

Paying the Price

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This book is dedicated to those still unknown.

Trigger Warning

These writings may contain any or all of the following: mental abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, child abuse, rape, bullying, profanity, pedophilia, self-harm, violence, suicide, nudity, sex, death, PTSD, panic/anxiety attacks, addiction, kidnapping, and torture.

Please proceed with caution.

If you or anyone you know is suffering from a mental illness, depression, or suicidal thoughts, please contact the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

Likewise, if you or anyone you know is suffering at the hands of domestic violence, please contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

You are not alone, and there are people who can help.

Chapter 1

From the back door, Ladislav exploded to top speed before we rounded the corner of the arena. The blanket cocooned around me, holding me tight against him and blocking the icy wind. The blurry trees and incredible speed disoriented me. I closed my eyes, hunkered down, and held on tight. His smooth movements became a lull, and sleep tempted me. The high speeds distorted time. One second melded with the next, dragging me towards relaxation.

Suddenly, the lull jerked and shifted slower. The quick change in speed lurched me forward toward his shoulders. The treetops came into focus, and the colder air brushed my face as I peeked out. And then, we stopped. All motion ceased, but my body continued to feel the movements despite them not existing. He untied me and set me down. I wobbled, unable to remain standing. I lowered myself to the dirt trail and braced myself for sickness. The crisp air rushed into my lungs, cooling the rising heat.

“Oh, gods.”

The bile crept up my throat, and I wretched. My knees dug into the ground with each heave. My body trembled and shook. His icy hand made slow circles on my back, grounding me. I struggled to adjust to the lack of movement. He handed me a water bottle, and I managed a few difficult sips. The gathering clouds above us released its soft snowflakes. They drifted towards us, threatening a quiet cover.

“Stopping is always the hard part.”

Ladislav stood and gave me space. The edge of the cliff side disappeared close to me on my left. To my right was a giant opening into the rock face. Behind me, a narrow trail wound down the mountain. Treetops dressed in blankets of snow stretched to the horizon. Fluffy white clouds dotted the sky. The falling snow clung to every surface not yet already white. The bits of rock peeking through the trail disappeared one flake at a time.

“Where are we?” I forced a few more sips.

“It’s a cave system west of the farmhouse. We are quite a distance away. It was built a long time ago with carved out rooms, and it’s quite cozy.”

He motioned to the opening. The earth called to me in quick pulses deep within my muscles. The limitless sky begged me to soar on the wings of eagles and claim the sky as my own. My conflicted body was slow to cooperate, but Ladislav’s hand was available by my side to stabilize me. The moonlight only entered a few feet. My eyes adjusted, and I let Ladislav guide me further into the tunnel.

My steps were small and tentative, but he didn’t mind. He slowed himself to match my speed as he escorted me down a small slope and around a corner to my right. Several more steps into somehow darker shadows, and we turned back to the left. The small hallway seemed never ending until the slope straightened out into a tall, open room. Ladislav let go of my hand, and the disorienting darkness swayed my balance. The snaking entrance blocked the immediate cold, but I shivered, releasing the pent up chill.

Sparks flickered in front of me. A shower of sparks followed another until the flame caught, and it illuminated his face. His usual stony expression was soft, almost human. He placed

the baby flame down into a fireplace type crevice. The light initially dimmed before growing into a blaze. The large room came into focus with three exits on the opposite side of the room from the tunnel we entered. The heat chased the chill from the air. The higher it burned, the warmer the waves it threw out.

“One way in; one way out.” Ladislav nodded behind me. “Those doorways are rooms.” He motioned toward the others. “I wasn’t sure if you’d have a preference, but I put some of your belongings in the middle one.”

“Thank you.” I paused. Relief welled up in my chest. “For taking me away from there. For everything you’ve done for me.”

He stoked the fire, and I let my fingers trail down the dirt and rock walls. They sang under my fingers, but I resisted answering the call. It pulsed within me, begging to be released. *It’s not safe.* I urged it to keep quiet, to stay hidden. The smoke begged me to follow it up the unknown venting shaft. The water deep below beckoned me to take a quick dip. A deep breath centered me. He poked at the burning embers, breathing more life into it.

“Lucrezia wasn’t kidding when she said family. She just wasn’t referring to the Consilium. Let me show you around.”

An enormous smile spread across his face. His demeanor shifted the longer we were away from Wintermoor. His shoulders relaxed, and his normal stoic facade melted into an array of authenticity. He pulled a stick from the wall and dipped it into the fire. It ignited in a hissing fury. He ushered me next to the carved hearth into a small cove. Stacks of firewood were tall and plentiful. He motioned to them as if to say that it speaks for itself.

We continued around the chamber to the first of the openings. The torch crackled and hissed, illuminating the small room. A plateau type table stood in the center with a filled bookshelf style pantry on the left wall. It reached my height, so I wouldn’t have to climb to grab something.

“This is the kitchen of sorts. There’s non-perishable food in all the cubbies. It replenishes itself. Also, a high-powered flashlight.”

His outstretched hand contained a heavy cylinder. Tears filled my eyes to the brim. The thought and care that went into my escape touched me. If there was ever a doubt to his care for me, it dissipated. He loved me as much as a vampire could love a human. Not wanting to spoil the moment by turning on the bright electric light in my hands, I perused with his torchlight.

I took a stroll around the options. One entire row on the bottom shelf were bottled waters. Then came the canned soups and fruits. To the right of those were granola bars and jars of peanut butter. Crackers and beef jerky were next, and my heart fluttered with appreciation. At the end of the shelves, a small box seemed carved out of the surrounding stone. As I approached it, it was cooler than the rest of the room.

“That is a special refrigerator. It doesn’t need electricity. It will always be cold, and nothing inside can perish.”

“I can’t thank you enough for this. It’s absolutely perfect.”

His cold arm wrapped around me and pulled me close. No longer having to hold back my reactions, I released my tears from their dam. They spilled down my face, dragging relief with them. His safe embrace held my gratitude. The weight of oppression from my former prison lifted. Each breath was deeper and easier.

“Come, we aren’t finished.”

His smile creased his eyes, and I wiped my face dry. We left the small dining area and walked to the middle opening. He forced the fire through and lit up my new bedroom. A similar

plateau table was up against the wall to the left decorated with my bedding and pillows. The cubbies were on the right side of the room, across from the makeshift bed. Changes of clothes and other personal items waited for me.

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything."

Expecting the bed to be as hard as the surrounding rock, it was soft and welcoming. Lifting the covers, a thick memory foam topper appeared. The pillows lined the wall, and I was excited to settle down and rest. At least, once I calmed down and the adrenaline wore off. Overwhelmed with a mix of excitement and guilt, I wrapped my arms around him again. Gratitude threatened to ignite my magic in a grand display of thanks. I desperately begged it to surrender and lessen.

He waved me on to the third room. A stone tub sat in the corner, and a few feet away was a toilet-like protrusion from the wall. He walked the light around, showing more of the detail. He turned a stone above the tub, and water poured from an open mouth. I gasped in awe. *Indoor plumbing?* I couldn't comprehend the complexity. He noticed my reaction and shut off the flow before it unleashed my magic.

Overwhelmed and filled with gratitude, I found a spot to sit in the main chamber. The soft glow of the roaring fire calmed me. The mountain itself comforted me. The magic in my veins begged to be released, to be allowed a recess to stretch and exist. A deep breath did nothing to temper the impulse. Ladislav hung the torch on the wall and joined me. His chilly hand settled on my back, and I sighed.

"I'm going to head back, so there's no question as to my presence or absence. Lucrezia or I will be by to make sure you have everything you need. It may get lonely, but under no circumstances are you able to use your magic. I know how difficult that is, but it's imperative."

"Understood. I won't do anything to get me back on his radar."

"I'm proud of you."

Tears blossomed in my eyes. My chest tightened, and I leaned into him. His arms encompassed me, and I wrapped mine around him. I hung on. I knew he had to leave, but I didn't want him to go. He let me cling to him. He rubbed my back and gave me time. Finally, I sighed and released him.

"Be careful."

"Always."

He kissed my forehead before leaving. He ceased to exist as soon as he rounded the corner to the exit. Silence. Alone, but not the same isolation as the farmhouse. I studied the main chamber and walked the lengths. My fingers trailed the walls. The brand new living space was more of my home than the farmhouse ever had hoped to be. It welcomed me in a way that only nature could.

I hesitantly shuffled my way up the only way in and out. The light stretched to the first turn, leaving the rest caked in darkness. Standing at the first turn, I debated if I should go any further. The flashlight was heavy in my hand, and a deep yawn overtook me. Nothing urged me to continue exploring, so I abandoned the trek in search of rest. *I have a room.* I added another log to the fire and turned to my new bedroom.

The memory foam eased the rigidity of the rock base. The comfort surprised me. A deep breath relaxed me further into the bed. The shadows danced along the wall in the flickering flame light. My tired muscles settled in, and safety encompassed me. Sleep whisked me away before I could think another thought.

Chapter 2

Time existed outside of myself and the cave. Nothing and no one pressured me to perform. I could stare at the food for hours if I wanted, deciding what to eat. No one cared how long it took me to cook or if I had to start over because of a mistake. Having never cooked in an open flame, it took time to learn how to adjust my skills. It was safe for me to take my time eating. Responsibility and routine faded to nothing. No one expected me to do anything at all.

The next morning, my eyes opened to pitch darkness. The fire in the hearth burned out sometime in the night. Winter's grip entrenched the mountains, and the cold crept in through the cracks and crevices. My eyes struggled to adjust. My hand searched for the flashlight. The cold metal called to me, and my fingers found the base. *I can't use my magic.* Severing the connection, I clicked the flashlight on, and light flooded the room. My breath left my mouth in a string of fog.

"Where's a clock when you need one?"

My voice bounced off the rocks, highlighting the emptiness. I delighted in my isolation. Alone was safe. It meant I was free. A smile snuck across my face, and I made my way to the living room. Throwing a few logs into the smoldering ashes from the night before, I struck a match and watched the flames disappear beneath the wood. Within seconds, a warm glow lit the room, chasing the cold into the corners.

Making my way to the kitchen, the options overwhelmed me. Food was always delivered and brought. I didn't get a choice as to what it would be, unless I was cooking with Ladislav. The small fridge held eggs, butter, milk, a small loaf of bread and cheese.

Decisions, decisions. Grabbing the cast-iron skillet, I laid it on the rock table. My mind wandered to my situation. What were they up to? Did Mr. Conrad know I was gone? Was there chaos and pandemonium? My stomach growled, pulling me back to my options and the immediate present.

I grabbed a few eggs and the butter from the fridge. Laying the contents in the skillet, I was careful to not crack any of the delicate shells. Taking a rock plate, I carried it to the stone hearth. The fire roared, and I toasted my hands. I tested the skillet in the fire. It was secured on the grate that hovered above the flames, warming the bottom. Removing it, I laid it down and tossed in a few butter pats. I cracked two of the fragile shells and spilled the contents in the middle. The fire sizzled around the skillet when I put it back on the grate.

My ears pierced the silence, searching for any sound. The wind whistled across the entryway with major gusts. The snow outside absorbed most of the noise. Paranoia and panic nipped at my ankles. Breakfast popped in the pan, pulling me back to breakfast. The delicious smell drifted further into the room. *What if someone smells it?* I shook my head at the ridiculous thought.

"There's no one here."

I said aloud. My voice confirmed it. The energy of the rock flowed with nothing adding or impeding. *Get a grip.* The eggs bubbled and popped as they cooked. I returned to the kitchen

to get a couple pieces of bread, utensils, and something to drink, but when I opened the small fridge, nothing was missing. I ran to the doorway. They were still cooking in the pan.

Shaking my head, I grabbed a couple slices and tried to shake off the mysterious replenishing. *Is that why he wasn't worried about bringing food?* I tossed the bread onto the plate, slathering a side with butter. When the yolks were perfect, I slid them onto the plate and added the bread. Just a couple seconds on each side, and they toasted to a light perfection. My mouth watered at the small meal. My stomach growled, and I dove in.

My power begged to be released. It desired a direct connection to the rocks and the earth. I sucked in a deep breath and held it. I released with intention and cleared my throat. Focusing on my breakfast, I dunked a piece of bread into the gooey center of the egg. It spilled into the plate and entranced me. The power flowing in my veins fought against my control. The water beneath me pulled at my awareness. It begged me to join it in its underworld cascade.

Focus on the food. One bite turned into two. My hunger took over, and I thought about nothing else until my plate was cleaned. Taking my dishes to the sink, I dumped them in and turned on the water. It washed over my hands, and the pull was stronger than ever. I resisted. How long did I stand there staring at the stream? Time left me behind. I couldn't tell the time from inside the cave. Was it night? Was it day? I did not know. Disorientation slammed into me.

My full stomach squashed most of the growing anxiety. Glancing towards the hallway, I pondered venturing to the entrance. *They said no magic, not stay inside.* Grabbing the flashlight from the kitchen, I walked up the incline and around the corner. My heart pounded like I was making a mistake, like he would be waiting for me. I pushed my back flat against the wall and focused on my breathing. The cold rock comforted my racing heart. I pushed against the fear and forced my legs forward.

Sunlight streamed into the main entrance. *Okay, so it's daytime.* I turned off the flashlight and walked into the golden rays. My face warmed, and a soft, crisp breeze drifted in. The view took my breath away. The entrance was on the side of a cliff face. Despite the warming sun, the air was frigid at the high altitude. Towering trees rushed up the mountain ridges to the very top. Clouds seemed close enough to touch. My magic flowed from me, connecting without my permission.

I rushed back into the shadows and cut at the connection, but it was too strong. It flowed from me, uncontrollable and powerful. Fear and panic rose against the outpouring, shutting down the flow. Hyperventilation stole my oxygen, and I stumbled back into the main chamber. The soft flickering flame drew my attention as I slid down the wall. My raging power fought against the inner prison. The panic hijacked my nervous system.

Tears flowed down my face, and I choked on each breath. *He can't find me.* The walls pulsed smaller and smaller, shrinking through the blurriness. Terror spasmed my lungs. Oxygen refused to stay in my lungs longer than a second. The mountain tried to comfort me, but I refused. I withdrew from its attempt, not able to allow my magic any satisfaction. My muscles quivered against my will. My skin flushed, and a wave washed over me.

The flames danced in the fireplace, entrancing me. They sang a song of temperature and comfort. It lured me closer to its warmth and safety. My tears slowed, and my body calmed. It wrapped me in peace, calmed my fears, and embraced me. I crawled closer to its charm. I curled up into a ball in front of the warm stone and laid unmoving until the wave of terror passed.

No one came to take me away. No noise infiltrated the cave. My heartbeat echoed in my ears with each beat. I laid in the silence, expecting footsteps at any moment. Time forgot about me, and I, it. My veins buzzed alive with the ancient force. My skin prickled with awareness. *No.*

No magic. I willed it to stay put, and for once, it obliged. The fire chased away the shadows and the cold.

Before I peeled myself off the floor, the fire burned until it was all but extinguished. I tossed a few more pieces onto the bright embers. Freedom was as overwhelming as being controlled. Tiny flames ignited and licked the sides of the wood. *I'm free.* Warmth and light filled the room. *I'm safe.* Making decisions paralyzed me, but there wasn't anyone rushing me to figure it out.

Chapter 3

The hours melted into days, and the days faded into weeks. With no way of keeping time, I guessed at best. I tallied each approximate day in the kitchen in a small notebook Ladislav left. I ventured often to the entrance, spending more time in the elements without connecting with them. My heart shattered every time I had to deny my magic.

The powerful winter storms blew through, sending snow deep into the entrance. The roaring fire kept the room above freezing but not by much. I wrapped myself in multiple layers, curling up next to the hearth. The wind howled and begged for me to step into the tempest and tame it. I shivered under the blankets and ignored the request.

My impressions of the small fridge were correct. Every time the door was shut, it replenished itself. Without fear of running out of food, I only missed Ladislav and Lucrezia. Their company was the one thing I missed about Wintermoor. With my magic off limits, there was little to do with my time except read and think.

I settled into somewhat of a routine. I ate breakfast whenever I awoke and then checked outside. I'd spend a few hours reading, then I'd study the books Ladislav left. I practiced my martial arts in the main chamber, and I meditated in the flames. I ate when I got hungry, and I slept when I got sleepy. I visited the entrance several times a day but feared leaving the cave entirely.

My magic simmered within, building near explosive. Each time, it encroached towards the uncontrollable release. *Maybe Anahera was right. I can't not use it.* I sighed and begged it to retreat. Eventually, it would subside, and exhaustion floated in on its wake.

I settled into a nice routine. Tally marks lined the corner of the kitchen table. I added a fourteenth mark and sighed. My thoughts drifted to the farmhouse. My memories felt light-years away and simultaneously yesterday. I curled up in a rock chair with a book I read a thousand times. My muscles and body relaxed. For the first time, breathing wasn't laborious and taxing. My environment poured energy into me instead of syphoning the life from me.

The fire in the hearth blazed bright, but the flicker was inconsistent for reading. I positioned the flashlight behind me and aimed it down at my book. One of the few fictions I owned, I dove into the world I knew so well. The cave melted away, leaving me deposited in a green field. Dragon calls filled the air. Their large wings disturbing the air high above, and their call covering the land.

A band of horses ran along the hillside. When they reached the crest, wings sprouted from their backs, and they took flight. They soared as high as the dragons, joining them in their journey. The fire crackled, and a log slipped, pulling my attention back to the cave. My heart leapt into overdrive. A whoosh came from the entrance and a shadow glanced across the wall. I flicked off the flashlight and readied myself. Adrenaline flooded my system. Magic tingled alive in my veins, ready to deploy.

"It's just me."

Lucrezia's voice rang through the open chamber. My senses refused to process the familiarity. She stepped into the light, and our eyes met. Safety and calm cascaded down my

body. I ran to her and threw my arms around her. She held me in a tight embrace. I inhaled her perfume and relaxation spread through my muscles. Her presence filled the emptiness, both in the room and in my chest.

"Tell me everything. How's Ladislav?"

"So far, all is good. He is doing well. I arranged for a shifter to play you for as long as it works. The powers that be are none the wiser." Pride filled her smile, and she made her way further into the chamber. "I like what you've done with the place."

"Do you think he can still find me? What if the shifter gets caught? Surely, he will hurt them."

Panic struck my core at the thought of having to return to the farmhouse, at the idea of someone else paying for my actions. She studied me intently as she took a seat next to where I was reading. She waved me over to take a seat. Taking a deep breath, I ran my fingers through my hair before obliging.

"They had a price to pay and a favor they owed. Whatever comes of them is not of your worry. I can't guarantee he can't find you, but we have done as much as we can. Hopefully, we can continue to put his focus elsewhere."

She noticed my fear and laid a comforting hand on my leg. The fire crackled in the silence. Her company pulled tears to the edge. I missed her and Ladislav's continued affirmations and comfort. I wouldn't surrender my freedom for it, but the loneliness tempted me. My gaze fell into the flames dancing along the logs. Fabricated images of my demise if I was caught played unabated in my mind's eye. I shivered and returned my attention to her.

"I can't go back there."

"The goal is that you don't. How have things been here? Are you comfortable? Is there anything that you need?"

The cave was more home than the farmhouse ever was. Freedom and independence filled my days. The mountain held me like a treasured prize. The rock seat cradled me perfectly. *What could I possibly need?* The infinite kitchen held more food than I could ever eat in a lifetime. Then it dawned on me.

"It has been very comfortable. I have been losing track of time, though. I don't know what day it is or even if it's day or night. I take trips to the entrance, but I'm always scared to be in the entrance."

"We forgot a clock. Of course, being centuries old, we would forget the clock. I'll have one for you in a few days, tops." She chuckled and shook her head in amusement. "As for the entrance, you should be safe to come and go as you please. Just be sure not to fall off the cliff."

She winked. In the warm firelight, her pronounced eyes drew my attention. They didn't glow per se, but there was a distinct sparkle. Her light brown eyes dove to a darker shade, more golden. Her millennia of sight seeped through her normally human facade.

"Are you sure? What if they have someone trying to find me?"

"They don't even know you're gone, love."

Calm and relaxation washed over me. *He doesn't know I'm missing.* I let the thought marinate in my mind. I let the pressure of escaping drift away for a moment, or two. A smile spread across my face as it sunk in. *For as long as the shifter isn't discovered, I'm safe.* The idea of never going back tingled across my skin.

Lucrezia's presence reminded me that despite the uncertainty and danger, there was always a way to hold on to the hope of better days ahead. My anxieties melted away, replaced by

the comforting knowledge that I wasn't alone. Even when she left, I knew I wasn't by myself in the fight for freedom and safety. My fears quieted, and the afternoon faded into dark.

Chapter 4

Movement from the corner of my eye grabbed my attention. My heart jumped into overdrive. Straining my eyes in the firelight, there was nothing but silence. Stillness. Another shadow flitted across the wall. Adrenaline flooded my body, and I dove behind the rock chain, keeping my back against the wall. Presences besides my own filled the room. *They've found me.*

"Millie, I meant no danger."

Giacobe's soft voice rang through the chamber. I dared to peek over the rock and saw him standing next to the hearth, more solid than ever. Paranoia kept me from believing him. Fear prickled up my back while the room filled with his gentleness. He crossed the room and knelt in front of me.

"Come, I have someone I'd like you to meet."

He extended his hand. I hesitantly glanced down, but the tingle spreading across my skin drove back the fear and panic. Oxygen flooded my body. The mountain awoke around me. I closed my eyes and willed my magic to calm. I reached out and took his hand.

He guided me to the left of the fireplace. The stone wall dissolved into a long corridor. Despite the darkness, my vision didn't dim. We ventured further into the mountain. The tunnel appeared never ending. Several branches darted to the left and right, but he didn't pay them any mind. I couldn't help glancing down into each one, not knowing what to expect.

A soft flicker of light illuminated an entryway. Either that or my eyes were playing tricks on me. As we closed the distance, it brightened. *Okay, I'm not seeing things.* The glow flickered and danced. Just as I expected, Giacobe turned down a smaller tunnel to our right. I followed without fear. Excitement and wonder filled my mind.

The small hallway opened up into a small chamber with a similar fireplace across the room. The heat chased the tunnel's cold from my skin. A stone table and chairs sat on our left, and a petite woman stood with her back to us, hands out to the growing blaze. Her straight, flat hair reached her lower back.

"Millie, I'd like you to meet my wife, Myckenia, otherwise known as Mother Earth."

The firelight illuminated her honey golden eyes. A beauty beyond any ever seen radiated from her core. Goosebumps raced up and down my body. Giacobe's presence paled compared to hers. A bright and welcoming smile spread across her face. Her outstretched arms ignited an urge to throw myself in her arms and cling to her like a baby koala bear.

Her arms surrounded me, and tears overflowed the dam. The safety of her arms strengthened my bones. The mountain itself held me in its hands. Her lips touched my forehead in a delicate kiss. My buzzing magic quieted, submitting itself to her authority. She guided me to the stone table, and we sat.

"You're more solid than ever."

"The stronger you get, the more we return. The rebels drained us, and we've waited for the magic to regenerate. As it does, so do we."

Giacobe placed his hand on mine. A familiar warmth spread through my core. The firelight sent waves of shadow across the walls. Sitting with them was the closest I had ever gotten to having a family and having parents. My heart ached, but it didn't consume me.

"Will the other dead gods come back?"

"Unfortunately, no. We were not killed, only drained. The gods were entombed before they could siphon the remaining magic. We believe that's how it regenerated."

The rocks reached for me. The dirt within the mountain called to me. It begged to act on my will, like a servant without a master for far too long. The wind whipping around the peaks, searching for a hole to enter, to find me. Water permeated through the cracks and crevices. All of which tempted me to fall into my magic, to unleash my power onto the world. It tingled just under my skin. It swam through my veins with excitement. I balled my fists.

"How do I resist using it? Mr. Conrad can't find me, and I'm traceable."

"That is why we have come. We have something for you. You need to strengthen your magic which means you need to use it. It will protect you from being tracked by anyone, even a seer. Use the isolation to harness your ability."

"What is it?"

"A tattoo. We had to wait until we had the strength."

A shiver ran down my spine. *A tattoo?* My mind flashed images of Jalai with his twisted and desperate face screaming in silent agony. Hesitation and fear pushed against their confidence and courage. Taking a deep breath, I nodded.

"Not only will it protect you from prying eyes, but it will keep us tethered stronger than we are now."

Myckenia rose and walked to the hearth. She positioned her right hand into the fire. Giacobe took my hands in his. A soft connection weaved through the magic in my veins, spreading throughout my body. Her left arm pushed my shoulders back, pinning me against the chair. Fear and panic flared to life, but his presence within my body shut it down. Her other hand, glowing and otherworldly, descended on the left side of my chest, right under my collarbone.

The connection between her essence and his seared through my skin. Electrified spasms shot through my body, but their hands held me still. Oxygen populated within my lungs; no breathing necessary. Millennia of knowledge and experiences seeped into my mind. The deep well of connection breathed life into my shame. *Your family.* Brief memories of my parents flashed in my head. *Are not dead.* Her words echoed within my mind, sending a shockwave through my body.

The intricate lines and details webbed through my skin from his energy to hers. Tiny lightning bolts threaded my new symbol of freedom. Four circles sat inside a larger circle. Each one flared to life with the essence of the elements. The surrounding ring was filled with an ancient script. It protected all the magic within. Each element was tied together with swirling vines and intricate ribbons.

He broke the connection first, and she finished the ritual before retreating to her seat. My mind swam with relief and intrigue. My body sank into itself. My lungs opened up, and I tasted the molecules of not only oxygen, but nitrogen and argon. Their power pulsed within me, but it faded in intensity with each one.

"What do you mean 'are not dead'?" The words echoed in my mind, and I finally broke the silence.

"Your family didn't die in the fire. Conrad only thinks they did."

“How do you know?”

“Because we were there.”

“I don’t understand. Why are you just now telling me?”

“We didn’t know what you knew. I know you have plenty of questions, but we need to rest. We will be back.”

Their beings faded and blinked in and out of focus. They lingered around me in an ethereal embrace. Tears welled up, because I wasn’t ready for them to go. They disappeared and so did the fire in the fireplace. With the light extinguished and being plunged into darkness, a panic bubble immediately rose through my core. Instead of growing, it popped and fizzled out. The fresh addition on my chest warmed and tingled.

The pitch black comforted and smothered me. The stones lit up against the emptiness of the air. Magic flared alive within my body, and there was no resisting. *What if they’re wrong?* The crispness of the air returned, shoving out the last of the warmth from the dead fire. *What if he still finds me?* I retraced our steps back to the main chamber. The earth guided my way despite no light when too much fear stopped me from using my magic.

Chapter 5

My family may be alive. The thought ricocheted through my mind. Having been crushed by the weight of falsehoods, the truth liberated me from the overwhelming pressure in my chest. *I didn't kill them.* Relief flooded through me, obliterating the guilt that weighed me down. The circles on my chest responded with pulsing light that matched my heartbeat.

Magic swam unabated through my body, reaching for all the connections outside of myself. It dove deep into the wells of natural springs. It bounced off the clouds high above. It carved its way through the earth, nestling itself somewhere in the mantle. The power echoed through time and space, gaining strength and stamina. It pulsed far beyond myself, searching through humanity for my family.

"No," I muttered, clenching my fists. "Not yet."

I breathed in sharply. The weight of the noisy world pounded against my mind. My magic wanted to escape, to spread beyond myself, to stretch its fingers and touch the distances. It was ravenous and desperate for release. It roared with a power I never felt, a power I feared I couldn't control.

Time since before the Dark Wars came for me, tired of waiting and praying. It deposited the ancient knowledge into my memories. Memories that weren't mine now belonged to me. Awareness streamed through me, and I could no longer contain it.

My magic surged forward, like a river breaching its dam. It flooded out of my chest, shot from my fingertips, and filled the main chamber with a pale blue illumination. It wasn't light per se, but it cast long, trembling shadows across the jagged rocks.

The threads of the universe tethered within me and reached across the globe to every creature. Their existence rebounded across the atmosphere, landing square in my chest. My mind raced; my senses overloaded. Despite being sheltered in the chamber, the wind outside the cave brought the birdsong and the promise for rain. Then, just beyond the horizon of my mind, a fragile, thin thread shone through the masses. A soft and consistent hum, like a whisper in a storm, rose above the rest. My breath caught in my chest.

Could it be them? Could it be my family?

I closed my eyes tight, trying to block out everything but that single thread. I latched onto it, clinging to the faint, brittle line with everything I had. The storm inside me calmed. The frantic pulsing of my magic died down, leaving the single, solitary thread. I let my awareness drift along it, like a boat being carried by a gentle current. It replied, pulling me as much as I pulled towards it. Then, with sudden clarity, my heart leapt into overdrive. *It is them! They are alive!*

Racing to the entrance, I hoped the clear sky would strengthen the connection. Despite the open expanse, the beacon remained frail but alive. Anger raged at Mr. Conrad and the Consilium. *How dare they kidnap me!* My excitement dwindled with a shiver down my spine. *What if they gave me away? What if they didn't want me?*

The possibility of their betrayal severed the connection. An emptiness flowed into the negative space it left behind. The wind whipped through my hair, calming my growing fears. The mountain behind me offered safety and comfort, but I refused.

The voices of nature returned in the absence of my family. It drew me down the mountainside and into the thick forest below. The moon illuminated the path, reflecting off the white snow until it wound under the canopy. Then, beams streamed through the arching branches, sending spotlights across the floor. The snowy floor absorbed the normal forest sounds.

A rustle in the leaves and branches to my right grabbed my attention. A large white stag stepped onto the trail, blocking me from going any further. His breath became visible in the moonlight. It curled in a soft wispy mist before disappearing. His head stood several feet above my own, but I wasn't afraid of him. He lowered it towards me.

"I am Fendrid, protector of these woods." His words echoed in my skull. His eye contact pierced my soul. I took a step forward and bowed.

"I'm Millie. It's nice to..." I paused and looked up at him. "Meet you?" I questioned. A huff left his snout in amusement.

"I've kept watch for hundreds of years waiting for the return of your kind. I have to say, you're a bit small." A huff escaped his muzzle.

Now, it was my turn to chuckle. I approached his massive body, and he allowed me to run my hand down his shoulder. The air buzzed and crackled around us. Eyes glowed from the trees, watching and waiting for their leader to determine their safety.

"I may be small in stature, but I make up for it with my magic."

"Climb on."

He knelt down onto the ground. My heart drummed against my ribcage. He patiently waited. I walked around him, determining the best way to ascend. He laid his head to the side and placed his antlers like steps. Concern blossomed in my core. *I can't crawl on his antlers.* More air exited his muzzle in amusement.

"You may, and you must."

Placing my foot on a sturdy branch, I hoisted myself up. He nudged me higher until the flat between his shoulders made a perfect platform for me to sit. I gripped tightly to his mane as he rose. Swaying with his motions, I settled onto his back. His steps were powerful and intentional. No creature was ever caught under his hooves, and he broke no branches in his movements. He continued across the trail and into the thicket. His antlers knocked snow off the branches above me, raining snow around me.

It glittered down around me, opening up an entire other world. Magic coursed through my veins, flowing with the power of a tsunami. My eyesight adjusted to the dark, and I gasped at the new skill. Vibrant, strong night vision illuminated an unseen side of the forest. Time paused and existence suspended while riding through the brush. We were somehow outside of it. The moon seemed unmoving in the large sky, but the creature under me paid no mind to the strangeness.

We arrived at a small river. The water glinted under the moonlight. The stag knelt down and took a few sips before following the bank upstream. It was slow moving, shallow, and about thirty feet across. The water lapped at the edges, calling me to explore it. Soft, incomprehensible whispers followed us in the tree line. The further we followed the river, the smaller it became. Thirty feet became fifteen before it opened into a waterfall fed pond. He knelt by the edge, and I climbed off.

My feet crunched in the snow, and I turned to gaze on the wonder in the woods. Steam drifted off the calm water top at the water's edge. The roar of the cascading water filled my ears. It called to me. Tree branches decorated with snow and ice hung over the top, exposing the falls to the night air. The rocks outlining the falls were ice covered and slick.

Small chunks of ice occasionally tumbled over the edge, crashing into the pond below only to immediately melt. The larger ones floated around like tiny icebergs, dwindling once they escaped the icy plunge. My magic reached out into the waters. Warm water bubbled up from below to meet the icy curtain. The moonlight sparkled off the frothy water, and its beauty held me in place.

“The answers you seek lie in the waterfall.”

“What do you mean?”

“Go find out. Enter the waterfall.”

Chapter 6

The rocks shifted under my weight with each step. Turning, I glanced at Fenrid. He nodded in encouragement. The pond before me lured me closer. It sang a song only my magic could hear. I knelt down and submerged my hand. The water was cold and numbing, yet welcoming. My skin tingled before it rejected the cold, coated in magic prepared to handle the depths. Taking a deep breath, I submerged my entire arm. The cold never permeated the barrier between me and it. Curiosity exploded in my core.

I waded further into the pond. Ice patches raced away from me, but no cold chilled my bones. Glancing over my shoulder, Fenrid watched in guarded amazement, or as amazed as a giant stag could express. His energy entwined with my own. I returned my attention to the roaring entryway. I swam through the deepest part and pushed my way against the waves. I reached the cascading conclusion and placed my hand through it. Tingling covered my skin as the rest of my body followed.

It contained me within itself, holding me steady while it transported my consciousness elsewhere. The tumbling water was a portal. The physical world faded away, replaced by a small cottage in the woods. A healthy fire burned in the hearth. The wooden table held small bowls of spices and ingredients. A large pot sat at the end. A small woman came through a door on my left. She was young with strawberry blonde hair midway down her back. She noticed me, and her eyes lit up.

“I’ve been expecting you, Abigail.”

“My name’s Millie.”

My voice trailed off, and my heart sank. The surrounding cottage flickered in and out of focus, as though it, too, was uncertain of its place in time. She froze in mid step and studied me. She approached me, and her hand rose to meet my face. She dove deep into my eyes, and a similar threat connected us through time. A smile spread across her face.

“Come, sit. Names change, but eyes don’t lie.”

I abided by her request and took a seat at her table. There was an ancient weight to her gaze, as though she could see through me, through the layers of my memory. I sank into the seat, my hands resting on the table, fingers trembling. The house and table were dreamlike, yet the fire’s heat against my skin was all too real.

“I don’t understand,” I said after a moment, my voice low and hesitant. “How do you know who I am?”

The woman gave a soft chuckle, almost purring. “I know many things, Millie. You could say I have the gift of seeing beyond the veil of time, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that time has woven itself into me.”

The vision flickered in and out. I swallowed hard, unsure of what to say. Everything was happening so fast. The stag had led me here, guiding me to the waterfall, and I was suddenly in the presence of someone who spoke as if they held the answers to every question I’d had since the storm. She took a seat across from me, taking my hands in hers.

“I have no idea how to control my magic.”

“You’re not meant to control it, child. You’re meant to weave it.”

I blinked, unsure if I had heard her correctly. “Weave it?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “The old magic is not like the magic of today, nor like what you’ve seen of the magic from the Dark Wars. Before the Wars, magic was not something to be controlled or commanded with gestures and words. It was woven into the very fabric of reality, as natural as the flow of water or the wind through the trees.”

Her words sank like a heavy stone, reaching into the bottom of my mind. I couldn't imagine a world where magic wasn't something to be wielded, where it was a simple part of life, flowing and changing with the world. My thoughts drifted back to the stag. The way it moved with such grace, so unburdened by effort. It knew things I couldn't yet grasp.

“How do I weave it?” I asked, my voice trembling slightly. “How do I... become part of it?”

The woman tilted her head, her eyes glinting as though she had been expecting this question for centuries. “Close your eyes.”

I hesitated but obeyed. As soon as I did, the world around me shifted again. I could no longer hear the crackle of the fire or feel the weight of the chair beneath me. Instead, something else shone in my vision. An invisible thread reached out to me from every direction, curling around my skin like the wind, similar to the thread that revealed my family. My breath hitched. *The essence of magic.*

“This is the magic before the Dark Wars,” the woman’s voice whispered in my ear. “Before humanity forgot that it was part of the world, that it was not separate from it. You are a part of the thread, Millie. Your body, your spirit. They are threads woven into the tapestry of existence.”

My heart raced, but there was no fear, just wonder. I reached out instinctively, and the threads responded. I could feel them stretching, growing, pulling in response to my movements. It was as though I could touch the very cords of the world itself, tugging on the fibers of life and existence.

“The fire, the water, the trees, the air, and everything in between. You are all connected,” the woman’s voice continued. “Magic is the invisible force that binds all things together. You must learn to see it, to feel it. Then, you must learn to move within it.”

“But how do I—”

“Shhh,” she interrupted gently. “It is not about words or gestures, Millie. It is about being. It’s about allowing the natural connection to show itself to you.”

The sensation deepened, and at once, I no longer observed the threads; I became them. I became the water rippling in a distant stream, flowing with freedom. I joined the wind caressing the trees and long blades of grass far away. I transported into the crackling fire in the hearth, breathing the same oxygen. The magic was me. The woman’s form blurred, her body dissolving into the vision until there was nothing left but a voice, a presence.

“You have always known this, deep within you. This is your birthright, Millie. You are not just some mage or a witch. You are a weaver, a guardian of the old magic. Humans with one or two elements are thread spinners. When they are reborn, they will need your guidance. The world is waiting for you to remember the ways of old.”

Her words echoed in my mind as the portal sucked me in. It deposited me back into my body, under the waterfall. I opened my eyes, blinking rapidly. Water cascaded down my face, washing the tears that fell freely. *I found answers.* I exited the pond, understanding my magic for

the first time. My clothes, wet, and clinging to my body under the waterfall dried as soon as I left the pond.

“Thank you.”

The stag knelt in front of me, asking me to climb back up. I hugged his neck before I did. The trek back to the main trail was just as illuminating and vibrant. Even more so, the new knowledge unlocked aspects of my abilities I hadn’t had access to before. I was a weaver, and the single, solitary one in existence. The journey back to the mountain trail passed as I took in the threads popping up around me. When he stopped and knelt, I wasn’t ready for him to leave.

“You need to rest. Then, you need to put your new knowledge to use.” I hugged his neck again.

“Thank you, and I will.”

I started up the trail before turning back. I waved, and he disappeared back into the trees. I climbed my way back to the entrance. The mountain became home. The rocks welcomed me and guided me back to the main chamber without the need of light. A yawn overtook me. I grabbed a couple protein bars from the kitchen and curled up on my stone bed. *He was right. I’m exhausted.* I shoved the snack down with a yawn and curled up into a peaceful rest.

Chapter 7

The next few days were a whirlwind of success and possibilities. Harnessing the threads was much more efficient than trying to control the raw element. My eyes lit up each time an experiment worked. The tattoo on my chest glowed brighter with each successful attempt. The farmhouse grew to be a memory as life in the cave became home. The tally marks in the notebook were adding up. Just under nine weeks, sixty-one days to be exact.

I sat straight up from a dead sleep. I rubbed my sleepy eyes, trying to orient myself. An arctic tempest raged beyond the stone. Its power jolted me from the stony slab I called a bed. It beckoned me to step into its power and soak it up. It lured me out of bed and into the main chamber. I shook my head, getting a grip on myself. A deep breath did nothing to squash the temptation. I threw a couple more logs on the roaring fire.

Sitting in front of the hearth, the flickering flames caught my attention. From willpower alone, I saw it grow larger in my mind, and it mimicked moments later. However, imagining it getting smaller didn't have the same effect. The flames licked out the side of the stone, threatening to spill over into the chamber. Panic rushed up my back. Images of Jalai caught in my creation flashed in my head. *Find the thread.* Her voice echoed in my mind.

Closing my eyes, the brightness dulled, and the threads illuminated. *Okay, but how do I make a thread smaller?* Taking my fingers, I lined them up with the thread and pushed them together. The flames died down. I repeated the process. I studied in my mind's eye the connection between the thread and the fire. I clapped my hands together and jumped up in elation once it became foolproof.

"I did it!" I yelled to the empty room.

My joy turned to grief as loneliness crept in for the first time. I sighed and sat down, lowering my head into my hands. Running my fingers through my hair, I took a few deep breaths and centered myself. Isolation was necessary for safety, but I was never alone. With my eyes closed, the threads were obvious and bright, but they disappeared once I opened them.

Trying a few experiments, nothing I did combined the two visions. Curiosity overtook the grief, and I dove into ways to see the threads. Several failed attempts left me frustrated and tired. I grabbed a snack from the kitchen, and while I was resting, it dawned on me. Did I have to see the threads to know they were there? In the doorway, I glanced back to the fire and repeated my previous motions. It worked without finding the thread first.

My life suddenly became finding and understanding the tiny strings that comprised everything. Venturing outside opened up a similar world to the night vision. The same threads plucked and grew trees or squished them to destroy. Confidence and curiosity fed every waking moment. The idea of returning to the farmhouse delightfully slipped away.

Until a few days later. On a berry gathering mission, I sensed someone watching me. I ducked behind a fallen tree and scanned the woods. Adrenaline flooded my system. Nothing seemed out of place. There were no strange rustling in the underbrush, yet the feeling intensified. My heart pounded in my chest. With only half a bowl of berries, I returned to the cave and tried to shake the paranoia.

The stone walls did nothing to prevent it from following me indoors. Someone's gaze, someone's awareness was with me. Throwing water on the fire, I plunged the chamber into darkness. My lungs sucked in air too quickly. *After all this time, has he found me?* I sank down behind the stone chair, in a tiny inlet. I stayed there until the awareness drifted away. Terror sucked the confidence from my bones and replaced it with doubt.

It continued on and off for days whether or not I was inside the cave. It left and returned on its own whim. The prickle raced up my back, and any magic I was performing ceased immediately. The moment the awareness fell upon me, I expected company. Despite the convincing fear, no one walked through the entrance. Nothing materialized. It would fade, and I would return to my curiosities.

While trying to use two magics at once, a shadow darted across the wall. I froze, straining to hear. Silence. Like many times before, I was no longer alone, but no one was here. However, within moments, a figure came through the doorway. I jumped out of my skin.

"It's just me." Lucrezia smiled as I put my hands over my chest. I prayed my heart didn't explode.

"You scared me." I tried to giggle off the fear.

"That is never my intent. How has it been?"

She joined me in a chair across from the hearth. Taking several deep breaths, I begged my body to calm down. Her cold hand descended on mine, and a peaceful tranquility washed over me. One more deep breath, and I was alright. I smiled as I turned to her.

"I don't even know where to begin. A stag brought me to a waterfall that transported me to a woman who taught me a little about my magic and how to use it. Before that, though, the gods visited me and gave me this tattoo that blocks my magic from being traced."

I pulled down the top of my shirt to reveal the ring of elements. Her icy hand drifted over it. My magic tingled against her touch. I held up my finger and closed my eyes. Finding the threads fueling the fire, I tugged at them, pulling the fire higher in the hearth. She gasped, and I let the design unravel.

"Impressive."

"I've been practicing ever since. You and Ladislav are the most powerful creatures, and you didn't pick up on it. It works! It's been nice connecting with everything and truly harnessing my ability. How are things back there?"

"Conrad has been very secretive in his actions. As far as I know, he hasn't discovered the shifter. He's even skipped a few Consilium meetings, but there's no telling what's going on in his mind."

Her smile brightened, and a comfortable silence drifted between us. I allowed my mind to wander back to the farmhouse but just for a moment. The woman from the cottage replaced Mr. Conrad in my mind. *Don't think of him.* I jumped, and shook them both from my thoughts. The awareness crept into the room, almost too low for me to recognize.

"About four days ago, I felt like someone was watching me. No one was here." I admitted.

"That is concerning. We may have to move you to a new place before too long."

"But I like it here."

"That won't matter if he's found someone who could find you."

"Like who?"

"Like a seer. They're rare now. They used to be very abundant before the Dark Wars."

Fear prickled along my spine despite her being with me. I shivered under the weight of being found, even if the chance was low. If he hadn't discovered the shifter, why would he have anyone looking for me? All I could do was wait. Wait and get stronger.

"What's a seer?"

"Someone who can remote view. Meaning, they can travel all over the world without ever leaving their chair."

"Oh. That doesn't sound good."

"Which is why we may have to move soon. It would be a similar place. There are many around here that don't connect. Now, show me something you've learned."

Her smile pulled one from me. I sat towards the edge of the chair and faced the fire. I breathed more life into it, brought it into the main chamber, and returned it without losing control. The threads wove into more intricate designs the more complicated I manipulated the fire. When I was ready for it to return to its natural state, I pulled the original thread, and it all fell back to normal.

Her eyes lit up with excitement. I held up a finger, and using the fire and stone threads, I expanded the hearth. After a few moments, I let that change stay. Repeating the simple movements of expanding the thread and constricting it, I grabbed a few in the air and pulled the edges. The temperature rose with the extension of the string. Smooshing it back together brought the opposite effect. She applauded my progress. I bowed, glowing with pride.

"Thank you. Thank you."

"I'm so proud of you."

We stayed up for most of the night showcasing my newly mastered abilities. Exhaustion tugged at me, and I turned in for sleep despite every want to stay and enjoy Lucrezia's company. It was nice for her to drop by. She was as confused about the potential viewer as me. She left me a steel blade for a bit of defense, and then, she went back to continue the ruse. She promised to return within a few days with an update.

Chapter 8

“Millie, wake up.” Hands rocked me, and my eyes flew open. Adrenaline flooded my body. The dying fire illuminated Ladislav’s outline in the hearth. “Millie, come on. Hurry. We have to go.”

His hushed voice was panicked and hurried. He repeatedly glanced over his shoulder and around the room. I threw back the covers and slid my feet into a pair of shoes. He threw water on the fire, extinguishing it with a sizzling sigh. The flashlight in his hand awakened, illuminating the far side of the chamber.

My muscles stretched, ready to move. Magic roared to life in my veins. Careful footsteps and hurried, yet intentional movements took us around the turn and towards the exit. *One way in. One way out.* The light leading our way died. Pitch darkness surrounded us, not yet close enough to the entrance for the moonlight to paint the path.

My eyes didn’t have time to adjust. Multiple sets of hands grabbed my arms and legs. The shock of the assault froze my body for a couple of seconds, but it was long enough. My struggle against them was useless. Pressure against the back of my knees forced me to the ground. Each arm was extended painfully behind me. The air in the tunnel picked up, blowing my hair from my face.

Fingers weaved their way through my hair, tightened, and forced my head back. Aggressive hands pried my mouth open. A fruity liquid slipped down my throat against my will. I choked against the intrusion. My skin tingled. The mountain shifted under us while a wave washed over me. The wind died down, retreating from me. My shoes were removed, and a dense fog filled my head.

I fought against their hold, biting down on the fingers still holding my mouth open. A sharp sting spread across my face in response to my defense. Cold heaviness clasped around each wrist and ankle. Clinking metal joined the scuffle, and a cannonball descended in my belly. The flashlight clicked back on revealing Anahera in front of me with a couple more people behind her in the shadows. Two long chains hung between her hands and my wrists.

My heart pounded in my chest. Genuine fear leaked from every pore in my body. Hands pushed me forward, and I turned to see Mr. Conrad, not Ladislav. My stomach turned, and the color drained from my face. His fingers dug into my shoulder, and there was no escaping my fate. He stalked around me, never removing his eyes from me. An inferno of rage boiled behind his empty eyes.

“What is this?” I asked in confusion. “I don’t understand.” I added quickly, knowing it was all over.

“How did you get to this cave?”

His voice was angry, low, and gruff. My blocked magic pushed against the barrier, leaving me at their mercy. My thin pajamas offered no protection. I scrambled to think, but I couldn’t form a single, cohesive thought. Panic spiraled down my spine, and my stomach lurched.

“I... I don’t know. I thought you brought me here!” I stammered and pleaded.

“Liar!”

He quickly closed the distance between us. His hand connected with my throat, and my feet lifted off the ground. My back came in contact with the stone wall, knocking the air from my lungs. My hands clawed at his wrist and pulled at his fingers. His cold eyes bore into mine. My lungs burned for oxygen. He released me, and I tumbled to the ground, gasping and choking for air. Rough hands gripped my upper arm and yanked me to my feet.

“Now walk.” He growled close to my ear.

Anahera’s smirk nauseated me. She tugged on the chains, and I hurried forward instead of allowing her to pull me against my will. Having walked the tunnel for weeks, I knew the opening was approaching. The drop off loomed in my mind. *I can’t go back there.* Visions of throwing myself off the cliff, dragging Anahera with me flashed. The impulse washed over me in a wave.

“Mr. Conrad, I don’t understand. I don’t know how I got here. I was asleep in my bed, then I woke up here. I thought you hid me away.”

No response. Silence filled the air. *How did he find me?* Anahera walked ahead through the opening, careful to keep the length short enough that I’d get no momentum to topple us over the edge. He stayed close to my back and kept one hand on my shoulder, guiding me down the winding path. She sauntered with pride. My mind spun. *Had the tattoo not worked?* The rocks bit into my bare feet, and my focus returned to the nightmare at hand. The incline was steep, and I couldn’t maneuver well without shoes.

The path descended around the cliff face, entering the dark canopy of the forest. It was covered with a layer of fresh snow. My skin didn’t register the cold. The moon and stars disappeared. Stones bit at my unprotected skin through the blanket of powder. Sticks scraped against my ankle. *This can’t be happening.* They quickened the pace, and I stumbled. His harsh, sharp fingers dug into my shoulder and kept me upright while she pulled me forward.

Our footsteps were the only sound through the forest. My magic fought against the barrier keeping it from use, but the containment didn’t budge. A distant owl hooted through the darkness. A limb crashed to the ground to our right. A rustle in the leaves to our left pulled my awareness. My captors none the wiser to the company just feet away. The chain slacked, and I tripped into a frozen Anahera. Conrad’s hand fell off my shoulder, and he brushed past me.

The beam of light trembled in front of us. I peered between them, struggling to see what caused our stop. *At least I can catch my breath.* And then I saw it. An exceptionally large buck with impressive, otherworldly antlers blocked the trail. His eyes stared beyond them, straight to me. *It’s the same one.* An incomprehensible whisper echoed in my mind. A trance washed over me, reaching for the blocked power in my blood.

“What have they done to you?” His concerned words echoed in my mind.

“I’m not sure. I can’t reach my magic.”

His magic worked until mine fizzled out. I returned to everyone staring between me and the giant creature. He huffed, sending steam from its nostrils and grunted several times. Confusion bloomed in the creature’s deep eyes, as if his words no longer reached my mind.

Conrad raised his arms, and my stomach sank. His magic streamed from his fingers in the direction of the protector of the forest. None of it made contact. Fendrid reared up on his back two legs before running back into protection of the trees. Tears sprang to the bottom of my eyes. The disconnection unsettled my soul.

With the path clear before us, she jerked me forward, and we continued. His hand returned to my shoulder, and my stomach sank back to helplessness. Tree branches snapped and

fell throughout the woods. *They're following us.* Small animals scampered over the underbrush. The rocky trail turned dirt, and we continued. My aching feet were caked in dirt and blood. A small clearing ahead seemed to be our destination.

My thoughts disappeared. One foot struggled to make it in front of the other. Exhaustion coursed through me, but there was no rest. The flashlight glinted off something in the clearing. My heartbeat quickened. Once we entered the small patch, a large black SUV sat on the other side. He pushed me towards it, and she donned a sinister smirk. The cold crept through my fading magical protection. Panic wove through my spine, and I prepared for the worst.