

Feral

BY- Amy Ford

Chapter 1

After the Storm

It was a cloudy, rainy day. I loved rain. I was sitting at home, eating a bowl of Cheerios. They were not my favorite, but they would make do for tonight. My dad worked until 10:00 pm and my mom was on another business trip. When that happened I cooked frozen dinners for meals. But we ran out, and so now I have a bowl of cold cereal. Not the worst dinner. I got to thinking about school, I had acquaintances at school, but no best friends. I just didn't fit in, and I was fine with that. I didn't want to be popular, just alone. I liked to read and draw, so I didn't talk to people. I lived a pretty normal life, except that incident in sixth grade.

Sixth grade, I was stepping into a world of hate that not even the best psychiatrists could figure out. I had chosen to try Band, first period, first experience. I walked through the door. The band teacher was a small man with a pointy nose and large reading glasses. His hair went down to his shoulders, beneath the glasses his blue eyes shone with a bored curiosity.

I sat down next to Chloe. Chloe was... she was... difficult. In fifth grade all the boys tried to impress her. Some held contests of who could eat the most jalapenos without drinking milk. It was stupid, but Chloe loved the attention. Wherever she walked there was a herd of boys following her, like dogs following someone with food.

Chloe sniffed at me and turned her back. Her hair was blond, cut to the right length, sexy but cute. Her face was considered perfect. Perfectly white teeth, lovely skin, dazzling blue eyes that would leave boys writing poems, endlessly. Bright red lips, the only boy to touch those lips was Chris Winston, the head jock. Chloe was the head popular girl, it was so cliché, I wanted to punch them both. But that was just one of the reasons.

I sighed and sat through the welcome speech. Mr. Benlow was an amazing teacher, I listened to him intently. He used life to explain music. I looked forward to Band every morning. It was on one of those mornings when my life changed.

November tenth. The day was cold, my breath floated out of my mouth in a cloud. I loved seeing that cloud. It was my breath, my life. I watched the fog curling out of my mouth. The straps of my trumpet case biting into my hand. My backpack lay heavy on my shoulders. Filled with books.

I watched as squirrels ran up and down the oak tree at the end of my block.

Band class, we practiced our piece for the winter concert. A storm picked up outside. As I walked to Science, I felt the soft, wet patter of rain on my jacket. I lifted my head up and more drops splashed my face. I smiled, the rain felt good. My face was flushed with warmth and the coolness of water felt like tiny buckets putting out the fire of my face.

Thunder boomed far off and lightning flashed, staining the sky white. I sighed, storms are best when you are at home. You can sit on the couch with a blanket, a book and some tea. A fire will be crackling in the fireplace, and you can stare out the window watching lightning strike, and rain pour. It is the best feeling in the world.

I got to Science, the classroom smelled like window cleaner and gasoline. Mrs. Susans stood besides a tall man. A short woman with short blond hair and oval glasses, next to a tall man with black hair and black eyes. It was an unusual sight. I sat down, one of the last to arrive.

Mrs. Susans introduced the stranger as Mr. Collins. Apparently he was a scientist experimenting in animal hybrids. He gave a speech as thunder boomed outside. I doodled in my science notebook.

“ And that is what I have been doing.” Mr.Collins said clasping his hands together. “Now, If you can answer a question I’ll give you a prize.”

Everyone sat up taller. “ What kind of animals am I trying to combine? I’ll take quiet hands.”

I scratched my head. “ You!” He called pointing at me. “ Uhh.” I said completely caught off guard “ I don’t know, sir.”

A loud crack split through the silence

Lightning slashed into me, Blackness slammed my eyes shut.

Everyone said I wouldn't survive. Lightning would kill, it almost always killed. After I passed out Mr. Collins disappeared. Apparently, he had an emergency at home.

I was in the hospital for 3 months. 2 of those months were spent in a bed. I could not walk for 2 months.

I lived. But, with side effects. First, I had a long scar on my torso from where the lightning struck. Second, I had fast reflexes, better eyesight and hearing. The third and weirdest side effect is that I have the weirdest dreams.

And here I am now. Lonely and alive. Eating a cold bowl of Cheerios on a rainy day. I ate in silence. When I was finished, I heard a knock on the door. I looked through the peephole. On the porch stood a young man of about 17 years, his brown hair was plastered to his face. His green eyes looked up from a handsome profile. His clothes were spattered with raindrops, and the bottoms of his pants choked with mud. On his side he wore a leather satchel stamped with a strange symbol.

My parents had told me not to open the door to strangers, but my instincts compelled me to do otherwise. I had learned to trust my instinct in my 15 years of living. I swung open the oak door. "What do you want?" I asked blankly, guessing he was a telemarketer, albeit a weird looking one.

"Nova Ironwood?" He asked peering at my face.

I shivered inside, wondering how he knew my name. "Who wants to know?" I told him, jutting my chin out.

"My name is Fin Majin and you are being hunted." He held out his hand. "You must pack your stuff and come with me."

"Why!?" I asked confused and defiant. I should slam the door. But I just couldn't do it.

"I swear by Gajil I am telling the truth. You are being hunted Miss Ironwood." He stood up tall. "Come with me or you will die."

I stared at him. "You can't be serious. My mother told me never to go with strangers." I leaned on the door. "Besides, if someone was hunting me, why hasn't he attacked by now?"

Fin gasped, staring down the street. I leaned out of the doorframe and squinted through the heavy downpour. A black figure strode through the storm. It's head was catlike, with yellow eyes and whiskers. But the body was man. Except for the tail. A tall man of about six feet. He was wearing all black with a black cape that hung down to his shins. He walked towards us, staring at me.

“ This is bad, this is bad!” Fin said shakily. “ They sent Skia Catt!” His eyes were brimming with fear. He grabbed his satchel and pulled out a white and black stone. He reached in again and brought out a wooden disk. A sun was carved into one side.” We have to go.” He said closing the satchel. “ I am so glad I brought a reliable Pyli Petras.”

“ A what?” I asked, Cat-man was getting closer. Now I could see a long knife hanging by his waist. He really might be trying to kill me.

Fin showed me the black and white stone. “ Half black half white, a portal stone, in your language.”

“ I see you up there, Asinith.” The cat-man yelled. His voice sounded like thunder. “ Save your tricks and hand over the Agrios.”

“ I will not.” Fin said defiantly. “ The queen demands that I bring her to the palace.” He stuck his chin out. “ The queen's word is law.”

“ Who are you to stand against me, a simple sun mage, when I control the shadows!” He stood on the sidewalk, right in front of the house.

His black clothing whipped in the wind, yellow eyes fixated on me. “ I will take the Agrios and bring her to my king.” He smiled. White fangs stood where normal teeth should have been.

Fin clutched his wooden token and whispered into it. A warm wind picked up, the rain started to stop and a gold rope shot out of Fin's hand. It snaked through the air reaching for cat-man's throat. The human cat tried to swat the rope out of the air but the rope wrapped around his wrist and began to creep up his arm.

“ I am not impressed.” The man said wrinkling his nose. He clamped his hand down on the rope and it dissolved into ash.

“ But you will be dead soon, so what do I care?” He drew his knife and came towards us.

Fin spoke into his amulet and sent thin waves of white-yellow fire towards the black man.

The man waved them away. “Don’t even try.” He hissed.

By now I had backed up to the door. I tried to open it but it was locked. Of course it was locked!

The man stood on the front steps. With one swipe of the knife, he cut deep into Fin’s shoulder. He cried out and fell on his side.

“Get back!” I squeaked, my voice was unsteady. I had stood up to high school bullies. I should be able to hold my own against a magical cat man, right?

He laughed. “You have been defeated.” He glanced curiously down at me. “I admit I expected you to put up more of a fight.”

“You want to fight?!” I jumped at him, swinging my right fist down on his nose. He yelled and pushed me off. Dark red blood dripped from his injured nose.

“You little-!” He said swearing. He pointed at me. “Ropes.” He said thickly. Blood was dripping into his mouth.

Black ropes bound my wrists and ankles together. “Hey!” I shouted.

“Oh yeah, Gag.” He pointed at my mouth. Black cloth appeared over my mouth.

He looked at me and nodded. “That should hold.” He glanced over at Fin. The knife had cut shallower than I thought, but Fin would still bleed out if the cut wasn’t bandaged soon. “hmm.” The tall black clothed man said.

“Should I leave you here, or take you with me?” he crossed his arms.

Fin moaned, half-conscious. His hands were still clutching the wooden disk and the portal stone. His eyes fluttered open. He reached out and touched my shoulder with the stone. “Home.” he gasped.

“No!” Cat man shouted but a white vortex had already surrounded me and Fin. The world turned black, then white. The sound of wind howling flew through my ears.

We slammed into the dirt ground. The ground spun before me when I tried to push myself up. My wrists and ankles were still tied tightly. Black

fog edged my vision. I looked up. Two female faces looked down at me. There details were fuzzy.

“ He did it.” one of them murmured.

“ Let’s take them inside.” the other one said gruffly.

White spots swam before my eyes. I lay down and dreamed of blackness.

Chapter 2

Tea with Otherworlders

“ Careful now, don’t wake her.” A soft voice broke into my dream.

“ That’s the point. To wake her up.” A gruff voice said.

I slowly opened my eyes. A woman of about thirty years stood over me, about to pour the contents of a pitcher on my face.

“ I’m awake!” I said maybe a little too loudly. I tried to sit up quickly but a sharp pain hammered through my head. “ owww.” I said moaning. “ This is the worst hangover ever.” I sat up more slowly and was pleased to find that resulted in only a small ache in my head. My wrists and ankles were still bound. “ Where am I?” I asked. I looked at my ropes. “ Are you gonna take me prisoner too?”

“ It’s just a precaution.” said the woman who was going to pour water on me. “ We didn’t know if you were demon.” She said. Her hair was short, brown curls framing her tanned, weathered face. She dressed in a green tee, brown pants and bare feet. Her sea-green eyes hardened.

“ Well I’m obviously not.” I said holding out my trapped wrists. “ So could you please let me go?”

“ Hrmph, we don’t know that.” The woman said. “ You could just be saying that.”

“ Tara, do you really think she’s a demon? Or does your hatred of humans cloud your mind?” A young woman stood at the foot of my bed. She had shoulder length blonde hair. Her face was lightly tanned and she had soft, brown eyes. She too dressed casually. A fawn brown shirt with brown pants and bare feet.

“ You can never be too sure, Mala.” Tara said grumpily.

“ Nonsense.” Mala said reaching for my bonds. She took out a steel knife with a handle made of wood. With swift strokes she cut the ropes around my wrists and ankles. I realized that my gag must have fallen off in the portal. “ Thank you,” I said rubbing the feeling back into my wrists.

“ Mother?” A voice sounded from the bed next to me. Fin lay there, his shirt off, a bandage around his shoulder. Mala and Tara went to him. He smiled weakly at me.

I smiled back.

“ How are you feeling dear?” Mala said feeling Fin’s head. “ No fever, so the wound is not poisoned.”

“ I did it Moms” Fin said. “ I brought her back. She is the lion, I know she is.”

“ Sorry to interrupt, but I’m gonna need some background here.” I said.

In the end we all sat down at the wooden table in the kitchen. Mala fixed us some tea. Fin had put a grey shirt on and I wore a blue shirt with black pants. Tara sat on a stool, at the end of the table.

“ Here’s some farmako tea.” Mala said placing a steaming tea kettle in the middle of the table. She placed four cups one for each of us. She poured me some tea. I sipped slowly. The tea was perfect temperature. It tasted faintly of mint and herbs.

“ So, first of all who was catman?” I asked drinking again from the clay cup. “ And why did he attack us?”

Mala sat down across from Fin. Mala sighed. “ If what Fin says is true, you were attacked by Skia Catt, he is a minion of the shadow king.” Mala shuddered. “ He has killed many of our kind.”

“ He was trying to kill us because you are an Agrios.” Fin said draining his cup. He poured more tea for himself.

“ What’s an Agrios?” I asked

“ You are an Agrios, or in your language, a Feral.” Tara said gripping her cup tightly. “ An Unusual that does not live here.”

“ And where is here? Can I go home? My parents will be worried.” I said looking around. The cottage was small. There were a few windows I looked out of one. I saw a large forest, bright and dark green leaves. It didn’t look very thick.

“ We live in a world called Ilios Tomia, it is home to many Unusuals.” Mala said pouring me some more tea. “ Unusuals are people with weird abilities. Like Fin, Fin is a sun mage. There are healers, water breathers, earth mages, stone mages and Beastpeople.”

“ Once humans like yourself found this world, they wanted to take it for themselves.” Tara said, slamming her mug down on the table. “ You killed almost a third of our population. We were forced to kill anyone who knew about our location.” Tara stood up. “ And that is why I hate your kind human. You are greedy and selfish. You don’t belong here! I should kill you.”

“ What?!” Fin gasped, “ Mother, don’t talk to her like that!”

Mala reached out and placed a hand on my arm. “ Tara lost her brother in that war, they were very close.”

Tara growled. “ I don’t need to be explained.” She stood up and walked into the bedroom.

Fin sighed. “ Mother gets grumpy sometimes.” he sipped his tea. “ The shadow king wants you because you hold the spirit of Froua, the guardian spirit of this world.”

“ What? Spirit? How?” I asked nearly spitting out my tea.

“ That lightning that struck you, it was actually the spirit of Froua. That’s why you have weird side effects.” Fin said promptly. “ The weird voices are the spirits of our dead. Froua was supposed to guide them to the Otherworld. But now she is inside of you.”

I felt strangely calm. A guardian lioness spirit was inside of me and I was calm. It was strange. “ Sooo,” I said my voice shaking slightly. “ How did this Froua get inside of me and why?”

“ Hmm, well we believe that Froua was fighting a demon at the gate of this world and she almost died. She sent out her spirit, to search for anyone who could carry on her work. I guess her spirit chose you.” Mala said softly. “ Our queen sent Fin here to find you, and bring you here so you can protect this world.”

“ How?” I asked. “ I am just a simple human!” I nodded towards the bedroom. “ Tara said it herself. I am pretty powerless.”

“ But you are the vessel for the spirit of Froua!” Fin said his eyes lighting up. “ You have powers that no one can even dream of!”

“ Like what?”

“ You already can hear and see better, ahhh maybe you can turn into a lion! Like the beastpeople!” Fin said standing up so quickly he almost knocked his chair over.

“ A what person?” I asked standing up more slowly, pushing my chair back.

“ A beastperson,” Mala said picking up Fin’s chair. “ They are very shy, but apparently they can turn into a certain animal.”

“ It’s so scary!” Fin said.

“ Being a sun mage must be cool.” I said. “ How do you do that again?”

“ Oh, mom! Can I show her?” He turned to Mala. “ Please!”

“ Okay just don’t set anything on fire, like last time. And try not to over reach your limit again, I swear you slept for 3 days.” Mala said calmly as if setting things on fire was a normal occurrence.

Fin dragged me out the door. The cottage sat behind a clearing. The treeless fields stretched about 15 yards in front of the building, and to the sides. I followed him to a large boulder about seven feet tall and four feet wide. He told me to stay there and raced towards a three by three wooden square. He picked it up and ran with back towards me.

“Okay,” He panted. “ get on top of the rock and I will hand you this.” He motioned towards the rock. I scrambled up the side and pulled myself onto the top. The rock felt warm underneath my hands, heated by the sun.

“ Okay you can give me the square.” I told Fin reaching down, lying flat against the rock face. He handed it up to me. “ Now what?!” I asked standing up.

“ Now throw it up and sideways.” He pointed to his right.

I grasped the wooden board and threw it up and right as hard as I could. The wooden square flew up. A yellow bolt slammed into it and the wood caught fire. By the time it hit the ground it was a smoking, black pile of charcoal.

“ Wow” I whispered. “ That was amazing!” I turned to Fin. “ How is that possible?”

“ I harness the sun’s energy and use it as my own. Unless I store the sun’s energy away in like a amulet.” He pulled out the wooden sun disk

from his pocket. “ At night I can’t use my powers without this.” He shrugged. “ Powerful sun mages are able to use their powers at night because the sun shines off of the moon and they can harness that. But nothing lives without the sun.”

I slipped down the rock. “ Cool.” I said. “ Now what?”

“ Well the queen does want to see you, so we can start traveling tomorrow morning. Mala can make you a satchel. It will be about a three day travel from here to the palace.”

I nodded and we walked back inside.

That night I slept in the same bed I woke up in.

She was in pain, all over. Her body bleed from countless wounds, I have to keep fighting! She roared and charged through the sky, barreling towards her foe. The shadowy figure reared up and clawed at her throat. She dodged and made her own move leaping on top of the shadow beast. You will not hurt my people! She yelled.

The shadow reared and tossed her off. She landed on her side. She screamed as her shoulder broke. The spirit struggled up and limped painfully towards her enemy. The darkness smiled. It knew she was defeated. For it suffered from only a few bloodred cuts. She was dying. She had to give her life to save her world. She lunged forward, using up the last of her energy. She slid under the blackness and reached up to cut its throat. Red wispy blood gurgled out of its neck. It’s eyes never left hers as with its dying breath it smashed its claws down onto her throat, digging into her skin until shiny silver blood coated it claws.

She died slowly, long after her foe had fallen. She needed to find someone. She detached her spirit from her dying body and threw it out into space. Her spirit ran fast, legs pumping, slowly particle by particle fading away. She found it! Her successor. She raced through the atmosphere and slammed into a twelve year old girl sitting in science class.

I sat up panting in bed. The sun barely shone through the cracked window. That was a weird dream. I stood up and walked into the kitchen.

Fin sat at the table with Tara while Mala made eggs. I sat down next to Fin across from Tara. She glared at me and I looked away.

“ How did you sleep?” Fin asked.

“ Fine.” I mumbled still half asleep.

“ Really?” Fin said chewing on a fingernail. “ Because you were talking in your sleep.”

“ I was? I never talk in my sleep.” I watched as Mala set a plate of eggs down in front of Fin.

“ Yeah you were mumbling about fighting and the stars and science class.” He picked up his fork. “ What is science class?”

I laughed uneasily remembering my dream. “ Science class is where I learned about science.” I thought of my parents, they would be looking for me. Maybe there would be police cars and search parties. They would care until their work pulled them away again and they would forget about me.

“ But what is Science?” Fin said through a mouthful of eggs.

I sighed, Mala placed a plate in front of me. “ It’s hard to explain.”

After breakfast Mala led us outside. “ Here,” She said handing me a satchel like Fin’s, it had a lioness's face stamped onto the leather.

“ Seems appropriate.” Fin joked.

“ Thank you.” I said to Mala.

“ There are an extra set of clothes, four apples, a piece of bread and some jerky in there.” Mala said patting the bag. “ Along with an iron knife and some herbs that I have labeled just in case you run into trouble.” She turned to Fin. “ Use them if you need to.” She kissed him on the forehead. “ Goodbye dear, have a safe journey.”

Fin pulled away. “ I’ll be fine.”

I half expected Mala to pull out a white handkerchief and wave us goodbye, like in the movies, but we kind of just walked away all anticlimactic. Once we reached the trees Fin looked back.

We walked until noon. Fin’s feet still bare and me wearing my woebegone tennis shoes. We talked little, I fantasized about how the queen's palace would look, missed my parents and thought about the strange world I had

landed in. Fin stopped every so often and clutched his pendant. He scanned the trees and then kept walking. He had shorter legs than me, I sometimes had to wait for him to catch up. When the sun was right above us we stopped to eat a little and rest.

“What’s life on Earth like?” Fin asked leaning against a log, his legs outstretched. He gnawed on a piece of jerky.

I bit into an apple. “Slow and horrible.” I mumbled through a mouthful of fruit. I reached into my bag and set the apple on the log. I pulled out the knife that Mala had given me and started to cut the apple into slices.

“I was told that humans were like shadow demons, selfish and cruel.” Fin smiled at me. “Apparently not all humans are like that.”

I handed him a slice of apple. “Most humans are like that.” I nibbled on a slice. “Especially adults.”

“Hmmm,” Fin said. “I hope that when you turn into an adult, you won’t be cruel and selfish.”

“Yeah.” I stared at the knife, it was simple yet beautiful. The blade was iron, the handle, wood. The grip was nice. I remembered my old knife back home. Cheap metal and a plastic handle. My dad taught me how to use a knife. Before he got sucked into work.

“I have one to.” Fin said watching me.

“Have what?” I asked slowly.

He pulled out a knife from his satchel. The knife was more used than mine, but still in good condition.

“Cool.”

We finished snacking and walked on. The ground grew more rocky, I looked over at Fin’s feet, if I had been walking this far with no shoes my feet would have been a bloody mess. His were fine.

We cleared the trees and walked through a mile long field. I saw rabbits and quails, they scurried by. A couple of times we saw a hawk swoop down and dive into the tall green grass. It would pull up with a mouse or vole in its talons. The sun slipped down the sky, soon it started to set. Orange red ink spread through the clouds as the sun disappeared.

We stopped at the edge of the woods, a small creek ran through a clearing. An old, worn cabin stood across the creek. It had a chimney and one window.

“ C’mon.” Fin said waving me towards the cabin, he walked across the flat board that served as a bridge.

I sighed and followed him, weary from exhaustion. The door for the cabin was non-existent. A cloth flapped in its place. Fin pushed the ‘door’ aside and held it for me. I don’t think I thanked him.

Inside the small cabin was a fire place, a table with four crates, a shelf with three books and two twin sized cots. The cabin was surprisingly clean. I took off my satchel and put it at the foot of the bed closest to the wall. I slipped into the bed, too tired to be hungry. I was half asleep. It was only seven, my internal clock told me. I slept.

Chapter 3

The Woods

I woke up early, the sun was just rising over the trees. I blinked and looked around. Fin sat on a crate stoking a fire that lay in the fireplace. A pot sat on the coals, giving off a warm, delicious smell. I got out of bed, putting on my shoes. “What’s for breakfast?” I walked over to Fin.

He turned around. “Rabbit stew.” He looked towards the door. “You can go clean up. Just walk down stream and there is a pool.”

I shrugged and poked my hand outside. I shivered and walked over to my satchel. I looked around for extra clothes. I found a sweater. I pulled it out and put it on. “Much warmer.” I whispered and grabbed my knife. Just in case.

The air wasn’t as cold with my sweater. I walked downstream. It wasn’t long before I saw the creek stop in a pool. I knelt down next to the pool and dipped my hands into the icy water. Yow! It was cold! I shivered and splashed some water on my face. My hands already felt like blocks of ice.

The forest went silent. No birds chirped, no trees dared to rustle. I froze, the forest had gone silent like this once before. When a mountain lion had passed me and my dad, five years ago. This felt like that, but creepier. More dark. I slowly rose, until I was standing up.

The darkness was behind me. It was breathing, hoarse, deep breathing. I slowly turned around. The source of the darkness was a large black greyhound. Instead of ears it had sharp horns, poking straight up. Its mouth was open in a snarl, a growling noise coming from behind its long, white fangs.

I tried to slowly back away. I reached the creek and stopped. What now?

The greyhound lunged at me, claws slashing the air, reaching for my throat. I yelled and dodged out of the way. The beast’s paw glanced off my shoulder. I winced, it was powerful. I reached for my knife. I grabbed it from the sheath. The dog growled again, louder. I wrapped my fingers around the smooth handle and held it out in front of me. A barrier between me and the greyhound. It leaped again. I stabbed with the blade wildly. I felt the

knife hit flesh and then bone. The dog yelped and landed on all four paws. It glared at me with its abnormally blue eyes. It turned to lick a stab wound in its side.

I tried to turn and run. But the moment my back turned I felt a heavy weight drag me down. I rolled over and tried to stab it again, the dog headbutted the knife out of my hand and it slipped down the rocks, coming to a rest in the stream. I reached for it and the dog clamped its jaws around my outstretched arm. I yelled again. Maybe Fin would hear and come help me. I yelled and yelled. The dog looked at me confused. It let go of my arm. White light was filling the clearing. I yelled one more time and everything went black.

Later Fin told me that I had appeared on the steps of the cabin. The corpse of a blue eyed greyhound in my hand. My eyes had glowed white and my hands were filled with power. I had thrown the dead dog on the ground and smiled. Then I had fainted. Fin brought me inside the cabin and bandaged my arm. He lay me down on the bed and that's where I woke up.

I woke up near noon. The soup was cold and yet tasty. Fin grumbled about losing half a day of traveling as he marched around the cabin tidying up.

“ Why did my eyes glow?” I asked as he told me what happened.

“ As far as I can tell the spirit of Froura took over your body so her host would not die.” Fin said folding the blankets. He looked at me. “ It obviously worked.”

“ So I have a raging spirit inside me that can at random times take over my body?” I asked slightly terrified.

“ And your mind, she can control that to.” Fin corrected setting the newly folded sheets on the bed.

I glared at him.

We burned the greyhound. Its grey fur went up in flames, until all there was left was scorched bones.

“ Is there any other weird creatures I should know about?” I asked Fin as we watched the sparks fly up into the blue sky.

“ Well, we have all the animals Earth does, except we also have dragons and dodo birds.” Fin said stirring the cold ashes with a long stick. “ Dragons are very rare. Dodo birds are cute and sometimes people keep them as pets.”

“ But what was that?” I asked slowly, trying to take in the fact that dragons were real. “ That thing that attacked me?”

Fin shuddered. “ That was a Pagos demon.” He whispered. “ A demon of ice. They serve the shadow king.”

I nodded “ Didn’t you say that the shadow king was looking for me? That would explain why the Pagos demon was here.”

Fin tossed the stick into the creek and rubbed his hands together. “That’s the thing Nova, the shadow king’s demons should not be here, they should not be able to get past the guards.”

I looked at him. “ So how did it get here?”

“ Maybe they got there hands on a Pyli Petras. Then they could travel to any part of the realm.” Fin stood up straighter. “ The queen needs to know this immediately. We must get going.” He ran into the cabin and came out with our satchels. He handed me my knife. “ I found this in the creek.”

I took the blade and slipped it back into its sheath. “ Thanks.” I slung my satchel over my back and followed Fin over the bridge. “ Wait!” I called to him. I walked under a tree and picked up a long stick about three inches taller than me. I quickly carved a handle and ran over to Fin with my new walking stick. I smiled at his exasperated look.

We hiked for hours, the sun slipped down the sky. We passed large trees and long fields. I saw a nest of dodo birds and fell into a rabbit hole. “Oww.” I said pulling myself out of the hole with my stick. My ankle wasn’t hurt so that was good. My shoe was filled with dirt. I sighed and removed it and dumped it on the ground. “ Stupid hole.” I said.

Fin laughed. “ You were the person to fall in it, don’t blame it on the hole.”

I grumbled and we walked on. When the sun started to set I asked Fin if we would stop for the night.

“ We could, but someone slowed us down.” He looked at me with a mock glare. “ So we have to walk for a little longer. At least so we can get to a

more enclosed spot.” He spread his arms indicating the open field in which we walked through.

“ Okay,” I sighed, bone tired. “ But when I see a tree, we are going to stop there.”

It turns out that I didn’t have to wait long for the meadow to end. In about ten minutes we were under the trees. Fin steered me over to a patch of grass and pulled a blanket out of his satchel. He lay it on the forest ground and walked over to a patch of dirt. He studied the ground for a minute then walked over underneath a tall oak tree and started to pick up sticks. I settled down on the blanket and watched drearily as Fin placed the sticks on the patch of dirt. “ I’ll be right back.” He said dusting off his hands.

I nodded and curled up. My eyes felt heavy and a swirling darkness of inescapable sleep washed over me.

The cold morning air woke me. I blinked and sat up shivering. Fin sat across from me, his back turned. I stood up and stretched, my legs sore from walking.

“ Morning.” He said his back still turned.

“ Morning.” I responded, walking over to sit next to him. In front of us was a small fire. I welcomed the warm wave of hot air as it blistered against my frozen face. I held out my hands. “ Thanks for building the fire.” I mumbled softly. I never liked speaking loud in the morning. Especially in nature. It felt like if I spoke too loud I would crack the glass that was the serene silence of the woods at dawn.

Fin handed me a piece of bread, lightly toasted. “ For breakfast.” He said smiling.

I scowled, not a morning person. “ Thanks.” I told him despite his despicable morning happiness. I crunched into the bread, it was sweet but not too sweet. I smiled despite my foul mood. It tasted like my grandma’s bread. Whenever my family visited her small farm in the country she would teach me how to bake her bread. I loved that time, the smell of flour and cinnamon. All her life she made bread for a living. She brought it every other morning to the local farmers market. She would always be there. Sitting on a rocking chair her long brown hair tied into a bun. Bread lay out

on a table her husband had made for her. Then she wasn't anymore. A strange sickness confined her to bed, slowly draining her memory, she could not remember how to make bread.

I coughed, suppressing the memory. Fin was poking the fire with a small stick. "You okay?" He asked his eyes staring into mine. I nodded and stood up. The sun beamed through the lower branches of the large oak tree that stood next to our campsite.

"Let's get going." I said firmly. I walked over and folded the blanket that I had slept on. In the corner of my eye I saw Fin shrug and stand up. He started to spread dirt over our fire. The cold dust smothering the warm flames. I ate the rest of the bread, cramming it into my mouth.

"Fin could you pass me my satchel?" I mumbled over a mouthful of crumbs.

He handed it to me deftly and I slung it over my shoulder. "Thanks."
"Let's go." He said and started towards the trail. I followed stretching my legs.

"I hate walking." I said after around two hours of endless hiking. "Can we please stop soon?" I moaned, fingering my walking stick. "My feet are sore."

"Fine." Fin sighed. "Only ten minutes, we have to get to the palace to tell the queen about the Pagos demon." He stopped and sat down in the middle of the path.

I sat down with a thud. I lay on my back, feeling the cool, soft earth with my fingers. I sighed happily.

"You humans are easily pleased." Fin said laughter hidden under his voice.

I growled and threw a handful of dirt in his face. He shielded his eyes, laughing. "Stop laughing when I attack you!" I said holding back my laughter.

"Oh so you're attacking me now?" Fin said brushing dirt off of his shirt. He picked up a twig and threw it at me. It hit me in the face. Fin exploded with laughter.

“ Shhh!” I said holding up a hand. Fin went silent. I turned slowly to face the bushes behind us. The leaves rustled and a tiny, gnome like human jumped out.

“ Steal!!!” It screamed and grabbed our satchels, lying on the ground. It ran across the path and dove into the bushes.

“Hey!” Fin yelled, struggling to his feet. I rose behind him. We ran over to the bushes. The gnome giggled to our left. I swung my head around and spotted him ducking behind a tree. I ran over to the tree. He ran down a deer trail. I raced behind him, my feet flying over stone and leaves. He screeched to a halt and swung left. I dug in my heels and turned just in time to spot him slide down into an empty creek bed. I ducked under a branch and followed him. I slammed my foot into a root and fell. I landed hard, my breath knocked out of me. I gasped for air and crawled to my knees. I wheezed for a while until the shocking pain in my diaphragm disappeared.

“ Nova?! You okay?” Fin asked appearing behind me I turned and nodded, slowly getting to my feet.

“ What was that?” I asked.

“ A Klevo dwarf. They steal things.” He looked around. “ A lot. There kind of known for it. I didn’t realize we were in their territory.”

I scowled. We had lost our stuff. We couldn’t get it back. And my injured arm throbbed in a bad kind of way.

“ Sounds like you need help.”

“ Who was that?” Fin said unsheathing his knife.

“ A friend.” A young boy jumped down from the maple tree above us. He stared at us. “ At least hoping to be.”

“ Who are you?” I asked staring at him. He had short, light brown hair, blue eyes and an array of freckles splattered across his nose and under his eyes. He wore furs, a furry shirt and pants, with no shoes. A bone handled knife hung from his waist and all in all he looked like a little warrior. He held himself high and balanced, ready for anything. Blue eyes flicking from side to side.

“ I am Mirko.” He said cheerily. “ And I know where your stuff is.” He held out his hand. Cupped in his palm was a large brown mouse. “ Well Taco does.”

“ Taco?” I asked.

“ Yes, that’s his name.” Mirko pet the rodent with one finger.

Fin stared at the boy and his mouse. He was obviously thinking. He slowly tapped his forefinger against his lip.

“ What?” I asked, turning towards him.

“ Nothing,” He said avoiding my eyes. “ How can your pet mouse find our stuff?” He asked a little too harshly. I placed my hand on his shoulder.

Mirko seemed undisturbed by Fin’s attitude. “ Taco knows where the Klevo dwarves village is.” Mirko smiled at the mouse. “ He is very smart.”

“ Fin, let’s follow him, after all.” I whispered. “ We lost our Pyli Petras.”

Fin sucked a deep breath and nodded. “ Okay, lead us to this village.” He shoved his knife back into its sheath.

Mirko nodded and whispered to Taco. Taco stood up straighter and leaped out of the boy’s cupped hands. He scurried down the creek bed and stood on the other bank. He looked back, waiting.

Mirko ran down the side of the creek. He leaped up the other side to stand next to Taco. “ You comin’?” He yelled softly.

I slowly walked down to the creek bed. Fin followed behind me grumbling. “ I don’t get why we are trusting him.” He growled.

I glared at him, confused. Missing the happy, cheerful Fin.

We followed Mirko and Taco through the forest, taking deer trails and wading through plants that I hoped were not poison oak. The trees grew thicker and the trails grew overgrown. We had walked for about an hour when Taco squeaked and Mirko held up a hand. I paused and Mirko motioned for us to get down. We ducked behind a leafy bush, pebbles digging into my hands. I winced and rubbed my arms.

“ Taco says we are here,” Mirko whispered his voice barely audible. He dug in his pockets and pulled out a piece of lettuce. He held it out. Taco took the leaf and began to nibble on the edge. “ Good boy.” Mirko whispered.

I peeked over the bush. We sat on a cliff, the ground sloping down almost vertically into a canyon. In the canyon sat mini houses and gardens. There was no way down. “What are we gonna do now?” I whispered to Fin and Mirko. “There is no way we can get down there without them noticing.”

“But that’s the point!” Mirko said and stood up waving his arms. “We want to trade!” He yelled at the top of his lungs.

Fin slapped his hand to his face. “I knew we should not have trusted him.” We stood up. In seconds we were surrounded.

Chapter 4

Trading Is Violent

“Stupid kid!” Fin hissed drawing his blade. I nudged him with my shoulder.

Mirko looked at Fin, “They just want to trade.” He pointed to a disturbance in the crowd of short, hairy Klevo dwarves. A thickly built, small man stepped forward, a long beard entangled his lower face, curly hair draped down to his shoulders. Clothed in furs and scraps of cloth, he looked very much like a small bear.

“ I Nanos.” He said prodding his chest. “ I king.” He spread his arms gesturing to his people. “ You want trade?” He pointed at us and cocked his head.

“ Yes Nanos.” Mirko said holding out his hands palm up. “ We want to trade.” He gestured to us. “ You borrowed our stuff. We want to trade for it.” He smiled politely. Fin snorted.

“ Nanos has orders.” The dwarf said shifting from foot to foot. “ Capture Feral and sunmage.” He turned to Mirko. “ Not you though. You trade.” He flapped his hand, two dwarfs grabbed my arms with their grimy hands. I struggled.

“ Hey!” I shouted as they lifted me off of my feet. “ Put me down!” I heard similar complaints from Fin.

“ Go now, shadow king wants them soon.” Nanos said right before a dwarf hit Fin over the head with a large stick.

“ Wait don’t-” My head exploded into stars. Pain clouded my vision into a black and red blur. I was out like a light.

“ Nova! Wake up!” Fin shook me awake.

“ Whuh? Where are we?” I sat up slowly, my head bruised and sore. I gently felt my scalp with my fingers wincing as I felt a sensitive lump.

“ The dwarves dungeon.” Fin said reaching towards me.

“ What?” I said my brain still asleep.

“ We are in the dwarves dungeon.”

“ Oh.” I said sheepishly. I looked around, we lay on a couple of ratty, thin blankets in a cave. A dirt floored cave with stone walls and a short tunnel with light flickering from it. I stood up slowly and walked up the tunnel hoping we could just walk out, but strong iron bars blocked my way. I rattled them looking outside, it was early in the morning, the sky lightening but the sun was not yet up. Fin came up behind me.

“ There is no way out Nova, I already tried.” Fin said placing a hand on my shoulder.

A rustle came from the back of the cave. I spun around. “ Ah visitors.” An old man sat in the back of the cave, he looked around sixty, tall and strong

with silvery brown hair and hazel eyes. A silver tabby sat next to him, its eyes were intelligent.

“ Who are you?” Fin asked, confused. “ You were not here before.”

“ I was.” The man croaked his eyes twinkling. “ Hiding is fun.” He looked behind him “ You can always hide in the shadows. Isn’t that right Nails?” He pet his cat.

“ Again, who are you?” Fin asked almost shouting.

“ Ah I am Gata, do not yell at this old cat.” He looked at Fin with startling clarity, “ Do not be afraid of who you see, I am a man nothing more.”

“ Fin?” I looked at my friend curious. “ What is he talking about.”

“ He is a beast person, Nova, secret keepers who hide in the woods.” He glared at the old man. “ My mother does not trust them so I will not either.”

The old man laughed. “ You must think for yourself young man, see me now before you, willing to help you.”

“ Oh just like you helped us in the war?” Fin stomped angrily, “ One of your people spied for the humans. Why should I trust you?”

“ You yourself travel with a human, the very race that attacked this world.” The old man smiled. “ How curious.”

Fin was rendered speechless. His eyes flickered from me to Gata. I smiled at him and he grumbled and walked into a corner.

I turned to Gata. “ That was hilarious, you said something about help?” I sat down in front of him.

“ Oh, yes. But first have you seen a young boy of about twelve years, he travels with a mouse.” Gata leaned forward, pausing in his stroking of the cat.

“ Mirko?” I said. “ He got us captured.” I frowned, “did he get you captured too?”

“ No, Mirko is here to trade for me. He is my grandson.” He looked over at Fin. “ I trust that he did not mean to get you captured.”

A loud crash came from the tunnel. I sprang up and walked towards the iron bars. Fin walked behind me. I blinked as the sunlight stung my eyes. Two figures came into focus. Two Klevo dwarves. One opened the iron bars and stepped inside, the other held out his spear menacingly.

“ King wants you.” He pointed to the three of us. “ Do not escape.”

Gata stood up, picked up his cat and followed us out into the open air. It was morning, fog drifted from our mouths and I shivered, my clothes were not meant for cold weather. We walked down a hill and around a bend. We stood in the canyon, before us was a throne, it bristled with metal. Knives, bowls, forks, scrap metal and even a hubcap was welded onto the throne.

“ They love metal.” Fin whispered in my ear.

On the metal chair sat the king, beside him was Mirko. Mirko held a metal dragon. It looked to be about one foot tall and two feet long, Mirko held it stiffly indicating that it was heavy, solid metal. Taco sat on the boys shoulder.

The guards left once Nanos looked at us. They blocked the way we had come.

“ Mirko has offered dragon in exchange for prisoners.” Nanos announced. “ I like dragon, but shadow king offer more, Mirko may have old man but not feral or sunmage.” He looked at us greedily.

A dwarf came up behind us and grabbed Gata, he dragged him over to Mirko and Mirko set the dragon down carefully.

“ Wait!” I yelled “don’t leave us here!”

“ We are not.” Mirko said calmly and sprang at Nanos, stabbing him in the arm with a fork he had pried off of the throne.

Nanos shrieked and ran around banging into the canyon walls. “ Help! Help! Help!” He screamed. The guards ran after him screaming as well.

Mirko grabbed my arm and ran behind the throne. “ Your stuff is in there.” He said pointing to the small cave in the canyon wall. “ Hurry.”

“ Wait here,” Fin said and ran into the cave. We waited tensely, Nanos’s screams echoing down the gorge. Fin finally ran out of the cave and handed me my satchel. “ Run!” He panted and we ran.

CHAPTER 5

Beast People

We ran towards the dungeon, racing up the hill and onto a path up the canyon. The trail was precarious, we could not run the path. Fin went first sidling along determined. Next went Gata he walked steadily up, feet firm and strong. “ Uh oh.” Mirko whispered. I turned around quickly, and looked down. Nanos had recovered from the fork attack and he was mad. He ran surprisingly fast for a guy with short legs. His face purple with rage and soldiers ran behind him brandishing swords, spears and sporks. I almost smiled, but we were being chased by angry dwarves, so it didn't seem appropriate.

“ Go go go!” Mirko said harshly. I crept up the path, shaking I placed my feet carefully. I made the mistake of looking down. I gulped, stones crumbled away and fell down a twenty foot drop. I tried to walk on, but my foot slipped on weak gravel and I slipped down the side of the cliff. I grabbed at a root, grasping it in my hand. My chest lay on the path, legs dangling over the drop. I heard the delighted shrieks of the dwarves below me, cheering me to my death. I gritted my teeth and scrambled at the dirt with my free hand.

“ Nova!” I heard Fin yell. “ Do you need help?”

Sweat rolled down my forehead. “ I’m good.” I yelled and heaved myself onto the trail. I lay there for a second catching my breath. I stood up slowly, my legs shaking with adrenaline. I slowly hobbled towards the top. Mirko urged me on, the dwarves nearly on him. I gasped and stepped onto level ground. I heard Mirko yell.

I turned to find a mouse at my foot. It had shaggy brown fur and weird human like eyes. I glanced down the path, Mirko was gone. “ Mirko?” I yelled.

“ Right here.” The mouse said and turned into a boy. “ come on we have to get out of here.”

I nodded uneasily remembering how beast people could turn into animals. I shook off my confusion. Questions later, running from enraged dwarves now.

Gata waved us over, he stood in the forest, his cat gone. Me and Mirko ran over to the man. “ Your friend went ahead.” He nodded to me. “ He will meet us at the road.” I nodded and followed at a trot, my lungs burning and my legs shaking.

The yells of angry Klevo dwarves faded behind us as we passed the empty creek bed where we had met Mirko. I paused panting. “Please can we stop, I am not used to running.”

Mirko shrugged and leaned on a tree. Gata sighed gratefully and sat down. I stood with my hands on my knees taking in deep breaths. After about ten seconds I stood upright. “ Okay, let’s go.” We ran slowly to the road, my satchel bumping against my chest. We emerged onto the path Fin

stood with his back to us shuffling through his satchel. He turned around and smiled then frowned. “ Hey Nova,” He said ignoring Mirko and Gata.

“ Hey.” I turned to Gata, “ What now?”

Gata looked at Mirko and smiled. “ Now we take you to our village.” He walked into the woods across the path. Mirko waited.

Fin glared at Mirko. “ You really think we are gonna follow you anywhere again?” He crossed his arms.

“ You got your stuff back, right?” Mirko said cheerily. “ I helped you get it back and nobody was impaled with a spork. I call that a success!”

“ C’mon Fin, I am tired and you know that we need more food.” I nudged him. “ And I know you don’t trust them but Mirko and Gata helped us.” I smiled at Mirko. “ Please.”

Fin sighed and nodded. “ You and your logical points.” He huffed and followed the deer trail that Gata had walked down.

I shrugged at Mirko and followed him into the green forest.

We walked through the morning forest. Green light dappling the pale dirt. Ferns reached out onto the path dripping with dew. The tall oak tree’s besides the path shook in the slight breeze. I walked quickly, hurrying to keep up with Gata. We walked for an hour. My feet began to hurt.

“ Stop.” Gata held up a hand. We halted and waited. Gata whistled two high notes and one low.

“ Gata!” A furry bundle leaped out of tree. It was a young girl with blond hair and furry clothes. She had dark brown eyes that glinted with a hidden ferocity. An ocelot followed her down silently.

“ Ilour.” Gata said and embraced the young girl firmly. “ Hello granddaughter.”

Fin stood awkwardly, shifting from foot to foot. Mirko looked on happiness filling his eyes.

Ilour turned to us and gasped. “ Grampa is this-” She said staring at me her gaze strong and curious but not threatening.

“ Gata you have returned.” A young man swung out of the trees. “ Good to see you well.” He glanced at me and Fin. “ I see you brought visitors.”

“ Hello Kos.” Gata said. “ This is Nova and Fin, they were captured by the Klevo dwarves as well. We helped them escape.” He glanced sideways at the man. “ After all I could not just leave them there.”

“ Yes, Lykos will be most pleased you will be introducing the Feral to him, he sensed it as soon as it came here.” Kos looked at me, his leaf green eyes dark with worry and dislike. A monkey poked its head over the tall man’s shoulder.

“ Let’s go see Lykos.” Mirko said. He strode past Kos and Ilour.

Kos and Ilour took up the rear, alert and curious. We walked only for a few minutes more when we rounded a bend and came across a large village. It had small huts made out of tree bark and grass. Fires dotted the camp, meat roasted over coals and animals of every species ran underfoot. A large wall surrounded the buildings and guards stood at the only entrance.

Gata smiled at my surprise. “ Welcome to the village of the Beast People.” Kos and Ilour came up behind me and stood watching their home proudly.

Gata led the way over to the entrance.

“ Halt!” Shouted a guard once we got close. “ Who do you have with you?” He addressed Kos and Ilour.

“ The Feral and a sunmage.” Kos said, “ They wish to see Lykos.”

“ Hmm.” The guard walked in a circle around us, spear up ready for any threats we posed. “ Okay, go ahead Kos.” He stepped back into position.

We walked into the village. Smells of roasting meat and vegetables assaulted my nose. My stomach growled. We passed people of all ages, sizes and sex. Some tended food, building up the fires, mashing up corn and cutting up vegetables. Some worked on their houses, patching walls, sweeping, and hanging up herbs. We also passed small gardens and ponds, every so often a fruit tree would loom out of a yard, dripping with rotten or ripe fruit.

Animals of all kinds ran around. I saw, beavers, ferrets, foxes, coyotes, rats, voles, rabbits, skunks, and birds. They looked well fed and yet some were covered with scars or looked very old.

Mirko saw me staring at a particularly old badger. “ Some of these animals live until their partner dies.” He looked lovingly at Taco. “ We are chosen when we turn ten, we are sent out into the forest and an animal comes to us. We are partners for life, they are our best friends and we care for them.”

“ So they are kinda like spirit animals.” I said thoughtfully.

“ What? What's a spirit animal?” Mirko asked.

“ Oh nothing. Taco is so cute.” I said distracting him.

“ Yes, Taco is a common brown mouse, he loves lettuce.” Mirko dug in his pocket and pulled out a grimy leaf of lettuce. “ My cousin Ilour got an ocelot, she brags about it all the time. But I think Taco is better than Lisa.”

“ Mmm.” I said still staring at our surroundings, we were coming up on a large house almost as big as my house back home. It was made out of dark wood, deer and moose antlers hung over the large door. It looked very sinister, we walked up to stand on the porch.

Kos knocked heavily on the door. It swung open to reveal a throne room interior. A wooden chair sat on a dais a fur rug sat in front of the chair, statues of wolves in noble positions lined the hall. Their stone eyes calm and strong, not matching the rest of the throne room.

A young man sat on the throne. He had black hair speckled with grey framing a weathered, tanned face, with stormy blue eyes and a strong chin. By his side lay a small dark grey wolf. It's fur coat reminded me of a huskies pelt, alternating grey and white flecks.

“ Hello Lykos.” Kos said stonily. “ I have brought Gata home.”

Mirko sniffed angrily. “ I brought him home, I actually care about him!” He glared at Kos. “ You are a sly little-” I nudged him and he shut up.

Lykos stood, a wave of authority fell across the room. “ Kos, you and Ilour may leave.” His voice was smooth and powerful. “ Welcome home Gata.” The two embraced warmly. “ Welcome home father.” He turned to Mirko. “ Thank you nephew. I knew you could do it.”

Mirko bobbed his head and spoke. “ I see Kos is no different from when I left.” He turned serious. “ Is he still trying to lead an uprising against you?”

“ Yes, I ‘m afraid he is. My spies in his group have reported that not a lot of people will follow him, for now.” Lykos said softly.

I cleared my throat. Mirko and Lykos turned towards me. The black haired man’s gaze was worried then surprised.

“ This is the Feral and a sunmage.” Mirko said slowly. Eyes warning me not to interrupt again.

“ Ah yes, I have been waiting for you Agrios.” He spread his arms wide, “ Welcome.”

“ Please call me Nova.” I said slightly angry, Agrios was an insult. Lykos nodded. “ Welcome Nova, or should I say Froura. We will help you on your journey to the palace.” He sat back down. “ Mirko, arrange for our visitors to stay with your family and feed them. When they are ready to depart for our glorious capital you will travel with them.” Lykos tapped a finger on his armrest.

Fin started to protest but Lykos held up a hand. “ Do not refuse my offer of a warrior, young sunmage. I realize you do not trust our people and have good reason too, but this is our home. You will treat my people with respect and follow my orders.” He waved his hand. “ Go please.”

We walked out of the building. Fin was speechless and grumpy. “ So if Lykos is your uncle, who is your mother and father?” I asked Mirko.

“ My father was Alepo, he had a fox.” Mirko picked at a flower. “ My mother is Myda, she has a birch mouse.” He sighed sadly. “ My father died, he was a hero. He killed Rakoun, he was the beast person that betrayed us.” He said it robotically. As if he said it often. “ Here we are,” We had turned down a road that passed fewer and fewer houses, until ending at a medium sized building with sweet smells drafting from the inside and a large vegetable garden. We walked up and knocked on the door. It opened on a short woman with the same light brown hair as Mirko with additional blond streaks. She had grey-blue eyes and a round nose over thin rosy lips. She wore a plain white shirt with light brown pants and a woven grass bracelet.

“ Hello Mirko! Welcome home.” She said a smile spreading across her face. She held open the door. “ Come in, come in.”

We walked into the threshold. It was very roomy with patched pillows sitting in a semicircle in front of a fireplace. A warm scent rose from the pot that lay on a bed of coals. Two doors led to different parts of the house.

“ Hello mother.” Mirko said and embraced her. Me and Fin stood awkwardly next to them.

“ Mirko! Mirko!” Two little children slammed into Mirko. “ Tell us everything! Did anyone die? Where was grandfather? Is he dead? Who are these people? I lost a tooth! Can I see Taco?” They asked questions in a whirlwind of speech.

Mirko took them off of him and said. “ Nobody died, grandfather is fine, that’s really cool you lost a tooth and yes you can see Taco.” He pulled the mouse off of his shoulder and gave it to the kids. “ Garia, Elia, this is Fin and Nova. Fin, Nova, this is Garia and Elia. Or as we call them, the twins.”

I waved at the twins, and Fin snorted. I elbowed him and smiled.

“ You look strange.” Garia said, her air that of a proud six year old. “ You are not beast people are you?” She sniffed at Fin. “ You don’t like us.” She sat down with a thump. “ Why? And why are you here? What are you? The girl looks strange. She is not from here either.”

“ Woah, Garia stop asking the poor boy so many questions.” Mirko’s mother said calmly. She put a hand on Fin’s shoulder and led him over to sit on a pillow. I sat down next to him. “ Let’s get some food into you dears.” She walked over to the pot on the stove.

The twins walked into one of the other rooms and started to talk between themselves. Mirko sat down next to Fin.

“ Mirko, go get some bowls.” Myda said stirring the pot. Mirko sighed and got up. He shuffled over to a shelf and grabbed six bowls and spoons. He walked back over to his mother and set the bowls down next to her. “ Thank you dear.” She said and picked up the first one.

The soup was delicious. It had cubes of beef, green onions and fresh peas and carrots. The beef was chewy and tender. I burned my lips when I tried the soup too early. Fin ate the soup grumpily, trying not to show that he liked it. Mirko and the twins finished first, they walked outside to look for fresh lettuce for Taco. That left just me, Fin and Myda.

“ So, you are the Feral. From Earth.” Myda said after a few minutes of silence. I nodded, my mouth full. She turned her head towards Fin. “ You are a sunmage, you are interesting.”

Fin set his bowl down and turned to me. “ How does everyone here know I am a sunmage?”

“ Don’t you know? Beastpeople can see auras, if you have a specialty, we can see it. Some can at least. Me, Garia and Lykos and just a few.” Myda said with a smile. “ You have a yellow-green aura. You are a healer and a sunmage.”

Fin almost smiled. “ That’s kinda cool.” He caught me looking at him. “ I guess.”

I smiled to and set my bowl down. I had scraped the last of the soup from the bottom. “ Thank you for feeding us Myda. Is there a place we can sleep?” I asked politely.

“ Yes, I can set you up in the corner,” She pointed to the corner across from the door. A screen blocked it from view. I nodded and walked to the screen, Fin followed me obviously tired.

We set up two cots that Myda brought us and helped make them up with blankets and pillows. We helped Myda with cleaning up our dishes and then went to bed. My muscles were sore and my legs were tired. I slept soundly and well.

CHAPTER 6

Civil Wars! Yay!

We woke up to the sound of screaming, a tang of smoke and blood filled the air as we fought to get out of bed. We grabbed our things and checked the house. Mirko, Myda and the twins were gone. “ They aren’t here Nova! We have to go!” Fin yelled above the noise. I ran out the door to find a knife placed at my throat. A person grabbed me and shoved a bag over my head. I heard Fin yell as the person who held me ran. I was a rag doll to him as he pushed through crowds of people I pummeled him in the back, kicking him vigorously I tried to escape. He grunted when I kicked him in the groin. I felt him set me down.

“ Hold still or I will kill you,” He said gruffly. I stood still. He ordered me to sit and then tied my wrists together. He then tied my ankles together and took my satchel. The noise of the village had faded. The screams were distant and soft. When the man was done he grunted in surprise and fell. The bag was yanked away and I blinked at the sudden light.

“ Thought you would need some help.” Mirko said his brown curls falling in his face as he bent to slice the ropes off of my wrists and ankles. The

man that kidnapped me was large, with long brown hair and large hairy arms. I looked at him and then Mirko and then to the large bump on the man's head. "What?" He said goofily. "He isn't dead."

A growl came from behind me. "Hold still." Mirko said and turned into a mouse. "A bear is right behind you." How could I hold still? I wanted to ask but Mirko the mouse had run behind me. I could hear him squeaking to the bear and then a loud thump. Mirko walked around me and helped me up. "Kouda was gonna take you to Kos. That bear was his helper. The revolution has started. We have to get back. The twins and my mother are safe but I swore loyalty to Lykos and my future people. I need to help them." I never realized that Mirkos was a prince. I stored that thought away as I stood on shaky legs.

We ran through the woods. Mirko running slowly so I could keep up. We jumped over logs and rocks, weaved around trees and bushes. Soon the smoke of fires burned sharply in my nostrils and I could hear screams as clearly if them that was screaming was next to me. I sped up and we crested a rise. There it was. The village was in ruin. Fires burned on many of the houses. Piles of coals and dead bodies were strewn around. Mirko winced and walked on. Tears bordered his eyes and he looked down. "Innocent people." I heard him murmur. "Must kill Kos."

We met up with Fin who stood with Mirko's family. "Where is Lykos?" Mirko asked his gaze firm and determined.

"As far as we know he is in the fight." Myda pointed to the edge of a mob of people and animals. Mirko took a deep breath and walked towards the battle. I waved Fin to follow me as I marched after Mirko.

We shoved through the battle. It was hard to tell foe from friend. Anyone who did not try to kill us was either battling an enemy or was a friend. We heard the screams of man and animal. Fin went down when he slipped in a puddle of blood. I dodged a sword and helped him up. Blood stained his soft cotton clothes and made him look like a deranged killer. I almost laughed.

"We will end this battle with one stroke." Kos's voice sliced through the battlefield air. "Lykos, you will die and your family and anyone who denies

me will die. Any last words?" Two people moved aside to reveal Kos standing over Lykos. Sword poised to plunge into his chest. The defeated Lykos sported a gash in his right leg. Kos had been stabbed in the shoulder by a skinny knife, it still sprouted from his flesh. Behind them sat two animals, a monkey and a wolf. They had fought but now sat attentive, knowing the fight would end soon.

"Yes," Lykos said softly. "You will never win, people need freedom and joy. They have fought for these things and always will."

Kos glared. His green eyes turned poison green. Mirko screamed his fury and flung himself onto Kos's back. Metal flashed and blood jumped from the stab wound in Kos's neck. The mutineer fell to his knees as Mirko stood. A bloody knife in his shaking hands. "You have lost." Mirko whispered to the corpse. "I have won."

The battle stood still. Kos was dead. The rebels did not have a leader. They dropped to their knees. Lykos stood and thanked Mirko.

"You have done a great deed. Now you must go with Fin and Nova to the palace. Help them." Mirko nodded and hugged Lykos.

We ran into the woods as the followers of Kos were subdued. "What's gonna happen to them?" I asked Mirko.

"Well those that killed will be punished. Lykos will probably take a finger and then assign someone to watch them for a while. The leaders will be tortured and then killed and Kos is already died. If he was alive he would be tortured for the rest of his life. We take rebels seriously and they knew the consequences." Mirko said without emotion.

I hissed with sympathy and then remembered the dead. Kos deserved a worse fate than dying from a stab wound. I growled and slowed to a walk.

"That seems.... Efficient." Fin said slowly. A twinkle of laughter in his eyes. I was getting my funny friend back.

CHAPTER 7

The Palace. FINALLY!

At around four in the evening we rounded a bend in the trail and stood before a towering palace. I was made out of silver and white stone. With large lioness statues guarding the gate, and carvings of silver male lions along the walls. Dark blue flags whipped on tall poles and guards stood on parapets. Spears bristled in their hands.

“ Halt!” A guard cried. We halted. Halt is such an interesting word. Used very often to stop people but not modern. I had not heard halt used seriously.

We waited for the guard to walk down the stairs and off the wall. Fin rummaged around in his satchel and pulled out a thin stone card. “ You have to have one of these to get in to see the queen. She sends them to people she summons and messengers carry one on them always.” He whispered. Mirko stood ready. He had accepted Fin’s offer of a plain white shirt and brown pants. They were big on him. Mirko being around thirteen and Fin being sixteen.

The guard opened the gate and closed it behind him. “ Show me your card.” He addressed Fin, probably because he was the oldest. Fin handed him the stone card and waited as the guard stared at it carefully.

“ Randy!” He yelled up to the wall. A young man of about twenty ran down the stairs. His orange hair startling against the grey wall. The guard handed the card back to Fin who shoved it in his bag. “ Randy, please take the queens visitors to her throne room.”

“ Yes sir.” The redheaded man said saluting to the older guard. He turned and led us through the open gate. We walked through the gardens. Orange, red and pink roses bloomed on long rose vines that climbed up the palace walls. Randy saw me looking at them. “Those are so nobody climbs the wall. Your hands would be filled with thorns if you tried.”

I nodded, it was very smart. We passed pea plants and lettuce stalks. Gardeners roamed the grounds, shovels and bags of seed in their hands. The path widened and large white flagstones replaced grey cobblestones. A dark wood door stood at the end of the path. Two soldiers in chainmail were on either side of the door. Randy nodded at the guards and they stepped aside.

We entered a hall. Torches hung on the walls, their yellow light flickering on the stone floor. Balconies were spread evenly on each side of the hall. Archers stood at the ready, their crossbows strung and loaded. At the end stood a silver throne on a dais. On the throne sat a young woman. Her hair was black with silver streaks, lily green eyes and a strong chin. Her lips were full and pink with white teeth that shone from a crack in her smile. A silver swan earring hung from her left ear. She was dressed in a light green dress, from the way she held herself it was obviously uncomfortable. Lacy dark green slippers covered her feet. And finally a silver crown perched on her hair. It had sapphire jewels laced in with the silver metal.

“ Your Majesty, Queen Via.” Fin whispered and knelt. Randy was already on his knees. Mirko looked uncomfortable. He probably thought it was unfit for him to kneel before a ruler that was not his. I thought for a second and then knelt besides Fin, tugging Mirko down with me.

“ Welcome Fin. I see you have fulfilled your mission. Thank you for bringing me the Feral. Hello young beastperson, please stand, I know I am not your queen.” Her voice was lower than I had thought. A high alto with a slight accent.

Mirko stood and nodded in appreciation. I followed him in standing. “ Hello your Majesty. “ I said calmly. “ It is good to finally meet you.” The queen nodded her eyes were kind.

“ I will protect you from the shadow king until Froura is strong enough to resume her former state.” Queen Via said and stood.

Fin and Randy stood after her. “ On the topic of the shadow king I am afraid he has a Pyli Petras.” Fin said rushing over his words. “ A Pagos demon attacked us when we were traveling.”

“ And he has put a price on there heads, the Klevo dwarves were going to hand them over until I saved them.” Mirko cut in.

“ You also got us captured.” Fin whispered.

“ I needed to! Besides you got your stuff back and you are alive. Thanks to me.”

“ We did not need your help! We were fine.” Fin said harshly as he took a step towards Mirko.

Mirko snorted. “ You never would have found their village if I had not been there.”

I intercepted them. “ Boys, stop fighting.” I said firmly. “ This is not the time for fighting. Fin, Mirko helped us, stop acting like a bear with a bee sting and accept that Mirko is our friend. Mirko, don’t brag. We know you helped us and we are thankful.” I took a step forward putting myself in between the seething boys.

Fin nodded shamefully and took a step back. Mirko sighed and turned towards Queen Via. She had watched the spat calmly. Maybe she knew it was needed. The boys needed to work out their differences and soon. We needed to be on the same side.

“ What now?” Mirko asked the queen. He had all the pride of a broken horse. The queen looked at Fin and at Randy.

“ I need to talk with Fin, Randy can you please lead Nova and Mirko to there quarters. I believe this will be better in the morning.” Randy bowed low and led us down a hall to the left of the throne room. He passed many doors. Randy hummed to himself as he walked. He had produced a key ring from his pocket and was sifting through the keys. Mirko was walking swiftly, hurrying to keep up with us. We turned and stopped. The door in front of us was labeled, IMPORTANT VISITORS in a bronze plaque. Randy rustled his keys and grasped a large bronze key. He fit it into the lock. It clicked open to reveal a small sitting room, with a fireplace and a large window looking out to the gardens. Four doors branched out on either side.

Randy pointed to the third and fourth door. “ That's the bathroom and the kitchen” He pointed to the two doors. “ Those are rooms, two beds and a trunk. Here's a map of how to get around the palace. Nice to meet you.” Randy bowed and handed me a slip of paper. I took the map and stored it in my satchel. Randy closed the door behind him.

Mirko looked around and then walked into the room on the left. I heard him sit down on the bed and sigh. These walls were thin. I turned and walked into the room on the right, it had a small window looking over a tangle of yellow roses. The bed was simple with a white pillow and pale yellow sheets. An oil lamp sat on a crate next to the bed. In the corner sat a large oak trunk with iron hinges and no lock. It squeaked slightly when I opened it and put my satchel inside. I still had an apple and I took it out, sat on the windowsill and pondered.

The gardens were peaceful and calm, every so often a colorful bird would fly by, singing a lovely song. They were unlike the birds at home, the drab city birds who chirped out their songs disdainfully at the trash dump of our world. These creatures were happy. I eventually heard the sound of Mirko snoring softly. I looked out at the horizon, the sun was setting in an orange haze behind the distant hills.

I turned to look at the door to the sitting room, Randy had mentioned a kitchen, maybe I could make dinner.

Dinner was okay. They had bread, cheese, meats and fresh lettuce and tomato. I set up a sandwich bar on the table. I cut the pork into thin slices and set it on a pan to cook. I grabbed three wooden plates and set them out. The lettuce was cut into leaves and the tomatoes into slices. The bread was soft and delicious, I must admit that I snagged a slice or two in the kitchen. I set the lettuce and tomato on a cutting board. The bacon went on a plate that was set next to the vegetables. The bread was placed on another board and cut into thin slices. Once I had over six slices I turned off the stove (It was very primitive no offense to these people. This is better than earth.) and walked into the sitting room.

Mirko lay asleep on his bed, the pale blue sheets pulled up to his waist. Taco was curled up besides him on the pillow. I had saved Taco some lettuce.

“Dinners ready.” I whispered to Mirko, He slowly blinked awake and nodded. I walked out of the room and sat down at the table. I was placing my bacon on top on my bread when he stumbled out of his room and sat down rubbing his eyes. He stared for a moment at the food and then lunged to reach for the bread, he grabbed two slices and set them on his plate, followed by a slice of tomato and three pieces of bacon. I crunched into my sandwich, I had not realized how hungry I had been. We ate in silence, every so often asking each other to pass a plate of food.

Mirko slipped some lettuce to Taco. The little brown mouse sat on the table, munching through juicy, green stalks of lettuce.

The silence was broken when Fin walked into the room and slammed the door. He was white and tired. I motioned for him to sit down. “It is worse than I feared,” He said emotionless. “Queen Via has already sent soldiers north to fight the shadow kings invading troops.” I handed him a cup of water and he drank quickly, draining it in a couple of seconds. “I told her what we know.”

“So the shadow king is already here.” Mirko said leaning back in his chair.

“No, the king himself is not here yet, his soldiers are.” Fin nodded at Mirko.

Everyone was tired, only interested in eating and going to bed. The food disappeared in silence and when it was gone I led Fin over to the pillows in front of the fireplace and set up a bed there. I had offered him my bed but he refused.

When I returned to the kitchen Mirko had gone to bed. I stacked the plates to wash in the morning and put the extra bread in the pantry. Walking into my room I closed the window and shut off the lamp. The sheets were cold and so I sat there a minute to warm them up. I thought about my parents and everyone at home. They would look for me. The police would say I had vanished off the face of the world. It was true. I thought about Fin and Mirko's weird relationship, and how the beastpeople were doing. I didn't think of anything after that because my head had slipped down onto the pillow and my eyes had dropped shut.

I woke up to a weird bird call. I looked out my window blinking at the sudden rush of light. Once my vision cleared I saw a large, white and brown bird perched precariously on a thin branch. Its beak was large and hooked at the end. The small wings suggested that it had hopped onto the branch rather than flew. A clump of feathers made a tail. I recognized it from the road. A dodo bird sat outside my room. It honk whistled again and took a shaky flight. It crashed only a few feet from my window, glancing up at me it tried again to go a few feet further. I looked away from the rare sight and disentangled myself from my sheets.

I stumbled blearily into the main room. Fin was gone from his makeshift bed, I heard the clatters of wooden plates from the kitchen. I walked in and saw Mirko at the table. Fin was humming and swirling around the kitchen. He looked like he was cooking, if you had to cook in a dance competition. Mirko was staring, a mixed expression of confusion and amusement on his face.

Fin turned and saw me. A bright red blush spread across his face. Mirko started laughing, clutching his sides. Fin glared at him and then brushed off his embarrassment. "Pancakes are ready." He announced. "For those of you that stop laughing."

Mirko stopped and started coughing. Fin glared at him again as if saying 'I know you are still doing it.'

Despite that, we both got pancakes. They dripped with amber syrup, we both thanked Fin graciously and then stopped when his face grew smug. After a minute of eating Mirko stood up and grabbed lettuce from the icebox. He tore it into pieces and fed them to Taco, even the mouse looked sleepy.

When we finished, we all helped to clean the dishes from last night and recent. Mirko went into his room to relax and clean. I helped Fin fold up his blankets and put them in my trunk as I told him about the dodo bird.

"They are supposed to be lucky." Fin said as I shut the trunk. "People say that they can travel between worlds." He shrugged. "Just a myth."

"You people have sun mages and people who can turn into animals, you draw the line at birds who can travel between worlds?" I said teasingly.

"Well nobody has actually proved it." Fin said blankly. "So it could be possible."

"We hunted the dodo birds to extinction on our world." I said walking into the main room. "We thought they were lazy and stupid, but they were just kind and we were stupid."

Fin nodded, "I heard about that, some people say that the last of your dodo birds came over here. They are the brown and white ones." He looked at me. "Maybe it sensed you were from its home and was drawn to you."

"Yeah maybe." I said and sat down on a cushion. Fully awake I fidgeted with the cover. It was rosy pink with tiny white dots. A useless detail noted I looked at Fin. "So what now?" I asked him quietly. "Are we going to attack the shadow king? Is he gonna attack us?"

Fin shook his head. "The queen remains on the defensive side, she believes attacking him will make us no better." He looked away. "She has to protect her daughter."

"Oh! She has a daughter. What's her name?" I asked quickly. Maybe I was spending a little too much time with boys.

“ Her name is Kardia. She is around fourteen years old. Very nice, but great with a bow and arrow. Sometimes the guards take her hunting with them.” Fin said, reciting facts. “ Her name means heart and she likes to be called Kar for short.”

Mirko opened the door to his room. Taco perched on his shoulder, he plopped down on a pillow. “ Okay can we see the queen now? Maybe DO something?” He asked exasperated in his boredom.

“ Yes, Her Majesty wanted to meet us at eight thirty.” Fin said grandly. Mirko stood and walked over to a window. Sticking his head out he glanced at the sun.

“ Its around eight o clock. A little over.” He called. Brushing off his hands on his pants he walked over to us. “ We should go. Please can we go.”

I nodded and galloped into my room. I opened the chest and grabbed the map that Randy had given us of the palace. I realized that the queen must trust me a lot to give us a map of the castle. We closed the door behind us softly. Minding that it was technically still early in the morning for some people.

“ Where now?” Mirko whispered. Taco crawled out onto his arm and squeaked with delight as Mirko swung his arms slowly.

“ Turn right at the intersection.” I told my friends flashing back to my family's last vacation. A road trip when I had to tell my mom directions. Why to parents do that to their kids? I mean it's so stressful and confusing. They are the adults here, they know this stuff.

“ Okay.” Fin said turning right. “ now left.” He said. “ I have been here three times before.”

We turned left, and found the throne room. Queen Via sat on her throne today in a light grey dress with a grey and pink pearl necklace. Next to her on a smaller throne sat an uncomfortable girl with amber brown hair and hazel eyes. She wore an amber drop earring with no other jewelry. Adorned in a tan yellow dress with short sleeves, she was neither skinny or fat. Her arms were strong and wiry. She twitched her hands like reaching for something. Like a bow. Sitting next to Queen Via was Princess Kardia, Archer and heir to the throne. I got to meet her. I thought vigorously, after

years of high school girls I was glad to meet another female with my interests.

“ Good morning.” the Queen said softly.

Fin bowed low. I followed soon after. Mirko just stood. The queen nodded and we straightened.

“I would like you to meet my daughter Kardia.” Her Majesty said and nodded to the princess. “ She will be glad to show you the palace gardens. I have to meet with my advisors, but she will be your guide for the morning.” The princess nodded with exaggeration. I could sense the push and pull of a teenager and her mother. It was a tense relationship and one I had never experienced.

“ Okay.” Kardia said roughly. Her voice was low for a girl. Close to my range but a little higher. She stood up and moved slowly towards us. “ Mother, If I am to show them around the gardens can I change into my hunting clothes?” She said slyly. I had guessed that she was uncomfortable in her dress, her mother probably forced the girl to wear it with bribery or threats.

The Queen nodded and stood up as well. “ Go to your room and change, they will wait out front for you.” She swept into the right hall and disappeared. Fin led us to the front door and we waited on the steps. The sweet smell of roses, and cut grass drifted through the lightly warmed air. Fin led Mirko over to a yellow flowered bush and started talking about it’s healing properties. I was to relaxed to go save Mirko. I wandered over to a sweet smelling fruit tree with pink-green leaves. I sat on the soft, dark brown dirt. A whistle honk made me look up. I peered around a large green leaf. The dodo bird that was outside my window sat on the highest branch.

“ Hey little guy.” I called. He squawked and looked at me. It hopped down a branch and glanced at me with one yellow eye. I laughed softly and stared at the large duck-like bird. It looked very clumsy on the branch.

I looked away and stared at my friends. I heard a rustle and looked up. The dodo was gone. I glanced around and jumped when it whistle honked right next to me. Turning slowly I found the large brown and white bird sitting on the ground beside me.

It whistle honked again. Shuffling its feet it slowly walked towards me until his beak was inches from my arm. He nudged my arm tentatively. I raised it slowly to pet his head. It wiggled with delight. I laughed again and continued to pet him. His feathers were soft and clean. The brown feathers were light and warm. The white and tan colors blended perfectly. “ I’m gonna call you Max.” I whispered to him.

Max extended his neck and honk whistled happily. I stood up slowly and walked out of the shade. I turned and saw Max standing right behind me. He looked at me expectantly and nudged my leg with his beak. I sighed and walked over to the boys. My feathery dog following behind.

CHAPTER 8

My Pet Dodo Bird Likes Pears

When Kardia came out she laughed. She had changed into a green t-shirt and brown pants. Archer gloves on her hands and a quiver full of arrows on her back. A black wood bow hung in her hand. The other covered her face. “ You have a peculiar pet.” She said calmly.

Fin and Mirko started to giggle. Taco had met Max with enthusiasm. Max was running around, Taco riding on his back like a human riding a horse. The dodo was running in circles kicking up clouds of dust and whistle honking.

“ Do dodo’s usually become pets?” I asked her when she finished laughing. She shook her head.

“ They are not hostile towards us but they never get this close.” The princess said and glanced at Max. “ He’s cute.” She crouched down and whistled the same note that Max had. Taco jumped off the dodo and ran over to Mirko. Max waddled out from behind my legs and stuck his beak in her hand. “ He doesn’t look like most of the palace birds, they are silver and white. Not brown.” She stroked his head. Max whistled again and ruffled his feathers. He ran back over to me and nuzzled me. I reached down and scooped him up. He was very light, with a birds hollow bones. He might have been able to fly if his wings weren’t so small.

We walked down the path as Kardia explained the plants in the gardens. We saw lemon, orange and apple trees. Thyme, mint, sage and oregano plants. Pea, morning glory and tomato vines.

Kardia stopped us at a pear tree. We sat underneath it and ate pears. Max jumped up and grabbed a ripe fruit, he bit it in half. The pear smeared

across his beak and juice dribbled onto his white chest feathers. I giggled and grabbed a couple of leaves. Max struggled a little bit as I wiped the pear remnants of his beak. I was half way done when he back up and licked his beak. Max's tongue reached all the way over his beak. He whistled again and started to hop for another pear.

When we were full of pears, we stuffed some in our pockets and stood up. Max took a running leap and landed on my shoulder. I nearly fell over, surprised as I was I could still realize that Max was almost as light as a parrot. "He's really light." I remarked when the rest of the group turned around. Kardia nodded.

"They have hollow bones like most birds and they ruffle their feathers up to look bigger than they actually are." Kardia started to walk back to the palace. When we arrived in the throne hall it was lunchtime. The princess told us to join her and the queen in the dining hall at twelve forty five.

We returned to our room, Max still on my shoulder. I set him down outside the window. "I'll see you when we come back." I told him and closed the window. He stood there for a minute and then hopped away. We changed clothes and stored the pears in our icebox. Taco had nestled up on Mirko's shoulder and was nibbling on a sunflower seed.

"Lets go." Fin said at twelve thirty eight. "We don't want to be late." We followed him out of the door and through the halls. We turned right this time and stepped into the dining hall. On a raised dais sat the royal table. Two tables sat against the right and left walls. Parallel to eachother. We walked past the tables full of guests and servants, to join the queen at her table.

The cooks set out a large silver bowl of spaghetti. Smaller bowls were filled with tomato sauce and cheesy sauce. Ladles were set in the sauce bowls as the servants scooped long strands of pasta into small wooden bowls. These were set before us.

The queen stood when everyone in the hall sat down. "Good afternoon, as you have probably heard. We have a very special guest, a Feral, from Earth." She motioned for me to stand up. I stood embarrassed. "You may eat." The queen declared and sat. I followed suit a beat behind her. A

clatter of utensils and bowls filled the hall. Talk started, I looked around and saw the soldiers that had stood at the gate. Fin saw me looking.

“ They have lunch in shifts, and breakfast, dinner, sleep. Everything is worked out on a schedule.” He said reaching for a bowl of tomato sauce. “ Those soldiers are worked hard but I have never heard a complaint since the queen changed the guard commander.” He ladled the sauce onto his pasta.

“ That’s good. So she’s a good queen?” I asked shoving a ball of pasta in my mouth. Tomato sauce splattered over my lips.

“ she is the best.” Fin said as I grabbed my napkin and wiped it across my mouth. “ The queen before her was cruel to non-unusuals.” Fin poked at his pasta. “ She would treat them like dirt.”

I nodded and ate some more spaghetti. “ Sounds like the leader we have at home. He is sexist and racist. We have male leaders, women have tried to be leaders but are made fun of for doing it.” I angrily stabbed a meatball. “ I am glad I am here.”

Fin had listened to me in silence his face displaying shock and thoughtfulness. “So you let males lead?” He said disgustedly. “ We did that too, until five hundred years ago when our king led us into a stupid war over someone saying that women were as strong as men. We learned not to let males like King Jaron rule.” Fin took a sip of water.

“ Mmmm.” I said, my mouth full of noodles. “ You guys are smarter than we Earthlings.” I swallowed.

After lunch the palace settled down for a rest period. Only the soldiers on the walls were not relaxing in some way. I followed Fin to the library and grabbed a book on dodo birds. I crept through the gardens and sat underneath the pear tree. The book was very helpful, it noted on what dodo birds liked and did not like. It had beautiful illustrations. When I finished the book, I spread out the small picnic blanket I had brought and lay down, staring at the leaves above my head.

I heard footsteps and sat up. Princess Kardia was walking towards me, bow in her hand and quiver on her back. She sat next to me. "Hey," she said. I nodded to her and hugged my knees to my chest.

"Do you want to go hunting with me?" She asked standing back up.

"We don't even have to hunt, maybe just ride." She helped me up and led me through the gardens. "I have a horse for you if you can ride."

"I rode a couple of years ago." I said as we walked swiftly towards the stables. "It was fun."

"I have a nice slow horse for you." Kardia said hiding a smile.

The horse was not slow. At least in my opinion. The 'slow' horse was a grey blue coated mare with a black mane and tail, white stockings, and white ears. Her name was Riptide. Named for the rough current that can pull someone out into the sea. She was lovely, and fast. Kardia led us on her horse, a light brown mare with a brown mane and tail. She was called Bella. She too was strong and fast.

We trotted down a forest trail. Large oak trees rimmed the path. It was fall and the acorns were tumbling down the trees. Squirrels ran around collecting nuts for winter. "We can visit Gold City tomorrow if you want. They have an all year market, I love to get jam there." Kardia said pointing west. "I could lend you some Kerma."

I nodded and gripped my reins. "So we just wait for the shadow king to attack?" I asked her after a minute of silence. "I mean, don't you want to help?"

"Of course!" Kardia exploded. "But if the heir to a kingdom dies, the realm will fall into chaos. I have to stay here." She sighed. "The royal family are earth mages, apparently the strongest. We should be helping, I should be helping. But my mother says it isn't safe."

"It is logical that the princess should be kept safe." I said. "But it is also correct that the strongest should fight."

"That's what I told my mother." Kardia nudged her horse into a run. I repeated her movement and followed a beat behind her. We ran for a while, stopping when our mounts were tired. Kardia led us over to a short birch tree. She tied my reins to the tree and tied Bellas reins to an oak tree.

They grazed, flicking their tail at flies. Kardia spread out a clean horse blanket on a thick patch of grass and sat down, handing me a water bottle.

“ About a couple minutes from here is a swimming hole. We should wade later.” She said as she took off her shoes. I looked down at my shoes. Their soles were thin and ragged. The white spots brown with dust and the laces were torn up lengths of fabric. I sighed and took them off. Kardia lay back and stared at the clouds.

“ I used to do this with my brothers.” She told me. “ They loved coming here. Then they went to defend the north.”

“ I liked to hike with my parents, my mom taught me to carve and fish.” I told her. “ Gods, I am sooo glad I met you. The boys are insufferable. They argue all the time. Like seven year olds.” I picked at a piece of grass.

“ I noticed that.” Kardia said giggling. “ They are kinda funny.”

“ Yeah, want to go wading?” I sat up and put my shoes back on.

“ Sure.”

We led our horses down a deer trail. A few minutes out I could hear the trickling of water. I sped up and almost tripped into a large pool of clear water. “ Wow.” I whispered staring at the crystal clear water. “ The only time I saw water this clear was when I swam in Lake Huron.” The bottom was white sand. About three feet deep and ten feet in diameter. Small silver minnows swam near the surface. A small waterfall filled the pond, pouring over mossy boulders.

I tied Riptide to a maple tree and set my shoes on a root. Stuffing my socks in the shoes I took off my knife. I walked over the grassy ground until soft sand bristled underneath my toes. A few inches away was the water. I stuck a toe in. It was cold, but refreshing on a warm autumn day. I was soon up to my knees. Kardia was already all the way in, Bella was tied to a aspen. She laughed and ducked under.

I hurried up and dove in. Shivering internally at the cold I burst up. Smiling, I paddled over to the center of the pond. When I stood the water was above my hips. Minnows bumped into my legs.

We swam until the sun was hovering just above the horizon. I had been drying off on the bank when Kardia told me we should go back. My clothes

were stiff and dry. I sat up and winced, my face was lightly sunburned. We saddled up and rode slowly back to the castle.

We got back at before dinner. I walked into my room and found Fin collapsed on his makeshift bed, snoring. Max had hopped through an open window and was sleeping on Fin's head. Mirko was gone, maybe in the gardens or the library. I went to my room and changed clothes. Placing my dirty clothes near the door I planned to ask Fin where I could get them washed. I walked into the kitchen and got a cup of water. Looking through the cupboards I found a clump of slightly dry mint. Putting it in my cup I walked into the living room and sat on a cushion. Mirko walked in closing the door quietly. I motioned for us to go into my room.

"Where have you been?" He asked sitting on the chest. "I went to the gardens and found your book."

"Oh, I went riding with Kardia, and swimming." I said taking a sip of mint water. "She let me borrow a horse."

"Well next time invite me. I was stuck with him for four hours." Mirko said pointing at the door. "I finally escaped to the kennels, Her Majesty has beautiful hunting dogs."

"Hmmm." I said looking out the window, the sun was sinking in a crimson and orange sky. "We should probably wake up Fin and go to dinner with the Queen."

"Yeah." Mirko said. "So you talked with the princess, is she nice?"

"Yes, she is nice and very smart. But in a good way, not an evil take over the galaxy way. She likes animals a lot and rides whenever she can." I said setting down an empty cup.

"Okay, lets go wake up Fin." Mirko said opening the door. I stepped into the middle room and lifted Max off of my friend. The bird opened his eyes and leaped onto the floor. I shook Fin awake as Mirko got a cup of water.

"Time to go to dinner," I told him as he sat up. "I went riding with Kardia." He stood up and smoothed his hair. "Cool, she's nice isn't she?" He ran his fingers through tangled hair.

“ Yep, she is going to be a great queen.” I opened the door for him. We strolled into the hall. Dinner was nice, everyone was tired and quiet. We fell asleep as soon as we dropped onto our pillows.

CHAPTER 8

The Siege

I awoke to find the castle alert and bustling. “ What’s happening?” I asked a soldier who jogged down the hall.

“ We sighted the shadow kings forces in the forest.” He said repositioning his shield on his forearm. “ All forces are being called to the wall, you should get to the queen’s rooms.”

I nodded and closed the door. I ran to the window, Max had roosted right outside, his spot was empty. I shook Fin awake and he woke up Mirko. We grabbed our bags and ran up the stairs, Kardia had told me about the

palace while we were swimming, her mother had rooms in the west tower. We ran up flights of stairs, my legs burned and I was gasping for breath by the time we reached the top. I opened the door to find the queen dueling with a cat man. It was the same man that tried to kidnap me. I almost felt nostalgic, that was before I realized that he might kill the queen. I took a running step and skidded to a stop. Four Pagos demons stood with their hackles raised, growling so much that their ice spikes shivered.

Fin grabbed his amulet and Mikro turned into a mouse. No offense to the mouse but he looked the opposite of menacing. “ Good time for Froura.” I whispered to myself and unsheathed my knife. Taking a step forward I slashed the knife at the demon. It deflected with its horns and stepped in to bite at my legs. I jumped back and stabbed again. I spared with the demon, I would try to stab with my knife it would dodge or deflect. It finally jumped at me. I rolled and came up on my knees. It slashed with its paw catching me in the chest. I growled and stumbled to my feet, throwing the short blade, I caught it in the side.

It fell, blood pooled from its side. I looked at Fin, he battled a whitish grey demon. It was bigger than the others. Mirko and Taco were running in circles around the third dog. It followed them every so often snapping at the mice. I heard a sharp bark and turned, the fourth demon sniffed its dead companion. It turned slowly and lunged. Icy eyes flashing with hate it knocked me over. I fell, the breath knocked out of me, gasping I realized that my knife was still in the dead Pagos demon. The dog lay far from my reach. I punched wildly at the dog, my fist connected with its bony muzzle. My knuckles bled slowly as the demon shook his head, it growled and bit into my wrist. Crunching to the bone my wrist snapped. Vision going white with pain and terror I struggled.

HELLO NOVA a voice slammed into my head. It was so loud that tears leaked out of my eyes. *I CAN HELP, LET ME TAKE OVER.* It boomed again. *Who are you?* I thought as hard as I could. *NOVA, I CAN SAVE YOU. YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE KILLED.* The voice was female, she could help. *Okay.*

White light swam through my body, it was soft and warm. Like a fleece blanket. We stood up, I could see the demon. The greyhound was backing up, whining. We yanked our knife from the dead dog, white light raced across the blade, the red coat of blood evaporated. We smiled and advanced. “*Nova*” We heard a voice. We turned to see two boys. They shielded their eyes, they looked scared. We saw a flicker of movement. The Pagos demon ran past us and stumbled down the stairs. We growled at the boys. “*YOU LET HIM GO!*” We said.

“*Nova, he took the queen.*” Fin said, backing up slowly. The white light imploded inside me, I fell onto my hands and knees.

“ What...was that?” I panted. “ That was crazy.” I stood up and stared at Fin and Mirko. “ What?”

“ You looked like you were about to kill us.” Mirko said staring at the floor. “ Skia Catt took the queen, they used a Pyli Petras to get in and out.”

“ Can we get her back?!” I asked shocked. I walked over to the spot where the queen had held off the shadow king’s right hand man. “What's this?” I asked bending over to pick up a folded piece of paper. Opening it I gasped.

We propose a trade
The feral for the queen
Come alone or we will kill her
Meet at the sea willow in three
days and your queen will not be
harmed.

I showed Fin and Mirko the note. Fin looked angry and Mirko looked shocked. I sat on the bed and sighed. I would do it, I would trade myself for Queen Via. I told Fin my plan.

“ Are you crazy??!” He yelled. “You are NOT giving yourself to the shadow king. Who knows what he has planned for you?”

“ What?” Mirko said coming over. “ You can’t.”

“ I have to!” I told them shaking my head. “ Nobody needs me, but you need a queen.”

“ We need you Nova. You can’t.” Mirko glared at me. “ You simply can’t.” I stood up. “ Yes I can.”

I sat under the sea willow. Its long branches swayed in the wind. The tree was ancient, high as a three story building and as wide as a car is long. The gnarled roots rose out of the earth, bright green leaves almost touched the dusty ground. I heard footsteps and looked up. A tall man stood, blocking the sun. His black cape drifting slowly through the air. Behind him were five Pagos demons, on their necks hung a braided necklace, weaved into each of them was a portal stone. They stood in a circle around a chained dark purple dragon. The dragon’s eyes were navy blue, pink scars showed starkly against it’s purple scales. A metal collar sat right behind its white horns and leaf shaped ears. A long chain attached it to a sleigh. Instead of bells, bones and teeth hung on a string. The sleigh was black with gold blades and seats. Chained to one of the chairs was the queen. The dragon roared, smoke swirling out of its nostrils. It had white bird wings and long white claws that sank angrily into the earth.

“ Greetings.” Skia Catt said loftily. He reached out a hand to help me up. I ignored it and stood.

“ The queen first.” I said and swallowed, trying to hide the tremble in my voice.

“ Of course,” The cat man said. He flicked his tail once. A Pagos demon darted over to the queen. He bit into the chains tethering her to the sleigh. They splintered, icy chunks flying. The queen stood and followed the

demon over to Skia Catt. “ Here is your queen,” He shoved her towards me. The queen stared at me as I walked over to the cat man.

“ Bye.” I told her and sat in the sleigh. The pagos demons teleported away. Skia Catt sat in the driver's seat and flapped the reins. The dragon snarled and took off. We ascended quickly, wind slapping into my face. I started to shiver.

“Hold on.” My captor said and pressed a button. We sped up and teleported, landing in a new setting. It looked normal at first, that was before I saw the forest. The trees were made of stone and charred wood, with magenta leaves and grey grass. A black dirt road led to an ebony castle. It had an array of twisted towers, gold banners hung on their poles. The castle was set on the other side of a deep canyon. A wooden bridge was the only way across. We landed in front of the black castle, Pagos demons hurried to take the sleigh and dragon away.

“ As you can see, His Highness does not like company.” Skia Catt said, he pulled a pair of black handcuffs from his pocket. “ It's a precaution,” He told me shrugging. “ It would be horrible if you escaped.” He clacked them shut.

We walked through the tall black doors. The hall was dimly lit by torches. Statues of Pagos demons sat on pedestals on either side of the door. We walked past more statues. Finally we stood before the throne. Skia Catt thrust me into a kneel and then bowed low. “ Your Majesty, I brought you the feral.”

The throne was made of smooth obsidian. On it sat a small boy of about twelve years, his face was pale, eyes lined with kohl. His hair was short and black. He wore gold rimmed, black robes. A simple gold crown sat atop his spiky hair. “ Thank you Skia Catt, you are dismissed.” His voice was raspy and cold. It did not sound like a boy's voice. “ Hello, Froua.” He addressed me, his eyes were gold. “ Welcome to the Dark Kingdom.”

“ Hello.” I said politely. I noticed that on either side of the throne stood two very large Pagos demons. They had silver bands around their necks. The one on the right had a ruby in its collar and the one on the left had an emerald.

“ As you can see it’s very late, I can deal with you in the morning, please don’t escape.” He waved his hands. “ Nanou and Pogo will take you to your rooms.”

The two demons stood up and growled at me. I stood up and one went in front of me and one stood behind. They escorted me down the hall and up a long flight of stairs. We reached a landing and went through a door. There was only a mattress and a short table with a jug of water. The demons broke through the chains and locked the large metal door. There was only one window, it was barred shut, literally. I sat down on the mattress. I had done the right thing, the queen was safe and could continue to rule her kingdom. I lay down to think. The mattress was hard and dirty, there was one ratty, grey blanket. The room was cold but not as cold as winter back home. To bad I would die here. At least, I thought I would die here. The king had never said he would kill me, but that was what all bad guys did to their enemies.

I heard footsteps coming up the steps a few hours later. The door clanked open. Two navy blue colored people walked in, they had scant clothes and plain black rings around their necks. They walked in slowly and placed a piece of bread, some soup and a wooden cup of water. They came and went silently. Only when they left did I notice their long tails.

The soup was mostly broth and the bread was hard and tasteless, but I still ate. My mind had warped fantasies about fighting to the death or the shadow king hunting me down. My mind told me that this might be the last food I ever ate. I longed for a cheeseburger, or a hotdog. When my scant dinner was gone I gulped down the water and filled it up again with the jug. Then I lay back down on the mattress. I quieted my mind and slept as the moon rose in the sky.

CHAPTER 9

The Shadow King

I woke to the sound of keys in the door. The navy people walked in on either side of Skia Catt. I stood up quickly, if they wanted to take me somewhere I would fight.

“ Stop that.” Skia Catt hissed. “ Your fate is inevitable. Don’t fight us.” He beckoned the navy blue beings towards me. They held steel ropes. I growled and sighed.

“ Fine, but only because you asked nicely.” I said sweetly and offered my hands for the ties. They wrapped the ropes tightly, at first I struggled, but stopped when I felt blood seeping onto my fingers. These ropes were sharp! They led me back down the hall and into the throne room. Instead we walked out the doors and into the front gardens. If you could even call them that. Dead trees clutched the red dirt with shriveled roots, blood red fruits swung on the creaking branches. There was grass, but it too was dead. Not yellow or brown, but grey, the kind that basically disintegrated under foot.

“ Pretty aren’t they.” Skia Catt said. He flicked his tail and turned right on the path. I could hear the note of sarcasm in his voice. “ Everything is so cheery.”

“ Mmmhmmm.” I said dully, trying not to laugh.

“ You know, I kinda like you. To bad I have to give you to His Majesty, you have spirit.” He halted at the steps to a large white building, it looked like a temple. Nanuo and Pogo stood at the top of the stairs. “ Bye Feral.” Skia Catt flicked his tail and the navy blue people fled back to the castle. Nanuo and Pogo walked down and led me to the door. They nudged it open and pushed me towards the back of the temple. On a dias stood the king. He was looking through a large book.

“ Thank you Pogo, Nanou, leave me.” He said still staring at his book. The demons growled and left.

I took a step forward. “ Why do you want me?” I challenged. I had seen this moment in my fantasies. I would go down fighting, I was not the type to be remembered as a coward. “ What are you going to do to me?”

The shadow king whimpered, for a second he sounded like a small child. “ It’s true, I feared, but. Froua, don’t you recognize me?” He turned and I now saw that his face was not that of a human. Soon he began to grow, paws replaced hands and a tail swished across the marble floor. Curved ears shot out of a black mane. His skin, no, fur was golden. His eyes were a deep shade of brown.

My first thought was, who are you? Of course the spirit inside of me roared something different. *BROTHER?* Froua gasped. I could feel her love coursing through me until I too was a lion. A lion with pale brown fur and gold eyes. *ASTER, WHY ARE YOU HERE? How is he here? Froua thought back to the last time she saw him. He was angry, angry at Mother for telling him to change. That’s right, he had wanted to be a guardian, a protector. But Mother disagreed, she said he was different, destined to be different.*

WHAT DOES IT MATTER IF WE ARE TOGETHER AGAIN? Her brother walked towards Froua.

“ Wait!” The human spoke in Froua’s mind. “ He has killed many people!” *DON’T LISTEN TO THE HUMAN DEAR SISTER, WE CAN BE TOGETHER AGAIN AND RULE OVER THE LANDS! Aster nuzzled his sister.*

BUT, WE DON’T RULE OVER, WE PROTECT. Froua frowned, her mind was foggy. She had forgotten something. What had Mother told her about Aster?

THAT IS WHAT I MEANT FROURA, WE CAN PROTECT THESE WORLDS. WE WILL BE THE GREATEST IN THE GALAXY. He stared at her. WE CAN BE TOGETHER.

BUT, THOSE PEOPLE YOU KILLED? WHAT ABOUT THEM? Froura asked, still searching for the memory, it was like fishing. But her paw moved to slow.

A NECESSARY PURSUIT. THEY HAVE WHAT I WANTED, AND NOW I DON'T HAVE TO TAKE IT BY FORCE! I DON'T HAVE TO KILL. Aster paced. TALK TO YOUR PEOPLE, TELL THEM I HAVE YOUR PERMISSION. Her brother was purring, the light of victory in his dark brown eyes. Those eyes were almost black with hidden malice.

That's it, Mother said that Aster was dark inside. And, before I died, a dark figure. One of Aster's minions. Aster tried to kill me! Froura gasped. YOU TRIED TO KILL ME! ASTER HOW COULD YOU? Froura roared, the temple shuddered.

I SEE, YOU REMEMBER. Aster growled. REMEMBER, I AM SORRY SISTER, I AM TRULY SORRY.

FOR WHAT? Froura hissed.

FOR THIS. Aster pulled out a syringe in one fluid movement and stuck it in Froura's shoulder. Froura howled and scrabbled at the needle, but it was too late. The work was done.

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME? She hissed, trying to stay standing.

YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO HELP YOUR HOST ANY LONGER. HAVE A GOOD SLEEP MY DEAR SISTER. Aster pushed Froura to the ground. HAVE A GOOD SLEEP.

I felt extremely tired. My bones felt like bricks and I shook with exhaustion. "What happened?" I wheezed. My voice was dry and soft. I looked around. I sat on the floor of a small cage. The floor was cold metal and the bars were strong. My cage sat next to the throne, it was about five feet tall and six square feet big, I tried standing but hit my head, I sat down. The king was gone from the throne, I could hear nothing. I remembered being Froura, her brother was the shadow king, had Aster killed her?

No, but I cannot help you. Only advise. I am very weak. Aster took away my strength. Froura spoke in my mind.

It felt weird to have a lion goddess in me. Whenever she spoke my brain would vibrate. “ Okay,” I said shakily. “ Can you um, advise me how to get out of here?”

If you had keys or something that would break the bars yes, but I am afraid we are trapped for now. Froura hissed her frustration.

“ I guess we should just wait here then. Maybe Fin and Mirko will come.” I lay down on my stomach.

They won't unless they are stupid. Froura hissed. *Just hope that they don't get killed.*

“ Anyone ever tell you how pleasant you are?” I whispered, there was something tickling my arm. I sat up and looked, Max was sitting next to the cage. His eyes were wide and happy, he honked quietly and ruffled his feathers. “ Max? How are you here?” I asked, shocked. Max showed me his leg, wrapped tightly to his foot was a piece of dirty paper. I untied it quickly and unfolded the paper.

Nova,

Hold on, we're coming to get you out. We need to know your location. Please try to find a way to write it down on the back of this note. Max followed us, we didn't bring him, but we are glad he is here.

Fin and Mirko

I gasped softly and looked around. At the middle of the throne room sat a large fire pit, cold charcoal lay around the edge. “ Max,” I hissed. “ You see those black rocks?” I pointed. Max turned his head to look at the charcoal. “ Can you go get one for me?” Max hopped to the fire pit.

“ Honk?” He asked and tapped a big chunk with his beak.

“ Yes!” I said. “ Bring it to me!”

Max picked it up in his beak and flew to the top of my cage. I reached through the bars for the peace. Max whistled and leaned out of the way.

“ This isn’t a game buddy!” I said patiently. “ Give me it, please?” Max flapped his wings and whistled, he opened his beak and dropped the burnt wood on my head. “ Thank you Max.” I said and grabbed the coal. I flipped the note over and scribbled,

I folded it and tied it to Max, “ Bring this back to Fin.” I told him. “ Hurry.”

You have a dodo bird pet huh? Froura purred. Maybe the idiot boys will save us after all.

“ They aren’t idiot’s! Well, most of the time. And I know they will save us, they have a plan.” I grabbed the charcoal and threw it into the fireplace.

Ooh a plan, great! A plan, nothing can go wrong if we have an all powerful plan! Froura hissed, plans go wrong all of the time, and I know, I’m ten thousand years old.

“ I have confidence in my friends.” I said defensively.

They haven’t let you down before? Froura said. Mortals are unreliable. If only I had my strength.

“ What can get you back into full strength?” I asked.

Mostly rest, or lots of food. And, if I can get my hands on some gold, I can absorb it and get back my strength. I can’t die, but I can be weakened, just like my brother.

“Yeah, your brother seems, nice.” I said, fiddling with my hair.

Ha! Yeah, sure. Aster is nice. Froura laughed. In fact if I had to use one word to describe him it would definitely be nice. Not evil or anything.

“Why is he evil?” I wondered. “ Was he nice when he was younger?”

He started out as a gentle kind being. But he had a lot of ideas, ideas that could hurt people, and benefit us. Mother saw this and tried to push him away. That just made it worse, Mother didn't realize that he needed her to sway his mind. He started to hate her, to rebel against her, and one day he just ran away. That was seven thousand years ago. I grew up and started to protect this world, until he sent his minion to attack me. Froua sounded distant and sad, thinking of the past. I tried to help, to add good to his bad, but he didn't want help. He loved me, I think I'm the only thing he loves.

I nodded. "Sounds sad, who was your Mother? She doesn't sound very wise."

Mother was wise, very wise. Sometimes I wonder if she pushed him away so he would turn evil. Mother was Space, and the Sky. She raised us in her home. We grew up in the corner of the universe, in the Hall of Life. Other protectors lived there. It was a home for immortals, like me. Froua took a deep breath. I haven't seen my home in many, many centuries. It looked like your earth, but smaller and cleaner. With stone temples and green plants. It was peaceful, hidden and protected by the Shield.

" Sounds beautiful." I said quietly.

It was. Froua said softly, wistfully.

I glanced at the windows, light grey light was beaming through the glass. It was morning. The doors to the hall opened, in walked Nanou and Pogo walked on either side of Aster in his lion form. He had donned his crown, a black metal earring was in his right ear. A silver snake bracelet wound around his tail. He walked with his head up high, he reached the dais and lay down on his throne. " You have a good night sister?"he purred.

" Do you think I had a good night?" I growled. " You big overgrown housecat!"

" I am sooooo insulted." Aster said loftily.

" I'm gonna kill you, you little hairball." I hissed.

" Oh you are? But your in a cage! And I'm out here!" He laughed and flicked his tail. " You think you can kill me, a pagos demon almost killed you without the help of my sister, what can Nova Ironwood do? Nothing."

I sighed. “ But, your still a whining little kitten.” I said, pretending to pout. “ What’s going to happen to me Assturd?” I tilted my head.

“ Clever little nickname, child. You will stay in my kingdom, on display. This afternoon you will be moved to a bigger, more comfortable little enclosure. You are quite a rare specimen for my to show my friends, you will grow old, and die. I hear you mortals don’t live very long, to bad.” He bared his teeth. “ I hope you said goodbye to your friends.”

I growled. He smiled at me and stood up. “ Give her some food,” He told Pogo. “ not a lot, and some water.” He walked out of the throne room, Nanou and Pogo following behind.

Pogo came back to give me a bread and cheese sandwich on stale bread, and a cup of water. I ate the sandwich slowly, pausing every so often to drink water. I thought about living here, ignoring Froua’s thoughts. My friends were coming, but how soon? Were they already here? Had they been caught? Had Max taken the message to them? Would they know were I was? If I was moved this afternoon, they would lose me.

Calm down. Your making me nervous. Froua hissed.

“ You’re nervous?” I said angrily. “ I’m the one who is in the hands of and evil immortal lion!”

Well semi immortal. Froua purred. *He can be killed by me. He can be killed by another protector.*

“ Well unless we get our hands on some gold, you can’t kill him.” I snapped. “ Maybe I should just do what he wants.”

So you would give up? Froua growled. I felt her growl in my chest. *You would bend to Aster? I guess you aren’t the human I thought you were.*

“ Yay, a motivational speech, don’t worry I was just kidding.” I said blushing.

Mmmhmmm. Froua growled.

They came for me at noon, the navy blue people opened the cage and stepped back. Two pagos demons stood guard as Skia Catt walked in. He tied my wrists together behind my back and pushed me out of the cage. We marched into the dining room and passed exhibits behind glass. There were bored looking navy blue people and a jackalope. We reached another

enclosure, it had a blanket on a wooden floor and a secluded walled in corner with a toilet. The walls were white and blank. A tall vase was filled with water. All in all it was about six by six square foot area. Skia Catt shoved me through a metal door and into my new home.

“ Bye, kid.” Skia Catt hissed and closed the metal door. I watched them leave through the glass. Suddenly the two pagos demons collapsed, then, the navy people. Mirko dropped from the roof and high fived Skia Catt. Skia Catt grabbed his keys and opened the metal door.

“ What are you doing?” I asked the cat man. “ I thought you worked for the shadow king.”

“ I worked for the boy, not the lion. When Aster took over, I followed his orders, but I was never his minion.” Skia Catt said quietly. “ Mirko and Fin found me and talked me into helping them.”

“ He’s safe Nova.” Mirko said. “ We trust him.”

“ Okay.” I walked out and hugged Mirko. “ I’m glad you’re here.” I squeezed him and let go.

“ What now?” Fin asked. He looked weary and alert. “ We need to take care of Aster. You need to.” He looked at me. “ I mean you and Froua.”

“ Um, unless you have gold, I can’t call on Froua. Aster did something to her that zapped her strength. She told me gold would help.” I shrugged.

“ Aster keeps his gold in a safe, other than that the only piece of gold is his crown.” Skia Catt hissed. “ He sleeps in the royal chambers, I’ll lead you there.”

“ Wait,” I said. “ How do I know this isn’t a trap?” I took a step back.

“ Nova, we can trust him. He had plenty of time to betray us to Aster but hasn’t.” Fin put a hand on my shoulder.

“ Hmmm. I guess. But if you betray us I’ll kill you.” I growled and pointed my finger.

“ Fair enough.” Skia Catt shrugged. “ Follow me.” He swept down the hall and we walked back to the throne room. We stuck to the shadows as Pagos demons patrolled the halls. We ran up the stairs to the left. “ He sleeps at the top of the tower.”

“C’mon.” I whispered to my friends and we raced quietly up the winding staircase.

We reached the top and stood panting on the landing. Fin pointed at a large dark wooden door with a silver handle. Skia Catt pulled out his keys slowly, making sure none of them jingled.

The door creaked open. I winced, surely the king would wake up, but the sound of snoring still came from the darkened corner. Mirko turned into a mouse and crept across the floor boards. “ I don’t see the crown, he squeaked.”

“ He puts it on his nightstand!” Skia Catt hissed. He watched Mirko, following his every move with catlike attention.

“ Don’t even think about it!” I whispered and nudged him.

“ Sorry.” Skia Catt crept over to the stairs. “ I think I’ll keep watch.”

“ Good idea.” I said.

Mirko was climbing up the drawers to the nightstand, I could see the golden crown glinting in the light of the moon. Mirko reached the top and tiptoed across the wooden surface. He grabbed the crown with tiny mouse paws and lifted it onto his back. He leaped off of the dresser and landed with a soft thud on the ground. To me it sounded like a thunderclap. But the king of shadows kept on snoring.

Mirko was almost at the door when he froze. Aster tossed in his bed. Mirko took another step and tripped over the crown. He landed with another loud thunk.

In a flash Aster leaped out of bed and grabbed Mirko the mouse. His paw wrapped tightly around the mouse. I yelled and Skia Catt turned and drew his knives.

“ Make one move and your friend dies.” Aster hissed. “ His spine is so weak, I can snap it in a second.” Mirko struggled and hid the crown under his body. I nodded slightly at him and got ready to catch something. Fin nodded at me and tackled Aster. Mirko changed form and threw me the crown, I caught it.

Okay, no what? I asked Froua.

Hold it in your hands and say, 'Apokalýpto', it means reveal. Froua whispered in my head.

I nodded and held the crown in my hands. " Apokalypto." I whispered.

" NOOO!" Aster growled. He swatted the crown out of my hands, but it was too late. I transformed into Froua. But this time was different, she wasn't in control, I was. I smiled and pounced at Aster. He growled and jumped over me. He raced down the stairs and into the palace of night.

CHAPTER 10

Shadow

Did I ever mention that Aster is a coward? Froua purred. He probably went to fetch his guards. We should get to the courtyard, it's a better spot to fight, more dramatic.

“ Lets go downstairs.” I told my friends. They stared at me. “ What?” I growled. I looked down. My body had transformed into a lion, human hybrid. I looked like a character from a TV show. “ I guess I do look pretty weird.”

“ Yeah kinda.” Fin said.

“ C'mon, let's stop gawking and hurry up.” Mirko shoved Fin towards the stairs

I jumped down the the landing. I felt powerful, my vision had increased and I noticed everything. In one perspective it was distracting. In another it saved my life. On the way down the stairs we came across a small herd of pagos demons. They hid at the entrance to the stairs and almost ambushed us. Luckily I spotted them and we attacked first. We ran down the rest of the way and leaped out of the door.

“ Allies! Fight these enemies of the throne!” Aster howled when he saw us. He hid behind an army of pagos demons. They growled and barked at us.

“ Um, do we have any backup?” I asked my friends.

“ Just a few people.” Mirko grinned. War cries sounded from the front gates. A horde of people dressed in furs charged into the Pagos demons. The dogs turned and fought back. Some tried to run, but were confronted by another army, this one was made of people with shiny, metal armor. They were led by a woman in full armour on a golden horse.

Even with reinforcements we were heavily outnumbered. The Pagos demons eventually got over their surprise and formed lines.

“ I will be right back,” Mirko whispered in my ear and then popped into a mouse. He ran off.

“ C’mon!” Fin yelled. He clutched his amulet and mumbled something. A fiery lasso appeared in his palm. He charged into battle.

I found Aster standing on the temple steps. He stared at the battle with an eager look on his face. He watched as warriors fell with merciless eyes.

“Aster!” I roared, changing into full lion form. “ Your reign of terror is over!”
“ Really? Cliche monologue?” Aster purred. “ I truly expected your last words to be better.”

“ Oooh good one.” I said. “ You have to look that one up?” I crept closer. Backing him into the temple.

“ Ha, c’mon, I can see you want to kill me.” Aster glared at me. “ Why don’t you get your death over with?”

I leaped at him, claws extended. He reared onto his hind legs and met me head on. We rolled around, clawing and biting. When we separated we were both bleeding from small wounds. I fainted another leap and slashed at his head. Blood dribbled down from a shallow cut. With any luck it would blind him. He swiped at his head and backed up. From outside I could still hear the screams and yells of battle.

“ Is that all you got?” Aster hissed. He smiled like he was winning. “ You can’t kill me, you know that?” He grinned. “ I was always better than you. But Mother still liked you the most.” He paced towards me. “ I may not be immortal, but I will still win.”

“ What makes you so sure? You arrogant pussycat?” I growled and leaped again. Aster jumped to the side and jumped onto my back. I rolled over and squashed him. He hissed and clawed me. I scrambled to my feet and licked the scratch. It was deep and bleeding sluggishly. I would have to watch it.

“ You see?” Aster purred. “ Fighting is useless.”

“ Froura.” I whispered. “ You need to leave me, you should be strong enough, we can only defeat him together not as one being. ”

I agree, brace yourself, this will hurt. Froura hissed.

White fire engulfed my body. My vision swam and it looked like the world was vibrating. My head felt like someone was cracking it open. In the background I could hear Aster laughing. I clenched my teeth and fell onto my hands and knees. I screamed and clutched my head as a new flash of pain tore through my skull. Then, suddenly, the pain stopped. I sat up slowly. In front of me stood a pale lioness, her paws were the size of tractor tires and she was as tall as a two story house. I stood up and walked to stand next to Froura. She looked down at me.

HMMM YOU NEED A WEAPON. Froura's voice made the ground tremble. HOW ARE YOU WITH A SWORD?

"I took fencing classes for a couple of years." I grinned.

GOOD ENOUGH. Froura opened her giant maw and spat out a gleaming, two foot long, steel sword. I picked it up.

"Thanks?" I said wiping cat spit off of the hilt.

YOUR WELCOME. Froura turned towards her brother. He had disappeared. ASTER YOU ARE SUCH A COWARD WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE PAGOS DEMONS TO HIDE BEHIND. GET ON MY BACK NOVA.

"Okay," I said and Froura crouched down, I grabbed fistfulls of coarse, tan fur and hoisted myself up. I sat up between the lionesses shoulder blades. "Let's go find the cowardly lion." I smiled.

We charged out of the temple. The battle outside was dying down. I saw Mirko leading his people aboard the shoulders of the dragon that had pulled the chariot. Her chains were off and she swept demons back with her large bird wings and spread waves of fire that came from her horns. I had no time to help my friends, I saw the tip of a dark tail disappearing through the door to the castle. Froura roared and ran towards the closing doors. She reared up and knocked the entrance down with her strong front legs. The doors landed with a thud. Froura squeezed her way in and ran up the stairs. Stone crumbled as the lioness rampaged up the tower.

HE ALWAYS LIKED HIS TOWERS, I AM SURE THIS IS WHERE HE WENT. Froura growled.

"Maybe you should get smaller." I told her. She was destroying the tower.

I PROBABLY SHOULD. Froua snarled as she bumped her head on the ceiling. She crouched down to let me off and shrunk into a slightly large lioness.

“ Thanks.” I ran up the stairs behind her. In the distance I heard roars and howls, yells and the clanging of metal on metal. I hoped that my friends were okay, I felt a flash of guilt at leaving them.

THEY ARE FINE. YOUR FRIENDS ARE STRONG. Froua growled and jumped up five steps. THEY CAN WITHSTAND BATTLE.

“ I know, I just wish I could fight alongside them.” I panted. I hate stairs. SHHH, Froua hissed suddenly. WE ARE ALMOST AT THE TOP.

I nodded and crept up to stand besides her. I hefted my new sword into ready position and got ready to charge.

I’LL GO FIRST. Froua whispered. She lept around the corner. I gripped my sword and ran out behind her. Aster was standing on the balcony. He looked sad.

HELLO SISTER. Aster said without looking at us. AND PUNY MORTAL. He didn’t look evil, or mad. He looked bored. WHY DIDN’T MOTHER LOVE ME? He turned towards Froua.

I DON’T KNOW ASTER. Froua purred kindly.

YOU KNOW WHAT? I’M DOING THIS BECAUSE SHE DIDN’T LOVE ME. SHE THINK WITH ALL HER WISDOM SHE WOULD HAVE THOUGHT OF THAT. Aster growled. I JUST WANTED TO PROTECT PEOPLE! He roared.

“ No,” I said. “ You wanted to control people.”

YES, TO PROTECT THEM. Aster glared at me. THEY ARE THE SAME THING.

NO ASTER. Froua said. PLANETS NEED FREEDOM, IF THEY MAKE BAD CHOICES WE CLEAN UP, BUT WE DON’T CONTROL THEM.

Aster backed up. I DO NOT UNDERSTAND.

“ If you don’t let people learn, they won’t be happy.” I explained.

Aster backed up more, he was almost at the edge. THEN I WANT TO CONTROL PEOPLE, THEY WILL LOVE ME THEN!

I stepped forward to warn Aster about the edge, but Froua stopped me. Aster whipped his tail. He growled and backed up some more. His hind paws slipped and he dropped off the ledge. He roared as he plunged into the deep canyon below. The cry echoed through the palace.

HE WILL BE REBORN, HOPEFULLY WITH DIFFERENT INTENTIONS. THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP NOVA. BUT, I MUST GO BACK TO ILLIOS TOMIA. IT NEEDS ME. Her fur glistened and she sprouted white bird wings, she jumped off the balcony and flew away into the starry sky.

EPILOGUE-

I ran through the halls of the palace. Mirko was besides me. We skidded into the throne room and stood at attention for the queen. She smiled and stood up. Fin was standing next to her.

“ Fin believes he has found your planet.” Her Majesty said. “ When you are ready, you will be returned to Earth.”

Fin grinned at me. I frowned. Why was he so happy?

“ Fin and Mirko will come with you to Earth. They will be our scouts, to see if we can make a friendship between your world and ours.” The queen nodded to Fin and Mirko. “ They will also protect you from any harm, though I’m guessing you can take good care of yourself.”

“ That’s great!” I cried. “ We should leave soon, I can’t believe it, but I actually miss my home.” I bowed to the queen. “ Permission to pack?” I asked.

She laughed, “Permission granted.”

As I grabbed the portal stone, I thought about how crazy my life was now. How much different it would have been if Froua had not chosen me. Or if I had never answered the door. I thought back to the battle, two weeks ago. There had been casualties, including the head of guard in the palace. Randy, the guard that had taken us into the palace, was his replacement. Gata, had lost the use of his legs when a Pagos demon landed on his spine. I had helped make him a wheelchair. Mirko’s family was alive and

happy to see him. Fins mothers sent their regrets for missing the battle. The dragon Mirko had freed turned out to be a minor protector of Earth's moon. White and black flashed in front of my eyes. We landed on my front porch. I stumbled and sat down on the steps. It was almost midnight, the stars shone faintly. Mirko scowled.

“ Why don't you have stars on this planet?” He growled.

“ We do, They are just hidden by pollution.” I looked at my door. “ How long have I been away?” I asked.

“ Hmm,” Fin said. “ I'd have to guess, about a month.” He shrugged. “You said your parents wouldn't care.”

“ Well, they might freak out.” I said and knocked on the door. Nobody answered. I pulled up the rug and felt for the key. I grabbed it and stuffed it in the lock. The door opened and I crept in. A piece of orange paper caught my eye. It was taped to the table, covered with dust. It read;

Nova;

Me and mom are on business trips, we will be back in a week.

~Mom+Dad~

The date was September 2, 2017. The day I left. Mirko and Fin came in and I towards them. “ My parents are missing.” I said and sat down at the table.

“What's on the back of the letter?” Fin asked.

“Noth-” I flipped the note over. In a neat handwriting someone had written;

Come find them.