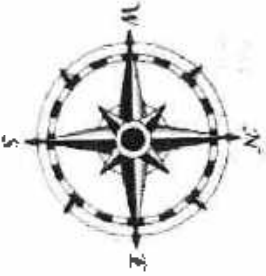
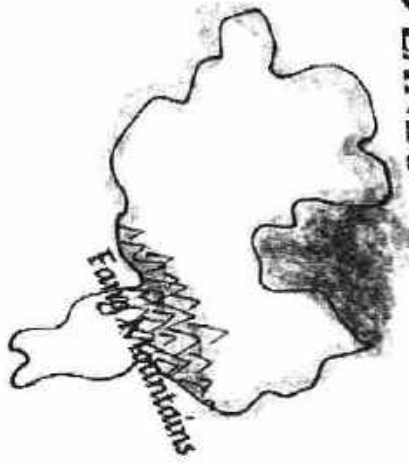


SUN'S DAUGHTER



SHADOWED LANDS



ISLAND KINGDOMS

SUN'S DAUGHTER

BY REESE GRINSTEAD

"Hear ye! Come one, come all, for an announcement from the castle! I bear grave news, and news that you do not want to miss! Hear ye! Merchants, peasants, come one, come all! The news affects us all! Hear ye! Hear ye!"

I clung to the shadows of a nearby alleyway as the messenger tore down the streets on his horse, its hooves clattering against the worn, cobbled pavement as its rider drove it onwards. As he passed by, a paper fell out of the saddlebags of his mount, drifting to the ground at my feet. I picked it up, the writing practically jumping off the page as I read it.

WARRIOR-KING JULIUS AERMONT DEAD! PRINCE PHILLIP MISSING!

The immortal Warrior-King, Julius Aermont, was found dead in his chambers this morning. As you may remember, his queen and former honor knight, Malea Nalasen Aermont, was taken into the Dark Lord's territory years ago, never to return. Rulership of this land would fall to the noble Prince Phillip Aermont, however he has gone missing. Speculation exists that he was taken by whomever killed his father, but no one knows for sure what happened to him.

Hastily scrawled below the printed message, as if it was written in a hurry, was a single sentence. My breath caught in my throat as I read it, a mix of dread and fear flooding my senses. I looked up, staring at the horizon. The direction sailors feared going when they left the islands, the direction of the Fang Mountains. The direction of the Dark Lord's territory and the dark haze that covered it. My eyes were probably playing tricks on me, but I could almost see hints of darkness on the horizon, before I looked back down at the note, the ominous text staring back at me.

The Dark Lord is coming.

stared at him, the silver armor of her people and her dark blue cloak draped across her shoulders adding to how intimidating she was, despite the fact that she was the shortest in the room. And on the other side of the room...

I swear, she could stun even the most cold-hearted of the nobility. Her golden hair hung in waves, two braids wrapping around her head like a crown. Even though she wore standard-issue military school clothing, she still managed to have the aura of someone in a beautiful gown, the kind only the richest in the land could buy. As she stood there, she pushed her glasses up higher on the bridge of her nose.

"Well, what do we do about this?" the young man asked, leaning back against the wall and crossing his arms behind his head.

"You're doing nothing, Luca," the partially-armored woman said sternly. "We all will have to wait and see what happens and who will step forward to lead."

"Ashlynn..." Luca begged, turning to look at the stunning woman.

"Emma's right," Ashlynn told him. "This is serious, and beyond anything we can do. We just have to wait for the noble houses to come together, or for Prince Phillip to return."

"We can't wait that long," I said, stepping further into the room as they all turned to face me, Luca jumping a little bit.

"Ica," Emma said in a warning tone. "What do you know?"

I strode to the center of the small room, where a table sat. Scattered across its surface were various versions of the paper I had found, but none with the ominous message at the bottom. I glanced at the lantern sitting on the far end of the table, and the flickering light from within, taking a deep breath before I told them.

"The Dark Lord is coming."

Silence filled the room. I stared at the flame, watching as it flickered.

"That... that can't be true," Ashlynn stammered. "Ica, tell me it isn't true!"

"It is," I sighed, pulling the piece of paper out from where I'd hid it in one of the small bags under my dark cloak, setting it on the table for them all to see.

"What does he want with us?" Luca asked after a brief pause.

"I don't know," I said, looking up to meet his brown eyes, his brow creased with worry.

"But whatever it is, it can't be good."

I resumed staring at the flame as they began arguing around me.

"Is he here for the throne?"

"No matter what he's here for, he won't have Rhyne."

"Yes, but... the old legends-"

"Are legends and folk tales."

"King Julius was immortal. Who's to say those stories aren't true?"

"Yes, but the rest of the stuff about Shadowsouls and the First King and Sundancers isn't."
I winced.

"They say the Dark Lord's territory is covered in darkness because of the Shadowsouls who seek refuge there. They say he himself is a Shadowsoul."

"That's peasant speculation."

"Ahem."

"Luca, you could've risen to the top, if you hadn't gotten caught stealing from the Warrior-King's vault."

"And what was it with that roll of privy paper you also took?"

"Heg, you've gotta do something memorable when you're stealing from a king!"

"Focus! Who knows how long we have to prepare!"

"Who knows what's even going on."

"Ica might."

"What's going on?"

"Will he be here for the throne?"

"When is he coming?"

"Yeah, how long do we have?"

"How-"

"I don't know!" I snapped, whipping around to face them.

All three of them stared at me in shock, Emma with a hand on the pommel of the sword sheathed at her hip. Luca looked at me with fear in his eyes, Emma with guarded caution in hers, and Ashlynn with concern.

"I don't know what's going on or how long we have," I breathed, trying to calm myself, "but I do know that he's coming. And whatever he's coming for, it can't be good."

Ashlynn glanced around, before meeting my eyes. Emma eased up slightly, but stayed tense as she watched me, and Luca stayed huddled in the corner.

"Well," Ashlynn said slowly, stepping closer, "we need more information so..." she looked at the ceiling, lost in thought. "What if we go out tonight? Get some information."

"What?" Luca asked, staying in his corner.

Ashlynn paced in an arc around the table, stopping and picking up the paper I'd brought in as she leaned on the table, nonchalantly skimming its text before looking up to lock eyes with each of us.

"Tonight, we go out and take a look around," she said. "See what we can learn."

"And what if we get caught?" Emma asked, taking her hand off her sword and crossing her arms across her chest.

"We won't," I said. I stood up tall, meeting each of their eyes in turn. "We've done stupider stuff and gotten out of it, so I know we have the skills to pull this off."

"Ica, if this goes wrong..." Emma said, meeting my eyes.

"What could go wrong?" Luca cut in, casually emerging from his corner and walking over to stand next to me. He wrapped one arm around me, and I had to hide my wince as his arm pressed down too hard on-

"Luca-" Emma started, cutting off my thought.

"We've got this," Luca scoffed, waving his hand dismissively.

"Let's vote," Ashlynn proposed. "All in favor of a nighttime scouting trip?"

Luca, Ashlynn and I all raised our hands, Luca pulling away from me as he did so. I rolled my shoulders, releasing the tension I didn't realize I'd been holding on to. Emma stared at us disapprovingly, crossing her arms.

"If you don't want to come with us, you don't have to," I told her, lowering my hand.

She sighed, dropping her arms and rolling her eyes.

"I may not want to do this, but someone's gotta watch your backs," she said, turning away from us, and pushing open the secret door hidden in the far wall of the room. She looked back over her shoulder, meeting each of our eyes in turn. "We leave at nightfall. Be ready."



Kneeling on the edge of the tower, a cold breeze playing with my long, braided hair, the night sky wide open above me. I fidgeted with the clasp of my black cloak, longing to ignore the cold and let myself be free. The urge to throw caution to the wind and soar was so tempting, but I managed to resist, tightly gripping the edge of the tower for a moment to center myself.

Scanning the dimly lit streets below, lit only by the flickering light of lanterns hung from metal posts scattered throughout the grid of the city, I searched for something, anything that might give a clue as to what was going on. Or where my friends were. As the world lay sprawled before me, I made the most naive mistake I could have: I forgot to pay close attention to my immediate surroundings.

A hand grasped me from behind, cold steel pressing against my throat as a male voice whispered "Don't move."

My breath quickened as I froze, helpless to whomever had found me at the top of this mostly abandoned clock tower. I closed my eyes waiting for the inevitable.

Silence filled the cold night air as I felt the man drag me away from the edge, holding the blade to my throat the entire time. His grip changed, and when I next heard his voice it was from in front of me instead of behind.

"Who are you?" he whispered in the dark. "Why are you here alone?"

I dared to open my eyes slightly, gasping at what I saw. I stared at him, wide-eyed, taking in his soft brown eyes and long, flaming-red hair secured in a ponytail, the wind toying with the vibrant strands, his faded purple tunic under a dark grey cloak, clasped with the wolf insignia of the Warrior-King. Looking into his eyes, he didn't look too much older than I was, yet I knew who he was immediately.

"Prince Phillip!" I whispered, unable to tear my gaze away from his shadowed eyes. "You're alive!"

"Yes, I am," he said, a cold edge seeping into his voice, faint shadows beginning to swirl around in the center of his eyes. "Now who are you?"

"I-I'm no one, I swear!" I gasped, terror beginning to set in as I started rambling. "I'm a student at Hermon Military Academy. I was raised by my mother, until she died when I was a child."

"Hmph." he scoffed, backing off and removing his dagger from my throat, its hilt ornately engraved in the shape of a dire wolf's head, its jaws open as the dagger's blade emerged from its mouth.

I took a slow breath, trying to calm myself as I stepped back and away from him.

"Then tell me this-" he started, before being knocked forwards into my arms by a rush of darkness. My eyes were open, but I could see nothing beyond the darkness surrounding us.

The darkness swirled in torrents of power, its jagged edges scraping against me. Despite leaving no physical traces of their presence, the sharp blades of darkness cut into me, agonizingly dragging their sharp edges across my body. I pinched my eyes closed, a familiar warmth beginning to rise within me. I struggled to push it down, very conscious of the prince who stood in my arms. The storm of darkness intensified, calling to the power within me. I pulled away, barely taking a single step when my eyes snapped open, sunlight pouring out of me and driving back the darkness in an uncontrolled burst.

The light swirled around, dancing in joy after having finally been let out. As it dissipated into the night, I fell to my knees, shivering against the cold that filled me in the wake of releasing much of my stored power.

"Impressive," a voice said from behind me. I spun around, a man in a black cloak standing in the shadows on the far side of the tower, his face hidden by the hood of his cloak. Shadows danced around him, until he held out his hand, the shadow energy swirling above his palm before fading into nothingness. I stared at him, a sinking feeling flooding my senses as I started to put the pieces together.

Slowly, he removed his hood, revealing a pale young face with haunted grey eyes, as if he'd seen the rise and fall of centuries. The wind toyed with his messy black hair, and even without even having laid eyes on this man, I knew exactly who he was.

"The Dark Lord," I whispered, fear settling in.

"I mean you no harm," he said, putting his hands up in a display of peace. "I didn't realize I was in the presence of my n- Prince and a Sundancer."

"Stay back," Prince Phillip said from behind me. I heard his footsteps coming closer, and I looked up to find him standing behind me protectively, his dagger raised. "This girl is one of my people, and you will not have her."

"Did your father tell you nothing about who I am?" the Dark Lord asked, an expression that almost looked like hurt flashing across his face.

"The fact that you attacked us without provocation says all I need to know," Phillip snarled, faint shadows dancing on the tip of his blade.

I rose to my feet, standing beside Prince Phillip as I stared defiantly at the Dark Lord.

"You don't have to like me, but you do have to let me live," the Dark Lord said, keeping his hands raised. "I'm—"

The door to the top of the tower flew open as Ashlynn dashed into the room, out of breath and partially covered in mud. She took one look at the Dark Lord and froze. She looked at him in a way that didn't make sense to me, as she gazed into his eyes with what almost looked like curious admiration.

"What..." she gasped.

"I'm here," the Dark Lord said, looking back at Prince Phillip and I, "to pay my respects. But this..." he said, turning back to Ashlynn and extending his hand to her, "is a lovely surprise. You are Rosa's sister, are you not?"

"I-I am," Ashlynn stammered, taking his hand. "You really wrote those letters?"

"I did," he said gently. "And I read every one you sent back."

"Ashlynn, what is going on here?" I asked, stepping towards the two. I didn't care that I was walking straight towards what might be the most powerful man in the world.

"You know each other?" Prince Phillip asked.

Before I could respond, the Dark Lord spoke.

"Clearly there are some secrets here that need to be unpacked," he said, stepping away from Ashlynn and pacing around the three of us as he spoke, looking out over the city. "Like, say, who knows who, and that we have both Shadowsouls and a Sundancer among our little group here. But how about this," he paused, turning away from the city sprawled beneath the tower to face us, "I'm in need of help getting into the meeting of the noble houses, and from my information that's tomorrow. From there, it's up to you whether or not we part ways."

"What do you mean by needing our help?" Prince Phillip asked.

"Many of the lords and ladies wouldn't be the happiest to see me, to say the least," the Dark Lord said nervously. "They would likely call for me to be killed on sight, even though by law I am legally permitted to come and pay my respects. But that's where you come in."

"Me?" Prince Phillip asked as the Dark Lord stared right at him.

"The lords and ladies will walk down the streets of the city until they reach the palace," the Dark Lord explained. "Then, behind them all, you and our two friends here will walk to the palace, making your triumphant return. Behind you, under your protection, I will walk. That way, no one gets hurt, and better yet things don't get messy for you three."

I looked around. Prince Phillip looked skeptical, but Ashlynn looked as though she trusted him. Honestly, I didn't know how to feel about her, given the revelations involving her and the Dark Lord. But now wasn't the time to ask.

"Deal?" the Dark Lord asked.

Prince Phillip looked at me. I shrugged. He sighed.

"Deal," he said reluctantly.



Looking out over the crowd, people lining either side of the streets leading up to the palace. One by one, the lords and ladies of each island walked towards the palace, surrounded by guards from their island. I spotted Lady Meghan of Rhyne, clad in a simple yet elegant sky blue gown, no lord in sight around her. She was practically a legend because of her refusal to bow down and marry any of the many young men who have tried to win her hand in marriage over the years, and how she ruled the island kingdom of Rhyne all by herself despite her young age. Around Lady Meghan marched her all-female honor guard in their silver armor, blue cloaks of varying shades around some of their shoulders. Marching proudly alongside her fellow Rhynian honor guard members, I was able to pick out Emma among the blue-cloaked guards protecting their lady.

"It's almost time," Prince Phillip said from behind me. I turned around to find him standing at the door to the roof I stood on, Ashlynn at his side. Sparing one last glance at the procession of nobility, I turned away from the streets and strode over to them.

"Is everything ready?" Ashlynn asked as we made our way down the stairs.

"The Dark Lord is ready to follow us once we make it to the gates," Prince Phillip responded. "From there, we enter the palace, and the tiring delegation begins."

Sooner than I was expecting, we were walking down the street, Ashlynn and I flanking Prince Phillip as he walked proudly down the center of the street in his purple tunic, his dagger

sheathed at one hip and a cloak of wolf hide over his shoulders. I glanced over at Ashlynn, who stared straight ahead, her hair tied back in a standard issue military braid, wearing her full military uniform. I looked ahead, trying to ignore the shocked whispers of the people gathered around us, shocked at their prince's return.

The gates to the palace drew nearer, the gathered lords and ladies assembled within and staring at us with unmasked surprise. When we got to the gates, the midday sun beating down on us, cries of alarm sounded around us as the sky suddenly darkened. Within the few seconds it took for us to reach the gate and turn around, the sun was back to shining down brightly.

The people backed against the walls of surrounding buildings, crying out in fear as a man in a dark cloak walked down the street, his face covered by the hood of his cloak as shadows swirled around him in an overt display of power.

"Guards," one of the lords behind me said.

"People of Aermont!" Prince Phillip cried, his voice carrying the commanding tone his father was known for. The cries of the crowd silenced as the Dark Lord continued his slow walk towards us. "Under the agreement between the Island Kingdoms and the Shadow Lands, in times of grief there is no need for royal approval for visits. And due to our current time of grieving, I welcome the Dark Lord into our lands to pay his respects to my father and our king, the late Julius Aermont."

As the Dark Lord drew near, the shadows around him lessened, until there were only two darting bolts of darkness swirling around him. He stopped before Prince Phillip, removing his hood as he looked into the prince's eyes.

"I'm terribly sorry for your loss," he said. "I miss him already." Turning to face the people, the last two motes of shadow energy surrounding him winked out as he spoke to the crowd. "This is a sad time. To you, he may have been a king, alien and unknown. But to others he might have been an idol, an aspiration that was admired and looked up to. He may have been a leader, keeping order in times of chaos. But to some, he was a friend. A fellow noble, a brother-in-arms. A father." He paused for a moment, looking down. Under his breath, so quietly I could barely hear him, he spoke. "A brother." Raising his voice again, addressing the people once more, he continued his speech. "But now he's gone, leaving a void that for some can never be filled. But we have to find a way to move on, myself included. So today I stand here, sharing your grief, and prepared to aid in the decisions that will shape what happens next. But know this: even though I may not be one of your lords, even though I may not be a citizen of the Island Kingdoms, I will keep your best interests at heart."

He turned away, silence filling the air. The sound of a single person slowly clapping echoed through the streets. Slowly more and more people joined in as he and Prince Phillip walked slowly towards the assembled lords and ladies, Ashlynn and I trailing along behind

them. Soon, the streets were bustling with cheering people, a stark contrast to the cries of fear that had filled the same streets only moments before.

"Let's begin, shall we?" the Dark Lord asked, turning to Prince Phillip.

"If you think for one moment—" one of the lords said, his crimson garb bejeweled with rubies lining the collar and studding the buttons of his robe-like tunic, his hand on the hilt of his jeweled sword.

"Lord Nikoli," Prince Phillip said sharply, silencing the lord, "there will be no hostility today. Not for this."

I couldn't tell if it was for show, but for a moment it almost seemed as if Prince Phillip's perfect facade broke, revealing genuine grief underneath. But, as soon as it was there, it was gone, and he was back to being the perfect prince he always was.

"He's your prince," I heard Lord Nikoli's wife hiss. Lady Jade, if I remembered right, her short black hair falling free, her scarlet gown hemmed with lace and studded with ornate patterns of diamonds and rubies around her plunging neckline. "You have to listen to him."

The other lords and ladies stood with their guards in an arc around us, each in exquisite finery of their family's colors. Looking over at Lady Meghan, I locked eyes with Emma, who gave me a questioning look with hints of betrayal. Before I could say anything, the Dark Lord spoke.

"I understand your hostility," he said, looking around at each noble in turn. "But really, I'm here out of the goodness of my heart. And to honor our dear friend, we shouldn't argue here any longer."

"We really should get going," Prince Phillip agreed. "Follow me."

He strode ahead, Ashlynn and I staying beside him as the Dark Lord trailed behind us. I didn't look back, but I could hear the footfalls of the nobility and the few chosen guards who accompanied them into the castle. I stumbled, trying to resist the urge to stop and gawk at the entrance hall.

Above the hall, looking down on us, was a portrait of Warrior-King Julius Aermont, his icy blue eyes looking at something in the distance. He stood proudly, his white armor gilded along the edges, the wolf head on his shoulder staring at us with eyes of pure flame, an albino dire wolf hide cloak around his shoulders. His blonde hair was painted as if there was wind blowing, and even from where I stood I could see the faint hints of facial hair on his young-but-old face.

I had no time to marvel at the wonders around me, following Prince Phillip through the halls of the castle, passing portraits of the islands, well-known nobles, and of Julius and his family, including Queen Malea and Prince Phillip. I had to keep moving, but for a moment it almost looked as if one of the portraits had a figure in the background who had been covered up.

hand into the floor, shadow energy filling the room in a cascading wave. The air tinted grey, the Dark Lord rose as shadows condensed into the form of a man sitting on the edge of the bed. As the form grew more defined, it became the unmistakable form of Julius Hermont, a shadowy projection of his armor discarded on the bed beside him as he wore nothing but loose-fitting cloth pants, revealing a muscular form that still held on to his youthful yet old nature. He turned his head sharply to face the door as a shadowy form stumbled through the door, falling to its knees before the king, shadows swirling around the indistinguishable form.

"Who-" Julius said, jumping to his feet as he stared at the form writhing on the floor, gasping in pain as shadows swirled around it.

"Help... me..." the form gasped, its voice familiar yet unrecognizable.

The Warrior-King stepped towards him, concern in his shadowy eyes.

"Run," the form hissed, clutching its head. "Run!"

The Warrior-King stayed exactly where he was, kneeling down and putting a hand on the shoulder of the form, who looked up at him with what looked like a pleading look. Suddenly, the form screamed, daggers of pure darkness bursting from the form. One struck the Warrior-King in the chest, and he fell back, lying on the ground with a dazed look in his eyes.

The shadows stopped swirling around the form, yet it remained unrecognizable. As it crawled over to the near-limp form of Julius Hermont, what almost sounded like faint sobs sounded from the form.

"Who is that?" Lady Meghan asked, her breaths shaky. "What have they done to him?"

"The shadows don't remember," the Dark Lord said, looking on as the form cried over the dead king. I could hear hints of voices, as the dying king and the form conversed with each other, but nothing that I could understand. "However..."

He trailed off, holding up one hand as the shadowy projections froze. Kneeling down, he inspected the dying king and the wound in his chest.

"This is the work of a Shadowsoul," he breathed, worry creasing his brow. Suddenly, he stood up, turning to face the nobles as bolts of shadow darted from his fingertips, slicing through the air as they darted towards us. People screamed as bolts of shadow harmlessly ran through them, leaving no trace of their presence. As one of the bolts drew near me, it suddenly turned, never making contact as a familiar warmth echoed from within me.

Looking around, a few of the guards in the room and one of the lords in lavender had faint shadows swirling around them. As the bolts of shadow began to fade, after having touched almost all of the people present, one sank into Prince Phillip's chest.

Shadows burst from him as he gasped, swirling around him in a dark mass before fading back into him, leaving only a few pulsing bolts of shadow orbiting the young prince.

"What have you done to him?" Lord Nikoli cried, shoving his way through the crowd towards the Dark Lord.

"Look around you," the Dark Lord said, spreading his arms wide as he gestured to the few with shadows swirling around them. "Among you are Shadowsouls. Most only have traces of the gift, not enough to ever use them, but I had to be sure." He locked eyes with Prince Phillip, slowly walking closer to him. "This power, it's a gift, but it's also a curse. As you grow older, it grows with you, gaining strength and getting harder to control. And in a world like this where those few who have the gift are shunned, banished, or murdered for simply being who they are, no one learns control any more. But if you don't, this power will consume you, making you a threat to everyone around you and eventually yourself as well."

The Dark Lord stopped, only inches away from Prince Phillip, as the other nobles and their guards backed away from the shadow-clad pair. The Dark Lord set one hand on Prince Phillip's shoulder, closing his eyes as the shadows started to dissipate. Prince Phillip sighed in relief, his power becoming dormant once more.

"I will train him," the Dark Lord said, turning to face the assembled lords and ladies. "For both his safety and yours. But someone will have to rule in his place while he and his two guards here are with me."

I glanced over at Ashlynn, meeting her eyes. The Dark Lord is bringing us with him? I thought, her face looking just as shocked as mine must have been.

The many lords and ladies began to state their cases as to why they should rule, all talking over each other in their attempt to temporarily win the throne. It was disgusting, how even so soon after their king's death, even in front of his mourning son, all the nobles really cared about was power. All but Lady Meghan, who stood silently, watching the other nobles argue with her arms crossed. Silently, I made my way over to the Dark Lord and Prince Phillip.

"Just a thought," I whispered, "but Lady Meghan is the only one here who's not pining for power. If anyone's fit to temporarily fill in, it's her."

The Dark Lord looked at me for a moment, before nodding. Prince Phillip merely stared at Lady Meghan, before nodding in agreement.

"Everyone!" Prince Phillip cried, his voice cracking. The lords and ladies continued arguing. "Stop it! Stop arguing right now!"

Something dark took over his tone, and the lords and ladies froze where they were, eyes wide in shock as, in unison, all of them slowly turned to face Prince Phillip. Phillip staggered backwards in horror, the Dark Lord catching him and whispering in his ear.

"Be free," Prince Phillip whispered, the same dark tone in his voice. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry..." he trailed off, meeting the terrified eyes of the nobles, clearly horrified at his own

Before I knew it, Prince Phillip had led us to the lower levels of the castle, and as he pushed open a weathered wood door set in walls of plain grey stone, I could feel the chill of death radiating from the stones. As the door opened, a rush of echoing whispers carried on a cold breeze burst from the room beyond, filling the air with a macabre feeling. Still, Prince Phillip led the way into the room beyond.

The room was barely lit, with only a few candles illuminating the cold stone room. In the center, a large, ornate casket lay, its top open. Next to the door, a small stone table lay covered in flowers of varying colors. As each lord and lady entered the room, they grabbed a flower of the color of their family: red carnations for Lord Nikoli and Lady Jade, lilac for a pair of lords dressed in lavender, yellow tulips for a lord and lady in vibrant yellow (which didn't seem all that appropriate to wear to a funeral, but it was their family's color, so whatever), green iris flowers for a lord and lady in dark green, and blue orchids for Lady Meghan. One by one, each lord or lady walked up to the casket, setting their flower within as they said their last goodbyes. During the procession, I subtly inched closer to the casket, until I could see the face of the man lying within. Warrior-King Julius Hermont lay still, staring up at the ceiling, his sword laying on his chest as his lifeless hands gripped the hilt of the blade. Somehow, he looked like... a normal man. I don't know what I was expecting, since I had seen him from a distance, but he seemed much more human than you would expect an immortal man to look.

As the last flower was laid, everyone turned to the Dark Lord, who stood in silence, watching the casket with what looked like tears in his eyes. In the silence, shadows swirled around his fingertips, a white rose appearing in his hands. Murmurs of shock filled the room as he slowly made his way over to the casket and added the rose to the flowers laying on the dead king's chest. As he stood over the dead king, his breath caught in his throat. He whispered his goodbyes in an ancient, long-dead language, a single tear rolling down one cheek. Stepping back, rubbing the few tears away as they started to fall, he turned to Prince Phillip.

The young prince stepped forwards. As he took one look at his father, whatever resistance he had that allowed him to keep it together cracked, as a muffled sob escaped his throat, tears streaming in trails down his face. As the Dark Lord stepped back to give him space, Prince Phillip stopped him, grabbing his arm.

"Please," Phillip whispered, struggling to get the words out through the silent tears. "Do this with me."

The Dark Lord simply nodded, his eyes filled with tears as he stood beside Prince Phillip. Together, each laid one hand on the king's face, gently closing his eyes one final time. As they stepped back, four of the gathered lords grabbed the top of the casket and slid it shut. As the lords and ladies began to file out, I scanned the faces of Lady Meghan's three guards, not recognizing any of them. At the end of the trailing group of nobles, Ashlynn and I followed the

Dark Lord and Prince Phillip, the Dark Lord with one arm around the young prince's shoulders as silent tears streamed down his face. Once clear of the wooden door, it swung shut behind us with a click.

The nobles waited for us in the main hall of the castle, several, including Lady Meghan, showed some hints of grief, but the majority stood there stone-faced, cold and unfeeling despite the loss and grief they had just witnessed.

"What now, my prince?" one of the lords in lilac asked, his tunic embroidered at the neck and cuffs with elegant yet simple patterns.

"What can we do?" Prince Phillip said hopelessly, his voice devoid of any confidence.

"Well, how did he die?" Lady Meghan asked, crossing her arms. Her sky blue gown was mostly plain, with small sapphires studding the neckline, a silver shoulder guard on her left shoulder, and a slit in the skirt allowing her to move freely. One look was more than enough for you to see that she's no one to mess with. "If there's a murderer on the loose, we should know."

"Where did it happen?" the Dark Lord asked quietly, yet somehow all the attention in the room went to him. He looked around at the staring nobles, some of the guards and nobles looking at him with unmasked hostility. "Shadows have memory. If my information is correct, then it hasn't been too long for me to call on that memory to reconstruct what happened."

"And why should we trust you?" the lady in yellow asked. It occurred to me in that moment how few of the lords and ladies I knew by name. Hopefully none of them would address me.

"I want to know what happened just as much as you do," he responded, meeting her gaze. "Whoever killed him made me the only living immortal. I owe it to him to find out who killed him."

"They found him in his chambers," Prince Phillip murmured weakly.

Following the nobles through the palace, we eventually made our way to a massive bedroom, the four poster bed decked out in fine silks and dire wolf hides. Across the room from the bed, two doors were firmly shut, presumably leading to a wardrobe full of fine clothes. On the far side of the room were double doors with blue topaz and turquoise inlays depicting a rushing ocean, presumably leading to the king's private bath, and a large, clearly reinforced window looked out over the city on the far side of the room, shafts of sunlight cutting through the thin curtains and creating a pool of light on the floor.

The nobility stayed close to the door, no one wanting to go too far into the room. The Dark Lord stepped into the middle of the room, thin shadows trailing behind him. He stopped, raising his hands. Shadows swirled in the palms of his hands, as shadows darted from all corners of the room to him, swirling around him. The bolts of shadow energy revolved around him quicker as more and more joined the spiral of darkness around him. As the room darkened, he slammed his

"My Lord," the female guard said, her voice soft and silky, bowing slightly as she addressed the Dark Lord. "Where may we take you and your gathered company?"

Out of the corner of my eye I could see her scanning each of us, and saw her double take when she realized she was in the presence of Prince Phillip. Then, when she looked at me... Her eyes lit up a little, sparks of hope in her eyes as she took me in, her eyes catching on the bits of my wings that were poking out from under the cloak.

"We need passage through the Shadowveil and to the castle," the Dark Lord told her, striding ahead towards the door to the carriage. "As soon as possible, before anyone here gets any ideas."

"Yes my Lord," she said, bowing her head before turning and motioning to the male guard. She strode sharply over to the driver's seat, jumping up and grabbing the reins as the other guard made his way over to us.

As the Dark Lord opened the door to the carriage, the male guard slid up beside me, reaching out to place one hand on my arm.

"My fair lady, surely you must be shivering too much," he said, a faint smile on his face, the cold breeze playing with his pale blonde hair. "I cou-"

A little bolt of darkness flicked him in the face as I pulled away, leaving him stumbling back and away from me.

"Sevris, you will leave her alone," the Dark Lord said sharply, striding over to him and grabbing him by the front of his armor. "And if I get any more reports of your behavior..."

"I-I understand, my Lord," the guard (Sevris) stammered. He scrambled away as the Dark Lord dropped him, rushing around the front of the carriage to his side of the driver's seat.

"Sorry about him," the Dark Lord said, slowly walking towards the door, where Prince Phillip stood, holding the door open as Ashlynn peered out from within the carriage. "If he comes close to you again, don't be afraid to smite him. Now come on."

He strode over to the door, holding it open as Prince Phillip hopped in, sitting down on the opposite side Ashlynn was perched on. I followed, hopping wordlessly into the carriage before the Dark Lord followed suit, closing the door behind him.

The spacious interior of the carriage was plunged into darkness, until moonlight flooded the space, the Dark Lord holding what must have been the cover of a small sphere of glass embedded in the ceiling, a small orb of silver light pulsing from within. I sat down next to Prince Phillip, Ashlynn sitting on the pale grey seat across from me as the Dark Lord moved to sit on her other side, across from Prince Phillip. Between us, the aisle in the center of the carriage yawned, the empty space filled with silence as the creatures cried out, before lurching forwards. I almost fell forwards, before turning around to look through the window behind me, watching as the four creatures took flight, the silhouettes of the two guards visible on either side of the window.

"Magnificent, aren't they?" the Dark Lord asked, finally breaking the silence. I looked over at him, and he smiled slightly. I must have looked like a child, full of wonder at seeing things I had only dreamed to exist. Although, to him everyone must seem like a child.

"Hippogriffs. They were hunted to extinction centuries upon centuries ago, except for a single herd in the wastelands that the Shadowed Lands used to be. When I took control of that land, I made sure that they could thrive, and now they're back from the edge of extinction."

"What else is there?" Ashlynn asked, wonder sparking in her eyes, battling with the exhaustion that I was starting to see in her face. "In the Island Kingdoms, they're myths and children's tales."

"You'll see shortly," the Dark Lord said. As they sat there, their hands drifted towards each other, barely brushing, before the two of them noticed and simultaneously pulled away. "You all will. Things that were thought to be gone that still exist within the Shadowveil. And who knows?" He shrugged. "Maybe there are things in the Island Kingdoms that are thought to be gone but aren't. Like you, Sundancer."

"Two things," I said. "First off, why do you keep calling me Sundancer? Secondly, what do you mean, 'thought to be gone?' I thought you said that people with these 'gifts' are more common than people think."

"People fear us," he said. "And what they fear, they banish. Or they destroy. Back when the First King was still alive, people had some tolerance for people like us, but even though he had a Shadowsoul - a Shadowsoul-" He struggled to get the words out, fighting against something. "Blast that stupid taboo curse!" he snarled, sighing as he gave up. "I'll explain fully once we're through the Shadowveil and I don't have to deal with m-" he made an angry face, unable to say what he wanted once again, "the Warrior-King's taboo curse forbidding anyone from speaking of... something. Anyways, while the First King's right hand may have been powerless Warrior-Prince Julius Hermon, his left hand was a Shadowsoul. Even so, after the First King was killed by... someone I'll talk about later, the suppressed fear held by the people reached its boiling point. Murders of known gifted were common, and many were burned at the stake. At the time, the Shadowveil didn't exist, and the land beyond the Fang Mountains was nothing but a wasteland, so there was nowhere to run. The gifted population dwindled, nearing extinction. Julius, who had become Warrior-King, banished me to the other side of the Fang Mountains, believing it would kill me. But it didn't. I found ancient shadows lurking within the wastes, and using them and my own power, covered a small patch of the wastes, close to the Fang Mountains, with the first part of the Shadowveil. As the veil took hold, life started to return to the land, and I realized that I could create a safe haven for the gifted. But by the time the Shadowveil was big enough, by the time I was able to get a message across the mountains, it was too late. There weren't any known Sundancers left. But apparently I was wrong. Even

abilities. "As for who will rule while I learn to control this... Lady Meghan, you've served the Island Kingdoms well, and will continue to do so as Queen-in-Reserve."

A brief look of surprise flashed across her face for a moment, before she replaced it with a mask of steel determination. She nodded, uncrossing her arms.

"Thank you, my Prince," she said. "I will not let you down."

"I'm counting on it," Prince Phillip whispered.

Ignoring the looks of anger, contempt, and scorn, Prince Phillip and the Dark Lord turned to leave, the shadowy projection of the Warrior-King's death fading into nothingness. I looked over at Ashlynn, her face betraying her shock at what had just happened, before turning back to face the exit. Wordlessly, the two of us followed the Dark Lord and Prince Phillip out of the room and into the unknown.



Night had just fallen, and as we walked through the darkening woods, Prince Phillip keeping his head down and his cloak wrapped tightly around him as he walked, Ashlynn walking beside him in her military uniform, I glanced back at the Dark Lord, who brought up the rear. He met my eyes as he caught up to me.

"Mind revealing what we both know you're hiding, Sundancer?" he asked.

Prince Phillip and Ashlynn stopped, turning around with questioning looks on their faces.

"What?" the Dark Lord asked innocently, holding his hands up in surrender. "Don't you know the stories? About Sundancers and one of their abilities only the most powerful have?"

"For a moment I thought you meant something very different," Prince Phillip said quietly. Ever since the incident in the palace, he'd either been staying quiet or talking quietly, presumably to avoid using whatever power he'd used on the nobles.

"Skies above, no," the Dark Lord said quickly, his face flushing a little bit.

"Whatever it is you were asking, the answer is no," I said, striding ahead.

"You're really going to make me do this, aren't you?" the Dark Lord sighed.

"Do what?" I started to ask, just beginning to turn and face him when a sharp, cold rush of darkness trailed down the center of my back, cutting through my military uniform. I felt the strings tied around my chest underneath snap, freeing my darkest secret.

The strings and my uniform tumbled to the ground, leaving only the strip of fabric around my chest behind as my wings reflexively flared out around me. I wrapped them around myself lightly, crossing my arms as I turned to face the Dark Lord, the cream feathers doing very little to block the cold breeze that had begun to blow.

"What was that for?" I asked sharply.

"You're..." Ashlynn said, trailing off. I met her eyes, a look of surprise and awe in her eyes as she stood frozen, staring at my wings. I also thought I saw hints of betrayal in her eyes, but I hoped I was imagining it. Next to her, Prince Phillip looked at me with surprise.

"That's what I meant," the Dark Lord said, walking up beside me. "This way," he continued, striding ahead through the woods.

I shivered as the wind picked up. I looked up nervously at the gathering clouds. It wasn't quite winter yet, but it was getting close. Ashlynn turned to follow the Dark Lord, but Prince Phillip hesitated. He silently walked over to me, taking off his wolf hide cloak and handing it to me.

"Thank you," I whispered, wrapping it around my shoulders. He nodded in response, before following Ashlynn and the Dark Lord. I glanced behind me once at the fading lights of the city, thinking of Emma and Luca and everything I was about to leave behind. Still, I turned away, jogging to catch up to the others.

"How did you know I was Rosa's sister?" I heard Ashlynn ask as I caught up.

"She's a high ranking Moonblessed," the Dark Lord responded. "Her gift may not be as strong as some of the others, but she trains harder than any. She works at the castle a lot, and she talks about you. She's also the one who first introduced me to you, through those letters."

"How is she?" she asked.

"Thriving," the Dark Lord responded. "She misses you, but if she would have stayed here, she would have been discovered sooner or later, and who knows what they would have done to her. Speaking of powers, have you ever been tested?"

"Oh, we're both adopted," Ashlynn said. "We're not actually related by blood."

"The gift is more common than you might think," the Dark Lord told her. "The Island Kingdoms have a long tradition of hiding the truth, including how many Shadowsouls and Moonblessed are really out there. Then again, most either die young, are never discovered, or come to the Shadowed Lands for one reason or another."

The Dark Lord stopped in a shadowy clearing, looking up at the dark sky as if he was searching for something. After a moment, he whistled, shadows spiraling around him. Splitting the sky, a dark carriage carried by four dark, winged creatures descended into the clearing. Slowing to a stop before us, the black carriage was pulled by four creatures with the back half of a dark grey horse and the front half of a dark grey bird, probably an eagle?

The two guards in black armor sitting in the driver's seat of the carriage, one male one female, set down the reins and leapt nimbly from the carriage, the female guard strolling over to meet the Dark Lord as the other guard checked on each of the creatures. I gawked at the creatures, trying to figure out what they were called.

though I'd received a letter from the Warrior-King saying that he was trying to preserve the last Sundancer bloodline, I'd lost all hope that there would be any more Sundancers when we needed them. But then I found you. And as for why I call you Sundancer, you never told me your name, so what else was I supposed to call you?"

"My name's Ica," I told him, trying to ignore the exhaustion that was setting in. I looked out the window set into the door closest to me, the dark glass showing nothing but ocean as the carriage rocked in the wind, swaying to the beat of four pairs of powerful wings. I gawped, trying to hide it as I turned back towards my companions. I hadn't slept since...

Since before I'd found out about the Warrior-King's murder. Sure, I'd taken a short nap before Emma, Luca, Ashlynn and I had gone out to find more information, but I hadn't slept well, by any means.

"You okay?" Prince Phillip whispered quietly. The Dark Lord silently looked on from across the carriage, Ashlynn's eyes drooping as she sat beside him.

"It's safe here," the Dark Lord assured us all as I nodded silently. "You're more than welcome to sleep."

"Thank you," Ashlynn whispered quietly, before curling up in the corner.

I fixed the pin holding the wolf hide cloak around my shoulders so I didn't have to hold it closed before doing the same, closing my eyes and drifting into the sweet grasp of sleep.



I stood before the fountain in the center of town, an ancient prophecy etched into the stone in its center. The prophecy every young child knew.

*"Centuries gone and centuries past,
When the King of Time has long since been laid to rest,
Sparks of old will ignite,
The darkness will be one with the light."*

Below the inscription, written in an ancient, long-dead language, were four more lines. It was taught in school that those four lines were just a repeat of the first four, but no one alive could translate, so no one really knew for sure. Even so, they said the prophecy had been resolved centuries ago, when the Dark Lord was banished and the Shadowsoul menace ended. That the darkness of the Shadowed Lands had become one with the light of the Island Kingdoms a long time ago.

"Ica..."

I spun around, but no one was there.

"Ica..."

"Who's there?" I cried, looking around. The square, which had once been full of people as I'd remembered it being, was empty. I stood alone, looking around in search of the voice.

"Icarus..."

"Show yourself, now!" I cried, drawing my sword. But I didn't have a sword. This memory was from before I joined the military academy. Looking around, I realized that I was taller, and as I subconsciously flicked my wings, I realized that they had also been set free.

A boom of thunder split the sky. I looked up, two glowing blue eyes staring down at me. I gasped, stumbling back as a beam of swirling light and shadow struck the fountain, the text of the prophecy flickering between the ancient language and today's common tongue. The bottom line of the prophecy translated completely. I froze, reading it.

"The Sun's Daughter will rise to make things right."



"Ica!" Prince Phillip said, panic in his voice as he shook me awake. I glanced around, startled, blinking the last remnants of sleep from my eyes as the carriage shook.

"What's happening?" Ashlynn asked sleepily as the Dark Lord gently shook her awake, her eyes flying open as the carriage shook again.

"There are a lot of unsavory people on the peninsula leading to the Shadowveil," the Dark Lord said, striding over to the window on the far door of the carriage, stumbling as it shook again. "Many of which don't like me or the nobles of the Island Kingdoms. And if word's gotten out that you three are with me-"

Something outside snapped, and the Dark Lord fell into the sealed door as the carriage suddenly dropped. It leveled out, but we continued to sink downwards, falling towards what I hoped to be land. The Dark Lord pushed off the wall, grabbing the cover to the light as he struggled to stand in the falling carriage.

"Grab onto something, and don't let go," he commanded, before he slammed the cover onto the glass sphere of light, plunging the carriage into darkness. I scrambled for something to hold onto, finding a handhold in the wall with one hand and Prince Phillip's hand with the other. He held my hand back, lacing his fingers through mine as we fell towards what might very well be our deaths.

Time seemed to stretch endlessly in the darkness, until the hippogriffs screeched and the carriage slammed into the ground, rolling to a bumpy stop. My heart pounded in my chest, and

through our interlaced hands I could feel Prince Phillip's doing the same. Shaking, I let go of the handhold.

"Is everyone okay?" the Dark Lord whispered.

"I'm alive," Ashlynn whispered, and I released a breath I didn't know I was holding.

"Same here," Prince Phillip whispered.

"I'm also alive," I whispered.

"Thank the First King," the Dark Lord whispered, sighing faintly in relief. "Now stay quiet, and try not to move."

I couldn't see anything in the darkness, and it was so tempting to summon a little light, but at the same time I was terrified of what I'd see if I did. Or what the "unsavory people" would see...

Footsteps echoed outside, and it didn't sound like it was our two guards. One of the hippogriffs screeched, and I could hear the faint sound of gruff voices.

"Back away, or meet our blades!" the female guard threatened.

"Ah, but what would two of the Dark Lord's own elite guards be doing out here?" a man asked, his voice rough and gravelly. "Better yet, why would they be flying the Dark Lord's carriage, but with only darkness within?"

"It was a false alarm," Sevriss snapped. "We were called to pick up our Lord from the Island Kingdoms, but in light of the Warrior-King's death he's been asked to stay. So we came back without anyone, and were going to peacefully cross the Shadowveil. Until you shot us down."

"Oi, 'dey do be nice creatures you got 'dere," another man hissed.

"Yeah, who's to say we care about your Lord and 'is property, when we say they're ours?" another man jeered.

"Enough!" the first man snapped, his gruff voice echoing. "We're not here for the creatures."

"Hw..."

"We're here," the man continued, "because rumor has it the Dark Lord has left the Island Kingdoms. And he has the prince with him."

"That's news to us," the female guard says. "If he left, it wasn't with us."

"See, but I think you're lying," the man said. "What do you say, boys? You in?"

"Yeah!"

"Let's kill 'em!"

"Me's always wan'ed to spill Shadow People blood!"

"I'm telling you, we don't know where they are," Sevriss said one more time.

"Stay here," the Dark Lord whispered, before quickly slipping out of the door on his side of the carriage. He closed it behind him, once again leaving us in darkness.

Steel met steel, the echoes clanging as the two guards were faced with who knows how many men. As the sounds of battle filled the silent darkness within the carriage, I could barely hear the sound of faint footsteps on the top of the carriage. Screams started, and a faint thump sounded from above us.

"The Dark Lord!" one man screamed.

"I can't see!"

"Where are you?"

"Keep it together! It only proves their lies!"

"I can't take this..." Ashlynn whispered, her voice shaky. "Not knowing..."

"I have to go out there," Prince Phillip whispered. "I have to do something."

"If you're going out there, I am," I whispered as a body hit the side of the carriage.

"Wait," Ashlynn whispered. "Don't leave me."

"Come with us," I whispered. "You still have your sword. Fight with us."

"Emilia!" Sevrin cried as the female guard screamed.

"Don't!" the female guard (Emilia?) cried as a man opened the door closest to Prince Phillip, letting a faint strand of moonlight into the carriage as the prince lunged towards the man, slicing the man's throat with his dagger before the man could speak. Ashlynn and I jumped to our feet as Prince Phillip stood over the dying man, looking out over the gathered men.

"It's the prince!" one of them cried.

"They were lying!" another followed up.

Prince Phillip took a step back as the men approached, holding up their blades as one lifted up a crossbow. I stepped in front of him, drawing my sword from where it was sheathed at my hip, Ashlynn climbing around him on the other side and doing the same. As the men started to charge towards us, bolts of darkness shot down from above, stopping them in their tracks as the first rows of men fell over, either wounded or dead as the bolts of shadow energy found their marks.

"**Stop where you are,**" the Dark Lord commanded, a dark tone taking over his voice as the men froze. "These people are under my protection. Harm them, and you will have my wrath upon you."

"Don't listen to him!" the gruff man shouted, running around the side of the carriage, a sizable group of men following him. He held a sword, and as Ashlynn and I cautiously stepped out of the carriage and into the cold, he turned to stare at us, before looking up above us. "We will have none of your games, Dark One."

"Games?" the Dark Lord asked threateningly. "Do you think this is a game?" The dark tone returned to his voice. "**Kill him.**"

were soft as I burrowed under them, my wings falling how they wanted for the first time in a long time.

"See you in the morning, Ica," Rhya said, before closing the door.

I smiled, before closing my eyes and falling into a deep, dreamless sleep.



I woke the next morning to sunlight streaming through the crack in between the curtains, the beams of light painting an intricate pattern on the floor of the room. I sat up, the blankets falling away as I stretched, spreading my wings wide. Sliding to the side of the bed, I sat, my feet on the floor as I mentally took in everything that had happened.

I heard a knock on the door, before Rhya entered the room in her dark navy servant's uniform, a tray in one hand as a bundle of fabric hung over her arm.

"Feeling rested?" she asked, setting down the tray on a table on the far side of the room, two chairs next to it. I stood up walking over to her.

"Yeah," I replied, taking a seat.

"Eat up," she said, grabbing the bundle of fabric before starting towards the archway next to me. "I'll start getting things ready for your bath. Have to make you presentable, after all."

I smiled faintly, turning to the contents of the tray. A glass of water accompanied by a plate with a flaky, crescent shaped pastry, slices of a vibrant purple fruit, and strips of thin, well-cooked meat. I picked up one of the strips, sniffing its rich scent before taking a bite. The flavors melted in my mouth, the smoky tang of the rich meat more flavorful than I expected.

The flaky pastry was light and delicious, and the fruit tasted like citrusy slices of sunshine, reminding me of the sweet warmth that filled me when I took in the sunlight. Maybe it was because of my powers, or maybe I imagined it, but I almost felt a faint echo of that feeling stir through me.

"It's good, isn't it?" Rhya asked, taking me by surprise. "If you're done, then follow me."

I rose to my feet, following her through the archway. On one side stood the door to what I assumed to be a closet, but as Rhya pushed open the door on the other side, I made my way into the bathroom.

Faint wisps of steam rose from the large tub taking up most of the other side of the room, filling the room with the faint scent of herbs. Next to the tub sat a pile of dark grey fabric, as well as two small vials and a pitcher.

"How do you usually wash your wings?" Rhya asked, closing the door behind her.

"I let them get as wet as they need to, then use my powers to dry them," I said as she walked over by the edge of the tub.

"What are you waiting for?" Rhya asked after a brief pause.

"I'm... I'm not used to bathing in front of people," I admitted. "I always had to hide my wings, so... I always did it alone."

"Don't feel bad," she told me, walking over and putting one hand on my shoulder. "I used to be the same way. It'll all be over quickly."

I nodded, before starting to undress. Rhya carefully untied the bandage covering my wound, and I looked down to see it was sealed, a dark, hardened scab sealing the wound. When it came time to untie the strip of fabric around my chest, I struggled for a moment, before dropping my arms.

"Would you mind untying this for me?" I asked sheepishly.

Rhya nodded, walking behind me and untying the tightly knotted fabric. As it loosened, I pulled on it from the front, the fabric sliding out of the small gaps between my wings and the rest of my body.

Stepping cautiously into the water, I sighed at the heat, slowly lowering myself into the tub. Rhya knelt down on the edge beside me, untying my braided hair and gently running her fingers through the tangled locks. As she carefully untangled and washed my hair, I looked at the foggy stained glass window in the wall, its glass tinted so that it was impossible to see through but not too dark to let in the sunlight.

"I wasn't expecting to see the sun here," I said. Rhya paused for a moment, before continuing her work.

"I've heard that from most people who come here from the Island Kingdoms," she said.

"From the outside, the Shadowveil looks like a cloud of pure darkness," I continued, "so dark that no light can get through, from the sun or the moon."

"If that were true, then none of us Moonblessed could survive," Rhya said, rubbing the contents of one of the vials through my hair.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"All the gifted draw power from the world around them," she explained, rubbing in the liquid. "Shadowsouls absorb energy from darkness, Moonblessed from moonlight, and Sundancers from sunlight. The energy absorbed can be used to fuel a gifted's powers, but it also can keep them alive, even in the face of harsh circumstances. But at the same time, when a gifted is deprived of their energy source for too long, using up all their stored energy, they will die."

She pulled her hands away, seemingly satisfied.

"So if the Shadowveil didn't work the way it does, only Shadowsouls would be able to survive here?" I asked.

"Pretty much," she said, dunking the pitcher into the water and dumping it on my head. "Close your mouth, because I'm going to have to do that again."

I obeyed, closing my eyes as she refilled the pitcher and poured it on me. I opened them as she poured the contents of the other vial onto a small towel.

"Use this to wash your face," she said as she handed me the small towel. Closing my eyes, I gently rubbed the towel over my face, the sweet scent of lavender filling my nose. I opened my eyes, setting the towel on the edge of the tub. I only had moments to close my eyes before Rhya splashed me in the face with water.

"Was that intentional?" I asked her, wiping away the water before it could drip into my eyes.

"I probably should have warned you, but that's the best way to get the extra soap off," she said, shrugging. "But you're clean now, so hop on out."

I rose to my feet, carefully getting out of the tub as Rhya held up a large towel. I flicked my wings, sending most of the excess water into the tub, before sending shimmering beams of sunlight through my feathers, drying them off before I folded my wings in tight, allowing Rhya to place the towel over my shoulders.

"Come this way," she said, leading me back through the door and into the opposite door as I held the towel around me. I was right about this room being a closet, but I was expecting a few shelves and nothing more. Instead, the closet was a small room, shelving and racks for hanging up clothes taking up most of one wall, three mirrors on the right allowing me to see myself, and just how much I clearly needed that bath.

I had always been so used to seeing myself as some girl with tangled, messy hair barely restrained in a braid and with smudges of dirt on her that when I saw myself, I froze, staring. This new girl had shining, clean hair, clean skin, and shimmering blue eyes. And she was wearing nothing but a towel, as another girl dried off her hair with a combination of a smaller towel and moonlight.

Rhya turned to one of the shelves, setting down the towel and sorting through a pile of black and navy fabric. She picked up a piece of black clothing, before turning back to me.

"You can drop the towel," she said. "The door is closed."

I let the towel slide from my shoulders, little wisps of moonlight dancing across my skin and drying the last bits of water. Rhya walked around so she was in front of me, unclasping the top and back of the piece of clothing she held. Holding it up to my chest, she draped the upper part around my neck, keeping one hand on the front to hold it in place as she walked around behind me.

"Can you do me a favor and hold this up for me?" she asked. I placed my hand on the front, holding it in place over my chest, in the same spot that I used to keep a strip of fabric.

Rhya clasped the top around my neck, fingering it slightly as she adjusted it so that the halter-style neckline lay nicely around my neck.

"Okay, so the two strings on either side of the bottom, they need to be threaded through the holes in your wings," she said. "I don't know where they are, so I'm going to need you to thread them through, and I'll fasten them in the back."

I did as she told me, threading one side through, then the other. I dropped my arms as she clasped the strings together, tightening them so that the cloth rested snugly against my chest, the padded fabric keeping everything secure.

"Put these on," Rhya said, handing me a pair of navy underwear before turning back to the clothes still on the shelf. When I turned back to her, underwear on and covering my business, she had the clothes gathered up in her arms. "Turn around. You'll have to wait to see this until I'm done."

I felt like what I imagined a young girl playing dress-up felt like, except instead of facing the mirror constantly and giggling about how I looked, I was seriously being made presentable for nobles. Following Rhya's instructions, the fabric soft and comfortable as she helped put everything on, she eventually pulled a stool from under the shelves, telling me to sit down as she grabbed a pair of boots from another shelf.

She laced up the boots, the soft, flexible fabric fuzzy as it brushed against my bare feet, the upper parts lacing up halfway to my knees as she laced them over my black leggings. Finally, she walked around behind me, beginning to expertly braid my hair. I kept my wings pinned to my back, out of her way as she worked. When she was done, she walked over to the shelf, grabbing the last piece of clothing as she told me to stand.

"You can look now," she said.

I turned to the mirror, surprised by what I saw. A young woman looked back at me, standing tall in her black laced-up boots and leggings, a sleeveless navy top that came up to her throat but ended in a point that barely brushed her leggings, her hair in a braid as Rhya draped a short, hooded black cloak around her shoulders, her wings free from restraints.

As Rhya pinned the cloak in place, I noticed the design. Everything I was wearing was in dark colors, except for the golden sun pinning my cloak in place. I turned to her.

"Thank you," I told her. "I never imagined I'd ever look like this."

"You really are beautiful," she said, before turning towards the door. "Now follow me. Lord... the Dark Lord wants to speak with you and the others, and explain a few things."



"Yes, my Lord," Rhya said, bowing her head slightly before taking me by the arm and leading me into the castle.

From the outside, the castle was made purely of dark stone, but as Rhya rushed me through the halls, tripping over my own feet as she did so, I could see that while the walls weren't brightly colored, they weren't dark stone. Varying shades of grey, particularly light grey, made up the interior walls of the castle.

Leading me to a door, Rhya pushed it open, revealing a large bedroom beyond. Wordlessly, she pulled me into the room, closing the door behind me. Shadows filled the room, until she held up her other hand, moonlight filling her palm as she placed her hand on a panel next to the door. Moonlight flowed from the panel and up the wall in snaking tendrils, lighting up orbs of moonlight in a small chandelier hanging from the ceiling. When she removed her hand, the tendrils of light faded away, but the lights stayed lit.

"Come here," she said, leading me over to the wooden chest at the foot of the massive bed, motioning for me to sit. When I did, she lifted my faintly glowing hand from my side, before setting it back down and striding over to a cabinet on the other side of the room and grabbing a bag made from silvery cloth.

"After all this time, you think he'd know how to teach basic combat healing," she muttered under her breath as she set down the silvery bag, opening it up and pulling out a clean roll of cloth bandages, the white fabric pristine and clean. She turned back to me. "Unpin the cloak. I've got it from here."

I nodded, extinguishing the light that faintly glimmered in my palm as I reached up with both hands and unpinned the cloak, letting Prince Phillip's cloak fall onto the bed behind me.

Rhya went to work, untying the makeshift bandages as her palm began to shine with moonlight. I could feel the soft, warm but cold glow of the moonlight pulsing through the wound, looking ahead as Rhya cleaned it, the moonlight numbing the area just enough that it didn't hurt but not so much that I couldn't feel anything. Her fingers tracing over the wound as it began to close, I stayed as still as possible as she finished her work. She removed her hand, her fingertips stained with blood as she expertly tied a fresh bandage over the wound.

Stepping back she looked up and met my eyes.

"Thank you," I said. "Not many people I know would do that for me."

"Why not?" she asked, sitting down next to me as moonlight danced on her fingertips, cleaning the blood from her hands.

"Well... I only really have a few friends," I admitted. "And one of them doesn't know how to fix up his own wounds, let alone anyone else's. And the other two... Ashlynn would try, but I don't know about Emra. Sometimes I wonder if she'd have my back, even though she's loyal to a

fault. But now that she saw me guarding the prince with no explanation... And if she knew that I was a Sundancer..."

"If she's really your friend, she'll stick with you," Rhga said. "And as for me, it's an honor to use my gift to help you. Just like it's an honor to work here."

"As a servant?" I asked.

"Things are different in the Island Kingdoms, aren't they?" she asked, chuckling a little. "I've heard the stories, about how it's almost better to be in poverty than to be a servant on most of the islands, because then at least you wouldn't be treated like dirt. I've lived in the Shadowed Lands my entire life, and here it's an honor to serve. To use my gifts for something. And I may only be a second circle Moonblessed, but I still have the power. Might as well use it for something meaningful."

"Do you just work here in the castle?" I asked, before realizing how nosy I was being. "Sorry if I'm asking too many questions, but I never really heard much about the Shadowed Lands, and I want to know what it's like for you here."

"It's all good," she said. "I mainly work here, but sometimes I'm sent out to help in other parts of the Shadowed Lands. Very rarely, the Dark Lord takes me with him when he goes out among the people, leading me and the other servants to where we're needed most."

"Sounds like a good life you've got," I said. "Where I'm from, it's an honor to be in the military, despite the fact that we have no one to fight but the rebels who live on the peninsula, and being gifted is scorned so much that most either hide their gifts or flee here, either by choice or because they've been banished or chased from their homes."

"Now that you say that, it really does seem like I have it good," she responded. "But I should let you get some rest. You've got a big day tomorrow."

She stood up, closing the silver bag and returning it to where she found it. As she closed the curtains and began to walk towards the door, she stopped.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said, turning to look at me. "By the door here, next to the charging panel, there's this knob." As she explained, she walked over by the door, placing her hand on the small, wheel-like thing set into the wall next to the panel she used to light up the room. "Many years ago, a clever young man rigged up this knob to mechanically control the light covers, so if you turn it to the right..." She turned the knob, and small pieces of black metal rotated over the orbs of moonlight illuminating the room, dimming the room into darkness. "Turning it back to the left will uncover them. But I think you've heard enough explanations tonight."

She opened the door, letting a shaft of light into the room as I slipped off my shoes and unclipped my sword sheath, setting it on the chest before crawling into the bed. The grey covers

Prince Phillip walked up beside me, wordlessly sliding my discarded sword back into its sheath. I met his eyes, noticing the small gash on his cheek.

"You okay?" I whispered. He simply nodded, his eyes frozen on my wound.

"We should go," Emilia cried, leading two hippogriffs over as Sevrus grabbed the reins of the other two. "There might be more coming, and we need to get through the Shadowveil and get to a healer."

"Phillip, go take one of the hippogriffs over by Sevrus," the Dark Lord ordered. "Ashlynn, Emilia, one of these is yours. Ica, follow me."

He led me over to one of the hippogriffs, keeping one arm around me as support. I definitely must have been hallucinating earlier, because his wings were now gone. The hippogriff met my eyes, gentle curiosity shining from within. The Dark Lord held out one hand, helping me to get onto the hippogriff's back. I flared my wings out for balance, almost falling before I grabbed hold of the hippogriff's harness. Tucking them in close, I looked over at Ashlynn as she mounted her hippogriff, Emilia climbing up behind her. Behind me, I felt the Dark Lord mount the hippogriff, wrapping one arm around me for support as he took the short reins attached to the hippogriff's harness in his other hand.

A chill breeze blew, clouds covering the night sky. I looked up, and thought I could see snow falling. I shivered, the warmth of the light in my hand only doing so much to shield me from the cold.

"Get ready," the Dark Lord whispered.

The hippogriff ran forwards, extending its wings. Soon, we were in the air, the first snow of winter falling around us as the Dark Lord steered us towards the mountains looming in the distance, each wingbeat bringing us closer to the shadowy haze above their peaks. From the air, it was easy to leave behind what just happened, leaving the corpses behind in the lightly falling snow as we climbed higher and higher into the air.

"Sevrus, for goodness sake," Emilia said. "Fly in a straight line, please."

"What do you think I'm trying to do?" Sevrus snapped back. I looked over to see him fighting for control with his hippogriff, Prince Phillip effortlessly keeping control next to him.

"Even the untrained prince is doing better than you," Emilia scoffed. "You just have to trust her and let Skye fly you where you want to go."

"This thing has a name?" he asked.

I heard the Dark Lord sigh.

"I'm starting to question why I ever let him be in charge of anything," he muttered, before whispering to me. "Hold on tight."

He sharply pulled on the reins, the hippogriff rearing back for a moment. The Fang Mountains sprawled below us, the Shadowveil drawing near. Out of the corner of my eyes, I

could see the others doing the same. As one, the hippogriffs shot forwards, plunging through the Shadowveil, the hazy darkness brushing along my skin in cold waves.

I closed my eyes, the shadows causing the light from my hand to flicker. I willed the light to stay, to hold back the bleeding, but it was hard. Very hard. Suddenly, the chill was gone, and the light surged back.

"Open your eyes," the Dark Lord whispered, the warmth of him against me chasing away the cold. "We're home."

I opened my eyes, the snow still falling lightly as we flew slowly over the Shadowed Lands, the Fang Mountains coming to an end as open plains sprawled before us. Trees with grey bark and the lights of scattered civilization dotted the plains, hills cresting the terrain in various spots. And in the distance, a sprawling city lit up the horizon, a large castle of dark stone clawing at the horizon in elegant spires.

"It's..." I whispered, "it's beautiful."

"Not what you were expecting, was it?" the Dark Lord asked softly.

"Not at all," I admitted.

The snow lightly falling, the cool night air, soaring over the Shadowed Lands, it was almost too beautiful to be true. It was easy to forget the risk of bleeding out, easy to forget everything that had happened in the past few days as we soared over the expanse of the Shadowed Lands.

Soon, flying over the city, the castle drawing near, I could feel the light starting to flicker. I grit my teeth, willing the light to last just a little longer. As the hippogriffs spiralled down into the courtyard of the castle, servants and guards stopping to watch our descent, I almost sighed in relief.

As the hippogriff landed, the Dark Lord leaped from its back, landing beside it and reaching out a hand to me. I took his hand, swinging my other leg over the hippogriff's back before sliding to the ground. I stumbled, falling into his arms as he caught me. The exhaustion and blood loss must have finally been catching up to me, but I did my best to stand up straight and maintain a strong appearance.

"Rhya!" the Dark Lord called to one of the servants as the others landed, Sevrin falling off of Skye's back as they landed.

A young servant girl, her auburn hair in two braids, ran up to us, her dark tunic embroidered with two rows of silver on each wrist, her dark grey-green eyes meeting mine.

"Take Ica to her room," the Dark Lord ordered, his voice firm but gentle. "Make sure her wound is healed. Tell the other servants to bring food to their charges tomorrow morning, and have them ready for a formal meeting in the afternoon."

The frozen men turned towards their leader and his group of men, taking steps towards them, weapons raised. The man with a crossbow shot at him, narrowly missing. One of the men behind their leader raised a crystal shard high in the air, crushing it in a burst of light. The men stopped, a dazed look in their eyes as they looked at each other, before turning to stare at the Dark Lord above us.

"Ashlynn," I whispered, "get ready to fight your way out of this."

The men charged, Ashlynn and I dashing forwards to meet them halfway. Swords clashing, I met the men ready, effortlessly dodging his first attack before slashing him across the gut, leaving him to fall to the ground, dying. The next man, having seen his comrade fall, was a lot more cautious when fighting me, measuring his strikes. Even so, he dropped his guard, and I ran him through with my sword, shoving him to the ground.

Emilia, the female guard, made her way over to fight beside me, a deep wound in her arm hastily bandaged with a scrap of cloth. Her sword was stained with blood as she took down one of the men.

"What's the plan?" I asked her, fending off a blow from one man as I slashed the arm of another.

"Survive," she responded, her blond hair starting to fall free from her long braid. "Somehow get over the Fang Mountains and through the Shadowveil."

Cutting down two more men, I looked over at Ashlynn to see a man shove her to the ground. Knocking back the man next to me, I did the only thing I could think to do: I thrust out my hand, launching a bolt of searing sunlight at him as he raised his sword. He looked over at the last second, the bolt slamming into him and sending him flying, burns covering his chest. Prince Phillip dashed over, helping her to her feet as I was forced to block an oncoming strike.

"Sundancer..."

I shoved another dying man off my blade, the few remaining men backing away from me. A few were shot down by bolts of shadow energy from behind me as they ran. Emilia dashed towards them, scattering them further. As I took a step towards them, a man shoved me from behind. My wings shot out as I caught myself, my sword clattering out of my hands. I spun around, the leader of the men standing over me with his sword drawn.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised to find another freak among your group," he snarled, raising his sword high. I reached behind me, barely grabbing the hilt of my sword and getting it into place to block as he swung down at me, my arm shaking as he continued to press downwards.

Using my other hand, I flashed light in his eyes, scrambling away in the brief seconds I had while he was blind. He advanced towards me, attempting heavy blow after heavy blow,

pushing me back. Using both hands, I locked my sword with his, pushing back with all my weight.

"You think you're some kind of fighter, little freak?" he asked tauntingly.

He suddenly pulled away, catching me by surprise. I stumbled forwards as he slashed low. His sword burned as it sliced into my bare abdomen, and I staggered back, mind reeling as I looked at his sword to see it coated in my blood. He lashed out with his foot, knocking me to the ground. I lay there, gasping in pain, my sword slipping from my fingers as he approached.

"I'll enjoy ending your pitiful life," he hissed.

As he raised his sword, I stared up at him, hardly believing that this is where I would die.

A lash of pure darkness struck the man in the side, knocking him away from me as a dark form swooped between us, running the man through with a blade of shadows. Shoving the man away, the Dark Lord turned around, rushing to my side. I must have been hallucinating, but he had black feathered wings on his back, faint shadows dripping from the tips of his feathers.

"Ica, listen to me," he said quickly, tearing a strip of dark fabric from his sleeve. I looked down at the gash, quickly looking away again. There was so much blood... "Ica!" he said sharply, panic in his voice as he used one hand to hold my head still, forcing me to meet his eyes. "You have to stop the bleeding. Don't try to heal it, but if you don't stop the bleeding you are going to die."

"How..." I whispered.

"You'll know how," he said softly. "You just have to try."

I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath as I called the power from deep within me. Placing one hand over the wound, warm blood coating my palm, I felt the light answer. I opened my eyes, a faint glow shining from my palm as the bleeding slowed.

The Dark Lord gently tore additional fabric from his sleeves, carefully tying the makeshift bandages over the wound, before placing my hand back on top. The glow still faintly shone as I could hear footsteps approaching.

"Ica..." Ashlynn gasped as the Dark Lord helped me to my feet, steadying me with his arm. "Oh my gosh, are you alright?"

"I'm alive," I said, keeping my glowing and bloody hand over the wound.

"What now, my Lord?" Seurlis asked as he walked over slowly, limping slightly. Looking closer at him, there was a cut across his forehead and a small gash in his arm, hastily bandaged with faded grey fabric.

"Leave the carriage," the Dark Lord ordered. "Free the hippogriffs. We ride them over the Fang Mountains. Ashlynn, you're with Emilia, and Ica will fly with me."

"Yes my Lord," Emilia said, bowing her head before running over to the panicked hippogriffs, steadying them as she cut them free.

Rhya led me through the halls of the castle, leading me to the entrance hall. Prince Phillip stood waiting, his wolf hide cloak having been returned to him as he wore it over a grey tunic, the edges of the sleeves embroidered with black patterns. I hadn't even noticed the cloak was gone until I saw him in it.

"I'll leave you two to wait," Rhya said, before slipping away.

"You look stunning," Prince Phillip said after a moment, taking a few steps closer to me.

"Thank you, my prince," I said, feeling my cheeks grow warm. "You as well."

"Please," he said. "Just call me Phillip. I hate everyone trying to praise me just to avoid displeasure, when we're all people."

"I can understand that," the Dark Lord said, emerging at the top of the grand staircase in the center of the room, Ashlynn beside him. She wore a black tunic, a navy cloak pinned at her neck by a silver clasp, her black leggings and grey boots fitting her perfectly. She made her way down the stairs, the Dark Lord pausing at the top before following. His black tunic, pants, and cloak similar to what he'd been wearing yesterday, the pin made from what looked to be obsidian. "The people look up to you, and are conditioned to think of themselves as lesser simply because you are descended from their immortal king. Yet you only want to feel like one of them."

"H-how did you know that?" Phillip asked.

"I feel the same way," the Dark Lord said as Ashlynn reached the bottom of the stairs. Soon, he too was standing on our level, having descended down to speak with us. "Even after all these centuries, it's still the same."

"Huh," Phillip responded.

"I trust you all slept well," the Dark Lord said, looking at each of us in turn. His eyes caught on the silver amulet around Ashlynn's neck. He looked at it curiously. "That necklace, how long have you had it?"

"Ever since I could remember," Ashlynn responded. "I've never taken it off."

"May I?" the Dark Lord asked, reaching one hand towards the amulet.

Ashlynn nodded, and he wrapped his fingers around the amulet, standing only inches away from her as he ran his fingers over it. Shadows flickered, and he held the amulet tight for a moment. A shattering sound rang from the amulet, moonlight spiraling around Ashlynn as he dropped the amulet, the silver charm completely undamaged. Ashlynn looked down at her fingers in awe, moonlight dancing across them.

"Someone must have wanted to hide your gifts very badly if they went through the trouble to place a nullifier around your neck," the Dark Lord said. "I suspect you're at least third circle, if not fourth."

"Circles?" I asked. "Nullifiers? Last night's 'taboo curse'? What are you talking about?"

"I owe you many explanations," he admitted, taking a step back as he looked over us one by one. "And while we're on the topic of nullifiers I might as well explain. Nullifiers come in two main forms. One, as you saw here, blocks an individual's power, preventing them from using it but not preventing them from drawing in the necessary energies to survive. The other you saw last night, when the men who attacked us shattered it to temporarily limit powers usable in a small area, which they used to break my hold over them. Similarly, taboo curses prevent people within an area from talking about topics decided upon when the curse is created. Taboo curses must be bound to an object, and when that object is destroyed, the curse ends. Thankfully, the taboo curse on the Island Kingdoms doesn't extend here, so I can explain everything. Now follow me."

He turned to the stairs as he led us up them, a portrait hanging at the top. It depicted the Dark Lord, wearing all black with a sword held in front of his chest, his eyes closed as he looked down towards the blade in his pale hands.

"A few thousand years ago, the First King, sometimes known as the King of Time, ruled the world," the Dark Lord explained as he led us through an archway and into a large hall. On the far side of the room, a fire burned within a large, ornate fireplace, a portrait of the Dark Lord as a young man hanging above it. However, his eyes were a pale blue-green instead of grey, and he wore a pair of glasses, the frame thin and covering only the tops of the lenses. Also, it looked like he had shadowy wings on his back, but that could have just been the artist's interpretation. As he walked across the room, the Dark Lord motioned towards several navy chairs grouped in a circle by the fire, motioning to the padded chairs for us to sit. I sat next to Phillip, Ashlynn sitting on my other side. The Dark Lord remained standing, pacing as he continued his tale. "He created the world as we know it, although how he did it he never said. It probably had something to do with his powers as a Shadowdancer, or Sun soul, depending on how you look at it, using his powers of both the light and the dark to create. But that's just a theory. Anyways, he eventually grew bored of being the only sentient, humanoid being in the world, and he had a son. A Shadowsoul, he gave his son a name, making him the first human-like being to be given a name. His son, Iakiss, joined him at his side, exploring the new world as the islands were created. One day, a few decades later, the First King had another son. And while both the First King and Iakiss thought he'd inherit the power of sunlight, the second child was born powerless. Either way, both loved Julius as a brother or son, and the trio would go on to have many happy memories together. And then humanity came along.

"The humans, they looked up to the First King as their leader, giving him his title. And while some were gifted, most were not. They saw the power of the First King and his elder son, and at first they feared it. But then, the First King used it to create, and their fear started to dissipate. The brothers, they had the time of their lives as youths, but Iakiss could never compete

with his brother's popularity. The people loved Julius, loving his outgoing nature and his strength, and his so-called 'humanity,' despite the fact that as a son of the First King he was immortal. And Iakiis... he learned to spend most of his time on his own, reading books or studying his power. People feared him, despite the fact that he had only ever used his power to protect them. Still, he did find some companions, and his brother was close with him. The First King was too busy governing the people and shepherding their evolution to pay too much attention to his sons, so they could do pretty much whatever they wanted, so long as they made it home for family time. But even during that time, he would either focus on Julius' exploits or seem distant, only fueling Iakiis' feelings of isolation. Until it all reached its boiling point. Julius came home with a trail of followers, declaring that he, the Warrior-Prince, would protect the people from any darkness.

"Iakiis couldn't take it. He knew he didn't belong, and as he was growing more powerful, what had once seemed like a gift was threatening to consume him. So, spreading his wings, he flew as close to the new moon as he could, absorbing more and more darkness as he went, and he let go. The shadows began to tear him apart as he fell, but they weren't killing him fast enough. As he crashed into the ground, badly wounded and dying, his brother showed up. Until then, Julius had never realized what he'd been doing to his brother, and as Iakiis was about to slip away, Julius carried him to their father, saving his older brother's life. After that, Julius would bring Iakiis out into the human world, and the First King taught him how to control his powers.

"Things were happy for a few centuries, until three Sundancers, hoping to take the power of the First King for themselves, snuck into the palace and killed the First King. Iakiis and Julius both rushed to reach their father as soon as there were signs, but by the time Iakiis got there, his father was already mortally wounded. In a rage, he lashed out, killing two of the Sundancers and pinning down the third, about to end him when Julius dashed in. Pulling his brother away, Julius questioned the Sundancer, before ending the man himself. As people rushed into the room, seeing Julius kill the last of the First King's killers, the two brothers both rushed to their father's side. In a tongue that had already been forgotten, he said his last words to his sons, starting with the words of the prophecy. But, contrary to popular belief, that wasn't his last words. He said to them both that it was about time he gave them surnames, deciding upon *Aermont* for Julius and *Brimont* from Iakiis. He then turned to his elder son, about to say something, before turning to Julius. He told him that the people wanted him, and that it was time for him to become Warrior-King, before taking his last breath.

"The First King died in their arms, the people rushing around them. But what they didn't see was the look shared between the two brothers, the hardened look on the face of the Warrior-King and the look of grief and betrayal on the face of the Dark Prince. When the news got out that the First King was dead and Julius was now Warrior-King Julius *Aermont*, chaos

erupted. Despite Julius' attempts to keep control, it was impossible for him to be on all six islands and the peninsula at the same time. The people knew it was three Sundancers who killed the First King, and they turned on all gifted, regardless of what their gift actually was. The only one who seemed safe was Iakiis, but that might have been because of his position as the brother of the Warrior-King. But eventually, even he wouldn't be safe.

"When Julius was deciding on who to lead each of the islands as his nobility, he was considering giving his brother lordship over an island. But that was before the attack. People stormed the castle, holding torches high and calling for the death of Iakiis Brimont. They knew that he'd saved a young Sundancer boy and his Shadowsoul boyfriend from burning at the stake a few days prior, and they'd always known that he himself was a powerful Shadowsoul. His rumors had begun to circulate that he'd been the one to actually kill the First King, and that the Sundancers were an elaborate ruse to cover up what he'd done, using Julius becoming king instead of Iakiis as fuel for their fear-driven fire. But as the protests went on, Julius believed he had no other options. So, he grabbed his brother by the throat and dragged him to the castle walls, throwing him down against the edge of the wall. He shouted to the people, asking if his death was what they wanted, drawing his sword as he betrayed the promise he'd made to his brother all those centuries ago, claiming that he'd always have his brother's back.

"Betrayed, Iakiis fought back, asking the people if this was what they wanted from their king, someone who betrayed their own family so easily. But in the end, Julius was stronger, disarming his brother and holding his sword to his throat. The people cheered, calling for the death of the Dark Prince. But just as Iakiis was about to unleash his powers, Julius dropped his sword. He claimed that by showing mercy, he was the better son of the First King, and that he was what the people wanted. He banished his brother to die, and erased him from history with a taboo curse, spending a lot of time and money just to erase his own brother's name and history from the Island Kingdoms, brainwashing them into thinking he was the only son of the First King and their rightful ruler. He abandoned Iakiis, who would go on to become the most powerful Shadowsoul, no, the most powerful gifted in all of history. But even with all that power, he could do nothing as Julius sat on the throne, could do nothing to change the situations that had caused the people to turn on him and cast him out of his homeland, forbidden to return. And the people? They moved on with their lives. They knew of him, but they had no idea of the man they'd forgotten."

"What does this have to do with us?" I asked.

"I've been called many things over the centuries," the Dark Lord said, listing them off as he paced around us. "The Dark Lord. Dark One. Worthless. The Lord of Nowhere. The King Who's Not a King. A jerk." He paused, staring into the fire. "A brother." Turning back to us, he continued. "But I haven't been called my real name in a long time."

I started to suspect I knew where this was going.

"Then what is your name?" Phillip asked.

"My name," the Dark Lord said slowly, "is Iakiis Brimont."

Silence filled the room. Ashlynn and I stared at him in disbelief. Phillip shook his head, his red hair tied in a bun at the back of his head.

"But... my father would have told me if he had a brother," he protested. "He would have told me about all of that. Wouldn't he?"

"When Julius created the taboo curse, he prevented all mention of me or my relationship to him," the Dark L- Iakiis said, resting his forearms on the back of an empty chair across the circle from us. "It seems he included himself in the curse's effects."

"How..." Ashlynn whispered weakly as Phillip stared at his uncle in disbelief.

"I know this is a lot to take in," Iakiis said, looking at each of us one by one, "but I promise that I am telling the truth. The taboo curse doesn't extend here, so long ago I decided to tell the people who I am, and if you ask them they will prove that I am not lying."

"How are there no portraits of you and Julius together in the Island Kingdoms?" I asked. "Did the taboo curse destroy them, or were there none to begin with?"

"Some were destroyed," Iakiis explained, "but not by the curse itself. Most were sent here, and I kept them in the castle. He also sent the original stone with the prophecy from the Island Kingdoms here when he had the first half translated, but that I got rid of, since I already have it."

He pointed over to the space above the archway we'd entered through, where the prophecy had been carved into the stone. It was written purely in one of the ancient tongues, and while the bottom half looked like what I remembered, something seemed off.

"Don't the first and second halves match?" Ashlynn asked. "Because they don't look the same here."

"They're not the same," Iakiis said. "Do they really tell you that in the Island Kingdoms?"

Before anyone else could speak, a woman in black leather clothes covered in weapons and a black cloak over her shoulders dashed into the room, her hair in a braid, multiple strands almost all the way or completely free from the braid.

"Lord Iakiis," she panted, another woman in similar garb but with blonde hair instead of brown and a large axe strapped over her back. "We have a situation."

"On my way," he said, dashing over to the doorway, pausing and turning back to us. "I'll be back. Rosa's on the second floor, in the training room. If you ask one of the servants, they'll be able to show you where it is. So sorry about this."

Then he was gone.

Ashlynn stood up, walking towards the door. I stood up, slowly taking a step towards the exit. I hesitated, turning back to Phillip, who sat lost in thought.

"You alright?" I asked.

"Go," he said. "I'll come in a little bit."

I nodded, turning and following Ashlynn as she disappeared through the archway. Jogging to catch up, I found her deep in conversation with a female servant, her sleeves embroidered with a single row of black thread, barely visible on her navy tunic. I caught up to her as she started briskly walking away.

"Ashlynn," I said as I caught up to her. "Do you know where you're going?"

"I do now," she said, continuing to plow ahead.

I followed her quietly, stopping when she turned to a large double door, the wood carved with the moon, the sun, and a swirl of darkness in a triangle, a pair of crossed swords in the middle of the triangle. She pushed the doors open wide, exposing the room beyond.

The room was massive, a skylight set in the ceiling letting in light, the sides of the massive room lined with equipment as people trained with straw dummies, ropes hanging from the ceiling, or each other. I didn't know where to look. A young woman, her black hair in many small braids that she'd pulled back into a ponytail swinging behind her as she spun around, whips of moonlight slashing out around her and knocking back the training dummies, paused as she noticed us, her dark brown eyes lighting up when she saw Ashlynn. She ran over, her dark skin shining in the light of the moonlight dancing around her, her navy tunic embroidered with three rows of silver.

"Rosa!" Ashlynn cried, running towards the woman, who embraced Ashlynn.

"Ashy!" she cried, whirling her adopted sister around before setting her back down.

"You're really here!"

"I am," Ashlynn said, taking a step back as she took everything in. "Are you happy here?"

"Yes, but I miss you," Rosa said, one hand on Ashlynn's shoulder. She looked over and noticed me, taking a step towards me as she turned to face me. "And who would you be?"

"I'm Ica," I told her, extending one hand for her to shake. "I met Ashlynn at the Hermon Military Academy in the Island Kingdoms."

She shook my hand heartily, and I could already sense that she was a high energy person.

"I'm Rosa," she said. "I'm kind of a big deal here, even though I'm only a Half Moon Moonblessed." She must have seen my confused look, because she held out one arm, pointing to each ring of silver thread as she said "New Moon, Crescent Moon, Half Moon? A measure of power?" She waved one hand. "Anyways, neither of you have told me why you're here."

"It's a long story," Ashlynn said. "The short version is, we were looking for information, met Lord Iakiis on a rooftop, also met Prince Phillip on said rooftop, got dragged into the nobility mourning the Warrior-King, found out Phillip's a Shadowsoul, came here, found out Ica's a Sundancer along the way, which, apparently she's always known, got ambushed, rode hippogriffs through the Shadowveil, got to the castle last night, went to sleep, woke up, met with Iakiis as he explained who he is, and he ended the nullifier enchantment on my necklace, so apparently I'm, well..."

She held up one hand, moonlight swirling in her palm.

"Okay," Rosa said. "A few things. First off, Julius Aermont is dead? Also, the prince is a Shadowsoul and this girl's a Sundancer?" She pointed one thumb at me, and I crossed my arms, spreading my wings slightly. She took one look at them, her jaw dropping. "Holy... You really weren't kidding about the whole Sundancer thing. Anyways, you're a Moonblessed?"

"Yes," Ashlynn said slowly. "Looks like I am."

"Well, then we'd better get started!" Rosa said cheerfully, hooking one arm through Ashlynn's. "I have no idea what the protocol is for Sundancers, since I've never met one, you can tag along if you want. But the first thing for you, Ashlynn, is the test of power! Come on!"



I closed the door of my room behind me, sighing. The training room had been... interesting, to say the least. Ashlynn turned out to be a fourth circle Moonblessed, making her the second-most powerful ranking in the Moonblessed hierarchy and a Gibbous Moon, according to Rose. As for me, I'd kinda just watched it all unfold, not sure what to do. There was no standard for Sundancers, and if there ever was it had been lost to time.

Walking over to the table, I found a note, picking it up as I read it.

Ica,

I don't know when I'll be back, since this has turned out to be more serious than I thought. Those men on the peninsula, they want revenge for their leader's death, and are threatening to scale the Fang Mountains. I have to deal with this, and it may take a while.

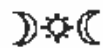
In the meantime, you and the others should start your training. I'm sending word to them, and everyone will be assigned a trainer. You, however, might very well be the only living Sundancer. So, in order to cover the basics shared by all the gifts, I've assigned you both a fifth circle Moonblessed and a Shadowsoul mentor. When I get back, I look forward to helping you discover your unique powers.

Until I get back,

Iakiis Brimont

I set down the note, turning to face the door as Rhya walked in, a bundle of fabric in her arms. I nodded to her as she walked past, thinking back to that night and the men who had attacked us. I barely knew him, but for some reason, I wished for Iakiis to be safe. Shaking off the feeling, I turned my mind to the training ahead, as well as the bubbling excitement I felt at the prospect of rediscovering the lost Sundancer powers.

That night, I went to bed with a smile on my face, ready to take on the challenge.



Two weeks had passed, and as I was making my way to the training room, a young servant boy stopped me, out of breath and holding a letter, which he extended to me.

"Lord Iakiis..." he panted, "is back... and... would like to... speak with... you."

"Thank you," I told him, taking the letter and opening it.

Room 434, at your earliest convenience

By now I knew my way around the castle enough that it didn't take me long to find the room he spoke of, its doors carved with his eclipsed moon symbol. I raised one fist to knock, before hesitating. He did say "at your earliest convenience." I pushed the door open, striding through the doorway.

"Lord Iakiis, I-" I said, freezing when I saw him, the door slamming shut behind me.

He turned to face me, completely shirtless. I blushed, trying not to stare, but I instinctively took everything in anyways. He didn't have the defined muscles of his brother, and he may have been kinda... scrawny, for lack of any other way to describe him, but he still had a quiet strength to him. And a large scar running down the center of his chest. He smirked.

"I should have knocked, shouldn't I?" I asked sheepishly.

"Well, probably," he said, taking a step closer and leaning against one wall. "But then again, I did say 'at your earliest convenience.' And I probably deserved it, since I've walked in on my brother doing much worse."

"Do I want to know what you mean by that?" I asked, raising one eyebrow and crossing my arms.

"Probably not," he admitted. "There was one time, during that time when he had a thing for this one female dire wolf... the funniest part was when she almost took his head off."

"You two must have been close," I said, taking a step farther into the room.

"We used to be," Iakiis said softly, his face falling as he turned away, walking to the edge of his bed and sitting down on the black covers, keeping his head down. I cautiously took a step towards him. "Back when we were young and reckless. Back when he looked up to me because I was his older brother, and to him I was the coolest person in the world. Then, when we got older, and began to impress humanity, he was still by my side."

I sat down beside him. He looked up, meeting my eyes with his dark, swirling grey eyes. He wordlessly held out one hand towards the empty space in front of us, shadows spiralling out from his fingertips. Swirling around the floor, the shadows took the form of two figures, both young men. One wore glasses, dark wings of shadow sprouting from his bare back. The other, wearing a cloak of wolf hide over his bare shoulders, raised his sword high.

"I shall vanquish the beast terrorizing you, and bring back its hide as proof!" the shadow cried as more shadowy figures appeared around them, cheering faintly.

"Together, we will rid you of this threat," the other said, flapping his wings to rise into the air as he conjured a blade of shadow, "and will return with tales of glory to share with you all!"

The crowd cheered, before Iakiis held out a hand, freezing the projection.

"That's you, isn't it?" I asked. "You and Julius."

"It is," he said. "That night, we slew the albino dire wolf that had been preying upon the people of what is now Hermont, and Julius turned its hide into his famous cloak. And then would go on to date the wolf's daughter, among many, many other people."

"Julius has been one of the most loyal nobles in the past few centuries," I protested.

"That's really what people think?" Iakiis asked, clearly surprised. "Back when we were younger, he was quite the player. I also had a fling or two, but many families today have traces of Hermont blood in their veins from ancestors who were careless with him."

"That's... hard to wrap my head around," I said. "The Julius I knew of was loyal to his queen, and grieved her immensely when she disappeared."

"My brother really liked to cover up history," Iakiis said. "Particularly anything before the First King's death that doesn't paint the image he wants today. Or, at least the image he wanted, now that he's gone. But, aside from his 'days of many affairs,' as I used to call it, he also had another unfavorable time. We both did."

"What do you mean?" I asked as he held out his hand to the projection, the shadows rearranging. Two people stood facing each other, one with a wolf hide cape and intricate armor and the other looking the same as the last projection, his wings folded behind him.

"I don't see a problem—" the winged projection (Iakiis) said.

"I can do what I want, and just because you're older doesn't mean I have to listen to you!" the other projection (Julius) snapped. "The people don't care what I do, so I'm going to do what I want."

He started to walk away.

"Just because the people love you doesn't mean you're the only son of the First King," the projection of Iakiis snapped, his voice filled with acid.

The projection of Julius paused looking over his shoulder.

"No, but it does mean that I don't have to use our father as an excuse for everything," the projection of Julius said, before leaving, his form dissipating when he got to the edge of the shadows.

The projection of Iakiis took a step towards where his brother had just left, the sound of a door slamming shut echoing from the projection. Clenching his fists, the projection turned away, stalking to the far corner of the shadows.

Iakiis held out his hand, the shadows fading away as he pulled his hand back closer to himself.

"I used to think that just because I was the son of the First King, I could do anything I wanted," he said. "We both did. But eventually, I learned. If he ever did, I'll never know, especially since he was such a good liar."

I looked up, noticing a small portrait of a woman, the stump of a white candle sitting on the table next to it. She had a loving look on her face, her brown eyes bright, her short dirty blonde hair framing her soft face. She wore an amulet with a pair of scales made from silver hanging from the navy cord, her amber dress completely wrinkle free.

"Who was she?" I asked.

"Helenus," he said, looking up at the portrait. "She was my wife. The people called her 'the Judge,' but not because she was strict. It was because she was always fair, and when people came to her with their problems, she found a solution that was favorable to everyone."

"You said 'was,'" I said slowly.

"She died," Iakiis whispered. "Over three centuries ago."

"I'm so sorry," I told him. "I-I had no idea."

"It was long before you were born," he said, looking over at me. "With no bloodlines descended from me anywhere, and no ties between me and the Island Kingdoms anymore, I doubt anyone ever knew. But Julius did. Want to know what his reaction was? He sent me a single black rose. No note, no visit, nothing but a rose. That's when I really knew how much the world had forgotten about me."

I looked at where the projection once was. I had tried training in projecting past events with the Shadowsouls, but it seemed like sunlight didn't hold on to memories the way shadows did. Still, I held out my hand, sunlight taking the form of two people as they danced across the small space. Their features weren't defined, and when I tried to make the image clearer, the projection faded away.

"Sunlight doesn't like holding on to memories, does it?" I sighed.

Lakiis stood up, walking away as I tried again. Still, the projections refused to show the moment I remembered from when a visiting Moonblessed showed us the first dance between Lakiis and what must have been Helenus. When he came back, he had put on a loose black tunic, two slits in the back yawning open. Shadows swirled around him, as two wings of pure darkness formed on his back, shadows dripping off them as they solidified into black feathered wings.

I stood up as he turned to face me, a faint smile forming on his face.

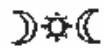
"The reason I called you here was to train," he said. "The sun's shining. What do you say?"

I smiled, unclipping the small cloak I was wearing over my navy tunic, the sleeves now embroidered with gold at the wrists. He led me to a pair of doors on the other side of his room, pushing them open, revealing a small balcony beyond, the sunlight pouring through the doorway. Stepping out into the light, its tendrils calling to me, he stepped out beside me, closing the doors before spreading his wings and leaping into the air. I smiled slightly, spreading my wings and following him into the sky.



Swords meeting, Rosa and I sparred in the training room, moonlight flashing in my eyes as she ducked away, slashing at my legs as I leaped, flapping my wings to help me get out of the way. I rolled out of the way as she swung again, popping up behind her and knocking her to the ground, holding my sword to her throat as she whipped around to face me, on her back as I stood over her.

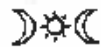
"You win," she said, dropping her sword with a faint smile on her face. I backed off, holding out one hand and helping her to her feet.



Sitting on the balcony outside the library, reading a very old book on Sundancer theory Iakiis had found buried somewhere in the castle, full of translations for the notes that had been inserted in ancient tongues.

Hearing hints of conversation below, I carefully closed the book, standing up and walking over to the railing. Below, walking hand in hand, deep in conversation, was Iahiis and Ashlynn, four rows of intricate silver embroidery on the navy sleeves of her tunic.

Smiling slightly, I shook my head and went back to work.



Wandering the halls of the castle, I came across a large piece of parchment on one wall. At the top was a drawing of a man's silhouette, his arms outstretched and his eyes aglow, the label "*the First King*" written below in Iakiis' unmistakable handwriting.

Running my fingers lightly along the parchment, following the line to the right that lead to a circle, drawings of shadows surrounding an orb that had the words "*Iakiis Brimont*" written within, another line leading from that circle to another circle that read "*Helenus Jordu Brimont*," the words "*rest in solace*" written below her name.

Looking at the other side, and the spiderweb of lines and names surrounding a circle labeled "*Julius Aermont*." There were many dotted lines leading from his name to the names of many others, and I chuckled a bit when I read the note Iakiis had written next to the many names.

There are probably a lot of names missing here: couldn't be bothered to count or remember them all.

A single solid line was connected to Julius' name, leading to a circle labeled "*Maleu Nalasen Aermont*." From the line connecting their names was another line, leading to a circle that was just a bit lower than the rest, labeled "*Phillip Aermont*." I was about to turn away from the wall of names when I noticed a blurred line leading from Julius' name to a circle that had "*Cyrah Lumos*" written within. From the blurred line, a solid line led to a bubble, but instead of a name the bubble had "?" written within.

I was curious, but at the same time it was getting late and I had a lot of training the next day, so I turned away from the wall, walking back towards my room.



Ducking through the rings of shadow, I spiralled through the air. Summoning a sword of light in my hand, I rolled as I hit the ground, my blade of light meeting a sword of shadow as Iakiis and I sparred, leaping back into the air when he slashed low.



Theory book in front of me, Ashlynn at the other end of the table as she drew in moonlight from the skylight above us, spinning it into a growing orb as she read the book in front of her. Watching, I took note of how she moved her hand, trying to apply what little remains of Sundancer theory I had to what she was doing.



Narrowly avoiding his blade, both of us in the air, the winter winds ruffled my feathers as I pushed off him, sending the lord of the Shadowed Lands tumbling down towards the ground as I launched myself upwards, trails of sunlight shimmering in my wake as I propelled myself further up into the sky.



Looking through the translated pages of the weathered book, I braced myself, taking a deep breath as I crossed my arms in front of my chest, sunlight gathering in the palms of my hands and dancing across my fingertips. Concentrating as the sunlight began to dance around me, I thrust my arms apart and to my sides, the light tearing through me. I gasped, my vision going white as the heat of the sun burned in my veins.

Painful as I was, I held on, willing the sunlight into submission as I collapsed to my knees, my dark room suddenly aglow with sunlight.



As the fight went on, the sun sinking further and further until it was almost gone, I knocked him to the ground, raising my left hand as sunlight started to gather in an orb above my palm.

spinning faster and glowing brighter the more I added to it. When he started to rise, I launched the orb at him, nailing him in the chest as it exploded in a glorious burst, sending him flying.

He lay on his back, groaning slightly as his shadow sword dissipated. I landed nearby, slowly walking over towards him, unsure if this was a trick. He sat up, gingerly pressing one hand to his chest.

"I have no idea where you learned that," he said, "but that was cool. Even though it hurt."

"So I win?" I asked.

"Who am I kidding," he said, chuckling slightly. "You win, Ica."



Pacing, waiting for Rhya to arrive, I waited in my room. It had been four weeks since Iahis had returned from dealing with the situation at the Fang Mountains, and tonight was the Midwinter Dance. I didn't really know what it was, but I'd heard rumors. Supposedly, it was a party that lasted from sunset until sunrise, and considering that it was on the longest night of the year, it was a long party. I'd heard tales of the dancing, of the displays of gifted power, of the drinks and the food, and of the toasts and wishes for the coming year.

The door to my room opened, Rhya and another young female servant coming through with fabric and two small bags in their arms. I turned towards them, not needing to be told to go to the bathroom, where a third servant was finishing heating the water in my tub, four rings of silver embroidery on the sleeves of her uniform. She nodded to Rhya before leaving.

While I enjoyed the bath, Rhya and her friend Lauren tenderly washing and preparing me for the night's festivities, everything passed in a blur. Soon, I was in the closet, the two working together to get me into the midnight blue outfit, sitting down as they did my hair.

Lauren opened a silver bag she had with her, pulling out an assortment of powders and creams, setting them on one of the shelves. Rhya picked up one of the powders and grabbed a brush from the silver bag.

"Close your eyes," she said.

I could feel the brush lightly tickling my eyelids. I sat there, thinking about what I was about to experience as Rhya and Lauren did their work. I had never been to a party, so I had no clue what to expect.

"You can open your eyes now," Rhya said softly, before I was expecting it. She motioned for me to look at myself in the mirrors, and my jaw dropped open at what I saw.

Staring back at me, her hair in a crown of intricate braids around her head, little white flowers woven in as the rest fell free in long waves, was a beautiful young woman, her eyes

delicately lined in black pigment, brown flecked with gold highlighting her eyelids, and her eyelashes seemed darker than normal. Smudges of gold powder shimmered under her eyes, and her lips were soft and pink. Her wings were free, her midnight top loosely laced up at the deep neckline, her shoulders bare as the sleeves continued below them. Her leggings had a skirt sewn in, the fabric starting at one hip, lengthening as it went around until it reached just below the back of her right knee, before swooping back up and ending in the center of her waistline. Gold embroidery on the edges of the sleeves in the pattern of tendrils of sunlight filled out the look. I turned to Rhya and Lauren.

"Thank you," I whispered, trying not to cry. A few months ago, and I never thought I'd ever be this beautiful.



A large hall in the castle had been converted into the party space, the combined work of Moonblessed and Shadowsouls turning the ceiling into the night sky, little stars winking in the midnight darkness. I stared, all the guests dressed up in noble finery. Someone came up behind me, and I spun around to find Phillip standing there in a dark grey suit, a small half-cape of black wolf hide hanging from his shoulders, the edges of his sleeves embroidered with black. His hair had been pulled back into a bun on his head, a black pearl band holding it in place.

"So is this what parties are like?" I asked him, looking around in awe. "People dressed up, lots of talking, and food and drinks?"

"Pretty much," he said, shrugging. "Although in the Island Kingdoms we don't have that." He pointed to the ceiling, before gesturing to a pair of dancers in the center, both women using tendrils of moonlight to enhance their moves as they danced.

"Phillip! Ica!"

I turned around to see Ashlynn running over in a black dress, somehow not tripping in her low heels. I'd gotten lucky, in the sense that I only had to wear short but fancy lace-up boots made out of black fabric, laced with gold and with a very low heel. Her dress was stunning, with an asymmetrical skirt and silver embroidery along the neckline and the edges of her sleeves. Her hair was woven in a single, intricate braid, strands of silver woven throughout. Silver dust highlighted her cheekbones, and her eyes were highlighted in much the same way as mine, but with silver mixed in instead of gold.

"You are stunning," I told her as she used a little flicker of moonlight to push up her glasses. "Both of you, truly."

"Ica, have you seen yourself?" Ashlynn asked. "You're the stunning one. You too, Phillip."

"We could argue about who's the prettiest all night," Iakiis said, joining the conversation, a half-empty glass in hand, "or we could enjoy ourselves. Maybe have a drink or two. Dance, a little?" He looked at Ashlynn, his free hand sliding into hers. "You are all old enough to drink, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"I have been for years."

"That settles it," Iakiis said, motioning for a male servant to come over, his navy button-up tunic pristine and well-made, the black embroidery and buttons showing up even on the dark fabric. The servant made his way over, holding a tray with six glasses on it, each filled with an amber colored liquid. Ashlynn took one as Phillip took two, handing one to me.

I sniffed it, before taking a sip. The liquid was slightly warm, with hints of tea and lemon in its taste. And then there was the unmistakable taste of moderate drink, similar to the stuff I'd had with Emma, Luca, and Ashlynn whenever one of us had turned old enough to drink.

Looking around, Ashlynn had a curious face, while Phillip looked like he didn't know what to think about the drink.

"This here is something I came up with myself," Iakiis said proudly. "There's a thriving tea market in the Island Kingdoms, and we are fortunate to trade for it, trading the lemons we grow here. So one day I decided to combine the two, and, throwing in a little drink in the process, I created this."

"What do you call it?" Ashlynn asked.

"I've been working on a name for quite some time now," he said. "But nothing ever stuck. Anyways, enough about the drink, go enjoy yourselves!"

I slipped away through the crowd, finding myself by a large table covered in food of all sorts. From pastries to meats to cut and whole fruits, the table was practically dripping in wealth and food. I grabbed one of the pastries, taking a bite of the light, cream-filled ball. I wanted to close my eyes and savor it, but people were watching. Even so, I took small bites, savoring every one. Taking a drink from the glass in my hand, I leaned against the wall on one side of the room. Soon, Rhya came over by me, her navy uniform the same as the male servant's, except for the silver buttons and embroidery as opposed to the black.

"So, how's the party going?" she asked, her hair in two braids as usual, but this time with strands of silver and white flowers woven through. She grabbed a drink off the tray of another servant as she walked past, taking a swig of it.

"Aren't you supposed to be working?" I asked.

"Not right now," she said. "We take shifts. Some serve while others enjoy the party. The only rule is you can't get too drunk that you can't serve. Other than that, it's just common sense stuff."

"Like?" I asked.

"Like don't be stupid," she said, a look in her eyes saying it all.

"So that kind of stuff," I said, taking a drink.

"Situations have happened," she said, shrugging. "One of my friends grew up with just her mother on the streets, never knowing her father. Turns out, her mother had worked here, gotten drunk, and made a dumb decision at this very party."

"There's a lot of people like her," I sighed, downing the rest of my drink. "Particularly because a lot of upper-class men seem to not care about the consequences. They just leave. Like my father did."

"What?" Rhya asked.

Maybe I was really susceptible to the drink (not likely, I beat Luca at a drinking contest, and he's barely affected by it), or maybe it was the spirit of the party, or maybe I just wanted to tell someone, but I told her.

"I was born in a back alley on Hermon," I answered, setting my empty glass on the tray of a passing servant. "My mother never told me who my father was, but he was never there anyways. Then, when I was ten, she died. After that, even when I got into the military academy, I never bothered to try and figure out who he was. Because I didn't care. He clearly doesn't care about me, so why should I care about him?"

"I'd assumed you were of noble birth," Rhya admitted.

"Nope," I said. "Well, I don't actually know, but I grew up on the streets, so I don't think that counts as nobility."

"Rhya," a young female servant said, coming up to us, "it's your turn to serve."

"I've got to go," Rhya told me. "I'll see you later."

The crowd swallowed her up as she followed the other servant. I stayed by the wall for a moment, before deciding to brave the crowd. Ducking between dancing people, keeping my wings tucked in close, I ran into Phillip, who was also weaving through the crowd.

"Ica," he said.

"Phillip," I responded, smiling slightly, glad to see a familiar face in the crowd.

The group of musicians on a raised platform in the corner finished the current song, before starting a new tune, upbeat and fun to grab a partner and dance to.

"Want to one up them?" he said after a moment, pointing towards the center of the room. Ashlynn and Iakiis danced together, his simple yet elegant black tunic and pants delicately

embroidered and designed, a half cloak pinned around his shoulders and his shadowy wings. As the two danced, moonlight and shadows danced with them in an elegant display.

"You bet," I said, holding out one hand. He took it, and we took to the floor.

The two of us quickly drifted towards the center, where I finally had space to loosen up a bit and let my wings be free, simply existing behind me instead of being pinned to my back. Twirling and spinning, I added threads of sunlight to our dance, the golden threads twining around us. Phillip responded with tendrils of shadow, and soon we were twirling around the floor, sunlight and shadows joining in our elegant moves. As the music hit its peak, Phillip spun away from me, spirals of shadow darting out around him. On the responding fall, I slowly glided towards him, twirling into his arms as tendrils of sunlight spiralled away from me.

The song ended, and as I looked in his eyes, I saw genuine enjoyment. We separated, Ashlynn and Iakiis coming over.

"You and me, Ica?" Ashlynn asked, holding out one hand as the first note of the next song began. I grinned, taking her hand.



I sighed, dropping down onto the bench next to Ashlynn, Phillip resting on her other side. The last song had been very memorable, Ashlynn and I trying to outdo the boys. Eventually, the rest of the dancers stopped, making a circle around us as it turned into a battle, Iakiis and Phillip trying to outdo Ashlynn and I. I sipped the drink I'd just grabbed off a servant's tray, adrenaline racing through my veins.

"I don't know about you," Ashlynn said, "but I'm exhausted."

"A few more drinks, and you'll forget about it until tomorrow," Phillip said. "But I wouldn't recommend that."

"I'm sure there will be a lot of hangover cures going around tomorrow," I chuckled, taking another sip of my drink.

Iakiis made his way over to us, leaning against the wall next to me.

"So," he said. "I think we can agree that Phillip and I won that dance off?"

"No way," I scoffed. "Ashlynn and I won."

"Eh," Phillip said. "I think Iakiis and I won."

"You did not," Ashlynn said.

"Yes, we did," Phillip replied.

"Oh yeah?" Ashlynn countered. "Did you see what Ica and I did?"

"While they're arguing," Iakiis said while Ashlynn and Phillip started debating the winner of the dance off, "do you want to get away from the noise for a little bit?"

"Sure," I said, handing off my drink to Ashlynn, who downed the rest of the contents.

He led me to one of the quiet side halls leading away from the party, before leaning against one of the walls and sighing. I leaned against the opposite wall, but because of how narrow the hallway was, I wasn't very far away from him.

"For a long time, I'd given up hope on ever meeting another Sundancer," he said. "So when Julius wrote me that he'd found the last Sundancer bloodline, I refused to get my hopes up. However, ten years later, he wrote to me saying that the Sundancer he found, who was the last of her family, died. He never explained if there was an heir to the bloodline or if the Sundancers were gone forever. But then, on that rooftop, I found you. So if you don't mind me asking, who are your parents?"

"I never knew my father," I told him. "My mother raised me on the streets, but she never told me her name. And then when I was ten, she died."

I could see him putting the pieces together in his mind. Then, recognition dawned in his eyes.

"Ica isn't your full name," he said. "It's Icarus, isn't it?"

"How do you know that?" I asked cautiously. I never told anyone that, keeping my real name close to my chest.

"Julius wrote about you," he said, shadows filling his hands as he conjured a letter. He handed it to me, and I read it to myself. "The taboo curse kept him from addressing me by name, so he called me his Brother-in-Arms."

My dear Brother-in-Arms,

I've found Cyrah Lomas, the last Sundancer and the last of her bloodline. I knew there was one from the records I've been keeping, and I finally tracked her down. We walked late at night, Queen Malea taking care of my son in the castle, and I found excuses to stay with her for a while. She was quite alluring. As we drew closer, I knew it was wrong for me to be with her, but I couldn't pull away.

That was months ago. And yes, she just had a daughter. My daughter. Malen can never know, and I don't think I can bring myself to tell Phillip he has an illegitimate sister. But my little Icarus... It pains me to know that she'll have to grow up alone in this world. If you ever meet her, if people find out she was born with wings and she's forced to flee to the Shadowed Lands, do me a favor and tell her I do love her and want the best for her.

Your Brother-in-Arms,

Warrior-King Julius Aermont

I looked up to see that his eyes were full of tears.

"You know what this means, don't you?" he asked. "You're my niece."

"I..." I started, handing him the letter, my hands shaking. My father was Julius Aermont?

"I guess I am. Should I start calling you Uncle?"

"That... feels weird," Iakiis said slowly, chuckling slightly. "But if it's what you want, you can. Or Iakiis is fine."

"My Lord," a servant said, walking up. "It's almost time for the toasts."

"Thank you, John," Iakiis said, nodding to the servant. He turned to me, using his power to send the letter back to wherever he conjured it from. "You might want to come watch this."

I followed him back to the party, making my way over to Ashlynn and Phillip, who were slow dancing together. I joined in with them, making a small circle. Soon, the song stopped, and people started chanting "Toast! Toast! Toast! Toast!"

Iakiis took to the stage in the corner, a glass in hand. People cheered, raising their glasses into the air.

"People of the Shadowed Lands!" he cried, addressing the crowd, silencing them without ever needing to use his powers. "Tonight we gather here to share in our revelries, celebrating both the year that has now passed and the year that starts tonight. We celebrate the things we have done, and we celebrate ourselves. As it has been, and as it will always be, a toast." He raised his glass, the crowd silently following suit. "A toast to the year we leave behind, stepping fully into the next year. We move beyond the hardships and tragedies, but we never forget them. We take with us the love, joy, and the discoveries that made this year shine. So raise your glasses high and drink them up, as we say a toast to this year!"

The crowd cheered, no two saying the same thing, before downing their glasses. Notably, Iakiis didn't drink his, merely lowering his glass.

"Now to what has made this year stay in our memories forever," he continued. "First off, a toast to my dear brother, Warrior-King Julius Hermont, who, just six weeks ago, met his demise. Some of you knew him, some were banished here directly by him or your ancestors were, some were born and raised here with no connection left tying you to the Island Kingdoms. But regardless, we mourn his loss, and toast his memory."

The crowd gave a silent toast with their lord, silently raising their glasses. Even though I didn't have a glass, I found myself raising one fist in the air. Glancing to the side, I found Ashlynn and Phillip doing the same, Phillip with tears in his eyes.

"But while this year brought many sorrows, it also had many joys. Here's to those whose life began this year, and to those who found opportunities aplenty."

The crowd cheered, raising their glasses or their fists at each toast.

"Here's to those who discovered their gifts, emerging into the shadows or the light."

More cheers.

"Here's to those who made their way here, finding safe haven and a home."

Some parts of the crowd cheered louder than others.

"And here's a special toast, to three special newcomers here. To Prince Phillip Hermont, who's here to train in his gifts before returning to rule the Island Kingdoms. To Ashlynn Sparrow, the Moonblessed who melted this old shade's heart and has proven herself a capable warrior in her own right. And finally, to Ica, who..."

The crowd had already begun to face us, but now they started openly staring, murmurs breaking the silence. As I looked up at Iakiis, I heard a voice whispering in my head.

"Do you want me to reveal your identity or not?" he asked, despite never moving his mouth. I nodded, thinking "Go ahead, might as well get it out there" back to him.

"To Icarus," he repeated, drawing the crowd's attention back to him, "the daughter of Cyrah Lumos and Julius Hermont, and the last living Sundancer in all the kingdoms."

The murmurs started up again. I could see out of the corner of my eyes that Phillip and Ashlynn were staring at me. Among the voices, I could hear a lot of the words "Hermont" and "Sundancer." But as soon as the attention had been solely on me, it was back on Iakiis, the crowd chanting again.

"Sing the song!" they chanted this time. "Sing the song! Sing the song!"

I looked at Phillip and Ashlynn, meeting their surprised and confused gazes.

"Alright, alright," Iakiis laughed, handing off his glass to a nearby servant, the glass still full. "You want to hear it?"

The crowd cheered in support. Iakiis turned and nodded to the musicians, who struck a single chord, silencing the crowd as Iakiis turned back to them.

*"Skies are gray,
The snow has fallen,
The chill has set in from the North.
You keep hoping for shelter, for warmth,
But look no further,
For this all will pass.*

*Follow the darkness into the light,
You're safe here until this all will pass,
But know that you're always welcome here,
You'll always have a place in my arms."*

I hadn't expected it, but the soulful melody and his voice were close to bringing tears to my eyes. I turned to Ashlynn, whose eyes were full of tears, and held out one arm. She took the offer, ducking under my arm and placing her arm gently around my shoulders.

*"The winter winds may blow,
The storms may tear us apart,
But even so, you will never be far.
The mountains may separate us,
The kingdoms may keep me away,
But no matter how far you get,
You will always be here in my heart.*

*And as the snow starts to melt,
The birds fly back home,
And the letters travel far.
You know I'll write to you, my friend,
Asking how you are,
Because this winter has been harsh.*

*I'll ask you to follow the darkness into the light,
You'll be safe here, if you want to come by,*

I hope you know that you're always welcome here,
You'll always have a place in my arms."

Scattered members began to sing along. His voice still could clearly be heard as more and more people joined in on the chorus.

"The winter winds may blow,
The storms may tear us apart,
But even so, you will never be far.
The mountains may separate us,
The kingdoms may keep me away,
But no matter how far you get,
You will always be here in my heart."

The people went quiet as the musicians struck a quiet chord. Iakii continued his song.

"Soon you'll be gone,
And there will be nothing but quiet left,
The silence left in your wake.
Soon I'll be the only one left,
The only one singing this song.

Maybe you're already gone,
Maybe you've forgotten our song,
But I can't think about that.
Maybe I should move on,
But then who would pass it on?
How can I erase you from my heart?

Why would I forget you?
Why would I leave you behind,
When you know I'll keep you in my heart."

He paused, and for a moment it looked like he was about to start crying. Slowly, softly, he continued.

*"But the winter winds will blow,
The storms may tear us apart,
But even so, you will never be far..."*

*The mountains will separate us,
The hold of death keeps me away,
But no matter how far you'll get,
You will always be here in my heart."*

Gaining confidence as the people joined in, he sang the chorus one more time. This time, even though I barely knew the words, I sang along, Ashlynn beside me doing the same.

*"Oh, the winter winds may blow,
The storms may tear us apart,
But even so, you will never be far.
The mountains may separate us,
The kingdoms may keep me away,
But no matter how far you get,
You will always be here in my heart."*

Iakiis continued alone, a single tear rolling down his cheek.

"You'll always be here in my heart."

The crowd erupted into thunderous applause. I couldn't help but find myself joining in, Ashlynn doing the same beside me. As Iakiis stepped down from the stage, Phillip came up beside me.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" he whispered.

"Sure," I responded, following him out of the crowd and into another quiet back hall, passing two partygoers stumbling back to the crowd. He looked over one shoulder, before opening the door to what looked to be a closet and beckoning for me to follow.

"Before you ask, I'm still 90% sober," he said. "I'm not going to do anything stupid, I just want some privacy to tell you something."

Looking around, I followed him into the closet. He closed the door behind me, plunging us into darkness until I called a few strands of sunlight to my palm, faintly illuminating the

closet. It was small, but he respectfully stuck to the other side, giving me what little space he could in a show of his intentions.

"Look, Icarus..." he said, trailing off.

"Call me Ica, please," I told him. "My birth name may be Icarus, but I've been going by Ica for so long, and I just found out about my parents tonight, so if this is about that—"

"Hold on," he said. "You just found out that you're my half sister tonight?"

"When Iakiis pulled me aside, he mentioned that Julius had written him a letter saying that he had found the last Sundancer," I explained. "However, Julius didn't say anything more, until ten years later when he said that the Sundancer had died. Not only had your father called me out by name in the letter, but my mother died when I was ten. Iakiis put the pieces together, and he showed me the letter as proof."

"Huh," Phillip said after a brief pause. "Well, now that all your secrets are out there, I suppose it's only fair that you know mine."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't want to be king," Phillip said. I stared, shocked, before realizing what I was doing. "I... I don't want to lead. This power I have, it's caused too much damage in the Island Kingdoms. But you're also an Aermont. They'd accept you."

"Two things," I said. "First off, I'm his illegitimate daughter. You realize how much scorn that would cause for both of us? Secondly, what has your power done that's so awful?"

"Do you know what happened to my mother?" he asked. "I suppose not, since my father covered it up, without even knowing it was me."

"What are you saying?" I asked slowly. I was starting to get a sinking feeling that I knew where this was going. I tried to ignore it, but it only got stronger.

"My powers come from her side of the family," Phillip explained. "She was the only person who knew, until Iakiis showed up and all this happened. She knew the toll it was taking on me, so she told me to give her the extra shadow energy. What she didn't tell me was the effect it would have on her, poisoning her and causing her to start wasting away. I begged her to let me take it back, but she refused, instead opting to disappear into the Shadowed Lands in search of a cure. Two weeks later, Iakiis wrote to me, saying that he'd frozen her in a stasis to keep her alive, and that the only way to fully cure her was using Sundancer power."

"So why haven't I heard about this until now?" I asked.

"I asked him not to tell you," Phillip said. "He took me to visit her, and, freeing her from the stasis, I removed the shadows from her, now that I'm strong enough to handle them. But she was too weak, and died in my arms. It's my fault she's dead, just like it's my fault that he's dead."

"He's dead?" I asked. "You were there. If you're talking about Julius, you saw that no one could identify his killer."

I saw the look of pain in his eyes. It felt as though the floor dropped out from under me.

"That was you," I whispered, feeling as though I was free falling. "But why?"

"The powers were growing too strong to control," he said. "As it started to take over, I scrambled to him for help, knowing that he'd dealt with this kind of thing before, although I didn't know it was Iakiis at the time. He... he insisted on staying close, even as I warned him to back away. The power took hold of me, lashing out. By the time I came back to my senses, he was already wounded. He told me that he forgave me, and that everything would be alright. I knew it wouldn't be, so as he died in my arms, I ran. The guards showed up moments later, and I left, never looking back, having done too much damage to justify taking the now-empty throne."

"Those were accidents," I said shakily, trembling as I took a step towards him. "You can control it now. That's the reason you were allowed to come here. No one is more fit to lead than you."

"You're wrong," he said. "Maybe I can control it, but they'll never look at me the same again. They'll never accept a Shadowsoul king."

"They did over here," I pointed out. "They can learn over there. And who's to say they'd take a Sundancer any better? It was Sundancers who killed the First King!"

"They don't know that," he said. "It was carefully erased from history. Most people think it was Iakiis who killed the First King, or random human mercenaries."

"Still, you're the best one to rule," I said. "I know nothing about running a kingdom. You were raised to be king one day."

"Just take the throne," Phillip begged. "I'll teach you everything, if you agree to reveal your heritage and rule. You can even say you're the actual firstborn!"

"You're the firstborn," I said. "And I won't take the throne."

I pushed open the closet door, extinguishing my palm as I made my way back to the party, leaving Phillip alone in the dark.



Flopping onto my bed like a limp noodle, I was expecting to fall asleep instantly. Somehow, I didn't, despite the fact that it was almost sunrise and I had been up at the party all night long. Iakiis and Phillip had disappeared shortly before the party's end, and Ishlynn and I had slipped away not long after.

I sighed, my head reeling from the night. Between revelations about my parents, finding out that Phillip is the Shadowsoul who killed Julius Hermont, our shared father, and the adrenaline of the night still coursing through my veins, it seemed like it would be a while until I could fall asleep.

Even so, after lagging there for long enough, my eyes drifted shut, and dreams took hold.



I stood on a rooftop, watching as the sun was eclipsed by a cloud of darkness, my power waning. Hippogriffs flew out from where the Fang Mountains loomed on the horizon, swooping down as their riders took out swaths of men, the people crying out as they slowly rid the peninsula of raiders. Looking up, a winged figure of pure darkness materialized, holding a sword of pure shadows above him. As he swept his sword down, blades of shadow cut hundreds of men down in a single swoop, their lifeless corpses collapsing to the ground.

Another winged figure, his wings made of shadow, flew up beside the first. As they set their sights on the horizon, looking towards the Island Kingdoms, they-



I woke to the sound of two voices echoing through the hallway. Struggling to my feet, my head spinning and my feet aching as I stumbled to my closet, pulling on a worn pair of leggings and a soft blue tunic, my hair somehow still mostly up the way it was last night.

Walking to the door, trying to gain my composure, I swung it open, stepping out into the hallway. I rolled my eyes.

Stumbling through the halls, arms around each other's shoulders and shadows spiralling in trails behind them, Phillip and Iakiis were drunkenly singing, well, screaming the lyrics of Iakiis' song from last night.

"Theeeeeeeeeee... winter winds may blow,
The storms may tear us apart,
But even so, you will neeeeeveeeeeeeer be far.
The mountaaaaaaains may separate us,
The kingdoms may keep me awayKKKKK,
But no matter how faaaaaaaaar yooooooooooooooooo geeeeeeeeeeeetttt,
You will aalwaaaaaays be here in my heaaaaaart."

"Will you two stop that racket before you wake up everyone!" I cried, leaning against my doorway.

They turned around, Iakiis stumbling over his own feet. One of his eyes was still completely grey, but the other had hints of pale bluish green showing through. Phillip only had one shoe on, one of his pants legs rolled up to his knees.

"What racket?" Phillip asked, swaying slightly.

I looked at him harshly.

"Where's your shoe?" I asked, crossing my arms.

He looked down at his bare foot, up at Iakiis, then back down at his foot again, before meeting my eyes and changing the subject.

"There's this thing you've got to try," he said, pulling away from Iakiis and stumbling a single step towards me. "Bottled, aged shadowy vapor... stuff."

"Bottled shadows?" I asked. "That make you stagger around like a drunk?"

"Well..." Phillip stammered, at a loss for words as he had to brace himself against a wall.

"It's strong stuff," Iakiis said, stumbling a bit as he walked over to support Phillip. "But, when you don't care anymore, you lose yourself very quickly."

"If you keep quiet, I won't embarrass you by sharing this story," I said, before turning and going back into my room.

Even through the door, I could hear the stumbling feet of the two of them as they walked away. However, listening closely, it sounded as though one of them was barely stumbling. Shrugging it off, I turned away, flopping back onto my bed.



Walking through the halls of the castle, two and a half weeks after the party, I paused by one of the doors, the sound of raised voices audible from within. Looking around, no one was nearby, so I pressed one ear to the door.

"Are you sure you want this?"

"I'm a danger to them. You've proven yourself to be a better leader than I ever could be."

"Yes, but... My history there is... complicated."

"Then make them remember the truth! You can do that, can't you?"

"Yes, but not without breaking the taboo curse. You really don't know what it might be?"

"No... Unless it's the crystal wolf skull sitting in the entrance hall of the castle. He's had it for so long, there's no record of where he got it. Which is suspicious, because he has records of

everything, even down to how many eyelashes that cow had that was traded a thousand years ago."

"That has to be it. But if I do this, you might not ever be able to go home."

"I don't care anymore. All I've done is damage to this world. I'm starting to question whether you should have let me die as a child. Maybe then, everything would be better."

"The world is better for having you in it. Even if you're not the one on the throne."

My eyes widened. Phillip was actually going to give up the throne.

Wings ruffled, I blasted the door open. In the small room beyond, Phillip jumped, backing away from the table in the center of the room, while Iakiis simply looked at me, leaning casually over the back of a chair, one hand resting on the table. His eyes were a pale bluish green, and he had the glasses that I remembered from the projections of his past and some of the portraits in the castle perched on his face.

"I was wondering when you were going to stop eavesdropping and open that door," he said, standing up straight, keeping one arm on the chair.

"What is this?" I asked. "Phillip, you're just going to give the throne away?"

"I've done nothing but cause destruction," he said. "It's better off not in my hands."

"That's not true, and we both know it," I protested, stepping into the room as the door swung shut behind me. "Phillip, we talked about this! The throne is yours, and it belongs in your hands. You were raised for this, and no one knows the Island Kingdoms like you!"

"I killed my own father!" he cried, slamming his hands down on the table. I stumbled back, shadows swirling around him. "My mother's also dead because of me. Both of them died because I couldn't control my power!"

"Icarus, please," Iakiis said softly. "He's lost hope. In this state, he's right about the danger of his power. But, aside from him, you and I are the only other descendants of the First King who could make claim to the throne."

"What?" I asked. "No! This time will pass. It'll be safe! You don't need to-"

"Ica!" Phillip snapped, tendrils of shadow lashing out around him. "It won't. When I came here, I thought it would get better, but it hasn't. So I've given up. It's time someone else takes the throne."

He turned to Iakiis, who nodded.

"I'm sorry, Ica," Iakiis said. "But this has to be done."

Something flashed in his expression, as a feeling of dread washed over me. As Phillip slid a paper across the table to Iakiis, I thrust out one hand, a bolt of searing sunlight blasting into the paper and disintegrating it. As I prepared another blast, Iakiis sent two tendrils of shadow towards me, the twin shadows wrapping around my wrists and stifling the light. I tried to step towards them, but the other end of the tendrils were stuck to the floor. Additional tendrils of

shadow wrapped around my ankles and began to snake up my body as Phillip backed away into the corner.

"Icarus, Icarus," Iakiis sighed. "I should have known not to trust you. Phillip here even warned me, 'she'd be a good queen, but is too strong-willed to ever take it.'"

"When did I say that?" Phillip asked.

"The day after the party," I said. "When you got Phillip drunk, and acted like you were. But you weren't, so you could get whatever you wanted from him."

"After all these years, you really think I wouldn't be immune to that stuff?" Iakiis asked. Tendrils of shadow wrapped around my wings, forcing them to be pinned against my back. "And now I know exactly why Phillip here doesn't want to rule, and I was able to find a solution."

"What, you taking the throne?" I scoffed.

"Exactly," Iakiis said, shrugging. He turned away, walking towards Phillip and a door hidden in the other side of the room, painted the same color as the walls.

"That song, from the party," I said, freezing Iakiis in his tracks. "You wrote it for Julius, didn't you? You loved him."

"And?" Iakiis asked.

"So why are you betraying his children?" I asked.

"All my life, I've lived in his shadow," he said. "Before he was born, I was adored. Loved. But then he came along, and he became 'perfect little boy Julius,' and everyone loved him. And as for me," he chuckled darkly, "they forgot me. Forgot everything I'd done for them. Even in his last moments, my own father abandoned me for him. The throne should have been mine. And now look at me. Look at what happened to people like us. Because they had a 'normal' king, because they feared us, they wiped out the gifted population. They cheered as they betrayed me. The only scar I have, the only one, is from when my brother, the man who should not have been king, took his sword and struck me. And then he banished me to die. Erased my name, erased the fact that his throne was my birthright. But now, now I have the chance to make things right. And prophecy or no prophecy, I will do it."

"What do you mean prophecy or no prophecy?" I asked. "The Prophecy of the First King was fulfilled centuries ago."

"You really believe that, don't you?" Iakiis said. "Did you never learn the full translation? Looking at your faces, clearly you didn't."

The room darkened, the moonlight orb in the ceiling partially covered by swirling shadows as Iakiis removed his glasses, shadows swirling in his eyes until they'd reverted to being grey once more.

"Centuries gone and centuries past,

When the King of Time has long since been laid to rest,
Sparks of old will ignite,
The darkness will be one with the light."

"We know that part," I said, cutting in. Iakiis ignored me, continuing on.

"The child of the old and the new,
Icarus in name and one of the few,
The Scorned Son will face his hardest fight,
The Sun's daughter will rise to make things right."

"Your name is in the prophecy," Iakiis said. "I can't risk you getting in the way. I'm so, so sorry for this."

The shadows reached my head, and everything went dark.



Everything felt fuzzy. I groaned, opening my eyes slowly, staring up at a grey stone ceiling. Sitting up slowly, I found myself laying on a cold stone floor, my wrists bound in chains that pulsed with shadows, the chains bolted to a ring in the center of the floor. I tried to spread my wings, but they were bound, clips keeping me from moving them too much.

Looking around, I took in my surroundings. The stone walls were bare, except for a single metal door. There were no windows aside from a small one in the door, and that only led to what I assumed to be a hallway. Behind me was a stone shelf, a single blanket and pillow set on it, and a stone bucket in the corner, presumably fastened to the ground. Maybe it was even fancy, and contained a pipe that would take waste away from here.

The door swung open. I scrambled to my feet as Ashlynn stood in the doorway, her hair braided and her eyes distant and cold. She crossed her arms, her navy tunic familiarly embroidered with silver.

"Ica, I hope you know what you've done," she said.

"Ashlynn, I'm begging you, please see him for who he is," I pleaded, walking quickly towards her. I stopped a few feet away from her, the chains stretched as far as they would go. "Phillip's giving him the throne, and when he takes over the Island Kingdoms—"

"I already know about all that," she said coldly. "And why do you judge him so harshly? He gave us a safe haven here, in his own castle!"

"He tricked Phillip into getting drunk so he could use what he said to get the throne!" I snapped. "He's been jealous of his brother for centuries, and has a grudge against the Island Kingdoms. Are you that blinded by love for him?"

"So what if I am?" Ashlynn cried. "I trust him, and I'm not going to be swayed against him at the first sign of trouble. Have some loyalty, for goodness sake!"

"Ashlynn-" I started as she turned to leave. She ignored me, letting the metal door slam shut behind her.



It didn't take long to lose track of time, without any way to see the sun. Or the moon, even. Lightly brushing a pencil across a page of the notebook I'd convinced the guards to let me have as I sat on the edge of my bed, I barely noticed the door opening.

"Ica."

I looked up. Iakiis stood in the doorway. Narrowing my eyes, I went back to my work.

"Icarus," he repeated.

"If you wanted me to talk to you, you shouldn't have locked me up," I said matter-of-factly, looking up and meeting his eyes as he paced further into the room, a small mass of shadows keeping the door propped open.

"I'm sorry about that," he said, "but not too sorry. I hope you see that I have to do this. Once it's over, and I've become king, I'll come back for you. If you're even still alive."

"Even still..." I said softly. "You won't kill me. I'm the last Sundancer."

"I won't kill you," he said. "But lack of sunlight might."

It dawned on me then, why my cell had no windows. They were starving me of sunlight. Weakening me, until I'd either have to agree with him or die.

"I can see that you understand," he said, turning and walking back towards the door. "If you comply, then maybe you can get out of here sooner, but until then you might want to get acquainted with your new, powerless state."

I decided to try summoning a beam of light to launch at him, but only flickers of sunlight appeared at my fingertips.

"Very clever of you, to put a nullifier on me," I called to him as he left, staring at the chains as if doing so could burn them off my wrists. If they weren't nullifiers, I might have been able to do just that.

But for now, all I could do was sit there as the door closed.



Time passed in a blur. People quickly stopped visiting me, although Phillip never visited once. Taklis also never came back after that one time. Ashlynn came by one or two additional times, but then never came back. Rosa never got close with me anyways, and Rhya never came to serve me. Food and water was always brought by a gruff Shadowsoul soldier, who would periodically refresh the shadows swirling within my shackles.

My only companion was the notebook, which I sketched and wrote in. So far, I'd only used a couple pages, but flipping through I could see just how insane I was already starting to look.

*What does it take to prove someone wrong?
How can people see when they LITERALLY have shadows in their eyes.
Ashlynn Brimont is likely to become a thing. It's just a matter of when.
Maybe you're already gone,
Maybe you're forgotten our song,
Maybe I should move on.
How can I erase you from my heart?
No matter how far you go, I'll always keep you in my heart.
The Sun's Daughter will rise to make it right.
If you want to know what's better, cages or wings, then go ask the birds.
An angel sits alone, uncertain and caged.
A devil holds the throne, eyes open and wings raised.*

Wait. I had something there. Flipping to a new page, I began to write.



"Can you deliver this to Ashlynn Sparrow for me?" I asked when the guard next opened the door to my cell, holding out a piece of paper I'd torn from my notebook. "Or is it Ashlynn Brimont now?"

"If it were up to me, I'd have cut your tongue out by now," he grumbled, setting a tray of food down by the door.

"Please," I asked, setting down the notebook and walking towards him.

"Depends on what you're sending," he said, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at me. I stopped, at the end of my chains, holding out the note to him as he stood in the doorway.

"It's a poem," I said. "I think she'll like it."

He snatched the paper from my hands, backing away as he read it. Snorting, he closed the door, wordlessly walking away.



Soon, I started to lose track of what was real and what wasn't. As I would add to my notebook, I'd often slip into a trance, not even thinking about what I was doing or hearing anything around me, not even the clinking and rustling of my chains. Often, I wouldn't even notice when the guard came to drop off meals and water. It didn't take long for him to stop speaking to me.



Standing in the bushes, the world still overgrown and new, the new moon shone overhead. A young man tore through the woods, shadows trailing behind him. Dark wings spread behind him, he leaped into the air, drawing shadows towards him as he flew higher and higher into the dark night.

Then all of a sudden, I was in the city of Aermont, watching a young woman, her form shrouded in sunlight, soaring up towards the eclipsed sun, drawing in sunlight as she did. She was not alone in the sky, as a dark form, large, reptilian, and covered in shadows chased her upwards. She lashed out in a radiant burst, and I was back in the woods, the young man taking her place in the sky.

He soared higher and higher, shadows clinging to him as he struggled to get more and more distance between him and the ground. The shadows almost seemed as though they were attacking him, thrashing around him as he continued to fly closer and closer to the new moon barely visible in the sky.

I was back in Aermont, as the shadowy form faded away. A man, wearing all black and with wings of shadow, shot out of the fading remains of the shadowy monster, soaring up towards the glowing girl. Shadows wrapped around him, and he shouted something to her, something that I couldn't hear. She responded, before turning and soaring even closer to the sun, the light swarming around her as she started to get close. But she still struggled onwards, climbing higher and higher. As the sunlight began to attack her, much in the same way as the shadows had the young man, she hesitated.

I was back in the forest. The young man hovered for a moment, so close to reaching the moon. He continued upwards, and I was back in Aermont, as the girl used some of the sunlight pulsing around her to launch herself upwards into the air, her wings eclipsing the sun. Radiant energy burst from her in waves, slamming into the lingering shadows that covered the city.

In the woods, shadows rippled out from the young man in a wave, blocking out the stars before dissipating. He stalled in the air for a moment, before beginning to fall.

In slow motion, my surroundings flickered back and forth between the young man and the girl as they began to plummet, each still shrouded in pulsing shadows or sunlight. The two images started to merge together, the two becoming one and the same: both doomed to the same fate.

In the woods, as the young man was about to break through the treeline, a form dashed through the woods, scrambling up a tree and leaping out to intercept the young man. He tackled him as he fell, adjusting so the shadowed man was sheltered in his fall.

In Aermont, the man who emerged from the shadow monster and another young man, his wings also made of shadow, dove for the girl as she fell, a girl with wings of moonlight leaping off a rooftop to join in, before everything went black.



An angel sits alone, uncertain and caged,
An angel wants to fly, but she does not have the space
Her wings are bound,
Her power wanes,
She prays to be found,
But her hope starts to slip away.

If you want to know what's better,
Cages or wings?
Go ask the birds.
They'll tell you the same thing she will,
They'll tell you it's better when you can fly.



I couldn't tell if I was awake or dreaming. It felt more like a dream, but who knew anymore? I for sure didn't.

As the door to my cell creaked open, shadows flooded through the open door. As the darkness wrapped everything in its cold embrace, including me, a form appeared in the shadows, its eyes glowing as sunlight danced around the edges of its shadowy form.

"Icarus..." it whispered, its voice strong. "Icarus... my poor child..."

A blade of shadow emerged from the darkness, slicing the form in half. I screamed, the dead-eyed form of Phillip holding the blade, his face and clothes splattered with blood. Through the darkness, I could hear a male voice, shadows tainting his every word.

"I've waited centuries for this. It won't be long now, and no one will ever pass me by again."



*A devil has hold of the throne, eyes aglow and wings raised.
A devil thinks he knows what's right, but is wrong as rain.
His powers are strong,
His hold over them is great,
He wants her to sing along,
But she wants nothing to do with his grudges and hate.*

*If you want to know what's better,
Cages or wings?
Go ask the birds.
They'll tell you the same as the man who betrayed her,
Although he locked her away.*



I quickly started to find that I didn't have the energy that I used to, barely being able to find the energy to walk, let alone to go to the door for food.



**"If she dies, it's on you."
"I know it is."
"Keep her fed. And alive. Only use sundrop juice sparingly."
"Understood."**



The decline only got steeper. I never found the energy to leave my spot on the floor. I barely ate. Soon, I started to feel lightheaded all the time, getting headaches whenever I tried to sit up. It was so much easier to just lay there with my eyes closed.



**"She still alive?"
"Yes, but she's only been getting worse."**

"All that matters is that she lives."



People cheered as hippogriff after hippogriff took off, some in groups pulling carriages, many containing riders. Alongside them, soldiers flew with wings made of see-through, half-formed shadows or moonlight. A rare few had solid wings of moonlight, and upon closer inspection, all had either four or five rings of silver painted onto their left gauntlet.

Flying above them, his wings made of pure shadow, was a man. Another, younger man, his wings also made of shadows, flew up beside him, a young woman with solid wings of shimmering moonlight joining them as they looked out over the gathering army.

"Stop this, Icarus..." a voice whispered. "Don't let this happen."



Laying on the ground, my eyes closed, I barely noticed when the door opened. I could hear that people were speaking, but it was too hard to tell what they were saying. Can't say I cared anymore, either. But I could hear the panic in their voices.

Strong arms lifted me up, holding me in a sitting position. I didn't have the energy anymore to move. Someone pressed a cup of liquid to my lips, a cup that I could barely feel even as they forced me to drink whatever slightly warm liquid it was.

Lightheaded, exhausted, and completely numb, I barely registered the surging warmth that slowly started to return to me. As they replaced the cup, I recognized the feeling that was growing stronger, the feeling of sunlight surging through me.

My strength slowly returning, I could hear arguing voices.

"You said not to give her sundrop juice or fruit!"

That was Sevris' voice.

"I said to keep her alive," someone snarled, hints of shadows filling his voice.

Iakiis, I thought, realizing who it was. Sevris must have been the guard that replaced the original guard some time ago, although I'd never paid attention.

"I did!" Sevris protested.

Healing energy flooded through me. I cracked my eyes open to see Rhya kneeling over me, holding me in her arms as her power swirled faintly around her, her eyes closed as she used her restorative abilities to help me regain strength. I placed one arm down behind me, pushing myself up to a sitting position.

"One moment more and she would have died!" Iakiis snapped. "The last Sundancer's blood would be on your hands."

"Rhya," I whispered. She opened her eyes, a single tear rolling down one cheek as she locked eyes with me.

"I'm telling you, I was just following orders!" Sevrus cried, backing away as Iakiis stalked towards him, shadows dancing around him.

Pushing myself to my knees as Rhya backed away, stacking two small metal cups in each other as she ducked into one corner, out of sight and out of mind. She clearly was smarter than Sevrus, at least when it came to common sense.

"Orders given to you by who?" Iakiis hissed darkly.

"I-I'm a loyal soldier I swear!" Sevrus stammered. "Stay back! Keep your twisted shadows away from me, you ancient freak!"

Sevrus drew his sword as Iakiis took a step closer, a tendril of shadow tauntingly dancing in front of Sevrus' face. Sevrus broke, slashing at it with his sword, the tip of his blade only inches from Iakiis as he stepped closer, forcing Sevrus up against the wall as he scrambled to stay away from the shadows.

"**Drop the sword,**" Iakiis hissed, the command laced with shadows. Sevrus' sword clattered to the ground.

Panic in his eyes, Sevrus lashed out, attempting to punch Iakiis. The ancient lord merely stepped to one side, leaving Sevrus stumbling past him. Iakiis whispered something in an ancient language, and Sevrus doubled over in pain.

"You feel that?" he taunted, stalking closer to Sevrus as he fell to his knees. "I bet you want it to stop. I bet you would rather I kill you than leave you like this."

"Please..." Sevrus whispered, a thin trail of blood dripping from his mouth.

"You ever wonder what being killed by your own power feels like?" Iakiis hissed. "This is how it feels to have your own powers tear you apart from within. **But that's enough.**"

Sevrus collapsed, sighing in relief, the look of pain gone from his eyes.

"**Stand up,**" Iakiis hissed. Sevrus could do nothing but obey, standing with his back to Iakiis, terror in his eyes. "You're a traitor, Sevrus, and I should have you treated as such. You helped him get out of the castle. You almost were a murderer." Iakiis chuckled darkly. "You didn't think I knew, did you? But I can practically taste your growing fear. I can see it in your mind, what you've done. But I'll be nice. I'll have mercy."

Without warning, Iakiis stepped up behind Sevrus and brutally snapped his neck, Sevrus going limp instantly. I gasped, scrambling backwards as Iakiis stood over the body of his foe, his eyes closed as his breath came in quick gasps. Shadows poured out of Sevrus' open mouth, condensing into a small, dark sphere. Iakiis opened his eyes, gently reaching out with one hand and grabbing it.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," he said, looking over at me as he sent the orb away in a small puff of shadows. Hints of shadows remained in his voice. "But traitors must be dealt with."

"Sevris... a traitor... helped someone out of the castle," I stammered, not sure what was going on. I'd spent First King knows how long in a daze, dying from a lack of sunlight, and now this? I couldn't wrap my head around any of what was happening.

"Phillip's gone," Iakiis said, the shadows around him starting to dissipate. "He ran off to the Island Kingdoms, leaving a note saying that he wanted to end things where they started."

"No..." I whispered.

"That wasn't that long ago," Iakiis continued. "He can't have gotten far, and if anyone can convince him otherwise, it's you."

He walked over to me, surprisingly in a calm manner, considering that he had to step over Sevris' corpse to do so. Kneeling down, he gently grabbed my wrists, a band of swirling shadows forming around each, before the shadows swirling inside my chains faded away, the cold metal falling off my wrists. He backed away, starting for the door.

"Rhya," he said, "clean her up. Whatever you do, do not remove her restraints."

"Wait," I said. He paused, halfway out the door. "How long have I been locked up here?"

"Almost three months," he said. "Longer than I was expecting, considering you had no sunlight whatsoever. Most would die after one and a half. But you, you're full of surprises."

He turned and strode sharply out the door, leaving me with Rhya.

"Come on," she said, pulling me to my feet. "Let's get you cleaned up."



Still weak, my wings still bound, the nullifying bands of shadow on my wrists still present, Rhya led me through the halls in a clean, sleeveless navy tunic, my hair still damp as I pulled the braid over one shoulder, absentmindedly playing with it before tossing it back over my shoulder. Four soldiers filed in around us as she led me through the halls, drawing a few stares from people in the halls.

In the courtyard, Iakiis waited, pacing. He turned towards me as the guards and Rhya led me into the open space, the spring winds still carrying a hint of the chill bite of winter. The sun was close to the horizon, but I soaked up its warmth, drawing in its power to try and regain my strength.

"Leave us," he said to the guards. Rhya stopped at the edge of the courtyard as the guards left, keeping her head low as she pushed me forwards.

"Does Ashlygna know about all of this?" I asked as I slowly walked towards him.

"She does, actually," he said casually. "Just like how she knows what I'm about to tell you."

There was only a foot or two between us. Defiantly, I met his eyes, even though deep down inside I was terrified of what he would say.

"I'm going to remove your bonds," he said. "Phillip flew off directly towards the Fang Mountains, and you're going to follow him. However, I will follow you, and if you do anything, I will not hesitate to intervene. I'll try not to kill you, but if I have to, I will."

"As far as bad deals go, that one's not terrible," I admitted. "At least you're not asking for my soul or anything."

"You joke, but I will go through on what I said," Iakiis said.

Flicking one wrist, the bindings on my wings fell off and clattered to the ground. Sore from holding still so long, I repositioned my wings, finally able to put them in a comfortable, loose position. He grabbed my wrists, unraveling the shadow nullifiers around my wrists.

"Don't try anything," he said under his breath, the threat clear.

I backed up, flapping my wings a few times to loosen them up, before leaping into the air.



Soaring over the Shadowed Lands, the sun casting its last light over the horizon, I tried to absorb as much of the remaining sunlight as I could, in an attempt to get at least somewhat back to my normal strength. In the distance, the Fang Mountains loomed, and hovering in front of them was a single form, wings of shadow on his back.

"Phillip!" I cried, using a beam of light to propel me forwards. I came to a stop a few feet away from him as he turned around.

"You shouldn't have come after me," he said.

"I didn't have much of a choice," I admitted.

"Then stand aside and let me finish this," he pleaded, tears filling his eyes.

"Phillip, there has to be another way," I said. "We can figure this out."

"He gets the throne tomorrow," Phillip whispered. I faltered, dropping a foot before flying back up.

"What?" I gasped. How could it already be tomorrow?

"You were in that dungeon for three months, Ica," he said. "I thought he'd killed you. Ashlynn still trusts him, but I'm having second thoughts, and now it's too late to fix the mess I got us in. And because I keep making things worse, it's time I'm removed from the picture."

"He doesn't have the throne yet," I said. "There has to be time to do something."

"I'm sorry, Ica," Phillip whispered, a single tear rolling down his cheek. "Stay here."

I felt the shadows pin me down, keeping me in the air but preventing me from moving.

"Phillip!" I cried as he turned and flew away, disappearing as he dove through the Shadowveil. "Phillip!"

Frustrated, I gathered sunlight around me, pressing it against the invisible chains pinning me in place. They were starting to loosen, but refused to break. I pressed harder, until the words clicked into place.

"Be free," I whispered, a strange, shimmering light filling my voice. The chains broke, and I fell for a moment until I was able to spread my wings and stop my fall. The sun still on the horizon, I flew towards the Fang Mountains, barely reaching the foothills when a cold band of shadows wrapped around my ankle, stopping me in my tracks.

"Ica, where are you going?"

I turned around, Iakiis hovering in the darkening sky behind me, one hand filled with writhing shadows.

"You said to stop Phillip," I protested, pulling against the shadowy chains fastened to the ground, which was a lot farther below me than I thought.

"I heard your entire conversation," he said, inching closer. "And from where I stand, it looks more like you want to join him than to stop him. Betraying me in the process."

"You betrayed me first!" I protested. "You promise safe haven, and then you lock me up?"

"To be fair, you did disintegrate the official documents I was about to sign, and posed a very real threat to Phillip and I," Iakiis said. "You're not as blameless as you think."

"But just because my name is in some ancient prophecy, you justify locking up the last Sundancer and almost killing her with lack of sunlight?" I scoffed. "You were willing to try for the throne with or without the prophecy, so why lock me up because of it?"

"Legend has it Sundancers could see the future," he said softly. "Some say they could also speak with the dead. My father said that prophecy with his dying breaths as a warning, and those legends stem from him."

I had no response to that.

"Why can't you trust me?" Iakiis asked.

"I want to," I said. "But after these past few months, I can't anymore."

"Icarus-" he said.

I launched a bolt of sunlight into the shadowy chains, breaking them as I darted away towards the Fang Mountains, quickly reaching the Shadowveil. I paused in front of it, the light of the dying sun shining on the strands of woven shadow that made up the shadows shrouding the Shadowed Lands. I reached out, grasping one in my hand.

"How much does the Shadowveil rely on this strand?" I asked, turning around as Iakiis froze in the air, a mix of shock and fury on his face.

"If you do this," he hissed, "the Shadowed Lands will become the wasteland they once were. Countless people will die. Do you want to be a murderer, Icarus?"

"That's your thing, so I'll pass," I said, brushing the strand aside and diving through the small hole I created, knocking strands out of the way as I dove through the gap, using whatever sunlight I could spare to launch myself through the gap. Not looking back, I furiously flew out over the peninsula, the light of the dying sun urging me on as I flew towards Hermont.



Hiding on the roof of the castle, I scanned the city, looking for any sign of Phillip. Or Iakitis, I thought with a shudder. But I couldn't see either of them, the night sky looming cold and empty above me, the new moon giving little light as clouds covered many of the stars.

"Don't move," a female voice said from behind me, the press of steel between my shoulders freezing me in place as I was about to turn around.

"I mean no harm," I said slowly, raising my hands.

"You're gonna tell me why you're on my roof with fake wings stuck to your back," the voice continued. I know I knew it from somewhere, having heard it once a long time ago, but I couldn't place it. Nervously I flicked one wing, hearing gasps from behind me.

"Before you ask, I swear that wasn't a trick," I said. "And if you want to see my face to know that I'm telling the truth, you're going to have to let me turn around."

I could feel hesitation radiating from whoever stood behind me as I closed my eyes, picking up traces of fear and confusion among the hesitation. I waited, unsure whether she'd pull away or run me through. But she removed her blade from my back, allowing me to slowly turn around, hands still raised.

Queen-in-Reserve Meghan stared me down, holding a sword to my throat, her blue dress not making her any less intimidating. Quickly scanning around, there were at least four other guards on the roof, all with their swords drawn as they watched me cautiously. Looking into their eyes, I didn't recognize any of...

Emma stood among the guards, a shy blue cape around her shoulders, her armor shimmering in the faint light of the moon, her face set with determination. If she recognized me, she didn't show it.

"What are you doing here?" Queen-in-Reserve Meghan asked.

"Have any of you seen Prince Phillip?" I asked. Surprise drifted from the guards, their faces matching the emotions drifting through the air as they emanated from them. "Or any Shadowsouls flying through here tonight?"

"The prince is in the Shadowed Lands, as he has been for months," Meghan said. "Why would he be here?"

"He left," I said. "He came here, saying he wanted to end things where they started."

The surprise and shock was replaced with concern.

"And..." I continued, "and... I—" The taboo curse. Now I get why Iaklis was so annoyed by it. I sighed. "The Dark Lord is coming for the throne."

The guards erupted into worried conversation, until Meghan held up one hand, silencing them as she looked at me, a combination of concern, stoic resolve, and fear in her eyes.

"What are you saying?" she asked.

"Prince Phillip made a deal with the Dark Lord, giving up the throne," I said. "And now he's coming here. Tomorrow. Prince Phillip ran away, and the Dark Lord sent me after him. But I betrayed him. And now, he will not hesitate to take the Island Kingdoms by force."

The Queen-in-Reserve backed away, lowering her sword.

"You're one of his guards, aren't you?" she asked. "One of the two who went with him into the Shadowed Lands."

"I am," I said, before realizing that she was technically my queen and I should have bowed. I dropped to one knee, bowing my head. "Icarus Hermont, at your service."

"Hermont?" Queen-in-Reserve Meghan asked, clearly surprised. "Were you two secret lovers who tied the knot over there?"

"No, my queen, I..." I said quickly, before hesitating. "I found records over there, of the entire Hermont family tree. And apparently, when the Warrior-King found the last Sundancer, he had a fling with her. And a daughter, who was left to grow up alone on the streets with her mother, until her mother died and she joined the military academy, hiding the fact that, well..."

I held up one hand, faint sunlight glowing from within my palm. I looked up, still on one knee, taking in the wide range of emotions across all five of their faces, faintly illuminated by my sunlight. I extinguished the light as Meghan held out one hand, taking it as I rose to my feet.

"Prepare the other guards," she said, never taking her eyes off me. "Keep the people calm, but make sure they'll be safe. Emma, lead Icarus to a room."

"I need to keep looking for Prince Phillip," I said as Meghan turned to walk away.

"If you don't rest, you'll never have the strength to find him," she said.



"Emma, please," I begged as she roughly led me through the castle, opening the door to a guest room and shoving me into the room, walking in and closing the door behind me.

"What is going on with you Ica?" she asked. She had her sword sheathed, but her hands were fisted, and I could feel her feelings of betrayal and anger, as well as hints of longing and something that almost seemed like relief. "You walk into the funeral with Ashlynn and the prince, the Dark Lord shows up, and all of a sudden you three disappear into the Shadowed Lands for months. And then, out of the blue, you return home, wings on your back, claiming to be the missing prince's half sister and the last Sundancer."

"Emma-" I said.

"I don't want to hear it," she snapped, drawing her sword and pointing it at me as I backed away. "I trusted you. I thought you were my friend. But then you show up, hoping to bamboozle my queen and make us all look like fools. And where's Ashlynn? Did she resist you? Did you kill her?"

"Ashlynn's still in the Shadowed Lands," I said, backing into the wall. "She's-"

"So you left her, just like you left me," Emma scoffed, holding her sword inches away from my throat. "Just like you left Luca. I don't even know where he is anymore, and now that I've been promoted I don't have the time to look for him. But if you hadn't left, he might not have disappeared. You may have your little tricks, Ica, but I see right through them. I see through your lies. You never really cared about us, did you?"

"Please just listen-!" I protested.

"Listen as you spout more lies?" she said, pressing the tip of her blade against my throat, tears in her eyes as her hands shook. "No. I don't think I will. I think... I think I'll end this."

"**You don't really believe that,**" I said softly, that strange light returning to my voice. Her eyes widened, only for her to narrow her eyes and snarl at me, shaking her head quickly.

"Enough of your tricks, Ica!" she snapped, but she didn't stab me with her sword.

"Shh," I whispered, placing one arm on either shoulder. "It's true. It all is."

"I don't believe you," she said, backing away, her sword raised. "I don't believe you."

"Emma," I whispered, taking a step closer.

She slashed at me with her sword, forcing me to summon a blade of light to block. Advancing, she forced me back up against the wall, our swords crossed, hers getting dangerously close to the side of my neck. I pushed back against her, forcing her to stumble back. Lowering my sword, I took a few steps away from the wall, until she charged at me again. I raised my sword to block, but was forced to grab her arm to stop her blade, the tip hovering over my right shoulder. She did the same to me, my sword mirroring hers.

"I'm not your enemy!" I snapped. "Maybe you really think I'm lying, maybe you don't, but the Dark Lord is coming, and the cost of him winning is too great to risk."

"Then kill me now," she snapped back, adjusting my sword so that it was on her throat. In the same motion, she put her arm in a position that I was forced to do the same. "Get me out of your way."

"No," I said.

I made my sword disappear, the light fading away. She pressed her sword against my throat, going for the kill, but I flapped my wings, jumping back so that she ended with her sword resting on my shoulder, the edge brushing my neck. She panted, clearly wanting to do it, but unable to finish the job. I placed my hands on her shoulders.

"**Stop,**" I whispered, the light returning to my voice. She didn't freeze, but she did look like she was hesitating. Shaking, she looked up and met my eyes, tears flooding hers. "**I understand. I left you, and I'm sorry for all of it. But I am not here to fight you. I don't want to fight you. I don't want you to be left here, hurting because of me. I'm here because of you, because I knew that you and Luca and countless others could die if the Dark Lord comes here, or get seriously hurt, and I might very well be the only one who can stop him. But I'm sorry for everything that I did to you.**"

Emma dropped her sword, letting it slide to the ground, as she collapsed into my arms, crying. I held her tight, sinking to the ground gently.

"**I'm sorry,**" I repeated. Realizing that I was still using my power on her, I immediately felt bad. What kind of person used their power on their friend? "**Be free.**"

Still shaking, tears rolling down her face, Emma looked up at me.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so, so sorry."

Through the window of my room, I could see the sky was still dark. For a long time, we stayed together, catching each other up on the past few months, before Emma left to return to her duties as a Rhynian Honor Guard Commander and I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.



"Ica, wake up!"

The sun had just begun to rise, its first rays sweeping over the horizon as Emma shook me awake, before rushing over to the window and throwing it open.

"What's going on?" I asked, rubbing the sleep from my eyes as I sat up.

"We found him," she said quickly. "Prince Phillip. He's on the top of the northern tower."

I walked over to the window, still in my sleeveless navy tunic and black leggings Rhya had put me in before leaving the Shadowed Lands. Poking my head out the window, the breeze ruffling my still-braided hair, I backed up into the room.

"Emma, if this is the last time I see you-" I started, but was cut off by her throwing her arms around me.

"Tell me after, once we've survived this," she said, before pulling away.

I nodded to her, before climbing out the window and taking to the air. In the morning light, I could see a dark form sitting on the edge of the tallest tower of the castle. Slowly, not wanting to draw attention to myself, I flew up to the tower, cresting its edge in one final burst of speed as I hovered next to Phillip, who stood on the edge of the tower, staring at the drop below.

"Phillip," I said slowly, careful not to startle him.

"You shouldn't be here," he said, his voice defeated as he continued to stare at the ground.

"He's coming today," I said, the sun's rays lending me their warmth. I was careful not to use my power on him, keeping the light from entering my voice. However, I could feel the turbulent mix of emotions surrounding him, wrapping him up in their tangled, twisted embrace. Looking closer as I tried to pick out the emotions, I saw what looked like a chain link of shadows at the center of the swirling feelings, but before I could investigate it further, Phillip spoke.

"I have to do it," he said softly.

"Phillip, please, just wait so we can talk about it," I said.

"We're out of time," he said, finally turning to face me, a haunted look in his eyes. "He's coming today. There's no way we can get any sort of defenses pulled together in time."

"If anyone can pull it off, it's us," I said, landing next to him on the tower. The emotions were stronger the closer to him I got, and looking closely, I could see the shadowy chain link, resting just above Phillip's heart. Reaching out to grasp it, my fingers brushed against it, only for Phillip to pull away.

"What are you doing?" he asked suspiciously, looking at my outstretched hand then back at my eyes. "Are you trying to use some sort of Sundancer trick to stop me?"

"I'm not stopping you," I said, not sure if I was telling the truth or not, "but you do need to hold still."

"No," he said, shaking his head and stepping backwards off the edge of the tower.

I dove after him as he closed his eyes, giving in to the fall. I caught up to him, grabbing the shadowy chain link and sending a burst of light into it, shattering it. Phillip's eyes snapped open, and much of the emotional storm around him either dissipated or calmed. Flaring out his wings, he tried to slow his fall, but I could see that he was too close to the ground to stop in time. Doing the only thing I could think to do, I called up tendrils of sunlight from the ground, weaving them into a half-formed net below him, using additional tendrils to slow him as he fell.

Crashing into the net, his fall significantly slowed, Phillip tumbled to the ground. He didn't get back up.

Starting to panic, I dove after him, landing gently beside him.

"Phillip?" I asked, kneeling down beside him. He'd landed face-first, and as I rolled him over I could see a decent-sized gash in his forehead, blood dripping from the wound. His eyes were closed. "Phillip! Please don't be dead, please don't be dead, please don't be—"

I sighed in relief as his eyes flickered open, wanting to cry. I sent flickers of sunlight into the wound on his forehead, removing any traces of infection. He winced as he sat up slowly, clearly in pain.

"Ia... I..." he struggled to get out the words. "Lord Ia... Stupid taboo curse!" I smiled faintly, tears filling my eyes, glad to see him express emotions that weren't from the cloud of darkness around him. "The Dark Lord did something to me. Made it hard to see beyond the darkness. Most of that was from me to begin with, but whatever you just did broke his hold over me. Now that I can see clearly... I was such an idiot!"

"Don't beat yourself up over it," I told him, placing one hand lightly over the wound on his forehead, sending healing flickers of sunlight into the wound, slowly sealing it.

"But I'm the one who was so blinded by his control that I couldn't see the deceptions in front of me," he said. "I'm the one who gave him the throne. And once he gets it, there is no stopping him. I don't doubt that he could be a good king if he wanted to be, but he has too much of a grudge against the Island Kingdoms. Also, people here are going to resist. It'll be years, maybe even decades until the bloodbath ends, if it ever does."

"We can still stop him," I said. "He hasn't come here yet, and we don't have long, but we still have a little time. The people will listen to you if you tell them what to do, and Lady Meghan already knows."

"We can do this," Phillip said softly under his breath. He turned to me. "What's the plan, Icarus?"

"You need to heal," I said, looking around. "Where's a dark spot you can—"

A chill feeling tore through me, despite the warmth of the rising sun beating down on me and filling me with power. I looked at Phillip, who also had an unsettled look on his face.

"Come to the castle gates."

I snarled, wrapping myself in sunlight to break the hold before the command could get a grip on my mind. Phillip lashed out with shadows around him, shaking his head before sighing.

"He's harder to resist," Phillip said. "He has to be using his full power for this."

"Stay here," I said, leaping into the air and flying up to the roof of a nearby tower, not as high as the northern tower, but still tall enough to look out over the gathering crowd of people in the streets, all heading towards the castle gates. Even as they swung open, the people stayed frozen on the other side, as people walked out of the castle and gathered in the courtyard.

Flying out from the castle gates, a bolt of darkness shot through the air, stopping on top of the castle roof and facing the gates as the shadows merged together and transformed into a human form. Iakiis stood above the people, looking down over them with a crystal skull in his hands. The taboo curse, I thought. He found it.

"People of Hermont," he cried, what looked to be the full population of the island gathered in the streets leading away from the castle. "You know me by many names, mainly as the Dark Lord, but it's time you recognized me for who I am."

Holding out the glass skull, shadows swirled within the glass, before exploding outwards in a burst, shattering the taboo curse. A wash of energy flooded over me, impossible to see but impossible not to feel.

"My name," he continued, "is Iakiis Brimont, the first son of the First King."

"Liar!" someone in the crowd cried.

People started to cry out in the crowd, creating cacophonous noise as they protested the truth. Watching it unfold, Iakiis standing above a frozen crowd that shouted up at him, a crowd he could control with a single word.

"Silence," Iakiis hissed, and all at once, everything went eerily quiet. "Remember."

I could see it in their distant eyes, could feel the power of his words rippling through the crowd, as the truth of who they were facing was forcefully shown to them.

"Your rightful king has come home," he said, extending his arms out to his sides as he slowly raised them, before clenching his hands into fists. Shadowy tears in reality formed on the castle roof beside him, hippogriffs mounted by soldiers flying through them, accompanied by Moonblessed and Shadowsouls strong enough to summon semi-transparent, incorporeal wings. Through one of the rifts, her wings made of shimmering moonlight, Ashlynn flew out, landing next to Iakiis as he dropped his arms.

The rifts stayed open long enough for a flight of hippogriffs to emerge, landing on various buildings, as well as the majority of his Moondancer and Shadowsoul soldiers. I didn't dare search for Rosa, but I knew she was out there somewhere.

"Before you ask what happened to your beloved Prince Phillip, well, he never wanted the throne," Iakiis said, addressing the people, who, despite being unable to move, were staring up at him with unmasked fear, the waves of their shared emotion strong enough to reach me, even as I stood so far from them. "Unable to live with the fact that he'd caused so much damage to his kingdom, he removed himself from the picture. I tried to stop him, but I was too late. If you want proof, well..."

He trailed off, extending one hand as shadows gathered in the air in front of him. A projection formed in the air over the people, forming the king's bedroom as he sat on the edge of his bed.

This is the day Julius dies, I thought. But that day, Iakiis had said something about the shadows not remembering who killed the Warrior-King. Unless...

The projection played out as I remembered. Julius sat on the edge of his bed, and a form stumbled into his room. However, this time the form wasn't unrecognizable. Although shadows still swirled around him, it was Phillip, tears in his eyes as he collapsed onto the floor, writhing in pain as the shadows swirled around him.

"Who..." Julius said, before recognition dawned in his eyes. "Phillip?"

"Help... me..." Phillip's projection gasped, his voice desperate.

Julius took a step towards his son, concern in his eyes.

"Run," projection-Phillip hissed, raising his hands to clutch his head, tearing one through his messy hair. "Run!"

Julius stayed right where he was, kneeling down and placing a hand on his son's shoulder. The projection of Phillip looked up at his father, tears in his eyes and a pleading look on his face. The shadows swirled tighter around him, and he closed his eyes tight, shaking as he tried to hold the shadows back. He screamed, daggers of pure darkness bursting from him. One struck Julius in the chest, causing him to fall back. He lay on the ground, a dazed look in his eyes, Phillip curled up on the ground nearby, shaking.

The shadows were no longer swirling around Phillip's projection, but as he looked up and saw what he'd done, small sparks of shadowy energy ignited around him.

"Father?" he gasped, crawling over to the fallen Warrior-King. "Father..."

Julius took his son's hand in his own, looking up at him as projection-Phillip began to cry, sobs shaking his body.

"My son," Julius said softly. "If I'd known..."

"I'm sorry," Phillip's projection said through his tears, his voice breaking. "Father, I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," Julius whispered. "I love you, my son. The people..."

"Father?" projection-Phillip asked as Julius went limp. "Father!"

Phillip's projection buried his face in his father's chest, sobbing.

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry..."

The door to the room opened, two guards rushing in. Phillip's projection looked up at them, startled, shadows writhing around him, before dashing away and leaping through the window of his father's room.

The projection changed, transforming into the room in Iakiis' castle, a table in the center of the room. On one side, Iakiis stood, Phillip across from him. A shadowy form, resembling a female with wings, also stood near the table. Her form was noticeably not as defined as the other two, yet the scene felt familiar.

Realization hit me. I was the third person. Iakii had also changed his image, removing his glasses despite the fact that he had been wearing them during that conversation.

"I've done nothing but cause destruction," the projection of Phillip said. "It's better off not in my hands."

"The throne is yours, and it belongs in your hands," the undefined projection (me) said, her voice obscured so much that even I couldn't recognize it. "You were raised for this, and no one knows the Island Kingdoms like you!"

"I killed my own father!" Phillip's projection cried, slamming his hands down on the table, shadows swirling around him as the undefined projection stumbled back. "My mother's also dead because of me. Both of them died because I couldn't control my power!"

"He's lost hope," the projection of Iakii said softly to the undefined projection. "In this state, he's right about the danger of his power."

"This time will pass," the undefined projection said. "It'll be safe! You don't need to—" Shadowy tendrils lashed out around the projection of Phillip.

"It won't," Phillip's projection snapped. "When I came here, I thought it would get better, but it hasn't. So I've given up. It's time someone else takes the throne."

The projection of Phillip looked over at the projection of Iakii, only for the shadows to freeze. In a dark burst, the projections were gone.

"It is with a heavy heart that I step up to my birthright as son of the First King and assume the throne of the Island Kingdoms," Iakii said, looking out over the crowd. "Kneel."

The entire crowd, Lady Meghan and her guards included, were forced to kneel before him. Looking around, anyone who wasn't on a hippogriff also was forced to kneel, despite already being his followers. Those still mounted on their hippogriffs weren't immune, either, having to bow their heads. Ashlynn was the only one excluded from the order.

Iakii looked like he was soaking it all in, almost enjoying the twisted servitude he'd forced the people to give him, even as they stared up at him with fear. Fury boiling within me, I leaped from the tower, spreading my wings and soaring into the sky, hovering above the castle.

"Iakii!" I cried, light shining from me.

He and Ashlynn spun around, Ashlynn surprised, Iakii going from surprised to something that resembled fear to furious all in the span of a single second. I could feel the shock radiating from the crowd, as well as Ashlynn's mixed emotions, but no matter how much I tried, I couldn't sense what Iakii was feeling.

"Look who decided to show up," Iakii hissed. He turned back to the crowd, addressing them. "Behold: the last Sundancer. She thinks she can stop me. She, a child born on the streets because her father could never show his face. Icarus Hermon, the illegitimate daughter of the

Warrior-King, who found a way into the military school on this very island without ever being found out. Until I found her."

"Liar!" I cried, cutting him off. "Prince Phillip found me first, then you did. Besides, my existence is proof that the throne is not your birthright, because there are still living children of Julius Aermont."

"As firstborn son, the throne should have been mine to begin with," Iakiis snarled. Turning back to the people, he gave them the command I'd been dreading. "**Kill her.**"

Ashlynn grabbed his arm, saying something to him as the people rose to their feet, all staring at me. Their actions made them seem hostile, but their eyes betrayed their fear. Some of the soldiers on the rooftops were preparing to take off, others drawing back arrows with their bows of dark grey wood.

Ashlynn must have succeeded at convincing Iakiis otherwise, because just as the first shot was fired, he held up one hand as the people all froze. The arrow arced through the air, and even as I dodged it brushed the tip of my wing.

"People of Aermont!" I cried, addressing the frozen people. "While Iakiis is the First King's son, there's a reason he was never made king. A reason you all have just seen. Is this what you want from you ki-"

A bolt of darkness slammed into me, knocking me backwards as I fell, landing hard on the castle roof. Groaning, I sat up.

"Don't listen to her!" Iakiis cried. "She lies, and her words are twisted to seduce you!"

Looking up at the sun as it climbed higher in the sky, I silently called upon it, drawing in as much sunlight as possible until I was glowing, shimmering tendrils of sunlight dancing around me as I stood up.

"Iakiis!"

Phillip darted through the skies, shadows swirling around him, masking his form until he stopped, hovering over the edge of the roof, facing Iakiis.

"You thought I was dead?" he taunted, extending his arms out to either side.

"Prince Phillip," Iakiis said, too suddenly pleasant to be real. "What a pleasant surprise. I thought you'd given up on the throne, and by extension your life."

"Turns out that while the motivation and fuel came from me, you sparked the fire," Phillip said.

I leaped back into the air, flying over to Phillip's side.

"Well, considering that you officially abdicated the throne, it is now my sworn duty as king to defend it," Iakiis said, a clear warning in his tone. "So I'm afraid if you want the throne back, you'll find it very difficult."

"Yeah?" I asked. "Where's your proof that he gave it to you?"

Iakiis smirked, conjuring a rolled up piece of parchment in his hand. Unrolling it, he used his other hand to create a large, shadowy projection of the paper in the space in front of the castle. Clearly written on the paper were the words that successfully proved Iakiis right, followed by the signatures of both Phillip and Iakiis. Sending the scroll back to wherever he conjured it from, Iakiis looked back out at the crowd.

"Is this what you would rather have from your king?" he asked, a direct mockery of what I'd asked the people earlier. "A man who gives up the throne without a second thought, or a man who'll fight for the throne? For you?"

"Would you rather have someone who gave up the throne because he cares about the people, returning when he sees that he made a mistake?" I asked, addressing the crowd, keeping an eye on Iakiis this time. "Or would you rather have a king who controls you? A king who's so desperate to fill the void created by his past that he'll do anything to make himself feel powerful?"

"Does it prove to you nothing that I willingly stand at his side?" Ashlynn cried. "Does it not prove our new king's good intentions that he is willingly backed not only by his own people, but by a civilian of Hermont and someone who was to be a future commander in the Warrior-King's prized military?"

"I wouldn't know, considering you made it so the people can't speak," Phillip responded.

Drawing upon the sunlight, silently and subtly drawing in more and more, I held on to the power, preparing to use it, closing my eyes as the pressure began to slowly build up.

"When this is settled, I'll let them go," Iakiis argued.

"Will you?" Phillip asked. "Or will you be so drunk with power from having the people in the palm of your hand that you never let them go?"

I opened my eyes. I wouldn't be surprised if they were glowing, considering how much power was coursing through me.

"Be free," I whispered, my voice echoing through the air, letting the powerful rush of sunlight I had been gathering enhance the command. The people below began to stir.

"You listen to me, and me alone," Iakiis hissed, tightening his hold on the people.

"You don't have to be his puppets," I said, gaining confidence as the light surged through me. "Act for yourselves. Choose your side, but if you want to be free then listen to my voice, not his."

The people had started to move of their own accord, the silence breaking as they were free to speak once more. The hippogriff cavalry and the gifted Iakiis had brought with him were also starting to stir.

"You are mine," Iakiis snarled, this time only focusing on the people of Hermont. He was able to freeze some of them, but not the whole crowd.

"Listen to me!" I cried, as more and more people began to move, free from his hold. **"Be free!"**

The entire crowd stirred, free from Iakiis' commands, at least for now. I could tell that it wouldn't last long, but it was time that could be well spent fighting back. Faintly, I could hear Lady Meghan calling for order, organizing her guards and possibly the people of Aermont as well.

"You don't know what you've started, do you?" Iakiis said.

In preparation, I started calling upon the sun's light once more, trying to gather a surplus of energy to try and fight him. He raised his hands, shadows swirling in the palm of his hands. I tensed, but he waited, more and more shadows swirling around him, until finally he slammed his hands together, shadows expanding out and filling what felt like the whole world for a moment. Blinded, I focused on not falling, very aware that I might be over nothing but open air.

When my vision cleared, the sky had noticeably darkened, the sun eclipsed by a mass of shadows. I still had all the strength I'd been storing, but the flow of energy I could get from the sun had weakened significantly.

Iakiis leaped into the air, whispering something to Ashlynn as he did so. She nodded, spreading her wings and leaping from the rooftop. I had no time to watch her as Iakiis engaged Phillip and I, summoning small blades of shadow in each hand. Summoning my sword of light, I tried to block, but very quickly found him to be much quicker and agile in the air than I thought, taking a grazing slash to the arm.

Backing away, I raised one hand, gathering what light I could from the sun and using energy I had stored to start forming an orb of light in my palm, sword still in my other hand. Phillip tried to keep Iakiis busy, but the ancient lord, well, now king, was the better aerial fighter, knocking Phillip backwards and leaving the prince struggling to regain his balance as he fell. Turning to me, Iakiis' face was a mask of pure fury.

"Just like old times," I said, hoping to lighten the mood. And stall for time.

"This time, I won't hold back," he said, the fury, betrayal, and haunted emptiness in his eyes matching his tone.

I launched the orb of light at him, only for him to be ready. Clearly he'd learned from when I'd used this move on him before, as he caught the orb before it exploded and threw it right back at me. Too focused on trying to absorb the energy before it could hurt me, I failed to see him come after me until he slammed into me, throwing me down. I slammed into the castle roof, gasping in pain.

Phillip came at Iakiis from behind, only for Iakiis to spin around and slash him across the chest with a sword of shadows. As I rose to my feet, preparing to take off and join in the

fighting, Iakiis got the upper hand, throwing Phillip into me, knocking me over and leaving us both sprawled out on the roof of the castle.

I could hear screams from below. As I scrambled to the edge of the roof, I could see the gifted and the hippogriff cavalry surrounding the people, capturing or shooting down the few who got away and made a break for it. I could see Lady Meghan and her guards clumped together, sheltering as many people as possible. I thought I could see Emma, but from this distance I couldn't tell. Above it all, Ashlynn hovered in the air, holding up a swirling orb of moonlight as a threat, clearly the one giving the commands.

"You thought you could stop me, didn't you?" Iakiis asked tauntingly. "You thought you could just come here, say a few words, and get the throne back. But that's not how it works."

Looking out over the crowd, I could see that he was right. As people resisted, they were cut down where they stood, never even standing a chance. It was hard not to give in to the hopelessness, both my own and what I could feel drifting from the crowd, strengthening as more and more innocent people fell. I closed my eyes, a single tear rolling down my cheek as I heard a blast. Looking down, tears in my eyes, Ashlynn had thrown the orb of moonlight into the crowd as a group tried to flee. Most lay on the ground, either wounded or dying, as shimmering hints of moonlight dissipated from the radius of the blast.

"Surrender now, and you and your friends can live," he continued.

I looked up at him, the eclipsed sun in the distance, despair hardening into rage and hate. I stood up, feeling the sunlight flickering around me in searing bursts, staring down Iakiis with eyes of flame, who looked back at me with faint amusement on his face. While his focus was entirely on me, Phillip came out of nowhere and attacked him, knocking the king off balance.

"Icarus, go!" he cried. As Iakiis regained control, knocking Phillip back, I sent a searing burst of sunlight flying towards Iakiis, the radiant energy slamming into him and sending him flying backwards. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Phillip dive after him as I leaped from the castle roof, soaring down towards the crowd.

Rolling as I landed, ducking between hippogriff riders before pushing my way through the crowd, I was surrounded by panic, fear, and hopelessness, the emotions washing over me in an overwhelming torrent of despair. Pushing through the crowd, I struggled towards the center, where I could faintly hear the voice of Lady Meghan.

Stumbling into the ring of the Rhynian guards, someone grabbed my shoulders. Looking into her eyes, Emma stood, shaking, her fear, confusion, hope, and fury all flooding into the air around her.

"Ica, how do we fight this?" she asked, her voice shaking. I placed my hands on her shoulders, feeling how much she was shaking. "His voice, he just controlled us! H-and now Ashlynn and the soldiers, and you and Prince Phillip... what is going on?"

"I bought you some time by freeing you from his control," I said, jumping as a bolt of shadow exploded in the crowd, "but I don't know how to fight the soldiers. By eclipsing the sun, he's weakened me, but..." I looked over to where Iakiis and Phillip dueled in the sky, shadows flying, "I think he accidentally made Phillip and the other Shadowsouls stronger."

"Including himself," Emma pointed out.

"Right but... there has to be a limit to how far away the sun is eclipsed," I said. "If we can remove Iakiis from the picture, I can go after him outside the eclipse and have an even match. But he's too powerful for that to last long, and he can probably just move the eclipse. But, if we remove the army from the picture..."

"Now you're onto something," Emma said softly, hope sparking in her eyes and flooding the air around her.

"I don't know if I have the strength to do it right now, but if I can get closer to the sun, I might be able to draw more power from it," I said. "If I can get even a single rift open, push them back through it as soon as it opens. I don't know how long I can hold it, or if this will even work, but it's worth a shot. Can you get the orders to everyone?"

"On it," she said, nodding before she pulled away, rushing towards the center of the group, soldiers parting for her as she passed.

I leaped into the air, launching myself upwards with a small burst of sunlight. Ashlynn immediately noticed me, turning towards me. As quickly as I could, I began to climb, focusing on drawing in as much sunlight as possible. Looking behind me, Ashlynn had abandoned her watch over the people to chase me.

Putting on a burst of speed, I climbed higher and higher, reaching for more and more sunlight. The trickle of available power was still so thin, but the higher I got, the quicker I could draw upon it, speeding up that small trickle ever so slightly.

"Icarus! Stop where you are!"

I looked behind me to see Ashlynn, moonlight lighting up one palm and a sword of silvery light in her other hand. I could feel the loyalty, betrayal, rage, and the hints of hesitation drifting from her, her face an unreadable mask. Even though I wasn't flying any higher, the ground very far below us, I still kept drawing in what sunlight I could.

"Ashlynn, please," I pleaded, holding up my hands in a show of peace. "Innocent people are dying. I have to do this."

"What did they ever do for us?" Ashlynn protested. "Look around you! These people, they never cared about us. In fact, if they'd have known what we are, they would have killed us on the spot. So why should I care about them?"

"Iakiis isn't going to stop at Aermont," I said. "This bloodshed isn't going to stop, not for a long, long time. Do you really want your time as queen to be full of endless bloodshed?"

"He'll see reason," she protested. "Without me by his side, it would already be much worse. But if you keep resisting like this, he'll never stop fighting back against you."

"I wish I could believe that," I said softly, before darting higher in the sky, throwing a large bolt of energy at the sun. Slamming into the shadows eclipsing it, the bolt tore a hole in the shadowy covering, releasing a flood of energy, so much so fast that I could barely contain it, before the shadows healed over the wound.

Ashlynn froze in her tracks, the light shining from me illuminating her and the fear that broke through the unreadable mask that was her face. Raising one hand to each side, sunlight burning in my palms, a glowing rift formed behind a group of gifted and hippogriff riders, the people rushing towards them and forcing them backwards through the rift. Closing it once they were forced through, I opened two more, each behind different groups of soldiers.

Continuing around, occasionally opening smaller rifts under powerful individuals before quickly closing them, trying to reserve my energy enough that I could get all of them. With only a few soldiers left, I closed the last rift, my energy mostly drained as I tried to replenish it with what little I could get from the sun. Just as I was about to dive back down, I froze, Ashlynn's sword at my throat.

"What have you done to them?" Ashlynn hissed, flying around to face me, her sword still inches from killing me.

"I sent them to the peninsula," I said, telling the truth. "Where they can't hurt us."

Looking over at Phillip and Iakiis, whatever hope I'd gained from successfully sending the soldiers away was gone in an instance. Iakiis threw Phillip off of him, blasting him through a building before turning to look at Ashlynn and I, clearly aware of what I'd done. Shadows swirling around him, he rose higher and higher into the air. The sky began to darken, the winds picking up as they began to swirl around the growing mass of darkness around him. Ashlynn backed off, fear radiating from her.

"What's going on?" I asked her, struggling to stay in the air as the winds intensified, the sky so dark that I could barely draw upon any sunlight.

"He only ever mentioned this power once," she said, her sword dissipating as it slipped out of her hand as she struggled to right herself, the wind buffeting her. "But it's one of the only ways for him to access his full power without serious consequences for him."

Every moment, the darkness swelled, and every moment it did, I only grew more terrified of what this power might be. Looking down, I could see that the people, including the few remaining soldiers loyal to Iakiis, were frozen, staring up at the darkness in fear.

Suddenly, the orb of darkness burst. Roaring, a large, reptilian creature, its body covered in large, black, shadow-clad scales, its leathery wings spreading wide. Blinking its grey eyes, the creature landed, its tail lashing as it grabbed onto the roofs of four buildings with its serrated

claws, several of its under scales laced with purple. It looked up at us, staring at Ashlynn and I with its familiar grey eyes, its horns shimmering in the faint light of the sun as they solidified. It might have been my imagination, but the creature almost looked like it was smiling.

"In the past," Ashlynn whispered, the wind dying down as the sky slowly began to lighten, "they called this form of his a dragon. He hasn't used it in centuries, but..."

"...that's what it is," I finished. "Can all Shadowsouls do that?"

"Only really powerful ones," she whispered back, the creature still staring at us. "And none were as powerful as him. There are also myths of Moonblessed turning into winged dire wolves, and there are mentions of Sundancers turning into what they called a 'phoenix,' but I have no idea what that is. The only thing I could find that was for sure not a myth is how dangerous the ability is to use."

The creature/dragon/whatever Iakiis had just... well, I had no idea if he'd summoned the thing or turned into it. At least, not until it leaped into the air, flapping its massive wings as its claws tore into the roofs of the buildings, collapsing one in the process, speaking as it took to the skies.

"The games are over," the creature hissed. Its voice was unmistakably Iakiis', and as he flew into the air, I could see in his eyes that the creature was indeed him. Raising one of his front claws as he spoke, he examined it as he continued. "People once praised this form. Worshipped me as a god. And then people feared the power I had, despite the fact that I only wanted to protect them. So I stopped using it, even as I grew more powerful, even as this became the only way to use all my power. But they still feared me." Somehow, in this form, he shrugged, and it actually looked like a shrug. "And if you fear me now, well, you won't be around much longer to stay afraid."

Opening his mouth wide, dark flames of shadow filled his throat, flooding out in the space before him. Doing the only thing I could think to do, still low on power, I sent light spiralling towards the people, weaving it into a shield above them. Tendrils of moonlight joined them, solidifying the shimmering shield only moments before Iakiis breathed a long line of dark fire at the people, the fire spreading across the shield as it threatened to break. I poured everything I had into that shield, faltering in the air slightly as my power began to run out. Ashlynn flew up beside me, adding her power into the mix, sparing the people from a slow death. But the edges of the shield began to fail, dark fire seeping in around the edges. People screamed, falling to the ground as the flames consumed them. Trying to block out the people crying in pain, I desperately tried to keep the shield up, almost sighing in relief when Iakiis relented his assault, dark flames surrounding the people and keeping them from leaving as the flames climbed higher. Looking down, only one of his soldiers was left, the other few remaining soldiers having died in the fiery assault. The last Moonblessed lowered his hands, pulling some of the

threads of moonlight from the rapidly fading shield back to himself as he made his way to the center of the group, weaving strands of protection over the group as he made his way towards the center.

A small, dark form flew up into the sky behind Iakiis, distant and small as it flew out from a damaged building. Iakiis looked out over the people, before glancing at me as I struggled to stay in the air, exhausted from expending so much power.

"Looks like someone decided to protect your physical forms," he said, his voice echoing through the air. "But will they protect your home? Your spirits?"

With an earth-shattering roar, Iakiis raised his two foreclaws, shadows condensing in rippling masses in his palms as the ground began cracking apart, shadowy flames emerging from the rifts as they opened. People stumbled as the ground shook, the castle beginning to collapse as a large rift formed under it. Releasing the shadows in his palms, the rifts staying the size they were, he turned and flew over the city, spewing dark fire over the buildings as he flew over them in bursts, the flames catching as the smaller form flew over to us.

"He's spreading shadowfire," Phillip panted when he reached Ashlynn and I. "It doesn't spread fast, but it's very deadly. Putting it out is a nightmare, since only strong will from the person who created it or concentrated sunlight can extinguish the flames."

"With the sun eclipsed, I can't draw enough energy to fight him," I said, barely regaining any strength from the sun anymore.

"Well, we have to do something!" Ashlynn cried.

My mind flashed back as I got an idea.



Skimming the book on Sundancer theory, I came across a page that had an illustration of a large bird, its feathers colored a bright gold with hints of orange. The entire page was written in an ancient language, but there was one word written above the drawing in Iakiis' familiar handwriting.

Phoenix

"That page," Iakiis said, coming up behind me. "I knew there was one I forgot to translate."

"Can you translate it?" I asked, handing him the book.

"Every gifted has a special ability that can only be used by the most powerful members of their kind," he explained, scanning the page with his grey eyes. "However, very few can use it safely."

"Can you use it?" I asked.

"I haven't in centuries," he said, "so who knows? Anyways, Sundancers transform by letting the light take over, becoming one with it for a moment. Then, the Sundancer must take control in order to

transform, gaining control over the light. When they do, they take the form of a phoenix, a powerful bird that leaves trails of glorious light behind it when it flies. Or, at least that's how the book describes it."

"Am I powerful enough to do this?" I asked, standing up and looking at the image on the page.

"We'll have to wait and see," he said, handing the book back to me. "But I'd like to think you are. I'll start teaching you the basics tomorrow, and we'll find out then if you can."



"Well, we have to do something!" Ashlynn cried.

I blinked twice, shaking the memory from my mind.

"Phillip, can you open a hole in the eclipse?" I asked. "It doesn't have to be big, it just has to be shining on me."

"I think so," he responded.

"Then do it," I said to him.

He raised his hands, shadows gathering on them as a hole began to form in the eclipse, slowly widening. The light shone down on me, flooding me with power in a dizzying burst. Very quickly, I started to wonder if I could hold on to it all. I knew I could hold a lot of power, but I was quickly reaching what felt like a limit, the solid floor refusing to give.

"Ashlynn," I said, panting as the intensity of the power increased, "go protect the people down below."

She nodded, looking like she wanted to say something before turning away and diving towards the people, blocking a spray of shadowfire as it came dangerously close to the crowd. I closed my eyes. I didn't have enough power, but the floor I could feel when I tried to expand how much I could hold felt solid as ever. The more I pressed against it, the more I could tell there was something beyond, something more, but it refused to give. Gritting my teeth, I slammed everything I had against it, cracking it every so slightly. Very aware I didn't have much time, I repeatedly threw my power against the floor, finally cracking it open.

I gasped, my eyes flying open. A vast well of power opened up to me, the light flooding through me as the power I thought I couldn't hold found its place. Reaching into that well I never realized I had, power I must have locked away when I started denying my abilities as a child, I crossed my arms over my chest, sunlight burning in my palms as light began to swirl around me, wrapping me in a cocoon of warmth. A light breeze began to pick up as more and more light gathered around me. Soon, I could see nothing beyond the soft, golden glow, the light seeping into me. Pain flared as the light began to flood through me, but I closed my eyes, remembering the texts, and let go, letting the light tear me apart.

The pressure intensified, and I could feel myself becoming one with the light, spreading out to fill the cocoon of light. As I began to brush the edges of the cocoon, I grabbed onto the light, pulling it in as I began to take physical form once more. My feathers solidified, covering me in a reassuring warmth, my talons forming as my arms became one with my wings. Curling up as small as I could, drawing in the light, I threw my wings wide open, bursting the cocoon of light as I let out a triumphant cry, my beak sharp and strong.

I looked over at Phillip, who seemed much smaller than I remembered, his eyes filled with awe as he looked at me, hope drifting from him in waves as he held open the hole in the eclipse. Looking out over the people, I could feel their awe and hope from all the way up here, and in the distance I could see Iakiis, no longer seeming so large, setting fire to the island. He paused, turning to look in my direction.

"Iakiis!" I cried, my voice booming.

"So the phoenix has come out to play?" he taunted as he flew back this way. He was still much larger than me, landing on four rooftops, stepping into a large patch of shadowfire as he landed, while I only required a single rooftop to land on, my talons gripping the top of the roof's peak. "I was wondering when you'd find that well of power you kept locked up."

"So you knew about that?" I asked. Even in this form, I couldn't feel his emotions, however, I could see what looked like faint chains of shadow around his heart, and what looked to be a gaping, empty void where I would find emotion.

"You didn't?" he countered. "After all those years of hiding, you didn't realize that you locked away your true potential?"

"How do you always seem to know things that I never told you?" I asked.

"Moonblessed have powers over the physical forms of people, Sundancers may have alleged powers over people's souls and emotions, but Shadowsouls have power over the mind," he explained. "How do you think I can control people? How do you think I can read minds and transmit messages mentally?"

"You can read minds?" I asked, willing a shield of sunlight to form around mine.

"You were always hard to read, even before you put that little shield up," he said. "Don't think I didn't notice that. But, no worries, since I don't need to read your mind to know that you want to stop me."

"That's fair," I said, trying to shrug nonchalantly.

"So do it," he said, spreading his wings. "Stop me."

I knew it was a trap, but I launched myself into the air as he tensed, preparing for me to dive at him. However, I quickly flapped my wings, sending bolts of sunlight from the tips of my feathers. He threw up a shield of darkness, absorbing the bolts that would have hit him, but the

others found their marks, sinking into patches of shadowfire and putting them out, extinguishing part of the ring keeping the people trapped and the buildings around them.

"Go, now," I cried as Lakiis took off, ducking beneath him as he launched himself towards me. Shooting upwards, beating my wings and flying higher into the sky, I spun around to find him following me.

Suddenly diving downwards, I caught him by surprise, twisting around and raking my claws down his underbelly as he roared in pain, ducking out of the way as he lashed out with his claws. He may have had the advantage when it came to size, but I was more agile.

Looking over my shoulder, I barely saw the stream of shadowfire he launched towards me until it was almost too late. I narrowly avoided getting directly hit, shadowfire singing my tailfeathers. Flying out towards the coast, trying to lure Lakiis away from the people, I flapped my wings, sending a trail of burning sunlight behind me, launching me forwards. Flying out over the coastline, I could see my reflection in the water, the reflection of a giant, glorious bird, her eyes blue and her feathers shimmering gold with orange undertones, hints of red on the tips of her wings and her tail feathers.

I spun around to face Lakiis as he soared over the beach, the burning city still visible on the horizon. Sunlight dancing on the tips of my wings, I flew upwards, forcing him to look up to keep his eyes on me. Slamming my wings downwards, I sent a single, strong beam of light arcing towards him, searing the scales on his back as he hissed in pain. Shadows gathering in his claws, I was forced to duck back over the shore to avoid the lashing tendrils of darkness he sent my way. Too focused on dodging the shadows, his tail slammed into my chest, knocking me to the ground. Laying on my back, I struggled to get my talons under me as he hovered above me.

"Thought you were clever, weren't you?" he taunted. "Bringing me away from the city. Away from the friends who could help you."

He raised one of his front talons, shadows swirling in his palm. As I prepared for the blow, he looked out towards the city, a look of anger crossing his face. Leaving me, he instead used the shadows to propel himself forwards flying away towards the city.

Frustrated, I sent a burst of sunlight into the ground below me, launching me up into the air. I floundered around, my wings flopping wildly through the air, before I regained control, once again taking flight as I shot towards the city, hoping against hope that I would make it in time.

Lakiis flew over the city, much of it still ablaze with shadowfire, soaring towards the crowd in the remains of the castle courtyard, surrounded by flames and rubble. Two bolts of shadow launched towards the group, one striking down the Moonblessed soldier, the other aimed towards Ashlynn. She threw up a shield of moonlight, the light weak as she ran out of power. The shadows tore through the shield, knocking her down. Phillip, abandoning his

attempts to open a rift out of there, rushed over to her, helping her to her feet as her wings faded away. I desperately tried to catch up to Iakiis as he opened his mouth, shadowfire dripping onto the street below. Seeing the space between him and the buildings below, I threw a blast of my power behind me, knowing that if I didn't make it, all of them would die.

I shot beneath him, drips of shadowfire dripping onto my back and burning my feathers before flickering out as I threw myself in his path, turning to face him as he launched the deadly flames. They slammed into my chest, the burning pain almost unbearable. But I held my ground, hovering between him and the people as he launched his dark fire at me, absorbing it as I let out a cry of pain and triumph. He narrowed his eyes, clenching his foreclaws into fists as he one final burst of flame at me. I closed my eyes, throwing everything I had into blocking that attack.

It slammed into me, tearing through my defenses. My eyes slammed open for a moment as he closed his mouth, shock in his eyes as I began to fall, slowly reverting back to my human form as I closed my eyes.

In the darkness, I could feel the pain tearing through me as I forcefully was sent back into my body, tumbling to the ground. I gasped, opening my eyes. My navy tunic was all but burned away, a top of pure shimmering gold replacing it and covering my chest in what felt like strong but thin fabric, my wings free to move still. My leggings weren't in a much better state, golden shorts with thin bits of sheer fabric hanging from the waist in two pieces and connecting to the back taking their place as they burned away. Very aware that people were staring at my new clothes made out of solidified sunlight, I rose to my feet, walking to the front of the crowd and staring up at Iakiis, who was still in dragon form.

"You would sacrifice yourself for these people?" he asked, cocking his massive head to one side. "After all they've done to hurt you?"

"They've done nothing to you," I shouted, having to raise my voice to be heard now that I was no longer in phoenix form. "Why do you hurt them?"

Looking up at him, I could see that I had done some damage to him, blood dripping from the gashes in his underbelly that I'd given him. Looking closely, I could see a long scar across his chest, the same one he had in human form. Even without being in phoenix form, I could see the chains around his heart and the void in place of his emotions. But it was much cloudier now, much harder to see. But it had worked to free Phillip...

Getting a running start, I leaped into the air, keeping my eyes on Iakiis the whole time. I had a decent amount of power left, but not much. Cautiously, I sent a small flicker of sunlight dancing into that void. It almost seemed at home there, able to fill the space for a moment, before it faded away. Iakiis looked at me, confused.

"What was that supposed to do?" he asked.

I didn't respond, instead looking up at the eclipsed sun. The hole Phillip had torn in the shadows hadn't fixed itself entirely, and two smaller holes were starting to form. Iakiis noticed where I was looking, and waved one claw, shadows swirling around it. The holes started to fill in, only to open wider.

"What the..." Iakiis hissed, his brow furrowed in confusion.

Wordlessly, I launched myself higher into the sky, feeling the gaze of the people on me. As I flew higher and higher, I pulled more and more power towards me, the holes in the shadows widening. I continued to climb, getting higher and higher as I drew in more and more power. I didn't dare try to take on my phoenix form again, instead storing the sunlight as I grabbed hold of it. Looking behind me, Iakiis was gaining on me, getting closer and closer. I sent a large bolt of searing energy at him, knocking him away. He barely righted himself in time to avoid hitting the ground, which was getting so, so far away. I continued to climb, replenishing more and more energy, to the point where I couldn't store it all as it swirled around me in a brilliant mass of light.

The people were becoming an indistinguishable mass below me, as I gained more and more height, too far away to pick out any individuals. Iakiis slowly began to fly towards me, but as I flew higher, the sunlight started to burn, stabbing me in sharp bolts as it tried to join my absorbed energy. I hesitated, stopping in the air where I was.

"Icarus!" Iakiis cried as he drew closer. "Don't fly any higher!"

"You want to know what it feels like?" I asked him, my voice booming. "To be hopelessly overpowered?"

I thrust my hands outwards, sending all the energy surrounding me, as well as most of the very deep well of power I'd stored, out in a brilliant burst of light, the radiant wave slamming into Iakiis and sending him falling from the sky, his draconic form fading as he fell, until he was in his human form once again. As the light washed over the city, it put out the shadowfire, healing over the cracks in the ground Iakiis had formed with his shadows. As Iakiis stopped his fall, his wounds carrying over to his human form, I noticed that his clothes had also changed, leaving him shirtless and wearing dark pants that went halfway down his calves, looking as though they were made out of his own scales. He was barefoot, much in the same way I was, the cost of changing forms having burned away his old clothes.

Looking at him as he advanced, I flew higher, absorbing sunlight in waves as it washed over me. The shadows covering the sun were almost completely gone, the light flooding through me. As I climbed higher and higher, I could feel something just out of reach. But whatever it was, it felt right.

The air was colder up here, but the sunlight surging through and around me kept me warm as I slowly climbed higher and higher, struggling against both gravity and the swirling

powers around me to get closer to the sun, in hopes of finally reaching that thing. The sunlight tore into me, burning as it slammed into my bruised and battered form. But still I climbed higher, until all at once, a presence washed over me.

In the sky, I could see the form of a man, his glowing eyes familiar from what I'd seen in my dreams.

"Icarus..." he said, his voice familiar. "Take my hand."

He held out my hand. I reached for it, so close but so far from him. Struggling closer, I continued to reach for him.

"Icarus!" Iakiis screamed from below me, genuine panic in his voice.

I reached the man, exhausted and in pain from the flight and the sun's light tearing into me, but when I grabbed his hand, I felt a rush of power flood through me. I turned around facing Iakiis as he hovered far below me, the crowd, despite being so very, very far away, becoming clearer. The presence shrouded me, partially protecting me from the sun's vengeance.

"Iakiis," the presence spoke, his voice commanding as he looked down at Iakiis.

"Father..." Iakiis whispered, his face full of disbelief. It was in that moment I realized who the presence was.

"The First King," I whispered in awe.

"My son," the First King said, addressing Iakiis, "I failed you. But this..."

"I did it for you!" Iakiis said. "To prove that I'm worthy of being your son!"

"Did you?" the First King asked. The longer he shrouded me, the more I began to feel the drain of the sun's light on me. And while allowing the First King to exist was draining my energy, the sun was replenishing it so quickly that I still was facing an onslaught of burning sunlight. "Or did you do it to fill that void in your heart? The void preventing you from feeling things fully, except for the feelings of scorn, resentment, and jealousy you've always had?"

"L..." Iakiis protested as a memory washed over me.

Young Iakiis, still a child, lay asleep. The First King stood over his Shadowdancer son, drawing the sunlight from the boy. It left behind a gaping void, a void the First King could see would only grow over time, but it was too risky to allow him to keep this power. Even as it tore away his son's feelings, his empathy, he left behind the ability to love. As chains of shadow wrapped around his son's heart, he could see the coldness the future had in store for his son, the lonely nights he'd face, the crippling cold he'd feel, reducing him to tears, the distance he'd feel from the humans. He wasn't supposed to be a Sundancer, and although the First King didn't regret giving him those powers so that his second son could one day be born normal, he did wish he didn't have to take the powers away. But the future needed to be preserved.

"You sacrificed your son's life for the future?" I asked the First King, coming back to my senses.

"I did what I had to," he whispered to me. He looked down at the son whose life he destroyed, the son who was bleeding, battered, and cold because of it. "I still have been holding on to his powers, but to give them back now would be hard."

"*The Scorned Son will face his hardest fight,*" I recited, flashes of visions flickering before my eyes. "The fight to control his full powers."

"What?" the First King asked. "That's not what that line means."

"*The Sun's Daughter will rise to make things right,*" I continued. "I rise up here, meet with you, give him his power back, and make things right. Fix the wrongs of the past. Sparks of old will ignite when you show up, and The darkness will be one with the light when the last living Shadowdancer gets his powers back."

"The prophecy means that you make things right for the Island Kingdoms by sacrificing both your own life and Iakiis' in one final moment of glory, your powers mixing together to reshape the world," the First King said. "That's how I saw it in my dying moments. That's how it's meant to go."

"But that future ends with the destruction of the world!" I argued, struggling against the growing pressure of the sun, seeing the visions flashing before my eyes.

"Yes, so I can do things right when I rebuild everything and start over," the First King said. "You can't see beyond that point because you die. But I can. No one knows about the disaster that is this world, and all they know is harmony."

"I can see the other futures, same as you," I told him. "The world is flawed, but that's how it's supposed to be. No matter what you try, it'll wind up this way anyways. But if you let the world continue, a new golden age starts, where the rubble of the kingdoms is pieced back together into a better world."

The First King sighed. I faltered for a moment, the sunlight energy searing through me.

"You're right," he admitted. "Finish this, Icarus."

With that, he faded away, leaving me with a single glowing orb of power and the full force of the sun tearing through me. I gasped, struggling against it, before briefly closing my eyes and unleashing it all in a single burst.

Iakiis cried out, the sphere of light slamming into his chest and filling the void, the chains around his heart shattering as his emotions burst out in a cloud around him, a mix so strong that I couldn't pick out one feeling from another as tears filled his eyes. My eyes wide open, both of us began to fall, the light searing my wings and immobilizing them.

Everything felt like it was happening in slow motion. The two of us tumbled through the air, falling the long way down to the ground. The sunlight continued to attack me, leaving me in trails of energy as I fell farther away from the sun, unable to hold on to its power. Some of it

made its way over to Iakii, dancing around him. He absorbed some of it, but most of it left after a moment.

I could hear people crying out as I began to get closer to the crowd. Iakii was finally able to right himself, regaining control shortly before he would have hit the ground and most likely died, before launching himself back up into the air as I continued to fall. I could hear Phillip shout something as he took to the skies, launching himself towards me as Ashlynn used the last of her power to summon her wings and do the same. The three of their emotions washing over me, I closed my eyes and waited for the crash I knew was coming.

I could feel the mix of energies swirling around me as they tried to slow my fall, but eventually, I slammed into the ground, falling into the cold embrace of darkness.



Cold surrounded me. I opened my eyes, floating in the air above the wreckage of Aermont, the crowd stirring below me. I could hear them talking, but everything sounded as though I was underwater. Then, all of a sudden, I could hear them, their murmurs of shock as a single, armored form pushed through the crowd, her short dark hair in two braids that barely brushed her shoulders, her sky blue cape torn and her silver armor partially covered in dust from the ruins.

"Let me through!" she cried, pushing through the crowd. "Please, let me see her!"

Looking over, I saw three forms huddled around something. Iakii stumbled back and away from the group, tears in his eyes and a horrified look on his face. Phillip and Ashlynn knelt over what looked like a body, Phillip frantically searching for signs of life, his dark wings tense. Ashlynn's wings, already half transparent, faded as her palm lit up with the last of her power.

"I'm barely seeing anything," Phillip said, his voice shaky and filled with panic.

Ashlynn closed her eyes, placing her faintly glowing palm on the limp form. The guard ran up to them, letting out a horrified gasp as she laid eyes on the limp form, tears streaming down her face. Ashlynn opened her eyes and met the guard's eyes, tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Emma," she whispered. "Luca's among the dead, and..."

She trailed off. I inched closer, gasping and stumbling back when I saw who the form was.

They were kneeling over my limp body, my eyes closed, wings sprawled out, one clearly broken. A small puddle of blood soaked my back, and there was a line of dark, purple bruises on my chest, as well as faint, ghostly marks from the shadowfire, nearly impossible to see.

"It's not too late," Phillip said, panicking. "It's not. She's still sorta breathing. The sun's beating down. She has to survive, right? She has to..."

"Phillip," Iakiis said weakly. I turned to face him at the same time Phillip did. He had his arms held out in front of him, and was staring at them as both shadows and sunlight swirled around them. The shadows tried to beat away the sunlight, but it was still drawn to him anyways.

"What did you do to her," Phillip snapped, rising to his feet and storming over to Iakiis.

"I don't know!" Iakiis cried. "I have no idea what's happening to me, why everything changed so suddenly. And now the sunlight's attracted to me?" He wrapped his arms around himself, and even in this out-of-body state I was in, I could feel the potent mix of fear, uncertainty, self-loathing, regret, guilt, and hints of all the other emotions he'd never fully been able to feel with the void blocking them. "I can feel your hostility. I can feel the sorrow in the air, the emotions drifting from all of you, and I have no idea why!"

"Icarus."

I turned around to find the First King watching me.

"What's happening?" I asked. "Why am I here like this?"

"You might want to say your goodbyes," he said solemnly.

"What?" I asked, stumbling back.

"You were always meant to die here," the First King said softly. "I'm so sorry, Icarus, but that's how it's meant to be."

"No," I said weakly. "No, no, this can't be, I-I only got twenty two years to live! I can't just die here, not when I'm the last Sundancer..."

"You won't be the last," he said. "Iakiis is a Shadowdancer, so he can pass on the gift. Ashlynn and Phillip both have traces of the genetics, as do many people in the kingdoms. One day, there will be another Sundancer when the world needs one most."

"So I was never more than a tool?" I asked. "A means for an end? Just like your son?"

"You meant so much more than that to me," the First King said, walking over to me and placing one hand on my shoulder. "I watched over you every step of the way, and I am so proud of you."

I pulled away, ignoring the flash of hurt on his face.

"So this is it?" I asked sharply. "I die, Iakiis is left with no one to help him learn to use his powers, and one day there will be another Sundancer who you will use as your tool to steer the future along the path you want it to go down?"

"This world is not ready for the kind of power Sundancers have," he said. "One of the biggest mistakes I made was giving them so much power. I should have kept the ability to see the future to myself, the ability to speak with the dead to just me, but I didn't. Moonlight can be taught to project what you want, shadows remember the past, and I was stupid enough to allow Sundancers to harness the sunlight's ability to know what comes next. So I allowed those three Sundancers to kill me, knowing that it would lead to a purge in the Sundancer population, until there was only one left. Because their power was too great, and shouldn't be allowed to exist."

"I disagree," I told him.

"You're biased," he argued.

"I'm looking at the same futures you are," I told him. "The world is ready for Sundancers. You are just too afraid to try, instead opting to stay on the safer route, to control everything yourself. Maybe that's where Iaktis and Julius got their tendency to be bad rulers from. It's all from you, their father, being a bad king. And yet, we all idolize you anyways."

"Did Iaktis ever tell you what Hermont and Brimont translate to?" the First King asked. I shook my head. "Brimont means 'broken one.' Iaktis never knew, but I gave him that name because I'd broken him, and was trying to signal him that. I don't think he ever actually got the message. But Hermont... Hermont means 'glorious one.' And while Julius sort of lived up to that title, you are the one the name was meant for. And you did live up to it."

"So let me live up to it some more," I argued. "You and I both can see the future. There are some really good ones, much better than most of the ones where I die and am unable to stop things from happening."

"Yes, but you also see the one where your descendants grow too powerful," he said. "That one's too likely to risk."

I stayed silent, seeing the images of flames, destruction, and a pair of Sundancers bearing some resemblance to me at the heart of it all. An idea popped into my head, along with new futures.

"What if..." I said. "What if you made it so I can never have children. Then that future never happens, and the ones where other Sundancers take their place are less likely."

"Are you sure you want this?" the First King asked. "Once I do this, there is no changing it."

"I'm sure," I said, only hesitating slightly. "I'd rather live out my life than die here."

"Icarus, wait."

Looking beyond the First King, I could see two forms, one male and one female as they took shape. One was Julius Hermont, and the other...

"Mother!" I cried, taking a step towards her before hesitating.

"Icarus, we are so proud of you," she said, smiling with tears in her eyes as she took me in.

"Even if I don't join you now," I told them, looking from my mother to my father, "I'll be with you one day. And who knows? Maybe I'll get to talk to you before then."

"Icarus, we may have never met," Julius said, "but know that I loved you, and longed to be with you. And now, watching over you these past few months, I can say that I am proud of you. I'll wait for you, just as I'll wait for my brother. Just... do me a favor and tell Phillip and Iaktis that I love them."

"I will, father," I said, tears in my eyes. I longed to run over and hug them, but I didn't know if I could. Turning back to the First King, I nodded.

The First King began to chant in an ancient language, pain tearing through me. I fell to my knees, gasping as burning energy flooded through me. Looking up at the First King and my parents, who waved at me as they faded away, silent tears began to flow down my cheeks. The First King finished his chant,

holding an orb of light in one hand. He walked over to me slowly, using his other hand to telekinetically lift me to my feet.

"Until we meet again, Icarus," he said, a faint smile on his face as he pressed the orb of light into my chest. I closed my eyes, darkness surrounding me. I could barely feel the ground beneath me, the pain of my broken wing, bruises, burns from the shadowfire, and what were probably broken ribs, but before the darkness fully took hold, I could hear one last part of the argument between Iakii and Phillip, and Ashlynn's words as she interrupted them.

"She's alive! Guys, stop fighting, I have signs of life!"

If I could have moved, I would have smiled as I drifted into the soft darkness that beckoned me.



FOUR DECADES LATER

"Do you, King Phillip Aermont, solemnly swear that you'll honor your queen, and be loyal to her until the day you part?"

"I do," Phillip said, all the emotions flooding from him in waves.

"Do you, Avae Florian, solemnly swear to uphold the ideals of this kingdom as its queen, and to honor your king and be loyal to him until the day you part?"

"I do."

"Then I pronounce both of you, King Phillip Aermont and Queen Avae Aermont, husband and wife," the man said. Avae, who years ago Phillip had revealed as his long-time secret lover, pulled Phillip in for a kiss, the two embracing as they pulled apart. Despite the time that had passed, she was still youthful like him, in part because of him sharing his immortality with her.

That night, standing on the roof of the castle as the party raged on in the castle, the sunset painting the sky in shades of red, orange, blue, and purple, Avae and Phillip stood together, looking out over their kingdom. Lady Ashlynn Brimont stood on one side of me, Lord Iakii Brimont on her other side.

"It's nice to get some fresh air, isn't it?" I asked.

"And to get away from that mess of emotions," Iakii remarked. I chuckled a little, agreeing with him. "Your gift is stronger than mine. How do you take it?"

"Until I came back here through the Shadowveil before everything happened, I couldn't sense that," I admitted. "It wasn't until after I'd trained in the Shadowed Lands that I could do that, after I'd stopped trying to pretend I didn't have this power."

"Auntie Icarus!"

I turned around to see little six year old Mia Brimont running towards me, a look of pure joy on her little face, her tiny silver wings flapping behind her as she ran. I smiled, kneeling down and picking her up, her brown eyes shining, her soft brown hair in two small braids, one of which brushed against my hand.

"How are you, Mia?" I asked, spinning around as I lifted her up into my arms. Her joy was infectious, and it was impossible not to smile. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Iakiis and Ashlynn doing the same.

"Tired," she admitted. "But I had to come see you! And Uncle Phillip!"

"In public you have to call him King Phillip, sweetie," Ashlynn said, holding out her arms. I carefully handed her her daughter, smiling as she held her tight. "But right now, it's just us, so you can say what you want."

"I love you, Mommy," Mia said, holding her mother tight.

The door to the rooftop swung open. I turned around, Emma and her girlfriend, Avery, walking through the door, both in blue dresses. I walked over to them, smiling.

"Look who decided to be festive and wear the colors of their homeland," I said.

"Says the girl in gold and white," Emma retorted, raising one eyebrow. "And if it were up to me, I'd be in my armor right now. Dresses are not my thing."

She had a point. My gold and white top, my wings free, both having thankfully healed right after the fall I took that fateful day, and my white and gold skirt were both meant to represent my status as the only Sundancer, although with Iakiis being a Shadowdancer I didn't know if I counted as the only one anymore.

"It's so loud down there," Avery said quietly. Her dark brown hair shone in the fading light of the sun as she brushed a strand out of her face, despite the grey running through it.

"Want to join us?" I asked them, gesturing towards the others on the rooftop. "We also came up here for fresh air."

"Sure," Emma said, following me over to the edge of the rooftop.

Eventually, we all found ourselves in a line with Phillip and Avae, standing on the edge of the roof, Emma and Avery on the other side of Avae, Phillip next to me, Iakiis on my other side, Ashlynn holding Mia on his other side.

"I have to ask," Avae said. "How many of you here are immortal?"

Phillip, Iakiis, Ashlynn, and I all raised our hands.

"Mia also is very likely to be at least somewhat immortal, if not completely," Iakiis said.

"Wow," Avery said, looking down the line.

"If you want, you can raise your hand," Phillip told Avae. "I've already started sharing my immortality with you. If you want, I could make you immortal too."

"I'm starting to feel left out over here," Emma joked.

"We could do something about that," I offered.

"I'll pass," she said. "I know Ashlynn already took up the offer, and I'm guessing Queen Hvae here will too, but I'd rather live my life knowing there's an end. Because I guess I've always seen the end of something as what gives it meaning."

I looked out at the dusk sky. Once, before I'd realized I was immortal, I'd thought the same thing, trying to do as much as I could before I grew old. Already, Emma's hair was streaked with grey, and although she was still strong and agile, that might also only be because of how in shape she was from being a commander of the Rhynian Honor Guard for the past forty years. I had no idea how much time I had left with her, and had been trying to make sure I made every moment count.

"Remember that time I gave you spectral wings for a little while?" I said, smirking as I looked over at her.

"Where are you going with this, Ica?" she asked, suspicion radiating from her, as well as curiosity.

"What do you say?" I asked. "While we're all together, one more flight together while we have time. I mean, if we're not going to take part in the party down there, why don't we have our own?"

"I'm in," Avery said quietly. Emma looked at her. "What? Who knows how much time we have left? We're getting old, so might as well seize the moment and enjoy ourselves."

Ashlynn wordlessly summoned her silvery wings, her dark grey dress containing slits in the back for them to form. Phillip turned to Hvae, who grinned at him.

"Our first adventure as a married couple?" he asked, holding out one hand as he summoned his own wings, unclipping his black wolf hide cape and revealing his light grey suit also had slits in the back. She took his hand, and spectral wings of shadow appeared on her back.

Ashlynn handed Mia to Iakiis, walking over to Avery and holding out her hand, giving Avery spectral wings of moonlight. I walked over to Emma, holding one hand out in a silent offer.

"You always did know how to get me to go along with your crazy ideas," she chuckled, taking my hand as shimmering wings of light appeared on her back. Grinning, I stepped past her, leaping off the roof into the night sky. Looking behind me as the others did the same, Mia spreading her little wings and flying on her own, I cheered, not caring who heard.

This is why I wanted to live, I thought, thinking back to that day. So I can live my life how I choose, and live it with my friends. Because this is my life, and mine alone.

Soaring with the people I cared about most, I'd never felt so free, so willing to face whatever life threw at me next, without a care in the world. I ignored the vision that flickered into my head, choosing this moment, this life I was going to lead. And nothing would stop me.

