



To Sway A Rival (Tempting Thieves #9)

Author: *M.J Iorkighir*

Category: Fantasy

Description: A low stakes rival to lovers, hybrid vampires, and friendly dragons fantasy romance

Two determined thieves, and a quest through a dragon filled forest.

If Morai Stoneheart loves anything, it's besting a Heathrow. The rivalry between their thieving guilds started long before Morai and Luka, but if you ask her, they do it best. Their families live right next to one another, to keep the competition close. Neither is getting away with much unless they're very clever.

So, when Morai falls for Luka, she doesn't tell her family. In fact, she doesn't even tell Luka. If she can just pull off one final job, she can establish her own guild, and live guilt free—with whomever she wants. But to pull off the heist, she'll have to outwit her strongest rival—him.

Luka Heathrow is an excellent thief. But try as he might, he's never quite been able to abscond with his true love's heart. And it's not just because she's a Stoneheart. Luka has responsibilities. As the first born, he's destined to take over the family guild. What's more, if anyone discovers his healing magic, he'll be carted off to the temple of Rapha, never to see the outside world again.

It feels impossible, but Luka can't seem to let Morai go. So, when she tries to steal an elixir from the mage tower, he thwarts her plans. But thieving inside one's own city is illegal. When they're caught, as punishment, the head mage sends Morai and Luka on a wild quest.

Trekking through an enchanted forest filled with dragons and a plethora of magical creatures, Morai and Luka must work together to secure a rare ingredient for the mage. But the farther they stray into the woods, the more it becomes clear they need to be honest with one another. Because the forest isn't as charming or innocuous as it seems. It's breathing around them, literally.

Total Pages (Source): 27

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:57 pm

The night was warm and quiet.

The mage tower sat like a looming giant in the backdrop of the city equally as quiet as the night, a perfect time to steal.

Morai paused and stared up at the flight of stairs she had yet to climb.

Muttering under her breath about the endless stairs, she clutched the clover pendant that hung around her neck, reminding herself of her true reason for doing this—aside from the massive paycheck, of course.

Luka had given her the clover after he'd returned from one of his jobs.

At the time she'd refused it thinking he was just doing it to taunt her.

Luka had thrown it away, but Morai had searched for it and taken it back.

Now covered in resin, she wore it as a constant reminder as to why she wanted to move away from her family.

Not that she hated her family or anything like that, she loved her family.

However, she was growing weary of the endless feud between her family and Luka's—a rivalry that had lasted for generations, keeping her from doing what she truly wanted.

It first started with one of her long-dead ancestors who at the time was best friends

with the Heathrows, but then something happened.

Morai wasn't sure what happened exactly, but it was enough for their friendship to deteriorate to rivals.

And it only intensified once her ancestor established a thieving guild, but the Heathrows claimed that they were the first ones to establish a guild in the now prestigious city of Linden.

Said guilds were right next to each other.

The rivalry or competition, if you will, trickled down to the most mundane of things, and that was somehow carried on through generations.

So, this quest was her last chance to get the money she needed to move away from all the rivalry.

Of course, she had plans after she moved, and she hoped her parents would agree.

With a sigh, Morai tucked the pendant under her shirt, wiped sweat from her brow, then proceeded up the stairs again.

Born into a family of thieves, Morai was raised to be a good thief.

She didn't consider herself to be one of the best out there, it was presumptuous to think she was.

She knew someone out there would always be better than her, but Morai thrived to be better than who she was yesterday.

And as long as she was better than Luka, she'll be fine.

Being better meant she could outsmart him.

She smirked at that, she'd bested him just a few weeks back when she'd stolen a book of magic he'd been commissioned to steal.

The thought of Luka had her frowning.

She hadn't seen him at all in the past week.

Was he on a quest? One she didn't know about? Morai always knew what quest he was on, thanks to her friend, Neoni, who belonged to an information guild.

Sometimes, he would gloat to her directly about snagging a quest before she did.

And since she was always determined to outsmart him, she'd make it her mission to finish his task before he could.

Morai smiled, then shook herself, mortified that she was even thinking about him.

Pausing at a large wooden door at the top of the tower, Morai furrowed her brow, wondering not for the first time if this was a trap.

There had been no guards since she arrived, but this was the mage tower, where all kinds of research on magic and alchemy ensued.

She had assumed there were other kinds of security around the building.

So far, she'd seen nothing, which made her increasingly suspicious.

Unless the security was of a magical nature, which would be detrimental to her since she could not sense magic or even use it.

But nothing had happened to alert anyone to her presence...yet.

Easing the door open, Morai stood in the threshold, waiting for an alarm to blare or something to jump out.

But nothing happened.

Did someone else disarm the alarms? Or get the elixir before she did? No, that wasn't possible.

With cautious steps, she entered the room, the mana stones attached to the walls lit up casting the space in a dull blue light.

Morai had been specifically commissioned to steal an elixir that was kept here, and always up for a challenge, she seized the opportunity.

It wasn't wise to steal from your own city, there was even a law banning it, but she'd been getting bored just sitting at home and helping to manage the guild with her younger brother.

Something she didn't want to do, and she threw it at him at the first opportunity with glee.

Not to mention the pay was 100,000 gold.

Who would turn down that many coins? Also, Morai needed the money, she was getting tired of doing smaller thieving jobs that paid way less.

But once she got this job done, she'll finally meet her quota, along with the presentation she'd already prepared to give her parents.

Hopefully, they'll see reason and let her move to the capital city.

It's not that she needed their permission to move or anything, but for her parents to let her move, she'd have to prove to them that she could take care of herself away from family.

Morai walked towards the dais that was again, suspiciously in the middle of the room, with moonlight directly on top of it, screaming for all the kingdom to see.

The elixir sat in a vial on the dais.

With a grin, she walked towards it.

Since she had been specifically asked to do it, Morai assumed she was the only one assigned to the job.

So, imagine her surprise when she sensed, rather than saw, a dart shooting across the room towards her hand that was reaching for the elixir.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:57 pm

two

Morai

Morai jerked her hand back. The dart sailed past and lodged itself into the wall. She spun around, ready to fight whoever had shown up, only for her stance to relax a little. She scowled at the intruder.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. Luka Heathrow, the almost bane to her existence, grinned at her as he pulled on the rope that was attached to his dart, dislodging it, and sailed back to him. He wiped it and sheathed it back on his belt with other numerous darts.

“I should be asking you that, shouldn’t I?” he asked, looking around the room, a lock of his black hair falling over his eye. His silver gray eyes finally met hers, and he grinned again. Morai rolled her eyes even as her heart sped up.

“I was here first,” she said, folding her arms across her chest.

“And yet the elixir still stands,” he said. Morai turned a fraction to look at the elixir, wondering how she could take it before Luka got to it. To be fair, she was closer to it than he was, but she knew he always had a trick up his sleeves. Morai shut her eyes, thinking through scenarios, she opened her eyes to find Luka watching her.

“Thinking of a scenario?” Luka smirked when Morai glared at him instead of answering. “You know I’ll get it before you do.”

“I’d like to see you try.” Morai lifted her chin, and Luka grinned.

This is as another reason she wanted to move, while she didn’t mind a bit of competition, Morai and her siblings were carrying on the legacy of rivalry, and now Morai felt she was way in too deep to pull out. Because she wanted to. She wasn’t just tired of constantly competing; the real reason, though it horrified her to admit it, was that she liked Luka—more than just liked him. Imagine her horror when she found out why her heart raced whenever she saw him, or that she wanted to run her fingers through his curly jet-black hair. And his silver-gray eyes that now twinkled at her, daring her to make a move. Morai swallowed, glancing back at the elixir. This was something she was absolutely not going to admit to anyone, especially to Luka. She knew her family would throw a fit if they found out. She threw a fit when she realized her feelings for him so much so that she went on a thieving spree in the neighboring kingdom. At least she got paid for it, and it helped her to save enough money to almost reach her goal. But Morai was hoping that if she put an end to the competing spirit, she might have a chance with Luka. In truth, she had considered giving up and trying to forget him. Her parents’ disapproval was one of the reasons she had considered it, but that didn’t sit well with her. They had taught her to go after what she wanted no matter the cost, and she couldn’t fathom giving up without at least trying. That’s why she had devised an elaborate plan to save enough money and hoped her presentation to her parents would help her make the move.

“You didn’t answer my question. What are you doing here?” Morai tried not to be self-conscious about her attire. Luka had seen her numerous times in it, but that never stopped her from feeling self-conscious. She wore her usual light attire, a long-sleeved shirt with a drab color, with matching pants, and ankle boots. Her curly hair was maneuvered into a huge bun at the nape of her neck. While her clothing was drab, it was practical, and easy to move in. Thankfully, the sweat had dried, but she still felt icky.

“You didn’t answer mine either.”

“Luka?”

“Morai?” His eyes shifted from her to behind her.

“Looks like someone decided to pit us against each other again,” he said with a tsk. Morai lifted her chin with a grin.

“This wouldn’t be the first time,” she said to which Luka smiled.

“When did you get yours?” she asked. Luka’s smile turned into a beam as he waved a parchment in the air.

“A week ago.”

“A week?”

“Yep. When did you get yours?” She wasn’t going to tell him she got hers a day ago. Her silence made him smile.

“Ah, looks like I won.”

“Uh, no. I got here first, and would have taken it if your stupid dart hadn’t been in the way.” Luka full on beamed this time.

“But I didn’t cut you now, did I?” Morai fumed in silence. Luka unfortunately had a scar on the back of his hand when she’d thrown a dart at him, when he’d tried to steal something, she had her sights on. While she succeeded in stealing it, mostly because Luka was writhing in pain, she’d felt bad for wounding him. She’d been training to be more accurate ever since.

Luka frowned at the dais.

“Don’t you think it’s suspicious how it’s just out here in the open for anyone to take?” Morai nodded. Turning away from Luka, she faced the dais. It was probably a bad move, but she didn’t care. Perhaps someone had set up a trap that would be triggered if anyone took the elixir. She wasn’t surprised that Luka was here, just annoyed. Knowing about their rivalry, people would give them the same jobs and then bet with each other to see who would get it completed first. What bothered her was that she got the job a week after Luka. Was he visiting...she squashed the thought before it could grip her mind. There had been a rumor years ago that Luka and a girl in a neighboring city were courting. But Morai had never met the girl, and since Luka neither confirmed nor denied it, the rumor had died. But that didn’t stop Morai from occasionally worrying about it. And she’d rather cut out her tongue than ask. Morai shot out a hand, halting Luka in his tracks as he approached her while she was deep in thought. She took a deep breath, inhaling the woody spicy scent that clung to him. Shaking herself, she asked,

“Why did it take you a week to get here?” The mage tower was in the center of the city and wasn’t that far from their guilds. Luka shrugged.

“Was on another job when I got it. But I wanted to complete that first.” Morai frowned up at him, she had to tilt her head back to do so, since he was standing behind her. He flashed a smile.

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Morai.” She scoffed, looking back to the dais.

“You’re not thinking of getting it first, are you?” she asked.

“Was just getting a closer look,” he said. Morai gave him a doubtful look.

“It’s true. Something seems off.” Too bad neither of them could use magic to see what the trap was. Magic was more like a talent. Either you were born with it, or you weren’t. Of course, with enough schooling, one could use magic but learning to use

magic if one couldn't use mana was difficult and most didn't succeed.

"There aren't any traps," Luka said. Morai glanced at him again.

"And you know this how?" He shrugged.

"I just do." Morai sighed, she wasn't going to push him if he didn't want to answer. She had more important things to do like steal an elixir.

"Maybe we should grab it and see what happens," she said.

"Be my guest." Morai tensed. She knew if she reached for it first, Luka would do something to stop her. Well, she could stop him too, if he tried anything. The tense silence stretched on, and Morai was well aware of his presence behind her. Then Luka sprung towards the dais, but Morai was ready for him. She tripped him with her foot, and reached for the elixir, but Luka grabbed her foot, pitching her forward. Using her hands, she stopped her head from hitting the dais.

"Are you trying to kill me?" she asked as Luka, who was still holding her foot, got up from the floor before letting go.

"I wouldn't dare. What would I possibly do without my Morai." Anger flashed in her eyes just as Luka knew it would. The first time he'd called her that was when she was still confused about her feelings for him.

"I am not yours," she said. Morai could just grab the vial, but Luka yanked her back towards him, using the back of her shirt. His arm wrapped around her waist, pinning her in place as he plucked the elixir off the dais.

"You retard," Morai said. She could feel the heat rise up to her cheeks at their closeness. What she wouldn't give to stay in his arms just a little longer. Morai

blinked; she really had it bad. Luka released her with a smile and was about to say something when a bellowing, like a horn, sounded.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:57 pm

three

Luka

“What is that?” Morai asked. Luka stepped away from her, looking around even as he wanted nothing more than to hold her in his arms again. He had to remind himself that she was not his, and never will be. It took effort to release her instead of just pulling her close. Shouts came from somewhere as Luka shoved the elixir in his bag. He’ll congratulate himself on a job well done later. Right now, they needed to get out of here before the guards arrived.

“We should leave,” he told Morai, who was already sprinting towards the door, she pulled it open and disappeared. Looking down at his bag to make sure the clasp was in place, he knew Morai would find a way to get to it, before following her outside. He caught up with her as they ran the rest of the way down the winding staircase. The blasted horn sounded so loud that Luka was positive the shouts they heard came from the townspeople and not the guards. When they reached the door, Luka could see that a few people were making their way out of their homes, pointing at the tower. Thankfully, the mage tower was situated high above the ground so that people couldn’t see them.

“Hey! What are you doing?” he called to Morai, who’d walked across the corridor and was straddling the wall that backed into the forest that took you to the outskirts of the city.

“I’m not about to let them see me. It’s bad enough that I broke the rule of not stealing in your own city. I don’t have to announce it.” Makes sense. Luka looked down at the

townspeople with a frown. There were still no guards. Following Morai's lead, he straddled the wall. She was already on the other side of the wall, waiting for him. A warm feeling expanded in his chest at that. Ignoring the feeling, he shoved his bag in front of him so he could land without crushing the elixir, he hoisted himself up the wall and landed with a roll and sprang back up. Before he could regain his bearings, he felt his bag give way. Morai had dashed off with his bag, leaving him holding only the strap.

"Mo..." Luka stopped himself from calling out just in case someone heard him. He ran after her with a stifled groan. Tree branches tugged and pulled at his clothes, the tree roots cascading across the floor slowed him down, and it was hard to see in the moonlight. But he saw Morai had the same problem. He chased after her. With his long legs, he gained more ground than she could. He made a grab for her, but Morai turned and threw his bag at him with a laugh. Grunting, Luka caught the bag, and stopped as Morai sped off, well, as fast as the tree roots would let her. Confused as to why she even threw the bag at him, Luka thrust his hand in the bag and cursed. She'd taken the elixir.

"Morai, you're so dead when I get you," he yelled, not caring if anyone heard, but by now they were far from the city that he was positive no one would. Scrambling after Morai, bag in hand, Luka heard the flap of wings behind him. He didn't dare turn, mostly because he was intent on catching Morai. He heard her yell, and what sounded like trashing before a thud sounded, he finally caught up to her. She was on the ground, her foot caught on a root. He grimaced as his hands began to itch, a sign that she needed healing.

"Are you hurt?" She glared at him.

"No, I'm just resting," she retorted, pulling her foot from the root with a grimace of pain. But once she was free, she didn't bother getting up. Was it that bad? Crouching, Luka inspected her foot, resisting the itch that demanded he heal her.

“It doesn’t look too bad,” he said. She gave him another glare before getting up from the ground. Belatedly, he realized he should have gotten the elixir from her while she was still on the ground.

“I was catching my breath,” she said, holding up the elixir with a triumphant glint in her eyes. Luka eyed it, wondering how to get it back from her. He also noticed she wasn’t putting any weight on her foot. He gritted his teeth.

“How bad is it?” he asked.

“It’s nothing serious,” Morai said. Luka frowned, and was going to suggest he would help her to get home when a whoo whoo sounded behind him.

“Is that....”

“....an owl,” Luka said, turning towards the sound, to find an owl gazing intently at them on its spot on a tree branch. Mundane creatures were rare and considered exotic. Only the wealthy could afford them, which meant whoever owned this owl was either a noble, wealthy merchant, or belonged to one of the tower mages. Luka shuddered at the last one; he didn’t like the tower mages mostly because they were quite snobbish.

“Why is there an owl here?” Morai asked, breaking into his thoughts.

“Probably belongs to one of those snubs,” he said, turning back to Morai.

“Doesn’t explain why it’s here and just watching,” she said. That was true, especially since it followed them as soon as they left the mage tower. Luka glanced back at the owl, then at Morai. She was staring at the owl distracted, the elixir loose in her hand. With her injured foot, he could grab it from her before she even knew it. He took a step towards her.

“Is it following us?” Morai asked.

“Who knows, it’s probably just some random owl,” he said, slowly reaching for the elixir. He snatched it from her and stepped several steps back.

“Gotcha,” he said. Morai groaned, just as he suspected she didn’t move.

“I got to that tower first. That bloody elixir is mine,” she said. He held it up in the air.

“Come and get it then.” Morai stared at her foot, then slowly put some weight on it.

“It’s not as bad as I thought,” she said with a mischievous grin. Lunging for him, her face twisted in pain, and she tumbled to the ground. Luka caught her before she could fall, but in the process, he’d let go of the elixir. The sound of glass shattering met their ears.

“Oops,” Luka said, with Morai still in his arms.

“Oops?” Morai said pushing away from him. “Oops, you just broke the one and only healing elixir and all you can say is oops?” Luka threw his hands in the air.

“What do you want me to do? Cry tears of blood.”

“Yes, actually, that would be preferable.” Luka sighed, looking down at the broken vial, its contents spilled to the ground, uselessly. Then a sinking feeling settled in his stomach. He’d failed a job. In all his twenty something years, he’d never ever failed a job. Well, sure, at times Morai bested him but the jobs were always completed, but this? It would be the first time either of them hadn’t completed one.

“What should we do?” Morai asked, looking at the broken vial and her ashen face. She was probably thinking the same thing.

“We could just tell him we failed,” Luka said with a shrug. How was he going to tell his parents that he’d failed a job? They would be livid.

“My parents are going to kill me,” Morai said. Luka felt some relief at that. At least he wasn’t the only one. “You and me both,” he said. Morai looked up at him, the same relief he’d felt in her eyes.

“I take it this is a first for you, too?” she asked. He nodded, and her shoulders relaxed a little, then tensed up.

“Does that mean it's a draw? We’ve never had a draw before.” The sound of the owl hooting brought them back to the present. There was no use standing here, he’d figure something out. Right now, he needed to get as far away from Morai so his hands could stop itching. No one needed to know he could use healing magic. At least not yet.

“I can take you home,” Luka offered. If she agreed, he could hopefully heal her without her noticing. Though that might be unlikely since his hands glowed when healing someone which would be a dead giveaway.

“I’m not accepting help from a rival,” Morai said, scrunching her nose.

“Fine.” Luka sighed, looking around. He found a sturdy branch on the ground and gave it to her. With one last look at the vial, they slowly made their way out of the forest. The owl watched them the whole time.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:57 pm

four

Morai

Morai tiptoed through the backdoor, though she shouldn't have bothered because as soon as she walked in the mana stone on the wall lit up, illuminating the house in a golden light. Her mother, who was sitting at the dining table, got up and rushed towards her.

"How did it go?" Her mother's hair, which was always in a braid and tied back in a yellow ribbon, swayed behind her. She'd received the ribbon as a gift from Morai, who'd bought it on one of her jobs in another city. Morai had seen how bright the color was, and the silky-smooth texture and thought it would be perfect for her mother. She wasn't wrong; it complimented her dark skin and hair quite well.

"I knew you'd be able to do it." Grabbing onto Morai's hands, her mother dragged her into a chair before Morai could speak.

Pulling down a bowl from the shelf, her mother filled it with soup, a soup that had a healing potion mixed in it. After every job, her mother always gave her and her siblings soup mixed with a healing potion regardless of whether they were hurt or not. Her mother placed the soup in front of Morai, who stared at it.

"Though when I heard the alarm, I was a bit worried." Morai's heart thudded in her chest. How was she going to tell her mother she'd failed? Never in her short life had she failed on a job before. Now she wished she hadn't told her mother about it. But the job had been a personal request from her client. Usually, they picked jobs from a

board at the guild, but once in a while they got personal requests. She didn't have to let her mother know since her parents had left her and her younger brother to run the guild in their place, but she also never kept anything from her mother, so telling her about the job was only natural.

"I've never seen an elixir before. Do you have it with you?" her mother was saying when Morai tuned back into the conversation. Plopping down on the chair opposite her, her mother propped her elbows on the table, hands under her chin. Her brown eyes, that were the same color as Morai's, sparkling as she waited for Morai to first taste her soup, then tell her what had happened. Morai cleared her throat and took a sip of the hot soup. It had chunks of meat and vegetables in it.

"It's good," Morai said. Her mother's food was always perfect.

"Of course it is. But how did it go? Is it in your pocket?" Losing her appetite, Morai pushed the bowl away from her.

"No, Mother, it didn't go as planned." Her mother frowned.

"What do you...don't tell me Luka showed up?" Morai stiffened.

"How did you..."

"Of course I know. I'm your mother. I know everything," she said with a huff. "So, what happened? Does he have it?" Morai's shoulders slumped.

"No, he doesn't. It broke."

"Oh, so neither of you got it?" Morai, who'd been looking at the bowl of soup this whole time, looked up to see her mother smiling.

“Well then, I’d say that’s a success, isn’t it?”

“Huh, but I failed.”

“No, you didn’t, if Luka had gotten it then yes, but he didn’t either, now did he?”

“Um.” Morai still felt like she failed.

“Finish your soup and get some sleep.” After finishing her soup, Morai made her way upstairs, wondering how she was to tell her client that she’d failed to get the elixir. That, and the fact that she’d just lost out on 100,000 gold. Morai groaned, slumping into a chair at her desk that faced the window. The window faced Luka’s home that was across the street. They’d become neighbors after both of their families grew too large, mostly because their parents were competing on who had more children. Luka’s family won that round with Luka having six other siblings and Morai having five. She was glad when both their mothers' ovaries dried up. She couldn’t handle taking care of all of her siblings. Morai sighed, staring at the house. From her spot, she could see the window to Luka’s room. The curtains were drawn, so all she could see was the light from the mana stone. She leaned her forehead against the coolness of the window, closing her eyes. She’d been so close to getting her money, and while she felt it was entirely Luka’s fault, she couldn’t bring herself to be angry at him. With another sigh, Morai moved away from the window, and pulled open her drawer taking out her bank book. She sat, flipping through it, she reached the page she wanted, and crossed out the 100,000 gold she’d written in it. Tapping her pen on the page, she looked out the window again. She’d have to find another way to get the money she needed, but how? No one paid such a large sum for a job, and this was the only job she’d had. Which meant she’d have to go back to working on smaller jobs until she got the amount she needed. She frowned at the glowing butterfly that flew to her window. She recognized that butterfly. It was how she and Luka had exchanged messages before they were aware of the rivalry between their families. Morai shot out of the chair, banging her knee hard against the table. Biting back a groan and with

tears springing to her eyes, she doubled over, rubbing her knee vigorously. Thankfully, the potion was still at work, but that didn't mean the pain wasn't there. Limping towards the window, she opened it, and the butterfly fluttered inside, then dissipated into blue dust, the message appearing in shimmering blue light.

Are you alright? Morai couldn't help the grin that appeared on her face. This was the first time in years that he'd sent a message of this nature. Pulling out another notebook, she scribbled a reply.

Yes, I'm fine. I had Mother's healing soup. Sending the butterfly on its way, she watched as it fluttered to Luka's window, it was now open with the curtain fluttering in the breeze. The butterfly flew inside, and Morai let out a breath. She was hoping to catch a glimpse of him. Morai frowned at the thought. This was really unbecoming of her, she moved away from the window. He was probably just worried about her ankle. She didn't want to read too much into it, shouldn't read too much into it.

five

Morai

Morai frowned at her friend, who had tears in her eyes as she doubled over with laughter at Morai's failure. She hid a smile, this was good. At least it took her mind off last night. Luka had not responded to her message, maybe she should have sent the message with a question of her own to keep the conversation going. Morai sighed.

"I'm sorry," Neoni said, wiping tears from her eyes as she straightened. "It's just that, I've never heard of you failing before." Morai rolled her eyes, deciding to put last night behind her. Neoni started laughing again. Neoni belonged to an information guild, and was considered one of the top candidates to inherit the guild once the owner retired. While she was considered a candidate, Neoni had other plans, she wanted to work at the research institute of magic in the capital city, so if she did get the job, the information guild will go to someone else. Neoni was quite the character, she loved to change her hair color whenever she wished. Today, her hair was neon blue. And she wore a blue dress to match. The bell to the inn jingled and Morai smiled, as Neoni waved at Fida, a hunter from the adventurer's guild. Fida waved back and headed straight to them.

"Sorry I'm late," Fida said, her armor clanged as she sat down at the table. She once had long black hair, but she'd cut it into a bob once she became an adventurer. While most of the mana stones used throughout the kingdom were obtained by miners, Fida, along with a party of adventurers, often went into dungeons or hunted magical creatures when the need arose. But mostly it was to eradicate whatever creature lived in the dungeon so the miners could continue their work.

As it was a tradition for them to meet every time either of them completed a job, Morai retold the story of her failing her assignment. Fida tried not to laugh, which made her look constipated.

“It’s okay to laugh. Neoni already had her fill,” Morai said, folding her arms across her chest when Fida laughed boisterously. Morai couldn’t help the smile that came to her face.

“It’s not funny,” she said, trying to wipe the smile off her face but failing.

“Oh, it is,” Fida said, gulping down a mug of cider. “You were always so smug about not failing anything and now...it just feels really good.” Morai grunted.

“Please continue to laugh at my downfall,” she said.

“Stop being dramatic, it’s just one fall.” Fida assured her.

“So what now? Will you be taking smaller jobs again? This was going to be your big break, wasn’t it?” Neoni asked.

“That’s the plan.” Morai’s shoulders slumped. “I even had my presentation ready and everything.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Neoni said. Fida nodded in agreement, too busy chewing to speak.

“Morai?” The innkeeper, a plump man that always seemed to be in a good mood, walked towards them.

“You have been summoned to the mage tower.” Morai’s heart lurched. Was she in trouble? Did the head mage find out it was she who’d been in the mage tower?

“Looks like you’re in trouble,” Fida said. Morai rolled her eyes, grabbing her still full cup of cider, and taking a drink.

“Aren’t you going?” Fida asked.

“I will when I’m done with this.” The innkeeper smiled mischievously.

“You better hurry then. They also summoned Luka.” Morai cursed, shooting out of her chair, and out the door, drink forgotten and her friends hollering behind her. She’d be damned if he got there before her.

Morai paused in front of the closed door, trying to catch her breath before she rapped on the door.

“Enter,” a muffled voice said. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and stopped short. Both her parents were there, and Luka’s as well. She was in more trouble than she thought. “Um, hello,” she said tentatively, stepping into the room. Luka’s mother, a petite woman with the same hair color as her son, gave her the evil eye. Before rolling them in a huff and looking away. His father gave her a small smile before turning away. They stood on either side of their chair, and her parents stood on the other. Neither of them were willing to sit before the other did. The head mage was the only one sitting, scribbling something on his desk. He hadn’t looked up when Morai entered, and still didn’t look up as Morai made her way to stand next to her parents. The head mage had waist length white hair that had nothing to do with his age. He also had pointy ears, which meant he was an elf, but his red eyes meant he was only half-elven. She’d heard he was a vampire as well, but with the large floor to ceiling windows that let the sunlight in, Morai wasn’t certain. This was her first time meeting the head mage after all.

“I am both,” the head mage said, finally looking up. His red eyes had a hint of amusement in them. “But thanks to my ancestors, the sunlight does not affect me as much.” Morai opened her mouth to ask how he knew what she was thinking, but a nudge from her father had her clamping her mouth shut. The head mage smiled and went back to scribbling.

“Surely you’ve met some of my kind to not guess where my red eyes come from,” he continued, not looking up from whatever he was scribbling.

“Uh, that’s true. I just didn’t want to come off as offensive,” Morai said. In truth, she’d only met a half vampire, half human only once. Vampire hybrids weren’t rare, and most, not all, held prominent positions within the kingdom due to their exorbitant amount of mana, which made them rarely seen. She was yet to meet a full-blooded vampire though. Most of them preferred to live in the mountainous kingdoms with the dwarves.

“It is not offensive at all.” Silence fell, and the only sound was the scratches the quill pen made on paper.

“What did you do?” her father, Poloren, whispered. A man of few words, her father was a bulky man with brown hair, and gray eyes, and the guild master of the thieving guild until he retired and handed the reins first to Morai who after learning everything she could, handed it to their second oldest. She was, after all, planning to open her own guild. Now her father spent most of his time in the farmlands. Morai was about to answer when the door burst open, and her traitorous heart did a little flutter, and her breath hitched a little, when Luka walked in. His hair was wet, like he’d just finished with his bath, he was still buttoning up his shirt as he walked to his parents. His woodsy spicy scent was even more pronounced. It was an effort not to stare, her mother clearing her throat next to her had Morai whipping her head around to find her mother studying her with an unreadable expression.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, rushing to his parents without glancing at her. The head mage stopped scribbling.

“Now that we’re all here, shall we begin?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:57 pm

six

Morai

“First, do you know why I called you here?” the headmage asked.

“Not a clue,” Morai responded, gaining her an eyebrow raise from the headmage, who turned his attention to Luka who only shrugged. With a sigh, the headmage got up from his chair.

“First,” he started, raising his arm. The owl they’d seen the night before flew from somewhere high up in the wall and towards his arm.

“Hoot told me someone broke into the tower and stole my elixir,” he said, giving a pointed look at both Luka and Morai.

“You named your owl Hoot?”

“Morai.” Her mother scolded, but the headmage only smiled.

“Yes, a cute name, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Uh.” Was Hoot giving her a smug look? Also, shouldn’t he be sleeping somewhere?

“Isn’t it against the law to steal in one’s own city?”

“Yes, but they were paying quite well,” Morai defended. The headmage paused,

cocking his head to the side.

“Who was paying you?” Morai shrugged.

“I don’t know. The client had an alias.”

“Hmmm.” The headmage stroked his chin, then turned to Luka.

“For you as well?” he asked.

“Yes.” The headmage sighed.

“So, you accepted a job by someone with an alias to steal my elixir?” Morai folded her arms across her chest.

“Well, if you hadn’t refused whoever it was, they wouldn’t have resorted to this now, would they?” He raised a white eyebrow at her again.

“Didn’t you think there might be a reason for why I refused?”

“Not really, you mages are known for being snobbish.” This time, Morai’s parents didn’t chastise her which caused the headmage’s eyebrows to raise even higher.

“Interesting,” he said, stroking his chin again. “That is not the image we were trying to evoke.” Morai said nothing and the silence in the room extended. Hoot hooted then flew off to wherever it’d been.

“Eh, headmage, if I may speak,” Morai’s father ventured.

“Please call me Kirnon.”

“Eh, Kirnon...why exactly did you call us here? It’s not to punish us, is it?” A surprised look crossed Kirnon’s face.

“No, no, of course not. Well, actually...” He seemed flustered looking from Morai to Luka and back. Then, with a sigh, he gracefully sat in his chair again.

“The reason I refused to give the elixir was because it was incomplete.”

“What?” Morai asked more concerned with the fact that if the vial hadn’t broken she would have given her client a defective elixir.

“I never could get the last ingredient to complete it,” he said, frowning at his desk. Then, Kirnon smiled, looking up at them. He put his elbows on the desk, fingers together.

“What if you could get me the last ingredient and we’ll call it even,” he said.

“Huh, I don’t think that’s necessary,” Luka said, and Morai agreed with him, but didn’t show it. Kirnon smiled again, and Morai felt unease creep down her spine. She didn’t like that smile.

“You will find it necessary once you realize who wanted the elixir.”

“You knew who it was all along?” Morai asked. Instead of answering her question, Kirnon only shrugged and said,

“The king wanted the elixir.” Morai’s mouth fell open, and she saw Luka and his parents stiffen, while her parents gasped. Her mother, being dramatic, even covered her mouth with her hand. So that’s why the job had cost that much. Telling the king she’d failed her assignment might not be a good idea, she wasn’t sure why the king needed it or what he would do if he found out she’d failed. She glared at Luka who

had the audacity to smirk at her. The effrontery.

“What is the last ingredient?” Morai frowned at her mother’s question.

“The feather of a peacock.” Again, collective gasps filled the room, this time her mother put both hands over her mouth.

“Are you sure?” Morai asked even though she knew this was a ridiculous question. But peacocks were rare, even rarer than dragons. She’d seen a dragon once, but never a peacock. She only heard stories of their blue green coloring and how glorious their feathers were. Kirnon nodded, sober.

“And a white one,” he added. Well, there was no way they were going to get that. Morai frowned, and why was she including Luka in this?

“Hypothetically, if we could find this peacock,” Luka said, “where would we find it?” Morai scoffed.

“Do you seriously think it would be possible?” she asked. Luka shrugged.

“It’s worth a shot,” he said.

“I think it’d be dangerous,” his mother said. “Don’t they live under the protection of dragons?”

“This is just hypothetical. I didn’t say I was going to go,” he said. Everyone turned to look at Kirnon.

“It’s in a glade in the Dark Flower forest.”

“Wow, they’re really not making it easy, are they?” The Dark Flower forest was

where no one went into, mostly because stories said the flowers there prevented anyone from entering, and if you did, you never got out. But legend has it that someone once got out, but apparently, the person had been living in the forest.

“Well, this is all good, but I think Morai would sit this one out. Won’t you, Morai?” her mother asked.

“Huh...” She actually hadn’t considered if she was going or not.

“Ha. Like you won’t grab the chance to win, or are you scared my son will get the feather first, Ophelia?” Luka’s mom spoke for the first time, her usual cheery voice sounding a little smug underneath. Ophelia rolled her eyes.

“Of course I care more for my daughter’s life than a feather.” “Mother, I appreciate the thought, but...”

“No buts, I know you want to leave us, but you don’t have to risk your life for it.”

“I risk my life every time I take on a job, besides, when will I get a job that pays 100,000 coins...”

“...I can pay five times the amount,” Kirnon interjected.

“When can we start?” Morai asked, ignoring her mother’s gasp and the look Luka was giving her.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:57 pm

seven

Luka

Luka bit into the cashew fruit chewing slowly, it had been two days since he and his parents went to Kirnon. Two days since he hadn't seen Morai, why was it so hard to see someone living next to you? He sighed, staring at the teleportation platform, a device the people of the mage tower built after years of research. The platform was round with three prongs that looked like jagged daggers sprouting from the edges of the platform to meet at the top. The top held a large mana stone that when charged by putting in coordinates of where one wanted to go, you would be teleported there. This would be his first time using it; he, like most others, never used it because of the high cost. He sighed again.

"Sigh one more time and I'll give you something to sigh about." Luka looked down at his mother. She had her arms folded across her chest, the bracelet he and his siblings had given her for her birthday catching the sunlight. His mother wasn't petite like Morai's, but since he'd grown taller than her, he always felt like she was smaller than she seemed.

"Did you know Morai was planning on leaving?" he asked. While they were rivals, his mother made it a point to know everything that was going on in that family.

"No, she did a good job hiding it. I can't believe she's planning on leaving the nest first." Sophia, who'd been staring at the teleportation platform, turned to him, her eyes burning with determination. Luka shuffled his feet; he didn't like that look.

“You know what you must do, don’t you?”

“Huh, no, not really.”

“What do you mean not really?” She reached up to pull at his ear, but since he was too tall for her she settled with smacking him on the chest.

“This is an opportunity to move out before she does. Remember we must be first in everything.”

“So you don’t mind me leaving?”

“Of course I do, but I cannot let the Stonehearts win again.” Luka sighed, rubbing a hand across his face. He was really getting tired of all this competition.

“It is a draw, remember neither of us got the job done.” His mother scowled at him, but returned her attention to staring at the platform. Luka furrowed his brow, his attention going back to the platform. What if he got the peacock feather first and then made it back to Linden before Morai did? He could get the money before she did, and stop her from leaving. Luka shook himself, no, he wouldn’t do that. If she wanted to leave, he’d let her. It’s not like he had a say in it to begin with. He sighed again, getting a withering look from his mother. Luka grinned at her.

“You do realize,” he said, grabbing her hand and placing the cashew nut in it, “that I can’t just leave being the first born and all.” His mother stared at the nut in her hand. Knowing her, she’d put it on a shelf along with all the other memorabilia that her children had given her through the years. She frowned up at him.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Brother.” Luka turned just in time to be engulfed by his hunk of a brother. His

younger brother, Tanen, looked nothing like a younger brother should. While Luka was lean and muscular, Tanen was built like a tank. Probably why he became a tanker, someone who specialized in defense on a team.

“What are you doing here?” Luka asked, taking in gulps of air when Tanen released him.

“Didn’t the headmage tell you? I’m coming with you.”

“What?” both Sophia and Luka said in unison.

“Well, Fida and I...and Neoni,” Tanen said beaming.

“I thought it best if a party was formed instead of just the two of you,” Kirnon said coming up to them. He wore a long white robe with gold trimmings on the edges, the sleeves of the robes were just as long. He smiled at Luka, before turning to Sophia.

“I hope you do not mind, Sophia.”

“Um, well, as long as they come back safe.” A worried look crossed her face before it disappeared.

“I cannot believe you’re coming, too.” Luka turned to find Morai, Opheila, Fida, and Neoni. Morai glanced at him before quickly turning away.

“Since no one has been to the Dark Flower forest, it’s only right as a member of the information guild to come along,” Neoni was saying as she unsuccessfully jammed a number of scrolls into her already bulging bag.

“Take this,” Kirnon said, giving Luka a bag; he took it with a frown. It was light like there was nothing in it.

“It’s a dimension bag, I have put a cut of meats in there for the dragons, and some mana stones that’d help you cross the field of flowers. Oh, and a map,” Kirnon explained. Luka frowned wondering how Kirnon knew there would be a field of flowers to cross.

“How do you...” Luka started.

“You have a dimension bag?” Morai asked, moving closer to Luka to inspect it. Luka tensed at her closeness. The bag was probably made by the research institute of magic, hence, why it was so rare and expensive to get.

“Why do we need meats?” Luka asked.

“For the dragons; it would appease them while you ask for the peacock feathers.”

“Ask?” both Luka and Morai said at the same time, they glanced at each other then away. Kirnon raised a brow.

“I would rather you do not try to steal it,” he said.

“What would be the point of going then?” Morai asked, Luka silently agreed. With a sigh, Kirnon said, “Do what you like. If we’re all here, shall we?” He walked towards the platform leaving everyone to say goodbye one last time before following him. Luka made to follow when Sophia pulled him into a hug.

“You come back safe, okay? I can’t believe your father couldn’t make it.” Luka smiled, hugging her back. His father was always busy at the guild, and was quite disappointed he couldn’t leave to say goodbye.

“I will, Mother, and tell Father I understand.” She nodded, letting him go. He was the last one to get on the platform.

“Remember, this only takes you to the city of Krandol, you’ll have to go the rest of the way on your own,” Kirnon said, holding a mana stone. Tapping on it, the stone produced what looked like a holographic screen that Kirnon rapidly tapped on, putting in the coordinates. The mana stone in the center of the platform began to glow a golden glow that intensified until Luka had to close his eyes. It felt like he was snuggled up in a warm blanket, then a surge of vertigo hit him as he was pulled into the mana stone.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:57 pm

eight

Morai

The mana stone spat them out and onto an identical platform. Morai kept her eyes shut until the dizziness dissipated. Opening her eyes, she found Neoni throwing up in a bucket that was provided for such an occasion. Apparently, many people threw up on their first time. Morai was grateful she didn't. But that didn't stop her from feeling queasy. From what she could see, they were in the city of Krandol. She'd been here before on an assignment, but this was her first time seeing it from the teleportation platform. A few people glanced their way but paid them no mind.

"Okay, first order of business we should find a carriage that can take us to..." Morai paused, "...where are we going from here again?" Neoni held up a finger, her head still in the bucket.

"Wait, who died and made you the leader?" Luka asked.

"Could you please step out of the platform?" a man she assumed was the one who manned the teleportation device said. He was holding the same device that Kirnon was.

"Yes, sorry," Morai said, stepping off the platform. The man's eyes were red which was a giveaway that he was a vampire, but he was probably mixed with something else. He didn't have the elven grace that Kirnon did, that and the fact his bushy hair was in a bun and had one braid hanging loose with a trinket in it. A telltale sign that he belonged to a dwarven family. Usually, the trinket told which dwarven family a

dwarf belonged to, but Morai couldn't tell. She turned her attention to Luka.

"First off, I should be the leader, since I'm the one who actually brought someone with information," she said, giving Tanen a meaningful look. Tanen only grinned and winked at her.

"That doesn't mean you should lead the team," Luka said. Morai glared at him, but he only shrugged.

"Fine, Fida, would you like to lead? You've worked with a party before."

"Sure, I don't mind," Fida said. "But I'm not good at this leading stuff."

"Then I'll do it," Luka said. Morai frowned at him.

"No, you're not. I'm the one who needs the money most."

"And I'm the one who broke the elixir so shouldn't I be the leader to take responsibility?"

"Are you serious?"

"We are to head to Braken which would take us two days or so by carriage," Neoni said, done with throwing up she'd pulled out a map from her bulging bag and was looking at it.

"Kirnon gave us a dimension bag, I could put some of your stuff in there," Tanen said to Neoni.

"He gave us that, for the feather and whatever else we may find in the forest," Luka said.

“I’m sure it’d be fine. As long as we take our stuff out afterwards,” Tanen said. Morai narrowed her eyes at him, watching as Neoni ducked her head trying to hide a blush. Oh, this is most definitely not happening. She sighed.

“Are we going to go find a carriage or not?” she asked, leading the way into the city.

The city of Krandol was among the largest and was known as the home of the merchant guilds. Though merchant guilds are scattered everywhere in the kingdom, the first one was started in Krandol. The marketplace was bustling with activity since it was still early in the morning, moving to midday.

“Since it takes two days to get to Braken, we can reserve a carriage and get some supplies. What do you think?” Morai asked. Glancing back, she caught Luka’s eyes and turned back around. She still wasn’t sure how she was going to handle being with him for such a long period of time. This would be the first time they’d been together for this long.

“I don’t think it’s a bad idea. I heard there’s a new blacksmith in the city that I’d like to check out,” Fida said.

“Yes, and I would like to meet with the information guild here to see if they have anything new,” Neoni said. Morai nodded as they neared the place to reserve a carriage. She walked right past the carriages that ran with mana stones, and those that were pulled by horses. Mana stones were expensive, and the only people who could afford to use mana drawn carriages were the wealthy. Mana stones came in different categories especially those for everyday use like providing light for the city. Those were not as expensive because they were readily available, but when it came to other uses, like drawing a carriage, it started to get expensive. It was the same thing with the horses. Horses were rare creatures, and the cost to ride one might be the same or slightly lower than the mana stone ones. She stopped at a carriage drawn by two large scaly lizards, with a stout horn protruding from their foreheads.

“Why did we skip the horses?” Tanen asked, looking awed at the creatures. Morai frowned; surely, he’d seen a horse drawn carriage since he’s gone on so many guild quests.

“Stop acting like you’ve never seen a horse before,” Luka chided.

“Yes, but they’re still eye-catching,” Tanen said, holding out a hand for the horse to sniff.

“May I be of help,” the carriage manager asked. He was an older man that looked like he should be retiring instead of working.

“Yes, we'd like to reserve a carriage,” Morai said, fishing in her bag to take out some coins.

“And you’ll like the horse drawn one, yes?”

“Huh...” Morai paused, glancing back at the horse. Tanen was stroking its mane.

“Just out of curiosity, how much will it be?” “500 gold coins.”

“500?”

“Gold coins?” both Luka and Morai said. Tanen dropped his hand and stepped away from the horse.

“How much for the mana carriages?” The old man hesitated, he probably wasn’t sure they’d be paying, but said, “A thousand gold coins.”

“Lizards it is, how much for an hour’s ride?” Morai said.

“100 silver coins per person, and if you have luggage, it would be 10 copper coins.” Morai cringed, which meant the price he’d given them for the horse was just for one person? Who would spend such an amount just to ride? Then again, the wealthy did so she couldn’t really complain now, could she?

“Thank you, we’ll be back in an hour?” Morai asked, glancing at her friends who all nodded. The group went their separate ways, Fida going to the blacksmith, Neoni went to the information guild with Tanen following her. Morai wanted to see what kind of foods they had in the market. The last time she’d been here was a while ago, so maybe they had something new.

“Why are you following me?” she asked Luka who shrugged.

“I have nothing else to do.”

“You’re telling me in this whole city, you can’t find something better to do?”

“Yes.” Morai put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

“Fine then, be my carrier.” She’d give him so much stuff to carry he’d wish he’d left her alone.

“It would be an honor,” Luka said with a mock bow. With a huff Morai went on her way, with Luka trailing behind her.

nine

Morai

Spreading the map Kirnon had given them on the table, Morai used blocks of wood to keep it in place. She then looked up at her friends, who had all gathered at an inn. They were now upstairs in Morai's room, which she would be sharing with Fida and Neoni, to go over the plan—though, to be honest, there wasn't much of one.

“So, here's the plan. We've already secured the carriage to Braken, and it'll take us two days to get there. That isn't the problem, though. The problem is here.” Morai pointed to the map that showed the layout of the entire kingdom. Braken lay to the south of the kingdom and while the path was straightforward, there was a swampy area that was dangerous to cross. It wasn't the swamp itself that was dangerous since a path was made for easy passage, but the things that lived there.

“So, what's our strategy?” Morai glanced briefly at Luka, who was sitting in a chair, his arms folded, before glancing to Fida. She was trying not to be concerned about it, but Luka had been suspiciously quiet. Even when they went to the market, she loaded him with supplies until his arms hurt. He didn't try to tease, or even sabotage anything. And if she knew Luka as well as she did, he was always planning something. His quiet demeanor confused her.

“I think it would be best if we get to the swamp before the sunset,” Fida said, frowning down at the map. “The swamp mermaids are nocturnal, so they should be asleep. I'm more worried about the chimeras. If they don't disturb the waters, they may not wake the mermaids. But if they do, we'll have to fight them off.” Morai

wincing. She heard of swamp mermaids, but she'd never actually seen one. She heard they had green slimy skin and could control the vines that grew around the trees in the swamp. That would be a problem.

"So, what should we do if we get attacked?" Luka asked, leaning forward to study the map as well.

"I think Tanen and I will be able to handle it, as long as you all cross the path fast enough." Morai frowned. That was a very vague plan. While she trusted in both Fida and Tanen's fighting skills, it would be a lot for two people.

"Are you certain about this? I mean, what if you get injured?"

"Oh, that won't be a problem," Tanen spoke up. "If we do Luka's healing sk...uh, I mean potions can heal pretty quick." Morai raised a brow at Luka, who was scowling at Tanen, who was rubbing the back of his neck with a sheepish grin.

"I didn't realize you also bought potions?" she said, Luka gave a nonchalant shrug.

"I figured stocking up would be beneficial, since we don't have a healer on hand." Morai studied him, her scowl still in place.

"What? Can't get over how handsome I am?" Morai scoffed.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, you're average at best," she said, though her face had grown hot. She relaxed a little. At least he seemed to be back to his normal self.

"Average, I'll have you know..."

"Okay, now that we have a plan, can we head downstairs for dinner?" Neoni asked, interrupting whatever Luka was going to say.

“Yes, let’s, I’m starving,” Tanen said with a clap of his hands, and with that, the group headed downstairs to the inn. Morai stayed behind to fold up the map; she put it in her pack and hung it on the door hook. She glanced around the room one last time. It was sparse, with three beds lined up next to each other and a window overlooking the city. On the opposite wall, an unlit fireplace was carved into the stone.

Morai sighed. While what had happened with the elixir was unprecedented, it still gave her the opportunity she needed to finally have enough money. If they pulled this off, she’d have enough money to move, and still have a lot left over. Satisfied, she opened the door, and gasped when she almost walked into Luka.

“What are you doing? You scared me,” she said, curling her hand into a fist so she didn’t clutch at her chest like her mother.

“When were you going to tell me you were leaving?” he asked. Morai scoffed.

“And why should I tell you that, and how did you even find out?”

“Your mother mentioned you leaving.” Morai frowned. When was that? Morai furrowed her brow in thought. Oh, her mother did mention it in Kirnon’s office.

“I still don’t see why I should tell you.” She pushed past him to head down to dinner. Luka grabbed her hand to stop her, quickly letting go again.

“Just...” He closed his eyes then shook his head, before opening them again.

“Never mind, forget I asked,” he said moving past her to head downstairs. She frowned at him, what was wrong with him, then her eyes widened, and she rushed after him.

“Did you just stop me so you could get to the stairs first?” Luka stopped and grinned at her, all the seriousness from his face was gone. Then he winked before continuing on. Morai scoffed.

“Oh, I’ll get you for that.” She followed after him vowing to get him for his sly trick.

ten

Morai

The first half hour of the trip to Braken was uneventful to say the least. Morai was the first downstairs, with a smug smile when Luka came down right after her.

“I should ride on the coach first,” Morai said. After breakfast, they’d all made it out to the stables only to discover that Luka was getting ready to ride on the coach with the reins in his hands. He smirked at her.

“I got this my Morai,” he said. Her face grew hot at the name, but she pressed on.

“No, I’d rather ride first.” She made a grab for the reins only for Tanen to snatch it from his brother.

“Neoni and I will ride,” he said, giving them an exasperated look. “Besides, neither of you know how to.” Morai folded her hands across her chest.

“That’s not true. Fida gave me some lessons.”

“Lessons you weren’t keen on,” Fida said, hopping into the carriage; she was wearing her usual armor. Morai sighed, then eyed Luka, he smirked before making a dash towards the carriage.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Morai said, tripping him with her foot before running over to get inside. She grinned when she heard Luka curse.

“Seriously, can’t you guys just let go of competing?” Neoni asked, a smile in her voice. They finally left for Braken the two bickering back and forth about nonsense. Morai was in a good mood once they got closer and closer to the swamp.

“Okay, remember the plan,” Fida, who was now riding in the coach, called out to them in the back. There wasn’t much to the plan except to be as quiet as possible so as not to wake the mermaids, or attract any of the creatures that lived in the swamp. Thankfully, the stone bridge that was built over the swamp would prevent the mermaids from reaching them, but that would not be the case if they fell into the swamp. The bridge had been built during the day, as it was the only road to cross into Braken. And while the mermaids were nocturnal, a sleeping potion was still used in the swamp to keep them asleep while the bridge was being built. Needless to say, they were not at all happy when they discovered a bridge over their beloved home. They gleefully tried to get any merchants who were unlucky to travel at night or wake them up and decided to use the vines on the trees to their advantage.

As planned, Neoni went up to the coach and took the reins from Fida who sat next to her, unsheathing her sword. Tanen went to the back of the carriage, sword in hand as well. While Morai and Luka were capable fighters, they weren’t experts, so they decided to stay in the carriage. Morai had a dagger in her hand just in case though, and Luka fingered his many darts that he kept sheathed around his belt. The midday sun made the swamp smell even more aggressive, making Morai gag a little. How did the mermaids even live in it? A dense forest of leafy trees surrounded the swamp, with rope like vines hanging everywhere and once in a while a bird would chirp and another respond.

Morai sipped on her waterskin, wondering not for the first time if she could take off a layer of her clothes. Not that she could, she wore a long-sleeved black shirt, with a matching pair of pants, with black boots. She’d thought it was a good choice once they’d started out, but with the heat becoming unbearable, Morai wasn’t so sure. Maybe she could cut off the sleeves, they were beginning to stick to her. Movement

in front of her caught her eye, glancing up, Luka's shirt was halfway over his head. Morai quickly glanced away but not before catching sight of his toned torso.

"Should you be taking off your shirt?" she asked, pointedly looking to the front of the carriage. Tanen, who'd been watching their surroundings outside, turned at Morai's question. He frowned at Luka, who'd already taken his shirt off and was folding it.

"It is unwise for you to take off your shirt," he said. Luka only grunted in response.

"I'm hot," he said.

"So am I, but you do not see me taking off my shirt," Morai said, irritation entering her voice, the heat was really getting to her. Luka glanced at her with a smirk. Morai huffed.

"How long has it been?" she called to Neoni.

"About half an hour," Neoni responded from her spot.

"We shouldn't have been so worried about the creatures. The heat alone would kill us." Luka decided to use his shirt as a fan. Morai agreed with him, but she didn't say it. They were at the midway point of the bridge when Morai furrowed her brow.

"Did you hear that?" she asked. Everyone fell silent, the only sound were the lizards and the wheels of the carriage. The sound she'd heard came again. It sounded like a growl, but Morai wasn't sure what kind of creature it was. "Let's hope they leave us alone," Fida said. Morai wiped her hands on her knees both from the sweat and because she was nervous. The growl came louder this time. The carriage stopped so abruptly that Morai, Luka, and Tanen surged forward.

"Sorry," Neoni said.

“What is that?” Fida asked, looking straight ahead. Morai, after getting her bearings, scrambled to the window that overlooked the coach where Neoni and Fida were sitting.

“What is that?” Luka, who’d joined her, asked. The creature was covered in swamp mud that undulated; it looked like a chimera.

“It looks like a chimera, but I’ve never seen one like that before.” Even though Morai considered herself to be well traveled, she always traveled in areas with lots of people and little to no dangerous creatures. She’d only ever seen a chimera in pictures. From what she could remember, they had the head of a lion, dragon wings, or was it a bat, and the tail had a snake head on it. She didn’t remember it being covered in mud that moved.

“Perhaps it’s a swamp chimera.” Luka offered. Morai, who was trying to not let his closeness affect her, gaped at him.

“Really, I didn’t realize that,” she said, but Luka only shrugged.

“What should we do?” Neoni asked from up front. The creature stood in front of them a few paces away, blocking them from moving forward. Fida responded by jumping off the carriage.

“Are you going to put your shirt back on?” Morai asked. Luka gave her a cheeky grin.

“What? Don’t like what you see?” he asked, and Morai rolled her eyes.

“We’re about to be attacked by a swamp chimera, but sure be naked.” Morai watched as Fida jumped down from the coach and ran towards the creature, sword raised.

“We’re going to run once Fida clears a path,” Neoni announced. “You might want to grab onto something.” Morai scrambled back to her seat and pulled her bag closer to her. The bottles inside clinked with healing potions. After making sure they were safe, she looked around for something to hold. With nothing to hold onto, she grabbed onto the edge of the seat, hoping that would keep her from flying about. She glanced at Luka who thankfully had his shirt back on and was also grabbing onto his seat. Morai heard a yell from Fida, then a splash, then the carriage rushed forward. Morai’s knuckles turned white from gripping the seat so hard. She heard a thump on the roof of the carriage and squeaked.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Just me,” Fida shouted. A roar came, and the carriage tilted to the side. Morai had enough time to shove her bag out of harm's way before her grip on her seat slipped and the wall of the carriage met her face.

eleven

Morai

Morai groaned as she peeled herself off the side of the carriage. It took her a minute to get her bearings. Her head where she'd hit against the wall throbbed in pain. She sat up, looking around, both Luka and Tanen were also picking themselves up off the floor.

"Is everyone all right?" she asked.

"Yes." Both Luka and Tanen grunted.

"I'm fine," Neoni said, "But Fida is..." Morai's heart lounged in her throat.

"What about Fida?" A roar came from the outside that drowned whatever Neoni was about to say. With a curse, Tanen climbed out of the carriage.

"Stay inside," he yelled at Luka, who'd been going after him. Luka frowned.

"We're not helpless, you know," he said.

"Yes, but if both of you are outside, it would mean we'd have to keep an eye out for you." Luka scowled, folding his arms around his chest.

"Neoni will join you." Tanen closed the door, leaving Luka and Morai scowling after him.

“We may be thieves, but we have an expertise that comes with the territory,” Luka said, sitting back down on the floor next to her. He rubbed his shoulder, grimacing in pain.

“True, we have our own fighting style,” Morai said, grabbing her bag and looking through it. She winced; some of the bottles had cracks in them causing the potions to leak out. Taking them out, she gingerly put them on the floor, it was then she noticed how quiet Luka had been. She looked up to see him watching her.

“What?” she asked with a frown.

“This must be the first time you’ve agreed with me on anything,” he said.

“No, it’s not. I’ve agreed with you on...some things.”

“Begrudgingly, yes, not willingly.” Morai shoved one of the cracked bottles at him.

“Drink this, it’ll help with the pain.” Luka stared at the bottle in his hand then gave it back to her.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Really? Cause even I can tell you’re in pain.”

“I’m fine.”

“This is not the time to be disagreeable.” Luka stared straight ahead, the muscle in his jaw twitched.

“I’m fine, Morai.” She wanted to argue, but the tone of his voice made her hesitate. Before she could ponder on it some more, the door to the carriage swung open, and

Neoni scrambled inside, hastily shutting the door.

“How is it out there, and are you hurt?” Morai quickly assessed Neoni for any injuries. Apart from a scratch on her cheek, and the fact she was covered in swamp mud, she seemed fine. Morai shoved the bottle Luka had refused to Neoni, who absentmindedly took it, unscrewing the bottle and drinking before responding.

“It’s not looking good. The chimera had fallen into the swamp, but there was another that rammed into the side of the carriage.”

“What about Fida?” Neoni grimaced.

“She’d fallen into the swamp. I helped get her out while Tanen fought the other chimera.” Morai exhaled with relief. A roar sounded from outside.

“With all this noise, I won’t be surprised if the mermaids woke up,” Luka said. Morai silently agreed as she stared at her bag of potions. Taking one out, she drank it; it tasted like nothing until it got to the back of your throat, then it tasted smoky with a bitter tinge to it.

“We should probably try to get the carriage upright,” she said. Neoni shook her head.

“Tanen explicitly stated that we should remain in the carriage.” The carriage jerked to the side. Neoni, who had been sitting next to Morai, fell onto her. As a result, Morai also fell, and Luka ended up underneath them, cursing as he was pinned on the floor.

“Sorry,” Morai said, sitting upright and looking up at the carriage like that would help her. The door wrenched open.

“Come out,” Tanen said.

“Oh, now you want us out?” Luka asked, grimacing a little when he sat up. Morai frowned at him. He wouldn’t be in pain if he just accepted a potion.

“Not now, brother,” Tanen said, holding out his hand for Neoni. The carriage rocked precariously when she got out.

“Move slow,” Tanen warned as Morai grabbed his hand to help her get out. It was when she finally got outside that Morai saw why Tanen was so cautious. Vines had wrapped around the carriage, and from the looks of it, Tanen had to cut them to get the door open. The carriage, lurching to the side, had caused it to move to the edge of the bridge, and with another tug they would have spiraled into the swamp. Morai shuddered at the thought as Luka joined her, whistling at the sight.

“Stay in the shield,” Fida yelled. She was covered in mud from head to toe and was fighting with one of the chimera that looked worse for wear. The shield was a blue circle that emitted a blue light, and as long as they stayed inside the shield, nothing could hurt them. Neoni was already inside.

“We can help,” Luka growled at his brother, who was herding them into the shield.

“Not now,” Tanen said. “Stay here,” he said mostly to Luka before running off to help Fida.

“We could help by cutting the rest of the vines away from the carriage,” Morai suggested. If the carriage fell over, they’d have to walk the rest of the way to Braken and that would take them longer to get there. The lizards, well trained as they were, hadn’t moved since the carriage fell over, but they snapped at the vines that tried to reach for them.

“Good idea. One of us should watch our backs while we do it,” Luka said. Neoni pulled a knife out of her inside jacket.

“I can watch your backs,” she said.

“Thank you.” Morai and Luka sprinted back to the carriage. The vines, thankfully, were not hard to cut, but they writhed every time as though they were in pain.

“Incoming,” Neoni shouted. Morai glanced towards the swamp to see the chimera that had fallen in, making an attempt to pull itself out of the water. A mud green hand shot out of the water, grabbed the chimera by the mouth and shoved it back down.

“They’re awake,” Morai said, thankfully, the chimera was keeping them busy.

“Do you think we can pull the carriage up?” Luka asked as he cut the last vine, throwing it into the swamp. He didn’t even spare a glance at the struggling chimera.

“Not with the two of us,” Morai said, stepping back to look at the carriage that wobbled precariously. A pained roar had Morai looking up and towards her friends. Fida and Tanen finally had the other chimera subdued.

“I thought we said you should stay in the shield,” Fida said, running up to them, and taking the bottle Morai handed to her. She nodded her thanks and downed it. Tanen scowled at Luka who only grinned and clapped him on the back.

“Good fight. Now, how about we right the carriage and leave while the mermaids are occupied?”

“Good idea,” Fida said, raising her hand to wipe her mouth before pausing and staring at her mud-covered hand with a grimace.

“We’ll have to move it away from the edge first,” Tanen said, Neoni joined them in assessing the carriage. A pitiful growl came from the chimera in the swamp causing the group to jump into action. Once the mermaids were done with the chimera, they

might turn their sights to them. With four of them pulling on the carriage, Neoni was on look-out duty again, they had the carriage upright in no time and sped away from the swamp. The injured chimera that was still on the bridge made a swipe at them as they passed by, causing it to topple over and join its kindred in the swamp.

twelve

Luka

Staring into space, Luka waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. The ordeal at the swamp caused a bit of delay, so instead of reaching Braken at nightfall as planned, they found a camping site to spend the night. Hopefully, they'd reach Braken by morning without incident. Luka's eyes adjusted to the darkness as he stood from his bed and scanned the tent. The moonlight cast a faint, pale glow over everything. He had been jolted awake by something, but he couldn't quite pinpoint what it was. The itchiness in his hands told him that someone or something needed healing. Luka walked around the campfire that had died out leaving red coals behind. Morai, Neoni, and Fida were on one side of the fire, while he and his brother were on the opposite side.

The sound that woke him up came again, fingering his dart, Luka made his way towards the sound. He paused, wondering if he should wake Tanen, but he banished the thought just as quickly. He could take care of whatever it was all by himself. Luka was still a little frustrated that Tanen wouldn't let him help when the chimeras attacked. As the oldest, he felt it was his responsibility to look after Tanen, not the other way around. But he knew that wasn't a sound argument. Tanen was better with the sword than he was anyway.

Luka came to a stop in a clearing, his senses on high alert. The sound came again from behind a bush, and it sounded like it was in pain. Luka looked around for something he could use to lift the bush. Finding a discarded branch, he made his way to the bush and lifted it. Luka stared at the creature, it looked wounded, but the

creature was curled in such a tight ball, he couldn't tell where or what caused the injury. The only thing he could make out was the fur, which was a light brown with black spots all over it. Opening its beady eyes, the creature looked at Luka as he knelt beside it, discarding the branch. Luka looked around him, wondering where the mother could be. For all he knew, she could be waiting somewhere ready to pounce. The baby made a mournful sound, bringing Luka's attention back to it. If memory served him right, the baby was called a jaguar, he'd read about them in books before; like every mundane creature without magic, they were considered rare. His fingers itched to heal. Moving slowly so as not to scare it, Luka sat cross-legged on the grass and picked it up, cradling it in his arms. It was shaking but Luka wasn't sure if it was from cold or fear.

"I got you," he said, looking it over. Its hind leg had a gnash on it, probably from a predator. Luka frowned, would healing magic work on a mundane creature? Luka shrugged, only one way to find out. Closing his eyes, Luka concentrated on the injured leg. He didn't need to close his eyes, but he focused better when he did. He felt the magic swell around his hands and the warmth seeped into the leg, feeling the wound knit itself into place. Luka let out a sigh and opened his eyes. The leg looked like nothing had happened.

"Now, how should we find your mother?" he asked the creature, not that he was expecting a response. A rustling sound came from behind him. Luka turned just in time to see Morai come out of the shadows. She gasped.

"Is that a jaguar?" she asked, walking towards him. She sat down, peering at the creature. Luka scowled at her.

"What are you doing here?" If she'd been a few minutes earlier, she would have seen him use healing magic.

"I heard a sound that woke me up," she said, her gaze fixated on the baby, who was

also gazing up at her.

“Do you want to hold it?” Luka asked. Morai looked up at him with excitement in her eyes.

“Can I?” In response, Luka lifted up the jaguar. Morai gingerly took it from him, placing it on her lap.

“It’s really soft,” she said, stroking its back, content the jaguar closed its eyes. Luka studied both of them briefly before turning his gaze to the night sky. Stars dotted the sky. Should he tell her about his healing magic? Now did seem like the perfect time. He sighed, turning his attention back to Morai.

“Morai...”

“Where is its mother?” Luka swallowed the rest of his sentence.

“I don’t know.” Reaching out, he patted the jaguar. Maybe he could tell her some other time.

“This isn’t so bad,” he said. Morai frowned at him.

“What?”

“You and me, enjoying each other’s company,” he said with a smile. Morai’s face reddened, then she shoved the jaguar back in his arms.

“We should keep it until we find its mother,” she stated, standing up. Luka followed suit. He was already thinking of doing that, but he wasn’t going to tell her that.

“And why should we?” he asked with a smile still on his face. Morai frowned up at

him, and he took a step back. She was too close.

“You seriously aren’t thinking of just leaving it here. And why are you smiling?”
Luka grinned this time.

“I’m sure it’ll survive, and I just think it’s cute when you get flustered.” Her face couldn’t get any redder.

“I do not get flustered,” Morai said, turning on her heel and heading back to camp. Luka chuckled looking down at the jaguar who was fast asleep.

“She does, doesn’t she?” he asked the sleeping bundle.

thirteen

Morai

“What should we do with it?” Neoni asked as she watched the baby jaguar Luka had brought in last night play with a vinusi. It looked like a bee, if a bee had fur. It had four yellow wings, two on each side, that started from the top of its head and flared out.

“We could just leave it here. It seems pretty happy,” Tanen said.

“Are you crazy?” Neoni asked. Morai, who’d finally mangled her hair into a bun, lowered her arms, and along with Neoni and Tanen stared at the jaguar. Luka had gone over to a creek they’d found nearby to clean up. Fida had gone off to train, something about keeping with her routine no matter where she is. Morai, Tanen, and Neoni had already taken turns using the creek and were now waiting for Luka, then Fida before they headed out. Now, the current dilemma was the jaguar. Morai found it surprising that it didn’t run after Luka. It barely left his side last night.

“We can bring it with us,” Morai suggested.

“How?” Neoni asked. “Do you have any idea what would happen if anyone noticed us with a jaguar?” The scarcity of mundane creatures meant that if one was discovered nearby, it would either be taken as a pet or sold to the highest bidder. It was not uncommon for them to be killed and sold for their fur, teeth, or anything else they could use. While mundane creatures weren’t magical, they were excellent conductors of anything magic, dead or alive. The hunting got so bad, that the king

had to issue an order preventing hunting or killing of any kind. The only ones permitted to use mundane creatures were people like Kirnon, and it was mostly for academic studies or medicinal purposes. And getting a permit from the king for such purposes was extensive.

“We could use illusion magic,” Tanen said. Neoni scowled at him.

“And who among us can use illusion magic?” Tanen raised his hands in a gesture of surrender.

“I was only making a suggestion.”

“A suggestion for what?” Luka asked, coming from behind a tree. The jaguar, upon seeing him, ran towards him, abandoning the vinusi who finally was able to fly away. Luka crouched and petted the jaguar.

“We’re trying to figure out how to get it into town without being seen,” Morai said, catching herself staring at his hair that was dripping wet.

“Yes, and I suggested using illusion magic,” Tanen said. Luka stood with a frown.

“None of us can use illusion magic.”

“That’s what I said,” Neoni said.

“And I said it was only a suggestion.”

“Yes, and not a good one since none of us can use it,” Neoni shot back.

“Or we can find someone who can,” Tanen said, flooding his arms across his chest.

“Not in Braken. The village is too small to have someone of that caliber,” Morai said. If there was someone with illusion magic, they would have already been carted off to the capital. Morai frowned, looking from her friend to Tanen, then back. Why was she sensing tension?

“I’m sure we’ll figure something out,” Luka said.

“Can someone let Fida know she can use the creek.”

“Finally, I thought we’d have to sleep on the road again,” Neoni said, slumping down in her chair. They’d made it into Braken and quickly found an inn. Luka and Tanen were seeing to the lizards with the jaguar safely hidden in Luka’s bag. Morai still thought it was a dumb idea, but they didn’t really have a choice. Morai and Fida pulled up some extra chairs to the table before sitting down. A barmaid came towards them, her hair was tied in a red scarf, and she had a corset over her dress that was so high it caused her chest to almost be level with her chin. She gave them a warm smile.

“What will you be having?” she asked.

“Can we have five bowls of soup and some bread? Some ale will be nice,” Fida said.

“Be right back,” she said turning to leave.

“Wait,” Morai said, and the barmaid stopped, a question written across her face.

“Do you know the best place to restock on supplies?” Morai had wanted to explore the village a little bit, but with the sun setting she’d have to do a quick tour tomorrow before they left. The barmaid's brown eyes lit up.

“That would be Inan, it’s really the only shop around here, they’d carry what you need. She has all sorts of things. It’d be the last building before you leave the town.”

“Thank you,” Morai said, the barmaid nodded and went to place their order. Fida pulled out Kirnon’s map from the dimension bag, they’d taken most of the bags in except Luka’s, and set it on the table, unrolling it. Luka and Tanen returned and took their seats. Tanen tried to catch Neoni’s eye, but she pointedly looked at the map spread out before them. Morai scowled but said nothing, at least not yet. She’ll ask her about what’s going on later.

“So, we’re here,” Fida said, drawing an “x” on Braken, with a colored quill pen. “Once we leave Braken, we’d have to trespass on the Grasslands of Hevon, but I heard the Chepi living there usually keep to themselves so we should be good. Once we leave Hevon, it’d be nothing but forests and trees.” She traced a line going over trees and some groves until she reached the place marked as the dark flower forest, then circled it.

“Ideally, we should make it there and back within two weeks, but it might take longer depending on what we encounter.” Fida paused as the barmaid brought in their food and drinks.

“Is there a place we can restock before we leave?” Luka asked when the barmaid left.

“I already asked about that. Neoni and I will be going there tomorrow,” Morai said, beaming smugly at him.

“Wait, I am?” Neoni asked with a confused look on her face, that Morai chose to ignore. Luka scoffed.

“Really, here?”

“Yes, here. You have no idea how satisfying it is to be the first to get to something before you,” Morai said.

“Don't worry, I have something planned.”

“Can we stop with the rivalry when our parents aren't even here?” Tanen asked.

“No,” both Luka and Morai said in unison.

“At least you agree on some things,” Neoni said. Morai folded her arms and sat back in her chair.

“What do we need?” she asked Fida.

“We lost most of our food when the chimeras attacked. It would be nice to stock up on healing potions, but I don't think a small village like this will have any.” Morai nodded.

“I'll see if they have any herbs we could use,” she said.

“Okay then, let's call it a night,” Neoni said.

“The sun hasn't completely set,” Morai said, looking longingly out the window.

“Yes, and I'm tired. Especially after all the food we just ate.” Neoni grabbed Fida's hand and pulled her up the stairs, as though Fida couldn't do it on her own.

“Did you do something to Neoni?” Luka asked Tanen. Oh, so he noticed, too?

“I don't know. She's been picking fights and avoiding me,” Tanen said, looking like a lost puppy. Morai wasn't sure if she should say something, but Luka's bag which he

had on his lap moved, distracting her.

“Did you feed it?” she asked.

“I did before we came in here, he’s sleeping.”

“He?” Luka grinned.

“I checked.”

“Do you have a name for him?” Tanen asked, looking over at the bag.

“I wasn’t going to. What if his mother comes looking for him. I don’t want to get too attached.” Morai raised a brow, he seemed plenty attached already. Morai got up from her chair.

“Hope you all have a good night,” she said, then paused. “If you'd like, I can talk to Neoni.” She’d been planning to, but it wouldn’t hurt to let him know. Tanen’s eyes lit up.

“Thank you.”

“I didn’t realize you were invested in my brother’s romance,” Luka said.

“I’m invested in anything that isn’t you,” she said.

“Ouch,” Luka said, placing a hand on his chest in a mocking gesture. Morai rolled her eyes heavenward before heading upstairs.

At daybreak, Morai and Neoni left for Inan's shop, while Fida, Luka, and Tanen went to get the lizards ready. Inan's shop was small but true to the barmaid's word, they sold a lot of things. From herbs, some common potions, some weaponry, travel food and the like.

"So, what's up with you and Tanen?" Morai asked as they looked at a wall of dried herbs. Inan, the owner, was a slender woman, her dark hair was tied in a scarf. She wore a white dress, with a brown apron over it. She stood by the door of her shop, playing with her two-year-old while her baby dosed on her back. Neoni, who was thumbing through a book of herbal remedies to figure out what they should pick out, looked up at her.

"What?"

"You and Tanen, what's going on?" Neoni snapped the book closed.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Morai rolled her eyes.

"There's no need to play dumb. You've been icing him out." Neoni's cheeks went pink, then she sighed.

"There really is nothing going on," she said, and Morai raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

"Fine, if you don't want to tell me..."

"No. It's not that. It's just...with all the rivalry going on with your family and his. And me being your friend, I didn't want any well...you know." Morai stared at her confounded.

"What does our families' rivalry have to do with you?" "Well, I'm your friend. I was

just trying to be loyal.”

“Don’t tell me you’re icing him out because of me?” Neoni had the grace to look down at her boots. Morai sighed. “Neoni, listen, what’s going on with our families has been going on for generations. You shouldn’t have to not court him just because Tanen is from a rival family. It’s got nothing to do with you, and him for that matter.” Neoni deflated. Morai bit back a smile, she hadn’t realized just how much she’d meant to her friends.

“So, it’s okay with you?”

“Yes, go out with him or court him. Whatever it is you want to do. I don’t care as long as you’re happy,” Morai said. That left a twisty feeling in her chest. She was pleased that Neoni liked Tanen and was glad she was pursuing a relationship with him. However, it also reminded her of the rift that had been growing between her, Luka, and their families. She sighed, more determined than ever to get that money and move. Morai frowned.

“Fida doesn’t have anyone she’s interested in that’s in Luka’s family, does she?”

“Oh, goodness, no!” Neoni said, plunking a bunch of herbs from the wall.

“That girl is married to her sword, and no one can come between them,” Neoni said, heading to the front where Inan straightened with a smile on her face.

“I wish you luck on your journey. Not everyone who goes to the dark forest comes back alive,” Inan said.

“What?” Morai asked, a bit taken aback.

“Oh, my apologies. Only people who come into this shop are heading there, so I just

assumed,” Inan said.

“You aren’t wrong,” Morai said, chewing on her bottom lip.

“Just out of curiosity, how many usually make it back?” she asked, as Inan bagged the goods they bought in a sack. They’d bought a couple of herbs, potions, some food, and other necessities.

“Maybe one out of five? My husband was one of those who left and never came back.” Inan looked around the shop with a fond look on her face.

“This was his shop, you know. He left a few years ago, with the promise of returning, but he never did.” Inan sniffed a little, tears welling in her eyes, but she blinked them back rapidly. She smiled a watery smile when her two-year-old stretched out his hands to be picked up.

“I’m sorry,” Morai said. Neoni, who was never good with loss, was looking out at the horizon.

“It doesn’t matter. I hope you find what you’re looking for.” Morai chewed on her bottom lip as they made their way to the lizards. Was it really worth risking her life just so she could find a place of her own, and loving the person she wanted, too? She could just stay in Linden without anyone knowing about her feelings and it would be fine. Morai waved when she saw the rest of the group with the lizards. But even if she wanted to back out now, it was already too late.

fourteen

Morai

“ This really wasn’t what I was expecting on our way to the dark flower forest,” Morai said, sitting on the dirt floor covered in grass, sweat beading on her forehead. Her friends were seated nearby, looking exhausted. Even Noa—whom Luka had named—was sleeping next to him. Though, how the creature could sleep in this situation was beyond Morai. Their journey out of Braken was pretty uneventful until they made it into the grasslands of Hevon. That’s where the trouble started: not only was it hot, and the scarce trees around them made it hard to find shelter, but they were also being attacked by Chepi. The lizards were so distressed by the attacks that they refused to move, which Morai found frustrating because they were completely fine when they’d been attacked by the chimera. In the end, the lizards were sent back to Braken, and the group continued on foot. It would take them longer to get to the forest, but since they were already so close, it wouldn’t take them too long. That is if the Chepi stopped attacking them.

Chepi were tiny creatures the size of a gnome with green skin, and their hair was made of grass blades that stood up straight in the air. They wouldn’t be such a nuisance if their hair wasn’t sharp like a blade. Though their skin and green clothing helped them blend in, the Chepi hid themselves by either lying down, or digging holes and lying in the soil so the only thing you could see was their hair. An unsuspecting person would take it to be just grass until they got too close and the Chepi attacked. They had tiny arrows and shields made of large leaves, so it wasn’t hard taking care of them. What was difficult was how fast they moved, and that they could trip you off your feet if you tried to outrun them.

“I thought they could be reasoned with,” Luka said, pulling out a tiny arrow from his leg. It left nothing but a speck of blood, but it still hurt. They were like tiny needles.

“They are supposed to be. But they’re also known for pulling pranks too,” Fida said. She’d discarded her metal armor, in favor of a magical invisible one that appeared if she was attacked.

“How do we stop them long enough to talk?” Morai asked. Everyone looked at Noa. So far, he was the only one who could attack them given how small he was.

“So, what’s the plan? Use Noa as a distraction or bait?” Luka asked, petting Noa on the head, he blinked sleepily at Luka.

“They know he can attack them, so they’ve been cautious,” Neoni said; she sighed and looked up at the sky. She was currently sitting next to Tanen, ever since Morai had spoken to her, she’d stopped icing Tanen out. Morai hid a smile and looked over the surrounding area. Nothing but grass and probably a few trees that were too far for her to make out.

“They don’t attack when we’re sitting. Maybe we could speak to them from here,” Morai said.

“You think they’d want to?” Tanen asked, Morai shrugged.

“It’s worth a shot.” Morai shifted into a kneeling position and focused on a tuft of grass.

“Excuse me. We would like to speak with you,” she said, hoping the grass she was focused on was a Chepi and not actual grass. Silence met her, and a breeze blew by causing the grass to sway.

“Maybe a little louder,” Luka said, gaining a glare from Morai.

“How loud could I possibly get? It’s right there,” she said, pointing to the tuft of grass that only stood a few feet away from them.

“Maybe...”

“EXCUSE ME. WE’LL LIKE TO SPEAK WITH YOU,” Tanan shouted, cutting Luka off, causing him to send a scowl at his brother. Morai grinned. The tuft of grass moved, and slowly, the soil became lumpy, then burst open sending dirt everywhere as the Chepi made themselves known. Their green beady eyes stared at them. One of the Chepi, holding a leaf shield, and had pink flowers in its hair, stepped forward.

“Whatever you give us, we aren’t giving you our mushrooms?” The Chepi’s voice sounded squeaky, and they spoke extremely fast.

“Huh.” Morai blinked. “We don’t want your mushrooms.”

“You don’t?” The Chepi blinked owlshly at her.

“No, we just want to make it past this land,” Morai said.

“Oh,” the Chepi said.

“I told you they might be harmless,” another Chepi said, this one a streak of black on its blades. The Chepi that had spoken first held up a tiny finger to Morai.

“One moment,” it said, then the Chepi converged in a circle, whispering. One of the Chepi poked its head up to look at them, only for its head to be pulled back down by another.

“Can we get up?” Luka asked.

“Not sure. We could try,” Morai said, but before they could get up, one of the Chepi turned to look at them.

“My name is Chenip,” the one with the pink flower said. “Come with us,” Chenip said. Without waiting, the Chepi turned and walked away.

“Huh, do you think that’s a good idea?” Neoni whispered. Morai shrugged. Fida got up first, brimming with excitement. As an adventurer, she was sure enjoying this little detour.

“Wouldn’t it take us longer to get to the dark flower forest if we go after them?” Morai asked, dusting herself as she followed behind Fida, the others trailing behind her.

“Not if we hurry,” Fida said, not even bothering to look back. Morai sighed.

“Does anyone want a healing potion? I have a few left,” she said instead, directing her question to the back. Luka, who was directly behind her, holding a sleeping Noa, shook his head.

“I think we can endure this much pain, we should save it for a more serious injury. What do you think?” Luka said, turning towards Tanen, just in time to see Neoni snatch her hand away from Tanen.

“Yes, that is wise,” she said, her cheeks turning pink. Morai resisted the urge to roll her eyes, and turned back to follow Fida. Luka quickened his pace until he was in step with her.

“What did you tell Neoni? She doesn't seem as cold towards Tanen anymore,” he

said, and Morai shrugged.

“Just that our family rivalry shouldn’t stop her from courting your brother.” Luka furrowed his brow at her before turning to look back at his brother.

“Mmm,” he said, before turning his attention back to her.

“Why would our rivalry stop her?”

“Friend loyalty or something like that.” Luka pursed his lips together, his attention now in front of them. Morai tried not to think just how happy she was that he wasn’t trying to bicker with her, though, she wouldn’t mind that either.

“That could be us, you know,” Luka said. Morai frowned up at him.

“Friend loyalty? I highly doubt that.” Luka grinned at her.

“That won’t be bad. But no, I meant we could try dating.” Morai stopped in her tracks. What was he talking about? Luka stopped as well; gone was the grin he’d had. Oh, was he serious? Was this a confirmation that he actually had feelings for her, too?

“What are you trying to say?” Luka inclined his head.

“What does it seem like I’m trying to say?” Irritation coursed through her. Morai resisted the urge to stomp her foot. He was teasing her, she was sure of it. Right on cue, Luka grinned again.

“That took you too long to answer so I’ll assume it’s a no to dating.”

“Hmm, guys, come look at this,” Fida called. They’d followed the Chepi all the way

across the grassland to the trees Morai had seen in the distance. Within the cluster of trees were more grass so densely packed it would be a chore to wade through it. But they didn't have to, the clumps of grass formed a hole in the center that disappeared into darkness. The Chepi, without turning to look at them, walked right into the hole. What Luka had said brought more questions, but she'll have to think about that later. Right now, she had to calm her thumping heart and figure out how they were going to crawl through this space.

"They expect us to go through that?" Morai asked. While the Chepi could walk upright, they would have to crawl into the hole.

"Ladies first," Luka said. Fida was already on her knees crawling through the hole. Biting back the retort on her tongue, Morai followed Fida, with Neoni behind her. Tanen and then Luka taking up the rear. Morai wasn't sure how long they crawled through the darkness, but by the time they came out on the other side, her arms and legs were hurting.

"Whoa," she said once she got out of the hole and straightened. Like everything before, they were surrounded by grass, but there were more Chepi around this time. And the grass that wasn't Chepi had yellow glowing mushrooms everywhere. Tiny huts dotted the grassland, and tall willowy trees that had the same yellow mushrooms on them were everywhere. As the group followed the Chepi, the others unabashedly stared at them as they walked past, some talking and pointing at them. "What is that?" Morai asked, looking up at what looked like a giant moss-covered woman. It looked like a giant next to the Chepi, but was just an average human to Morai.

"This is our queen," Chenip said, looking fondly at the moss.

"She hasn't been awake for some time now. We've been trying to get help, but every time a human came by it was to get our mushrooms."

“Why do they need your mushrooms?” Luka asked, and Noa, no longer asleep, was pouncing around sniffing at any Chepi that were bold enough to come close to him. The Chepi in turn seemed curious about him, gesturing with their hands and chattering excitedly.

“We assume they want it because the mushrooms give the queen the power to take care of us.” Morai looked around, the yellow mushrooms glowed around them. Morai was uncertain, but she felt the mushrooms did more than give the queen the power to care for the grasslands.

“So, what’s wrong with your queen?” Morai asked.

“We do not know. Ever since the first human stole our mushrooms, she encased herself in this moss. We have successfully prevented any more stealing, but she refuses to wake.” Morai frowned up at the moss. Feeling a tug at her hand, she turned to Neoni who whispered.

“They don’t expect us to help wake her, do they?” Morai shrugged.

“Only one way to find out,” she said. Turning back to Chenip, she asked,

“What do you want from us?” “If you help us wake our queen, by way of apology, we will give you whatever you need.” Morai hesitated.

“I don’t think we need anything,” Fida said.

“Then we’ll show you an easier way to get to the dark flower forest.”

“There’s an easier way?” Morai asked.

“Yes,” Chenip said without any elaboration.

“And all you know is that she went to sleep when the first mushroom was stolen?”
Luka asked.

“Indeed.” As one, they looked up at the moss-covered woman.

“We aren’t sure if we can figure it out,” Morai said, speaking for the group. Chenip nodded.

“That is understandable, but as long as you try, we’ll start from there.” Well, that was very nice of them.

“You must be tired. Please follow me. By the way, I didn’t get your names,” Chenip said as they walked.

“I’m Morai, and that’s Fida, Luka, Neoni, and Tanen,” Morai introduced, pointing at her friends respectively.

“And that’s Noa,” Morai said as Noa ran up to them. Luka picked him up as Chenip nodded in greeting. They came to a stop in front of dense grass that had a hole in it. But this time the hole was big enough for them to stand in. Yellow glowing mushrooms dotted the edges providing light inside. Beds of moss lined the floor.

“You’ll be sleeping here. Please help us and we’ll help you.”

“We’ll try our best,” Morai said. With a nod, Chenip walked away, leaving Morai and her friends.

“We’re taking the one on the left,” Fida announced, going towards the hole. Morai looked around her as her friends split up. Luka put Noa back on the floor as he and Tanen went to inspect where they’d be sleeping. Morai wanted to explore a little bit. Something rubbed against her legs, and she looked down to find Noa there.

“You want to come explore with me?” she asked, picking Noa up.

“I think it would do us some good,” she said, heading back in the direction they’d come from.

fifteen

Luka

Luka stared up at the tree Morai was sitting on, her back was to him as she petted Noa. He sighed looking around him. How did she even find this place? The Chepi home was large beyond belief.

He had set out partly to look around, and partly to look for Morai, and partly to get away from Tanen and Neoni who seemed to not want to leave each other since Morai gave them the go ahead. It was nice to see his brother happy, but it made him resentful, something he didn't want to feel towards a family member, and so he'd set out to clear his head. Only to find that the smallness of the place was an illusion, he did figure out where he could, and couldn't go by if the yellow mushrooms lit up his way or not. That sort of narrowed down where he could look, but it still took him what felt like hours before he found Morai up in a tree.

He took out his dart—the one he always carried, even when he wasn't armed—and threw it at her. He knew she'd sense it coming and dodge, but since she was up in a tree, he threw it, so it lodged itself on the branch she was on instead. That didn't stop her from trying to duck, though. She looked down at him with a furious scowl.

“Are you trying to kill me?” she asked.

“You know I would never do that, my Morai.” Her expected anger made him chuckle as he withdrew his dart from the tree, with the rope attached to it. He frowned as his hands itched. Was she hurt or Noa? Morai scaled down the tree, landing with a thud

next to him. She gave him a sleeping Noa. Luka inspected Noa, but he seemed fine.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I was bored.”

“So what? You decide to interrupt my much-deserved rest?” He grinned at her.

“Precisely that.” He turned and headed in a random direction, he didn’t want to go back to the camp just yet.

“Do you know where you’re going?” Morai asked, falling in step with him.

“Not a clue, but the mushrooms are good at telling you where you can and can’t go,” he said. Morai winced, rubbing her shoulder, and Luka stopped walking.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

“It’s just a bruise. It’ll heal,” she said, well that explained the itchiness, he stared at her shoulder.

“Really, I’m fine.”

“Did you take a healing potion?”

“It’s not so serious to need one,” she said. Luka furrowed his brow at her shoulder again. He sighed then continued walking.

“What happened, the mushrooms light up the place enough that you won’t slip on something.”

“Ahhh, well...”

“Don’t tell me you continued walking, even when the mushrooms didn’t light up.”
Morai lifted her chin.

“It happened once, and don’t tell me you weren’t curious.”

“I was, but my self-preservation instincts are pretty strong,” Luka said, coughing to cover up his laughter.

“What happened?” he asked.

“The trees made it pretty clear I wasn’t allowed. They had vines that practically dragged me out.” This time, Luka didn’t bother to hold his laughter.

“It isn’t that funny.”

“Oh, it is,” Luka said, straightening from putting Noa on the ground. His laughter had woken Noa, who immediately started sniffing around.

“Do you hear water?” Morai asked. Tilting his head, Luka listened and sure enough he could hear it.

“It sounds like a creek,” he said, leading the way again. Morai followed. The mushrooms lit up the place all the way to a clearing where they found the creek. The place was covered in mushrooms of all shapes, sizes, and colors. Luka frowned.

“Whoa,” Morai said.

“You think this is where someone might have stolen the mushrooms?” Luka asked.

“Possibly,” Morai said, going ahead of him and towards the creek. His hands still itched to heal her shoulder, gritting his teeth, he turned away from her and looked around. He saw a few white mushrooms and headed towards them. Healing potions were specific when it came to ingredients, but a rule of thumb was that anything white could mean it could heal or be added as an ingredient to make a healing potion. He stooped down and touched it, but it didn’t give anything away. The only mushrooms that gave a miniscule amount of magic were the yellow ones that were scattered in between the other mushrooms.

“These mushrooms do not hold any magic,” Morai said from behind him; straightening, he turned to face her.

“Since when could you sense magic?” he asked.

“I cannot, but look at the yellow ones compared to the others, then look at the trees.” The trees? Luka looked up to find that the trees were dotted with yellow mushrooms as well. Which meant the yellow mushrooms were the ones keeping this place running and the rest were a cover to protect them. Like everyone else, Luka had assumed the yellow ones were only for light. Could the Chepi have thought this as well?

“Which mushrooms do you think were stolen?” Morai asked.

“I’m not sure. We could ask Chenip tomorrow,” Luka said, and Morai opened her mouth to speak, but Luka raised his brow. “Fine,” she said, turning away from him. His hands itched again with all the lights around, he could heal her without her noticing. He just had to send a surge of healing magic as quick as he could. His mind made up, he grabbed both of her shoulders and spun her around to face him.

“Ouch, what did you do that for?” she asked, trying to break away from him. But he tightened a grip on her uninjured shoulder trying to figure out what to say.

“Why are you leaving?” he asked, blurting the first thing that came to his mind. Morai scrunched up her nose in confusion.

“What? I’m going to bed, of course.” He shook his head while at the same time concentrating on his hand that was on her injured shoulder.

“No, I mean...” He paused as he sensed the magic working, his hand glowing softly, but the light from the mushrooms helped to shield it. But Morai must have seen something from her periphery because she started to turn her head.

“Luka...”

“Why are you leaving Linden?” He cursed at himself, now was not the time to ask such a question, but it stopped her from turning.

“Really? You want to know that now?”

“Yes, why are you leaving and were you going to tell me?” He felt her tense.

“Yes, I was going to tell you eventually.” Luka raised a brow when she didn’t continue. Morai scoffed and tried moving away from him again, this time he let her. He’d healed her already.

“Besides, it’s none of your business if I leave.”

“Of course it’s my business, who else am I going to compete with?”

“Is that all I am to you? A competition?” Luka hesitated. Would telling her the truth change anything? He had a responsibility to his family; his parents expected him to take over the family business. He was certain his parents would let him marry anyone as long as it wasn’t Morai. But he didn’t want that, so he took a deep breath and

fingered his dart, feeling the cold smooth metal to anchor him.

“What if I told you, you are more than that?”

“Are you telling me that because you think it will stop me from leaving?” He focused on her face trying to read whatever was there, but she held her emotions close, so he focused on her eyes instead. She was studying him, like she was trying to find something.

“Did you mean it when you said we could date?”

“Will you stay, if I meant it?” Morai scoffed and looked away from him.

“Fine, I’m leaving because I want a better future for myself.” Luka gave a bitter laugh that had her turning back to face him.

“Really? You think your parents will allow that?”

“I’ll convince them that I can handle myself on my own.”

“But...you’re the first born.” Morai lifted her chin.

“I am aware of that. My siblings can handle the business.” Ah, so it was just him then, left to shoulder everything, his siblings had their own lives. Well, most of them did, but here he was stuck, he was hiding his healing magic, for crying out loud. He wanted to be happy for her so he smiled and hoped it didn’t look as sad as he felt.

“Well, I wish you luck,” he said. Either his smile didn’t work, or something in his voice gave him away, because Morai furrowed her brow.

“Luka...”

“We should head back.” Luka scooped up Noa who’d come back to them after frolicking in the creek. He walked past her and back the way they’d come, hoping that Morai wouldn’t notice that her shoulder was better, and that his heart would heal with time.

sixteen

Morai

Morai stared at Luka who was sitting against a tree, playing with Noa on his lap. The night before, he had seemed dejected, and for some reason, she felt compelled to apologize. But she still wasn't ready to explain why she planned to leave. She hadn't lied, though. It was for a better future—a future with him in it. She just had to get everything ready, and when all was done, then she'd let him know. But the look he'd given her was breaking her resolve.

“So you're saying the yellow mushrooms basically run this whole place?” Fida asked, poking at a blue mushroom with a stick. Morai frowned at the action.

“Yes, we think so.”

“Hmmm, and what else did you discover during your midnight walk?” Neoni asked, looking at Luka then back at her with a frown on her face. Luka had been keeping his distance from her, and that actually hurt even worse.

“Nothing. We're still trying to figure out how to tell the Chepi.”

“But it doesn't make any sense.” Tanen, who seemed oblivious to his brother's distress, walked to the creek.

“If the other mushrooms don't have magic, then why did the queen lock herself away?”

“Maybe something else was stolen? Some treasure maybe?” Morai shook her head at Fida’s question.

“No, I don’t think so,” she said.

“Oh!” Neoni’s face lit up, and her excited voice caught Luka’s attention. He glanced up from Noa and saw her watching him. Quickly, he averted his eyes back to Noa. Morai gritted her teeth, there was something she also wanted to ask him. When they returned to camp, Morai noticed her shoulder had stopped hurting. She only realized the pain was gone just before she fell asleep. “What if the queen tried to protect whatever mushroom was stolen and ended up in the state she’s in?” Neoni continued.

“What brought you to that conclusion?” Tanen asked.

“Morai, are you listening?”

“Yes, I am,” she said, whipping her head around to face Neoni.

“I was saying that since the Chepi couldn’t tell which mushroom was stolen, what if it never was? But the queen protected it, which left her in that state!” Neoni’s excitement was mounting as she spoke. And Morai couldn’t help the smile that came to her face.

“Okay, let’s try that theory out with Chenip. They’ve been waiting for us for a while now.” Morai turned around to find that Luka had already gotten up and was waiting on them.

“You’ve been awfully quiet today.” She heard Tanen say as Morai walked past Luka and towards the human moss. It looked like the entire Chepi village had heard what was going on because they all stood surrounding the human moss. The crowd quieted and parted as Morai and her friends walked through, meeting Chenip standing in the

center.

“Did you find anything?” Chenip asked.

“We think the humans didn’t steal the mushroom, but your queen was protecting it, and that’s why she’s in this state.” Excited chatter filled the air, until Chenip held up a hand to stop it.

“But how do we wake her?” Morai cleared her throat hoping that her plan would work.

“If I may,” she said, taking a step forward. Chenip gave a nod and cleared the way for her. Morai stood next to the human moss, and gently tapped on it.

“Huh, Queen...”

“Cherup.” Chenip provided.

“Queen Cherup. My name is Morai, your people asked me to tell you that the threat has been resolved.” Morai and everyone else held their breath. It took a moment. Morai stepped back as she felt the moss shudder, which exploded into a swarm of tiny moss creatures that flew away. In the center of the moss-covered floor was the queen curled up in a tight ball. With the size of the moss, Morai had been expecting a human sized Chepi, but what she saw was something even smaller than a Chepi if that was even possible. The queen was a yellow mushroom, but unlike the other mushrooms, she looked like a tiny human mushroom. The queen opened her eyes and gave an unqueenlike yawn.

“Queen Cherup!!” the Chepi chanted excitedly, as the queen uncurled herself and stood.

“Has the threat been resolved?” she asked, her voice shrill and exceedingly fast. She accepted the hand Chenip gave her and stood, reaching Chenip’s knee.

“Yes, my Queen, it has,” Chenip said.

“Oh,” Cherup said when she saw Morai and her friends and gave a curtsy.

“Apologies for my uncouth behavior.”

“Not at all, Your Majesty, it is our pleasure to help,” Morai said.

“If I may, my Queen, why didn’t you come out when we called you?” Chenip asked. The queen’s cheeks grew red. “Oh, the protection spell I wove was too deep so I couldn’t hear anything,” the queen said, looking sheepish. Chenip, who seemed like she was used to such things, only sighed. Morai raised a brow but was relieved the queen was okay. At last, they could continue their journey. Chenip turned to Morai.

“Thank you for your help, we appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it. You should thank Neoni. She’s the one who gave us the idea.” Neoni stepped forward, beaming. Chenip rustled her blades of hair, the other Chepi doing the same, it created a buzzing sound.

“Thank you,” Chenip said. “Now, would you like us to show you the way to the Dark flower forest?”

“Thank you, we just need to get our things,” Morai said. Fida bumped into Morai’s shoulder.

“Hey, is everything okay with you and Luka?” she asked as they headed back to their camp. Tanen and Luka were ahead of them.

“Yes, I noticed that as well,” Neoni said on her other side.

“What are you talking about?” Morai asked.

“You’re not bickering. You or he always have something to say, but he’s been unusually quiet, and you aren’t trying to pick a fight,” Neoni said. Fida nodded in agreement.

“Did you tell him why you are leaving?” Fida asked. Morai shook her head.

“I think you should,” she said. Morai frowned, staring at Luka’s back.

“No, not yet. I just want everything to go alright with my parents first. What if I told him, then my parents say I can’t leave. It would be embarrassing.”

“So, you’re afraid of being embarrassed?” Neoni asked.

“No, I just don’t want to live with that failure,” she said, while Neoni sighed, and Fida patted encouragingly on Morai's shoulder, the shoulder she was yet to ask about.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:57 pm

seventeen

Morai

Morai stared at another dark hole, the size large enough for a human to pass through, without crawling.

“This is the way to the Dark flower forest?” Morai asked, looking skeptically at the black hole. Chenip nodded. Queen Cherup had apparently retired to her palace, trusting Chenip to see to her guests.

“Yes, this should drop you off inside the forest where our family lives.” Morai blinked.

“Inside?” she repeated. How come no one had heard of this before? Then again, the Chepi usually attacked anyone who’d tried to come in here.

“Yes, we’re only giving this to you because you helped us. Do not let anyone know of this.” Morai nodded, feeling torn as she remembered Inan who’d lost her husband. How many lives could be saved if everyone knew there was an entrance here? But she knew not everyone could be trusted, besides one could still die once in the forest, so it didn’t really change anything, just shortened the time it took to get there. Morai shuddered, turning to her friends, she purposely avoided looking at Luka; if he avoided her then so would she.

“Are we ready?” she asked. Neoni nodded.

“Ready,” Fida said with an eager smile on her face. With a decisive nod, Morai lifted her chin and walked into the darkness before it got the better of her.

The feeling of walking through the darkness was different from when they’d crawled through it. Morai felt lightheaded and sluggish, almost similar to when they’d teleported. She soon noticed a light up ahead, that expanded until she was standing in a clearing. It looked similar to the Chepi village, except that it was a bit brighter, and had a lot more trees in the area, also a lot more Chepi. Chepi who stopped everything when they spotted Morai. Belatedly, she realized she should have asked Chenip for something that would show she came in peace, but it was too late now. She tensed as the rest of her friends arrived, bracing for the Chepi to attack. Then, an elderly one with a walking stick and blades tinged with silver stepped forward.

“You must be Morai,” it said.

“Yes, I am.”

“Chenip said to be expecting you. My name is Cheiv, welcome to the dark flower forest.” As though that was all that was needed, the other Chepi continued with whatever they were doing, the chattering resumed, and some it seemed were playing some kind of ball game with a rolled up...was that dung. Morai tried not to wrinkle her nose.

“Thank you, these are my friends, Neoni, Fida, Tanen, Luka, and Noa.” Cheiv nodded at each of them before pointing her wooden stick away, towards a path on her left.

“Walk that way until you see a cluster of grass, in a semicircle, that should lead you out of our territory.” Cheiv put her stick down on the ground with a thud.

“Once you do, you will no longer be protected by the power of Queen Cherup. Come back here when you’re done with your quest.”

“Thank you,” Morai said. Cheiv only nodded and slowly walked away.

“Well, that was a bit anticlimactic,” Tanen said.

“Were you expecting an escort?” Luka spoke for the first time. Noa yawned in his arms, then wiggled until Luka put him on the floor. Tanen grinned at him.

“That wouldn’t be bad,” he said.

“Come on, let’s finish this before it gets dark,” Morai said, leading the way. She knew she had high expectations, but still she hoped they would come out of this unscathed. They made their way through Chepi territory in silence. Morai hadn’t realized just how quiet everyone else was when she and Luka weren’t bickering. She bit her lip. She actually missed it. Was she being stubborn by not telling Luka the actual reason she wanted to leave? But it’s not like telling him would change anything. That and the fact that she was afraid, what if he didn’t feel the same way she did?! Then what? It’s not like she’d confirmed how he felt about her, but...well she’d seen some signs. At least she hoped they were signs, like that one time he sent her a note when she hurt herself, and the times he got close to her on purpose. Like last night for example, but Morai suspected he did that for another reason. She just needed to figure out how to ask him without risking him shutting down.

Morai glanced at Luka and this time he met her gaze, smirking in response, which made her heart beat faster as she quickly looked away. Looks like he’s in a good mood, that or he was just as excited as she was about finally getting this peacock feather. She just hoped they all made it back in one piece. There was something slightly disturbing about the forest, not in a foreboding way more like something was nagging at her about the forest but she couldn’t put her finger on it. They came across

the grass in a semi-circle just like Cheiv had said. It was a semi-circle because the grass surrounded the Chepi territory, and the rest of the circle couldn't be seen since it was surrounding other parts of the forest.

“Okay,” Morai said, turning around to face her friends.

“Are we ready?” she asked.

“Whenever you are,” Fida said, and she'd unsheathed her sword, though Morai doubted they would encounter anything as soon as they got out. With a nod, Morai turned and made her way out of the Chepi territory.

eighteen

Luka

Luka crouched and picked up Noa who'd been following on his heels, he looked around the place. It was unimpressive, just a mass of nothing but trees. But what caught Luka's attention was the bird calls going on, which meant they were safe. He frowned. Something else was nagging at him but he couldn't figure out what it was. It was something about the forest.

"Well, this is disappointing," Fida said, sheathing her sword back in its scabbard, her stance was still tense though as though she was waiting for something to attack.

"I agree," Tanen said, folding his arms across his chest. Luka frowned.

"Shouldn't we be grateful we didn't get attacked?"

"Yes, but the only action Fida and I have gotten was with the chimeras, we need more," Tanen said, and Fida nodded in agreement. Luka scoffed, turning to Morai to say something, only to remember he was not talking to her. It's not that he didn't want to, but he thought giving himself some distance away from her would at least start the process of getting over her when she moved. It was proving difficult when she was also so close.

"I for one, am grateful we haven't gotten attacked yet," Neoni said. Morai, who was standing beside her, didn't respond. She was looking around, trying to take everything in. Luka never understood her curiosity with new places, she always wanted to

explore whenever the opportunity arose. But that's probably why she made such a good thief.

"There is something..." She started then shook her head.

"What?" Neoni asked.

"Just the forest feels..."

"I feel it too," Fida said her stance relaxed a notch. Luka let out a sigh so he wasn't the only one.

"The forest feels what?" Neoni asked. Morai shrugged.

"I can't put my finger on it." Everyone stood still listening.

"It's not really going to come to us if we just stand here," Luka said.

"True. Now that we're here, do we know the exact location of where the dragons could be?" Morai asked, turning her attention to Fida. Luka didn't dwell on the fact she'd agreed with him. Instead he turned to Fida as she pulled out her map. She frowned at it.

"Well?" Fida started, then looked up at Morai. "I'm not sure where we are."

"What?" Morai said as Luka held out his hand.

"Let me see," he said. Fida offered him the map, he perused it and sure enough he couldn't tell either. For one, the Chepi territory, while it was marked in Hevon, the one in the forest wasn't. The map showed only how to get to the dark forest, from the entrance of the forest, and showed how to get to the dragons from there.

“How are we going to get anywhere if we’re lost,” Morai asked, and Luka shifted. She’d moved to look at the map behind his shoulder.

“We could go back and ask the Chepi or ask around for help. I’m sure there’d be someone or something willing to help,” Neoni said. Luka frowned; going back would take too much time. “Going back would take too much time,” Morai said as though reading his thoughts. Neoni shrugged.

“Onward then, until we get someone to help us,” she said; with everyone in agreement, they started on their way. Luka, who was still studying the map as they walked, didn’t realize that he and Tanen had fallen behind until Tanen bumped his shoulder to get his attention.

“What?” Luka asked with a scowl on his face when he saw the look Tanen was giving him. He knew that look, that was the look Tanen gave whenever he felt he needed to be the big brother. Which was laughable because he was older than Tanen, only by a year but still.

“Why are you avoiding Morai?” he asked. Luka glanced up at Morai and the girls who were walking ahead of them; they were far enough away that they wouldn’t be able to hear the conversation.

“It’s nothing,” Luka said, and Tanen rolled his eyes.

“Come on, brother. I may be dense, but I can tell you’re avoiding her. What happened at Hevon?” Luka sighed, rolled up the map and shoved it in his bag.

“It was nothing you don’t already know.” Tanen cocked his head to the side in confusion then his eyes widened.

“Don’t tell me you told her.”

“I did not. Well, not like that. But I don’t think she was impressed with my wording.”

“Huh,” Tanen said, “did she tell you why she’s leaving?” Luka shook his head.

“I mean she did, but I think she’s hiding something else.” Tanen’s silence had Luka looking back at him.

“What?” Tanen only shrugged.

“I just think she’s not the only one hiding something.” Luka was about to respond when a shrill scream had him turning around back to the girls, and Tanen cursed as he unsheathed his sword. Fida ahead of them did the same with relish.

“Finally,” Tanen yelled, running forward as Morai and Neoni came back towards him. Luka picked Noa up as the girls reached him, his hands itched.

“Are any of you hurt?”

“It shot something at me,” Morai said, shuffling in her bag for a healing potion.

“It? What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Neoni answered since Morai was busy guzzling down a healing potion.

“It’s the first time I’ve seen something like that,” Neoni said, ruffling through her bag, and pulling out her book. Luka frowned when Neoni started scribbling in it.

“I should have been more careful,” Morai said once she was done, getting another potion out of her bag. He thought she was getting it out just in case Tanen or Fida got hurt, but she drank that one as well, making him more worried. And the itching in his

hands didn't seize.

"Are you sure it's working?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. Look." Morai held up her arm where a red stain was slowly fading, the itchiness in his hands subsided into a dull ache. He frowned, well...that was a first. Which meant whatever the creature did was still there, but he couldn't see it. And it's not like he could heal them, he wasn't ready to make it known yet.

"We got it," Tanen said. Luka jogged towards his brother to the corpse of a creature he'd never seen before. It had large front and back paws, with huge claws, and had spikes all over its body.

"The spikes spit out some kind of red liquid," Tanen said as she went back to Neoni who continued to scribble vigorously.

"Do we know what the red liquid is?" Luka asked.

"As far as we know it's harmless," Fida said, accepting a healing potion from Morai, she was covered in the red liquid and so was Tanen. Luka frowned at the creature. His hands still had that dull ache in them.

"Are you certain? What use would it be to the creature if it was harmless?" he asked. Neoni, who was scribbling, stopped. Fida, Tanen and Morai stared at the creature. Even Noa, who had a paw raised to touch the creature's snout, paused.

"Morai, you were the first to get sprayed. Do you feel anything different?" Neoni asked. Morai shook her head.

"No." Another long pause. "Maybe it doesn't affect us because we're humans?" she asked.

“Let’s hope that’s the case,” Luka said.

“Let’s just keep going. If we start feeling any effects, we can let you know,” Tanen said, looking pointedly at him.

“Why would we need to tell him?” Morai asked with a frown. Luka gritted his teeth, while staring at his brother who grinned at him.

“He has more healing potions.”

“Oh,” Morai said, causing Luka to turn and look at her. She seemed disappointed by the answer.

“That makes sense. I’m running low,” she said.

“With that settled, let’s take some of those spikes with us,” Neoni said, pulling gloves out of her bag and putting them on with glee. A few minutes later, each of them had at least three spikes.

“Why do we need this much?” Luka asked, frowning at the spikes. On closer inspection, the spikes had tiny hairy thorns on them.

“We can give some to Kirnon. It would give me some brownie points with him,” Neoni said. Done with gathering up the spikes they headed off again, but Luka still couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off. The dull ache hadn’t subsided either, but maybe he was just overthinking things.

nineteen

Morai

“ T his is going to sound morbid, but...” Fida started, they’d been walking for what felt like hours. The early morning sun was now high up in the sky signaling noon, and they were yet to encounter any other creatures, not even dragons had flown across the sky.

“...don’t you think we should be seeing some bones or things left behind by others?” Fida asked.

“Yes, that does sound morbid.” Neoni said with a shudder. Morai scowled. She did get Fida’s point, with all the people that hadn’t returned, the lack of bones or other things like torn and worn clothes and such should be popping up.

“Maybe the creatures that live here took care of them. Or the dragons burned them to a crisp.” Tanen offered.

“There would still be bones, though,” Luka said, readjusting his bag where Noa, exhausted, was fast asleep.

“Then...” Fida continued as though she was dreading what she was going to say next. “Could it be that we’re going in the wrong direction?” Morai, who was leading the group, stopped and turned to Fida who had Kirnon’s map in her hand.

“Are you serious?” she asked, trying not to let her agitation show. It didn’t seem to

work because Fida winced.

“I could be wrong,” she said, holding up the map, everyone huddled around her to look at it.

“I was trying to figure out where we are by redrawing the map,” she explained, pointing to a spot where she’d drawn a tiny Chepi, and a little up the map was the creature they’d fought.

“If we’d used the normal entrance, we would have come across this waterfall, after we met the spiky creature, but there’s been nothing.”

“So, you think we got rerouted after fighting the creature?” Morai asked.

“It’s possible, we met the creature sooner than expected on the map, but we haven’t come across the waterfall.”

“Maybe we just haven’t come across it yet,” Neoni said. “Like you said, we met the creature earlier than expected and according to the map there was no mention of the Chepi territory either. So it’s possible that the others made it to the creature the long way,”

“Yes, but it shouldn’t be taking this long to get to the waterfall. If that’s the case, we should have been there by noon, then to the dragons by nightfall.” Morai frowned when she heard a twig snap. She spun around but saw nothing.

“Did you guys hear that?” she asked, turning back to the group when no one responded to find she was the only one on the path. The forest was still, except for that sensation she couldn’t put a finger on.

“Guys?” she called; they were just here a minute ago. Something rubbed against her

leg and she looked down, smiling in relief when she saw Noa. She scooped him up and rubbed her cheek against him.

“Let’s go find your master, shall we?” She started heading down a path when a shout caught her attention. Noa scrambled out of her arms and headed in the direction of the shout.

“Noa, wait.” Morai ran after him, the shout sounded like Luka, was he in trouble? She came to a stop when Noa ran into a cave. Frowning, she looked around at the surrounding area—nothing but weeds and rocks everywhere.

“Morai, look out!” Luka shouted coming out of the cave with Noa in his arms. Morai turned behind her and ducked in time just when an enormous claw swiped where her head would have been.

“Run,” Luka shouted, but he didn’t need to tell her that she already was. She ran towards him with the pounding feet of the creature behind her. But the footsteps disappeared when she reached Luka.

“What was that?” she asked. The creature, which looked like a black blob of ink, was trudging back the way it had come.

“I don’t know, but it can’t come into the cave,” Luka said, grabbing her arm and pulling her into the cave.

“Where are the...oh my goodness, is that blood? Why are you bleeding?” she asked when she finally got a full view of Luka; his shirt was soaked through with blood.

“Bleeding happens when someone gets injured,” Luka said with a smirk. Morai folded her arms across her chest.

“Seeing as you can joke about this, I’m assuming you’re fine.” Luka didn’t respond as he sat before the fire, leaning his back against the wall. His face looked pale, and his forehead sweaty.

“I’m partly fine.”

“Partly?” Morai said, going over to sit next to him. “Hang on. I have some potions left.” “No, it’s fine,” Luka said, waving her away. Morai frowned at him then at the blood-stained shirt.

“At least take off your shirt,” she said, continuing to rummage through her bag for a healing potion; she was positive she had at least one left.

“Why? You want to see my abs that bad?” Morai scoffed.

“You don’t have any,” she said. That was a lie, of course; she’d seen him shirtless plenty of times to know he kept himself in shape. Grinning when she found a bottle, Morai grabbed it and turned back to him.

“How would you know. You’ve never seen me shirtless?”

“What are you talking about, of course I have.” Numerous times, actually, since he loved to take it off when he was doing repairs on his family’s house.

“Huh,” Luka said, leaning his head back against the wall, his eyes closed.

“You should drink this,” she said, shoving the potion into his hands that closed around it, but he didn’t bother to drink it.

“Luka, you’re scaring me. Just drink it.” Luka opened his eyes and looked at her. His jaw throbbed. But instead of doing as she said, he closed his eyes and lifted a hand to

pat Noa who was sitting on his lap.

“Luka...”

“You know,” Luka said, opening his eyes to look at her again. “I’m not sure why I didn’t tell you this, or maybe I just thought I couldn’t. But...” He paused. Then shifted his weight so he was half facing her.

“Maybe I should just show you instead of telling you.” Morai raised a brow.

“What are you talking about...Luka!?” Morai squeaked when Luka grabbed the back of her neck caressing it with his thumb. This was the closest she’d ever been with him, well, not really, but she wasn’t counting the couple of times they had to get close to one up each other. Was he doing what she thought he was going to do? Morai closed her eyes, her heart racing, as someone grabbed her arm and pulled her away from Luka. She muttered a curse under her breath at the unwelcome interruption.

“What do you think you’re...Luka?” Morai stared at Luka who’d pulled her away from the Luka who was still sitting on the floor looking like he was about to die.

“Seriously? This is the best you can do?” The Luka holding her arm asked.

“What...who are you?” Morai asked. The Luka holding her arm stopped glaring at the Luka on the floor and turned his glare on her instead.

“Snap out of it. I really don’t want to hit you,” he said. Morai riled back.

“I beg your pardon?!”

“Morai, please.” Morai was about to retort, but the desperate look in his eyes had her studying him even more. Then at the Luka who was sitting on the floor, he hadn’t

moved but he seemed...foggy?

“Is this what I think it is?” she asked, turning back to Luka who was still holding her arm. He exhaled.

“Yes. It’s a hallucination. We think the creature that attacked us was responsible, it just took a longer time to take effect because we’re humans and the potions helped a bit.”

“We?”

“Neoni and I. We’re the only ones that didn’t get sprayed.” Morai scrunched up her nose, turning back to the Luka on the floor but he’d vanished, along with the fire and Noa.

“How are you here?” Luka hesitated.

“I’m trying to wake you up.”

“That doesn’t answer the how?” Morai said.

“Morai?” Luka said through gritted teeth.

“I will if you tell me how you’re here, and can you let go of my arm?” Morai rubbed where Luka had been holding her, his grip had been tight.

“You know, I never thought I’d be this jealous of myself,” Luka said. Morai felt her cheeks grow hot, was she really about to kiss Luka? He hadn’t been real but still.

“Do not change the subject.” She didn’t want to dwell on that, she was already embarrassed as it was. Luka grinned at her.

“Really, I thought you’d be a bit curious,” Luka said, leaning towards her, Morai leaned back. Luka’s smile dimmed a little.

“I’ll tell you how I’m here when you wake up.” Morai eyed him suspiciously.

“I promise, it’s not something I can hide anymore,” he said.

“Fine, how do I wake up?” Luka rubbed the back of his neck.

“That’s the tricky part. I thought hitting you might help. But you look like you’d murder me if I do.” Morai lifted her chin at him.

“Or I could try shocking you into waking up?” Luka asked.

“Okay, how do we do that?” Luka raised a brow.

“I can’t really tell you if it’s supposed to be a shock.”

“Fine, just get on with it then.” Luka looked up at the cave’s ceiling deep in thought.

“I could kiss you.”

“What?” Morai said, stepping back when Luka moved towards her.

“I told you I was jealous, wasn’t I?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“You were fine letting fake me do it, what’s the difference now?” Morai felt her cheeks heat again at the not-so-distant memory. She scrambled back when Luka made a grab for her arm, she tripped, her arms shot out to prevent her fall only for her

to meet darkness. Morai sat up with a shout breathing hard, Luka was kneeling in front of her beads of sweat on his forehead, a look of focused concentration on his face, his hands, which clasped hers, were glowing.

“Oh, good, you’re awake,” he said with a grin, though he looked strained.

“What...where...”

“Luka, hurry,” Neoni said. Morai turned her head to find Neoni kneeling with Tanen sleeping in her lap.

“Are you alright?” Luka asked, as Noa licked her hand.

“Wha...yes, I think I am.” Luka gave a nod and moved silently to Neoni’s side. He clasped Tanen’s hand just like he’d done with her, and slowly, his hands began to glow. Morai stared at his hands, her brain trying to catch up with everything that had happened. She’d fallen into a hallucinated sleep caused by the spiky creature, and Luka had somehow entered her hallucinations to bring her out of it. Morai swallowed. She knew he didn’t have to tell her anything but the fact that Luka hid that he could use healing magic stung but she didn’t want to examine that now. She’d ask him later. Right now, her friends needed her help. Morai stood, closing her eyes when a wave of dizziness overtook her. When it passed, she walked over to Fida who was sleeping next to Neoni and just like Neoni, she pulled Fida’s head into her lap and watched Luka heal.

twenty

Luka

Sighing, Luka leaned his head against a tree, his eyes closed, his legs stretched out before him. His head felt like it was being hammered by a blacksmith and there was nothing he could do about it but wait. This was the only downfall to having healing magic; he couldn't take a potion to alleviate his pain, and he couldn't heal himself. When Fida had woken up, he'd excused himself, though he knew Morai had questions for him, he couldn't sit there because every noise they made increased his headache. The silent stream he sat by helped somewhat, even Noa gave him some space choosing to stay with the others. He heard a twig snap, and his head pounded in revolt. He didn't bother opening his eyes to figure out who it was, he already knew it was Morai, he always knew her footfalls. A cold compress pressed against his temple, Luka flinched from the sudden cold but didn't open his eyes, he heard rustling, then a presence sit next to him. She stayed quiet for so long Luka decided to break the silence.

"Aren't you going to ask?" Even talking hurt.

"I was going to wait until your headache subsided," Morai said, and Luka grunted.

"Besides, Tanen told me everything," she said with a smile in her voice. Luka dared to open one eye to look at her, closing it shut when the moonlight was too much.

"Is it always this bad?" Luka shook his head.

“I used too much mana and had to pull more out of the air. My body just needs to recover.” And it was letting him know its disapproval. They fell into another silence, listening to the distant sound of a night creature that produced a musical tone.

“When were you going to tell me?” Morai asked. Luka shrugged.

“I hadn’t really thought that far, and when I found out you were leaving, I thought there was no need. Besides, would it change anything if I’d told you? We’d still be rivals, and you’d still leave and I’d...” Luka paused, swallowing the lump that had formed in his throat. Reaching up, he took the compress from her and pressed it to his other temple and sighed.

“Tanen said you haven’t told your parents.”

“They would be obligated to tell the temple, and then I’d have to go there. And you know how they are with their healers. I won’t be able to have a life.”

“Why don’t you want to go to the temple?” Luka opened his eyes, ignoring the jarring headache he got to look at Morai. She was looking down at her hands.

“Do you really have to ask that? After everything?” She looked up at him, her nose scrunched. She studied his face for a moment before looking back down at her hands.

“What exactly are you trying to say,” she asked. Luka sighed, then shifted so he could fully face her.

“If I leave for the temple, I won’t be able to be with you. But it’s not like I can be with you even if I wanted to, what with our family always pitting us against each other. Do you have any idea the fit my parents would throw if I told them how I felt about you?” Morai actually grinned at that.

“It would be quite the sight to watch,” she said, and he chuckled, then winced.

“Yes, it would be.”

“But that’s why I wanted to leave.” Luka frowned.

“Because they’d throw a fit?” Morai rolled her eyes.

“No, because I thought if I convince my parents to let me move to the capital city, we can have a relationship. I mean, you could visit without your parents actually knowing who you’re visiting.”

“Oh.” The tightness Luka had felt in his chest eased.

“And you didn’t think to tell me? I could have helped.” Morai lifted her chin.

“There’s no way I’d let you help with saving money. It’s mine.”

Luka allowed himself a full grin.

“So that’s how it is,” he said.

“Definitely,” Morai said with a smile. Luka stretched his arm out and Morai shuffled closer leaning her head against his shoulder.

“How’s your head?”

“Bearable.” They fell silent for a while.

“It’s not going to be easy,” Luka said.

“I know.”

“I’ll be working a lot at the guild and taking on jobs.”

“I know.” Another pause.

“I love you, Morai.” Morai pushed away from his shoulder to look at him, she opened her mouth, but no words came out. Taking advantage of that, he leaned in and kissed her. It was like all the tension he’d been carrying melted away with that one kiss. Her lips were soft against his, and his hand, the one not holding the compress, found its way to her neck. His breath hitched as Morai’s hands went up to his chest and stayed there. He could have gone on for longer, but Morai pushed on his chest and he broke the kiss. She had a dazed expression on her face, an expression that turned into a glare.

“That is not fair, I was going to say it first.” Ah, so she found her voice again. Luka beamed.

“Beat you to it, didn’t I?” Morai scoffed, getting up and dusting herself.

“I’m going to get you back, just you wait,” she said, then trotted off with a smile on her reddening face. Luka burst out laughing.

twenty-one

Morai

Morai couldn't help the beaming smile on her face as she and her friends walked the rest of the way to the dragon's nest. They'd come across the waterfall early in the morning, and it was a breathtaking sight, one that they didn't have the luxury of taking in. But that didn't stop Neoni from scribbling down in her notebook. Luka, who'd been behind the group because he had to stop several times because Noa kept wanting to be carried then put down repeatedly, hurried to the front to walk beside Morai, Noa at his heels.

"Do we have a plan?" he asked. Morai's stomach fluttered when his hand brushed hers.

"Scout the area when we get there," Morai said.

"The problem is, finding a place to camp, while we scout," she continued, glancing back at Fida, Tanen, and Neoni.

"You know," Luka said, and she looked up at him. He had a slight frown on his face which cleared into a grin he directed at her. "This is the first time we will be working together." Morai lifted her chin.

"Who said anything about working together?" Luka raised a brow and then laughed.

"So that's how it is." Morai grinned.

“Definitely.”

“Do we have a plan?” Fida asked from behind them.

“Sort of,” Morai said as Luka bent once again to pick Noa up, settling him in his bag.

“We’ll find a place to camp, while Luka and I scout the place,” she said, Fida nodded.

“How long would scouting take?” it was Tanen this time that asked. Morai shrugged.

“Depends on what we find on the first try.” Morai frowned, glancing up at Luka who put her hand on her lower back to stir her away from a rock that was protruding from the ground.

“Watch your step,” he said with a grin.

“So will you be working together?” Neoni asked, swinging her clasped hands with Tanen back and forth. Morai scoffed.

“Absolutely not. We’re sticking to tradition with this.” Tanen rolled his eyes, while Luka beamed.

“Can’t you just let the rivalry go just this once?” Tanen asked.

“And where would we be without our rivalry, brother?” Luka asked.

“Working together,” Tanen said, a bit exasperated. In truth, Morai had considered it. Maybe it was because of how long their rivalry had been going on, or that she actually wanted to go against Luka on her own free will. But she couldn’t fathom them working together to steal something. Sure, she was tired when her family constantly pitted them against each other, but this felt different somehow.

“We could just reason with the dragons. I heard they can be reasoned with,” Fida said. Morai scowled at that.

“But we’re unwanted guests. Do you think they’d listen to us?” she asked.

“We could try.” Morai chewed on her bottom lip, she was certain the dragons would attack them as soon as they were spotted. After all, no human made it this far, and dragons were territorial. Morai shuddered; she honestly didn’t want to encounter one. She furrowed looking up at the trees, then she stopped walking.

“What’s wrong?” Luka asked stopping beside her.

“The feeling we had earlier,” she turned in a circle listening, “I think the forest is breathing.” Like earlier everyone stayed silent listening. It sounded like the forest was sighing in and out.

“You’re right.” Luka said with a frown.

“Do you think it’s sentient? Neoni asked shifting closer to Tanen.

“Not sure. I think if it was Kirnon would have mentioned it.” Morai said. Unless this was a secret not even he knew about.

“Do you think it’s dangerous?” Fida asked reaching for her sword.

“If it was, I don’t think we would still be alive.” Morai said. Everyone fell silent again.

“We should focus on finding the peacock and getting a feather.” Morai said. If the forest wasn’t dangerous there was no need to dwell on it. They had a job to complete. They continued on.

“Or a couple,” Neoni added. Morai raised a brow at her.

“Well, if you guys are going against each other, it would be more entertaining if you tried to get more than one feather.” Morai glanced up at Luka, who’d slowed down. She looked ahead to find that they’d finally arrived at a clearing covered with dark purple flowers. At the edge of the clearing was a mirage, a barrier that kept anyone out. Morai took a deep breath.

“Once we cross this clearing, we should come across the dragon’s lair.” She wasn’t sure if she was trying to encourage herself or her friends.

“We have everything we need?”

“Yes, we have meats for the dragons just in case, oh and here,” Neoni said, ruffling through the dimension bag, Luka had given it to her when he’d been healing them. Pulling out the mana stones and handkerchiefs Kirnon had given them, Neoni gave a stone and a handkerchief to each of them. This would help them to cross the barrier and then dissolve into dust once its job was done. Morai stared ahead of her, suddenly feeling nervous. Luka grabbed her hand and squeezed.

“We prepared for this. Probably not the rest of what has happened, but we prepared for this,” he said. Morai nodded. They tied some handkerchiefs around their nose and mouth, mostly so they wouldn’t breathe in the dust. But the spell Kirnon had given them would stop whatever the dust was supposed to do.

“Okay, here goes,” she said, and they stepped into the field of flowers. The handkerchiefs immediately emitted a soft glow as the dark purple flowers started sprouting purple sparkling dust into the air.

“What is this supposed to do again?” Fida asked as they walked.

“Something about either making you sleep or hallucinating,” Neoni said. Morai shuddered. She was glad for the spell Kirnon had given them. She didn’t want to hallucinate again, just thinking about it made her chest tight. Luka squeezed her hand again, she turned to look at him, his eyes had a twinkle of amusement in them.

“Morai, breathe,” he said. Morai gulped in air, the tightness in her chest loosening, she looked away from him, her face burning with embarrassment. Luka coughed repeatedly.

“It’s not funny,” she said.

“Oh, it definitely is.” She couldn’t see his face, but she was positive he was grinning. Morai scowled, turning back to make sure everyone was doing okay. They finally reached the mirage and Morai used her hand that was still holding the mana stone to clasp onto her necklace for good luck.

“Is that mine?” Luka asked. Morai frowned at him.

“Focus,” she said, shoving the necklace back into her shirt, and stepped into the mirage.

twenty-two

Morai

Morai crawled through the tunnel, gritting her teeth as her knees scraped on the hard floor. When they'd crossed the mirage, finding a place to camp was not as hard as she'd anticipated. Caves had dotted the place, and the only thing they had to do was find one that was unoccupied. Most of the caves were since most of the dragons lived in close proximity to each other and had lived more in a clearing. It was one of such caves that Morai was crawling through.

Getting in through the mouth of the cave was not an option since there was almost always a dragon sunbathing there, so Morai had to get in through the back which wasn't easy because she first had to find a hole large enough to crawl through. Thankfully, Fida, who was acting as backup, had helped her up. Morai paused when she reached the end of the tunnel that opened to the rest of the cave, inching forward, she leaned over it, and frowned. This one was just like the last two. A large dragon nest that took the entirety of the cave, but no white peacock. Stifling a groan, she reversed her crawl back the way she'd come.

So far, she hadn't seen any of the peacocks that were supposed to be leaving with the dragons. She'd assumed they could be frolicking with the dragons, but so far, had seen nothing. Making her way back to the other side of the tunnel, she slowly turned around in a tight circle, cursing when she bumped her head against the ceiling of the cave. She now knelt with her head facing the entrance to the tunnel, chewing on her bottom lip. She paused, trying to catch her breath, then proceeded to sit on her heels, then forced her left foot forward, gritting her teeth again when her knee bumped into

the wall. Satisfied, she did the same thing with her right leg, then scooted forward until her feet dangled at the opening. She paused again, breathing hard, Morai was just grateful no dragons had happened to pass by while she struggled. Now, all she needed to do was jump and hope she landed safely. The distance from the tunnel to the ground wasn't too high, but from her distance it looked like it. She inched forward until she was sitting on her rump. Fida, who was pacing back and forth like a guard, looked up and waved. Morai waved back, taking a deep breath, she braced her hands on the edge so she could jump. A dragon roared in the distance, and Fida darted towards a tree, pulled her sword out before waving to Morai again. Morai didn't think twice before jumping down to the ground and rolled before springing up and going behind the tree with Fida.

"Did you find it?" Fida whispered looking up at the sky. Morai held up a hand as she took in gulps of air, watching a dragon fly overhead and over the cave. It was huge but too far away to see what color it was. She squinted at the setting sun and sighed.

"No, it was another dead end." Fida scowled.

"Where could it possibly be?" she asked. "Do you think the dragons knew we were coming and hid it?" Morai frowned then shook her head.

"No, I don't think so. Let's go back." She just hoped Luka and the others were having it just as bad, but there had to be a more efficient way to look for the peacock, like working together with Luka. A dragon's roar sounded again, and both Morai and Fida looked up at the sky, frowning.

"Isn't that where we're camped?" Fida asked.

"Maybe it just happened to be flying in that direction," Morai said. Fida gave her a dubious look. The dragon kept flying towards their camp, another dragon roared, and they flattened themselves against the tree as a different dragon flew over them and

towards the camp. Morai swallowed.

“This can’t be good.” Fida responded by unsheathing another sword; together, they ran towards camp.

twenty-three

Morai

“ L ook out,” Luka yelled, shoving Morai to the floor just as she made it to their camp. A dragon roar sounded, and Morai scrambled to her feet, with Luka on her heels.

“How did they find us?” Morai shouted, but her question went unanswered.

“Wait, we come in peace.” She heard Neoni shout but couldn’t see her.

“They’re not listening. Let's move,” Fida said from behind a tree, but move to where? Morai chanced a look up and saw a blue dragon circling overhead. It was huge, its wings seemed to cover the sky as it flew. At least there weren’t any coming at them from the ground. Morai groaned when a second dragon landed on the ground, with a thunderous boom and charged at them.

“Why is it running? It has wings!!!?” Morai shrieked as she and Luka veered to the left of a large tree only for the dragon above to try to scoop them up, causing them to lay flat on the floor. The dragon charging at them veered towards Fida, Neoni, and Tanen. Fida had run over to Neoni, who was behind a large rock.

“Once again, we come in peace!” Neoni shouted.

“Neoni, seriously?!” Tanen shouted, pulling her along with him. Fida sheathed one sword, and with the other still in hand, leaped over the rock, and landed on the

dragon's back.

"Do not hurt it," Morai shouted; she wasn't sure if Fida could even hurt it, but she didn't want to find out. Fida stopped just as she was about to plunge her sword into the dragon's scale. She leaped off the dragon and landed in a crouch. The dragon roared, spread its wings and flew off.

"Did that scare it?" Morai asked as Fida caught up to them. They watched as both dragons flew away.

"Not sure, they might be bringing more," Luka said.

"What should we do?" Neoni asked. A roar sounded in the distance again.

"How did they find us?" Morai asked again, grabbing Luka's hand to stabilize herself. Luka adjusted his grip on his bag, and Noa popped his head out of the bag and chirped.

"I don't know. I arrived here just as the first dragon attacked," Luka said.

"Did you find it?" Fida asked him.

"No." Neoni sighed in frustration and disappointment, and Morai couldn't blame her. She felt the same as well.

"We should probably find another place to camp, before they come back," Tanen said. After gathering their few belongings, the group walked on for what felt like hours, the tension increasing as they didn't come across any dragons again, not even a roar. Morai kept glancing up at the sky to see if a dragon might be flying towards them in the distance. If she hadn't been doing that, she wouldn't have noticed the peacock sitting on a tree branch. It wasn't the white peacock, but a peacock

nonetheless. She pulled Luka to a stop.

“What is it?” he asked with a frown towards her.

“Shhh,” she said, pointing in the direction of the peacock.

“You’ve got to be joking,” Luka said once he saw it, too.

“Whoa,” Neoni said. Morai heard rustling, then the sound of scribbling as Neoni took down notes.

“That’s a peacock,” Tanen said, a note of awe in his voice. “I’ve seen pictures, but seeing the real thing is...wow.”

“Are they skittish? Do you think we can get close?” Neoni asked. Morai shrugged.

“Only one way to find out,” Morai said. Stepping in the direction of the tree, they slowly made their way towards the peacock. The closer they got the more peacocks they saw. A lot of them were really colorful, with beautiful tails, and some were drabber with brown feathers, and their tails were not as impressive.

“Are those females?” Neoni asked, still scribbling in her notebook. “Why do they look so...drab?” Tanen, who was beside her, shrugged.

“Probably because the males need the colors and the females do not?” Neoni shot him a look, but he only shrugged again.

“I already know that but still,” Neoni said.

“Shhh,” Morai said as they walked closer to the first peacock they’d seen. Luka pulled Morai to a stop. Frowning, Morai looked at him, but he was looking up at the

sky.

“Aren’t you suspicious that we didn’t see any until now?” he asked.

“Yes, but...” Morai turned to the peacocks frolicking about.

“What if it’s a trap?” Luka asked. Morai frowned looking up at the sky then back at the peacocks, and peahens that were roaming about, but she saw no sign of the white peacock. Luka might be right about the trap; the sudden attack and departure was suspicious. Morai took a deep breath.

“We won’t know till we try,” She said. Luka gave her a questioning look, and she huffed.

“Do you have a better idea?”

“No,” Luka said with a smirk.

“Good,” Morai said. She barely took a step when a roar so loud they had to cover their ears split through the air. The peacocks, startled, cried out loudly even after the dragon’s roar ended. Their cries persisted as a black dragon landed with a ground-shaking thud. The two dragons that had attacked them earlier circled above while the black dragon shook its massive head and then fixed its gaze directly on them. The dragon was massive, bigger than the first too and as it started at them, Morai realized the breathing sounds they’ve been hearing wasn’t the forest itself but the breathing of the black dragon. Morai swallowed.

“What do we have here?” the dragon’s voice boomed in their heads causing Morai to wince. Startled, Neoni dropped her notebook, then scrambled to pick it up with trembling hands.

“We come in peace,” she stammered.

“Hmmm, yes, I gathered that when you first entered my territory. Though I was curious as to why you were all sneaking around,” the black dragon continued. Its voice was a low rumble. Ah well, this wasn’t looking good at all, Morai didn’t think lying about what they were doing would help either. But would telling the dragon why they were here, make the dragon angry? Or worse, throw them out before they could get the feathers?

“We’re just adventurers,” Fida said, causing Morai to gape at her.

“Adventurers?” The dragon boomed, causing everyone to flinch.

“I haven’t had adventurers come here for a while now. And none that snuck into caves.” Morai flinched. “Or stalked my dragons.” Luka flinched this time and Morai stared at him in shock, how did he even manage that. She took a deep breath, there’s a chance that the dragon won’t get angrier than she already was, or at least Morai assumed it was angry. It was hard to tell. Gripping Luka’s hand tighter, she moved closer to him.

“We just want a few feathers from the white peacock,” Morai heard gasped at her honesty and Luka squeezed her hand encouragingly.

“Hmmm.” The sound, even though wasn’t audible except in their heads, seemed to make the ground vibrate.

“It has been quite a while since we’ve had humans seeking those as well.” The dragon leveled a gaze at them, and Morai tried not to flinch.

“What do you need them for?”

“For an elixir,” Morai continued.

“Hmmmmmm.” Morai shifted from foot to foot. Was that not a satisfactory answer?

“We just need it for a uhhh...client, two clients actually. One is the headmage...”

“The headmage!? Kirnon!?” Morai gaped even as the dragon’s booming laughter rang in her head. She was sure her friends had similar shocked faces. How old was Kirnon that even a dragon knew him, or was he that well known that dragons knew him as well?

“Of course, that doodle head did it.” Morai wasn’t sure how to take a dragon calling someone doodle head.

“I will give it to you, but what would you give us in return?” Morai squeezed Luka’s hand, the only excitement she could show. She couldn’t believe mentioning Kirnon worked.

“Well...” Morai started.

“Wait, we should also ask for the people who’d come here previously,” Fida whispered to Morai who groaned; wasn’t that pushing their luck? The dragon must have good hearing because it asked,

“Others? What others? You’re the first humans to come here in a millennium.”

twenty-four

Morai

“What do you mean, we’re the only humans?” Morai sputtered.

“It’s exactly as I said.” The dragon thundered.

“But...how. Several humans throughout the years had come to this forest never to return,” Morai said, ignoring how the dragon’s voice caused her knees to buckle.

“Hmmm,” the dragon said again, turning its large head to the side looking off to the distance, before turning back to them.

“It would seem they were blocked from venturing further than the entrance.” Morai blinked as Luka beside her inhaled sharply.

“What are you saying?” she asked.

“That your humans never made it beyond the entrance of the forest. The forest is sentient and quite protective and the only way to get in safely is through the Chepi territory. If you go directly to the entrance of the forest, it puts one in a deep sleep.” So that meant everyone was alive? Just asleep?

“Unfortunately,” the dragon continued, “depending on how long the humans have been asleep, not all of them would be alive.” Morai’s shoulders slumped; she was hoping they could get Inan’s husband back. But it made sense, unless magic was used

to protect them while they slept, one couldn't sleep for a millennium, they'll just waste away.

"How long do they sleep until they pass?" Luka asked. The dragon looked up to the sky, was it communicating with the forest? It looked back at them.

"Ten to twenty years." Well, that narrowed it down considerably, Morai just hoped Inan's husband was one of them. She hadn't really said how long he was gone, just a few years, and that could mean anything.

"How do we get them out?" Luka asked this time.

"I can ask the forest to do so for a price." Morai swallowed; she wasn't sure what the dragon would ask for. All they had was the meats that Kirnon had given them. Was this why he'd given it to them?

"We have meats?" Neoni offered.

"I'm vegetarian," the dragon said. Morai felt the blood drain from her face. Whoever heard of a vegetarian dragon? Did Kirnon know this, or did the dragon's diet change without him knowing?

"Huh...well...we...we..."

"Shhh, Neoni. Maybe we could just back away," Tanen whispered, grabbing her arm.

"What? Not after we came all this way," Morai whisper-hissed back, and she was not backing down just because they brought the wrong food. The dragon's booming laughter had everyone wincing again. Morai was hoping she didn't have a headache after this.

“I’m joking,” the dragon said when it calmed down.

“Yes, meat will suffice. I will take some now, and the rest can be brought once a month?”

“Once a month?” Neoni squeaked.

“Yes, for letting the humans go and for the feathers.”

“How much are we talking?” Morai asked.

“Hmmm, since you’ll be bringing enough for me and my dragons...”

“Excuse me,” Morai said, raising a hand. She wasn’t sure if it was wise to interrupt, but she knew if she didn’t, whatever the dragon was going to say next would not only put her city, but the entire kingdom in debt.

“How about we provide meat just for you. Since you know you’re the one who’s going to help us,” Morai said. Silence greeted her, then the booming laugh rang through their heads again.

“Yes, I like that much better. Then, twice my body weight should suffice.” Morai closed her eyes with a shudder. Opening her eyes again, she opened her mouth only for Luka to cover her mouth with his hand.

“You seriously weren’t going to ask the dragon how much it weighed, were you?” he whispered. Morai gave him a look, she didn’t really know why they kept whispering since it looked like the dragon could hear them even if they whispered or not. She pulled his hand away.

“How else are we supposed to know how much we should bring?”

“According to my information,” Neoni said, reading from her book. “An adult dragon typically weighs 20 tons, but that one...”

“Anasta,” the dragon helpfully added.

“Anasta looks to weigh more, so we should shoot for a bit more than twice,” Neoni said, closing her book with a smug look on her face.

“I like her, yes, that arrangement will do,” Anasta said, then turned her head to the side again, waited a moment, this time Morai was sure she was communicating with the forest. Morai couldn’t feel anything but the way Luka shivered beside her told her that the dragon was using magic.

“The forest has released the humans at the edge of the forest. As for your feathers...” The blue-green dragon landed next to Anasta with another ground trembling thud. It had flown away when they were talking to Anasta and brought back the white peacock in its talons. Morai stared at it wanting to ask where it was but refrained; she doubted Anasta would tell her. The peacock did not look alarmed in the least, like this was an everyday occurrence. The blue-green dragon and Anasta looked at them expectantly.

“Hmm, I think they expect us to go there,” Morai said.

“One of you will suffice,” Anasta said.

“Tell me what the peacock feels like when you get back,” Neoni said, scribbling something in her book.

“What? Why can’t you go,” Morai asked, feeling nervous to approach. Neoni lifted her pen with a pointed look on her face.

“You’re the ones who need the elixir,” Fida said, gaining a vigorous nod from Tanen. Luka let go of Morai’s hand and took his bag off. Noa, who’d been silent this whole time, chirped and hopped out.

“What are you doing?” Morai asked.

“I’m volunteering,” he said with a glimmer in his eyes that Morai did not like.

“You are not getting the feathers before I do.” She may have asked Neoni, but she was not going to let Luka do it.

“Oh, a competition, I like that,” Anasta said. “Let’s make it more entertaining, shall we?” The blue-green dragon carefully lowered the white peacock to the ground. It ruffled its feathers, then looked at Anasta.

“You know what to do, Mushu,” Anasta said, and the peacock took off at a dead run, while Morai stared open mouthed.

“The two of you should chase it down. I will grant you the privilege of taking three feathers each, if you make it back here before sundown.” Before sundown? The sun was almost setting. The two dragons made themselves comfortable on the grass, as peacocks and peahens roamed around them.

“Is she serious?” Morai asked. Luka barked a laugh, then turned to Morai with a smirk.

“Race you,” he said, and took off after the peacock before Morai could respond.

“This is not fair,” she said, taking off her bag. She almost ran off when she remembered Noa, who had curiously and cautiously approached the dragons sniffing at them. He might help her sniff the peacock out.

“Noa, do you want to come with me?” she asked. Noa gave a chirp and Morai took off running with Noa on her heels.

“Would you like some refreshments?” Morai heard Anasta ask her friends.

twenty-five

Luka

Pausing, Luka listened to the stillness of the forest. Letting out a breath, he continued walking. Thankfully, the forest had a lot of color that was not white, so spotting the peacock would be easy. He had seen it twice already, and both times the bird evaded him. He smiled, he bet Morai was having a tough time as well. He paused again when he heard a chirp sound; frowning, he turned in a slow circle. Was that Noa? Why was he here? Luka cursed as he belatedly realized Noa would have been an asset for this. Carefully so as not to draw attention to himself, he stepped behind a tree and crouched, just as Morai stumbled her way onto the path.

“Are you certain?” she whispered to Noa who chirped happily next to her. Morai frowned looking around her, her hand absentmindedly going to her neck where her pendant was. Luka’s heart expanded. He had not realized she’d kept the clover he had found on one of his assignments; he smiled. She had adamantly refused to take it the first time he’d given it to her, throwing it away, only to return and find it missing. Who knew she’d taken it. Morai blew her hair which had come out of its bun away from her face. Mumbling something, she untied her hairband and proceeded to retie her hair. Her brown eyes widened.

“I see it, Noa, come on,” she said, forgetting her hair she sped off in the direction of the peacock. Cursing his bad luck, Luka followed closely. He could wait so she could get her three feathers then take those from her and have her hunt the peacock all over again. He grinned at the thought. Morai would absolutely despise him for that. He frowned. Should he really be relishing sabotaging her; it was nice when they’d been

hiding their feelings, but now? They could just work together. Luka stopped in his tracks at the thought. Then shuddered, no, not a good idea. His family ingrained in him to never work with the Stonehearts just thinking about it was a bit...Luka shuddered again, continuing on his way, when Morai's shout made him run the rest of the way.

"Morai?" Luka called. Morai was sitting on the ground staring at her arms. Noa trotted towards him, Luka crouched and patted him, his eyes still on Morai. His hands itched when he straightened.

"Morai, are you alright?" he asked when he finally reached her, he crouched again. She had three feathers in her hands and her arms were scratched up.

"It got my arms," she said, holding them out for him to see. His eyes strayed to her hands that held the feathers. Shaking himself he grabbed her by the elbows.

"You don't have to heal me; I can take a potion."

"You left your bags with the others."

"When I get back," Morai said, a triumphant grin on her face. Luka scowled.

"Don't get too excited, I could take those from you."

"Try it." Morai challenged. Luka glanced at her hands again.

"Luka?" He turned back to Morai to realize he'd been caressing the inside of her elbows with his thumbs. Morai gulped and he grinned leaning closer to her.

"Do I make you nervous?" he whispered.

“If this is your plan to take the feathers from me, you won’t,” Morai said, and Luka raised a brow.

“It isn’t...but that’s a good idea.”

“Luka...”

“Will you let me kiss you or not?” Morai sputtered and Luka grinned again.

“Do I take that as a yes?” Morai’s cheeks colored before she nodded. She wasn’t even done nodding before Luka kissed her. Morai moaned, grabbing the front of his shirt. Still holding onto her elbows, Luka felt them grow warm as magic left his hands and healed her arms. Morai broke the kiss.

“Did you just heal me?”

“I’m pretty good at multitasking, my Morai.” Morai pulled back from him, and he stifled a groan.

“That is not fair,” she said.

“What, that I can multitask?” Morai lifted her chin, and Luka smirked, leaning in again for another kiss when a loud squawk had them turning. The white peacock stood before them looking at them as if to say how dare you forget about me. Luka slowly let go of Morai and inched his way towards the peacock. It didn’t budge, but Luka was certain any sudden movement would have the peacock sprinting away. Luka dove for it just as the peacock was about to bolt again. It gave another loud squawk as Luka plunged three feathers from it and let it go. He turned to Morai with a grin.

“I didn’t have to take yours after all.”

twenty-six

Morai

“ W ith this, we have concluded our negotiations,” Anasta said. Morai scrunched at the meats that sat in a pail in front of Anasta. On their hunt for the white peacock, who now sat snugly in the blue-green dragon's talons, more dragons had shown up and were now in a circle all staring longingly at the meat. Morai looked up at Anasta, who was looking back at her with glowing golden eyes. She shifted uncomfortably, she would never get used to looking at those eyes.

“Thank you,” Morai said.

“Hmmm, do not mention it. Your friends were a delight.” Morai scowled at Neoni who had the grace to blush next to her. Apparently, while she and Luka were looking for the white peacock, Neoni, Fida, and Tanen told Anasta about their travels. Anasta was so delighted by such stories that she gave them information about dragons that no one else knew, and Neoni, ever the information collector, scribbled everything down. Morai lifted her eyes to the sky where stars twinkled, and the moon illuminated everything. She'd been hoping they would leave before the sunset, but it looks like that would be impossible.

“If you would allow it, Anasta, we would like to set up camp here for the night,” Morai said.

“That would be unnecessary. I can create a portal to send you to the Chepi territory.” Morai blinked.

“That would be very helpful,” Morai said. They could spend the night in Braken and leave the next day. Though why couldn’t she just send them straight home, that would be even more convenient. Morai was about to ask when a hand clamped down over her mouth.

“Do not push your luck,” Luka whispered in her ear. She shot him a glare. Luka shrugged, releasing her.

“Or you could go ahead and ask. But don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he said, a mischievous glint in his eye. Morai huffed but didn’t say anything. She could hazard a guess that portal magic could only travel a certain distance, and creating one from the forest all the way to Linden could work but with adverse effects. Like losing a limb or something worse.

“Thank you,” Morai said again.

“Hmmm.” Anasta turned her head and opened her giant maw, but instead of breathing fire, she breathed out air that coalesced into a portal that shimmered in dark purple light.

“Off you go then,” Anasta said. “And do not forget: once a month.” Morai nodded.

“I won’t forget,” Morai said. She would just let Kirnon know to take care of it.

“And give my greetings to Kirnon.” Morai nodded before grabbing Luka’s hand, took a deep breath, and walked into the portal. The journey from the Chepi to Braken was uneventful, it was just a reverse of how they got there, except the Chepi were quite excited to see them, giving them enough mushrooms that they didn’t know what to do with. Morai smiled. Kirnon would be delighted to get them, though.

“Who’s that?” Luka asked as they made it to the outskirts of Braken. Morai squinted

not that she could see much with only the moonlight to guide them. The silhouette of the figure was small, and whoever it was paced back and forth. As they got closer, the figure became clearer.

“Oh, I think that’s Inan.” As though hearing her name the figure paused and looked up.

“They’re here,” Inan yelled, running to them, and following behind her was a man Morai did not recognize. Inan threw her arms around Morai in a tight hug. “Thank you. Thank you so much,” Inan said.

“Uhh, did something happen?” Morai asked.

“Oh, forgive me,” Inan said, stepping back and grinning at them.

“This is my husband, Ebod,” Inan introduced. The man smiled at them, his dark hair was long and looked like it needed a good cut, along with his beard. But other than that, he looked healthy.

“Thank you for rescuing us from the forest, my wife told me that you might have been the ones who woke us up,” Ebod said, his voice was a bit hoarse from disuse. Morai smiled at him.

“It was no problem at all,” she said.

“They’re back,” someone shouted and soon a crowd of people spilled out of homes, all of them thanking them, some crying, while others laughed.

“You will be staying in the inn, correct?” the innkeep said, beaming at them.

“Yes, just for the night.”

“Good, I will give it to you for free. How about a celebration. Everything’s on me tonight.” Everyone cheered exuberantly.

“Umm, we’re quite tired and would like to...”

“Nonsense,” someone Morai didn’t recognize said.

“You’re the heroes of our village, of course we’d celebrate you. After all, the night is still young.” And that was how Morai and her friends were roped into celebrating for most of the night, stuffing their faces with food and drink.

The next day saw them bright and early.

“We wish you a safe journey,” Inan said.

“Thank you,” Morai said, getting into the carriage along with Neoni, Fida, and Luka. Tanen sat up front on the coach. “I cannot wait to give these to Kirnon,” Neoni said, beaming at the baskets of herbs she had gathered from the forest.

Kirnon was, indeed, beside himself with excitement at the number of feathers that they’d brought back along with the mushrooms and herbs. Morai could tell he was thrilled by the constant wiggling of his white eyebrows and how he kept eyeing the items while talking to her.

Morai’s heart leaped at the gold coins he gave each of them. She finally had enough to move, now all she had to do was convince her parents.

“...and that’s why I think it would be worthwhile for me to move to the capital city, not only will building another guild there be helpful but it’d expand our reach,” Morai said, ending her presentation. She tried not to fidget as her parents looked at the glowing board she’d set up in the kitchen that contained her presentation. The

board could appear with a tap on a mana stone designed for such things, and it would disappear with another tap.

“I think our reach is pretty expansive as it is,” her dad said.

“Yes, but think of all the business we’d get. This is the capital we’re talking about,” Morai said. Her dad leaned towards her mother and whispered something. Ophelia frowned.

“Is that the only reason you want to move? To build another guild?” her mother asked. Morai swallowed, trying to dislodge the lump in her throat. She could not tell them she was moving so she could have Luka all to herself, that would squash all her plans thus far. Thinking of Luka made her heart ache, they’d gone back to ignoring each other when they got back two weeks ago, and Morai couldn’t imagine anything worse.

“Yes,” Morai said. Both her parents stared her down, and it took everything Morai had not to fidget. Her parents shared a look, then Ophelia sighed.

“I realize we’ve always been pushing you and Luka to best each other. But to think that it would come around to this...did you really think you couldn’t tell us about Luka?” Morai swallowed again.

“What does this have to do with Luka?”

“Really, Morai, you don’t expect us not to notice...”

“If you don’t want to tell us, then it’s fine,” her father said. Ophelia scowled at him.

“You aren’t thinking of letting her go without her telling us, are you?” she asked. Her father raised a brow.

“Come now Ophelia, there is no use pretending we don’t know the real reason. Besides, I’m sure she’d tell us eventually when she’s ready.”

“Yes, but...”

“Huh, I’m still here,” Morai said. Ophelia clamped her mouth shut and turned to her.

“Fine, we’ll let you go.” Morai grinned.

“On one condition, you visit us at least once a week.”

“Once a week, that’s...I’ll be on the road for most of it.” It took at least two weeks by carriage to get to the capital city, they could use the teleportation device, but they were expensive to use, and she won’t be able to afford that until her guild was up and running.

Her guild. She still couldn’t believe she’d have her own guild, granted it’d still be under the family name, but it would be all hers.

“Fine, once a month then.”

“Ophelia...”

“Fine, once every other month. Happy?” Her mother grumbled, folding her hands across her chest and glaring at her father who smiled, patted her shoulder, and kissed her forehead.

“Thank you,” Morai said. “You won’t regret it. I’ll make our guild the best in the kingdom,” she said. Her mother lifted her chin, and her dad grunted. Morai beamed, she was finally free.

twenty-seven

Morai

She was beginning to regret her decision to move. At least when she was in Linden she had the opportunity to at least catch a glimpse of Luka. But now it'd been two years since she'd moved, and in those two years Luka had only visited once. Sure, they'd sent letters back and forth, but it wasn't the same. Most of the letters Luka sent seemed to come while he was on a job—which was constantly. Morai groaned, slumping at the reception desk.

“Are you doing okay there, Morai?” Amelia, her sister and a receptionist at the guild, asked as she slammed a stack of papers down on the wooden table. Morai still couldn't believe she pulled off starting her own thieving guild. It'd taken a lot of her savings and some ups and downs, but she was finally seeing some financial progress. It was smaller than the one back at home, but it was doing good.

“I'm fine, just...”

“Pining?” Amelia asked. Morai scowled at her, but Amelia only grinned. Amelia was one of the first people who'd wanted to come here with her, and Morai was grateful for it. If Amelia hadn't been here, Morai would have caved to all the stress of starting a business. Thankfully, the guild had started strong, mostly because the people who'd joined had heard about their family guild, that and the rivalry between her family and Luka's. Morai sighed at that, she couldn't really fault them for it since it helped her business. Morai frowned at a building she could see through the windows that sat across the room. The building had been vacant until a year ago when she'd noticed

construction going on there. She still didn't know what it was about.

“Do you know what that building is for?” she asked Amelia who shrugged, busy sorting through her papers.

“No, last I heard it was a guild, but I don’t know which kind.” Morai scrunched up her nose. She just hoped it wasn’t another thieving guild. Morai sighed again.

“Would you like to go see Neoni?” Amelia asked. After Morai had moved here, Neoni followed suit a year later. She’d gotten her dream job as a researcher at the research institute of Magic, thanks to Kirnon. Of course, they’ve both been busy, but they tried to spend as much time as they could together.

“No, that’s fine. I’ll be in my office if you need anything,” Morai said, trudging her way up the stairs. The guild wasn’t busy since most of her guild members were out doing assignments. What Morai hadn’t anticipated as the guild owner was how much paperwork she had to do. Her office was well lit because of the large window that let the sunlight in. Her desk sat next to the window with an open area of the entire office that had sofas facing a small table where she received guests. Most of her guests had been family, though. Morai sighed again as she sat in her chair pulling a stack of papers towards her. They were assignments she had to approve before Amelia posted them on the board in the reception hall. Cracking her knuckles she set to work. The sun had almost disappeared in the horizon, and the mana stones in her office cast an orange glow when a knock came at her door.

“Come in,” Morai said without looking up, the door opened and closed. Morai waited for Amelia to speak as she usually did when she entered her office, mostly about someone wanting to join the guild. Morai scowled when she didn’t say anything.

“Amelia, what...” Morai looked up and froze in her chair. Luka stood at the door with a grin on his face as he studied her.

“You look dashing behind that desk,” he said.

“Luka?” she asked just to be sure, the last time he’d sent her a message he hadn’t mentioned he’d be visiting. Noa, who’d sat obediently behind Luka, chirped and dashed towards Morai. She automatically got up as Noa bounded towards her. Crouching so she could give the jaguar a hug, he’d grown since the last time she saw him. Luka had told her in one of his letters that thanks to Kirnon the king had approved Luka to keep Noa. She stared down at the collar with the king's insignia that rested on Noa’s neck and smiled. She heard Luka approach her, and she straightened, studying him as he came to a stop in front of her. He’d cut his curly hair short, and his attire was what he usually wore, he had a new scar on his forehead. And his sliver gray eyes twinkled at her.

“Like what you see?” he asked. Morai scoffed.

“Shut it,” she said, throwing herself at him for a kiss. He wrapped his arms around her, lifting her slightly as he returned her kiss.

“What took you so long to visit?” she asked when they broke apart.

“I had something to take care of,” he said, rubbing the back of her neck.

“What was so important that it took so long?”

“You’ll soon find out.” Morai wanted to argue, but with his hand still rubbing her neck she relented.

“I missed you,” she said. Luka grinned, pressing his forehead to hers.

“I did, too.”

“How long will you be staying?” Morai asked. Luka’s grin turned devilish as he

stepped away from her and towards the window that overlooked the street and the new guild.

“I won’t be leaving anytime soon,” he said. Morai frowned, joining him at the window.

“What do you mean?” she asked. Luka pulled out a necklace that had a dove engraved in the center of the square pendant. Morai’s mouth dropped.

“I’m officially a healer.”

“Luka, that’s amazing,” she said.

“Yes, well. Only on a part-time basis. I had to speak with the high priest about not wanting to be tied to the temple and he agreed, but with the condition I relocate permanently to the capital.”

“Oh,” Morai said, trying to hide her glee at the news.

“You can live with me. My home is not that far from here.” Luka smirked, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her again.

“I’d love that,” he whispered. Morai didn’t respond, trying to get her bearings.

“If you’re working part time, how would you support yourself?” she asked then brightened.

“Oh, you can work with me?” she said.

“That won’t be necessary. I have my own guild,” he said, pointing towards the new guild.

“Don’t tell me...you didn’t.” Was this the thing that had been keeping him busy?

“I most definitely did. The rivalry continues, my Morai.”

THE END