mere feet away, and she could see the Aldan family waving. "Finally, we can get out of this stuffy contraption."

The carriage came to a halt, and Andreas took in the sight of his surroundings as the footman stepped down and opened the carriage door. The Aldan estate was larger than the noble estates that he had visited before. The property had a large garden off to the distance, and he was able to make out a large statue, possibly of the Divine Mother, he supposed. The exterior colors were off-white, a neutral tone for how humbly Sages carry themselves.

His father stepped out first and Andreas smiled as he saw the two of them embrace each other. Noel stood behind the two men, her expression mirroring Andreas. If they weren't so far from each other, would the two of them have had the same relationship? An advisor and a future monarch of the kingdom — or would both families see them as a suitable match? He shook his head, focusing on the task at hand — keeping his magic under control and reuniting with Noel. Stepping out after his mother, Andreas stared at Noel standing before him.

Her height and build were exactly like Wren's: short and petite. Even though her robe was long and flowing, Andreas could see some muscle. Did she train in her spare time, he wondered? Her ebony curls bounced as she turned to face him, and her dark skin and brown eyes glistened in the sunlight.

“Noel Aldan,” Andreas said. “We haven't seen each other since we were still children.”

“It's good to see you, Prince Andreas.” Noel smiled.

“Likewise. Like our fathers, there's no need to use formalities with one another,” He reached over and wrapped his arms around her, embracing her in a hug.

He felt Noel hesitate then wrap her arms around him, rigid. Stepping away from the embrace, he saw that she fidgeted, rocking back and forth on the heels of her feet.

“My apologies, did I do something wrong?” Andreas asked.

Noel shook her head. “No, it's just that I'm not—”

“She’s the second most important figure in a religion separated by gender, and you just hugged her,”

Wren giggled as she made her way to Andreas' side. “It’s no wonder she’s shaking like a leaf.”

Andreas’ face flushed. “Forgive me if that was too forward of me.”

“Let us not dwell on unimportant things,” Noel’s lips pursed into an awkward smile. “Let me present the two of you with a tour of the estate.”

Noel began to walk away and Andreas glanced over at his parents, who were engrossed in a conversation with Noel’s. His mother’s gaze shifted and the two locked eyes. She nodded, giving her permission. Wren skipped her way to Noel’s side, and she linked arms with her. Andreas heard her squeal and she dragged Noel in. He made his way towards the two of them, and entered the estate. Like the exterior, Andreas could see that the estate was humbly decorated. The foyer was vast but with simple decorations. A portrait of the Divine Mother stood in the grand hallway, and Andreas flinched. His eyes glanced over at Noel, who was listening to Wren. He felt his head throb once more, the shadows hissed in his ears as the portrait loomed over him.

“Is there anything interesting to do around her?” Wren asked as she stared at the portrait, bored. “If you ever get tired of all this religious nonsense, you can head to our castle to spend time with me and my court.”

“Don’t do it, Noel,” Andreas approached them and ruffled his sister’s hair. “This one is a horrible influence.”

Noel laughed and Andreas exhaled, knowing that he played his part correctly. He needed to distract himself from the power growing within him, doing anything to suppress it. It was a constant struggle. He wanted to seem normal in front of his old friend. He wanted to catch up like old times, yet his magic saw her as a threat. And Andreas grew more and more paranoid the longer he stood beside her, watching how calm

she was. Could she truly detect his dark magic, or did he suppress it well enough? He tried to let his mind wander, but to no avail. Thoughts of Noel harming him, the shadows taking over his body and eliminating her, his father finding out. It was all too much. He wanted his mother, as childish as it sounded. With her here, everything would be okay.

Andreas faintly heard Noel offer to pray, and Wren declined, opting to take her leave. He cursed under his breath. The last thing he wanted was to be left alone with Noel. Distracting himself, he stared at the portrait of the Divine Mother, but he felt a pit in his stomach. She and her descendants were his enemy, but all he wanted was to be cascaded in that warmth, free from this magic that felt like a sudden curse. From his peripheral vision, he could see Noel staring at him intently. He tried not to pay attention to it, hoping that she stared at him in curiosity due to not being around many men in her life.

“It’s a lovely portrait,” Andreas smiled sheepishly. “The Divine Mother was a selfless woman, and here I am, standing in the presence of one of her descendants. Thank you for having me, Noel. This is an honor.”

He watched her lips pull forward into a smile. It was a double-edged sword, one minute she was radiating kindness, and the next, she was bloodthirsty. She was a threat to him. Yet that’s what the shadows whispered to him, over and over. He wanted to clear his head. Noel had done nothing to him, yet the magic in him was on defense mode, plaguing his mind with paranoia. He was in a den of wolves, and his mother had tossed him aside. Noel turned and led the way, and the two of them made their way to the temple in silence. He knew that it should be the last place he could possibly be, but a part of him hoped that prayer would clear his mind.

“No shoes or headdress. And wash your feet before entering.” Noel said, pointing to the basin next to the temple doors.

Andreas took his crown off and sighed. His head always felt bare once he removed it, but this time, his crown felt unusually heavy atop his head. He ran a hand through his blonde hair to push wisps back and he felt Noel staring at him again, her expression unreadable. This time for sure, she could detect his magic, could she not? Or else, why was she so intent on looking at him?

He made his way towards Noel, ready to confront her, but was stopped, as Gatra's footsteps came rushing from the corridor, with Noel's mother Terra, close behind.

"Gartra, compose yourself," Terra cried out.

Ignoring her, Garta roughly grabbed Andreas' wrist, and the prince cried out in pain, sentries were immediately pointing their swords towards him, ready to strike. Andreas heard the shadows whispering in his head once more. They wanted to burst out and latch onto Gartra, to destroy anyone that threatened to harm him. He felt himself growing hot once more, his throat straining.

"What is the meaning of this?" He choked out.

"Papa, let go of him!" Noel cried out as she rushed over to the two of them and pulled at her father's wrist. "What has gotten into you?"

It was so foolish. Andreas knew that Noel didn't have the strength to pull her father back, yet she held on. Andreas watched as she looked bewildered, a small and insignificant thing. All he had to do was let go and let the darkness take over him — they would destroy the threat right in front of him.

"Unhand him," a sentry declared.

Andreas glanced over at the sentry, and the numerous ones behind him. The small squadron of men from the castle were no doubt loyal to the crown, yet here in the Aldan estate, he wondered if the rules were different. He noticed that Noel stared at him, her eyes wide. He mimicked her expression, hoping that it would throw her off on taking her father's side. For the time being, he was just as clueless as she was.

“Lower your weapons.” Ymir’s voice and footsteps echoed throughout the hallway as he made his way towards Gartra, Queen Elena standing behind him. Andreas silently prayed that his mother would help him. The sentries did as they were told, albeit reluctantly. “I trust Gartra’s judgment.”

The same sentry spoke up again. “But Your Majesty—” The king scowled and the sentry stood and nodded, knowing his place.

Gartra let go of Andreas roughly and watched as he stumbled back. “I thought I detected—” He stared wildly at the king and queen. “You two are both Null, so why am I sensing it?”

“Detected what?” Elena chirped.

“Nothing.” Gartra murmured and cursed to himself. “Forget I did anything. Forgive me, Andreas.”

Ymir scowled at Gartra’s ambiguity. “You cannot accost my son and then state it is nothing. Speak freely.”

“Dark magic,” Gartra said. “My body and spirit know, my magic calls out to me whenever there is a threat of dark magic. It is my duty as a vessel of the goddess to exterminate it without hesitation.”

Silence fell over everyone in the room. Andreas rubbed at his wrist, trying to relieve it of pain. Gartra was correct, of course, and he had hoped that his mother had a scapegoat of some sorts. Andreas should never have come; he should’ve thought of some elaborate lie in order to avoid this trip.

“How *dare* you accuse my son of having dark magic?” Elena cried out. “That is slander, Great Sage. Where would it even come from?”

“We all know that magic can skip generations,” Gartra pointed a finger accusingly at Elena. “Do not play coy. Seers you children may be, through Ymir’s line, but you—”

“My entire family is Null, the records state that.” The queen’s voice was haughty and Andreas had to bite down a chuckle at the lie.

“Enough,” Ymir said as he turned to Gartra. “If you detected it, why didn’t Noel say anything?”

Andreas blinked at his father’s question, as he had a point. Noel had yet to make note about his magic, almost as if she was unable to. He pushed the thought out of his head, as the most logical response would be that she was playing coy in order to corner him. Having Gartra confront him was her plan all along, and he fell for it. Yet, was she capable of such plans? Of course she was, for she was a Sage.

Andreas watched Gartra tell Noel to get inside the temple, and he felt his mother’s rage, knowing that she would use her rank to control them.

“But it involves you accusing my son, does it not?” Elena cried out. “Stay and answer the question. I command it.”

Noel wordlessly entered the temple and Andreas’ nose twitched. Why was it so easy for her? And why did his father allow it? Yet he knew that the Aldans had the same rank as his family. His head hurt once more, as he felt the shadows planting seeds of doubt in his mind, plaguing it.

“My daughter’s magic is latent in that regard. She’s not as powerful as Gartra,” Terra bowed her head to Ymir and Elena. “And while that accusation was one that should not be taken lightly, we apologize.”

Elena scoffed at the gesture and turned on her heel. “Andreas, Gartra, come.”

Andreas’ shoulders slumped as he followed alongside his parents. He was thankful to be out of that situation, but he did not expect the rest of this visit to go through smoothly. His father said nothing, his expression cloudy. His mother walked quickly, and Andreas suddenly felt small.

The three of them returned to their guest bedchambers, where they found Wren lazily spread out on the bed like a cat. Andreas swallowed thickly as his mother scowled.

“Wren, get up and wait outside,” Elena spat.

“What’s going on?” Wren sat up. “Weren’t you doing the rest of the tour?”

“Stop asking questions and do as I say,” Elena growled. “Now.”

Andreas watched as his sister quickly collected herself and quietly swept past the three of them. His mother slammed the door shut, rattling the centerpieces that were displayed throughout the room to make it seem less barren. His father sighed as he sat on the vanity’s stool. The tension was suffocating, and Andreas just wanted to disappear. Gartra was correct in detecting magic, but the ruse had to continue. He wondered how far gone he would go just to keep this up.

“You undermined our son,” Elena said, her voice shaking. “The future king. And for what?”

Ymir shook his head. “You misunderstand. All I wanted was to hear the man out.”

“So, you trust his judgment more?”

“Dearest, he was my advisor.”

“He *was*. This is our son that we’re discussing. And you failed to defend me as well.”

Andreas stared at his parents. In all his years, he had never seen them argue. The two of them worked in perfect sync with one another, and while they weren’t exactly evenly matched, they always discussed things together. It was a unity and team that wasn’t just for show. He couldn’t help but wonder that if he wasn’t such a burden and never manifested dark magic, the three of them wouldn’t be in this scenario. All he wanted was for the holiday to carry on smoothly, yet he knew that he needed to step in.

“Father, Mother, let’s just drop this, alright?” Andreas said. “Today’s an important day for everyone here — including us.”

Elena pinched the bridge of her nose and exhaled. Ymir stood up and walked past Andreas, bumping his shoulder into his. He made his way to the door and his hand lingered on the knob. Andreas winched and rubbed at his shoulder, and watched his father. Ymir’s gaze was cast downwards and his shoulders slumped.

Thousands of thoughts ran through Andreas' mind. Did his father believe Gartra? Was he in denial about everything that happened? Or was the bumping into him a warning?

“Are you done, Elena? Or is there anything else you'd like to say?” Ymir asked, his voice cold.

Elena flinched. In all of his years, Andreas had never heard his father refer to her by her given name. It was always with a term of endearment. And it was all because of Andreas and his powers. He watched as his mother gritted her teeth, trying to keep her composure.

“That will be all.” Elena said. “Take Wren with you on your way out.”

Ymir grunted and left the room. Andreas watched as his mother scowled as she turned to face her son. Anger bubbled within her and she made her way towards him, pulling him towards her from his tunic collar.

“What were you thinking, going to pray?” She hissed. “Do you not know how vulnerable you are to detections in that setting? You must never let your guard down.”

Andreas looked away from his mother, embarrassed. She let go of him and paced around the room, exasperated. How much of herself has she had to hide all this time? Would he have to be like her for the rest of his life? He saw how calculating his mother was, how every decision went without fail, and he wondered if it was due to hiding her dark magic, if she had to always be three steps ahead of everyone. What an exhausting way to live.

“When Gartra grabbed me, these powers kept speaking to me,” Andreas bit his lip. “They were making me think horrible things, even when I wasn't in danger. Mother, you said you'd teach me to control it.”

Elena pulled Andreas into a hug and patted his head. “In due time. As soon as we get back to the castle.”

“If this is what it’s going to be like, then I don’t want to use dark magic ever again.”

It made him question everything, and everyone. He felt alone, unable to trust anyone. Part of him wondered if this was an elaborate dream and that he was due to wake up at any moment. Only his dreams would he be Taboo, with his mother concealing her Druid heritage his entire life. He saw that his mother frowned at his declaration and she pulled away from him.

“There is no choice about what you want, Andreas,” Elena spat. “You and I are bound together in this magic. Bound to how much power we have. All we need to do is eliminate those that are in our way.” Andreas bit his lip. His mother was partially right. If threats were eliminated, this paranoid feeling would leave him. The shadows wouldn’t have to be pushed down, and why should they? This newfound magic was a part of him. It was something that he shouldn’t have to hide, regardless of how anyone felt.

Andreas hadn’t seen Noel since the incident in front of the temple. His family, the Aldans, and Noel’s bodyguard, Kallian, stood at the center of the steps of the grand hallway, with the door to the reception room right behind them, waiting for the clock to strike so the Acolytes could enter. Noel and her father were gleeful, pushing aside all tension from earlier, but Andreas knew that his mother loathed them. It was awkward to be in the middle, wanting to support his friend, but feeling as though he needed to be with his mother. A leader had to make the choices that were uncomfortable, but best benefited everyone and the environment. So for the time being, he didn’t choose a side. He wanted to enjoy the holiday as Andreas — not a prince, not a Taboo — just himself. He glanced over at Wren who rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. She was excited, yet nervous to see so many new people. Andreas longed for some of the carefree and spoiled spirit his sister had, yet he would never admit to it.

The clock struck the new hour and the servants opened the doors. Acolytes came flooding in and Andreas watched as Noel and her father waved to them, all eyes on them, the vessels of the progenitor goddess. The Acolytes cheered and wept, and Andreas felt overwhelmed at the sight. If he was a Sage, would his life have been more open? He had never seen such a large display of emotions from the public. On the rare occasion that he did attend a festival or a commoner outing, their reactions were usually hushed whispers. Yet he saw how Noel took it all in, without a care in the world. He felt jealous of her, able to live life freely as a Sage, to have people worship the ground that she walked on, able to bring peace with her healing magic. As a Seer, the only reaction Andreas received from when he used his magic was greed. Everyone wanted to See more — their futures, their destinies — all for their own gain. He wanted to receive the validation that Noel felt, yet that dream had died, now that he had also inherited the opposite of light — darkness. Who would want to embrace the abyss?

“We thank you for your attendance and for your journeys to arrive here,” Gartra said, and a wave of silence echoed from the room. “Tonight, we have two special announcements. My daughter, Noel, will perform the Dance of Creation alone. And as you have all noticed, Their Majesties King Ymir and Queen Elena, as well as their children, Prince Andreas and Princess Wren have blessed us with their presence.”

“What a momentous occasion,” An Acolyte cried out. “The goddess has blessed us with good fortune to ring in the new year.”

“The night will begin with the Dance of Creation, followed by a feast and dancing throughout the night. Please, follow us.”

Andreas followed suit, moving into the next room that bore the reception hall. A servant led him to the large table that he and the Aldans would be sharing, right in the front of the stage that Noel would be performing in. The chatter of the Acolytes swarmed throughout the room, yet he welcomed it. It wasn't as

overwhelming as before. He saw that drummers made their way to the stage, and saw Noel stand in the center. She looked so small and young, akin to a child. He could see the nerves that plagued her, yet he wanted to watch the performance. Except, his mother stood, whispering something to his father's ear and quickly rushed out of the room. The music had yet to begin so Andreas turned to him.

“What happened?” He whispered.

“She's having one of her sick spells,” Ymir said. “She's going to retrieve her medicine. It's a shame she'll miss this, though.”

Andreas nodded. He watched as the drums began, a slow and rhythmic pace. Noel stood tall and confident, her feet swaying with the music. A twirl, and the hems of her robes spun with her. Andreas watched in awe as the drums grew louder, Noel danced faster and faster and the sounds of the Acolytes singing and chanting echoed throughout the room. And her movements slowed, precise and fluid, almost like a leaf in the wind. Her arms wrapped around herself, as if she was hugging herself, for at this moment, she was the goddess. All of the Acolytes' eyes in the room were locked onto Noel. The chorus began, a slower, steadier progression as Noel slowed, her movements fluid and precise. Noel suddenly stopped, and stood perfectly still and straight at the center, and the drums crescendo resumed, back to a slow and rhythmic pounding.

She slowly raised her arms above her head and out emerged a glittering ball of light, bright and warm like a star. The glitz of light flew up and up, until it dispersed above the ceiling, shimmering the entire room in bright light. The acolytes gasped and applauded the display of magic, and Andreas clapped slowly. It was a beautiful dance, unlike anything he had ever seen. Her magic felt warm and inviting, but all that rang in his ears was the fact that someone with such beautiful magic could kill him. Everyone in the room was more focused on her and Great Sage Aldan, and Andreas felt a pang of jealousy in his chest. He wanted that power.

To be validated and loved by all, not feared due to his status as a prince. Would it have been different if the Aldans still lived in the palace? Why had his father's era changed so drastically? He needed to excuse himself, to find his mother. It was all her fault, his fault that he had to hide. He stood from his chair and exited the reception hall. The quietness of the estate felt eerie, and he glanced around, wondering where his mother could be. It wasn't until he heard the faint sweeping sound of slippers that he saw his mother walking from the other end of the hall.

"Andreas?" Elena called out. "What are you doing here?"

His mother's expression softened, and she looked winded. And as angry as he was, he couldn't confront her, not at a time like this. Not when her sickly attacks made her so fragile. So he bit his temper down and lied.

"I was looking for you," he said. "You missed the dance, and Father said that you weren't feeling well."

Elena's steps slowed as she reached her son, her breath heaving. "The attack came strong this time. I didn't want to disrupt such an important moment. Shall we go back together?"

Andreas nodded and took his mother's hand. It felt rough and calloused, not how a queen's hands should usually feel.

"It's a shame that I missed it.," Elena murmured. "I hope one day Noel can dance just like that for me."

Andreas said nothing and the two of them returned to the reception room, The Acolytes were already eating and he quickly made his way back to his table, bowing his head at his tardiness.

"Oh, thank the gods you're here," Wren said, covering her mouth with the back of her hand as tried to conceal her chewing. "We were all starving."

“My apologies for being late,” Elena said. “I hope that your meals aren’t cold.”

Terra grabbed her wine glass and smiled. “What matters is what we’re all here now. A toast to the royal family and Aldan Sages for this lovely reunion.”

“Here, here!” They cheered and raised their glasses in the air.

Andreas watched as their glasses clinked, with smiles all around. He quietly sipped on his wine and stared blankly at his food. The red wine was dry, not at all like the finer wines he’s had at his castle. His plate consisted of spiced lamb, rice and lentils, yet he didn’t have an appetite due to his nerves on edge. He wished that everything was simpler. He wished that he could be here, without dark magic. From his peripheral vision, he could see Gartra laughing as he raised the golden goblet to his lips. With his free hand, Andreas gripped firmly at his trousers. He was a prince before he was a son or brother, but his situation was far beyond that. His current duty wasn’t for the kingdom or anyone else except himself. Squeezing his trousers once more, the fabric wrinkled underneath Andreas’ hands as he tried to drown everything out. Then sputtered the first cough from Gartra’s lips.

Then Gartra coughed, in between his laughs, and Andreas watched that Noel’s mother chastised him for drinking so quickly. Then came the second, a cross between wanting to clear his throat and a cough deep from within, followed by a coughing fit. Noel turned to her father, concern visible on her face. Ymir called out to him, and it was all too much. Andreas stood straight, concerned etched on his face. Suddenly, blood emerged from Gartra’s lips and Andreas had to hold in his retching as he saw the man cough blood on Noel, before keeling over the table with a loud crash. Andreas trembled as his father and Noel screamed. Great Sage Gartra Aldan was dead.

The screams echoed throughout the banquet hall and within a flash, Andreas watched Noel be whisked away by her bodyguard, Kallian. He glanced at her with a worried gaze, unaware of what to do or

where to go, yet Noel was in too much of a disarray to notice. Sentries were quickly mobilized around his family, and Noel's mother was taken by the Holy Advisors. They needed to evacuate, and quickly. The sentries circled around them, a perfect circle of defense. Each drew their sword as they walked and escorted his family back to their bedchambers.

Andreas glanced over at Wren. Her head hung low and she fidgeted with her hands. *Poor thing*, Andreas thought. She had never seen a life being lost, only something she had read about in her books. Life was something that Wren took for granted, and Andreas was rather envious of her for that. With this newfound ability of his, he didn't have that luxury anymore. They made their way to the room, and the four sentries stood guard at the door, their positions akin to a statue. Wren shut the door behind her and whimpered, staring at the lock. Andreas couldn't help but wonder if she feared her life next.

"Pack your things quickly," Elena paced around the room. "We leave at first light; it isn't safe here."

Andreas and Wren nodded, yet Ymir remained still. He held his head in his hands, pain etching his face. "No," his voice trembled. "We're staying."

Elena's eyes widened. "Are you mad? We just saw the Great Sage *die*. Our lives and Noel's are at stake — there's too many targets here!"

"You expect me to just leave after I lost my brother?" Ymir pointed a finger accusingly at Elena. "I know that the two of you had your differences, but we cannot leave."

"So, you just expect us to be sitting ducks while the assailant can target any of us next?" Elena shook her head. "Come now, you're not thinking clearly."

Andreas felt Wren shift beside him, now standing behind him, her hands gently tugging at the back of his tunic. She was afraid. In recent years, Andreas had noticed that Wren's lax nature was a defensive

mechanism, a way for her to avoid confrontation. And now with the looming threat of death over her, she was afraid. He felt his sister tremble as the argument between his parents carried on.

“We are not leaving until we find out who did this,” Ymir muttered under his breath. “For him to be poisoned? Why didn’t anyone evaluate the drink beforehand?”

“We are at risk here, Ymir,” Elena hissed. “Think about yourself, our children — the kingdom — we need to *leave*.”

“Mother, Father, please, let’s just—”

“Stay out of this, Andreas,” his father’s voice boomed in the room as he turned back to Elena. “We’re staying.”

Ymir began to walk away grabbing Wren’s wrist. She whimpered at the touch, and she tugged on Andreas’ tunic. Andreas opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He felt so weak, unable to protect his sister. She stared at him, pleading, frightened to stand up to her father.

“Stay with your mother, Andreas,” Ymir spat. “She’s going to need someone to comfort her.”

The door slammed shut, and Andreas flinched. Elena sighed and shook her head, sighing. Andreas heard her mutter something under her breath about how ridiculous his father was being, yet he said nothing as he sat at the foot of the bed.

“Do you want me to call for someone to draw you a bath?” Elena’s voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

Andreas shook his head and his mother shrugged, stepping in front of the silk partition and stripping out of her dress. She grabbed for her white night dress that hung and slipped it on. Moving the partition aside she faced Andreas, staring at him quizzically.

“You’re acting strange,” her voice grew low and whispered. “Are you feeling the magic creep back up again?”

Andreas shook his head again. He sat on the edge of the bed, his leg bouncing. Something didn’t feel quite right. He knew that his mother and Gartra disliked each other, but the extent of that nature was foreign to him. His mother was aloof and guarded around him, and to an outsider, it could just seem that way due to a petty, fleeting dislike. Yet, it never subsided. His father had told him that Gartra had left for the southern region of Luceo shortly after he wedded his mother, yet the two men had clashed for a Sage’s duty is to his king’s side. The gears in his head began turning, and suddenly, it clicked.

“Were you the one that poisoned the Great Sage?”

Silence fell between the two of them as Elena froze. Andreas stood tall, his reflection in the mirror bore into his mother’s. He watched as her gray eyes darkened. She said nothing as she pulled the last hair pin out, perfectly lining them up on the vanity. Her long, black, waist-length hair seemed to cocoon itself around her, shielding her from everything.

“Everything I do is to protect you.” His mother’s voice was low. “That priesthood took away too much of our power, surely you understand that I had to eliminate a target.”

“Without remorse?” Andreas shot back. “You killed Noel’s father, your husband’s closest friend. Regardless of whatever feelings you had towards the man and his power, this isn’t right.”

“You talk so much about righteousness — those Sages would have murdered you in cold blood without hesitation. That is why we must strike first.”

“And what if Father finds out that it was you?”

“And with what evidence? Who would tell him?”

“I would.”

Andreas' voice was barely above a whisper. He saw his mother's expression sour, and she raised a hand, striking him across the face. It stung, and he knew that her hand print would stay there for a few moments, but he stared at her, dumbfounded. Never in his life had his mother struck him. The shadows burst from him at the impact, targeting Elena, their ends jagged and pointed. She chuckled darkly, unamused by his display of magic.

"You think you can turn your magic on me?" She asked. "Without even knowing how to control it?"

Andreas said nothing, as his mother sauntered around him. She was right, of course, yet he couldn't let her believe it. A leader must never show fear in the face of adversity. His mother touched one of the jagged ends and placed it between her fingertips, almost pinching it. The tendril recoiled and disappeared, almost as if it was in pain.

"You don't even know a fraction of what you can do with this power," Elena whispered. "Remember what I said — we are bound to one another."

She patted his head and smiled, walking past him and making her way to the powder room to freshen up before bed. Andreas stood still and watched his mother. The shadows retracted into him once more, the uncomfortable heat of his magic now slowly turning into something warm, almost like a hug. His body was used to it now, he supposed. He wished he could go back to before — when all that was on his mind was how to be the best king possible. But he was flung off the deep end, and there was no way of returning.