



The Forbidden Flame (The Lunaterra Chronicles #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: An immortal warrior cursed with protecting all life in the magical realms.

A human woman unaware that she holds the key to saving his soul from darkness.

A ruthless enemy determined to invade all of Lunaterra and fulfill a centuries old curse.

All she wanted was a weekend of fun and excitement, two days away from the brutal orphanage where she is forced to work sunrise through moonset. Abandoned on the steps of the Capital when she was a baby, Cleo Rathmore has no idea where she came from or why her parents left an infant in a basket without even leaving a note. The capitals royal wedding and tournament seems like the perfect opportunity to spread her wings and, perhaps, escape the maniacal control of her elders and an arranged marriage to a Death Mage, a horrid, terrifying Revenant. As far as she's concerned, kissing an Orc would be better. Accepting the match to a mage from The Spire would be a fate worse than death.

Death Mage Devin Grimm traveled to the capital in search of a miracle. He has fought evil for centuries and his soul is paying the ultimate price. A powerful necromancer in the capital is his only hope until he sees her, a human female who is more than she seems, but is promised to another of his kind. Worse, she vows she will have an Orc, a bloodsucking vampire, or even a stinky, hairy werewolf shifter before she accepts one of his kind.

She's adamant. She doesn't even like him. Sure, he's sexy, in that blue haired, scary, death mage kind of way. But he freaking kidnapped her and insists she's a liar. So why can't she resist his touch? Why does every kiss make her burn with a forbidden flame? She's a nobody, an orphaned human. He's a cursed, merciless warrior on the brink of death. So why does evil stalk them as if together, they are a powerful threat? And why does her foolish heart insist she sacrifice absolutely anything, even her life, to save him?

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~ C leo Rathmore, The Capital ~

“I’d rather kiss an Orc,” I muttered as I ducked behind a cart stacked with pear tarts. “A muddy, tusked, flea-bitten Orc with rotting fish breathe and a gambling problem.”

The tart-seller blinked at me and edged his tray farther away.

I gave him a grin and kept moving. I didn’t get far before a crowd of revelers blocked my path, the gasps and pointing fingers forcing me to look up.

I should have known the gods were mocking me the moment I saw the silk banner catch fire.

It wasn’t a large fire—just a flicker of gold licking the edge of the crimson ribbon strung across the archway to the Tournament Court. But still, fire. On a wedding day. An omen, if I believed in such things.

The knot in my gut said not only did I believe, but I also knew exactly who that bad omen was for...me. Maybe the gods were right. Perhaps I could not outrun my destiny. I sure as hell intended to try.

The flames climbed higher, igniting a second silken banner. A merchant raised the alarm, pointing and shouting for buckets of water. I gasped as a nearby fae from one of the outer regions waved his hand and suffocated the flames with a sudden whirl of wind. He was gorgeous. Tall. Long, silver hair fell to his waist and his eyes sparkled

like amethysts in sunlight. I had no idea what kingdom he was from, but it mattered not.

I wasn't betrothed to a Fae. Or even a vampire. "Void take me, I'd rather marry a half-wet dog." I didn't speak too loudly. Not when there were probably half a dozen werewolves within hearing distance. I'd always found the werewolves who came to the nurses at my orphanage for healing tinctures to have an extremely unpleasant odor, yet even one of those howling beasts would be better than what awaited me if I didn't manage to escape this city.

A death mage. Dark magic. The most powerful among them were known as Revenants, their magic so black they bound their souls to the dark portal and drained their brides of life to feed the magical gate between worlds. It was said their blood was cold as death itself. Their touch could drain the life from you between one breath and the next. That the shadows themselves fled before them.

Dramatic? Yes. In my experience, rumors like these were always based on a bit of truth.

"I'm no dark mage's sacrifice." I said it aloud for what had to be the twentieth time since the death mage's appearance at the orphanage last night. The Matron hadn't bothered to warn me, tell me she'd signed my life away, given me to a complete stranger.

Betrothed. I was to be married to him. Taken to The Spire. Never seen or heard from again. They'd probably stake me to some altar and sacrifice me to The Void. Why else would a powerful mage want someone like me?

No. I refused such a fate.

I pushed through the crush of bodies in the market avenue, ignoring the mingled

scents of roasted almonds, perfume oil, and too many sweating nobles packed shoulder-to-shoulder. Music floated through the air like a promise—violins and flutes, laughter and the drumbeat of feet on cobblestones. The hauntingly beautiful voices of the fae countered the pounding drumbeats of the Orcs on the opposite end of the street. Vampires leered from the shadows, waiting for sunset. Werewolves fought Orcs for prizes in the streets. Every merchant in the realm had made the trip to the capital to sell their goods during the royal wedding of Prince Adom of Pridehaven to a fae princess. It was a once in a lifetime event. The city held many times the normal population, every inn and tavern full to bursting. The capital was in chaos.

Everyone was celebrating. Laughing. Dancing. Unaware of the quiet death being stitched into my future. Many in the realm believed betrothal to a death mage was a fate worse than death. “Count me among them,” I whispered under my breath as a group wearing the black armor of The Spire walked through the crowd. The Spire was home to dark magic, Death Mages, Necromancers and Vampires who protected Lunaterra from entities too horrible to imagine. Worst of all, they’d built The Spire’s primary tower to surround the Void and the Rift between worlds. The horror of all Lunaterra.

As always, people parted before them as if afraid of being touched. Cursed. Or worse... noticed.

I backed into the edges of the crowd without making a sound, nearly bumping into a vampire.

“Careful, little one. Stay out of the shadows. Some of us are hungry,” He inhaled slowly, as if I smelled like a freshly baked sweet. “And you smell delicious.” He snapped his fangs at me and slipped inside the nearest building.

Great. The last thing I needed was a hungry vampire’s unwanted attention. One death mage determined to claim me was more than enough trouble for one day. Luckily, my

human blood was not high on the list for the bloodthirsty vampire lot, not with so many powerful fae and shifters in town.

I adjusted the hood of my cloak and walked toward the city gates, slipping between vendors hawking fruit-glazed sweetmeats and glass-blown charms. One day. A head start. That's all I needed. Just one day to vanish into the noise and color. One day to escape the noose tightening around my throat.

I'd packed everything I owned—three coppers, a frayed velvet book of fairy stories, the blanket I'd been wrapped in when the Matron found me—and placed it in the satchel flung over my shoulder. It would take me until sunset to reach the city walls. I'd sneak past the east gates, climb into the back of a merchant's wagon heading out of the city and disappear into the borderlands where I would start over. Make a new life for myself. One where I wasn't the poor orphan abandoned on the steps as a baby. One where I wasn't betrothed to a complete stranger who scared the hell out of me.

There was no way— no way—I was marrying him. Allowing him to touch me. Kiss me. Claim me. No.

Jarrik Morren. Death Mage of The Spire. He claimed to be more than a hundred years old, though he looked only a few years older than my twenty summers. His age showed in the hollow darkness of his gaze, the way he stood still as death itself, face void of emotion. As if the Rift behind The Viel had already devoured his soul. And now he wanted to devour mine.

The Matron introduced me to him yesterday. My future husband.

The Matron called his interest in me an "honor," her beady eyes gleaming as if she was handing me off to a prince instead of a walking tombstone. Jarrik came to the orphanage in full ceremonial black, silent as stone and twice as cold. Tall, sharp-featured, with ink-dark hair braided down his back and a voice that sent goosebumps

down my arms—not the good kind. The way he looked at me... it wasn't lust. It wasn't even interest. It was calculation.

Something inside me screamed that I was simply a puzzle piece he needed to complete some arcane ritual. A vial of rare blood in a worn dress.

He offered me a smile. It didn't touch his eyes. And when he reached to touch my hand, something inside me screamed. Recoiled.

No.

I'd smiled. Curtsied. Waited until the sun went down.

Then I started planning my escape.

The crowd grew thicker as I neared the palace courtyard, the heart of the festivities. Nobles in jeweled masks danced through the alleys, trailing ribbons and scandal in equal measure. Children darted between legs, giggling and tossing confetti. Everywhere I looked: life. Color. Magic. It clung to the air like perfume, a promise that something better waited, if only I could reach it.

Banners hung from balconies above, golden thread catching the light—every house's sigil blazing bright in honor of the royal wedding. The Tournament would begin soon. Swordplay, spellcasting, spectacle. Perfect distraction for slipping away.

I ducked into the shadowed archway near the edge of the Court and let myself breathe. So far so good. No one paid me any attention. No alarm bells rang. I doubted the Matron even realized I was gone. With any luck, she wouldn't notice my absence until tomorrow when my betrothed came to collect me and I wasn't there.

I wasn't brave. Just desperate.

The Death Mage I'd been promised to didn't strike me as the sort to grant mercy. Once he realized I'd run, he'd send spells to find me. Or worse. Monsters. Hounds. Bounty hunters.

Better to spend the rest of my life on the run than live a life of cold silk and shadowed eyes. I couldn't bind myself to a man who looked at me like I was already dead.

I refused to become property, no matter how handsome his face or how politely he offered me his hand.

I rubbed at my palm absently, remembering the jarring tingle that crawled over my skin the moment Jarrik touched me. Cold. Empty.

As if I'd summoned him, awareness raced through my blood like someone rang a bell inside my chest. Vibration and resonance sang through me, a song moving through me like an injection of magic. Not warm. Not cold. Whispers. Shadows.

Heat. My body jolted to attention as if a lover had just kissed my lips and pulled me close. I felt desire. Awareness. Need. Awakening. Something warm and terrifying unfurled in my core. Reached out. Wanted.

A pull. A breath against the back of my neck, even though no one stood near me.

My heart stuttered. My nipples pebbled into hard, sensitive peaks. I struggled to pull air into lungs when every breath felt like breathing fire.

I looked up.

He stood atop the high stone wall that ringed the Tournament Court.

Tall. Broad-shouldered. His long coat whipped in the wind, black as the void, silver

trim catching the sun like blade edges. His hair... it was blue . Deep, midnight sapphire, tied back with a strip of black leather, a few strands loose across his face. A tattoo arced beneath his left eye—delicate, sharp, like a crescent blade dipped in ink.

He wasn't masked. He didn't need to be.

He stood like a shadow carved from storm and steel. Unmoving. Watching.

And he was watching me .

I froze.

Our eyes met.

The breath left my lungs in a single, violent exhale.

His eyes were silver, ringed in black. Cold. Ageless. They glowed—not with fire, but with a shimmer like moonlight on bone. I felt... something . A jolt in my chest. A shiver beneath my skin.

Recognition.

It made no sense. I didn't know him. I'd never seen him before. But some part of me—something buried deep in my blood and my soul— knew him.

Not Jarrik.

This man was not my betrothed, although he wore the armor and markings of a Death Mage from The Spire. He was dangerous, but he was not Jarrik.

He was something else entirely. Older. More powerful.

Something worse.

Something... mine .

I staggered back a step, shaking my head, arguing with myself in disbelief. Denial.

No.

This man was a Death Mage. A Revenant. One of their worst, most powerful. Most feared. The Spire's crest was fastened at his collar, faintly glowing with sigils I couldn't read. I knew the stories. I knew what they were. What they could do.

I should run. Hide. I couldn't tear my gaze away. I should have been afraid.

I was.

But I was also... burning.

My cheeks flushed. My pulse roared in my ears. I hated it—hated that my body responded to him, hated that I didn't recoil like I had with Jarrik. This one... I wanted to touch. Wanted to feel his skin on mine, his hand fisted in my hair, his cock thrusting deep as I begged for more.

No. No, no, no.

I yanked my hood low over my brow and turned, forced myself to walk fast, nearly running as I pushed into the crowd, determined to disappear.

My thoughts were a whirlwind of denial and confusion, my chest tight, breath uneven. I didn't want a death mage. I didn't want a husband. I wanted to be free.

I ran, arms and legs pumping, heart pounding. But I knew it was too late. Something inside me had awakened, something dark and needy. Long forgotten. That part of me had looked into the eyes of a stranger—and seen itself reflected back.

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~ Devin Grimm, Death Mage, Revenant Protector of the Realm, The Cursed One ~

The capital stank of rosewater and desperation.

Even under the warded hood of my cloak, I could feel it—magic clinging to the air like wet silk, heavy with enchantment and expectation. The capital had thrown open its gates for a royal wedding and a tournament, two events I couldn't care less about, save that they gave me the only opportunity I had left.

I needed an audience with the Shadow Fae's High Enchantress—Lady Myrienna, the fae-blooded sorceress who served as both seer and spellcaster to the royal line of Abrakearth, my home. She was said to be as old as the mountains, as powerful as the Veil itself, and more merciless than either. She was my last hope.

And she had denied me an audience in my own capital city, the fortified seaport less than a day's sail from The Spire. Denied one of her own citizens. A death mage who had sacrificed his entire life in service to our people.

Denied me twice .

"She'll see me now," I said quietly, voice muffled beneath the hood. "Even if I have to tear down the gilded walls of this city stone by stone."

Beside me, Prince Kassio Polaris—heir to the Dark Spire and my closest friend for longer than either of us cared to count—sighed like a long-suffering saint. His

shadow magic flared briefly beneath his illusion, sending a shimmer across the glamour that masked his silver sigils and the infernal crown inked into his skin.

“Must we do this now?” he asked. “I was rather enjoying not being hunted for once.”

“You gave me your word,” I said flatly.

Kassio’s smile vanished. “I did.”

He didn’t need to say the rest. We’d already spoken the vow in blood and magic. If I slipped beyond the threshold—if the curse that rotted my soul from the inside devoured what was left of my will—he would end me.

Quickly. Cleanly. Before I became a monster.

The line between Revenant and Wraith was razor thin. I’d been walking it for years. Now I could feel the edges of my soul fraying. Every breath ached. Every spellcasting left me hollow. And the hunger... gods, the hunger in my bones had begun to whisper. I was ravenous for more. More power. More magic. More souls. Soon I wouldn’t be able to silence that hunger.

I didn’t want to die. But I refused to become one of them .

A Wraith. The horror of horrors. A soul-stealing, parasitic evil that never stopped hunting. Killing. Devouring everything in its path. More ghost than man. I needed Lady Myrienna’s shadow magic to bind the darkness within me.

She’d refused to see me, but she was in this city. Somewhere. Her powerful shadow magic, calling me like a few drops of blood in water, could summon the deadliest sharks.

Kassio and I crept through the shadows beneath the arching bridge that led to the inner keep. Once through, we used the shadows to walk up the wall to the roof of the guard house, keeping the celebratory music and laughter, the wild dancing in the courtyard below, just out of sight. Reflections of firelight danced across colored glass in the capital city's windows. Silhouettes twirled. Banners fluttered. The river we had just crossed bubbled and pulsed through the city like life's blood.

Life danced with joy all around us, every note of song, every tinkle of fae laughter, made my body burn with hunger. I had to find Lady Myrienna. Being in the capital, surrounded by so much magic, had made my condition worse. I doubted I would last the night.

I pressed my hand to the stone wall, feeling the ancient ley-lines thrumming beneath the city. Singing next to them, humming from every dark corner, every flickering shadow? Ancient magic. Dark magic. "She's there. In the tower above the Queen's Hall. I can feel her magic."

"And how, exactly, do you intend to climb a wall covered in royal protection sigils and thorny fae wards?" Kassio asked, arching one elegant brow. "Turn into smoke and pray you don't get caught in a wind ward?"

"If I must." If I shifted to smoke and shadow, wild fae magic, wind magic, could tear me to pieces and scatter my remains across the city.

"You are mad," he said with fondness. Then, quieter, "You are also running out of time."

I knew that better than anyone.

And yet... I paused.

A whisper tickled my mind, silken and strange. Not the hunger. Not the ache. Something else. A pull.

I straightened.

“What is it?” Kassio asked, drawing his black daggers.

I didn’t answer. My gaze swept the outer courtyard below, past the golden light and chaos of celebration, past the laughing dancers and drunk fools, until?—

There.

She moved like a shadow. Hood drawn low, cloak brushing against the curve of her calves. A slip of a girl, ordinary in the way a lightning bolt might seem ordinary until it struck the earth. Her body glowed with magic; a bright arc of power surrounded her that I doubted many could see. Not wild magic like the fae. Not vampiric or shifter. Not the magic of death and shadows.

Unique. Cold, like glittering diamonds. My breath caught and my cock went rock hard.

I couldn’t see her face. Not clearly. But my magic—my soul—recognized her.

The spark hit like a thunderclap, violent and sudden. A jolt of heat, followed by the deep, aching echo of something ancient. Something lost. I wanted her, when I’d desired nothing for decades. I needed to touch her. Know her. Let her magic devour me.

She looked up.

Our eyes met.

And the world stopped.

Silver and flame. Her gaze struck me like a blade to the chest. Not just beauty—not just attraction. This was claiming. This was bonding. The threads of fate lashed tight around my soul and refused to let go.

A Death Mage does not feel warmth. We are not granted light. We exist in shadow, in silence, in the still places between one breath and the next.

But in that moment, I felt everything.

I felt alive.

The hunger that gnawed at my soul surged, not with pain, but with longing. Mine , the curse whispered. She is mine.

And she was running away.

I moved before I could think. Stepped forward to follow her?—

Kassio grabbed my arm.

“What is it?” he hissed. “What do you see?”

“Her.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.” I tore my gaze from the shadows where she vanished, heart pounding hard enough to crack bone. “But she is the key.”

Kassio looked between me and the crowd, something tightening in his expression.
“Devin?—”

“I felt it. Saw her magic. You did not?”

“No. I felt you. Your magic just spiked. So did your pulse.”

“She’s mine.” The farther she moved from me, the more I struggled to speak. To be rational. To explain. How could I tell my friend what she was happening when I did not understand myself?

Kassio’s jaw clenched. “We came here for the fae sorceress. We came here to save your soul, not chase some stranger because she made your cock hard?—”

“No,” I snapped. “I can’t explain. I must find her.”

I didn’t wait for permission from my prince. I strode down the ramparts and into the flood of celebration. The moment I crossed the boundary into the light, the people around me shrank back instinctively—no one saw me for what I was, not truly, but they felt it. The presence of Death clinging to my aura like frost.

She had disappeared.

But I could still feel her.

The bond had awakened. Her magic called to mine like a song, and I would follow it. Through fire. Through war. Through The Veil itself.

“She’s the answer,” I muttered.

“To what?” To my surprise, Kassio walked beside me. I’d been so preoccupied, I had

failed to notice when he followed me. Dangerous, this level of distraction. Especially with the number of vampires in the city. They either worshipped or hated my kind, and some weren't shy about killing one of us if the chance presented itself.

"To all of it. The curse. The hunger. The breaking of the Revenant bond."

Kassio caught up beside me, moving like liquid shadow. "You think a girl?"

"She's not just a girl. Her magic is cold. It glitters like diamonds."

Kassio went still. "That's impossible." We both knew what I implied. The Starborn clans were dead and gone, hunted to extinction more than fifty years ago.

We paused near a fountain, hidden in a spray of light and sound. I turned slowly, closing my eyes, letting the bond between us pull tight again.

"I'm going after her," I said.

"And the High Sorceress? We traveled all this way."

I opened my eyes. "Lady Myrienna is irrelevant now. I either find the girl, or you keep your promise to me."

Kassio didn't speak. He didn't need to. He knew me. He knew what it meant when my voice went quiet, when my resolve turned to stone.

I would have her.

I would find her, bind her, drag her back to The Tower if I had to. Because if I didn't, Kassio would have to kill me. Within a few days, I would fall. I would become the very thing I had sworn to destroy.

“I’ll watch your back,” Kassio said finally. “But if you’re wrong...”

“I’m not.”

He offered a rare smile. “Then may The Void have mercy, because you won’t.”

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~ Devin ~

The girl was a phantom.

I followed the pulse of her magic through the city's veins like a dying man chasing the scent of water. Her presence burned in the ley lines—barely there, a shimmer of starlight against my shadow—but I could feel her

Starborn.

Every Death Mage in The Spire would kill to get their hands on her. Some would do worse.

But she was mine.

It should not have taken me this long to find her. I moved through the alleys of the capital like a storm—quiet, fast, lethal. I passed through illusion wards and mirror-glamours without hesitation. But the farther I followed the trail, the more resistance I felt.

Someone was masking her.

Someone with power.

By the time I reached the grim stone building squatting like a prison at the edge of the

river quarter, the stars had shifted, and several moons hung high. All the lights were out. The city had gone quiet. But I didn't need sunlight to see. The darkness welcomed me like a lover.

This was the place. Her essence was everywhere.

I stepped onto the cracked stoop, raised my hand, and pounded on the door hard enough to rattle the hinges.

Once. Twice.

A third time—and the rusted lock snapped open from within.

The door creaked open a sliver. A sliver was all I needed.

A woman peered out at me with sharp eyes sunken deep into folds of skin. She wore a threadbare shawl and the scent of vinegar. Her mouth opened to curse me—or question me—but the words caught in her throat when her gaze locked onto the sigil woven into my cloak. The Spire.

The old woman shuddered before meeting my gaze. “What do you want, Death Mage? The hour is late.”

“Let me in,” I said, voice low, controlled. Barely. The woman I sought hid within these walls. Her presence made my pulse race, by lungs burn. My cock harden and ache.

She hesitated, then opened the door wider and stepped back, wringing her hands. “We're closed. The girls are asleep?—”

“Not all of them.”

I moved past her like a shadow with purpose, ignoring the stench of mold and ancient dust. The interior was even worse than the outside—cold stone walls, rotted wooden beams, the distant creak of something large and broken. The sounds of rats rustling under the floorboards. I didn't care.

The moment I passed the threshold, I staggered.

She was gone. The absence of her was like a physical punch to my gut, as if a fire had been there and gone, leaving only the scorch behind.

I followed the trace of starfire magic up the narrow stairs, into a hallway lined with heavy wooden doors. Her magic clung to the walls like perfume. Faint. Fragile.

I stopped before one of the doors.

This room was hers.

I pressed my palm against the wood and felt it pulse faintly beneath my skin—like her soul had touched it once, long enough to mark it. My chest ached. My breath came unevenly.

I pushed the door open.

The room was empty.

The bed was cold.

The scent of her—lavender, ink, and warmth—faded like mist. Her things were gone. Every instinct inside me roared.

Too late.

Too. Damn. Late.

I turned on the woman who hovered in the hallway, blinking like an owl.

“Where is she?” I asked. No longer gentle.

Her mouth opened and closed. “I—I don’t?—”

“Her name. Give it to me.”

“Cleo,” she whispered, taking a step back. “Cleo Rathmore.”

Rathmore. A human surname, common in the outer provinces. A false name. No Starborn mage would carry such a name, nor bestow it upon a child. Unless they were in hiding. “How old is she?”

“This is her twentieth summer.”

Void be damned, she was old enough to be mine. A full-grown woman. “And where is she now?”

“I told you, she’s not here?—”

I closed the distance between us in a blink. “Do not lie to me.”

Her knees buckled, and she braced herself on the railing.

“She... she ran,” she said, voice shaking. “Tried to, anyway. Took her things and slipped out just before dusk. But... but someone came for her.”

Ice flooded my veins. “Who?”

She shook her head.

“Tell me.”

“One of yours.” She swallowed hard. “One of your kind. A Death Mage. Lord Morren. Jarrik Morren.”

My vision went white.

Jarrik? He was formidable. Powerful. Connected. A Death Mage who would want her power for himself whether she felt the bond with him or not.

One of mine. No. Jarrik was nothing like me. Had he felt her presence, as I had? Felt the pull of her magic? Decided to claim her as his own? Use her to take the throne? Use her power to gather favors, gain influence?

“And you just gave her to him?” I snarled.

“He had papers!” the woman squeaked. “He said he was her betrothed. The match was arranged! Signed and sealed with the Matron’s mark!”

A low, terrible growl built in my chest, and the lantern lights flickered. If he touched her, I would kill him.

“If he’s taken her,” I said, more to myself than her. “He knows what she is.”

That was the only reason. The girl—Cleo—wasn’t just a trinket or a trophy. If he’d gone to this much effort to secure her, it was because he knew.

He knew she was Starborn, wanted to solidify his hold on the royal court with her power, her influence, a magic not seen in all the realms of Lunaterra for decades. A

fire feared for centuries before that.

My hands clenched into fists.

But the bond with Cleo Rathmore was mine. I had felt it. If legend was true, she would not feel the same connection to Jarrik or any other soulless bastard The Spire had spawned. She was mine. And she had looked at me like she felt the bond, too.

No wonder she ran. What woman would want a cursed soul like mine?

“She doesn’t belong to him,” I said softly.

“Please,” the woman begged. “I don’t know anything else. She went with him. He said it was time. She didn’t even argue.”

I froze.

“She didn’t argue?”

She shook her head. “Packed her things and left. Quiet as a ghost.”

No. That didn’t sound right. The girl I saw in the square—the girl who looked at me like fire catching dry wood—she didn’t seem the type to go quietly.

Unless he cast a spell on her.

Unless he bound her.

Unless she was already in danger.

I turned on my heel.

Kassio waited at the bottom of the stairs, arms folded, his expression unreadable.

“You heard?” Of course he had. The shadows carried information, and this time of night, shadows were everywhere.

He nodded. “I’ll talk to my spies. There are many from The Spire in the city right now—it won’t take long to discover where they are headed.”

“I’m not waiting.”

“You shouldn’t go alone.”

“She’s mine, Kassio.”

He nodded once, without argument. “Find her. Before the bond drives you mad.”

Too late.

By the time I stepped out into the street again, the evening’s first moon had dipped low behind the rooftops and the wind had changed.

I closed my eyes and let the bond guide me.

It pulled like a thread caught in my chest, twisting, winding, frayed. She wasn’t far. But the magic I had once felt so clearly was now muddy. Blurred.

He was hiding her with a binding spell.

Damn him. He was masking her from me. Layering veil upon veil, trying to cut the bond’s voice from my soul.

It wouldn't work.

I could still feel the tug. Like a heartbeat out of rhythm, like a name I couldn't forget. She was ahead of me. Somewhere in the woods beyond the city, or already on the road to The Spire, or— naked. Seduced. Claimed by another.

No.

I wouldn't let that happen.

I would find her.

I would take her from my brethren.

And if I had to burn the world to ash to claim what was mine... so be it.

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~ C leo ~

The rope bit into my wrists with every sway of the horse, a constant reminder that I'd gone from a girl with foolish dreams of freedom to a prisoner riding through the gods-damned woods in the dead of night.

I sat stiff-backed on a thick black stallion that reeked of oil and smoke, my hands tied in front of me, barely able to balance. The saddle was hard. The wind cut like a knife through my cloak. And the man behind me said nothing .

Not since we left the city hours ago. Not since he cornered me in the alley behind the orphanage, said a few words I couldn't understand, and wrapped my mind in darkness.

That was the worst part.

The silence in my head.

Every time I tried to think clearly, to scream, to fight —a creeping shadow slithered across my thoughts and smothered them. It wasn't sleep. It wasn't exhaustion. It was magic, heavy and oily and unnatural, slinking through my soul like fog, softening everything it touched.

But something inside me... resisted.

A spark.

Small. Defiant.

It flared whenever the magic pressed too hard. Not enough to banish the darkness, but enough to keep me awake. Awake enough to know I was being led through cursed woods toward an unknown fate by a man I didn't know, didn't trust, and didn't want.

Not even a little.

"So," I said, forcing my voice to stay light as the horse jostled beneath me. "Do you always kidnap your brides, or is that just part of the whole Death Mage charm?"

He didn't answer.

I turned my head slightly, catching a glimpse of his profile beneath the moonlight. Jarrik Morren. Tall. Handsome in a cold, vulture sort of way. Like marble carved into something pretty but dead.

His eyes were like obsidian chips, polished and soulless. His expression hadn't changed once since we left the city—except for when I first tried to leap off the horse and run. Then, he'd murmured another spell, and the shadow had wrapped tighter around my thoughts like a noose.

Still, the spark burned.

"I'm serious," I said, pressing. "Where are we going?"

"To the foothills of the Hollowspine Mountains," he said at last, voice like cracking ice. "We'll reach the outpost by dawn."

“And then?”

“Then you’ll be mine.”

I choked on my own breath. “Excuse me?”

“Our bond will be sealed. You are my betrothed.”

“No, I’m not .” I turned fully to glare at him. “I never agreed to this. You showed up with your scary spells and your blank face and your spooky coat and just took me. You’re not my fiancé. You’re a kidnapper with a god complex.”

“You were promised,” he said, utterly unfazed. “Your Matron signed the pact. The bond is recognized by The Spire.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what The Spire recognizes. I didn’t say yes.”

He looked at me then. Really looked. And something flickered behind those black eyes.

“You don’t need to say yes,” he said.

I turned away before I said something truly foolish. Like how badly I wanted to burn him.

The trees thinned as we reached a clearing. The moon spilled silver over a patch of moss and rock, and Jarrik dismounted with a whisper of movement, graceful as a snake.

He pulled me down none-too-gently and walked me to a flat stone, where he lit a small fire with a flick of his fingers. No tinder. No sparkstone. Just magic—cold and

eerie, blue-tinged flames licking hungrily at the air.

I sat because I didn't have a choice.

He said nothing as he took out dried meat and handed me a strip. I didn't take it.

"You said I'm your betrothed," I said instead. "But I've never heard of you. Why me?"

He didn't answer right away. The flames made his face look more skull than man.

"I need you," he said finally. "There is a shadow rising from the Veil. The Tower is not as stable as it once was. A double eclipse is coming, and the old seals are cracking. Without the Starbound, we will not be able to hold it."

My pulse stopped.

"You think I'm Starbound?"

"You are. Your blood sings with it. My magic recognized you instantly."

"Then why not tell me the truth back at the orphanage?"

"You would not have come willingly."

"You're damn right I wouldn't."

He offered no apology. No justification.

"I won't hurt you," he said instead. "I need your power, not your suffering."

That didn't comfort me.

I stared into the blue flames, trying not to shiver. The night smelled of smoke and damp pine, cold earth and the faintest tang of sulfur from his spells. The meat he offered smelled dry and bitter, like old leather and dust. I turned my face away.

And I thought of him.

The other one. The mage with the blue hair and eyes like silver lightning.

The one who had looked at me like I was fire and salvation.

Why couldn't I stop thinking about him ?

If he had been the one to take me— would I have run?

The thought made my stomach twist.

Void take me, what was wrong with me?

“Your parents,” Jarrik said suddenly. “What do you know of them?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I was abandoned as a baby on the orphanage steps.”

“No name? No trinket?”

“Just a blanket with stars stitched into it. That's it.”

He nodded once, as if that confirmed something. “The mark of the Starborn.”

I curled my hands into fists, the rope biting into my skin. “I want to leave.”

“You cannot.”

“Then at least untie me.”

He stood. “No.”

My temper snapped. “You’ve taken everything from me—my freedom, my plans, my mind! And you won’t even let me sit without feeling like a prisoner?!”

He reached for me. “Calm yourself. I told you, I won’t harm?—”

The moment his hand touched mine, something ignited .

A spark. A pulse of gold and white fire, so hot it burned through the shadow like a comet through a storm cloud.

Jarrik cried out and jerked back, his hand smoking.

He stared at me in stunned disbelief. Then he snarled and reached for the blade at his belt.

“Enough of this.”

A wicked-looking dagger glinted in the firelight, etched with runes that slithered across the steel like living things.

I backed away. “What are you?—”

“You’re not bonded yet. Your power is resisting. I’ll break it.”

“No—stop?—”

Magic coiled in the air like a thunderstorm about to break.

And then?—

The forest exploded.

Darkness surged. Not like Jarrick's, cold and calculating. This was wild . Raw. Pure fury.

The campfire went out with a hiss.

Wind slammed into the clearing, scattering sparks. The horse screamed and bolted.

And a voice—that voice—growled from the shadows.

“Step away from her.”

My heart stopped.

He emerged like death made flesh—tall, cloaked in midnight, blue hair whipping in the wind, eyes glowing silver with a rage so pure it felt holy.

The mage from the city.

He'd found me.

I didn't know whether to cry in relief—or run like hell.

Jarrick grabbed me by the wrist and yanked me to my feet, dragging me backward. “Devin, she's mine. My betrothed. Leave us or escort us back to The Spire.”

Flashing silver eyes met mine. Held. Devin—that was the other mage’s name—tilted his head like a curious cat. “You know what she is?”

Jarrick’s finger’s tightened until I feared my bones would break. I tried to pull free. Failed. Twisted my arm. Kicked Jarrick’s legs. He didn’t even turn, his complete attention on the Death Mage who had obviously tracked us to this place. Had Jarrick known we were being followed? Was that why he’d been in such a hurry, not stopping for what felt like two days? “Let me go!”

Both mages ignored me and my words. Jarrick’s calm was fading. Power, no magic, was building up under his skin, pulsing in his veins. Somehow, I could feel it. He was going to attack Devin. Drag me back to The Spire with him. Force me to marry him. His next words confirmed it. “I have a signed betrothal contract from the Matron. The Knight Eternal will honor it. She’s mine. I found her first.”

“So, you do know what she is.”

What the Void was he talking about?

Jarrick shrugged and took another step back, toward our horse. Yanked me along like I was baggage. “I know she’s going to be my bride.”

I tugged, kicked, twisted. “No. I told you no. I’m not marrying anyone.” My eyes burned with frustrated, rage-fueled tears. I might as well have been yelling at two stone mountains.

“Let. Her. Go.” Devin’s cold words were accompanied by raised hands. He held his arms up, palms facing one another. Between them? Violet-blue flame twisted and burned in mid-air. “I’ll give you one more chance, Jarrick. She’s mine. We share the bond.”

Jarrick shook his head. “No. Liar.”

“Ask her,” Devin insisted.

What bond was he talking about? Even as the question entered my mind, I knew. The twisting in my gut when our eyes met, the way my body responded to him. The way I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about him since the moment I saw him. There was something between us, something dark and twisted and needy. Something terrifying and hungry. Something that wanted to take my freedom from me and give it to a Death Mage. “No.”

Jarrick’s shoulders seemed to slump in relief. “There. She denied it herself.” He shoved me back again and I tripped, would have fallen, but the vice-like grip he had on my wrist held. I felt the bone snap. I cried out as pain exploded under his grip.

I stopped thinking. My mind just shut down, filled with pain as the second bone snapped. I fell to my knees, the agony twisting into something cold as ice in my body. Was I going into shock? I didn’t know. All I knew was I wanted him to let me go.

Devin unleashed his violet flame, a ball the size of Jarrick’s head flew toward his chest. He twisted to the side, dodging the attack. Rather than release me to fight, his grip tightened further until it felt as if he was going to squeeze my hand off, separate it from the rest of me. The icy burn I’d been feeling intensified and Jarrick cursed, dropping my wrist as his hand and the sleeve of his fancy coat burst into white flame.

Devin took advantage, sending a burst of violet fire that lifted Jarrick from the ground and blew him halfway across the small clearing. To my shock, Jarrick landed on his feet, returning fire as I crawled away from both of them, cradling my injured wrist to my chest. I curled into a ball and tried to make myself small as the entire forest exploded with violet and blue fire, covered my ears when Jarrick began to scream...

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:41 am

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~ D evin ~

I woke to warmth.

Not the false warmth of spellfire or the suffocating heat of a fever dream—but the real kind. The kind that crept in quietly, curling around my skin and seeping into my bones. The kind I hadn't felt in... decades.

Maybe longer.

I blinked, the morning light slicing through the thin veil of sleep like a blade through silk. The forest stirred around us, hushed and golden. Birdsong. The crackle of a fire. The distant hush of water over stones.

And the smell of food .

I sat up too fast, dizziness sweeping through me like a wave. My entire body ached, hollow and slow, and I realized with grim clarity just how much power I'd used the night before.

More than I'd meant to. More than I could afford.

I'd burned deep, past the safe lines. Past the edges, where most Death Mages dare not tread. I must have passed out cold. Defenseless.

And yet...

She hadn't left me.

Cleo knelt near the fire, her back to me, tending a flat stone where eggs sizzled beside sliced riverroot and fragrant green herbs. Her hair was damp, dark and curling slightly where it touched her shoulders. She'd bathed. Cleaned the grime of the forest and her captivity from her skin. She looked... fresh. Radiant.

Alive.

More beautiful than she had any right to be.

She turned slightly, just enough to see I was awake. "Finally," she said, tone wry. "I thought maybe you were dead." She poked at the fire, shaking her head. "You weren't breathing. But you were glowing, so I decided to wait to burn your body."

"I appreciate your restraint." A chuckle bubbled through me. Amusement. Another emotion I hadn't felt in so long I'd nearly forgotten the sensation. When she ignored me, I forced myself to sit straighter. "You stayed."

"I have questions." She poked at the eggs. "Also, I have no gear, no coin, no map. Not a lot of options."

"You could've run."

"I thought about it," she admitted. "But I figured the odds were good Jarrik might come back to finish what he started. Didn't seem right to leave you helpless if that happened."

I stared at her. Not because she was wrong. But because no one —not in over two

hundred years—had given a damn whether I lived or died. Not really. I was just one more Death Mage whose soul was tied to the void. But there were dozens of us. If I died, another would take my place. The wheel of the world would continue to turn, with or without me in it.

For some unknown reason, she had protected me. Cared for me. Not out of fear. Not because of a soul contract or alliance. Did she feel this pull between us, as I did? Was her body painfully aware of my every breath, the scent of my skin, the way I moved? Was she on fire for me as I was for her? A few hours ago, I'd been in the healing sleep of my kind, my magic taking over, forcing me to lose consciousness, to remain still, to mend physically and spiritually. In that state, I could not protect myself. I could not protect her.

“Staying with me was reckless,” I said, voice lower than I meant. “Lighting a fire. You could have been attacked. There are worse things in these woods than Jarrick.”

“Maybe,” she said, glancing back at me. “But staying felt like the right thing. I couldn't leave you like that.”

I'd lost consciousness. Burned out and collapsed from my battle with Jarrick. He was a pompous ass, but he was also powerful. Something twisted in my chest. A foreign sensation. Soft. Dangerous.

I watched her quietly as she plated the food on a large, curled leaf and set it beside me. She sat across the fire, legs folded neatly beneath her, keeping her distance.

Smart. Especially if she knew the hunger that raged in me to touch her. Kiss her. Claim her. Shove my cock deep and make her scream my name. She was mine. I adjusted the hard, uncomfortable length in my breeches and picked up the food, studied it for a moment. “You foraged for this?”

She shrugged. “There were nests by the water. The eggs were still warm. The root’s sweet when you cook it right.”

“I didn’t know you could recognize the edible plants. Strange for someone raised in the city.”

Her smile didn’t reach her eyes. “People always underestimate me. You learn things when you’re raised in a place where you go to bed hungry more often than not.”

The thought of her suffering at the orphanage made me want to pull my dagger and go back to the capital, slit the throats of anyone who’d ever hurt her. Instead, I took a bite. My body all but groaned in response. I’d forgotten the taste of real food. Earthy. Slightly sweet. Savory from the herbs she’d crushed over it.

“I’m surprised you didn’t put poison in it,” I murmured.

“I considered it.”

That made me smile. Just a little.

Her gaze lifted. And for a moment, we just looked at each other.

Something passed between us. Wordless. Old. Familiar in a way that made no sense.

“You bathed,” I said finally, my voice rougher than I wanted as my gaze lingered on the thin wet fabric that clung to the curve of her breasts. Her hair was still wet, a random drop of water traveled the length of her cheek, down her neck, to disappear in the feminine clothing I longed to peel from her body.

She dropped her gaze, her attention darting to my lips before sliding away. “There was a pool near the stream. The water is cold, if you’re interested.”

I took a deep breathe, drew her scent into my body. “You smell like wild mint and moonlight.”

“Now you sound like a werewolf.” Her brows rose. “Are you trying to be poetic?”

“I simply speak the truth.” I had no idea how the shifter clans survived the pull of their mates. I was a mage, not part beast, and yet her scent lingered in the air between us, a constant tease to my sex starved body. I hadn’t touched a female in decades. Had no interest. No desire.

Until her.

Silence stretched like thin ice between us. I watched her throat work as she swallowed. Her tongue flashed in invitation as she hastily licked her lips. I bit back a groan but could not stop myself from leaning forward. Closer.

“Why are you here? Why did you follow me?”

“You know why.” I held her gaze and hid nothing of my desire. She was young. Innocent. If she knew what I wanted to do to her, she’d run, screaming, from our small camp. Instead, she cleared her throat and leaned back, away from me.

“Tell me everything you know about the Starborn.”

It wasn’t a question. More like a challenge. Like she dared me to confirm something she didn’t want to believe. “What did Jarrik tell you?”

“Not much. He claimed I am of the bloodline.”

Devin’s scowl made me squirm. “Everyone believes they’re just a myth. A bedtime story. Chosen people of the goddess of light. Gifted with magic in their veins. Stars in

their bones. Magic connected not to one of our moons, but to the light of our stars. Our suns.”

Cleo was shaking her head. “They can’t be real. Every story I’ve ever heard about them made them sound too good to be true.” She picked up a small pebble and tossed it into the fire, a frown on her face. “Which I definitely am not. There is nothing special about me.”

“I believed the old bloodlines were gone,” I said. “Until I saw you.”

She went still. “When?”

“You know. In the capital.” I set my food down and moved forward to kneel in front of her, my voice lower now, the weight of memory heavy behind my words as our eyes met and held. She was close enough to kiss. All I had to do was shift my weight and lean in. “Tell me what you felt.”

She shook her head. “No. I felt nothing.”

“Liar.” I reached out, moving slowly, and took her hand in my own. “There hasn’t been a new Starborn recognized on Lunaterra for many years,” I continued. “And the last time one was mated to a Death Mage was centuries ago.”

“Why does that matter?” She stared at our joined hands, and I knew she felt what I did. Heat. Connection. Purpose. We were meant to be together, her magic and mine. Her soul and mine. I was darkness and she was light.

“Because the Veil is thinning. There are cracks in the Rift. The runes are fading.”

She gasped; her horrified gaze lifted to mine. “That’s not possible. The Death Mages, the Necromancers, even the vampires give their blood to fuel the runes. It’s known all

through the kingdoms.”

“There are rifts forming—small ones, for now, but growing. Dark magic leaks into our world. Shadows cross. Wraithborn pass through unchecked. The Tower won’t be able to hold the Rift much longer without reinforcement. Without you.”

“Why?” she asked softly.

“Because the old bloodlines kept the Veil intact. Starborn magic isn’t like ours. It’s not death. It’s balance. Light.”

She frowned. “But if that’s true... why did all the Starborn disappear?”

“They were hunted.”

Her lips parted slightly. “Hunted?” She tried to pull her hand free, but I tightened my grip around trembling fingers.

“There was a war,” I said. “Long ago. Before your time. A cult—led by a woman who serves the darkness beyond the Veil—learned the Starborn were key to keeping the breach sealed. So, she sent assassins. For generations, they hunted the bloodline, wiped your kind from the realms.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Yes. And effective.”

I let the fire crackle for a moment.

“They were nearly all gone when I was born. Only a handful remained, hidden in the remote realms. But none strong enough to bond. None willing.”

“And you think I’m... one of them.”

“I know you are.”

“You can’t. It’s a story. A myth. ”

“You burned Jarrik. You healed the snapped bones in your wrist.”

She stilled. “I thought you healed me.”

“Healing is not one of my gifts. I am not the wild Fae. I deal with death and shadows, not healing.” I took the opportunity to cradle her delicate wrist in my much larger hand. She was so small. Delicate. If I hadn’t felt it myself, I would not have believed one who appeared to be so fragile held so much power.

“I’m not...I don’t have magic.”

“That wasn’t a fluke,” I said. “It wasn’t rage. It was your power, protecting you. The same way it burned through his sleeping spell. Are you trying to deny it?”

“I don’t want it,” she whispered. “I don’t want any of this. I didn’t ask to be powerful or rare or important. I just wanted to get out of the orphanage, out of the city.” Her voice cracked. “Just wanted to be free.”

“I will teach you to use your magic. You’ll be powerful, Cleo. Rich. You’ll never go to bed hungry again, I swear it.”

She was shaking her head in denial. “I didn’t ask to belong to some... terrifying Death Mage who thinks he’s entitled to my soul.”

I said nothing. Her soul, her heart, her body. All mine. I would not deny it.

Her eyes lifted, defiant even through the shimmer of unshed tears. “I would rather belong to a bloodthirsty vampire. A flea-infested werewolf. Even a Void-damned swamp Orc. Anything but one of you.”

My jaw clenched.

That stung. More than I wanted to admit.

The shadows inside me stirred. Hungry. Cold. But I held them back.

I stood slowly and pulled her to her feet before me. “Neither of us has a choice.”

Her brows knit. “I don’t believe that.”

“You will.” I kissed her. Not gentle. Not soft. But real. The moment our lips met, the world ignited.

I slid my hands into her hair. Her breath caught.

Magic burst between us, wild and uncontrollable—like fire leaping onto dry tinder, searing hot and white-gold at the edges.

She gasped, but didn’t pull away. Her body pressed into mine, and I felt every curve and hollow. Her fear. Her desire. Rebellion. Denial. Underneath it all—recognition.

This wasn’t a spell. This wasn’t a curse. It was fate.

Her hands curled in my cloak. My fingers tightened in her hair. I wanted to devour her. Bury myself in her warmth and light. Sear her soul into mine so deeply nothing—not even the Veil—could tear us apart.

But she pulled back. Breathing hard. Eyes wide. Pulse fluttering at the base of her neck.

“I don’t want this,” she whispered. “I don’t want to marry a Death Mage.”

“I know. But I can’t let you go.” I traced her bottom lip with my thumb and fought for control. “If I did, Jarrick, or another, would find you and try to claim you. Once word of your existence surfaces, assassins will rise like shadows to hunt you. I will protect you. You need me as much as I need you.”

She shoved me, hard enough to put space between us. But she didn’t run. She didn’t run.

And for the first time in centuries, I let myself hope .

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:41 am

6

~ C leo ~

I should have slapped him.

I should have shoved him harder, cursed his name, turned and run straight into the trees, screaming at the top of my lungs that a Death Mage—a Death Mage —had just kissed me like he owned my soul. Worse? I kissed him back.

I didn't run. I stood there. Heart racing. Lips tingling. Skin burning. And I watched him walk away.

The shadows melted around him like they knew him, like they followed because they didn't dare do otherwise. He moved like a storm given flesh—silent and seething and strangely beautiful.

And gods help me, I wanted him to come back. Touch me. Kiss me again. Make me forget my name, my past. Everything. When he touched me, everything else disappeared.

I pressed my fingertips to my lips, still raw from the pressure of his mouth. I could still feel him— all of him. The heat, the need, the hunger. It hadn't been gentle. It hadn't been sweet. It had been a promise and a challenge and a brand all in one.

I wanted more.

What was wrong with me?

Death Mages were the scourge of Lunaterra. Everyone knew that. They were the villains in every bedtime story. The cursed knights who made pacts with the demons on the other side of the Veil. The darkest of monsters. The horrors that mothers used to threaten misbehaving children. They were cruel, cold, unnatural. Heartless. Walking darkness.

And yet... when I said I'd rather marry an Orc, I'd seen something flicker in his eyes. Not rage. Not offense. Hurt.

Was that why I let him kiss me? Or was it because, deep down, I wanted that kiss? Wanted more than a gods damned kiss. I'd had a few half-hearted romances with local boys. Nothing serious. Nothing that lasted more than a few weeks. None of their clumsy, fumbling attempts to touch me made me burn. Made me want. Every cell in my body felt like it was on fire. For him.

Was he coming back? Of course. He must. If what he said was true, he didn't have a choice any more than it appeared I did. Assassins hunting me? Every Death Mage and Necromancer I ever encountered would try to claim me. Control me. Use me.

The idea fueled a boiling rage in my veins. Wild and hot.

Rage? Or need? Not for any random dark magician I might meet in an imaginary future. For him.

I shook myself and turned back to the camp. The fire had died to embers, but the pan still held warmth. I cleaned up in silence, folding the remains of our breakfast into a cloth bundle and tossing the scraps far enough into the forest to keep animals away from camp.

My fingers trembled. Not from fear. From something else.

Awakening.

There was heat in my chest now. A coil of fire beneath my ribs that pulsed in time with my heartbeat. It wasn't painful— not exactly—but it made me restless. Uncomfortable in my own skin. Like something had shifted inside me, and now I didn't quite fit inside my own body anymore.

Was I truly Starborn?

He'd called me that with such certainty. Like it was carved into my bones.

I'd scoffed at the idea. The Starborn were a myth, the stuff of legends told by candlelight. Children of starlight and fire, blessed by the goddess of light to protect Lunaterra from the creeping dark beyond the Veil.

They'd all died long ago. Become little more than a fairy tale in a world filled with wondrous and magical creatures. I was raised human. I had no power, no gifts. I'd been told the old stories many times about how humanity had stepped through the Void, chased from our home world, a place called Earth, by the very monsters The Spire was built to cage. We still needed the Death Mages and all the other dark magic users to seal the Rift, keep those monsters away from life in Lunaterra. Until today, there had been literally nothing different or special about me.

And yet... when Jarrik had hurt me, I'd burned his skin. Not with rage. Not with willpower. With magic. Something that should have been impossible. Devin claimed I healed myself. I'd assumed, when I woke, that he'd done it. But if Death Mages weren't healers, then...what?

Who was I? Who were my parents? Why had they left me—alone and nameless—on

the steps of an orphanage in the capital? Were they dead? Slaughtered by assassins? Or had they abandoned me, knowing what I was?

The questions were too big, too tangled. I had no answers. Just this strange fire inside me and a new obsession with a dark eyed Death Mage with hair the color of deep, blue midnight and eyes that burned into me like divine flame.

When Devin returned, he was damp and freshly dressed, his skin dewed with water and his dark cloak clinging to his shoulders. His blue hair was slicked back, the silver strands near his temples catching the light like threads of moonlight. How old did a Death Mage have to be before even a single strand of hair turned moon-kissed silver?

“How old are you?” I’d heard rumors, but I had no idea if they were true or myth.

His lips twisted in a grin. “You first.”

“I’ve seen twenty summers.”

His grin fled as his gaze locked onto my lips. I forgot to breathe. “One hundred and eighty-seven summers.”

Then the whispers were true. He was old. He was also— infuriatingly —gorgeous. And I wanted him. Worse, I believed him. About everything. Believed he would protect me or die trying. Believed him when he said we belonged together, that whatever power I had would help save the world. Believed that if I let him touch me, kiss me, fuck me, I’d know pleasure I couldn’t even imagine.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” Oh, I knew. I knew. Like I wanted him to strip me naked and make me his, burn me with magic and dark flames, kiss me everywhere...

“Not now, woman. We have to move. It’s not safe to stay here. Jarrick could return, with company.”

“I’ll just burn him again.” I meant it. I wasn’t sure how, exactly. Just knew I could.

He didn’t speak, just helped me onto the horse and mounted behind me, settling me between his legs. And that’s when the real torture began.

His body was all hard lines and restrained power. Every muscle pressed against my back. His arm wrapped around my waist, holding the reins, close enough that I could feel the steady rhythm of his breath. His scent wrapped around me—clean water, magic, and something darker. Shadow and heat. It did things to me I didn’t want to name.

“Where are we going?” I asked, my voice unsteady.

“To the port at Southreach,” he said against my ear. “We’ll take a ship to The Spire from there.”

“How long?”

“Another full day of riding.”

Gods. I would burst into flame by then.

I swallowed hard and tried to shift, but there was no escape from the firm wall of his body. I could feel every movement he made. Every twitch of muscle, every breath. My skin felt too tight. My blood too hot.

“What happens at The Spire?”

“I will present you to the Knight Eternal.”

Oh, holy hell of hells. That was their king. The oldest Death Mage. The most powerful. No one knew his real age, not outside of The Spire, anyway. Some whispered that he had absorbed so much darkness, so many demons, that he was immortal. “Why? I don’t want to meet him.”

“He will dissolve your betrothal to Jarrick and give you to me.”

“What if he doesn’t?” I was not marrying Jarrick. I didn’t care what I had to do. Run away again. Throw myself into the sea—I happened to be a very strong swimmer. Figure out how to use my magic and burn the entire Spire to the ground. I didn’t want a Death Mage to begin with. Devin? Something about him felt right. That did not mean I would accept any other Death Mage.

“He will.”

“So, we get married? Then what?” I wanted him to tell me all the wicked, naughty things he was going to do to me. His hard thighs pressed to the back of mine. His bulging cock pushed against my ass, rocking into me with every step the horse took. At this rate, I’d lose my sanity by midday. How was he able to speak as if completely unaffected? Was my ass not soft enough? My breasts not heavy enough where they rested over his forearm? Did my odor offend?

“I will take you to the heart of The Spire. Show you the Rift. It’s where the Veil is thinnest. Where the shadows press hardest. It’s also where the wards were first cast—when the last Starborn mated to a Death Mage and used sex magic to power the runes.”

I turned my head slightly, enough to catch his profile. “Sex magic?” Holy hells. My pussy clenched at what that implied. Would we actually burn with magic when he

claimed me?

He looked at me, his silver eyes unreadable.

“Yes,” he said simply. “The bond between us—if it’s real—it’s more than magic. It’s soul deep. Powerful. The bond will change both of us.”

Change me? Change him? I didn’t like that. Not even a little.

I faced forward again; arms crossed tightly over my chest. “What if I don’t want it?”

“Then we break it. If we can.”

“You’re not sure.”

“No,” he admitted. “Starborn bonds aren’t like other magic. They’re rare. Sacred. You’re the first in over five hundred years.”

We rode in silence for a while, the rhythm of the horse beneath us lulling me into a strange, restless calm. The sun was warm on my skin. The trees rustled softly above us, whispering secrets I didn’t understand as my awareness of Devin shifted from the heat of his body to the shadows

“When are you going to tell me the truth?” I asked finally.

“About Jarrik?” His voice darkened.

“No. About you.”

His grip on the reins tightened slightly. “What about me?”

“I can feel it,” I whispered. “The darkness in you.” I didn’t know how to describe what I sensed inside him. “You’re unraveling.”

He said nothing. Denied nothing. I wasn’t sure what the coiled shadows inside him meant, or where they would lead us. I didn’t know if they were new or something that always existed inside a Death Mage. I didn’t even know what to ask. The silence stretched long and thin between us. The tense muscles in his arm that he’d wrapped around my waist didn’t make the storm inside me any easier to weather. His body heat made me want to melt into him. Everything about him called to me on an elemental level I couldn’t resist or explain.

The truth was, every moment I spent with him, I was spiraling—falling into a fire I didn’t ask for. My identity, my newly awakened magic, my soul—all burning brighter and hotter because he was near. I’d vowed never to accept my betrothal to Jarrick because he was a Death Mage. So why was I suddenly unable to resist another of his kind? Nothing made sense.

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to escape... or let him consume me.

Hours passed. My hands, curled into tight fists in my lap for so long I could no longer feel my fingers, ached with the need to touch him. It was a compulsion. We’d stopped once to rest the horse, then pressed on. Since Devin didn’t want to talk about his dark magic or the shadows in his soul, we rode in silence. I wish he’d told me stories about life at The Spire, or his childhood. How to do magic. Anything.

Instead, my mind wandered to more painful topics, things I’d happily left buried years ago as I never expected to have answers.

I didn’t know my parents. Didn’t have a single memory of them, no letters, no heirlooms. Just a blanket with stitched stars, left with me on the orphanage steps like some tragic afterthought.

I'd always wondered who they were. Why they'd left. If they'd wanted me or if I'd been a cosmic accident, or worse. Had my mother been raped, with me the result? Did looking at me cause her pain? Maybe I'd been stolen from adoring parents and sold into servitude at the orphanage, my entire backstory a fiction told to keep me obedient. Every possible scenario raced through my thoughts over the years.

Now... I had new questions. Terrifying ones.

Were my parents dead because they'd been Starborn? Hunted, by assassins? Slaughtered because of the blood they carried? Was I meant to die, too? Had my parents given me away to protect me? Were they still out there somewhere, hiding?

"I don't want to belong to anyone," I whispered. "Not to you. Not to Jarrik. Not to anyone."

"I don't want to own you," he said softly. "I want to survive. I want to protect the world I swore to guard. But more than that..." His voice dipped lower, rougher. "I want you. Not because of your power. Because something inside me—something I thought was long dead—knows you. Craves you. Would die for you. We were meant to be together. Bonded. I know you feel it, too."

A shiver ran down my spine. I couldn't answer. I didn't trust my voice. I didn't believe him. No one had ever wanted me, cared about me. This was about my magic, my heritage. Not me. Didn't matter. My mind rejected the lie, but my body was already betraying me, my heart thudding too fast, my breath too shallow. And I didn't move.

I didn't want to admit how much I wanted to lean back. To rest my head against his shoulder. To feel that arm tighten around me and pretend—for just one day—that I wasn't abandoned, broken, cursed or hunted.

Just wanted.

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7

~ Devin Grimm, Seaside Inn ~

Steam-warmed skin, jasmine oil, crushed rose petals and salt. The scent was killing me. It drifted through the crack beneath the rented room's door like smoke from an old memory. Her magic pulsed beneath it, golden and sweet and growing stronger by the minute, wrapping around my senses—and my cock—with slow, deliberate seduction.

I'd bought the flowers myself when we reached the port city. Chosen them from the market with careful hands, knowing she deserved something soft after everything she'd been through—and the trials coming. Two days ago, I'd been prepared to face the fae sorceress, Lady Myrienna, even beg for my life. But I hadn't been prepared for this. For her .

Cleo was a wildfire barely contained in a mortal body, and her awakening grew stronger with every moment that passed. Her presence beat through the ether like a beacon, bright enough to draw every hungry creature for miles. We were barely holding it together during the journey. She'd set two trees ablaze without meaning to—just because I said something that upset her.

I didn't blame her. I'd had years of study to perfect my skills. Had learned hundreds of spells. She was like an open flame in a windstorm. Raw. Untamed. Out of control. I couldn't risk the world getting too close to that power. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

And Void help me, I couldn't leave her alone. Not when she might set the inn on fire.

I leaned my back against the doorframe, arms crossed, trying to keep my breathing steady as I stood guard. The smell of the stew we'd eaten for dinner drifted up the stairs, mixed with the bright, citrus scent of the innkeeper's soap used in my own bath. The hallway was silent save for the occasional footstep on the floor below, the flicker of torchlight catching motes of dust in the air... and the steady, unbearable sound of water lapping in the bath on the other side of that door.

Every now and then, I caught her voice—a hum. A sigh. The splash of water.

And still, I waited. Cock hard. Like a man cursed. Because going in there too soon would be a mistake. One I might not come back from.

I'd chosen the flowing nightgown now folded on the bed, paid the seamstress in pure silver. Soft linen, pale as moonlight, laced with silver thread and delicate enough to slide over her curves like a lover's hands. I imagined her wearing it. Imagined removing it from her as I kissed every exposed bit of soft skin.

I closed my eyes and breathed deep.

Focus. She was fire. She was magic. She was mine to protect, not possess.

When I was sure I was about to go mad—softly, with barely more than a breath—her voice came through the door. “You can come in now.”

I froze. Just for a heartbeat, long enough to make sure I was in control. Then I opened the door.

She stood near the bed, wrapped in the nightgown I'd chosen, hair still damp and clinging to her shoulders. Her feet were bare. The glow of the hearth fire painted her skin in gold. She looked like something from a dream. Untouchable. Divine. And yet so real it made my chest ache.

She didn't meet my eyes right away. "Is it really necessary? You staying in here with me?"

I shut the door behind me. Locked it. "Yes," I said simply. "It is." Not only could one flare of her magic burn the entire inn to the ground, but as her power grew, she would be hunted.

She frowned slightly.

"You started a forest fire a few hours ago." I reminded her gently. "And that was before your power really started to surge."

Her gaze dropped. "I didn't mean to."

"I know," I said, crossing to her slowly. "But until we reach The Spire, I need to keep you safe. And that includes keeping the rest of the realm safe from you."

Her lips trembled just slightly. She looked fragile in that moment, for the first time since I'd met her. But I knew better. She was forged from stronger stuff than most. She just didn't believe it yet.

I reached out and touched her chin, lifting her face toward mine. "I'm not afraid of your power," I said softly. "And I won't let anything hurt you."

Her eyes shimmered with something I couldn't name. "And what if I do?" she whispered. "I need to learn how to control it."

"I'll teach you. Until you learn, I'll protect you. Nothing will hurt you, Cleo. I give you my word."

Her gaze dropped to my mouth. She wanted me to kiss her. And I—I burned for her.

The relentless darkness within, silent. Watching. Waiting. Hungry.

I stepped closer. The air between us thickened, charged with something deeper than magic. She should step back. Retreat. Tell me to fuck off and keep my distance.

She lifted one hand and rested it against my chest. Moved closer. Tilted her head to look up at me with a level of trust I hadn't earned. She was too young. Too innocent. Too pure for a black-hearted mage like me.

"You should go to bed," I murmured.

"I'm not tired." She licked her lips and I locked my knees so I wouldn't move.

"You're playing with fire. You smell like temptation. I'm only a man."

Her lips parted. "I'm on fire, too. I need you."

I didn't wait any longer. I cupped her face in both hands, lowered my mouth to hers, and kissed her like it was the only thing keeping me alive. This kiss wasn't like the one in the woods. This one was slow. Devastating.

A caress of lips. A brush of breath. A slow press of my mouth to hers until she sighed and melted into me like she'd been waiting her whole life for this exact moment.

She wrapped her arms around my neck.

I slipped one hand to the small of her back, the other tangling in the damp silk of her hair. She fit against me like the missing half of a soul I hadn't realized was broken.

The fire—the magic—inside her responded instantly. A warm pulse of golden light spread through her skin, sinking into mine. It didn't hurt—but it lit every nerve with

electric heat.

I deepened the kiss.

She made a sound—soft, wanting—and I was lost.

Her mouth was sweet and hot and demanding. She kissed me like she needed it to breathe, like she was just as starved as I was.

I couldn't stop. Her body was soft curves and glowing power, pressing against every line of mine. My hands moved without thought, mapping her through the thin fabric of her gown, learning her shape like it was something sacred.

She didn't pull away. Didn't ask me to stop. Her nails dug into my shoulders. Her breath hitched as my mouth left hers to trace a line down her throat.

And still— still—I held back. Barely.

Because if I didn't, I'd take her right here, right now, and there would be no going back. No pretending this bond wasn't real. No denying she was already carved into my bones.

I pulled away slowly, resting my forehead against hers, breathing hard. "Have you ever been with a man?"

Her eyes fluttered open. "No."

Something primitive—madness—clawed to life inside me. She was mine. She would always be mine. Only mine.

I lifted her and carried her to bed, lay her down so I could strip off my clothes. With

one flick of my wrist, I sealed the door with death magic, the most powerful spell I knew, one that would suck the life from anyone who managed to force their way past the metal locks and thick wood.

Naked, I knelt and pulled her toward me, kissed my way from bare ankle to knee. Inner thigh to?—

Her hands fisted in my hair as my mouth closed over her sensitive clit. I devoured her sweet pussy, fucked her with my tongue, worked her until her back arched off the bed and she cried out, her inner walls pulsing with her first release.

She was virgin. My cock was not small. I needed her wet and ready and begging. Even then, I would use my magic to ease my entry, take her pain. I wanted her desperate for me.

Moving up her body, I tasted the soft swell of her belly, the soft underside of her breast. I slipped two fingers inside her core, working her as I worked her nipples with my tongue. She tasted divine. Better than I'd imagined. Perfect.

The dark magic inside me pulsed against my skin like ocean waves crashing against rock and sand, flowed into her sensitive breasts through my lips, into her tight pussy through my fingertips. I wrapped my darkness around her, through her, made sure she felt me in every cell, every breath.

I felt her body stiffen, the air in her lungs freeze. Her arms wrapped around my shoulders in both need and demand as her body responded, her orgasm seizing control of her like a wildfire blazing through dried paper. She came apart in my arms as I claimed her mouth and slid my cock deep.

Balls deep, I froze, used my magic to tease the walls of her pussy, make sure she felt no pain. Only pleasure.

She shuddered and lifted her legs. Wrapped them around my hips. “Why did you stop?”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I don’t think you can.” She laughed, her inner muscles squeezing me in unexpected ways. “I feel your magic. Mine is burning through me, too. It’s making me crazy. I can’t stop. I need more.”

Void take me. Her words unleashed an animal. I thrust hard and fast. Deep. Shoved her knees up over my shoulders so I could fuck her harder. Her hips rose to meet me with every thrust until she was writhing on the bed, her freshly bathed body covered in sweat that glistened in the candlelight. So sweet. Tasty. Perfect. I leaned over so I could run my lips over her shoulder. Her neck. Taste what was mine.

I took her mouth, and her body exploded with pleasure, her cries pushing me over the edge with her. I filled her with my seed, my soul, my darkness. My magic. My release roared through every cell, every nerve, from head to toe, consuming me until there was nothing but her body, her scent, her hot, wet pussy wrapped around my hard length, her delicate hands fists in my hair. Until I wasn’t alone.

My kisses slowed, became exploration. Gratitude. Contentment. After long minutes, she sighed. “Is it always like that?” she whispered.

“No. Never.” I tilted my hips, moved inside her, just to hear her gasp. “That was madness.”

“Was it us?” she breathed. “Or magic?”

“Maybe both.” I rolled over and pulled her with me, her head nestled under my neck, her hand on my chest, right over the place where my heart struggled to beat with this

new rhythm. Her rhythm. “Sleep. The ship leaves at dawn.”

I pulled the blanket over her, oddly satisfied when she molded herself to my side and promptly fell asleep.

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8

~ C leo ~

I stood at the rail of the ship, my hands resting on smooth, salt-slick wood, the wind tangling strands of my hair and whipping them across my cheeks. The sun was rising behind a veil of pale clouds, the sky painted in gold and soft gray, and the sea rolled beneath us in endless swells of shifting blue.

Nearly a full day at sea, and I was still not used to the motion. That wasn't what unsettled me. I could feel something in the air. A low hum beneath the surface of things. A tension just beyond sight. Or maybe that was just me.

I tightened my grip on the railing, staring out at the horizon. The waves shimmered, calm and endless, but my magic pulsed beneath my skin like a second heartbeat—nervous, electric, coiled.

Something wasn't right. I was starting to wonder if it ever would be again.

I wore a gown Devin had bought for me before we left port—dark blue with silver embroidery, light as air but cut to flatter my body in a way that made me feel... seen . Beautiful, even. The bodice hugged my waist, and the skirts flared in a cascade of motion with every gust of wind. My hair was pinned back in loose waves, and my boots were new, fitted to my feet like I'd been born to wear them.

I hated it.

Not because it wasn't beautiful. It was. Everything he gave me was.

But because it wasn't mine . Wearing it felt like playing a role in someone else's story. A noblewoman. A magical heir. A warrior's fated bond. I didn't know how to be any of those things. I'd never felt like more of an imposter. Everywhere I looked, I felt eyes watching me. Whispers from the crew. Side glances. Suspicion. Hunger.

Was it my imagination? Or did the sailor who'd offered me tea this morning stare a little too long at my throat? Was the fae wind-caller's smile a little too predatory? Was all the attention due to the fact that I was female, traveled with a Death Mage, or because they wanted to use my magic for themselves? I almost wished Devin had never found me, never told me the truth.

The truth about my ancestors had gutted me. They hadn't just been hunted. They'd been tortured. Slaughtered. Their blood used in dark rituals to twist magic into something evil. Starborn hearts burned in temples to open rifts in the Veil. Children drowned for the strength of their screams.

I couldn't stop thinking about it. Every time I looked in the mirror, I saw the echoes of the people who came before me. People who died screaming. Alone.

What if that was my fate too?

A warm hand slid across my waist, pulling me back against a body I'd already memorized.

I sighed and leaned into Devin, letting his presence anchor me. His shadow magic curled around me like smoke, dark and protective. Familiar. Possessive. I should've been terrified of that. Once, I was. Now?

He was the only thing that felt solid. Real. Safe.

“You’re too quiet,” he said against my ear.

“I’m thinking.”

“Dangerous.”

I smiled faintly. “What happens when we reach The Spire?”

He stilled. “I present you to the king.”

“The Knight Eternal?”

“That is one of his titles.”

“How old is he?” If Devin was nearly two hundred years old, I couldn’t imagine the power and might of someone the Death Mages considered eternal.

“Only the archivists know.” He leaned in and nuzzled my neck with lips I was already addicted to. “And I know better than to ask.”

I placed my arms on top of his and leaned into his heat. His warmth. A future I hoped would be as magical and full of passion as he’d promised me this morning when we boarded the ship. “So, we get to The Spire. We see the king. Then what?”

“We perform the binding ritual.”

“Like... a marriage?”

“Not quite. Deeper. A fusion of magic. Of souls. Your fire, my shadow, woven together to reinforce the Veil’s runes.”

“Sex?”

“Yes.” He turned me just enough to kiss me senseless. “And this time I won’t hold back. We’ll complete the bond. Our magic will strengthen the spell that seals the rift.”

I kissed him back, my body melting. “We’ll be alone?”

“Of course.” He kissed me again. Harder. A punishment. “I don’t share what’s mine, and I would never ask you to expose yourself in such a manner.”

I relaxed instantly and smiled at him.

His expression turned serious as he held my gaze. “It’s not required... but without it, the seals won’t hold much longer.”

I didn’t think about it too much. I didn’t want to. I stared out over the water and focused on calming the pounding of my heart under my ribs. Something—something—was clawing at the edge of my awareness. A chill against my spine. A wrongness in the wind. My fingers twitched over his arm, digging into his flesh. “Devin,” I whispered. “Something’s off.”

He pulled back just enough to look into my face, his silver eyes narrowing. “What do you feel?”

“I don’t know.” My voice shook. “But it’s wrong. It’s?”

A sudden gust of wind ripped through the sails above us, snapping the fabric with a deafening crack. The ship tilted. Shouts rang out across the deck. The fae wind-caller—a tall, white-haired fae in crimson robes—let out a high, musical cry that vibrated with alarm. “Shadows on the water! They’re coming!”

The clouds overhead darkened. The sun vanished behind a curtain of gray. And from the depths of the sea— they rose.

Creatures made of slick, glistening darkness. Long, eel-like bodies with too many eyes and mouths that split their faces in unnatural ways. Webbed claws. Translucent wings. Some swam. Some flew. All of them moved like nightmares dragged from a drowned world.

Sailors screamed.

One creature swooped overhead, letting out a shriek that shattered a lantern and sent glass raining onto the deck.

And in the middle of it all, Devin stepped forward.

He didn't speak. He just unleashed . Darkness. Shadows. Death magic.

The shadows around him surged like a tidal wave, pouring from his hands, his feet, his eyes. The deck darkened, a dome of black mist swirling outward as his magic rose like a storm, answering the threat with a voice older than time.

Creatures dove at him—three at once.

They didn't make it.

A wall of obsidian spears exploded from the shadows on the ship's planks, impaling one mid-flight. Another froze midair as a chain of runes wrapped around its throat, yanking it into the sea.

I backed against the cabin wall, eyes wide, heart racing. He was magnificent. And terrifying .

A creature made for war. For death.

The wind howled. The sea churned. Another wave of monsters surged from the depths, trying to swamp the hull, their claws dragging down sailors and tearing at the sails.

Devin roared, his voice echoing with power—and his magic erupted .

The creatures died screaming, their bodies dissolving into smoke and shadow as his deathlight consumed them. The sky turned black. Lightning cracked the heavens.

And then... silence.

The deck was slick with blood and ash.

Devin fell to his knees. Then collapsed.

I ran to his side. His body was hot—too hot. Magic still radiated off him in waves, flickering like coals.

The crew circled, hesitant. The wind-caller stepped forward, his voice sharp with command. “That was not standard death magic. What is he? And why is he on this ship?”

“He saved us,” I snapped.

“They came for him,” another sailor said, pointing at the remains of the creatures. “They attacked because of him. This was his doing.”

“No,” I said. Those things had come for me. I’d felt it in my bones, a cold, creeping awareness that sank its claws into my flesh and refused to let go.

“Yes,” the fae snapped. “He drew them here with that Veil magic. And now we should toss him overboard before his dark magic summons more.”

Several crew members muttered in agreement.

I stood. Slowly. Drew the dagger from Devin’s belt.

His magic pulsed through the blade—dark and cold—but I didn’t falter.

I turned to face the crew, heart pounding, fire singing in my blood.

“Touch him,” I said, “and I’ll show you what real Starfire looks like.”

The wind shifted.

The air trembled.

And the golden light that burst from my skin lit the deck like a star in summer.

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~ Devin ~

I came back to life on a wave of fire and fury. My vision swam. Pain arced through my chest. I couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. But I could feel her.

Cleo.

A blaze of golden power—wild, protective, furious —flaring above me like a living shield.

My lashes fluttered. The world sharpened in fragments.

The ship's hard deck. Light. The scent of sea and ash. The copper sting of blood. And her voice. Clear. Commanding. Righteous.

“Touch him, and I'll show you what real Starfire looks like.” Her hand gripped my dagger. And her body—gods, her body —was glowing.

A radiant halo of fire licked across her skin, threads of pure light woven through her hair, her fingers, her eyes. The deck shimmered beneath her feet, the golden runes of the Starborn rising to the surface, burned into the wood by her fury.

She stood between me and the crew like a goddess risen from myth. She was protecting me. Me.

A cursed soul bound to death and decay. I should have been terrified. Or ashamed. Instead, I burned. Burned with something deeper than magic. With something alive .

The fae wind-caller took a cautious step back from Cleo's shining form, his lips pale, his eyes narrowed. He stared at her like she was a weapon pointed at his chest.

Smart man.

I stirred, dragging in a breath that felt like swallowing glass. Cleo turned instantly. "Devin?" she dropped to her knees beside me. "Can you hear me?"

I nodded once. Barely.

Relief flooded her face, chased quickly by worry. "You're burning up," she murmured, brushing damp hair from my forehead. "You used too much."

I tried to sit up. My body disagreed.

Cleo looked around. "We need to get him below."

"Don't help him," someone growled. "You saw what he did—he called those things."

"He killed those things," she snapped. "And if I have to burn this ship down to make that clear, I will." A bolt of light seemed to shoot randomly into the sky and all but the fae male took a step back.

"I will help him."

Void take me. The fae leaned over and pulled me to my feet, braced me against his side and half carried me toward our cabin. I wanted to argue, but my legs would not hold me. Cleo was right. I saw her, in danger, and I overreacted, used too much

magic too fast. I hadn't made such a grave mistake since I was a young mage in training.

Cleo followed. None challenged her. Not again. They stepped back, as if some part of them recognized that the girl in fine silver and silk wasn't a girl anymore. She was something more.

She joined the fae on my opposite side, looping one arm around my waist. I leaned on her heavily, each step like walking through fire. My power was depleted—drained to the bone—but I could feel her magic wrapping around us both, cradling me, bolstering me.

I shouldn't have leaned into it.

Into her.

But I couldn't help it.

She was soft strength, firm hands, whispered fury. She didn't hesitate as she half-dragged me down the narrow stair to our cabin. Didn't waver as she pushed open the door and lowered me gently onto the narrow bed. She kicked the fae out of the room with a hasty thanks, then turned and shut the door. Locked it. Spun around to face me.

I knew before she spoke that something had changed. I sat up slowly, resting my elbows on my knees, dragging in another breath. "Are you hurt?" She looked unharmed, but I had to know for certain.

"I'm all right."

"You defended me."

“Of course.” She sounded offended that I would be shocked. No one helped the Death Mages. Everyone feared us, and rightly so. That a young orphan from the capital would face off with a fae and a ship of sailors to protect a man she barely knew? One who had kidnapped her, seduced her, and left her no choice but to go to the most feared and hated island in all of Lunaterra? She was either half-mad or the most courageous woman I’d ever met. “You threatened to burn half the crew.”

“They were going to hurt you.” Her hands twisted in front of her as if she were nervous or anxious and my heart disintegrated in my chest. It was gone, no longer mine, but hers.

Had the battle frightened her? Did she fear me now? Was that why she remained by the door, staring at me, instead of coming close? Void take it, she might as well know and accept the truth now. I positioned myself carefully on the edge of the bed. Hoped she would move in close. Accept me.

Want me as badly as I wanted her. “I would burn cities for you.”

A pause. Then, quieter, little more than a whisper, “Why?” She came toward me slowly, her eyes still lit with that strange, golden heat.

“Because they were wrong,” I said. “Your parents. The world. Wrong to give you up. Wrong not to want you.”

She swallowed hard, tears gathering in her eyes. “And you do?”

“Yes.”

She stopped just in front of me. Her fingers reached for mine, laced them together. “You were willing to die to protect this ship,” she whispered. “Even though everyone on it hates you. Even though it would’ve been easy to let the sea spirits tear them

apart. You didn't hesitate. You just... gave everything."

I didn't answer. Couldn't. And then she knelt in front of me, eyes searching mine.

"You might be a Death Mage, but you're not the monster I thought you were."

"No," I said hoarsely. "But I am a monster."

She smiled. Slow. Sad. Beautiful. "Apparently, so am I." The air between us snapped like a live wire. Her fingers slid higher on my arms. Her eyes flicked to my mouth.

And my restraint—thin, frayed, already dying—snapped .

I surged forward, grabbed her by the waist, and hauled her onto my lap.

She gasped—but she didn't pull away.

Our mouths collided.

There was nothing soft about this kiss. It was raw and desperate and too much, like we were both trying to devour the moment, the fear, the chaos still clinging to our skin.

Her hands tangled in my hair. Mine found the curve of her waist, the hollow of her back, the warm skin beneath the collar of her gown.

She tasted like fire and salt and survival.

I couldn't stop kissing her.

Didn't want to.

She straddled me, pressed against me, her breath ragged, her body alight with that golden fire. Every brush of her magic against mine reignited the bond, hotter and fiercer than ever.

This wasn't just attraction anymore.

This was claiming.

This was need.

We broke apart only long enough to breathe, to press our foreheads together, to let the storm inside us find purchase in touch.

"I thought I'd lost you," she whispered.

"I thought you'd run."

"I wanted to."

"But you didn't."

She shook her head. "Because I couldn't. I'm not afraid anymore. Not of you."

My heart cracked open.

She brushed a kiss over my jaw, my cheek, my lips. I pulled her toward me, my cock hard and aching. My magic twisted in my veins with a hunger that made the physical a pale shadow. I didn't feel desire. This was more. And less. Primal. Pure instinct. I needed. The darkness within me reached for her with a ferocity that demanded submission.

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10

~ C leo ~

I never thought surrender could feel like freedom. When I looked into Devin's eyes, chest heaving from the fight, skin flushed from heat and power, I knew. I was already his. There was no more room for fear.

I'd burned through it, melted it in the fire that now lived under my skin—his name etched into the molten core of my soul like a vow I hadn't known I was making.

He sat on the edge of the bed, still catching his breath, his silver eyes locked on mine like I was both salvation and temptation. The room glowed gold from the lantern swinging gently overhead, casting shadows across the curves of his bare chest and the angular lines of his face. Pain in his gaze. A history of being hated. Feared. Rejected.

I wanted to kiss every wound. Hold his heart in gentle hands. Protect him. Not because I pitied him. But because I loved him. I loved this man. This Death Mage. This terrifying, fierce, relentless protector who would burn the world to ashes before he let anyone touch me.

Void take me—I wanted him hot and hard and rough inside me. Making me feel. Making me burn. Making me feel alive.

I moved slowly, aware of his gaze tracking every inch of me as I released the ties that held my gown in place. Toed off my new boots. Bared myself to him before crawling atop him on the tiny ship's bed.

He didn't speak. Didn't move. Just waited—tense, coiled, as if afraid that if he reached for me, I might vanish.

I straddled his hips and cupped his face with both hands. "You're mine," I whispered.

His breath caught. His hands came up, wrapping around my waist, fingers splaying across my back, holding me like I was something fragile and rare. "I was yours the moment I saw you," he said, voice low and rough.

I smiled through the tears I didn't realize had gathered in my eyes. He pulled me onto his lap, fluid and powerful, and kissed me. It was different this time. Not desperate. Not wild.

It was reverent. Tender. As if we had all the time in the world. A kiss filled with promises and shadows and light—everything we were, everything we had survived, everything we were becoming.

He lifted me into his arms and laid me back on the bed like I was precious. His hands were rough as he laid claim to every rise and hollow, explored every curve, his mouth burning kisses along my collarbone, the curve of my shoulder, the hollow of my throat. Each touch sent shivers through me, sparks of golden fire racing through my blood.

I helped him undress, fingers working blindly at the clasps and belts, too consumed by the way his skin felt beneath my hands to focus. He was all strength and heat and shadows wrapped in flesh, the lines of his body carved by war and survival. And still he trembled beneath my touch.

He looked at me like I was the only thing holding him to the light.

We tangled together on the bed, limbs entwined, hearts beating in sync. He kissed

every inch of me, slow and deliberate, worshipping me with hands and mouth like I was something sacred. My fingers explored the hard planes of his back, the curve of his shoulders, the roughness of old scars I longed to learn the story of.

Everywhere he touched, I burned. Everywhere I touched, he shivered.

It was like dancing with fire and shadow—our magics mingling, not in battle, but in harmony. My golden light curled around his darkness, not to smother it, but to embrace it. His shadows didn't run from my fire—they folded around it, sheltering it, feeding it, letting it shine brighter.

He covered me perfectly and I tilted my hips to take him deep. I reached between us, positioned his hard length at my wet core and guided him inside. He thrust hard. Deep. One slow, solid claiming that made me whimper and moan. He held himself over me, stared into my eyes as he moved, hips thrusting, cock filling me up. Retreating. Marking me. Making me whole. When he moved inside me, it wasn't just physical—it was soul-deep.

A fusion.

A claiming.

Not of ownership, but of belonging. We moved together, bodies driven mad with magic and desire. Lust. Belonging. Need. I'd never felt more alive, or more vulnerable. I hid nothing. Gave him everything. Let his magic curl into my chest and cool the fire that threatened to consume me.

We cried out together as our orgasms took over, an explosion of darkness behind my closed eyelids, shadows around my heart that made me feel protected. Complete. Loved. His.

~ C leo ~

I felt it the moment the ship crossed into the island's waters. The dark magic that surrounded The Spire, and the Rift concealed within, was like ice cold water splashing over me from head to toe. The cold seeped into my bones, a chill from which there would be no escape. The darkness of the Void, the break between worlds. The place Devin had given his entire life to protect and defend.

The air thickened around us as the ship dropped anchor in deeper water, away from the rocky cliffs, and Devin helped me into one of the small boats the crew used to go to shore. Magic pressed against my skin, cold and electric, like a storm held tight in the palm of a god. The sea darkened—not with shadow, but with depth, as if it knew what waited beneath the cliffs.

Something ancient. Something dangerous. Something calling to me. Not in a voice. Not in words. Just a pull. A whisper at the edge of my mind. A longing that wasn't mine.

I wrapped my arms around myself and stepped to the railing as the island loomed into view.

It was wild. Jagged cliffs rose high above the waves, streaked with white where seabirds circled. The shore was a mosaic of black stone and green moss, dotted with flowering bushes and twisted trees clinging to the rocks like ghosts. Beyond the coast, a narrow valley stretched inland, fertile and strange, dotted with orchards,

thatched cottages, and pale smoke curling into the sky.

And at the heart of it all—rising like the spine of the world—was The Spire.

My breath caught. It wasn't just a building. It was a monument. A warning. A monolith of obsidian and iron-veined stone rising high into the clouds, crowned with ancient spires and wardstones that pulsed faintly with magical light. It didn't shimmer. It didn't gleam.

It throbbed. Like a living thing. Like a heartbeat. Its blood ice cold. Its pulse sluggish and dissonant, not of this world, as least not fully. It was beautiful. Terrible.

I took a step back. I could feel what lay inside. A rift. The Rift. The Veil—torn, poisoned, open. Devin was wrong. The Veil wasn't thinning. It was open. Not wide. Not yet. But the wound was real. And the darkness inside it was hungry.

It scraped against my soul.

“Breathe,” Devin said behind me, his hand sliding to my lower back. “It won't hurt you.”

I leaned into him, letting his warmth push back the chill crawling over my skin.

“You live here?” The thought was abhorrent. Horrifying. No wonder Death Mages had a reputation for being sullen, grumpy, frightening murderers.

He nodded, a small grin adding a bit of warmth back to my soul. “It's not as bad as it looks.”

I looked at him. It was worse. “You are tied to it, aren't you? Your magic feeds it?”

“My blood helps power the runes.” He was paler than usual, his power already curling tighter around his bones. The closer he got to the Veil, the more it wanted him.

“It wants to kill you.”

“I know.” He smiled as if that fact was of no great concern, the tilt of his lips both crooked and fierce, and I couldn’t help smiling back.

“You’re insane.”

He wrapped his arm around me. “I thought that was why you liked me.”

“Who said I liked you?” I loved him. But I wasn’t about to tell him that. Not yet.

We disembarked from the small rowboat, stepped into a small port village nestled between the cliffs and the orchard-lined hills. It was busy—markets open, vendors calling out wares, children laughing as they chased each other through the muddy streets.

And everywhere I looked—Death Mages walked among them. And no one screamed. No one ran. In fact... they smiled . Laughed. A stooped old man waved at one mage in heavy robes. A woman with a baby on her hip handed another a bunch of herbs and bowed her head. Two children darted between Devin’s legs, giggling, before running off without so much as a backward glance.

“They... like you,” I said.

Devin nodded. “You’re surprised?”

“All of Lunaterra is terrified of the Death Mages, and the Necromancers. The Void.

Dark magic.”

Devin laughed. “We like it that way.” He kissed me, a promise for later. “They respect us. They know what we protect. They’ve seen the Tower bleed magic when the Veil shakes. They’ve watched the sky split during eclipses. They live with us. In our shadow. We protect them. They provide for those that live in The Spire. They chose to stay. To help us. They are our people. Our families. Friends. Generations of people who understand what’s at stake and what will happen to the world if the Void opens, the seals break.”

I stared at a young girl handing a sugarfruit to a Death Mage with glowing purple eyes.

She hugged him.

He smiled.

I couldn’t make sense of it.

“I thought everyone feared you.”

“They do. In the cities. In the courts. Where people pretend death is far away. But not here. Not where it touches the world.”

I followed Devin through the winding paths of the village, through ancient archways and stone-walled gardens until we reached the gates of the Tower itself.

I stopped walking.

The gate was made of dark steel, etched with runes I didn’t recognize, and flanked by twin statues of winged figures holding swords— Revenants , I realized. The

guardians of the Veil. Death Mages who had tied their lives and their blood to the runes that sealed the Rift. Mages like Devin. My chest tightened.

“Cleo,” Devin said softly, offering his hand.

I took it.

The tall gates opened without a sound and The Spire welcomed me in.

The air inside was cooler, scented with magic and old stone, like the dust of centuries lingering in the bones of the building. The walls pulsed faintly with power, whispering in tongues I couldn’t understand.

We passed through wide halls filled with light from enchanted glass. Through libraries carved into the rock. Through quiet spaces where young mages trained in silence and study.

I felt like I was walking through a dream. A memory.

Or a place I’d been long ago and forgotten.

Then we turned a final corner—and a tall Death Mage stood in greeting.

“Kassio.” Devin smiled at the prince of The Spire, a royal so well known—so feared—even I knew his name.

The prince of the Dark Spire stood at the top of the stairs, arms crossed, grinning like the gods had dropped a joke in his lap and dared him to keep a straight face. “Well, well,” he drawled, descending the stairs. “I thought you were dead, brother.”

Devin stiffened. “I should’ve been.”

Kassio stopped in front of him. “You look like hell.”

“You don’t.”

“I’m prettier,” Kassio said, smirking.

“I thought you had business in the capital. How did you beat us here?” Devin asked.

“I got bored,” Kassio replied with a shrug. “And I’m a better mage. I flew.”

I laughed, surprising both of them.

Kassio turned to me and swept a graceful bow. “And you must be the miracle.”

I flushed.

He took my hand and kissed it with ridiculous elegance. “I’m Kassio Morven. And I am delighted to meet you.”

I glanced at Devin, whose brow had lowered into a warning line.

“She’s taken,” he said.

“I hadn’t noticed,” Kassio replied with an innocent smile.

He looked between us, then sobered slightly. “You’re here to complete the bonding.”

“Yes,” Devin said.

“Just in time. I had to donate more blood last night. The Rift is cracking.”

“It’s already broken,” I said.

Kassio turned to me, eyes narrowed. “How would you know that, my dear?”

“I felt it as soon as we entered the harbor.”

“I see.” He glanced at Devin, then back to me. “Has he explained the situation? Are you willing to be bound to this fool for the rest of your life?” His gaze was sharp, though kind. A prince’s gaze. One who had ruled in shadow and still kept light in his eyes.

I took a breath. I didn’t look at Devin as I replied. “Yes.”

Kassio nodded once. “I’ll let my father know you’re here and tell the others to prepare for the ritual claiming.” He smacked Devin on the back. Hard. “Congratulations, my friend. She actually seems to like you.”

He turned and strode up the steps again, calling for the guardians.

I felt Devin step close behind me.

I didn’t turn to inspect his expression. I didn’t want to see doubt or disappointment or regret in his eyes. Because in that moment, I was happy. And also... not. Because he hadn’t said anything about me to his prince. No words of affection. No claim. No assurances that he wanted me as much as I wanted him. No whispered I love you.

All I sensed from Devin was relief. Protection. I was his “miracle”. But was I in his heart?

I didn’t know.

And it hurt more than I expected.

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12

~ Devin ~

The Tower was quieter at night.

Not silent—never silent—but still. The kind of stillness that clung to ancient places, where the weight of memory lived in the mortar, and magic never truly slept. Torches burned low in their sconces. The walls hummed faintly with old wards. And below The Spire, the Rift pulsed in the dark, whispering to the shadows.

I stood by the stone balcony that overlooked the western cliffs, the wind cold and briny on my face. The stars were bright. Clear. It should have felt peaceful.

But it didn't.

Behind me, Kassio leaned against the railing, arms crossed, a wineglass in hand, his expression unreadable. "She said yes," he said at last.

"Yes," I replied.

"And you haven't told her."

My jaw clenched. "Told her what?"

"That you love her."

I didn't respond.

He exhaled slowly, swirling the wine in his glass. "You're a fool, brother."

"She's not ready to hear it. She's been through enough the last few days."

"No, you're not ready to say it."

I turned to face him. "It doesn't matter. The ritual binds us. She'll be protected. That's all that matters."

His smile was thin and sharp. "That's what you told yourself when you were bleeding in my arms outside the Blackwall. When you nearly died trying to save a village of people who spat your name."

I didn't want to talk about the Blackwall. I didn't want to talk about Cleo either. Because if I said what I felt—if I let it rise—then I wouldn't be able to hold the curse at bay.

Love and shadow didn't mix.

Not for me.

"She's more than I expected," I said quietly. "More than any of us deserve."

Kassio nodded. "And yet, she's yours."

He took a slow sip of wine, then sighed. "There's something else."

I knew it the moment he said it. "Jarrik."

Kassio nodded. “He returned to the Tower last night. Filed a formal complaint with the Council of Seven. Claims she’s his betrothed. Presented a signed marriage contract. My father will have to listen to their claim.”

My stomach turned to stone. “She’s mine.”

“Your word against his. He claims you used coercion to steal his bonded Starborn. He says you attacked him unprovoked and endangered a sealed contract of The Spire.”

“It wasn’t sealed,” I growled.

“It bears the Matron’s mark. Technically, Cleo’s guardian. Her mother. The law is clear.”

My hands curled into fists. “Cleo is not a child. Nor is she property to be bartered or sold. What did Jarrick give that old hag?”

“Who knows? He’s trying to use the old law,” Kassio added, gaze darkening. “The blood-right clause. If he convinces the council that Cleo’s power was bonded to him first—even momentarily—he can challenge you.”

“No,” I said, voice low. “She was never his.”

“He doesn’t care about the truth. He’s desperate. You humiliated him. And you’ve already won her heart.”

I turned away, breathing hard. I didn’t want to have to kill him, but I would. “If he touches her, he dies.”

And then Kassio said the words that made everything worse. “The king has summoned The Knight Eternal.”

My heart skipped. Void take me. The Knight Eternal was the king's magical form, a mage without emotion or bias. His magic was so powerful, the king's personality withdrew completely. It was like speaking to an entity from beyond the Void. For all intents and purposes, a god without concern for the cares—or passions—of mere mortals. If Jarrick could convince him of his lies, the outcome would be dire.

“The council requests formal judgment,” Kassio said. “They’re invoking blood precedent. You know what that means.”

I did. The Knight Eternal wasn't just the king of The Spire. He was its oldest living pillar. A descendant of the first human soul to cross through the Void from Earth—a man whose blood had merged with shadow and become something else. Something immortal. His magic had helped seal the Rift during the first eclipse. His power kept the council from tearing itself apart.

He was Devin's father by blood. But he was not a father in any way that mattered. He was an immortal being inhabiting a feeble, mortal shell.

“He won't side with me,” I said. “The Matron did sign the betrothal agreement. Jarrick traveled with her for an entire day before I caught up to them. He could claim—” Claim he'd touched her. Kissed her. Made her his.

“No, he won't side with you,” Kassio agreed. “But he might side with her.”

That possibility hadn't occurred to me.

“The Knight Eternal has seen many things,” Kassio murmured. “But even he hasn't seen a Starborn choose a Death Mage for a mate. Not in five centuries.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “So, maybe don't keep her in the dark much longer, hmm? Tell her how you feel? Give her a reason to fight for you.”

And with that, he vanished down the stairs, leaving me alone beneath the stars, with the weight of my bloodline and the whisper of her name already on my lips.

~ Cleo ~

The scroll burst into flames the moment I touched it.

“Again?” I shouted, flinging the smoldering parchment across the stone floor. “That was the fifth one!”

“Seventh,” the mage beside me muttered, brushing soot from the sleeve of his once-golden robe, now more of a scorched brown with edges that curled like dried leaves.

Mistress Elarra had lived through seven magical wars, three plagues, and the accidental banishment of a minor god. She looked like it. Her spine hunched with age, her hair fell in brittle wisps to her belt, and her right eye twitched whenever I so much as looked at another spell.

“I thought this was a controlled exercise!” I said, still watching the charred remains of the scroll.

She grunted. “It was. Until you touched it.”

My hands tingled with residual magic—golden fire pulsing just under the skin, wild and untamed.

“I don’t understand why I can’t control it,” I muttered.

“Because you were born with a fire no one’s seen in five hundred years,” she said, shuffling across the room with a limp. “And because I, unfortunately, am not a Starborn.”

I stared at her.

She smiled—faint, dry, and far too cheerful considering her left eyebrow was still smoking. “Do I look like someone who has any idea what they’re doing?”

“You’re the royal tutor for The Spire. You train all the Death Mages. Necromancers. Even the vampires respect you. Unless the chatter around the breakfast table was all lies.”

“I’m also two hundred and twelve years old. The last Starborn died three hundred years before I was born. Everything I know about your kind is written in tomes older than The Spire, secrets preserved from the other side of the Void.”

“From Earth? My bloodline was from Earth?” The planet was long past legend and into mythical territory. If the fae and Vampires didn’t have elders older than the stones themselves, all memory of the human home world would have long been forgotten.

“So, you really don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Not a damn clue,” she said, cheerfully. “But I’ve never exploded in the same place twice, and I call that a win.”

I groaned, turning away as yet another spell fizzled uselessly in the center of the training hall. The ancient stones beneath my boots pulsed with barely contained magic. Everything in this place was too full—too loud. My own power sparked against the walls like it wanted to fight.

I felt like I was going to explode.

Again.

I gathered my things—mostly singed scraps of parchment—and one relatively intact book on Starborn lore that I'd stolen from the restricted shelf while Mistress Elarra pretended not to notice.

"I need a break," I muttered.

"Just don't set anything on fire that isn't trying to kill you first," she called after me.

"No promises!" I marched out of the training wing and into the cold, echoing halls of The Spire's main tower. It smelled like magic and stone dust, centuries of secrets soaked into every brick. Tapestries lined the walls—scenes of long-dead mages standing against horrors I could barely comprehend. Some of them glowed faintly, pulsing in time with my heartbeat.

I didn't care about old books, spells, secrets or myths about old planets. I needed Devin. I needed something solid. Something that made sense.

I turned the corner—and walked straight into a nightmare.

"Lady Rathmore," Jarrik purred, stepping from the shadows like a smirking cat. "How delightful to see you again."

I stopped cold. The book slipped slightly from my fingers.

He looked better than he had any right to—his black and silver robes immaculate, his expression carved in smug marble. His hair was slicked back, his boots polished, and his eyes gleamed like shards of obsidian glass. He bowed low, mockingly. "You look radiant."

"Get out of my way," I said.

“Tsk. So cold,” he said, straightening. “Not the way a fiancée should speak to her betrothed.”

“You are not my?—”

“But I am.” His smile widened. “You see, your Devin has failed to complete the bonding. Technically, you are still unclaimed. And according to Spire law?—”

“Don’t you dare quote law to me.”

“There is a contract,” he said smoothly, ignoring my tone. “A betrothal contract. Signed by the Matron of your orphanage, your mother.”

I blinked. “She’s not my mother.”

“Your legal guardian. We traveled together, Cleo. Alone. So unfortunate Devin attacked us without warning and stole you from me.”

My stomach turned. “You know that’s a lie. You were the one who kidnapped me.”

“I filed my claim with King Polaris,” Jarrik said, stepping closer. “The Knight Eternal will hear it this evening. You’ll be present, of course. I wouldn’t want to be accused of trying to force anything.” He was close now. Too close.

I held up the book between us like a shield. “Void take you, Jarrik.”

“Perhaps,” he murmured. “The Rift is cracked. The creatures beyond the Void are coming to us.” He brushed past me, the chill of his magic brushing against my skin like frostbite. “Wear something formal,” he said over his shoulder. “This is, after all, a royal judgment, and, most likely, our wedding ceremony. You can hate me if you wish, but we need your Starborn magic to heal the fracture in the Rift. I won’t

sacrifice all of Lunaterra for your childish desires.”

And then he vanished down the hall, leaving me rooted in place.

Shaking.

I stared down at the ancient book in my hands, writings so old they had supposedly traveled through the Void from Earth. The ancient title shimmered in golden ink:

The Starborn Legacy: Flame, Fire, and the Veil.

For a long moment, I just stood there. Angry. Confused. Hurt. But beneath it all—something else. Resolve. I wasn’t a child. I wasn’t a servant. I wasn’t a pawn. I was Starborn.

My fingers tightened on the book’s cover.

If they thought I was going to show up in some stupid gown and politely sit through their rituals and judgments while two Death Mages argued over who got to own me like a prize, they were wrong. I wasn’t a prize. I was a damn inferno. And they were going to learn that the hard way.

I turned on my heel and marched toward my room, the book heavy in my hands and my magic already simmering beneath my skin. Let Jarrick and Devin argue with one another. Plead with their king. Let them summon their entire royal court. Every Death Mage. Every Necromancer. Every vampire. Let them try and decide my fate.

Void take them all. I wasn’t a frightened child. I was a woman. A Starborn mage. This time, I was going to choose it for myself.

13

~ C leo ~

The throne room inside the tower was a chamber carved from obsidian and oath-stone, its ceiling vaulted like the inside of a cathedral built to house gods. Dark flames flickered in wall sconces—blue-black and whispering with barely restrained power. The air smelled of dust, iron, and ancient magic. I stood on a rune-carved floor that pulsed faintly under my boots like a heartbeat.

At the far end of the chamber, seated atop a jagged throne of black stone veined with crystal, loomed the Knight Eternal.

He was terrifying.

Tall as a statue, cloaked in layered mage-robos darker than midnight, he radiated magic so ancient it made the walls hum. His hair was silver—not with age, but with power—and his skin was the pale ash of someone who had lived too long in the embrace of the Veil. One hand rested on the arm of the throne like a blade laid to rest; the other gripped a staff topped with a shard of the original Riftstone, the crystal used by Earth's ancient mages to open the original Void. To save what humans they could from the ravenous entities that inhabited the Void.

Eyes like dying stars locked onto me where I stood in a gown of dark blue that matched Devin's hair. Fur lined boots did little to protect me from the pulses of icy death magic surging under my feet.

I felt the truth of this eternal being in my bones—this was no man, no king, no courtier. This was a weapon crafted by time and torment, a being who had watched empires rise and fall and stood unmoved. The only thing that still tethered him to this realm was duty—and now, judgment.

I should have been afraid. I was too angry.

Jarrick stepped forward, his black robes pristine, his voice smooth as satin stretched over knives. “My lord, I stand before you today to assert my legal and magical claim. I have here”—he held up a parchment, thick and sealed in mage-wax—“a signed and binding betrothal contract. Witnessed, sealed, and archived. The girl, Cleo Rathmore, was promised to me by her Matron mother. I claimed her and escorted her out of the capital city. She is mine.”

I curled my fingers into fists. The girl. Not a person. Not a woman. Property.

A rustle of robes echoed behind him. Four men and one woman stepped out from the shadows—his allies. All dressed in regal mage attire, silver and violet sashes marking them as nobles of The Spire’s High Houses. Their expressions were smug, condescending.

One of them—a man with sunken eyes and fingers stained with ink—snorted softly. “She’s an orphan. Unbound. Untamed. Jarrick should have married her before taking her from the city. The contract is the only thing preserving propriety here.”

“I refused to marry him.” I spoke clearly. Slowly. So these idiots could understand my words.

“She’s a foundling, is she not?” said another, completely ignoring me, irritation flashing in dark grey eyes. “Reputation in tatters. No family to care for her. Gratefulness would suit her better than rebellion.”

I bit the inside of my cheek hard enough to taste blood, fighting a sudden urge to hate all Death Mages again. Except mine, of course.

“She hasn’t completed the bond with Grimm,” another added, flicking a lazy glance toward Devin, who stood at the edge of the circle, radiating silent fury. “As far as tradition goes, the betrothal stands. Ritual law cannot be overridden by sentiment.”

Jarrik turned toward the throne. “I acknowledge that she fled. That her emotions are... troubled. But we were intimate. She gave herself to me willingly. The bond, though not sealed in blood, was forged in flesh.”

The words struck me like a slap.

A lie.

A monstrous, vicious lie.

I stepped forward, the fire in my chest rising like a scream. “That’s not true.”

“She denies it because she’s confused,” Jarrik said with a faux-gentle smile. “Her power is awakening. She fears what she doesn’t understand.”

“YOU LIAR!” My voice cracked the air like thunder. Magic surged up my spine, crackling under my skin like lightning in a bottle.

And then—I heard them. The words from the book in my room. Nova’s Requiem.

They shimmered in my mind’s eye, curling like molten gold across my memory. I’d read them the night before, scrawled in the ancient Earthen tome, hidden under a spell only one with Starborn blood would be able to see, tucked between warnings and half-burned pages. A spell of last resort. A weapon born of light and fury and soul-

deep fire.

It wasn't just magic. It was truth incarnate. And I couldn't stop it.

The first word left my lips like a prayer.

The second, like a blade.

The third—a war cry.

Light exploded in my chest.

A white-hot orb of condensed starlight ignited inside me, burning outward, every breath fanning the flames. I could feel my heart feeding it—my anger, my betrayal, my refusal to be claimed like a sword or a slave.

The fire surged through me and became me .

The floor beneath me cracked. The air shimmered. Then?—

Detonation.

The light burst from my chest in a ring of gold and silver flame, a shockwave of burning, howling truth.

Jarrik screamed. Not like a man caught in pain. Like a soul ripped open.

The Starfire struck him full force, not destroying his body—but annihilating every lie that clung to his essence. I saw it—black threads of corruption boiling away from his skin, his mouth forced open as if the light itself was dragging the lies from his throat. He staggered backward, clutching his chest, eyes wide and unseeing.

His allies fared no better.

One dropped to his knees, retching up a writhing shadow that twisted into smoke. Another clutched her head and screamed as illusory glamours tore away, revealing a younger woman beneath, twisted by dark bargains. All of them—liars, manipulators, false claimants—were burned down to what they truly were.

And the fire didn't stop.

The Starfire rolled across the room like a tide. Every illusion, every shadow, every binding was torn away.

The Knight Eternal stood in the center of it all, unmoving. Until the fire touched him.

Then he shuddered.

Magic flared around him like a dying sun—and I saw it: the chains of darkness coiled inside his soul, centuries of sacrifice, layers of shadow that had kept him alive far past mortal limits.

The Starfire ripped through them like wind through dry leaves.

He roared—not in pain, but in release.

His knees hit the stone floor. The crown fell from his head. From within the brilliance of the flame, his voice rang out. “Devin Grimm.”

Devin stepped forward, silver eyes locked on mine. “Yes, my lord.”

“Do you love her?”

The chamber went silent. No breath. No motion. Only the fire and the question.

“Yes,” Devin said.

Not shouted. Spoken. Soft, sure, soul-deep.

The magic surged. I felt it. Felt it. His truth became mine, golden threads wrapped in Starfire that echoed through the bond forming between us like a second heartbeat.

The Knight Eternal nodded once. “Then you are to be bound immediately.” His body shivered, a flicker of shadow curling off his skin like mist. He turned to me, and for the first time, I saw his true face—not the warrior-king, not the death-lord. Just a man. Oberon Polaris. Kassio’s father. Death Mage. Necromancer. Revenant.

A tired, noble, broken man.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “For setting me free.” He collapsed.

The prince—Kassio, Devin’s oldest friend and heir to The Spire throne—rushed forward, catching his father’s body before it hit the floor. But it was already too late.

The darkness was gone, burned away by my magic. So was the life it had preserved. The Knight Eternal dissolved into soft, swirling shadows—and then nothing.

Silence crashed over the room.

Jarrik lay smoking on the floor, moaning faintly. Void take the asshole. I hoped he was in pain.

The remaining nobles staggered back, shaken, their illusions gone, their lies exposed. None dared speak.

Devin crossed the distance to me in three long strides, his hands cradling my face, his lips pressing to my forehead. “Cleo,” he breathed. “What did you do?”

“I told the truth,” I whispered, my voice still vibrating with residual magic.

From the side of the room, someone clapped.

Slow. Cackling.

My tutor—Elarra, Mistress of Broken Oaths—popped up from behind a column where she’d taken cover, brushing soot from her sleeves. “Marvelous,” she said. “Absolutely magnificent. No one’s seen a Nova’s Requiem in centuries. Worth every second.”

She gave me a wink. “Bit early in your education, but we’ll adjust.”

“Elarra...” Kassio growled.

“Oh hush, your father’s final command was quite clear,” she said, twirling a smoking wand. “The girl burns, the boy broods, and the two of them are to be bound before the next damn sunset.” She turned to us with a grin. “To the Void with you both. Let the bond be sealed. Preferably before you level another historical monument.”

I blinked. “Wait—now?” Jarrick had warned me that I might be wearing my wedding gown.

Devin’s arm wrapped around my waist. “Now.”

I could still feel the spell humming in my veins. But something inside me—something ancient, sacred, and undeniably mine—whispered that this was only the beginning.

And I was ready.

14

~ Devin ~

I'd never feared magic.

Not the twisted kind that danced from revenant blades, not the deathlight I carved from the Veil, not even the whispering rot that clawed at my soul when I reached too deep. I was born to it. Molded in it. I'd watched kingdoms fall under the weight of magic and never blinked.

But standing before the Void—emptiness radiating from the abyss—I understood what it meant to be afraid. The Void was the unspeakable darkness where true destruction lived. The Rift was a tear in the fabric of reality, the opening our enemies used to attack Lunaterra, to harvest souls. The magical gate our ancestors built inside the Spire was covered in glowing runes, magic and ritual used to hold the gate, seal the opening, keep our world safe from the ravenous dark entities that forced humans, like Cleo, to flee their home world, their ancient Earth.

The Rift loomed like a scar carved into reality itself. A towering arch of bone-white stone and obsidian black, each stone etched with runes that shimmered like breath on a winter morning. Light and shadow warred across its surface in a constant dance, runes pulsing like the beat of a dying heart.

It wasn't just a portal. It was a wound. A tear in the world's skin that bled possibility and madness.

And it was awake. I could feel it watching.

Cleo stood beside me, her hair still laced with gold light from the spell she'd unleashed. Nova's Requiem. The spell of legends. The power of ancient queens. She had become something radiant in that moment—something divine. Yet... her Starfire hadn't touched me.

It had swept through the hall like a celestial tide, burning the lies off Jarrik and his sycophants, peeling the darkness from the Knight Eternal's soul, and yet... it hadn't grazed me. Hadn't even noticed me.

Why?

I'd watched her stand in the center of that storm, eyes blazing, skin crowned in flame, and felt her power roll over me like a promise. And still... nothing.

Not a flicker. Not a whisper of recognition. Was even her magic avoiding me? Was the darkness in me so deep it made me invisible to light?

"You're brooding," Cleo murmured, not looking at me. Her hand found mine, fingers slipping between mine with effortless familiarity. "That's a new record. It's been what—ten minutes since something crazy happened?"

I forced a smile. "Just taking in the ambiance."

She snorted. "You mean the ancient soul-eating gate at the center of the world? The one we're now supposed to have sex in front of?"

"That would be the one."

Ahead of us, Elarra waited by the ritual chalice, which sat on a pedestal of what

looked like petrified bone and crystal. Her hunched form seemed smaller here, the room swallowing her shape in shadow. She'd been strange from the beginning—flamboyant, madcap, brilliant. The kind of teacher who laughed during curses and offered cupcakes after necromantic theory.

I'd trusted her. She and Kassio were the last ones I trusted.

“Come,” she croaked. “Stand together. Hands over the bowl, lovers. Let the blood remember what the soul already knows.”

Cleo arched a brow at me. “That's not creepy at all.”

We moved as one.

My hand trembled slightly as I unsheathed the ritual knife. Not from fear. From something older. Instinct.

I ignored it.

Cleo held out her hand without hesitation, eyes steady.

We cut.

Our blood mingled with the sacred herbs and wine already in the chalice, swirling into a deep crimson gold that shimmered with threads of both fire and shadow. What flowed from us wasn't just blood. It was truth. It was the bond.

Elarra's hands moved fast—too fast—as she lifted the chalice and poured the mixture across the stones beneath the Rift.

The runes ignited.

Now she would leave us. I would undress my new bride, claim her here, in the ritual chamber, our magic would bind us to the runes, reseal the Rift. But Lunaterra needed time. Time to train more Death Mages. Recruit more Vampires and Necromancers. Find more mates for our people. More power.

The runes burned. But not with gold, nor the violet flame of my magic. Not with light.

They turned black. Veil-black. Rift black. Void black.

Wrong.

Cleo flinched beside me. “Something’s not right.”

The Rift hummed . Deep. Hungry. The kind of sound you felt in your ribs before it reached your ears.

“Elarra?” I stepped forward. “What are you?—”

She straightened and shed her disguise like a snake sloughing its skin. Gone was the hunched old woman in velvet robes and bird-skull pins. In her place stood a goddess of ruin. Queen Solenna.

Her robes shimmered with runes that moved like serpents across the fabric. Her hair fell in silver waves, her skin pale as moonlight, her lips blood-red. Her eyes...

I remembered those eyes. Eyes that once watched me with love. Now, they burned with something far colder. Hatred. The kind of disdain one could only feel after a broken heart. Betrayal. She’d wanted me to open the Void for her. Instead, I’d tried to kill her. That was more than a hundred years ago.

“Hello, my love,” she purred.

Cleo gasped beside me.

I stepped forward, shadows coiling around my hands. “Solenna.”

“Still so handsome,” she murmured. “Still so broken.”

“Who are you?” Cleo’s voice sharpened. “Solenna? I thought your name was Elarra?”

Solenna turned, and her smile widened. “This, little star, is the truth you’ve been too naïve to see. You were never meant to seal the Rift. You were meant to open it. Starborn blood. Death Mage soul. A bond of light and shadow? The perfect key.”

Cleo’s eyes widened. “You lied. You trained me. You showed me where to find the book. You knew I’d read it. You wanted the king to die.”

Solenna cackled, hysteria and insanity in the sound. “I taught you how to reach your power. Fed you tales of legacy and hope. All so you’d walk willingly into the jaws of destiny.”

The runes flared brighter. Pain bloomed in my chest. My knees buckled.

I reached for Cleo—found her shaking. Her light was pouring out of her. Not in controlled flares. Not with intention. With power.

In loss.

Cleo screamed.

The Rift drank it in, greedily, hungrily, veins of gold and black lashing out from the stone like lightning.

“No!” I tried to cast—but the magic slipped through my fingers like water. My link to the Veil... fractured. The spell draining me was old. Older than Revenants. It had my soul by the throat. Our blood bound us to Elarra’s dark spell.

Cleo dropped to one knee, breath ragged. “I... I can’t...breathe...”

“You’re killing her!” I roared.

“I’m freeing her,” Solenna snapped. “From the lies of balance. From the shackles of false gods. From you.”

I forced myself forward—each step a war. My body felt unmade. “Why didn’t her light burn me?” I gasped.

Solenna’s eyes glittered. “Because you never let it. Because deep down, you still believe you’re cursed. And curses, my dear, protect themselves.”

Cleo screamed again.

The Rift cracked, the sound like thunder inside the chamber.

Beyond the gate, something moved. Massive. Shifting. A shadow with a hundred eyes. A god that had forgotten its name.

Solenna reached toward it. “I’ve waited five hundred years for this,” she whispered.

“No,” I snarled. “You waited five hundred years for me.”

I pulled everything. Every shard of shadow. Every scream of the soul. Every drop of death I'd hoarded in my cursed veins. And I unleashed it.

It wasn't elegant. It wasn't beautiful. But it worked.

The pedestal shattered. The chalice exploded. The runes flickered—and fought back.

The Rift didn't close. But it recoiled.

Cleo collapsed against me. Her skin was fever-hot. Her veins glowed with light.

I caught her. Held her. Glared up at the woman who had once taught me how to love... and then betrayed everything love meant.

“This isn't over,” I spat.

Solenna laughed, stepping backward into the undulating mouth of the Rift. She stepped through the crack in reality, into the seam. “Of course not. The first act is never the last.”

And then she was gone. The Rift pulsed once. Fell silent.

Cleo trembled in my arms, unconscious but breathing.

The gate was still open. The Rift was wider. Not sealed. But my bond with Cleo? Shattered.

Solenna, the woman I once trusted with my soul, had used both of us to start the end of the world.

I'd barely gotten Cleo into my arms before the Rift screamed.

It wasn't a sound, not really—more like a vibration that shattered the world from the inside out. The floor beneath me buckled, stones cracking in a perfect circle around the portal. Light and shadow flared along the arch, the runes pulsing faster, out of rhythm—panic, pain, power too wild to be held.

And then they came through. Not in one wave. In layers .

The first were shadows—figures of smoke and bone, slipping through the cracks like spilled ink. They had too many limbs, no eyes, mouths that split vertically like ruptured skin. They didn't move like men. They slithered, twisted, glided, dragging chains made of sound.

One screamed, and I felt blood leak from my ear.

Cleo stirred in my arms, unconscious but glowing faintly. Her light was pulling them in like a beacon.

They wanted her.

I stood, pain shrieking in every joint, and stepped between her and the oncoming tide.

They paused. Not because they feared me—but because they recognized me. One of their own. Half-cursed. Part-shadow. Almost broken.

I met their gaze—if they had one—and summoned what was left of my magic. Deathlight flickered in my veins, sickly and dim.

I was nearly dry. The drain from the false ritual had gutted me. But I'd die on my feet before I let them touch her.

“Come on,” I hissed, lifting both hands. “Let's finish this.”

They came. Faster than thought. A blur of limbs and talons and memory . One touched the edge of my magic and screamed , unraveling into black ash and jagged light.

But more poured in. Behind them, the Rift widened . The arch strained, runes burning blood-red, and something massive moved just beyond.

I glimpsed it—just once.

A god, if gods were made of teeth and silence. Its form was wrong , shifting, folding in on itself and reforming, eyes opening where there were no faces. It hadn't crossed the threshold, but it wanted to.

And it was using her light to anchor itself.

Cleo's chest flared, and a bolt of gold fire erupted into the air.

It arced across the ceiling, struck the stone, and carved a glowing sigil in midair.

I felt it. A heartbeat. Not mine. Not hers. Ours.

My knees buckled. The ground cracked again. The Rift pulsed once, twice—and vomited another wave of creatures.

These were different. Larger. More complete.

Wraithborn, but not twisted by madness— perfected . Controlled. Armored in shadow. Their blades were made of weeping metal, their robes stitched from stolen names. One stepped forward and looked at me—and smiled .

Not friendly. Recognition.

Brother. It's voice slithered into my mind.

I spat blood. "Not in this lifetime."

He raised his blade. I realized too late—I couldn't beat them. Not alone. Not even with all my power at full strength.

And Cleo... Cleo was dying . Drained, fading, burning up from within. The Rift was taking her. I had minutes. Maybe seconds. The darkness wasn't just pressing in.

It was winning.

15

~ C leo ~

Pain was the first thing I felt—a searing, all-consuming fire that coursed through every fiber of my being. It wasn't just physical; it was as if my very essence was being unraveled, thread by thread.

I opened my eyes to chaos.

The Rift loomed before me, a gaping wound in reality, its towering arch of obsidian and bone-white stone pulsing with malevolent energy. The runes etched into its surface flickered erratically, casting eerie shadows that danced like specters.

From within the Rift, horrors emerged—twisted, wraith-like creatures with limbs that defied anatomy, eyes that glowed with a hunger for destruction. They moved with a predatory grace, their forms shifting and undulating as they advanced.

Devin stood between me and the oncoming tide, his stance defiant despite the exhaustion etched into his features. Shadows coiled around him, a dark aura that both repelled and attracted the creatures.

I tried to rise, but my limbs were like lead. The ritual had drained me, siphoning my Starfire until only embers remained.

But then, amidst the cacophony, I felt it—a tether, fragile yet unbreakable, connecting me to Devin. It pulsed with a rhythm that wasn't mine alone. Our bond, though

fractured, still existed.

I reached for it, drawing strength from the connection.

"Devin," I whispered, my voice barely audible over the din.

He turned, eyes meeting mine, and in that instant, understanding passed between us.

We couldn't defeat this darkness separately.

But together...

I summoned the remnants of my Starfire, the light within me flaring to life. Devin's shadows responded, intertwining with my light in a dance as old as time.

We moved as one, stepping towards the Rift. The creatures hesitated, sensing the shift in power.

Hand in hand, we channeled our energies, our souls merging in a harmony of light and shadow. The fusion was seamless, a perfect balance that neither overwhelmed nor diminished.

A blinding radiance erupted from us, a beacon that pushed back the encroaching darkness. The creatures shrieked, their forms disintegrating under the combined force of our magic.

The Rift trembled, its edges fraying as if reality itself sought to reject the abomination it had become.

With a final surge, we directed our unified power into the heart of the Rift. The runes on the arch flared brilliantly before dimming, the portal sealing with a resounding

boom.

Silence fell.

We collapsed, the fusion dissipating, leaving us separate yet irrevocably changed.

Our bond was no longer just emotional—it was elemental.

We had become one to save our world.

Time unraveled.

I couldn't tell where Devin ended and I began.

There was no breath, no heartbeat—only light and shadow interlaced so tightly, they became something new.

Something infinite.

I stood—no, we stood—fused in will, in power, in soul. One being. One pulse. Starfire and deathlight twined together in a perfect, terrible harmony.

The Rift screamed.

The arch flared with spiraling runes that twisted in pain, in resistance, in hunger. Creatures still poured through—fanged horrors with smoke for skin, memories for mouths, and claws made of regret. They lunged, shrieking.

I raised my hand.

So did he.

And we burned .

The light wasn't gold.

The shadow wasn't black.

It was both. Everything . We were the line between worlds, the blade drawn across a dying god's throat, the promise that love could defy fate.

Our fused magic surged outward in a wave that seared the air, turning Shadowborne into ash and truth . They didn't just die—they were unmade . Erased from the memory of the Rift itself.

They screamed as they vanished.

And still we pressed forward, toward the heart of the arch.

The runes resisted, flickering red and silver, groaning as we stepped into the threshold.

Then—we touched the stone.

With one hand.

Together.

The arch shuddered .

A burst of heat and chill erupted through the room as our joined magic branded itself into the stone, searing a new seal— our seal—into the very bones of the gate. Not a glyph. Not a rune.

A soulprint.

His mark.

Mine.

Interlocked, bound, eternal.

The Rift howled, the sound like the death of empires.

It tried to resist.

It fought us.

The arch cracked. The air trembled. Something vast and formless on the other side reached out?—

—and we said no.

Our joined magic flared brighter than the stars, a final detonation of light and dark that drove the godling scream back into its prison.

And then?—

Silence.

The runes went dark.

The archstone cooled beneath our hand.

The Rift... closed.

Not healed.

But contained.

Like a wound bandaged, still festering, still dangerous—but no longer bleeding into the world.

We collapsed in a heap of light and shadow and breath.

Two again.

But never the same.

~ Devin ~

I came back to myself with the taste of starlight in my mouth.

The floor was cold beneath me—stone veined with blood and ancient magic. My limbs felt foreign, heavy, too full and too empty all at once. My body remembered the fire. My soul remembered the light.

And when I closed my eyes...

I saw it.

Not shadow. Not the familiar comfort of darkness.

Light.

Warm. Golden. Endless.

I opened my eyes with a gasp, half expecting it to be a dream. But she was there. Lying beside me, her hair a tangle of burnished flame, her skin still glowing faintly with magic that wasn't entirely her own anymore.

Cleo.

She stirred, a soft sound in the back of her throat. Her eyes fluttered open—and for a moment, I saw the Rift reflected in them. Depthless. Wild. Sacred.

She turned to me, and her voice was a whisper. “I can hear them.”

I reached for her hand. “Who?”

“The shadows.” Her fingers curled into mine. “They’re quiet. But they’re still there. Like they’re... watching.”

I should’ve panicked.

I didn’t.

Because I could feel it too.

Not the way she did—no whispers in the dark—but a presence . A tether. Our bond had snapped into place with a finality that went deeper than blood or vow.

We weren’t just connected.

We were fused.

Two souls no longer separate.

“I see light,” I said softly. “When I blink. When I breathe. Like your fire got stuck under my skin.”

She gave a small smile. “You’re welcome.”

A laugh escaped me, breathless and raw.

Footsteps echoed through the chamber.

Kassio emerged from the shadows at the edge of the hall, cloak torn, one arm bleeding, but upright. He looked at the Rift—silent, sealed—and then at us. His expression was unreadable.

“You two,” he said, his voice flat, “are either insane... or gods.”

“We’ve been called worse,” I muttered.

He knelt beside us and dropped a satchel between us. “Water. Salve. Runes to monitor your pulse.”

Cleo tilted her head. “No cupcakes?”

Kassio arched a brow. “You just fused your souls in front of a sleeping apocalypse and closed a gate no one’s touched since the Sundering. I think I get to skip the baked goods.”

Cleo grinned.

Kassio’s expression softened, just a touch. “The Tower is reeling. The Circle is fractured. But they saw it. What you did.”

He looked at the gate. Then at us.

“I declare you,” he said, standing tall, “the Watchers of the Rift.”

The words settled like truth in the air.

Heavy.

Binding.

Right.

Cleo’s grip tightened in mine.

As his voice echoed into silence, I turned my gaze back to the Rift.

It was closed.

But not quiet.

Not gone .

Deep inside, beyond the threshold where light and shadow had danced their final war, something stirred.

Not a creature.

Not a nightmare.

A will.

Awake.

Waiting.

Cleo felt it too—I saw it in her eyes.

It would come.

And when it did, we'd be ready.

Because now... we were more than cursed.

We were bound.

And we burned.

Together.

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16

E pilogue

~ Cleo, Three Weeks Later ~

The wind off the eastern cliffs smelled like salt and sunlight and summer.

I stood on the balcony of The Spire's highest tower, looking out across the sea of clouds as the first rays of dawn lit the world in gold. The Spire had more scars now—burned stone, fractured runes—but it still stood. And so did we.

Behind me, Devin was naked in our bed, pretending to be asleep.

He never slept deeply, not really. Not with the Rift's echoes always whispering at the back of his mind. But he liked to lie in bed after sunrise, sheets tangled around his hips, watching me through half-lidded eyes like a dragon guarding treasure.

He called it peace.

I called it heaven.

I turned to lean on the balustrade. My fingers glowed faintly in the morning light. Starfire hummed under my skin, quiet but alive. Since the Rift, it was never fully still anymore. But it didn't frighten me. I'd learned to live with it.

Like I'd learned to live with him.

“I can feel you brooding,” Devin appeared from behind the curtain of a stone archway, barefoot, shirtless, a cup of tea in one hand and a book in the other. Void take me, he was gorgeous. Sexy.

I grinned. “I thought you were asleep.”

He kissed the side of my neck. “You thought wrong .”

His arms slid around me from behind, warm and familiar. I leaned into his chest and let the quiet settle around us. Just for a moment. I was contemplating in which position I wanted to take his cock when the knock came.

Soft. Hesitant. Unfamiliar. A woman’s voice. “Excuse me? Prince Kassio said I’d find Cleo up here?”

Devin stiffened behind me. I turned.

The woman standing in the doorway was dressed in road-worn leathers and travel-stained boots. Her cloak was faded blue, pinned with an old, chipped brooch in the shape of a crescent star. Her hair was golden brown and braided over one shoulder, streaked with silver at the temples. She looked like someone who had run for most of her life—and learned to survive by watching everything .

But it was her eyes that made my breath catch.

They were mine .

She opened her mouth and whispered, “Cleo.”

My knees gave out. My magic sang in recognition. My cells ignited with sacred knowledge. “Mother.” I barely made it to her before the tears overtook me.

We collapsed into each other—mother and daughter—clinging, crying, laughing and apologizing all at once. She smelled like wildflowers and wind and the kind of love I'd dreamed about in broken dreams and half-remembered lullabies.

"I had to leave you," she whispered into my hair. "They were hunting me. The dark mages, the fae... anyone who knew your father's bloodline. I took you to the city. The chaos there would hide your light until it was safe."

I pulled back, blinking tears. "You knew what I was."

"I knew," she said softly, cupping my cheek. "Your father... he bound your blood. Locked it away until you met the one who could awaken it."

She looked over my shoulder. Straight at Devin. "I'm guessing that was you." Her lips trembled. "Your father had the sight. He said you'd be claimed by a Death Mage with blue hair."

I turned to see Devin standing there, quiet and wide-eyed. And for once in his life, he looked completely lost.

She stepped forward and pulled him into a hug. "You saved her. Just like her father hoped you would."

I caught her hand, partially because I needed the contact. Mostly to save my poor husband. "Do you know where he is? My father? Is he still alive?"

She looked away. "He vanished when you were a baby. Said he had to find the key to closing the the Void forever. He said I would know you were safe... when the light called the shadow and the world didn't end."

My throat tightened. "So... maybe he's still alive?"

She smiled. “Starborn never die easy.”

I led her into the room, where Devin poured her tea like it was his duty now, and asked if she’d stay. Attend the prince Kassio’s coronation. Be part of our life in at The Spire.

She looked between us, at the gentle touch of Devin’s hand on my hip, and said yes.

Not because she needed refuge. But because, for the first time, she wasn’t running anymore.

We walked her to her new rooms—small but warm, overlooking the tower’s southern gardens, where the moonflowers bloomed even in the dark. My mother touched everything like it was sacred: the bed’s carved posts, the hearth, the stained glass in the far window that cast rainbows onto the walls.

She turned to me at the threshold. “He’s a good one,” she said quietly. “That man of yours.”

I smiled. “I know.”

She leaned in and kissed my forehead. “And thank you... for letting me come back.”

The magic in me stirred.

No lies.

Even now, with the gift of Nova’s Requiem still glowing beneath my skin—always pulsing, always listening—I felt no deceit in her. Not a flicker. She had run, yes. But not out of weakness. Out of love.

I kissed her cheek. “Rest. We’ll have years to catch up.”

And then I left her there—safe, for the first time in two decades.

I didn't make it halfway down the corridor before arms wrapped around my waist and spun me gently around.

Devin.

His eyes were blazing, pupils wide, hunger and wonder and disbelief all fighting for room on his face. "I won't let her take you away from me. I can't."

"I'm yours. Always."

He laughed softly, burying his face in the curve of my neck. "She's staying?"

"She's staying."

His arms tightened. "I don't think I deserve you."

I pulled back just enough to look into his eyes. "You're an idiot."

"I'm your idiot," he said.

And then his hands framed my face, and his voice dropped, raw and quiet.

"I love you."

It wasn't rushed or poetic. It was simple. Pure.

"I love you more than breath. More than fate. More than the magic that tried to keep us apart. I will love you in shadow and in fire, in silence and in war. You are my truth, Cleo. My light. My end."

My heart stuttered.

“Your end?” I said, pretending to frown. “Not your beginning?”

“Both,” he said. “Everything.”

I reached up and tangled my fingers in his hair. “I love you, Devin Grimm. I always have. Even when I said I’d rather marry an orc than kiss you.”

He grinned, wicked and beautiful. “I’ve been waiting for you to take that back.”

“Make me.”

He kissed me. The kind of kiss that rewrote worlds.

It was heat and hunger, promise and possession. It wasn’t gentle. It wasn’t careful. It was the collision of two souls that had already fused once—and would do it again, a thousand times, in love and in war and in wonder.

He carried me to our bedchamber, lifted my skirts, and thrust his cock deep. I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on. Enjoyed the ride. The pleasure. The hard, fast thrusts of his hips, the bunching muscles that held me exactly where he wanted me.

He swallowed my scream with a kiss and filled me with his seed. When we broke apart, breathless and dazed, I touched his cheek and whispered, “I take it back. You are far superior to an orc.”