

REALM OF RUINS

A Nissera Novel

HANNAH WEST

HOLIDAY HOUSE



NEW YORK

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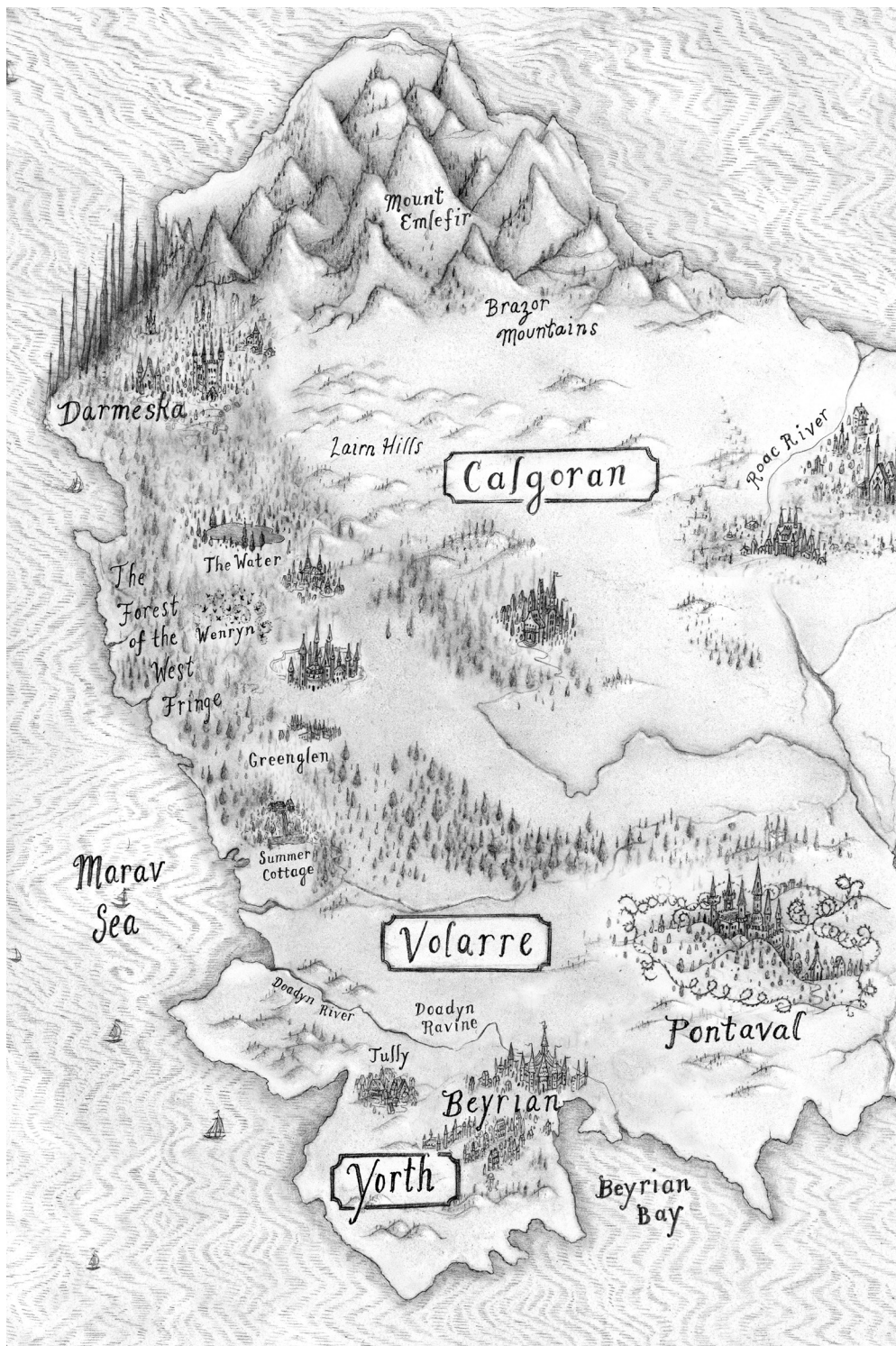
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For Vince, my unflagging encourager through thick and thin



Mount
Emlefir

Brazor
Mountains

Darmeska

Lairn Hills

Casgoran

Roac River

The
Forest
of the
West
Fringe

The Water

Wenryn

Greenglen

Summer
Cottage

Marav
Sea

Volarre

Doadyn River

Doadyn
Ravine

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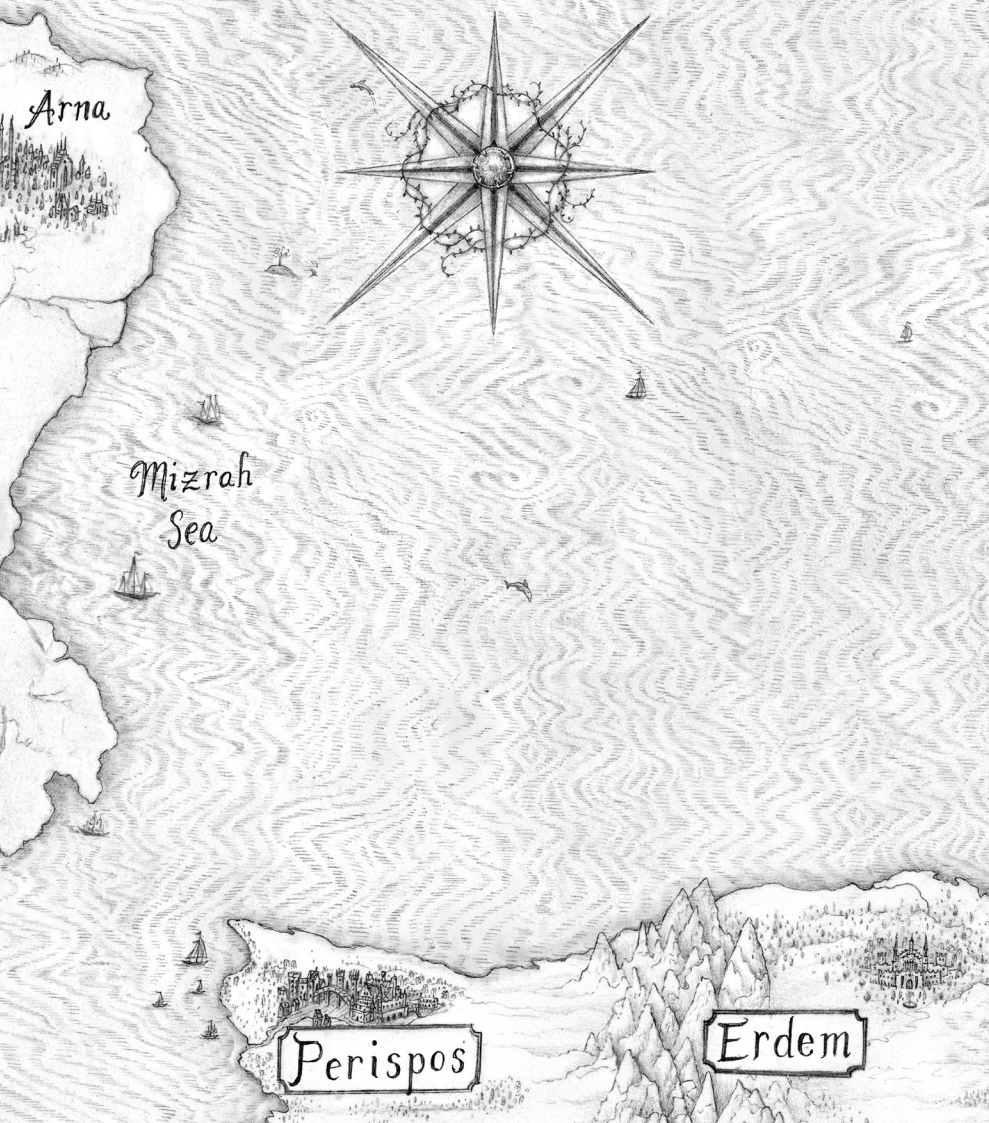
Beyrian

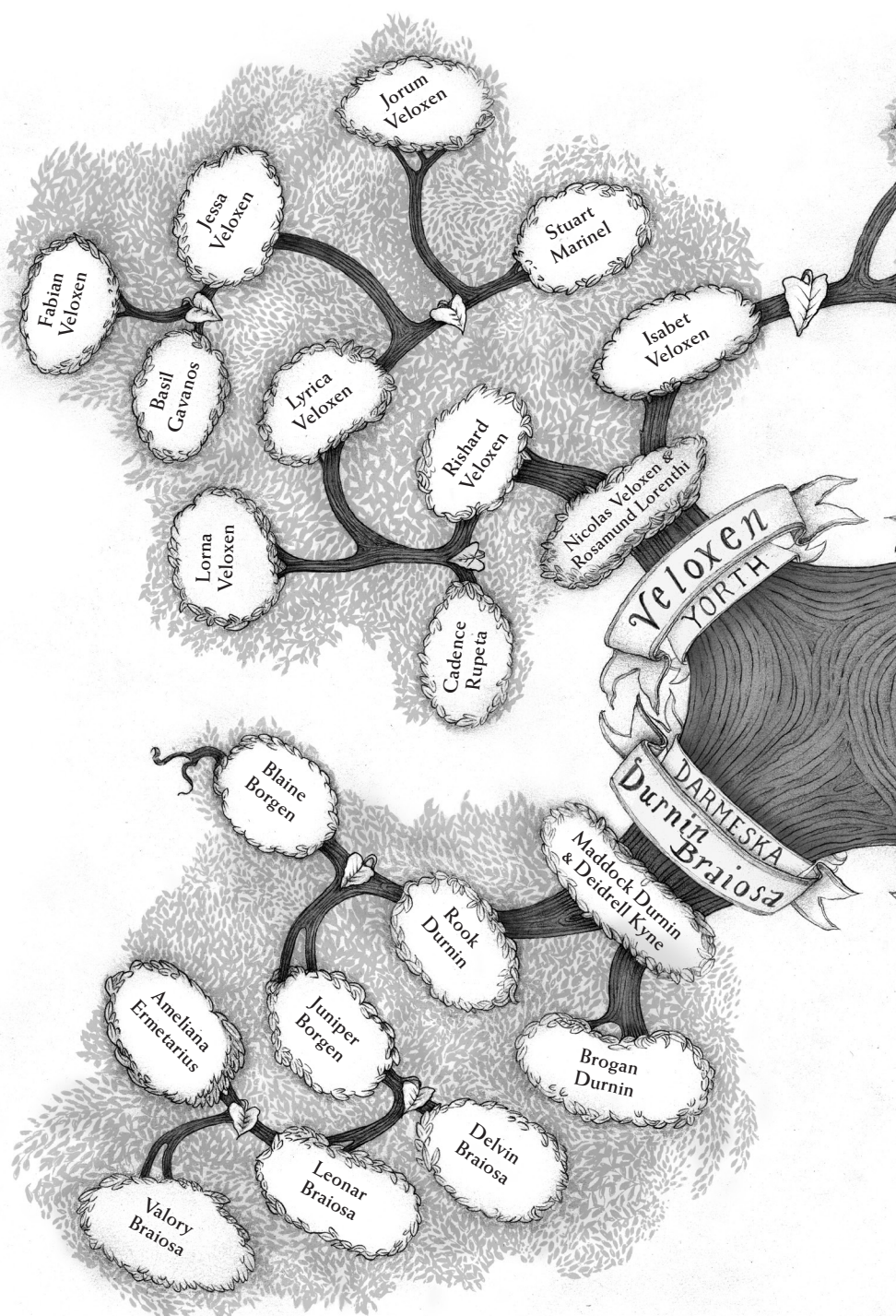
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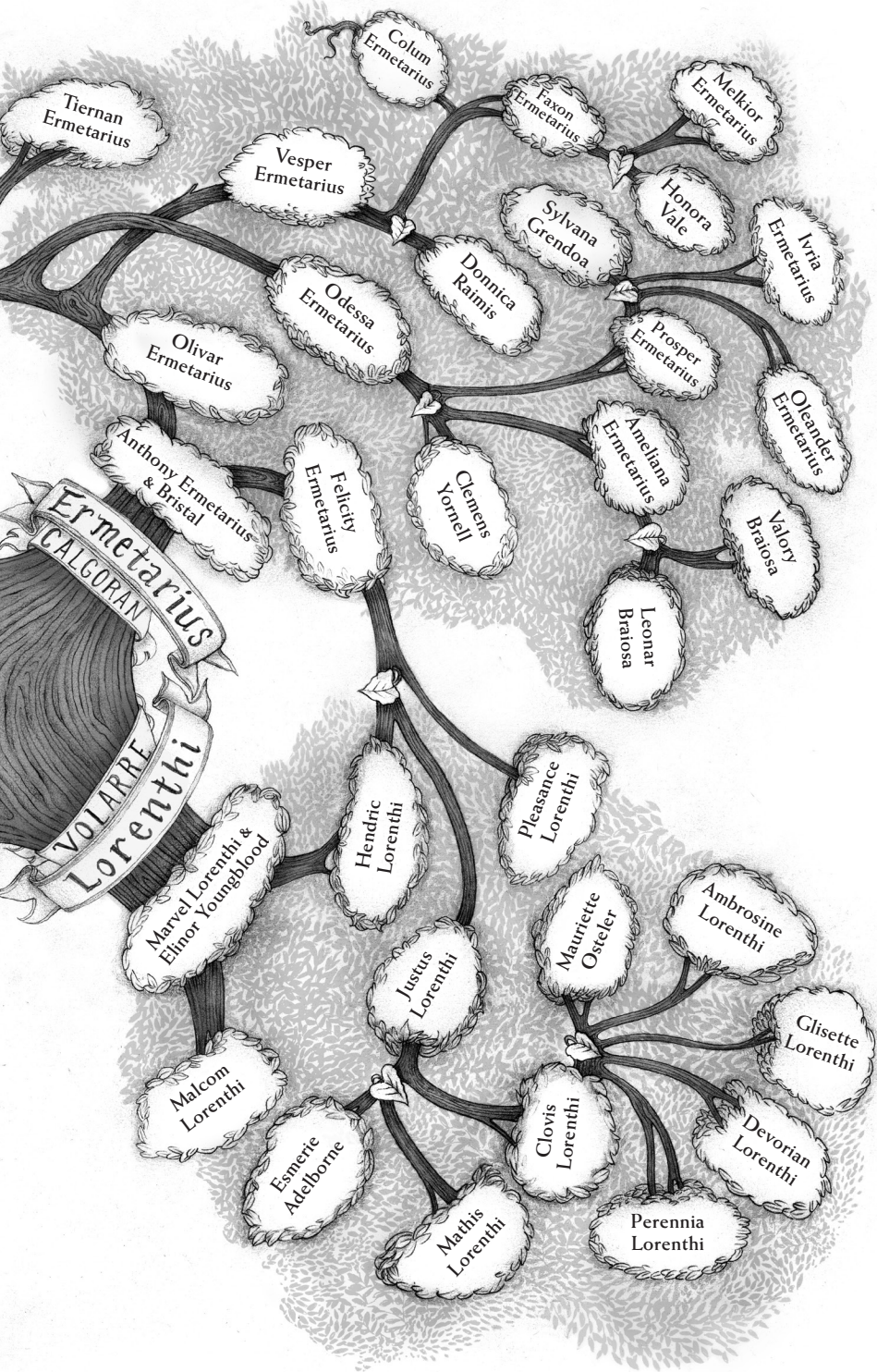
Yorth

Beyrian
Bay

Nissera







PROLOGUE

The first kingdom he destroyed by plague, the second by vanity and decadence. The third he destroyed by wielding its own craving for power.

But the new queens rebuilt the realm from its ruins.

And it will never be destroyed.

❧ ONE ❧

RAIN DROPS tapped on my brow as I hastened across the soggy training grounds toward the academy. I shut out the sharp whispers pursuing me, but I couldn't outpace the enchantment that struck the small of my back.

Warmth danced between my shoulder blades as I fumbled with the ornamental clasp on my cloak, refusing to cast a sideways glance at the flames crawling up the fabric. But ribbons of heat licked through to my skin and gave me no choice but to drop my satchel full of books to roll in the mud.

My three assailants caught up to me. I lay on my back, gritting my teeth hard enough to crush them to powder.

"If you're going to spread disparaging rumors about a superior, Valory," said a wiry, wan-faced boy—my second cousin, Melkior—as he pinned my cloak under his boot, "you should mind your listener's loyalties."

I shot an exasperated look at the girl idling behind him. She was new to the elicromancer academy. I had hoped to make her feel welcome, but apparently Melkior had beaten me to it, and in return she'd given him her fealty. The offhand comment I'd made about him during Herb Magic lessons in the greenhouses had been noted.

Melkior hunkered down beside me, his eyes narrowing to slits behind a curtain of stringy dark hair. "You think I'm not worthy to be an elicromancer."

“You have your elicrin stone,” I growled, ripping my cloak from under his heel. He wobbled and caught himself by planting a hand in the muck. “You’ve already proven yourself worthy. I simply said you make such waste of your gift.”

“At least I have one to waste,” Melkior sneered. He stood and signaled to the other two. I tried to scramble to my feet, but the boy, one of my dear cousin’s rotating henchmen, lunged to pin my wrists. The girl made bloody hatch marks on my arms and face by merely flicking her finger through the air, as though my flesh were nothing but a scratch page in her notes dossier. My cloak and the sleeves of my gray scholar’s tunic ripped to rags while I landed a glancing kick to the boy’s stomach and stifled grunts of pain. I wouldn’t give Melkior any more pleasure in his dark sport.

He let the torment go on much too long before he waved his friends away and drew close to touch my forehead, his milky-white elicrin stone aglow on the silver medallion around his neck. It was the only time the smirk slipped unsuspectingly off his face, when he concentrated on healing. My cuts closed up like ripped fabric under a deft seamstress’s care.

I clambered up, eager to retaliate. But unlike those of the other pupils in my tier, my temper did not summon poisonous breaths from my lungs or a lightning bolt from the sky—or do anything magical at all.

Melkior knew this. His self-satisfied grin made his otherwise decent face look weaselly.

“If you’re so superior, why are you still loitering around the academy?” I demanded, desperate to land a blow. “Don’t you have

more important things to do? Or do even the most sickly patients find your presence unbearable and beg for death to come?"

The girl swiped her hand through the air, slashing my cheek and lip. A growl rumbled deep in my throat. She cocked one thin brow as if to say she'd be happy to keep slicing me up like a juicy ham, but my cousin Ander jogged over from the nearby stables. The crest-shaped carnelian elicrin stone hanging above his navel captured the sunlight so as to twinge my pride a bit.

"Is he bothering you, Valory?" he asked.

"Is he ever not?"

Melkior's companions bowed their heads and shifted behind their leader. What was it about Ander that made him so regal and imposing? I possessed as much royal blood as he, and stood closer to claiming the throne than Melkior. But others did not instinctively bow their heads in my presence, much less do my bidding. In fact, they seemed to have no qualms about making mincemeat of me.

"I trust you will allow Valory to reach her next lecture *and* her birthday celebration on time, without further harm." Ander gave Melkior a pointed look, but it wasn't without pity. Melkior was the one cracked egg out of a dozen, the family outcast, and that hadn't changed when he became an elicromancer.

"Yes, of course. Are you quite all right, Valory? I admit that got out of hand." Melkior glared at his henchwoman as he said this. Her face flamed under Ander's gaze, and she hurried to pick up my satchel and books. She was not only a new pupil, but a peasant from a far village. Joining an elicromancer academy studded with royals

was no doubt intimidating. I watched the realization dawn: she had too swiftly chosen her allies.

I would forgive her. Melkior's accomplices usually abandoned him after they realized that being royal didn't make one right.

Eyes down, she passed off my muddy satchel. Melkior placed a hand on my face to heal me, but I jerked back and spat blood onto his boot.

"Come on," Ander said, ushering me away. "You'll be late for your lecture."

We turned our backs on Melkior and his gang, strutting over the spongy grass. The rain clouds had begun to scatter, revealing a slate of cornflower blue. The palace stretched over the green fields, a pale mountain with a river running through it and wine-red flags waving sinuously from its parapets. The academic wing stood apart from the palace, joined to it by an arcade strewn with ivy.

"Melkior never learned why it was wrong to cut off a kitten's tail and regrow it," Ander said as we walked. "Since he can immediately fix something he's broken, I suppose it doesn't make sense to him not to break it."

"I don't care what does and doesn't make sense to him," I said, at last succeeding in unclasping my cloak. "His heart is a rock and his brain is a pebble. I don't see why the Water didn't just swallow him whole."

"Maybe it didn't want him." Ander smiled down at me, his fair cheeks ruddy. The levity in his gray eyes revealed that he hadn't a care in the world. He stood fourth in line to the throne of Calgoran, and these were untroubled times. "Perhaps he will have some use yet. With a gift like that, surely he will be useful whether he wants to be or not."

I shrugged, noticing as I did so that I smelled of sweat and sludge. Ander had just returned from a hunting trip planned in preparation for my birthday feast, but his dark hair still smelled of fine fragrant oils.

“Are you sure you don’t want him to heal that cut?” he asked as we parted ways.

“I’d kiss a wild horse on the hoof before I’d let Melkior touch me again,” I said, joining the other late pupils scurrying from one lecture to another.

Ander shook his head and strode toward the entrance to the palace, ignoring the fawning looks my peers cast his way. With a gentle dab at the stinging cut on my lip, I sauntered to my Elicrin History and Folklore lesson.

Professor Wyndwood had already begun his lecture and shot me a disapproving look from beneath feral gray eyebrows before proceeding. I draped my ruined cloak on a hook and hurried to my seat next to Knox Rodenia near the tracery windows. Most people I met were taller than me, but Knox’s hefty build made him seem especially towering. He was strong yet a bit cushy, with kind green eyes, fawn skin, and agreeable features.

“I would say ‘happy birthday,’ but it doesn’t look as if it has been,” he whispered as I sank down beside him. “What happened? Was it Melkior? I swear, when I’m an elicromancer I won’t let him get away with it. I don’t care if he’s royalty. He can’t treat people like this.”

“I’m fine,” I said, extracting a soggy textbook from my satchel with a grimace.

“What about your ball tonight? You’re going to go with your face like that and let him win?”

“He wins when anyone pays him mind,” I hissed.

From the front row, Jovie Neswick sighed with annoyance at our commotion. She had never shown an aptitude for elicrin magic but was permitted to attend lectures due to her noble status and enthusiasm. Her tawny hair was always smoothed back in a painfully tight plait, pulling her parchment-pale forehead taut, and she was always, *always* taking notes. Sometimes I worried that there was no clear distinction between the Conclave’s benevolence toward her and their justification for *my* presence at the academy. Hereditary magic didn’t guarantee a gift—apparently—and there were plenty of people with no known elicromancer lineage who manifested gifts; but with a family tree laden with ripe magical fruit, I staked a greater claim to this seat.

The professor cleared his throat and glared at me and Knox. I clamped my lips together, tasting the tang of blood.

“Don’t be like everyone else,” Knox continued in a hushed voice when Professor Wyndwood resumed his lecture. “Don’t absolve Melkior just because he’s a Healer. I can feel the way he hurts people, tearing them down with words and bruises. I shudder to think what I’ll sense from him when my gift is fully unlocked.”

“Perhaps you’ll better understand the motives behind the malice.”

“I’m not sure I want to.”

“Some Empath you are!” I teased with a wry smile that stung my split lip.

Professor Wyndwood nearly shouted to catch our attention. “Can anyone name the ages of Nissera?” he asked. “Valory?”

“The Archaic Age, the Heroic Age, the Mortal Age, and our current Age of Accords, sir.”

“Very good,” the professor muttered reluctantly.

“It might be sooner than we thought,” Knox whispered after a moment.

“What?” I asked.

“My ceremony. The professors have agreed I’m ready for my elicrin stone. They’ve scheduled a hearing with the Conclave.”

As we came of age, professors picked off pupils in my tier one by one like wild game on a hunt, pulling them out of courses and elevating them to a higher status. Once approved, each potential elicromancer stepped through the portal to a woodland pond rife with deadly, glorious magic. Upon contact, the Water tore each one under like a thief in the night, trapping its quarry under impenetrable ice.

If the Water considered you worthy, the ice shattered, and one of the shards became an elicrin stone offering greater power and control over your gift, as well as immortality.

If the Water didn’t offer you an elicrin stone, it drowned you and swallowed every trace.

Whether the risk was worth taking was determined on a case-by-case basis by the Conclave, a collective of elicromancers and mortals who presided over the academy and acted as a gateway between us pupils and our ambitions.

“Already?” I shook away the shock and mustered a smile. “That’s wonderful.”

My tone contradicted my words. I glanced at the empty seat next to the window where Ivria had sat just weeks ago. Ander’s older sister, my cousin and dearest friend, had been approved for her ceremony. Now the time had come for her to decide whether or

not to brave the deadly Water in order to receive an elicrin stone, to test the unpredictable magic in her blood against her life.

Ander had excelled enough to obtain his stone early, while Ivria's lack of confidence had kept her at the academy well into her last term.

I wished I lacked confidence and nothing else. I knew the enchantments. I had excelled intellectually in all my studies: Astronomy, Cleromancy, Herb Magic, Curses and Forbidden Rituals, Deep Magic and Ancient Forces. Yet the absence of even a murmur of magic inside me meant I might never have the chance to put my expertise to use.

But Knox had received approval.

He and I had always been equals, never one a better student than the other. I had mastered knowledge but wavered in magic manifestation. He demonstrated a strong gift but lagged in his studies.

Now he would have his ceremony. He would touch the deadly Water, and it wouldn't kill him. He would receive an elicrin stone and become immortal the moment he reached physical maturity. He would put all the spells he had theoretically mastered into practice. To my left and my right would be nothing but empty chairs.

I would be stuck here with Jovie the mortal, and I would have no choice but to exit the academy in defeat and shame.

"What was the event that marked the end of the Heroic Age and the beginning of the Mortal Age?" Wyndwood asked. "Knox?"

"Um," Knox said.

I bit my tongue to keep from whispering the answer. Perhaps I'd given him too many answers.

"The Elicrin War?" Knox guessed.

“In a way,” Wyndwood conceded. “After the peacekeeping elicromancers defeated the rebels in the Elicrin War, they gave up their stones, and therefore their power and immortality. They subverted a flaw that has plagued elicromancers for ages: the temptation to think of ourselves as higher beings and use magic for personal gain rather than for the greater good. Of course, as long as the Water exists, so too will elicromancers, and so too will the temptation to subjugate mortals . . . but we have learned from history how to keep our kind in check.”

While the professor lectured on, his rampant eyebrows helping to emphasize each point, I thought about the elicrin gifts, from prophetic visions and supernatural strength, to shapeshifting and self-duplication. There were so many gifts, so many flashing shades of jewel-like elicrin stones hanging from hundreds of throats.

Please, I thought, imploring the ancestral magic in my blood to catch. *Please let me be powerful.*



After the lecture, I crossed the arcade to the palace and was admitted by a stern-faced guard. Folding my cloak to avoid leaving a muddy trail on the crimson carpet, I ascended a grand staircase leading to the private quarters and traversed a corridor with portraits of dozens of members of the Ermetarius family. I wondered what it would be like to have lived over a century ago, during the Mortal Age, before elicromancy training became requisite education for the royal sons and daughters of the realm—before all three kingdoms in Nissera had established a sturdy peace. Back then

there was adventure, and magic was a bright gleam in an otherwise dark place, rather than a cloud of failed expectations hovering over my head.

When I reached the suite I shared with Ivria, I went to rap on the door that led to her private chamber, but paused just before my knuckles struck wood. My cousin had lately been more solemn than a grieving widow. She had not yet set a date for her Water ceremony. Most pupils began planning it the very hour they received approval from the Conclave.

Crossing our common room, I spotted Calanthe and trailed my fingertips along her wiry coat of hair. Ivria's gray deerhound, a gift from her brother, Ander, could often be found reposing in gentle dignity on her pallet by the fire—at least, when she wasn't tearing across the palace grounds or basking in the attention of her personal maid.

I opened the doors to my chamber, which held a grand bed that could have comfortably fit eight of me, though somehow I always found myself at its edge. Noticing my birthday gown at the front of the deep oak wardrobe, I felt a thrill of excitement.

Ivria's preferences often superseded my own when it came to my attire, resulting in the royal clothiers knotting me up in yellows, pinks, and periwinkles come spring. Winter tended to be an affair of deep-toned velvets and glistening jewels. But on my birthday, Ivria had made certain I would wear something I adored. A sheer silver material gathered over a cream silk underlayer, and from the plunging neckline to the shoulders of the gown, crystals clung to colorless gossamer.

"Do you like it?" Ivria appeared in the doorway, her raven hair

tumbling around her shoulders. Her normally sharp gray eyes were as obscure as fogged windowpanes.

"It's breathtaking," I admitted.

The sunset was a simmering pool of blood orange through the west windows, and for a moment my cousin paused within the glow. When she stepped into my room, an ashen tinge washed across her porcelain face. She sat on the corner of my bed with a sigh, her lace dressing gown rippling around her feet. "Sit with me," she prompted.

When I obliged, she clasped my hands in hers, her knuckles turning white as bone. "You know you are a sister to me," she said. "Closer, even. We don't fight as sisters do. You are my dearest friend and our souls are entwined forever."

"I know that," I said, freeing one of my hands to close over hers in reassurance. "You look pale. Are you worried about your ceremony? You know you have nothing to fear."

"Of course not." She dismissed the notion with a wave. "I only wanted to wish you a happy birthday, properly, before all the commotion." She plucked a gob of dried mud from my braid and at long last noticed the swollen cut on my lip. "Melkior?" she asked, her misty eyes flashing like blades fresh from a forge. "I can make him heal you—"

"No, no," I muttered, daubing again at the bruised lump, which tasted of metal. "Ellen likes having her work cut out for her."

Ivria laughed. "I ought to get dressed," she said, then squeezed my hand and floated out of my bedchamber. I fought the urge to coax her back so I could somehow elicit another laugh. I hadn't heard her laugh for weeks.

But we'd be expected in the receiving hall soon. I would corner her after the celebration and pry her fears from her, remind her how fortunate she should feel to have earned access to the Water. I would do so more gently than Uncle Prosper and Aunt Sylvana, who grew agitated over their daughter's tarrying.

Ellen, my maid, attacked Melkior's handiwork with powder, concealing the swollen cuts as best she could. She rushed to plait my straight chestnut hair, the hair that made me stand out like a daisy in a rose garden of royal relatives. Most members of the Ermetarius line were tall and fair-skinned with ink-dark, wavy hair, including my mother. I would have felt like an impostor if my mossy eyes hadn't so matched those of my great-great-grandfather King Anthony, whose handsome portrait graced the corridor.

While I admired my gown in the mirror, Ivria returned, clad in deep purple silk embellished with fabric petals. Her curls had been painstakingly arranged with sapphire hairpins. She held an ornate wooden box tied with a blue ribbon—my favorite color—and donned a soft smile.

"Something you've always wanted," she said. But instead of offering it to me, she slid the familiar box onto the mantel. "Since you've waited this long, you can wait until after the party."

"Why? I already know what it is," I teased, eagerly imagining the intricate amethyst diadem, an enchanted family heirloom I'd always wanted to inherit. Grandmother Odessa had given it to Ivria instead.

"It doesn't match your dress." Ivria linked her arm in mine. "And you don't want to know what everyone truly thinks about you on your birthday, do you?"

My heart pattered. I both desired and feared the truth-seeing diadem, whose power derived from the retired elicrin stone nesting amid its silver whorls. With it, I might unearth the deepest insecurities of cruel people like Melkior, and practice wielding the knowledge to gain respect. But I might also confirm what I sensed from my family, something they all denied: that only prestige and power could earn their deepest acceptance—that I, not Melkior, was the cracked egg.

“You could have just let me borrow it,” I said. “Grandmother Odessa won’t be pleased you gave it away.”

“She won’t be pleased to hear you call her Grandmother either,” Ivria said. And then her tone darkened a shade. “You deserve it more than I do.”

As her gaze grew misty and distant again, I wondered: Was there something my cousin hoped I would see?

Or, in making me wait to open the gift, was there something she hoped I wouldn’t?

❧ TWO ❧

WHEN we reached the receiving hall, Ivria hurried ahead, leaving me to make an ostentatious entrance as the guest of honor.

As the herald announced my name and I stepped through the double doors into the gleaming marble hall, hundreds of noble guests paused to observe my dress and hairstyle and murmur among themselves. Anytime Ivria made an entrance, the revelry would fall quiet and intakes of breath could be heard echoing off the pillars of the vast ballroom.

Garlands of blue delphinium decorated every archway and coiled up the bases of the shimmering gold candelabras. I felt so small walking across the glistening tiles, even though I was seventeen today and no longer considered a child.

I was reminded too keenly of this as I took my place across from my mother, Ameliana, and my field instructor, the cold, mountainous Victor, both of whom had expected me to demonstrate an elicrin gift well before my seventeenth birthday.

“Happy birthday, dearest,” my mother said, her eyes twinkling over her wine goblet. Her gaze snagged on the powdered cuts on my face, but she only pursed her plump lips.

Becoming an elicromancer had halted her aging so that she looked but a few years my senior. I had never thought much of my relatives being older than their appearances would suggest—at

least, not until recently. Coming of age made the subtle urgency to enter the Water ripen inside me.

I smiled at her and diverted my attention to the extravagant spread. My mouth watered over goose simmering in spices, sturgeon cooked in parsley and vinegar, stewed venison, honey-mulled wine, and rosewater-poached plums. But a soft tinkling drew my attention to the king's table on the dais.

Most kings who had reigned for decades would exhibit signs of aging: peppered hair, wrinkles, or a substantial gut. But Tiernan Ermetarius hardly looked a day over twenty-two. Recently, the Realm Alliance had determined that elicromancers would be permitted to stretch their immortality for five decades before surrendering their stones to age as mortals.

The light from the enormous chandelier glistened over the king's thick, dark curls as he stood and raised his goblet in my direction. "Tonight, we gather to celebrate the coming of age of my great-niece, Valory Braiosa," he said. "May your heart be as just, your mind as keen, and your spirit as joyful as your life is long."

"As your life is long," the crowd echoed, lifting their drinks in my honor.

At the table on the far side of the king's dais, Melkior kept his glass raised long enough for me to notice his vainglorious smirk. Despite the prickling of my split lip, a small burst of sympathy tested its wings inside me. Melkior's mother had died in childbirth, leaving his father to unfairly weigh that cost against the value of his son each day.

I took a sip of red wine to hide my grimace and broke our gaze. Ander, who sat to my right, waited until I had finished serving

myself to begin heaping food on his plate. “Quite the toast,” he said sardonically, carving a bite of venison with the stoic pride of a hunter who had felled the beast himself. “A rare show of emotion.”

I laughed. King Tiernan tended to be brusque and taciturn, especially toward me, his great-niece, who stood only sixth in line for his throne, behind my mother as fifth—and that was without consideration to Ivria’s and Ander’s respective unborn children. “Right. I think I saw a sheen of tears,” I added. “He was one sniffle away from naming me his heir apparent.”

“Oh, you three,” Mother said with feigned sternness. She’d included Ivria out of habit, but when I glanced from Ander to his older sister, I found her lips mashed together and no trace of humor in her countenance. Catching my concerned stare, Ivria stabbed a plum and nibbled dispassionately at the skin.

“Ander,” I whispered. “What’s wrong with her?”

“What do you mean?” he asked. Had he truly not noticed his sister’s recent sullenness, the dread that seemed to stalk her like a shadow? He looked at Ivria and then concluded, “She probably laced her bodice too tight to eat anything. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Oleander,” my mother chided, absentmindedly adjusting the gold chain that held her teal elicrin stone.

Ander succumbed and leaned toward his sister. “I’d wager Lord Davener brought you a grander gift than he brought Valory, even though it’s *her* birthday,” he said, gesturing at the gift table. “It wouldn’t be the boldest thing he’s done since he began courting you.”

Ivria didn’t acknowledge his attempt at cursory conversation. Her hand trembled as she lifted a cup of water to her lips.

“Speaking of courting,” my mother said, “Valory, would you

please respond to the advances of young Lord Rodenia tonight? You're embarrassing him and yourself."

She made a request rather than a demand. She had to be careful with demands, as her power as an Emperor made those around her suggestible to them. She chose each word vigilantly before she spoke, and was often ordered by the Conclave to help settle mortal disputes or force a criminal to come peacefully into custody.

"Knox is my friend," I said. "My practice partner in combat lessons. Just because we're fond of each other doesn't mean—"

"Valory," Ander interrupted, his voice flat. "Come, don't be naïve."

"Victor," I said, turning to the large, quiet man. "Tell them the truth. Knox and I are merely fellow pupils who—"

"I'm your instructor, not a gossiping lady's maid," he responded.

I sighed at his tone, which left no room for argument. Only my mother could pry a word of affection from him. As a child, I'd admired Victor, how pragmatic he was about teaching me the principles of magical combat. He never treated me differently from the other students despite the fact that I hadn't manifested a gift.

But a few years ago—not long after we learned that my aimlessly wandering father had died of wounds sustained in a bear attack—I began noticing the looks my mother and Victor exchanged. And then I noticed their long absences from court events, her sudden refusal to let me sleep in her chamber even though I felt as though grief would swallow me whole.

Victor didn't have a title; therefore, my mother couldn't marry him without abdicating her bid for the throne—and mine—but that hardly discouraged their involvement.

“Don’t make me command you to dance with him,” my mother went on, half teasing. “If you don’t, it will be a clear signal of disinterest.”

“Fine,” I conceded. “Since it’s my birthday, I’ll be passed around like the last bottle of mead in a siege regardless.”

Indeed, before I could polish off dessert, I got swept away in a sea of dresses and slippers and shining boots, anchored only by sweaty palms and arms encircling my waist. Looking up to find Knox as my fourth partner was nothing short of a relief.

“You look beautiful,” he proclaimed, breathless. I wanted to believe it was from dancing.

“Thank you,” I said, but my inflection hiked to a question. We both cleared our throats.

“I know you didn’t want to hear my news today,” he said, studying my tactfully covered cut.

“That’s not true at all,” I scoffed.

“I’m an Empath, remember?”

I sighed. “I’m sorry. It’s not that I’m not happy for you. I am.”

“I know,” he said with a sideways grin. “Buried beneath the bitterness.”

“I am most certainly not bitter!”

He cocked an eyebrow.

“If being your friend after you receive your elicrin stone means having no secrets, I’m not sure I can suffer your company.”

He rearranged our grasp so that our fingers interlaced and our palms met like lovers brushing cheek-to-cheek. A bright feeling raced through my gut, and the soft groove of my hand dampened. “What if we felt no need to keep secrets from each other?” he asked.

“What if we were to grow closer after I leave the academy instead of drifting apart?”

I swallowed and fixed my stare on his shoulder rather than his face. I had always liked Knox. But we were friends, nothing more. My thoughts and dreams fixated on one thing: inviting some hint of power to the surface and obtaining the immortality that would allow me to welcome each passing year instead of dreading it. If I did not receive approval from the Conclave by the end of my term at the academy, I had decided I would move to Darneska to live with my late father’s side of the family in their ancient mountain fortress. I knew I could survive the cold, the lack of palace intrigue, and the quiet of the hallowed halls—but not if I first attached myself to Knox.

“Do you think you would want that?” he prodded gently.

Ever superstitious about voicing my fear of failure, I dodged. “Um...yes, of course,” I muttered in a rush. “I would like us to remain friends. I’m sure you will have so much to teach me, once you...” I trailed off.

Knox filled his broad chest with a deep breath, understanding the emotional barriers I was erecting between us.

“Are you afraid?” I asked just to close the gaping silence. “Of the ceremony?”

He shook his head. “I may be, when I’m staring at the Water. But not now.”

Are you afraid? My question seemed to linger even after he answered it. Ivria’s bone-white knuckles and haunted gaze loomed in my thoughts.

The fog in her eyes—it was fear.

She had held my hands. She had told me she loved me.

She'd given me a prized heirloom with the murk of melancholy behind her eyes. Each separate action did not strike me as strange, but together...together, they amounted to some sort of quiet farewell.

The song fortuitously drew to a close. Knox seemed to sense the worry spearing my chest and released me without question.

I stalked back to the table and found Jovie Neswick in Ander's seat. She wore a black dress with golden embroidered panels and an emerald the size of my fist at her throat. Flashy, nonmagical gems were the fashion among mortal courtiers, who tended to imitate immortals. But I suspected Jovie's was, in fact, a retired elicrin stone. Once the possessor of an elicrin stone died, the artifact often took on a second life as a sort of trinket. Some stones gave luck. Others might help you find love or protect your family. Most simply dimmed out completely after the death of their wearer, magical no longer.

"Have you seen Ivria?" I asked, searching for my cousin's eye-catching gown amid the revelers.

"She left a moment ago," Jovie said flatly. I followed her gaze and found Ander dancing with an elicromancer named Elythia Carrow. She was merry and lovely, with shiny brunette curls, a plump build, and full, red lips. "They're all so perfect, aren't they?" Jovie remarked, clasping the emerald between her thumb and ink-stained forefinger. "Ever young, beautiful, powerful."

"Elicromancers have problems just like everyone else," I said. "They're not perfect."

"You'd know better than any other mortal," she admitted.

Mortal. The word pricked. "Do you know where Ivria went?"

Jovie shook her head, fixing her round amber eyes on me. “She said she wanted to be alone. Do you want help looking for her?”

“No, thank you. If she said she wanted to be alone, then—”

“Then she probably meant completely alone,” Jovie muttered, a dark look passing over her face. Perhaps it was envy of Ivria, or of my nearness to her, or both.

I brushed her off, knowing Ivria’s edict didn’t apply to me, and hurried out of the receiving hall. Outside the doors, I crossed paths with Uncle Prosper, who smelled of a successful hunting trip, like crisp woods and strong spirits. With dark hair, gray eyes, and a rigidly handsome face, Ivria and Ander’s father looked similar to his uncle King Tiernan, but emitted warmth and vigor where Tiernan exuded ice and indifference. Prosper wore a yellow-orange elicrin stone that allowed him to emit a bright light so powerful it could permanently blind onlookers.

“Uncle Prosper, have you seen Ivria?” I asked.

“She mentioned she was feeling ill. She may have retired early. I’m sorry I missed the toast...I’m certain it was quite touching.” Uncle Prosper squeezed my shoulder and offered a lighthearted wink before proceeding to the celebration.

Just as I lifted my layers of skirts to mount the curving marble steps, I noticed a glimmer on the wine-colored carpet down the west corridor and found one of Ivria’s delicate sapphire hairpins. She hadn’t returned to our rooms, then. I continued westward, brushing past pairs of guards clad in red tunics, each pointing me farther west when I inquired as to Ivria’s whereabouts.

At the end of the corridor, I nearly tripped over Ivria’s heeled purple slippers. I removed my own and hurried to reach the double

oak doors leading out of the palace to the academic wing. The guards swung them open and I crossed beneath the stone arcade, bracing against the lingering chill of a waning winter.

The windows of dormitories occupied by nonroyal students glowed above. After a long period without much magic, the return of elicromancy to Nissera had stimulated a reawakening across the realm. Even in the most remote villages, you might find one or two folks with a promising elicrin gift. “Magic calls unto magic,” my great-grandfather Olivar said the day he established the academy. “And we no longer fear it. We welcome it here, and we must teach the next generation of elicromancers to use it with integrity.”

Magic these days was a neat and tidy thing, bound with ribbons and boxed up like the gift on my mantel. Yet I could feel the pull of a savage old magic strengthening with each step.

Laughter and lively conversations drifted from the upper stories, but when I found the door to the academy unlocked—and another one of Ivria’s pins at the threshold—I proceeded into ghostly-quiet corridors and lecture halls. The academy was nowhere near as lavish as the royal residence. Metal sconces rather than ornate candelabras jutted from the walls. Instead of luxurious carpet, the surface underfoot was cold stone.

I called Ivria’s name. Only my echo answered.

The halls that seemed so cramped between lectures now yawned, labyrinths of infinite shadow. Had I possessed an elicrin stone, I could have lit the darkness with an easy enchantment or whispered the lanterns aflame. But I was forced to feel my way along the smooth walls, listening to the distant laughter of the guards

who stalked the academy halls at night. The sloshing of wineskins explained the ease with which Ivria had snuck inside.

The deeper I wandered, the more keenly I sensed an ominous presence.

A streak of white swept past me with a whoosh of soft air. I gasped, fancying a cloaked intruder in our midst, footfalls trained and silent—even though logic insisted it was only Professor Strather's white cat, known to roam the halls. A shiver scuttled between my shoulders, but it was only my imagination.

Yet the pull of ancient magic thrumming around me was real, and grew stronger when I found a certain door ajar, one that nearly always remained locked.

It was the room that held the portal to the Water.

Once, the Water had been difficult to reach, moving around the Forest of the West Fringe, cloaking itself, a capricious force of nature. But King Tiernan, a Portimacian, had erected a doorway spanning the distance and uncertainty. Now, mortals and pupils need not travel across the kingdom to hold an elicrin rite of passage. One could take a single step through the portal and arrive at the Water's edge. I'd passed through for Ander's ceremony just last year.

But there was a drawback to the convenience, which I'd never before pondered: immense danger lurked mere steps away.

The door creaked as if to contest as I pushed it fully open and cast a timorous glance inside. The circular chamber held no windows, yet muted moonlight spilled through the shadows. It came from the archway across from me, which led to a dense forest swathed in snow.

Ivria stood at the threshold of the portal, her graceful hands clinging to the frame. The shrill squeak of the door had announced my entrance, but she didn't acknowledge me.

"Ivria," I said. Her name left my lips a nervous melody.

She turned, exposing her delicate profile.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I don't want them to see," she whispered.

"See what?"

She faced the portal again. Trepidation tingled through my limbs.

"You're missing my party," I said, hoping my insouciant tone would somehow reel her back to me.

"You don't care about the party," she said quietly. A stinging wind from the other side stirred the hem of her gown.

"I care about you being there."

"You can be at my party," Ivria said. "You can be the only one."

She took a deep breath. I lunged to grab her by the waist, but she had already stepped through the portal. The silk laces of her bodice slithered through my fingers.

I stepped through after her.

The sensations hit me in swift succession: cold beneath my feet, cold flurrying around me and landing on my eyelashes and hair, cold intimately caressing the skin exposed by my gown. The fragile smell of fresh snow brought back piercing memories of the months I'd spent wandering in the wilderness alongside my father, with only worn furs and shuddering flames to keep warm. He had spirited me away from my royal relatives, hoping I could live a life like his.

A pure white shroud covered the clearing and the surrounding woods. Several of these trees had once entwined to form a gate

meant to keep out the unworthy, but the Conclave had done away with that. *They* were the ones who decided who reached the Water. Any fool willing to take her chances without their say-so deserved her fate.

My cousin traipsed, barefooted, to the shore of the black pond. She lined up her toes against the edge and let the icy wind toy with her hair, obscuring her features.

"Ivria," I whispered, softer than before. This place was both menacing and marked by ethereal beauty. I had only ever come here with a crowd of people in the daytime. But in the dark, it felt as if a mere sigh would echo for days and shake the snow from shadows best left undisturbed. "You don't have to do this. You're nervous. You're frightened. You're clearly not prepared for this."

"Will I ever be?" she asked.

"You don't have to be. No one said you *have* to do this."

"But I do. Or I will grow old while everyone stays the same. I'll shame our family."

Each word pierced my heart. I hadn't known Ivria harbored the same fears as I.

I took a step closer. The snow stung the tender pads of my feet. "Then do it properly," I answered. "You've received permission from the Conclave. Ander will want to be there, and Uncle Prosper and Aunt Sylvana. Grandmother Odessa will mount your head in the receiving hall if you don't invite her."

"I don't want them to see," she repeated.

"See what?"

Her lucid gray eyes met mine. My heart dove to my gut.

She didn't want them to see her die.

❧ THREE ❧

IVRIA, you're not going to die," I said, chancing another step toward the magnificent presence looming before us.

"You know my gift," she said, facing the Water again. "I sense danger."

"Sensing danger and sensing death are not the same."

"I knew your father was going to die. No word from Leonar Braiosa for over a year as he rambled through the Brazor Mountains, and yet I knew the exact moment."

The cold felt like knife tips, though perhaps it was the pain I'd trained myself to tuck away like a broken, precious figurine.

"Let's go home, Ivria," I said, glancing at the dark archway behind us. Soon we could be warming before a crackling fire, explaining ourselves to relatives who would scold me for absconding from my own celebration. "Please?"

Ivria's pale features softened as she turned to me, eyes like twin moons in the night. I held out my hand to her.

But instead of stepping closer to grasp it, she extended her leg and pointed her toes, soaking the hem of her gown. Before I could even flinch, she skimmed along the surface of the Water, creating a tiny ripple.

A gasp tore out of my lips, jarring against the otherworldly silence.

After a few dreadful beats, an unseen force from below seized

Ivria by the ankle and dragged her into the depths of the Water, as merciless as a predator swallowing prey.

I shrieked and raced to the edge, my impulse to go after her warring with my knowledge of the Water and its ways. At first, the Water treated its chosen ones the same as the ones it would destroy: it pulled them under and trapped them beneath a solid sheet of ice.

Wait. See.

The ice began to form at the outer edges of the pond. Just as it had for Ander, it would emit a thousand glittering colors, then burst into a thousand shards. One of them would be an elicrin stone, which Ivria would retrieve and wear at her sternum all her long days like a prized royal jewel. A constellation of spells and enchantments would supplement her innate gift. She would be powerful, beautiful, unstoppable, a force of good in the world.

Wait. See.

Ivria was an Augurer, and only a fool would refuse to heed her warnings about impending danger. But her acute gift was exactly why she deserved to be an elicromancer in the first place. It was the reason she had received permission to try. It was the reason she wouldn't die.

Wait...

An unwelcome irony impaled my reasoning: If Ivria's spirit was attuned to imminent danger and, apparently, tragedy, then her belief concerning her own fate could be trusted. She would die. And if her intuition could not be trusted, then perhaps she did not deserve the Conclave's approval—which also meant she could die.

As the sheet of ice crept over the surface, hemming Ivria underneath, her last look of resignation haunted me.

I shot across the glistening barrier toward the black liquid center. My stockings offered little traction or protection from the blistering cold. I slipped and fell but managed to launch myself toward the shrinking aperture, sliding on my knees and skidding to a stop nearly within arm's reach of it.

A pale hand shot out of the Water, grappling with the slick ice. I lunged for it, flattening my body against the surface and stretching to clasp Ivria's shivering fingers, but the tips of mine barely touched hers before hers slipped away.

I scrambled closer. My arm shot into the freezing Water of its own volition to numbly grope for a limb or a handful of thick hair.

I latched on to a thin wrist, but the relief was ephemeral. The ice was still closing in.

"Ivria!" I screamed, pounding my free hand on the rock-solid barrier. But I knew, as I had always known, that the only force capable of breaking it was the elicrin power of the one trapped beneath the surface.

The ice closed around my forearm, clamping down. I cried out in pain but kept a desperate grip on Ivria.

Hold on, hold on, I commanded, but I knew that if I held on, this unforgiving force of nature would break my bones. I would freeze and die alone.

And whether I held on or not, Ivria was utterly at the Water's mercy.

I released her and yanked my arm out of the Water, hoping for the best. In the midst of the pounding suspense, an oblique realization struck me: I had touched the Water.

A bright light burgeoned at the center of the ice. I laid my hands

flat on the surface as the light spread, seeping out around me. Was it for Ivria or for me? Which of us would prove worthy to receive an elicrin stone—and in so doing, survive?

Was it possible that both of us would?

A loud crack made me jump to my feet and whip around. A small fracture began to crawl through the ice behind me, growing and forking out like the roots of an ancient tree. The lines slithered and spread until they surrounded me and the only patch of solid ice resided just beneath my feet.

The cracks built to a loud rumble, barreling through the quiet night. I could feel the Water roiling and churning, its energy palpable, restless. I braced myself just in time.

Finally, the Water erupted around me like an inverted waterfall deluging into the black sky. My pedestal was a tiny vessel in its midst, and yet the Water did not toss me to and fro. As the deafening waves surged upward around me, my island held steady.

After what seemed an age, silence descended again, soft as a dove's wing. I inhaled deeply. The winter air burned my lungs, but it served to remind me that I was alive.

My eyes roved over the landscape. It had changed.

There was no Water.

All around my island lay smooth, black rock gleaming in the moonlight.

Survivors of the Water had explained what it was like under the surface. There should have been weeds and dirt, terrain one might find at the bottom of an ordinary lake. But there was only bald rock mirroring the lucent stars.

I didn't have long to take in the sight. A dense, sparkling fog

drifted down and settled over the world like a fleece blanket. It wandered over my skin and sank into my pores. I sucked in a breath and watched the fog wind and coil its way toward my mouth.

As I absorbed it, I felt a deep, dormant part of me come alive with warmth, with light, with . . . power. It was as though the sky had soaked up the Water's magic and wrung it out for me in a soft mist.

For so long, I'd waited for my power to manifest, to strike something inside me like flint and steel. Now sparks flared within my spirit.

This was what magic felt like.

But ice snaked through my veins at the sight of Ivria lying motionless on the black rock, the silken folds of her dress sprawling like the petals of a crushed violet.

In the cold silence, the merciless truth struck me. I opened my mouth to scream her name, but no sound transpired. The pain tightened like a rope around my throat.

I climbed down from the slick block of ice, clambering over the sloping landscape to collect her in my arms. I pressed the cold fingers of each of her hands open, looking for an elicrin stone. One of the broken ice shards was supposed to be an elicrin stone in her grasp. She was *meant* to be an elicromancer.

Mashing my ear to her chest, I listened for a rhythm. But I could hear only my own blood pounding in my head.

"Ivria," I said, turning her face to me. Her black eyelashes fanned out around once-bright eyes. Beneath the rouge, her lips were bluish. I could feel the warmth leaving her cheeks with each fleeting moment.

Ivria had always shielded me and cared for me. When my mother had stopped dabbing away my tears, when she had stopped tucking me in to sleep, Ivria had not. But this time she'd needed me. And I couldn't save her.

I touched my forehead to hers. Hot tears welled over and slipped onto her skin. "What happened?" I whispered. "You were meant for this." A sob ripped out of my chest. I tore my gaze from her face and looked at the tranquil wood. "What happened?"

My hoarse refrain roared out from the clearing, shaking the boughs of the trees. Their branches and trunks twisted in on themselves and withered. The foliage on the evergreens drooped low, faded to brown, and drifted to the covering of fresh snow. I stared, aghast.

"Valory?"

Ander's call brought comfort and despair in equal measure. As long as I clung to Ivria, as long as it was just the two of us, I resided in my own universe of agony. Now I would have to invite others into this secret place, to expose and confront my wounds, to explain that I had touched the Water and survived without an elicrin stone.

I felt the warmth of Ander beside me. Gently, he peeled my hands away from his sister's corpse and went through familiar motions: searching for an elicrin stone, listening for a faint heartbeat. As he wept, he pleaded with her to come back.

Soon other figures became visible in the starlight. Some of them hesitated before stepping onto the rocky wasteland where the Water had once lain. One of them tossed a cloak around my shoulders and helped me stand.

As steady hands guided me back through the portal, I cast a

final look over my shoulder at Ivria. The sugary sound of her laugh tiptoed into my mind. I imagined capturing it and stowing it away in a snug, safe corner of my memories, where it would burrow deep, unthreatened by the passage of time.

For I could live a very long life.



Within the instant it took to return to the academy from the snowy woods, I was swept up in another dance. A partner with blurry features led me down the corridor and passed me off to another, and another. Each moved with more urgency than the last. My abandoned silver slippers were nothing but a whirling streak on the bloodred carpet in the palace.

I survived. But I don't have an elicrin stone. What happened?

Back in my bedchamber, the dance continued, coinciding with the rhythm of my hammering heart. I raised my arms so Ellen could trade my wet gown for a nightdress, stepped out of my stockings one foot at a time, and plunked down in a chair by the hearth. Someone asked me a question, but, like a shadow in the corner of my eye, I couldn't quite catch it.

"*Matara liss*," my mother hissed, lighting the fire with words in the old tongue. As the warmth thawed my fingers and toes, I overheard her and Victor's whispered speculations.

"What happened?" my mother asked.

"One or both of them defied the tenets."

"Is she an elicromancer? I don't see an elicrin stone."

"Ask her yourself."

"She's stunned." My mother's hands fluttered nervously before landing at her temples. "We'll wait until she comes back to herself."

Servants brushed by me, stoking the fire and keeping their heads down. Ellen pitched a blanket over me and tucked in the hem with meticulous concern. Before she bustled away, the older woman looked on me with crinkled eyes and peeled a lock of damp hair from my cheek, tucking it back into my plait.

I felt a warm, hairy snout press into my palm and found Calanthe on the floor at my side. A soft whimper in her throat cut through the commotion of servants brushing in and out. The deerhound's other eyes moored my spirit.

"Valory." My mother's voice drew my gaze upward. King Tier-nan stood in my doorway.

"Your Majesty," I croaked, standing to draw a curtsy.

His black brows dipped over eyes gleaming with questions. "A private word, please."

The gentle request sent servants and nobles alike scurrying from the room. My mother lingered, crushing her lips together until they lost color. "Uncle Tiernan—" she started, but he turned his stern features on her. With a rueful look, she darted out like the rest.

As she shut the door behind her, a last lone shiver traced its way up my back.

"Please, sit," the King of Calgoran said.

I stumbled back and sank onto the soft bed. Calanthe curled up at my feet, impervious to the commands of rulers.

Tiernan gripped the high back of the chair and slid it away from the fire before settling in across from me. I fixed my eyes on the maroon brocade velvet of his doublet, the same one he had worn

at my party. Not even an hour could have passed since I'd fled the great hall in pursuit of Ivria. Had rumors of her fate already perforated the revelry?

He swept back a wayward dark wave and leaned forward. "What happened?" he asked calmly.

I expected to choke on the explanation, to sob uncontrollably, but the words flowed as freely as my tears. "Ivria snuck away from the feast to go to the Water. She believed it would kill her and she didn't want it to happen at her ceremony, in front of everyone. I followed her. I tried to stop her. And then something happened and the Water just . . . was gone."

"Is she the only one who touched it?"

"No. I tried to pull her out before the ice closed in."

He nodded slowly. "But she touched it of her own volition?"

A wave of indignation tore my gaze from the gold cross-stitching on his collar. I looked straight into his eyes, but they harbored no accusation. I didn't know much about the man behind the crown, yet his reputation was that of an impartial ruler. His blue elicrin stone, set in a gold medallion casing of twisted vines, seemed to reflect its wearer's cool temper.

"Yes, she touched it of her own volition." I cleared my throat. I could not, would not, dissolve into a helpless puddle until he was gone.

King Tiernan stood, paced to the door and back, and noticed the unopened gift from Ivria on the mantel. He tilted his head and lifted the box. Surely he wouldn't be so audacious as to open a birthday gift. Yet he untied the ribbon, let it glide to the floor. "The amethyst diadem?" he ventured.

I nodded, clenching my teeth. The anger that rattled through me lost its nerve and came out as a sigh.

The lid of the box creaked as he opened it. “Your great-great-great-grandmother’s,” he said, removing the sparkling silver circlet with its bulging jewel. It reminded me of a faraway time, of old magic and love poems lost to the ages. “Did you know this gem was Callista’s elicrin stone?”

“Yes,” I whispered, my bravery bolstered. “Its remaining traces of magic allow the one who touches it to more easily see the truth. So then, do you believe me, Your Majesty?” I longed for him to leave me in peace.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, even without this, I believe you. Though...” He trailed off, laying the diadem back in the velvet-lined box. He closed it and replaced it on the mantel. I stared down at my shaking hands as tears clouded my vision. “The trees surrounding the Water. They’re destroyed too.”

“I think... I think I did that,” I said, pressing a palm to my heart as though I could isolate the grief there.

King Tiernan nodded again, curtly. “There will be a hearing the day after the funeral.”

“A hearing?” I murmured.

“When an elicromancer or pupil breaks a tenet, there must be a hearing. May I make a suggestion I believe will benefit you? Give up your elicrin stone now. Don’t wait for the Conclave to confiscate it. It will paint you as cooperative.”

I tried to swallow but felt as though a lump of gravel had lodged in my throat. “I didn’t receive an elicrin stone, Your Majesty.”

King Tiernan’s charcoal brows snapped together. Touching

the Water could lead to one of only two fates: death or elicro-mancy. There was no between, no half measure. Yet here I sat, empty-handed, no jewel glinting at my breastbone or hiding in my pocket.

An excruciating moment of silence passed and a dark fear began to ferment inside me, souring my stomach. The elicrin stone's function was to distill unmanageable hints of magic into a more potent magic that could be commanded and directed. The spells in Old Nisseran interacted with the stone to do the possessor's will. Without an elicrin stone... was there any hope of controlling whatever force had found its way inside me?

The king swept out of the room. As he exited the antechamber, I saw a flash of dark red tunics and glinting swords: guards. Either the king or the Conclave had posted guards outside my door.

My rigid posture collapsed and I lost myself in the roaring fire, whispering, "Ivria, what have we done?"