

Pronunciation Guide

Zeheb:	Zay-heb	Janhu:	J-ah-n-who
Aanleg:	On-leg	Waarheid:	W-ore-h-eye-d
Urion:	Yer-eye-on	Siener:	See-n-er
Sterkte:	Stare-ck-tee	Baai:	B-eye
Soirus:	So-are-rus	Sheya:	Sh-ay-uh
Xander:	Ex-and-er	Anna:	On-uh
Wyshied:	Why-she-ed		
Keiser:	K-eye-zer		
Nag:	N-ah-g		
Saam:	S-ah-mm		
Triad:	Try-add		
Meridian:	Merr-id-ee-an		
Glistendane:	Glis-sen-day-n		
regeer:	r-eh-hee-air		
Vervaag:	Ver-v-ah-g		
Leveren:	Lev-air-ren		
Riviere:	Riv-ee-air		
Vel:	V-ell		
Reuk:	Air-ee-ook		
Beskerm:	Bess-care-um		
Geslepe:	G-eh-z-lee-eh-p-uh		
Stryd:	S-ter-rye-tuh-duh		
Sjarne:	S-are-m-uh		
Kwaai:	Kuh-why		
Suné:	Soon-ay		

Prologue

Zeheb once told me that the ugliness in the world comes from the loss of something beautiful. For a while I disagreed—openly—with him on this. Ugly things do not have to first be pretty—if I found something (or *someone*) to be unattractive, then that was my opinion, and, to me, there was never a *loss* of beauty, there just *wasn't* any to begin with.

In the time I spent being protected in the Hallows, my view of Zeheb's statement never changed, and I grew to value my own opinions very highly. This way of thinking was encouraged by the Aanleg as they tried to prepare me to be acquainted with the vicious world behind the slate stone walls, and I saw no reason to complain about it. Even so, I knew that my being a half-blood would make it difficult for those outside of the Hallows to accept me—especially the ones who truly mattered. So having high self-esteem was good for me, but I had to remind myself of this every time Zeheb sighed angrily and didn't even try not to make it obvious that I was not understanding what he meant, even though I disagreed with him on that as well.

Actually, I disagree with everyone on a lot of things. The Aanleg believe that, though the decisions I make and opinions I have are all very important and very (for the most part) correct, when the time comes for me to reveal myself to the kingdom, I should be able to step aside and allow the Wyshied to actually have command.

No.

Zeheb not only believes the aforementioned cause of ugliness, but also believes that I am currently too weak-minded to actually be able to convince anyone that my bloodlines are of any use to the needs of the kingdom.

No.

Urion has this idea in his head that he needs to be everywhere I am at all times to keep me safe from threats that everyone expects and only I know are not coming, even though, at all times, I am surrounded by *at least* five different Sterkte men, all of whom are as equally as qualified and equally as committed to keeping me alive as Urion seems to be trying to prove to me that he is.

Hell no.

And when I tell them all that they are wrong, they just give me disapproving glances and purse their lips, or, in Urion's case, smile wickedly and ignore my glare. And I could try to convince them, but that would only happen if I actually believed for one second that they'd listen to me and actually consider that I might be right, even though I am "much younger, more inexperienced, and extremely naïve," as Zeheb so blatantly stated two years ago, than absolutely everyone else in the Hallows.

Well I agree with him on the point of being much younger than everyone else, but I can honestly say that my experience level with many things—combat, quick thinking, singing,

kissing, *more* than kissing—is pretty damn high. A lot higher than some of the board stiff Aanleg, that’s for sure. And naivety? Humor me.

So I don’t argue with them on this. I don’t tell them that no one other than myself will be putting anything into action in this kingdom. I don’t tell them that there is no way that anyone who can deal with the stuffy old Sprites that haunt this gray prison and still be sane could be weak-minded. I do not tell them that a protection detail in this place is a complete joke, seeing as no one, other than those actually staying in the Hallows, knows I’m alive.

I just keep these opinions—these very *high* opinions—to myself.

But I would realize, once I was finally freed from that ghostly place I called home for all of my twenty-six years of living, that Zeheb was right about some things. I didn’t know what he meant when he told me that ugliness is the loss of beauty, and I was definitely more inexperienced than I had ever imagined.

And I would learn to understand.

Chapter 1

Being a half-blood has no perks. I live a shorter life than full-blooded Sprites (who tend to live for about three hundred years), I’m smaller than they are, and I have to work harder in a fight. A lot harder. Stealth and speed and strength come naturally to all Sprites, though only those deeming to become Sterkte, the guardians of the royals, the Reign, actually hone in these skills.

Sterkte are not easily recognizable without the gold-plated vests and gold-hilted swords, decorated solely with their symbol of four lines creating a circle with the outer two each interrupted at the top by a dot, plastered to the belts of their black silk trousers, unless one knows what to look for. I’ve learned, in my extensive exposure to all things Sterkte, that most of them are quite lean. Being built is important, but being swift is almost more so. They must be able to be flexible; to move like snakes, to strike the target exactly where it is weak and avoid being struck themselves. The way the Sterkte move fascinates me, and I know that every single one of them would excel in the art of dance. When I told Urion this, he raised his eyebrows mischievously at me and told me that I should know. My face burned for a good twenty minutes after, and I avoided all eye contact with any Sterkte for the rest of the day.

I curse my vulnerability as a half-blood every time I enter the arena. Soirus, my trainer, told the Sterkte about six years ago to never go easy on me in my lessons, and I personally think that they have taken this order a bit too seriously.

As I’m slammed on my face for the third time in a row, I adjust my opinion. They take it *way* too seriously. The side of my fist slams on the mat, betraying my frustration as I adjust my position and glare at Beni, the lucky Sterkte that I feel like killing today.

“Nova, you completely disregarded what I said.” Soirus states in a flat tone, his crossed arms and planted feet content with not checking to make sure I’m not injured at all.

I’ll take that as a compliment.

“I thought I did what you said! Or else I just have *no* idea what you mean!” I try not to screech as I stand up and shoot Beni a glare that could boil water. He’s too busy looking at Soirus, awaiting his next orders, to notice. Yes, way too seriously.

“Obviously it’s the latter.” Soirus retorts, finally coming towards me in a slow saunter. Like he actually has anything better to do. It’s like the Hallows were made to *force* people to socialize with one another because there is literally *nothing* to see or do in the place. Home sweet home. “You need to keep your knees bent and your feet need to be even with your shoulders. You should have your right foot slightly in front of your left so you can easily lean away from any strikes Beni throws at y—Are you even listening?” He snaps the question at me and brings his face close to mine, his brown eyes blazing.

I’ll admit, I am not listening anymore. I’m sweaty and hot and tired and Urion just walked in and switched shifts with Fenley, so now my attention span on anything but Urion lasts anywhere from one to two seconds. It frustrates me how he can get me to completely disregard anything else. Frankly, it isn’t healthy, and I should really work on it.

But right now, I’m too annoyed with combat lessons and Soirus to try to work on it. I am acutely aware of Urion’s presence just behind Soirus’ left ear as I look at my trainer.

“Are we done for the day? I don’t think I’ll be able to learn anything in my state, Soirus.” I say, ignoring his question and motioning to my sweating silk shirt and shorts.

Soirus is fuming, and it takes him a second to come up with something to say. In that second, I notice that my bare feet are dying to relax in some hot water. I desperately need a nice, hot bath. Then my eyes flicker to Urion again, and I meet his blue gaze. He looks at me for a second before slowly lifting his mouth into a sly grin as he reads my thoughts. I look away quickly before Soirus can read my expression, too.

“Fine. Get out of here.” He’s as done with me as I am with him. “We’ll pick this up tomorrow.” Soirus adds in his usual flat tone, turning and walking away towards the North hallway.

I just about bolt to the East hall, which connects to my living suites. My Sterkte follow me like lemmings, easily keeping up with my quick pace. When I get to my door, I take a deep, impatient breath and motion to Urion to go before me. Letting my guards check my headquarters before I enter is required, but I hate the way it makes me feel like a weak, sickly child. I try not to tap my feet impatiently as Urion sweeps his way around my rooms.

When he emerges from my bathroom, he snickers, “Clear,” and I turn to the others.

“Stay on the perimeter, please.” I order, crossing the threshold of my doorway and closing the door so that only and Urion and myself are inside.

I let go of my breath and lean back against the door, my eyes steady on Urion's form. "Nice timing." I say as calmly as possible. My heart is beating a thousand times each second and my skin is burning. None of it is from the long workout that I just had.

Urion moves closer to me with every word. "Fenley can never resist a chance to work the border." He shrugs, suddenly only inches away from me. His body heat is not helping me calm down. He reaches up and begins fingering the bottom hem of my sweaty shirt. "You're in need of a good wash." His eyes examine my face confidently, and I can see his smug expression hiding just below the surface. I want to hate him for it.

"You're not." I mention, noticing how clean he smells. I'm trying not to grab him and drag him into the bathroom, but it takes a lot of self-control and I'm having a hard time after that exhausting lesson.

Somehow I refrain myself from doing so as that mischievous grin reappears on Urion's face. Zeheb was so wrong about me being weak-minded.

Urion leans forward so that our noses brush, and my body longs for him as his hands meet the bare skin of my stomach and hold me against him. His breath against my face makes me briefly forget what we were even talking about, and my hands move along his sturdy chest. "I can if you want me to be," He murmurs, his lashes tickling my cheek. "Do you want me to be, Nova?" His lips gently brush across mine, and a thrill races down my spine. I grip his shirt in my hands and close my eyes.

"Yes," I whisper. Then he's pressing me back against the door, his lips slamming onto my own, his hands lifting me up so that I can wrap my legs around his waist and tangle my fingers into his light hair. His tongue is in my mouth and he holds me firmly against him as we move towards the bathroom. I try not to give away how much I am anticipating what is coming next, but the hunger in my kisses is easy to distinguish. The effect he has on me is a terrible flaw in my control.

Maybe Zeheb is right after all.



It's against the rules for me to be sleeping with one of the Sterkte, and I have been told a million times by Zeheb (as if he knows what I am doing), but I know that the only one who can truly enforce this rule is the only one who is actually in charge of making sure rules are enforced: me. I gained such right at the ripe old age of eighteen. So, even if the Aanleg or Zeheb or even Soirus, the head of the Sterkte in the Hallows, ever find out, they can't really do anything about it. They'll try, but technically they can't. The only reason I don't just admit that I am not going to listen to that stupid rule is because it makes life a lot more interesting to break it.

Urion and I have had an attraction to each other for about two years. He was switched to guardian duty for the first time, rather than patrolling the outside border of the Hallows, and when he pummeled me into the mat not an hour afterwards, I hated him, and I loved it. It only took about a month for us to give up all notions of trying to stay away from each other, because

seriously? What did they expect by locking all us young'uns down here? I'm naturally curious, and Orion is confident and way too sexy an opportunity for me to pass up. If I'm honest with myself, I am wondering whether any of the other Sterkte are as...*talented* as he is, but I don't have the desire to feel them out now, and Orion is a bit possessive. Sometimes it's irritating but I have no doubt in my mind that all males would be so.

It is time for me to eat dinner, and the Sterkte I left outside of my door are going to come knocking in a couple of minutes, but I do not feel like leaving the soft sheets of the bed or letting Orion stop kissing me at the moment. His skin is warm and soft, and I am the happiest I will most certainly ever be in the Hallows.

Orion moves his mouth to my ear, his teeth scraping the surface. "You're gonna have to get dressed soon, you know."

I groan and turn my head so that he's kissing me again, pulling him closer. "I don't want to get dressed." I whine against his mouth. He chuckles and pulls away, gazing at me and playing with a strand of my white hair.

"Well I suppose you could go out there naked, but I don't think that's what you want, either." He replies nonchalantly.

I smile evilly at him. "I think you mean that's not what *you* want." I correct, rolling over and slinging my legs over the side of the bed. I pull the sheet with me and hold it around my body as I turn to look at him.

Orion is trying not to expose how he feels about what I just said, but he is failing. I know I'm right. He says nothing for a while as I pick a loose white dress to throw over myself.

"So you would have no qualms walking out there in front of all the Sterkte in your birthday suit?" He is attempting to keep his voice from sounding disapproving. Seeing how I haven't given him an answer yet, he should not disapprove anyways. But I hear it there, in his voice, and I roll my eyes.

"What if I didn't?" I reply, turning to him and putting a hand on my hip. I raise my eyebrows expectantly, and he narrows his eyes at me.

"Then I'd tell you to get dressed." He says simply, shrugging and standing to grab his uniform.

Something about the way he says this—something about the statement in general—rubs me the wrong way, and I try to find something to say that doesn't involve me biting his head off. I look at the ground, sure there must be steam coming out of my nose and ears. Finally, when he is finished fixing himself to look presentable again, I move to the door and open it right before Beni goes to knock.

I shoot Beni a triumphant smile and walk out of my room. I'm still barefoot, which is how I prefer to be, and the white marble floor is cold against my feet. I know the Sterkte are right behind me, and I know Orion is going to want to talk to me, but I am done for today. I do not feel

like talking to him right now. The tall, dark, gray stone walls loom over us as we head to the dining hall, and I try to figure out what to do so that I can avoid Urion tonight.

As we pass the study hall, I realize what it is. Unfortunately, avoiding Urion means spending time with Zeheb. He is always finding ways to casually insult me, and usually I try to visit him only as much as required, but tonight will be an exception.

Dinner is boring. Being thought to be dead limits one's options, and a good following of a variety of different people with a variety of different skills—for example, cooking—is nearly impossible. No one can believe in a dead heir.

Thorn and Corie are my new best friends for the night, and I must admit that being mad at Urion really makes everyone else look a hundred times more attractive. Thorn, true to his name, has prickly brown hair and eyes like ice, and it almost seems like he can see into the depths of my soul with how sharp they are. Corie's hair is long and black, tied back into a small ponytail, with a few strands loose on either side of his face to frame eyes as dark as night. This is not my first time noticing them, but it is my first time being attracted to them. They talk to each other in a way that makes me want to watch them all night, and makes me want them to try and gain my attentions. I'd love to see how they use their words then.

I smile complacently at this and can't help sending Urion a pity glance. He does not seem at all disturbed by my new attentions. As if he has nothing to worry about.

I want to strangle him. The feeling grows stronger when I admit to myself that he's right—I'm planning on visiting Zeheb tonight, so he really does not have anything to worry about.

I stand up and move toward the door. The Sterkte on duty to be my guardians begin to follow my lead, but I wave them off. "Zeheb." I tell them, and they nod in understanding but wait on the edge of their seats. I glance over them. I remember vaguely hearing once that Xander loves reading, so I motion to him. "Xander, you can come with me." The experienced Sterkte nods again and moves to my side. As we exit, I glance at him sidelong. He's good at keeping a straight face. "I hope you like reading, as I thought." I say.

He looks at me and allows a small grin. Damn, he's good looking, too. "I do."

I smile at this. It feels nice to get things right once in a while. "Good."



"You *voluntarily* came to *learn*?" Zeheb says disbelievingly. He does not even try to pretend.

My wonderful teacher is seated behind his huge wooden desk, which is splattered with various novels and scriptures and learning materials that give me a headache every morning around eight o'clock. The interesting stuff is what lies behind him, in rows and rows and columns and columns of dark wooden bookshelves that reach all the way to the ceiling of the dark library. The stories, the history, the worlds all wait behind Zeheb, while I'm stuck on the damn crimson, velvet couch that sits facing his desk. There's a small table to one side of the couch that I pull in front of me during our lessons on politics and etiquette and everything else

that should never be taught so early in the day. Behind me, Xander is relaxing in one of the four velvet chairs lining the wall with lamps to light the seats in case the overhead lights are not turned on as they are now. Xander is reading a novel that I randomly selected from the more interesting stories that await me when I have finally excelled in every topic Zeheb can scavenge from his two hundred and seventy-one year old brain.

“The only thing,” I tell him, sprawled out on my stomach on my couch with one hand tracing the cracks in the marble covering the floor. “I dislike about learning,” I look pointedly at him as I say the last part, “is you, Zeheb.”

Zeheb chuckles, not at all upset. I think that if I was anyone else, he would tell me he feels exactly the same way about me. He still might.

He doesn't. He leans back in his chair and says to me, “What you need to learn is how to obey the law.”

I smile, not at all concerned with him knowing anything about me breaking the law. What I am concerned about is how he could possibly know that I am upset with someone. I thought I hid my emotions from him so well. Though my being here now could be the giveaway. “Now, Zeheb, it is my duty to respect all laws. I surely have no idea what you're talking about.” I say sweetly.

The Wyshied elder snorts at this but moves on. “You're too inexperienced”—Stars help me, here goes that “naïve” crap again—“to stay here.” He finishes.

At this I furrow my brow and examine him. “Well now I *definitely* have no idea what you mean.” He literally is making no sense. Is it not logical to teach me all I need to know so that when I go to claim my rightful place, no one doubts my ability to lead? The Aanleg—and Zeheb!—have told me plenty of times that the kingdom will have a hard time accepting even *with* skills in all things political. My damn human side is impossible to hide. I might have been able to do it—to fool the Sprites long enough to get me my rightful place, if not for my skin color.

In no way do I dislike my skin tone—I happen to think it's perfect. Probably the only thing human about me that I do not hate, even though it is a dead giveaway that I do not belong. No Sprites have dark skin tones. They are all pale. The tannest they can get is about the color of dry sand. My father was one of them.

I've been told countless times by countless Sprites here in the Hallows that my father was a Sprite, the most powerful Sprite of all, the Keiser, with skin as beautiful as sunlight and eyes the color of the brightest, purest gold. But he fell in love with a human woman, and, against all wishes of the Wyshied, the congress of the kingdom, and the Aanleg, the Reign's close advisors, he married this woman. But when the kingdom finally saw the wife of their ruler, they knew she was not one of them. She had beautiful dark skin, the color of mahogany, and white, shimmering hair, known to belong only to the humans of Nag, a country located in the southern deserts of the kingdom. And so my father was overthrown and killed by the head of the Sterkte, Mavern, and his warriors, but before they could kill his wife, the Aanleg and a few loyal Sterkte led her safely

from the palace into hiding, and soon discovered that she was carrying the child of their former Keiser. The heir to the throne.

Me.

But I am a half-blood, and the Sprites, who have ruled the lands of our kingdom, Saam, for as long as history can recount, hate the inferior human race. Hate half of me.

“What I mean, Nova,” Zeheb leans forward on his desk to still me with those intense blue eyes, “is that you cannot truly make educated decisions about how any Sprite might react if you are only exposed to certain Sprites. And you definitely cannot learn to control your gifts while cramped in this deathly building.” He clarifies, the look in his eyes growing increasingly sure of himself. My frown deepens, because I have learned to be wary of his “awakenings.” “Yes.” he begins nodded to himself now, his eyes taking a faraway look. “Yes, this has to happen. You must leave.”

My heart is beating fast now, and I sit up straight on the couch, listening but now quite sure if he is still sane. Leave? He thinks I should leave...*oh*, please *don't be messing with me now*, Zeheb, is all I can think as I watch him.

“Zeheb,” I begin carefully. I can feel Xander’s eyes burning a hole in my back as he stops reading his book and begins paying attention. Things are finally starting to get interesting in the Hallows. “Zeheb, you think it would be best for me if I left the Hallows?” I can’t quite believe it. If this works...I’m finally getting out. I’m finally going to live.

Zeheb sighs irritably. “Is that not what I just said?” He snaps.

I can’t be annoyed because I am practically flying with excitement. I laugh and jump to my feet and run to his side of the desk, throwing my arms around his neck. He cringes away from me but I just laugh even more and spin in circles, already feeling free. I had not realized until now how much I need to escape. How much I need to *see*.

“I will talk to the Aanleg tonight. They must come to the same conclusion. At the rate you are going now, you will never be ready. Yes, you need to meet your kingdom.” Zeheb rambles on some more about what I “need” and how “unprepared” I am for everything, but all I can do is lay on the horrid velvet couch that has held me hostage for twenty-four years and stare happily at the gray stone ceiling, imagining it’s the night sky, filled with the stars of my father’s people.

Chapter 2

I hate my humanity because it makes the Sprites see me as inferior. I hear it every day in the absence of “Your Highness” at the end of their sentences, in the way the Aanleg talk of my

half-blood failure, in the way Soirus gazes at me while I am thrown continuously on my face because I am not quick enough. I can empathize with humans, so I do not hate them. I believe that the only reason Zeheb does not truly hate me is because I have this connection to the human race. Because I can see them without disgust.

So I cannot truly hate Zeheb either.

Soon after his rambling began, Zeheb shooed me from his office so he could figure out a plan to get me out of the Hallows. I was not inclined to keep him from this task in any way so I ran from that room like I was being chased by Urion wanting to talk to me. Xander was close on my heels, and together we headed down the hall back to my room and I told him to come inside. When Urion comes with the others, he will stay on the perimeter since Xander is in my room.

Urion being outside gives me time to think about Zeheb's awakening anyway. I lay in bed, the darkness engulfing me, and wonder what it's like; what I have been missing all these years. I wish I was out there already so that I might be able to begin to absorb its incredibility, but patience is going to have to be my companion for now. I sigh and turn on my side, curling into a fetal position and closing my eyes to try and get some sleep before I drive myself crazy.

Lying here, alone, without Urion's warmth seeping through the blankets, I feel that empty part of me again, opening to the darkness, breaking a part of me that I don't know how to fix. It has been here all my life, and is why I am so open about giving myself to Urion so often. I hoped that having that closeness with him would fill the hole, but I have long since figured out that having Urion only covers it up for the time being. I do not know what it is, why my soul has this place that is lost and so barren. It is the worst feeling in the world, and I squeeze my eyes shut and hope that sleep will come soon, and with it, oblivion.



The very fact that I had not seen any cons to my leaving the Hallows until the blood moon rose that night would prove, at least to Zeheb, that I am as naïve as he thinks I am. I decide, the next morning, to exclude this tiny detail from my own evaluation of myself, though this would lead Zeheb back to my weak-mindedness. It hurts my brain to think about it after last night, so I stop.

I had fallen asleep after about an hour of suffering and had the dream. The same dream as before, with the sun shining over a meadow of the liveliest green, and then slowly night begins to fall, and it grows darker, and the moon begins to appear, but the sun is still there. The sun is in the same place as before, and the moon, its ghostly white hue, is moving at a steady pace towards it. The closer to the sun it gets, the darker the night becomes, and the deeper yellow, then orange, then red, the moon becomes. Soon the grass is not grass, but dark water dancing in the moonlight, and the moon is cutting off the bright yellow sunlight almost completely. I unconsciously felt a stirring in my abdomen that grew with the every move the moon made to cover the sun, and by the time the final flickering of yellow light disappeared, the moon became a gleaming red bulb staring at me, *through* me, and I awoke.

It is the sort of like sleepwalking except, while in sleepwalking, one has no idea what is happening and no control over it, but in this state, I know exactly what I'm doing and no control over it. It has probably the same level of appeal as sleepwalking, or even less so.

This is the only time the full strength of my abilities comes to light, literally. I feel the battle taking place in my veins, in my heart, in my head, as fire and water clash and flare and sizzle through my being. This has been happening to me since I was twelve, and the only thing Zeheb has been able to get me to do is run from my room to the dark room, where the extreme light can be concealed from prying eyes.

So this is what I did tonight, as I tried to keep myself from exploding and melting and everything in between. Xander, knowing exactly what was going on, had already opened the door and called the warning to the rest of the Sterkte. By this point, everything everywhere was glowing, as if my eyes were the new sun and it was shining as bright as a clear, summer day. I raced down the hall, my speed faster than usual because of the power that radiated from me. I was gasping for air through the flames; trying not to drown in the waves engulfing me, trying to make it to the dark room before it was too late. I made the final turn and clenched my teeth, squinting through my glowing golden eyes, and finally I entered the eternal darkness, barely slamming the door before everything was white.



I let the water from the shower rain on my head as I stand there, shivering, knowing that Zeheb is getting nowhere in his fight to send me away from the Hallows. Last night was perfect timing for every reason why I should not leave to make myself known. The frustration burns in my throat as the last of the power slowly turns to dust, and I slam my fist against the hard tile, letting out a small scream of absolute defeat. The Aanleg are right—there is no way I can go with my gift so unpredictable; so out of control. I'll end up killing someone, and then where will I stand? No one would support me. No one would accept me as their Kaiser.

I shut off the water and climb out of the shower, grabbing my towel and wrapping it around my shoulders. My eyes are unfocused as I stand in the middle of the tile, not knowing what to do next, not being able to think. I vaguely hear the door open and close behind me and I can't bring myself to wonder who it is, or to even tell myself that there is only one person it could be. I just stand there staring until I feel warm hands on my back, then my arms, turning me so I can see his black trousers and tunic, and the gold belt that carries his elegant sword.

His hands move to my wet hair and force my head up so that I'm looking straight into his blue eyes. He stares at me for a moment, and then he kisses me, one hand holding my head against his, the other pushing against my stomach until I'm against flat the far wall. His kiss is hungry and enticing, and soon I feel myself moving against him, my hands forgetting to hold the towel up and instead going to remove his shirt. His hunger is contagious, and soon I'm starving for him, too.

And as more and more of his bare skin touches mine, I can feel myself slowly being brought back to earth.



I walk nervously to the library and peek inside. Zeheb is nowhere to be seen. I am not sure if I am happy about this or upset that he doesn't have a definite answer for me yet. I have had the whole day off because of the total eclipse, so I have been basically enjoying Urion's company all day until I finally worked up the nerve after dinner to come and see Zeheb.

I decide that, since I'm already here, I might as well wait.

By the time I finally make it out of the Hallows, patience really *will* be my closest friend.

I sigh and plop down on my couch, sitting there for a few seconds before getting too bored and wandering up to examine the papers spread out on Zeheb's desk. He'd kill me for doing it...if I was anyone else. Being so important really makes a girl feel valued.

Zeheb's crazy scrawl litters everything I am looking at, and I can't find the effort in me to try and decipher it letter by letter, so I turn to the shelves running across the room behind the desk and feel the thrill of possibility race through my limbs. I smile and casually make my way through the row closest to me, scanning the titles and colors of all the books and letting my imagination get the best of itself. I contemplate which one to choose first, and finally I decide not to judge the books by their covers and I choose the most boring (looking) one I see.

I let my eyes linger on the title before flipping it open to examine the writing. *Night Hymn*. Hmm. I read a random sentence on one of the pages I flip to. *The night called to me like a siren, and I knew I should not want the stars that were in his eyes to be in mine, but everything in me wanted to be swept away into the darkness.* I frown. The cosmic aspects are attractive, but I'm not sure I really feel like a love story right now...I want an *adventure!* Something to quench this thirst I feel for the outside world.

"At least I will not have to deal with your irritatingly bad choices anymore." A voice growls from behind me. I keep myself from jumping (and I'm quite proud of myself for it), and looking over my shoulder in exasperation at Zeheb's wrinkly face and scraggly, grey hair.

"I cannot seem to recall a bad choice that I have ever made, Zeheb. I think your age is finally catching up to you." I say innocently, placing the book back on the shelf and turning to look at him with my hands on my waist.

Zeheb grunts and walks back to his desk. Probably so he doesn't have to look at me longer than necessary. I can't bring myself to care. "When you leave in two days, don't say I didn't warn you about your inexperience handicapping everything you do." Is all he says to me.

I'm frozen in place. I can barely breathe. "Leave?" Well, nothing to quench a thirst like fresh, clean water!

Zeheb continues. "I managed to convince the Aanleg that the only way you will master your gift is if you learn from a real teacher. A guru."

I shake my head, now thoroughly confused. "Zeheb, that's not possible. The only place they have gurus anymore are the Institutes. An Institute..." I hate to say it, because thinking

about it nearly broke my heart four years ago. “An Institute only ever allows full-blooded Sprites into acceptance. They would never accept me.” I look at the ground, the ache and rage of my inferior half threatening to pour from my eyes. I had not been lying when I had told Zeheb that I had no problem with learning.

Zeheb either does not notice my pain or does not care. “I know. But this time, they will make an exception.” He says matter-of-factly.

I roll my eyes, blinking away the tears. “No, they won’t.”

Zeheb turns to me and holds my gaze with complete confidence, so much so that it verges on arrogance. “Yes, they will.”

I give up arguing and instead ask, “Who is ‘they’?”

Zeheb’s smile looks kind of like a snicker, except he’s not the only one who is winning here, so I don’t know why he looks so self-satisfied. I narrow my eyes. “The Reign Institute of Sterkte.”

I stare at him for a good thirty seconds, my mouth gaping open, my brain trying not to flail and fizzle and die like a chicken with its head cut off. Zeheb waits for my dramatics to fade, and when they do, all I can do is laugh hysterically, because I always knew that one of us had to have lost his or her mind over the course of the twenty-one years we’ve spent together, and now I have proof that it was not me.

Zeheb does not let me comment, though. “You are by no means a Sterkte.” He begins.

“Oh, well, you can say *that* again! There is *no way in hell* that I will be able to get into that school! I’m more likely to become Kaiser first!” I exclaim, throwing my hands in the air and letting them fall back to my sides. I can feel the panic mixing in with my newfound hysteria. The Aanleg actually *agreed* to this?! Have they all gone *mad*?!

“*But*,” Zeheb accentuates, cutting off my rant, “you can fight as well as any of the beginners entering that school. Even Soirus agrees on that.” He adds.

The fact that Soirus confessed that I was as good as a beginning Sterkte was a miracle just in itself. I didn’t think he’d ever promote me past the “infant Wyshied” landmark, probably the most harmless Sprite—possibly creature—on the planet, that he’d proclaimed me to be equal to on the combat mat five years ago.

Something like pride shines in my chest hearing this. They should all really learn to stop praising me. It really gives me too much confidence in my abilities. The cooking fiasco from when I was nineteen is a prime example of what comes of much praise. All I can say is that that is where I learned how chickens act with their heads cut off if one does not know what she is doing.

“I’ve been training for *sixteen years*.” I snap myself back into reality. “The new recruits going in have been training *at least* twice as long!”

Zeheb shrugs. “The Institute does not need to know all the details.”

“Everything you’ve said to me in the past two minutes has to have been a joke.” That’s the only way I can comprehend all of this information in my (what feels like a pea) brain at the moment.

Actually, Nove, you’re the only one here who does not have a pea brain, it seems. I console myself.

“Why would I joke about this Nova?” Zeheb inquires in a serious tone.

I search for an admittedly embarrassing amount of time for the sarcasm in his tone, but I mean seriously. Everything he is telling me is ridiculous.

“Nova!” Zeheb finally snarls. I still stare, unfazed by his temper. “*This* is why you still have not mastered that almighty gift of yours! You are too immature to be able to control such power.” At this, I give him a death stare. He ignores me, as per usual. “It really does become increasingly disappointing every second that you do not have as much time as the rest of us to learn the necessary skills of integrity and selflessness.” He shakes his head, scratching his messy hair and sitting in his desk chair.

If anyone else would have said it to me, I would have turned into a complete nightmare. Even hearing it from Zeheb is like a slap in the face. But the difference between everyone else in this stone asylum and Zeheb is that Zeheb does not disrespect me because of my human ancestry. He disrespects me because of my self-importance.

I will confess that sometimes I do take it to the point of overkill, but I have found that this is necessary if I want to keep the constant reminders of my inferiority from crushing my spirit.

“My maturity level is perfect for the crap I am put through on a daily basis. If anything, I’m the only one keeping everyone in here alive. You’d all die of utter boredom if I wasn’t around.” I know it’s true.

“None of us would be here if you weren’t around.” Zeheb replies grumpily.

I don’t reply because I am too busy trying to figure out if he means they wouldn’t be *here*, as in in the *Hallows*, or *here*, as in *alive*. His face is giving me no hints as to whether it is one or the other, so finally I huff and stalk to the door.

“You leave the day after tomorrow. You will not come here tomorrow until after lunch; go to Soirus when you finish breakfast.” Zeheb calls after me. I don’t bother turning around, but I know he knows I heard what he said.

I walk to my room at an easy pace so that I can think through everything I just learned, Xander trailing just behind me.

You’re leaving. I keep telling myself, my hands twisting nervously in front of me. I’m caught between glee and dread. *You’re going to the Institute of Sterkte.* Dread. *You’re going to the Institute of Sterkte.* Glee. *The Institute of Sterkte.* Dread, glee, dread, glee.

I slump against the bumpy rock wall, trying to absorb it all.

“Nova.”

My head jerks up and my eyes flick to the Sprite who said my name.

Xander watches my startled expression. “You are as good as any recruit. You will be fine.” He says sincerely.

I’m so struck by his kindness that I don’t know what to say. I blink about four times before I finally realize I should smile. The smile falters, but it’s real, and I know he can tell. He has definitely been around me long enough to know.

“I’m no Sterkte.” I state, repeating Zeheb’s words. “But I will definitely try.”

Xander nods. “Good.” He waits for me to lead the way again. I watch him for a second more before pushing off the wall and continuing the silent trek to my room.

Chapter 3

The Reign Institute of Sterkte is more than just a training ground for Saam’s most magnificent warriors. All of the textbooks I have studied that have talked about the Institute of Sterkte have raved about the quality of the professors, the structure, and the methods of teaching, and even those who fail to pass the final exam to be marked permanently as either a Sterkte Guard of the Kaiser Household, a Wyshied Legislator, or the very rare Trustee of the Aanleg (all three Great Sprite careers stem from the Institute of Sterkte), praise the school endlessly. I have never heard a bad word about the kingdom’s most notorious Institute.

I have also never heard a word about what actually is taught in the Institute of Sterkte. I asked Urion once or twice when I finally worked up the nerve to connect with him on more than just a physical level, but apparently, the Institute that he attended was a very bad place to start, because he shut down my questions faster than I could ask them.

Of course, then I shut down his advances faster than he could apologize, and for a nice, long week, he was given the cold shoulder. But then I became lonely and he looked at me with those eyes and I let him make it up to me after dinner. That was the first time he stayed the whole night with me. And Urion finally gave up that the Institute is very strict on its teaching methods staying classified, which is why I will never be able to squeeze anything from any Sterkte on the subject. I consented to this reply, if only because I was enjoying Urion’s company immensely and he was kissing me the whole time he explained himself.

Speak of the devil.

“So, the Institute of Sterkte.” Urion says in an unreadable tone as my door clicks shut.

I look at him, trying to figure out if he is doubtful of my ability to get in. I still am, even after Xander's kind encouragement. "Yeah," I say. "It's...incredible. Impossible."

Urion says nothing, and I know he agrees with the latter, if not both. Finally, he mumbles, "Zeheb has gotten ambitious." This whole time he has been leaning on the doorframe of my bathroom entrance, but now he lightly pushes himself off and glides towards me. I watch his movements, taking in his tall frame, looming almost a foot over me, and I notice his sword and belt are already gone. My stomach twists with exhilaration.

"You know, if I'm going away to the Institute, we really should figure out how to make it through a day without seeing each other, let alone months." I say, trying to keep my voice steady as he lifts me onto my bed and hovers over me.

He chuckles darkly. "Why?" He brings his lips down on my throat and I arch my neck. Now his body presses mine against the mattress, and his teeth graze my skin. "Don't you want me to come with you?"

My hands are underneath his shirt now, and his tongue is sweeping over my throat, claiming me, and I love it. I hate that I love it, but I do.

"Is that even an option?" I breathe, shuddering as his mouth reaches my jawline.

At my question, Urion chuckles again, and as a reply, he meets my stare, a mischievous glint in his eyes, before his lips engulf mine, and I let him sweep me away.



According to Soirus, it is an option.

Instead of filling my morning with outrageous lessons on political etiquette and speech-making, I instead get to sit through something even worse.

A lesson on behavioral expectations with Soirus.

I'll take Zeheb's insults over this any day, I decide right then and there. For once in my miserable life I am wholeheartedly missing the coma-inducing lessons I usually have with Zeheb in the morning. A coma is better than this. A coma.

"You're vulnerable. You're easily influenced." Soirus has decided to list all of my flaws. I stifle the retort that he might as well tell me that I'm me. "You know nothing about the doings of the Sprite population outside of the well-trained, organized, obedient actions of professional Sterkte warriors and other legal consultants." I beg to differ. Urion definitely shatters the possibility of that statement being at all true. Obedient—give me a break. I shoot him a glance, and he actually has the nerve to look slightly guilty. I don't believe it for one second. "You have a hard time holding your tongue, and you're overly confident. You have slim to no chance of making it in the Institute with all of these character traits alone, but then we can add everything else that sets you behind"—like my half-blood—"and *then* we add that you're a half-blood." So apparently not like my half-bloodedness. Apparently there is even *more* wrong with me than the five-million things he just named off.

No pressure.

I choose to disregard his never ending list of my faults. “So what do we have riding on my success?” I decide to ask.

Wrong question.

Soirus stares at me like I have lost my mind. Like he is now realizing that maybe I never had one to begin with. “*Everything* is riding on this, Nova. *Your rightful place on the throne* is riding on this. You had *better* succeed.” He spits at me.

I make an expression of complete disbelief. “Are you kidding me? You tell me every reason why I *won’t* succeed and then you tell me I can’t afford *not* to succeed? Is this some kind of trick?” I’m squawking like I just stubbed all of my toes but I just can’t believe this.

“I’m *telling you*, Nova, all the things you need to have *fixed* by the time you get to the Institute.” Soirus states blatantly. His face stays serious and no-nonsense, and I think I might consider giving whoever will punch his stupid face right here and now my claim to the throne.

“Well, how about you stop *telling me* all the things I need to *fix* and tell me something I am doing *right* for once, Soirus!” I suggest temperamentally. I wait, glaring at him.

Soirus clenches his jaw. I can see how much I am rubbing him the wrong way. At the moment, it is making me quite satisfied. “I will choose seven of the Sterkte Guardians to accompany you to the Institute.” So he is choosing to ignore me. No surprise there. “We will accompany you to the Institute, but not inside.” I nod grumpily. “The placement exam to be accepted into the Institute will test your knowledge, your physical abilities, and your mentality. I expect that your knowledge and physical abilities will be enough to get you in, if you stay focused.” I am becoming exhausted with the endless insults, but I bite my tongue. I just need to get out of here. “You will need to be at the top of your game in those exams, Nova. If you haven’t noticed, Sterkte women ...they do not exist, Nova. There is yet to be a woman to pass the final exam. You will have to be the best just to get into the Institute.”

I had noticed the lack of women in this place, which is made up of ninety percent Sterkte warriors. I have only ever interacted with two other women in my lifetime, and it’s amazing that I have any sense of how to behave at all. Easily influenced my ass.

At this I decide something. My mentality is perfectly qualified. I will not just be the best in the physical portion of the placement exam—I will excel in both the mentality and the knowledge portions as well. I am determined to show Soirus, Zeheb, the Aanleg, *Urion*, that I can do this. I can succeed. Me: a woman, a half-blood—*me*.

I can get into the Reign Institute of Sterkte.



After about two hours burning in the hell of Soirus’ gaze, I am subjected to another three hours of hellish torture where Soirus tries to force—excuse me—*coax* my gift to emerge again.

If I wasn't so damn important I'd swear he is trying to kill me. They all are.

"No, Nova, keep your feet planted on the ground so that when it comes, you have an anchor!" Soirus all but shouts at me. I raise an eyebrow.

"You and I both know my power is not coming Soirus. Calm down." I reply.

I can feel his hair graying in the silent fury that follows. I desperately try not to laugh.

There's an itch on my leg. I would use my foot to scratch it but I'm positive Soirus will definitely kill me then, screw the consequences, so instead I lean down and use my hand. I know he's pissed about this as well since he also told me to stand up straight but, hey, at least I'm still "anchored."

"Now breathe, and recall the dream. Reply the dream in your mind." He tells me, sounding slightly less stressed but not enough to make the ache of holding down laughter any easier. I take deep breaths through my nose, trying to gain some control, and finally I begin to focus.

I think about the sun and the grass, a slight breeze grazing across the green, the rustling noise soothing my soul. I take a few more deep breaths as I make sure all of the details of the sun and the sky are there, in perfect clarity, before I slowly let the vision fade closer and closer to night. My laughter is gone now, replaced by a calm so relaxing that I actually want to fall asleep again.

The longing to fall asleep gets stronger as I make the scene in my head darker. I carefully pick out the stars and set the color of the moon just right, and I vaguely feel my body sway as I move the moon closer and closer to where the sun awaits.

"Nova?" I hear a distant voice, Soirus, but that is not where I want to be. I want to be here, in this dream, with the sun and the orange moon, the moon that is getting closer and closer to red. For a second the tips of the two magnificent bulbs touch, and then everything is moving, happening, without me even having to create it in my mind. The fire and water are stirring in my core again, and I am aware that I am no longer standing, but for some reason, I cannot move. The moon is now red-orange, growing darker with every passing second, and the water shimmers in the night, reflecting the glow of the stars, the beautiful stars...

My eyes fly open, glowing with the brightness of the sun, and I am aware that I am moving, but in an odd way. My body is horizontal, kind of. I'm not the one moving. Someone is carrying me. The moon is almost completely blocking the sun now, I can see it in the light of the sun shining from my irises. I am almost there.

I stop paying attention, my veins on fire, my hair on fire, my skin on fire, my lungs drowning, and then finally, everything is white.



I know I have been out longer than I usually am before I even open my eyes.

Unfortunately, this is not a testament to my internal clock. I know this because I am again moving, and my body is again horizontal, for the most part, but the noises I am hearing tell me quite clearly that I am in some kind of carriage.

I have never been in a carriage, but I know this is one. I can feel the lurch with each step the horses make, and hear the clop of hooves on the ground and the jingle of the chains. Jeez, if I am in a carriage headed to the Institute already, that means—

I sit up abruptly, wincing at the sharp pain that shoots through my head. I don't usually have this kind reaction after my gift has taken place. Maybe because I induced my own eclipse, or...the fall. I must have fallen and hit my head. Ouch.

I rub my head as I try to get my bearings, and then I carefully examine my mode of transportation. It is small and cramped—I had been squished against the back on the cushioned seat. Everywhere I look, the inside is covered with a green, silky cloth, with the only break in the color happening where the Sterkte symbol shines gold below the windows on each door and above the seat across from mine.

Wait—windows! The Hallows—none of the rooms had real windows. Okay, they'd been windows, but they had been windows that stared out at a looming, ugly stone wall. I was basically the same as not having any windows. Now, I almost leap with excitement as I grab the curtains and tear them open to look outside into the world. My mouth hangs open at what I see.

It is even more incredible than I had ever imagined.

Stretching for endless miles ahead of me is the bluest, most beautiful water I have ever seen. Waves crash along the shoreline, creating a white outline against the light, sandy beach. The carriage is a ways from the water, but the sand comes right up to the gravelly road that we are using. I can distantly hear the *shhhh* of the water lapping the shore, and the call of birds in the air, birds that I can't see.

I want to see the birds.

Before I can think twice, I am opening the door to the carriage and flying out on the sand. I land on my feet, sliding a little in the loose grains, but then I am sprinting down the slight hill towards the water. *The ocean*, I realize.

There is shouting behind me as the Sterkte guards try to stop me. I keep going, laughing wildly, spreading out my arms, breathing in the salty, watery air, let the wind whip my hair across my face.

I'm free.

I reach the edge of the shore and jerk to a stop, staring at the calm water as it moves in and out with each current. I hold my breath as I lift one foot to touch the wet sand.

Suddenly I'm jerked off my feet and slung over someone's shoulder.

“Hey! Put me down! Stop!” I yell, pounding on his hard back.

“Where in your right mind did you decide that was a good idea, Nova?” Urion’s stiff, deep voice scolds.

“Put me down! Urion! Please! *Please!*” I beg, and something in the way I say it, the desperation in my voice, makes him pause. My breathing is shallow as I try to keep from crying. I hate that I feel this way, but he needs to understand. He needs to see how much I need this.

He sets me on the ground in front of him and takes in my expression. His light hair ruffles in the breeze, making him look less like a Sterkte guard and more like a normal Sprite.

“Please,” I say again quietly, my voice cracking. I hate feeling so weak. “Just for a few minutes. That’s all I want. Please.”

His blue eyes slide towards the others behind us before he looks at me again and nods. “Fine. But when we say it’s time to go, no arguing.” He tells me.

I grin, taking a deep breath, and shoulder past him. I walk back to the wet sand take the first step.

I gasp. It’s freezing! I laugh and move closer to the water, my feet sinking into the soft ground.

All of a sudden, a huge wave pounds into the sand in front of me and water comes spraying into my face and folds around my legs. I yelp at the unexpected cold and scurry back to dry sand. Then I laugh again, looking towards the carriage at the others. A huge stone cliff juts out behind them, blocking my view of what is beyond. They’re all watching me, like usual, but unlike usual, they seem tense. A few of the men by the carriage pace back and forth anxiously, scanning our surroundings. Urion stands ten feet away, arms crossed, eyes following my movements, with a blank expression on his face.

My free spirit wanes, and I look into Urion’s eyes.

All he says to me is, “Welcome to the real world.”

Chapter 4

Soirus is here. I curse my misfortune when I recognize him as Urion escorts me back to the carriage.

Soirus sits aboard the carriage, obviously acting as the driver, with two beautiful chestnut creatures attached to the front. I want to reach out and stroke their beautiful coats but Urion all but shoves me back into the carriage. I barely get a glare in before he slams the door in my face.

I hate him.

There are six other men, Urion included, all riding their own horses. I managed to put names to all of their faces even with Urion pestering me to no end.

Ahead of the carriage, Xander and Thorn lead the way, and on either side of the carriage are Urion and Beni. Behind us, Fenley and Grant make up the rear. And my favorite person of all, Soirus, sits mere feet in front of me.

I just cannot get away from him.

I am kind of put off by the setup, really. I can ride a horse. I learned when I was sixteen how to ride, and I loved it. I don't want to be smashed inside the carriage for the entire journey. I will miss half of the adventure!

I jerk back the curtain to watch the ocean again and am met with something immensely less stunning for the time being.

Urion's torso and black trousers and boot hanging down around his horse's saddle.

I briefly wonder where he had been when I had jumped out of the carriage earlier, but I don't really care as long as he goes back to that place right now so I can see the water again. I pound my fist against the side, and he leans down to look at me.

Urion raises a light eyebrow. "Move!" I say, motioning for him to fall back.

In response, he raises both eyebrows and then straightens again. I wait. He stays. I groan and lean back in the seat, not being able to stop the pout that sours my expression.

If this is what my trip is going to be like, I'd rather just sleep through it all.



My senses sharpen when I hear it. I've become so accustomed to the clanking of the horses' hooves and the minimal sounds of the Sterkte that I notice it right away. I straighten and I try to focus my hearing. Yes, I am sure of it.

Voices.

We are moving through a town.

My heart is beating wildly and I try to think of a way to jump out of the carriage as successfully as I did last time.

But I quickly notice something is off. The voices, the lively town noises I was hearing...they're fading.

Are we leaving already? I think despairingly, trying to peer around Urion's stupid self. I can slightly see wood behind him, and that was a window, so we must still be in town. Why did everything go mute?

The carriage shudders to a stop and I clench my hands together, anxious to get out. It seems like hours go by before Xander finally opens the door to my right. I fall out of the carriage and hurry around the side so that I can examine our surroundings.

Oh, the people! There are people of all different ages, sizes, colors, *people!* They stand near the buildings, out of the street, many behind carts or store windows selling their merchandise. My wide eyes drink in the scene thirstily.

“Nova, don’t move.” Soirus warns me before he and Beni enter a shop that we stopped next to.

Then I remember the noise. None of the townspeople are talking. They are all going about their own business, but any fool could see that they all have one eye on us.

No. I tell myself. On the Sterkte.

These people are humans.

The revelation hits me in the gut, and I turn and look at my companions. I feel stupid for not recognizing this before, seeing as many of them have darker skin tones.

Xander and Thorn are next to me, their hands hovering over their golden sword hilts, eyes narrowed as they gaze around us. Fenley and Urion stand in the street on the other side of the carriage, as if guarding everything from a thief.

Embarrassment floods my body. My face burns, and I turn to get back into the carriage when I hear her.

“You are of the Nag.”

The Nag. My mother’s people, known for their moon-white hair and dark, luxurious skin. My skin is not nearly as dark as theirs, but it is dark enough to be different. I spin around to see a small girl with dark skin and a small afro of tiny black curls, her large round eyes staring at me. She couldn’t be more than ten, and she holds a white chicken against her chest like a baby.

Thorn and Xander prepare to frighten her away. I step forward before they can move a muscle.

“My mother was of the Nag. Yes.” I say calmly, my eyes scanning her dirty, ragged cotton clothing and her bare, dusty feet. I usually choose to go barefoot as well, but I know immediately that her bare feet were not a choice. She just cannot afford shoes.

The girl looks carefully at my guardians and then murmurs, “They hate the Nag.”

I swallow. Talking about this right now would be a very bad idea. I need to change the subject. “Is that your chicken?” I ask dumbly. I feel so...helpless. I don’t know how to interact with children. With anyone other than the Sterkte and the Aanleg, actually.

She is quiet for a minute, then she smiles and strokes the chicken's back. "Yes, I just bought 'er. I saved money to buy one all year!" She states proudly. "Now we can make eggs in the morning 'fore going to the factory!"

My heart clenches. I am speechless. The factory? *She* saved? What about school? Where are her parents?

"That's wonderful." I say softly, crouching down so that my face is level with her chest. "Can I touch her? She looks very soft."

Wariness clouds her eyes as she pulls a little bit away. "Papa told me never to let anyone near your animals. They might snatch them right outta your hands."

I am stunned all over again. My stomach is feeling slightly sick. "Oh, well, that's alright." I give her a small smile. "You should listen to your Papa." She nods. "Are you allowed to tell me your name?"

She smiles. Her teeth are crooked and small, but miraculously white against her skin. "I'm Leah." She abruptly sticks out a hand towards me. I blink, and then slowly reach out and grab her small fingers in my own. Her hand is rough and dusty from working, but there is a warmth and a compassion in her grip that makes her touch inviting. She pumps my hand up and down twice before pulling back again. "What's your name?" She asks curiously.

Then Soirus walks out of the building with Beni in tow, and I stand up again, wondering how he is going to react to this.

His brown eyes scan the girl and I and his face goes hard.

Badly, then.

"What is this?" He growls, motioning to Beni to take his place once more.

I square my shoulders and glare at Soirus. "Leah and I were talking. Is there a problem?" I ask.

Leah has already begun to retreat, her fear of Soirus' rigid power eclipsing her curiosity about me. Something saddens in me as she leaves.

"The *problem*," Soirus says harshly, closing the distance between us, "is that people don't keep their *mouths* shut. If the Sprites learn of you traveling through human territories just before entering the Institute, they will start asking *questions*." That is when I notice that the townspeople are no longer pretending to mind their own business. They are outright staring, and probably have been ever since Leah worked up the courage to speak to me.

I avert my gaze from his angry face and glare at the gravel beneath our feet.

"So I would suggest that you for *once* try to use your so-called brain before you do something that will ruin your life. Get in. We're leaving." Soirus snarls, jumping aboard the carriage and waiting impatiently for me to listen to him.

I glance over my shoulder one last time to see Leah. She stands a ways down the road, watching us. When I look at her, she waves sadly. I wave back, and then do as Soirus instructed.



My father should have never met my mother. The Nag and the Sprites get along even less than the normal humans and the Sprites. I am still not quite sure how the Kaiser ended up interacting with a normal Nag woman of no importance. If my mother had belonged to the Nag government, I might have a clue, but she did not, so I do not. Zeheb failed as a teacher in educating me on my family's history. It is quite ironic, actually, that the one thing he failed to talk about is the one thing that absolutely need if I am going to convince anyone that I belong on the throne.

The people of the Nag have always rebelled against the treatment humans receive from the Sprites—the unfairness of it all. They and the Lig—their neighbors to the left—constantly send soldiers to defend the helpless people close to the Meridian, the split that determines where Sprite territory begins and from where all humans are banished.

The Institute lies about three days north of the Meridian.

I have been so busy thinking about what I am going to do when I am inside the Institute that I have not even considered that possibility the Sprites might not even let me past the Meridian.

I walk over to where Beni and Urion sit near the fire. I sit cross-legged between them, hoping that I will soak up some of their warmth this way. I desperately want to snuggle up in Urion's warm grasp, but Soirus would probably lock me in the carriage then. So I'll suffer for now.

“Do we have a plan to get me past the Meridian?” I inquire, warming my hands by the flames. Urion is finishing his chicken leg and Beni is sharpening the blade of his sword.

Beni stops to answer me. “Half-bloods are not forbidden from crossing the border.”

I raise an eyebrow. “And what about *Nag* half-bloods?”

Urion eyes me as Beni replies, “You'll survive.”

Well isn't that hella comforting, Beni.

I am silent for a few seconds before I can't help myself. “You hate the Nag.” I murmur, Leah's haunting dark gaze appearing in my thoughts.

Urion throws his chicken bone in the fire and gets to his feet without saying a word. I stare at my hands as they twist nervously between my legs. Beni sighs.

When he says nothing, I stand and follow Urion away from the fire, near the darkening trees. We stopped to camp just inside the forest that now runs next to the street. I have no idea when the ocean disappeared—it seemed like it would go on forever. I miss the breeze, but the

new colors and textures and wildlife are also exciting. I do not think I will ever be able to go back to the Hallows.

“Tell me I’m wrong.” I say to him, glancing around to make sure no one is watching us. They’re all busy setting up camp or eating food to pay attention. I turn back to Urion. “You hate the Nag.”

Urion looks at me with those blue eyes. They flow down and then back up my body, and my skin tingles. My throat goes dry with that familiar hunger springing back to life. “We hate all humans, Nova.”

I stop tingling.

I don’t know what I was expecting from him. We’ve never talked about humans, and we certainly have never discussed whether he actually hates them like the Sprites that overthrew my father. But I had assumed that the Sprites protecting me, a half-blood, would be more accepting. Had learned to accept my humanity.

“No.” I say. I am not letting him get out of this. “No. *You* hate humans. Not ‘*we*.’ *You*. You hate them because they are inferior. Weak. Insignificant. Don’t you?” My voice is getting increasingly angry with every word, but I need him to tell me now that he hates, will always hate, a part of me. Half of me.

Urion sighs. “Nova, what is this?” I know, in any other setting, he would have reached out to pull me in by now, but we’re not in any other setting. And something about the fact that he doesn’t makes this situation even worse.

“Tell me *why*. *Why* do you hate them? *Why* do you hate *us*?” I cross my arms in an attempt to warm myself, comfort myself, and make myself look stronger all at once. I don’t think it works for any of those.

Urion looks away, into the dark forest, still giving me nothing. I feel my heart sinking when he finally says, “It’s like you said, Nova. They do nothing for us.”

I have no idea what he means by ‘us;’ if I’m even included in that. He didn’t object when I included myself in the human category.

I do not know why my father could see humans differently than all other Sprites. I do not know why I am here.

“Will you ever be able to see me as your equal, Urion?” Suddenly I am too tired to argue with him anymore.

Urion leans back against a tree and doesn’t meet my gaze. “You are the heir to the Keiser throne.” He points out.

“You know what I mean.”

He sighs, staring at the ground. “You cannot change what you are, Nova.”

Short answer: No.

My eyes are blurry with tears, my throat is closing up, and my chest is tight with pain as I take a step back. Away from him. He sighs again, probably now trying to find something to say to make me understand. Make *me* understand.

As if *my* way of thinking is the one that is flawed.

I feel it now. Zeheb's words, coming around full circle, preparing to crush me, and I know this is only the beginning.

I am naïve. I was naïve in my assumption, my idiotic belief that I could change their minds. I cannot even convince Urion, the Sprite that I gave myself to, the Sprite that I may have been falling for, the Sprite that I thought had been falling for *me*, to change his mind. I am the Reign heir to the throne, but I am half human. They will never respect me. They will never accept me.

So why am I *here*?

Chapter 5

Only one day has gone by and I have already lost all desire to be on this journey any longer. I can't look at him. I can barely look at the rest of them, but I can't look at him.

Soirus' purpose on this planet, I decide the next morning, is to make sure my life can always get worse. And does.

I am jerked awake by a rough hand, and as I squint to clear and adjust my vision, I realize that I don't actually have to do much adjusting—it's still pitch black outside.

"What the—" I swat at the arm that so rudely tore me from my slumber, trying to disappear back against the wall of the carriage so I can go back to sleep.

"Get up." Soirus barks at me. "We're going for a run."

Excuse m—a *run*? At some godforsaken hour when the *sun* hasn't even decided to get up yet?

How about no.

"Go by yourself!" I snap, tugging my blanket over my head.

He takes the liberty of snatching my only source of warmth and throwing it across the campground.

He is *so* lucky I am so tired, or else he would not have eyes anymore. *So* lucky.

“Now.” Is his only reply. He moves aside so that I can climb out of the carriage.

Obviously, he has lost his damn mind. I would tell him to go find it on a run with himself, but all of this interaction and anger has left me wide awake and without the ability to get back to sleep.

“You are insane.” I grumble under my breath as I clamber out of the carriage and slam the door behind me. I have not a care in the world that the others are still sleeping, except for Xander, who has taken over watch duty.

I work my fingers through my hair and tie it back with a band before glaring at Soirus and waiting for him to lead the way.

“You will want shoes.” He tells me, looking pointedly at my feet.

I snicker. “I think I can make it.” I say stubbornly.

Soirus shrugs. “As you please.”

What I *please* is to be *asleep*, but we can’t all have what we please, as I have learned time and time again.

He sets off along the side of the road and I follow, the brisk air piercing my skin and dragging me farther from the comfortable state I was in only minutes before.

All of this quiet exercise would kill me if my mind wasn’t so busy spinning its golden wheels.

The Sterkte—and probably all of the Aanleg, as well—all hate me just as much as the rest of the Sprites. A painful jolt runs through me and I shove it away. Urion will not distract me right now.

If they all hate me so much, why are they trying to put me on the throne? Is Mavern so awful to them that he must be overthrown? From what I have heard, that is not the Sprite opinion of the new Kaiser. The human opinion is probably just so, though I have no idea if the conditions humans are being subjected to were that horrible even when my family ruled the kingdom. I have no idea if the human conditions are even as horrible as the little town we stopped in anywhere else. I have no idea about anything.

Why wouldn’t Zeheb inform me of any of this? This is all essential information to a ruler! I know nothing about my own kingdom! I am trying desperately to control my breathing so I don’t lose my breath on this run but my frustration is not helping my case.

Soirus notices.

“You’re slowing.” He warns me. “I told you to wear shoes.”

My glare could melt stone. He is completely unaffected by it. He keeps his gaze ahead.

So I study him. I realize that I have never seen him with a Sterkte sword until now. The bright gold shines, contrasting starkly against the rest of him. He is so naturally dark—his demeanor, that is—with his cropped, black hair, his dark brown eyes, his daily black tunic and pants. If I dig deep down inside of myself and bring out my true, honest thoughts, I can admit that Soirus is quite attractive. More so than the others we are with. Except Urion. But I am bias.

Soirus is lean, as expected. He is just shorter than Urion, and he has a long face with a sharp jawline. Whereas Urion’s jaw took on a square shape, Soirus’ face is more of an oval. He has a sharp, long nose and thick, dark eyebrows framing his features, and his lips...I feel odd thinking this, but they are full and probably the softest feature he has.

I never think about it, but Soirus isn’t actually very old. I finally got Zeheb to give me a hint at his age, and from that I calculated that Soirus must be about a hundred and forty years of age, now. Seeing how he has about a hundred and sixty years left, he will still die after me. Lovely. He will forever be more attractive than me.

I can’t do this anymore.

“Tell me,” I pant, “that we...are...halfway...done!” I would give my left leg to be halfway done.

“If you can’t run at a steady pace for this long, there is no way you will pass the physical placement exam.” He sounds like he has been walking this whole time! What the hell?!

“Speaking of...the Institute...” I begin. I reach out and snag his arm, stopping us both, though I know I only stopped him because he let me. There’s a first. “Why the hell,” I pant, lifting my arms behind my head and staring up at the increasingly orange morning sky. My breathing is not calming but I need to ask this question before he keeps going. “do you care...if some half-blood...gets into the Institute?” I take a few more breaths before adding, “I know you hate everything about half of what I am, don’t try to deny it.” I give him a look that says he cannot argue with me on this. “You will never accept me. So why are you trying to put me on that throne? Why are you trying to get me into the best Institute in the kingdom? Am I just some kind of pawn for you?” My damp hair is sticking to the sides of my face, and I sweep it behind my ears impatiently.

Soirus stands there, saying nothing.

They never have anything to say. I roll my eyes. “Well, you know what? While you think about what lie to throw at me next, Soirus, I’ll just head back to camp and surround myself with all of the other Sprites that pretend to value my life.” I say with no small amount of disdain. I turn to begin the long, treacherous jog back.

“Nova.” Soirus stops me, his voice, for once, not sounding at all harsh. I stop moving but don’t turn around. I’m too mad at them all to turn around. “I will not lie to you.”

I shake my head at this but say nothing.

“You are correct. Your life is not what is valuable about you.” I feel so much better. “Your title is. You have the rightful claim to the throne, Nova. Once you take it, once you are Kaiser...Nova, you will need an heir.”

I had always wanted the honest truth. But this...I have nothing to say to this.

“You are the key to the kingdom, Nova. The people, the *Sprites*, may not accept you as a half-blood, but they will accept whoever is by your side, and they will learn to accept your heir, because it is your family’s rightful place. Your human blood will no longer matter. Your heir will be a full-blooded Sprite.”

What if I don’t marry a Sprite? I think stubbornly. But instead of speaking my mind, I do something even more satisfying.

The sun breaks through the trees as I spin around, storm over to Soirus, and slap him hard across his face.

He knows how much this hurts. I know he can read it in my eyes. So he lets me slap him without blocking me. I glare intensely into his eyes.

“I may be half human, half *Nag*, but you had better get one thing straight *right now*. I *will* take the throne, and I *will* do it without *anyone* next to me. So you had better tell your boys to start changing their attitudes because,” I straighten and make sure I have his full attention. “I am the Reign heir. And I *will* be their Keiser, whether they are on my side or not.”

Soirus stares into my golden eyes and I hold his gaze confidently. Then, taking me completely by surprise, he smiles and says, “Okay.”



In the light of day, everything changes. I had no idea the road we are traveling on is so beautiful. No thanks to Soirus’ ridiculous before-dawn run.

The dawn brings a rainbow of colors to the beautiful sky, and as the moon disappears, chirping and chattering from the birds grows louder and louder.

There is nothing as far as I can see, just trees and tall, green and yellow grass. It is peaceful like the ocean, but in a different way. I could stay here forever.

Soirus was right about the shoes. I’ll never admit it to him, though. I should have known when he didn’t object to my rejection to the shoes that I would need shoes, but I am always trying to defy him in any way I can. I know he purposely ran in the grass so that my feet would survive, but mostly so that it would be harder to get through, so any thoughtfulness oh his part is cancelled way out by his plan to run in the grass anyways.

When we finally make it back to the carriage, everyone is ready to head off. Thorn hands us both a water pail and a small breakfast of an egg between two halves of a biscuit, and I accept both gratefully. As I climb into the carriage, I act like I don’t notice that Urion is staring at me.

You will need an heir. That was probably why Urion has been so willing to overlook my huge “fault” and be with me these past two years. And here I was thinking it was my personality.

As we move along, I decide I am too disgustingly sweaty to sit like this for hours. I turn towards Beni. “Beni. I need a bath. Desperately.” I say through the window.

He jerks his head forward. “Soirus says there’s river up ahead where we can stop.”

Soirus says, does he?

I open the door and grab a hold of it and the inside of the carriage so I don’t go toppling to the ground to be trampled by Fenley’s horse.

“Dearest Soirus.” I say. Soirus clenches his jaw in irritation. “How far away is this so-called ‘river,’ might I ask?”

“Close enough.”

“Well I did not see any signs of water in the probably four hundred miles you dragged me along mere hours ago.”

“Which only proves how uneducated you are.” Oh, more insults? And here I thought we were making some progress after this morning.

“Well *maybe* I wouldn’t be so *uneducated* if *someone* had let me out of that DAMN PRISON once in a blood moon!” My temper flares and I can feel the newfound sunlight beating down on me.

“That was not my decision to make.”

“No. I guess it wasn’t, now, was it? You had no say at all.” I duck back into the carriage and slam the door. One of these days the window is going to break from all of this slamming that I am doing. But who can blame me?

I decide, after what I am sure is a good two hours of riding, that Soirus is delusional. I’m planning ways to kill him in my head while staring out the window struggling to see past Beni’s horse when I spot something in the distance.

And they think I’ll let them just pass this by?

The door is open again and it takes complete concentration on my part to nimbly swing myself up and over Beni’s horse onto the gravel road. I seriously hope Soirus saw that and notes how well he has taught me to handle myself in flight.

“Nova!” Beni calls, pulling back on his reins so his speckled gray stallion halts. Before I can take a step, Beni and Fenley are next to me, grabbing my arms.

“Don’t tell me we’re not *going*.” I say, pointing through the field to the town that rests there. I can smell the freshly baked bread already.

“Nova, get—” Soirus begins, but I don’t let him finish.

“Last I checked,” I say, shooting him a look. “*I’m* the one who is actually in charge.” I slowly look around to all the other Sterkte, daring them to disagree. Try me. “So *I* get to decide if we go into town.” I grab the saddle of Beni’s beautiful horse and swing myself up before he can stop me.

“Nova.” Soirus tries. I don’t listen.

Beni grabs the reins near the horse’s muzzle. I give him a wicked smile. “I don’t think you really want to be on my bad side, Beni.” He swallows but keeps a hold of the reins. I sigh. “I swear I am only going into town. Nothing is stopping you from following me.” I try to reassure him. He’s still not having it. Now I’m starting to lose my willpower. “Beni.” He stiffens, hearing my tone.

“Beni, just let go.” Soirus saves his Sterkte from ultimate doom. I grin as Beni releases his horse.

The second he is out of my way, I kick the horse into a canter. The stallion is strong—I can feel it under my legs, in the reins—and he can feel my enthusiasm. The wind whips against my face as we race across the meadow towards town. I know that if I want to get a feel for the townspeople without them acting weird, I need to make it there before the Sterkte men do. My sweatiness forgotten, I speed towards the brown buildings.

My triumph and reaching the town with so much time to spare before the Sterkte arrive is short lived.

I pull the stallion to a halt as I survey the town.

It is empty. There is no one in the streets, no one inside the buildings, from what I can see. Stray dogs and cats skitter in and out of crevices in the old, rusty buildings that are beginning to fall apart from weathering. I dismount and lead the horse over to a shop with faded letters spelling out *DARCY’S DINER AND INN*. I leave the stallion by the porch as I climb the steps and reach for the door, my heart pounding loudly in my chest.

The others arrive then, and Urion tries to grab me before I can look inside, but he doesn’t. And I see.

Rats. Hundreds and hundreds of rats. They chirp and squeak and scurry around the inside of what was probably a very quaint diner not very long ago. Now the bright red carpet has faded, the chairs to the tables are strewn about, and dust has collected on everything.

And a body lies in the middle of the floor, being devoured by rats.

I can’t hear anything but my heart. It is pounding in my chest, in my ears, in my hands. All I can see is that body as Urion tries to pull me back, away from the stench and the horrors of it all. I let him take me outside but then I shove him off of me and move to the next store. A barber shop. The front window has been smashed so I do not have to go inside to see what awaits me.

More bodies. These ones are being eaten as well, by rats and dogs. There are three, two large men and...

And a small one. A small corpse, already clear of all skin, all muscle, everything. Just bones, staring up at the ceiling.

My breakfast comes back up through my throat before I can even try to stop it. I grip the window frame even though I can feel the glass slicing through my skin to my half human blood.

I am on my knees now, dry heaving, my eyes too watery for me to see anything but blurry colors. I gasp for air, and all I can think to myself is, *Why do I smell bread?*

Why do I smell fresh-baked bread? I wipe my mouth on my sleeve and look up, searching for the source. The bakery. Where is the bakery? I stand up and move out onto the street so I can better view the store fronts.

“Nova, stop.” Urion pleads. I am shaking and sweaty and reeking, but I need to find it.

“Nova, we need to keep moving.” Soirus says, sounding a bit sick himself. They’re all slowly beginning to block me in, or maybe just block the gruesome sight out.

“There is someone here,” I say desperately. “There is still someone here.”

“What are you talking about?” Soirus asks, carefully moving closer.

“The bread. There is...don’t you smell it? Someone is making bread!” I explain, spinning in circles to find the bakery again.

There. There it is!

It’s quite amazing how, at the absolute best times, everything I have learned comes rushing back and I can become exactly what Soirus has tried to make me all these years. As he makes to grab me, along with Xander and Urion, I duck and slam my palm into Xander’s forearm while sweeping my foot out to catch Soirus’ leg. He goes down and Xander stumbles back, and Urion is far enough away that I can bolt to the bakery without him snagging my shirt. Soirus curses, but I am too focused to be proud of myself.

I reach the bakery and swing the door open. The smell of bread is overpowering, and after just puking out my guts, is not really appealing.

I slowly make my way through the bakery, trying to ignore the bodies scattered around, and go through the swinging door to the kitchen.

The kitchen is dark and stuffy and cramped, and there are so many loaves of bread sitting on the counter, waiting to be eaten, but after checking three times, I find that none of the ovens are on.

“Nova, no one is here. Let’s go. Please.” Urion says at the entrance.

“I smell—”

“There is no bread, Nova! No one is *here*.” He moves to grab me again. Because that worked out so well before.

I take a step back and hear a squeak.

Urion is there in seconds, shoving me behind him and crouching on the floor to protect me from whatever threat hides in the darkness.

But he stays crouched there, staring, for a good five seconds before I finally decide that there is no threat. If anything, *he's* the threat.

He stands then, and turns to me, his expression dark. “Go outside.” He says in a deep voice.

I look at him like he's crazy. “Uh, *no*?” I make to crouch down but he grabs my arms and uses his hips to pin me against the counter behind me. I gasp, and his dark blue eyes give me a look that tells me he will not take no for an answer.

Well, I'm bad at following orders. “Get off me, Urion. Tell me what it is.”

“We can't do anything.” Is all he says.

“I am not a *child*, Urion. Tell me!” I wish I could hit him, but he's too strong. Some stupid part of me misses his strength, and his touch.

“No. You need to leave.” If he thinks I will be going anywhere at his point, he obviously did not get to know me in the least in the past two years. I try to convey this message through my stare. He stares right back, but I can see that I he does know me, and he knows he's stuck.

He continues to watch me for a few more seconds before releasing my arms. When he doesn't step away, I push him and crouch on the ground, fear gripping my chest but looking anyway.

My eyes cut through the darkness, and I first see little feet, then little legs, and then a little head with a nose and a mouth and two huge blue eyes peering out at me in undisguised fear.

It's a young boy. He can't be much older than three.

“Hey,” I say in, seriously, the friendliest tone I have ever heard from anyone. Though that's not saying much with where I've lived my whole life. “Hey, it's okay. We're not going to hurt you.” I try to get him to stop looking at me like I'm a monster, though I bet he thinks I must be if I am associated with the Sterkte. “It's alright.” I repeat, about to wonder what Urion meant when he said we can't do anything until I notice how pale he is. A whole new type of fear grips my heart. “Are you hurt? Did someone hurt you?” I ask the little boy.

His tiny head moves up and down, and I swallow.

“Can I help you? Will you let me help you, please? I won't let anyone hurt you. I promise.” I tell him as I hear the others gathering in the kitchen to see what is taking us so long.

“I won’t let them hurt you.” I say, my voice sounding so sure but my head reminding me of what Urion said.

I hold out my hand to the child, and he slowly starts to reach for it, but then pulls away with a cry of pain. I have to bite the inside of my lip hard so that I don’t start crying. I can’t start crying. Not right now.

“Okay, okay, I’ll get you. Don’t move, it’s okay. I’ll get you. It’s okay.” I say, trying to sooth him as I reach under the counter and try to pull him out as gently as possible. He still cries out, and it takes everything in me to keep lifting him out.

Finally, he is curled in my arms weeping as I sit on the dusty floor, and I hold him tightly as Urion and Soirus crouch down next to me to look at the wound that pierces through the middle of his chest. I continue telling the boy that he is okay, I won’t let them hurt him, he’ll be okay, but I can see the wound, and I know without a doubt that I am lying. I can’t look at Urion, because I know he doesn’t believe there is anything we can do, so I stare at Soirus. I watch as Soirus leans in, as his nostrils flare and his eyes lose something, something that the boy needs, something that I need. Then Soirus looks up at me, and I know it’s over. Tear are streaming down my face as I clutch the little boy, but I my voice is steady.

“You’ll be okay. I promise, you’ll be okay. What’s your name? Can you tell me your name?” I say, looking at the top of his tiny head, his hair dark with dust and dirt. I understand now that he is the bread. He is what I smelled.

“My...my name is William.” He says in his tiny voice, a voice still carrying a baby lisp, a voice so innocent.

“William. William, I am Nova. I’m Nova, and I’ll keep you safe, okay?” He nods against my chest and I feel my heart breaking. “I won’t let anybody else hurt you, okay? I promise. You’ll be okay, William, I promise. I promise.” I have to refrain from rocking because I don’t want to cause him more pain.

I can’t watch. I hold him, and tell him everything will be alright, but when Soirus nods at Urion and retreats, I have to look at the ceiling. I have to look at the ceiling and think about the fluffy white clouds, the brightness of the sun, all the stars that are hiding behind the blue sky.

And when I hear William gasp for a breath one last time as Urion slits his throat, I have to imagine that there will now be one more star waiting to be seen tonight.

When Urion touches my shoulder, I can't hold myself together any longer. I clutch William's small body to my chest and sob. My chest heaves and my eyes overflow and my heart aches and I can't stop. I can't do anything. I can *never* do anything.

Why can't I save my people? Why am I so weak? I think in despair, my chest caving in.

Urion stays, though I wish he'd just go. He killed him, and I know it was the right thing, but I also know that he will never understand how much it hurts that *he killed him*, because I know that he does not care that a life was just lost. William was a human. So he does not care.

I can't move, and I think after a short while, Urion realizes this, so he lifts me and William's body into his arms and carries me outside. There is blood seeping through my shirt from William's neck and chest now, but I don't care.

Urion keeps walking, past the horses, past the carriage, towards the field that I so enthusiastically ran through twenty minutes ago, and he gently sets me down.

He looks at me as Xander comes to my other side and kneels down next to me. "Nova." I look at Xander, still sobbing, as he says, "Can we teach you how to bury the dead?" He asks quietly.

My sobs slowly subside as I stare into his gray eyes. A gratefulness like no other that I have ever felt runs through my veins as I nod slowly. "Yes." I whisper. He nods to me and then looks at Urion, and together they move about ten feet further into the field. Beni and Thorn soon follow, and Soirus, Fenley, and Grant join as well. Somehow, as they all form a circle, a hole appears in the ground between them, and Soirus leaves to come towards me.

"I will place him in, and then we will say the chant before covering him. Alright?" He says slowly.

I nod, not having any idea what chant he means but not being able to say anything else right now. Soirus tenderly takes William's body from me and stands, making sure that I am following before he walks inside the circle and carefully places William's body in the ground. I try to breathe normally, and the tears are still coming, but the sobs have subsided for now. I stay on the circumference of the circle next to Grant as Soirus comes back to stand next to me.

As he takes his place, I feel the connection come alive in the soles of my feet, and, in sync, all seven of the Sterkte unsheathe their swords and point them at William's tiny grave.

Then the chant begins.

"Met krag, wysheid, en liefde, die moedige kan vind die ewige lewe in die sterre." *With power, wisdom, and love, may the courageous find eternal life in the stars.* They chant, their voices strong and like gold, and their swords begin to glow brighter and brighter until there is a flash, and the hole where William lay vanishes.

And then the final lines: “Long live the House of Reign. Long live the Kaiser.”



No one talks again until dinner is finished that night. I sit leaning against a tree, throwing twigs at the fire and staring into the burning flames. The stars are out, but I am waiting, waiting until it is later and I can clearly see them all.

Soirus was right. The river was about a half hour up the road. I bathed first, scrubbing at the bloodstains on my shirt before giving up and throwing it in the river. Luckily, I have underthings that cover my chest as well, so I did not have to go ask Soirus for one of my other shirts that had been packed away half-naked.

It seems that I can never do something fully; I can only strive for halves. It’s in my blood, one could say.

Thinking about being any kind of naked only leads me to thinking about Urion, so I decide that now is the time for me to wander away to stargaze.

I throw the last of my sticks in the fire and prepare to stand when Soirus crouches next to me. I don’t look at him because with him next to me like this, I can clearly remember him nodding at Urion to slit William’s throat.

But it seems that, now, Soirus knows how to get my attention.

“Your power is getting stronger.” He mutters. I don’t turn my head, but my eyes move to his face. He looks at me under long lashes solemnly. “You could smell his need, Nova.”

Now I look away again, clenching my fists at my sides. My newly bandaged hand stings.

“I believe...I believe that as you get closer to the Triad, your powers grow. Or at least reveal themselves. I can’t believe I never thought of it before. Your father was very particular about—”

“Did my father create this?” I whisper, staring into the distance but not really seeing.

“Nova—”

“Who killed those people, Soirus?” My voice is strong and steady and broken. I know exactly who killed those people, and Soirus knows I know.

“Mavern’s rule...it has not changed anything for the better, Nova.” Soirus says, and I bow my head in shame and sorrow. “But your father’s would have.”

I close my eyes, soaking in his words, replaying them over and over in my head. “But he made the mistake of falling in love with a human.” I open my eyes again and look at Soirus, waiting for him to agree.

There is a glint in his eye that catches me off guard. “I don’t think he would call it a mistake.” He says.

I stare at Soirus. There is more to what he is saying.... “So what would he call it?”

The corner of Soirus’ mouth tilts up slightly, like I am finally asking the right questions. “Fate.”



Mass murder? So what! Let’s still go for a jog, Nova!

This Sterkte is insane.

Again he wakes me in the depths of the night, and again he forces me up for the apparently *daily* jog. *And* he has the nerve to tell me that I will want shoes.

“Shut up.” I snarl, snatching up the sturdy boots someone packed for me. “Jackass.” I mutter.

Soirus just starts on his merry way down the road. I haven’t even gotten the first boot on!

If I trip on these stupid laces because I was too busy trying to keep up with your insanity, I will drop-kick you. I promise silently.

The only positive side to a jog this early is that I am so angry at Soirus the whole time that I don’t think about William.

What I *do* think about is why I always prefer to go barefoot. The boots someone—probably Zeheb—packed for me are like hundred-pound weights on my feet. I am more tired by the halfway point of our jog today than I was by the end of our jog yesterday!

“You will have to wear shoes in the Institute.” Soirus tells me as we turn to head back. “I was too lenient with you in the Hallows.” He scorns himself.

If the training he was putting me through in the Hallows is what is considered *lenient*, then I am humble.

Exactly: No.

“Tell me about Mavern.” I wheeze, pushing aside his complete wrongness for the time being.

“Didn’t Zeheb teach you *anything*?” Wow. For once the insult is not directed at me.

“Yes. Everything that does *not* have to do with the current Kaiser, problems in the kingdom, or my family.” I say. Soirus gives me a look of confusion, unsure whether I am telling the truth or not.

Would I lie to you, Soirus? I consider asking, but then I remember Urion. *Never mind.*

“Mavern,” Soirus begins, “is as powerful as any Kaiser. He does not possess the same amount of power as the Reigns but he does possess the power of knowledge, and that is just as

useful. He studied at the Institute of Sterkte and excelled in all three careers. Your grandfather chose him as an Aanleg ten years before the overthrow.” Soirus recalls.

At the mention of my grandfather, I glance at Soirus. “My grandfather?” The words are foreign to me—no one has ever talked about my grandfather directly. Only my family, the Reigns.

“Your grandfather was a very wise leader. He had been keeping the peace between the Nag, the Lig, and Sprites for a couple centuries. He was not being what the Nag considered fair to the humans, no, but he was doing enough to keep a rebellion from happening.”

Yes. So wise. I think sarcastically. I hate that I am disappointed to learn these things about my grandfather, but I am slowly gaining some insight on the sufferings of *all* of my people.

“Mavern supported your grandfather wholeheartedly, but it was obvious that he believed the humans should not be given any consideration, and ties with the Nag and the Lig should be severed completely. He and your father had completely opposite opinions, and your father being next in line for the throne was always a problem to Mavern. It became an even bigger problem when your father married a Nag woman, and your grandfather grew gravely ill, the kind of sickness not even his own power could save him from.” Soirus hesitates now, glancing at me.

“What?” I say, growing excited. “Tell me, Soirus!”

He sighs. I don’t know how he can waste such precious air on this ridiculous jog but he does. “There is an old tale that is whispered behind backs that the Nag...the Nag have special powers that apply to...that apply to healing. Some even believe that your mother may have been able to heal the sick Kaiser if she had wanted to. Others say that she made him sick in the first place.”

I stare straight ahead, the carriage coming into view and never looking so beautiful before now.

“Do you think they are true? The rumors?” I ask softly.

Soirus thinks for a second. “No. Humans have never had powers before. The Nag are no different.”

I say nothing at this, because now he just sounds like Urion. The Nag, humans, the Lig—they’re all the same to the Sprites. They don’t see what I am starting to see.

I need to go to the Nag.



The Triad found its name in the three values of the Sprite kingdom. Power. Intellect. Love. The sign of the House of Reign, the Trinity Knot, encompasses the three values, the left point representing power, the right intellect, and the top representing love. I only know this because I found a text book explaining this once in Zeheb’s library. Zeheb himself failed to mention it, unsurprisingly, to me.

So it is only fitting that the palace where the royals make their living is called the Triad, and the Triad lies in the absolute center of Saam.

Two of the three careers taught in the Reign Institute were direct products of these values. The Sterkte—meaning strength—to encompass the power of the Reign household, and the Wyshied—meaning wisdom—to encompass intellect.

All of this information I figured out for myself, and I am quite proud of this accomplishment. For a second, I even wonder if my parents would be proud of me, too.

It's hard, not having parents to actually think about. I never knew either of them; my father died before I was born, my mother probably right after. Zeheb did tell me that; how she had been on the run, so had decided the best thing to do would be to separate us. She gave birth to me and I was immediately swept deep into human territory to hide in the Hallows, my group of Aanleg and Sterkte protectors and Zeheb by my side.

Which is how I grew up with only their company. The closest thing I had to a mother was the human nurse that fed and nurtured me until I was six, Valerie, before, one day, she, too, disappeared from my life, and I was left with only my Sterkte guards and Zeheb to call family.

Hell no. I'll take no family over that *any* day. Plus, seeing Urion as family would have completely ruined any possibility for an attraction. Though that can be argued to have been a good thing in the long run, with how well everything has turned out.

Great. Now I'm thinking about him, and my heart is pulling me in two different directions. I seriously need to get out of this stupid caravan. Enough is enough.

I open the right side door and peer outside. We have been underneath a canopy of trees for some time now, as the path is cutting straight through a stretch of forest. The sun shines through the cracks of the leaves, and if I wasn't blinded by it on random occasions, I would lie on top of the carriage and just watch the leaves rustle in the wind. But, I cannot, so instead I am stuck maneuvering my way to the seat next to Soirus.

He's delighted.

"Get inside, Nova." He says flatly.

"I'm bored. And it's so dark in there. You can go. I'll manage the horses." I smile brightly.

"That may be the stupidest thing you have ever said to me, Nova." He says. I roll my eyes. He motions to Beni. "Get her inside." He orders.

I shoot Beni a glare that could turn him to stone. "Touch me and I'll kick you off your horse." I growl. I turn back to Soirus. "I just watched you kill a child. If I keep sitting in that dreary carriage, he is all I'm going to think about and I will resent you that many days longer." I inform him. I am not lying. My mind will always eventually drift back to William, and just thinking his name breaks me all over again. I can't do it.

Soirus mutters something under his breath and grunts. I'll take that as consent. I settle in on the bench, my eyes wandering all over the forest, my mind finding patterns and wildlife and colors in everything. Being out here is so much better. I don't know why it took me three days to finally do it.

I adjust my position to sit with my arms folded on top of the caravan as I look back towards Fenley and Grant. I try to keep a straight face as both Sterkte try to figure out what to do with their eyes.

I break into a smile. "How old are you two, anyways? I know everyone else...except Thorn. I'll have to ask him. You're not older than Soirus, are you? That'd be embarrassing." I sneer at the thought.

Grant sits up taller in his saddle, and my smile widens. Fenley clutches his reins. I almost start thinking that neither of them is going to answer me, but then Grant speaks up. I've always known Fenley is kind of skittish anyway. It's a miracle he passed the final Sterkte exam. "I am ninety-eight now." He answers.

Ninety-eight. That means he followed my mother out of the Sprite territories at only seventy-one. I'll admit, I'm impressed. He has a strong mind, for sure.

I don't try to cover up my opinion of this, and he smirks a little. So I say, "So you're like the baby then, huh, Grant?" Fenley's eyes widen and Beni coughs to my left. I hear Urion sniggering at this on my right.

Grant, on the other hand, is openly glaring at me. Like I said, no respect. Tsk, tsk.

"You're one to talk, might I point out." He retorts.

The intended affront flies right over my shoulders. I have taken a lot worse. Instead, I push myself to my knees and lean forward over my arms on the top of the caravan, grinning. "Do you have any idea who you're talking to?" I remind him lightly.

Grant's chin raises as he says nothing. My eyes sparkle with the possibility to have a lot of fun. And to get on Urion's nerves. Two birds with one stone. Perfect.

In a swift second I'm balancing on top of the carriage. Soirus sits up straight on the bench. "Nova!"

I wave him off without a glance, my eyes focused on Grant. "Calm down, Soirus, jeez. Don't you trust your training at *all*?"

"It's the one I'm *training* that I don't trust." Soirus grumbles. Still, he turns back around so he can drive the carriage. I can hardly believe it.

Grant is now looking slightly nervous. I love this. I haven't had this much fun in ages. Well, since Urion's true colors were revealed. Which seems like ages ago. So ages.

I move into a crouch, feeling like a predator stalking its prey. “I may be the youngest one here,” I admit, “but I am probably about as *mature*,” I give him a look so he knows what I mean, “as the lot of you. Maybe more so.” I shrug. *Except for Urion*, my mind corrects me.

Let’s not go there.

Grant’s ears are turning red, just visible under his shaggy blond hair. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Urion’s tense back, and I know my plan is working beautifully.

They all underestimate me way too much. But I think I prefer it that way.

I settle myself on the back edge of the carriage, where the slope of the ceiling flattens for about a foot before falling off. My legs swing jovially over the side and I lean back on my palms, my eyes sliding over to Fenley.

Well, meaning to slide over to Fenley. But what I see in between the two Sterkte keeps me from actually looking at him.

It is a bird. Probably one of the few birds that I could recognize anywhere, because it is the symbol for the Wyshied. An owl.

The owl swoops lazily near the trail probably twenty feet behind us, its round, black eyes curiously watching me. It is a beautiful mix between ten different shades of brown, and it is huge. Magnificent.

I stare in complete wonderment as Grant and Fenley immediately go on high alert and look to see what is so entrancing. They see the bird and their shoulders slouch once more. Fenley flicks a hand in its direction to shoo it away.

“No,” I tell him, holding out a hand to get him to stop. “Don’t.” I am completely mesmerized by the creature. There is something so elegant, so hypnotizing, about the way it sways about. Like it is trying to tell me something.

Grant and Fenley are eyeing me cautiously. They probably think I have lost all common sense.

But as the owl finally disappears with a tilt of its glorious wings towards the trees, I stare at the space where I last saw it, trying to understand what I just witnessed.



We don’t pass any towns today. I am relieved, after what the last one brought, but I am also disappointed that I cannot talk to more people and find out how the humans are faring. It keeps me restless all through dinner.

I sit awake longer than usual, staring at the stars, trying to decide which one I think is William. Everyone has fallen asleep already—I can tell by the heavy breathing—except for Urion. It is his shift for the time being.

I'm still lying in about ten feet from the camp when I hear soft footsteps approaching. I sit up and squint through the darkness as Urion settles down next to me.

My heart is racing, but we don't say anything for a while. The last time we touched was when he had set me down just outside of the small, massacred town. The last time we'd talked he had been pressing me against the counter.

I feel a huge amount of guilt when I remember how, even there, I had wanted him to touch me. I force myself back to the present.

"You have managed to make me hate Grant in a matter of minutes." He finally confesses. He is looking at my face, following my expressions.

Well, he *would* be following my expressions if I was expressing anything.

I keep my eyes on the grass in front of me, running my hands through it thoughtlessly. "Do you now hate him as much as you hate me?" I say casually.

Urion leans towards me slightly. "I don't hate you, Nova. I can't hate you."

I gradually meet his gaze. "My bad. You hate *half* of me." I correct myself bitterly.

Urion sighs irritably. "Nova, I don't get to choose what I end up liking or disliking about you."

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" I exclaim, trying not to be too loud in case I wake one of the others. Their hearing is already amazing as it is.

"What I mean is—" He begins, but I don't feel like waiting for the explanation.

"Did you only get with me because of my claim?" I blurt, needing to know.

Urion is so startled that he sits back. Then he laughs as quietly as he can. "Are you kidding me? Nova, maybe I would have if I thought we'd last at all long enough, but seeing how I *didn't*, no. I was with you because I am, regrettably, attracted to you and, to my good fortune, you felt the same." He states genuinely, amusement twinkling in those bright blue eyes as he shakes his head in amazement. "Alright?"

I look in those eyes for a while longer, considering. I would disagree, except he is right. There is no logical reason that two people with our personalities should still be hanging on. We are both headstrong and like to be in control, and we both think very highly of ourselves. It should be a bad combination.

But this truth doesn't seem so bad right now.

So I say, "Alright." And I lean forward and kiss him.

Chapter 7

I recognize it is unhealthy, falling back to Urion even with everything that I know about him and the way he thinks of me. But it has been too long. That terrible hole inside of my soul has been completely exposed, and without him, his taste and his smell and his touch, I would be completely gone. After everything I have learned and experienced in the past *three days*—and to think I still have eleven more to go before this adventure is over—if I don't have a fix to make me forget it all, I will not make it to the other side.

Urion is my fix.

If I ever want to be able to survive in the Institute, though, I will have to find a new one. Soon.

But soon is not now, and right now, my fix is much too satisfying to give up just yet.

We can't be as physically active as in the Hallows because privacy out here is seriously lacking, but that's okay. We just come up with ways to make up for it. When I finally wander to my carriage to snuggle into a peaceful sleep, I swear I am out before my head even hits my makeshift pillow of tunics.

And I swear that only two seconds go by before Soirus is shaking me awake.

"Nooooo!" I moan, burying my face in the tunics.

"Let's go, Nova." Is his response. He is seriously the most heartless man I have ever had the indecency to be exposed to.

"Take Grant!" I suggest.

"*Grant* has already made it through the Institute, Nova." He says incredulously. "Let's go."

I'll never stop trying, believe me.

The run today is even harder to bear than yesterday. Not only do I get to lug around the boots of stone, but instead of being a cool, brisk night as usual, the temperature and the humidity have both decided to skyrocket so that I feel like I am running—*unnecessarily*—through a sauna. Even Soirus breaks a sweat in this weather, and I have never seen him precipitate.

There is minimal talking today, basically every word coming out of my mouth going into one of his ears and exiting the other. I would mind if I at all cared about him interacting with me, but I don't, so I don't.

When we get back to the camp, Urion hands us our water jugs and honey and apple biscuits and inclines his head to the other side of the cart, where we can hear talking. We make our way around, curious as to what is going on.

A human woman stands there, her old, brown, crinkly skin sagging down towards the ground, and her back hunched from years of work and life. I would guess she is about eighty – five years old (still younger than all of the Sterkte present, might I add). Her nimble fingers float around in front of her while she talks to the Sterkte, who seem entirely disgusted by her but have, oddly enough, not yet told her to get lost.

“What’s going on?” I ask loudly before Soirus can say anything. Everyone turns to look at me, and the woman’s whole demeanor seems to brighten, stripping her of five years at least. Maybe she’s only eighty.

“Oh, dearest!” She exclaims, moving to hurry towards me.

Bad idea.

At once, all seven of the Sterkte have surrounded me, hands ready to pull out their swords.

I shove through them, groaning and scowling at them, so that I can see the woman again.

She cackles at the sight. “Oh, any woman would love to be you *your* shoes right now, dearest!” She cackles again.

I highly doubt that, but whatever.

As if she read my mind, she gives me a hard look. “Oh, dearest, you have no idea what they’d give. Listen to me well, white-haired one.” She points a long, creaky finger at me and lowers her voice. “Only the owl can see true; to tame the fire, you must let it guide you. That is the only way you will succeed, Lady Trinity.” She advises me, her deep eyes blackening as she scans the horizon. My blood has run cold, and I’m sure I am not breathing. The elderly woman clucks her tongue. “Think as the Wyshied, white-haired one, but hold on to your Sterkte and do not disregard what your heart holds true. Now, I must leave. I have wasted much time—he will not be pleased.” He? She shakes her head worriedly, her gray braid whipping across her back. “Listen to me well!” She says again before hurrying down the road in the direction from which we came.

All I can do is stare. *The owl...only the owl...can tame the fire.* I know the owl I saw yesterday most likely has something to do with this, but she *cannot* be telling me I am too lively and temperamental. *That’s what I need to deal with these people, lady!* I want to call, but since I’m not quite sure what she was talking about, I don’t feel like making a complete moron out of myself right now. Maybe another time. I’m having a hard enough time as it is trying to remember what she even said. *And who is ‘he?’*

As she disappears around the curve, I turn to the boys.

They all look completely offended.

I decide right then that I like her.

“Well,” I sigh. “Off we go!”



I smell them some time later.

I first just assume that it must be the flowers. We all took turns bathing in a pond Soirus “knew was not far ahead,” and I changed into a light purple tunic and brown trousers, wanting to change it up a little from the normal black and white. As I head back to the carriage feeling fresh and new, I smell something delightfully different, like lavender and roses. I search for the plants but find none, and decide that they are just hiding.

But the scent grows stronger as I approach the camp, and I begin to wonder if what I am smelling are plants at all.

I stop about five feet away. “*What is that smell?*” I say loudly, crinkling my nose.

They all stop and turn to me. “What smell?” Soirus asks.

“That...that *smell*. Is it...is it *you?*” I motion to them.

They all exchange glances. “You’ve never scented us before?” Urion asks in disbelief. I shoot him a glare, not liking his tone.

“In case you may have forgotten,” Unlikely. “Half-blood.” I say, pointing at myself.

They all examine me a little longer before returning to their business. I know for sure that the scent is definitely them because, as they move around, the strength of the scent moves with them.

I am completely amazed. I can *smell* them. Why couldn’t I smell Soirus before, when we were closer (marginally) to the Meridian? I raise my eyes to the sky, squinting towards the sun. It’s not just the scents that are stronger. There is something beginning to stir within my gut as the day goes on. Something is different about today, or this place, or *something*. I have no idea what it is, though.

The stirring turns to churning by the time the afternoon arrives. I wonder if I should say something to the Sterkte.

I’ll pass.

I have adjusted my position so that I am now lying contentedly on top of the caravan, my eyes closed, listening to the nature surrounding us, when the breeze carries a scent of burning wood and pastries to me. I breathe in deeply and then sit up, turning towards the scent.

Jackpot.

“Soirus,” I say, not taking my eyes off of the buildings in the distance.

But he is already heading that way. “Only because I smell it too.” He retorts. I grin manically and slide down next to him excitedly.

“So hopefully that means they’re all still alive.” I reply dryly. His jaw tightens but he says nothing. Good.

I am forced back into the caravan before we enter the town, and the only reason I go is because I remember him telling me that the more I am seen, the more danger I am in, but all plans for me to just admire the scenery from the inside quickly fade as I see the garlands and the flower vines and the flags and the banners.

It’s a celebration.

What for?

The door opens then and Xander peers in at me. “You should stay in here.” He tells me in a voice that conveys he knows I will not stay in here.

I give him an apologetic face that I absolutely do not mean. “I should do a lot of things, Xander.” Then I shove him aside and hop out.

This time, the noise and the action does not end for us. There is even music playing farther down the street. Hundreds of people crowd around carts and stores everywhere, chatting loudly and happily as they eat delicious foods and buy flags of bright yellow and green. Many are dressed in the colors, as well, even though most of their clothes look used and scraggly.

It’s beautiful.

I want to join.

I dance away from the cart, and Urion and Soirus follow me unhappily as the rest of them park the horses at a watering trough and move the cart out of plain sight. This delights me because it means they do not plan on just hurrying through. I don’t know what changed, but they are finally beginning to listen to me. It’s refreshing.

I pause, observing the behavior of the commoners, before following their lead and pushing through the crowds to get to the front of a crowd to view different cloths for the festival. At first, people turn and stare at me, but then they just accept that I am of the Nag and continue on with their lives.

Being ignored in this way is exhilarating. Nothing like Soirus ignoring me when I actually need him to listen, or the Aanleg ignoring me when I tell them they’re wrong.

“What is the occasion?” I yell over the loud chattering of people. My question is directed at a middle-aged woman with long, dark hair flowing down her back in shiny waves and a crown of flowers atop her head. She looks at me without judgement.

“It is the summer solstice, miss!” She yells happily. “The festival honors Mother Nature’s generous giving and plentiful crops to come!”

I am fascinated, and I let my eyes skim over the clothes before pointing at a long, bright yellow dress and saying, “I want that one!” To the storekeeper.

He smiles and names the price. “Five regeer.”

Before I can turn around, a warm body comes up behind me and hands the storekeeper his money. I glance up and see Urion’s tall form. I realize it was so easy for him to reach me because, as he approached, all of the other humans retreated. There is now a circle of space around us as we stand at the counter. I can pass as a human. Urion cannot.

At the sight of a Sterkte, the shopkeeper pauses, but he takes the money and hands me the dress. “You have a great eye for quality,” He admires as I take it. I smile at him.

“Thank you.” I say. We leave the booth and the humans swarm around it once more. A prickle of sadness touches me at how I will forever be surrounded by fear. But then I look at my new dress and I smile happily. Before I run back to the carriage, I dart to a flower shop and buy myself a crown of yellow, purple, and orange daisies. I change into my new outfit in the caravan and then prance back into the streets, my hair flowing freely down my back as the flowers circle my head.

Being dressed in new clothes that have never seen the grey of the Hallows does wonders for my spirit. I no longer feel its grip of oblivion as I run along the streets, admiring the food and the music and the dancers. People stay at a safe distance away from my Sterkte and me, but none stop the festivities on our account. Some of the songs I know, and I sing along with the others and, after paying close attention, I even learn some of the dances. The Sterkte stand at the edge of the dancing ground as I sway with happy humans, big and small, completely free. I am slightly disappointed they don’t join in: I have always wondered if they dance as gracefully as they fight.

The sun is beginning to set, and lanterns of all different colors lining the shops and the street are lit so the festival can continue. As I move on from the dancing, people begin to look me in the eyes and nod in my direction. I smile at them, but after the fifth person, I glance back at my Sterkte in confusion. Before I can even ask, Soirus explains.

“People of the Nag are respected widely throughout human territory. They are honored to be your hosts for such an important festival.” His eyes never stay on me for more than a second. None of their eyes do. They are constantly on the lookout for a threat.

Hearing this, pride shines in my chest and I square my shoulders. As the day gets later, the churning in my stomach has become an all-out storm, but it feels *so* good. There is something alive and amazing about what is happening within me, and I get the feeling it has to do with more than just the proximity of the Meridian. I smile brightly when a small girl shyly looks up at me through her light lashes and sends me a small wave. I wave back at her and am about to say hello when my nose is pounded with the scent of pine and leaves. The storm in me thunders at the smell.

I stop, my eyes slowly gliding around the streets as I search for the source. I know it is a Sprite, and I know it is not one that I have ever met before. This is different. I am drawn to it, the leafy aroma. It is like nothing I have ever smelled, and it’s lovely.

When I see the eyes, I know. I would be surprised I ever found the Sprite at all, but...no one could miss those eyes.

They radiate the brightest green, like the fresh, wild grass from my dream. Our eyes lock, and I am fixed. The storm in me becomes a sea of beautiful blue-green, peaceful and wild all at once, and for a few moments as I take him in, there is only us.

I know he has been staring at me since I scented him, and now that I have seen him leaning causally outside of another flower shop, hands resting contentedly in the pockets of his black trousers, those green eyes are attentive on me and the Sterkte that follow close behind.

He has an oval-shaped face with ears that stick out more than usual because of his buzz-cut black hair, and a strong jaw that is smooth and symmetric and perfect for his complexion. His nose is straight and political, but his eyes are soft and his mouth, with its sensuous yet thin lips, defies any notion that he could be at all conceited.

And there is a kindness in his eyes that I have only ever seen in those of two others.

Leah and William.

As I take in his character, his mouth forms a crooked, inquisitive smile that is as light as the wind, and he pushes himself into a standing position.

And then the Sterkte find him.

I know because I feel a shift in the air and the space around me becomes so tense that I could suffocate. The green-eyed Sprite's eyes drift along my seven guardians and his smile, though still there, is not nearly as carefree. A small girl runs over to him, holding out a lily, and he places a hand gently on her head and says something to her before she happily skips into the store.

How well does he know these humans?

The storm in me is back, stronger than ever, and I feel a slight sense of dread as the Sprite casually moves to the far edge of the porch he has been standing on, his eyes never leaving the Sterkte guardians. Something rustles behind me and Urion and Grant are suddenly in the street, keeping pace with the Sprite as he saunters deeper into town. I reach out to stop them when Soirus grabs my wrist firmly.

I search for those lovely eyes again, following his scent, and I know he can see my panic, but he doesn't seem too concerned about it. Instead, he meets my gaze and inclines his head slowly. If I didn't know better, I would think that he knows exactly who I am.

And he is bowing to his Kaiser.

The activity around us continues on as the Sprite, and then Urion and Grant, disappear in the crowd, and instantly, that incredible leafy aroma is gone.

And so is the sun.



I don't get much time to wonder what Urien and Grant plan to do to the green-eyed Sprite. The townspeople have begun dancing all over the streets, the stench of alcohol beginning to tinge the air.

But everything I am seeing is beginning to glow.

The solstice is drawing out my power.

I turn frantically to Soirus. "Soirus—" I begin, but he gravely takes note of my state and I am being rushed away in seconds.

"Get the horses," He mutters to Beni, Fenley, and Thorn, and they obey without hesitation. Xander and Soirus lead me through back alleys full of trash and reeking of odors that I would rather not identify.

I am burning and drowning and fighting to breathe now, and in my mind the eclipse is flickering, the moon getting darker every second. It is not actually happening, but the solstice...it is having the same effect on me as if it *were* actually happening.

No, no, no. I am panicking, but I think I am justified in doing so. I am completely *exposed!* I am gasping now, the fire around me making it hard to move.

"Nova, come on!" Soirus shouts through the smoke and the waves.

I can't. I can't. I don't know what to do!

Only the owl can see true... The words are suddenly there in my mind as I shudder to control the light. *To tame the fire, you must let it guide you.*

The owl.

Somehow I know it is there. It waits, perched in the lone tree that stands just ahead, next to a small cottage. It watches me with eyes like coal.

I cannot move, but as the owl takes flight, I can tell that this is okay. I am now burning too brightly for Soirus and Xander to be near me, but the owl has no trouble swooping down and landing gracefully on my forearm.

Let it guide you. It stares at me, and there is something in the darkness of its gaze that makes me concentrate everything I have on those starry, dark eyes. *I need those stars.* I think, the familiar words pulling the line back to me that I read and disregarded days ago. *I need that darkness.*

I have concentrated everything on the black eyes of the owl, and soon I begin to notice them changing, becoming a lighter grey, and my own vision darkening, blackness sweeping in.

Just before his eyes go snow white, my vision goes black, and I feel cool, soft water before nothing more.

Chapter 8

And *still* I am jogging.

Soirus had better never tell me I am *any* kind of weak ever again.

Actually, I will admit that it is much easier to jog as long as Soirus wants me to with so much on my mind.

What kind of owl was that? It was no normal animal, that's for sure. It was sent to help me, but by whom? That old woman? Or maybe it was the 'he' that she had mentioned, saying that she was late. Will I ever know?

Who was that green-eyed Sprite, and how could he get me to control my power? I don't bother asking myself how he could have known who I am because that is impossible. I am told time and time again that the only resemblance I have to my mother is my hair color, and my only resemblance to my father is my eye color. And golden eyes in the Sprite world, while rare, are not exclusive to the Reign family.

And what happened to him? What did Urion and Grant do? I didn't get the chance to ask, between my blackout after holding the owl and Soirus' stupid decision to *still* force me out of my cramped bed at the most unreasonable hour known to Sprites.

And why is he even in human territory in the first place? While Sprites are allowed to roam the kingdom freely, it is almost unheard of that one wanders below the Meridian willingly, seeing as the best property is said to lie above the Meridian, completely off-limits to humans. Why spend time with the inferiors if one doesn't have to? The green-eyed Sprite certainly did not look like a fool, and from the way he knew what to expect from the Sterkte, I know he has been surrounded by them before. So why is he here? And for how long has he stayed with the humans? There is no question that the small child that ran to him was well acquainted with the Sprite and knew there was no reason for her to be wary of him.

How does he even feel about humans? He looked so comfortable in the presence of the normal townsfolk. Does that mean he does not find them inferior to him like the rest of his kind?

What does it all *mean*?!

I let out a frustrated sigh and Soirus eyes me. "You have been incredibly silent." He observes after a minute.

I don't look at him. "I'm not talking to you." I say as my response.

He shrugs. "I can't complain about that."

Really, the only reason I don't not talk to him more often is because I always have questions that need to be answered. I can afford to give him the silent treatment now because I know for a fact that he cannot answer my questions.

No, that is not true. He might be able to answer one. He *is* able to answer one.

Now I am dying to ask. I am dying in general, but my need to ask him my question adds to my suffering.

My feet hurt.

But if I ask him now, after I've already told him that I will not speak to him, then I will look like an idiot. But not knowing what happened is rubbing me the complete wrong way. Well, the way they handled the situation in the first place is rubbing me the complete wrong way, but it has led to my question.

So many decisions....

What the hell.

"What happened to the Sprite?" I sputter through my breathlessness. "What did they do to him?" My chest is cramping. Death is soon to come, at this rate.

Soirus grimaces, like hearing my voice is comparable to being stabbed in the stomach. Repeatedly. "He should not have been there." He says in an emotionless tone.

He calls that an answer?

Try again, buddy.

"What did you *do*, Soirus?" I practically spit at him. The thought that they might have killed him pierces through me, and brings flashbacks of William's small, pale body and large blue eyes to my memory. *My people*, I think sadly. *Innocents*. I try to shake them away.

Again Soirus evades directly answering my inquiries, but this time hints at something I hadn't even considered conceivable. "We had no idea he would be so...prepared. It was a challenge we were not ready for."

Prepared? What the hell is he saying? "Soirus, just answer the damn question!" I bark, my patience having been left in the caravan much too early this morning.

Soirus' face tilts up to point at the gray, ever-lightening sky. "We wanted to question him, but he managed to avoid being captured." He finally tells me.

I blink. I blink again.

Is this a joke?

"Are you kidding me?" I inquire darkly. If this is a joke, it is not funny. At all. I wait for him to confess the truth, but there is a small part of me that recalls, *Soirus doesn't joke*.

“I wish.” He grumbles instead.

I stare at him before I suddenly let out a loud squeak. Then I am actually dying. Dying laughing. I am laughing so hard that I have to stop jogging, to Soirus’ even greater displeasure, and double over, one hand on my knee while the other holds my stomach. I am gasping for air because I cannot stop laughing.

This is hilarious! They see themselves as all ‘high and mighty,’ but then they can’t even grab a normal Sprite for questioning? Do they *realize* how sad this is? There is literally no explanation that could make this anything other than comical.

When I am finally able to settle down, I rub my eyes and put my hands on my hips. “Well now I know why you didn’t want to tell me! You’d best believe that I will remind you of this every day, Soirus. This is great.” I promise him joyously. He clenches his jaw but does not reply. What can he say, though? Seriously, that is pathetic. For once, I am not the one who can be ridiculed. It’s quite glorious.

“Soirus, everything you have put me through has been totally worth it to get to this moment.” I tell him, starting to jog again. “Totally worth it.”

I am not lying.

Because there is a piece of me that is absurdly happy. Not that they failed, though that is just a wondrous bonus.

Happy that the green-eyed Sprite got away.



Urion and Grant get the chance to become laughingstock very soon after. They both look completely put off, and I smugly think to myself, *Now they know what it feels like*. I finally stop teasing them after bathing, but shoot them amused glances all throughout the day. I know, if I was anyone else, I would have been punched by now. But I am not anyone else. So I can do what I want.

We continue on, and my mind reviews everything that it does not know, and I end up thinking about that book that I put down almost a week ago. What was it called?

Ode something. *Ode...Sky*. *Ode Night*. *Night Ode*! No...*Night Hymn*! *Night Hymn*. The book about love and not adventure.

But now I am doubting my original diagnosis. Was I too swift in assuming the book was about love? I had wanted an adventure, then, but can’t books with love also have adventure? I can’t remember the line I read now, but I know that it did not necessarily imply love. I just interpreted it that way.

I need a library. I need to know once and for all. I don’t like being wrong, even though it seems to like me. Very much.

“Soirus, I want to go to the library.”

“I’ll add that to the list.” He doesn’t take his eyes off the road.

“The list?” Huh?

“The list of things you want that I couldn’t give a damn about.” He clarifies.

“You’re forgetting something.” I say, completely unfazed.

“What is that?” He asks in a voice that really says he doesn’t actually care what he’s forgetting.

“I didn’t ask for your opinion.” I say matter-of-factly. “We’re going.” I am trying to force my way, but I learned the first day outside of the Hallows that, without the Aanleg, my very high opinion doesn’t have very high importance. Hopefully, Soirus forgets that for now.

Not likely.

“Good luck finding one.”

“Well I’m sure that, while *you* may see humans as incompetent *lumps*, *they* are out here educating themselves so as to be able to, one day, be taken seriously. With *libraries*.” I retort.

I hate him with everything I have for what he says in reply.

“According to your good friend Leah, that is not the case.”

It’s a slap to the face. Ten times over. I can hardly believe he dared to say it. In an instant I am on the ground, my breathing unsteady as I glare, with all the hatred my small form contains, at the ground.

Soirus makes no move to apologize as everyone stops. “Come on, Nova.” He sighs instead.

I try to calm my fury, to no avail. My hands form fists, my nails biting into the skin of my palms. I want to hurt him. I want to hurt him so much. But I can’t think straight. I can’t do anything right now.

Everyone waits. They can see that trying to convince me to acknowledge them at this point in time could cost them a limb.

Finally, I smother my rage enough to say, “I’ll walk.” I can’t stand to be on the same carriage as that Sterkte. I hate him.

“You’re not—” Soirus begins.

“Try and stop me.” I growl, starting the trek across the gravel. I pass the carriage and reach the heads of the horses it is attached to. The Sterkte men are silent, considering what to do, before they finally give in and spur the horses into motion again.

I hate Soirus more as we continue. Now I've gotten myself into yet another situation where I might have spoken too soon. Walking seems like a fine decision when I think about who is driving the caravan, but keeping up with the horses' pace is a whole other issue. I am practically jogging to retain my position by the carriage horses, and I am a) shoeless, and b) tired very quickly.

In order to not give in to the temptation to grab onto the caravan, I plan ways to kill Soirus while he sleeps. The pros of killing him much outweigh the cons. In fact, there are no cons.

Pro: He'd be dead.

Con: Not applicable.

Pro: I would never have to deal with him insulting me ever again.

Con: Not applicable.

Pro: No more twilight jogs.

Con: There is still nothing wrong with this plan.

I continue on like this for a good half hour before a hand reaches down and lugs me by the arm onto his horse, sidesaddle in front of him.

I am panting, but I am also seething as I turn to possibly murder whichever Sterkte smells like vanilla and interrupted my display of hatred.

Urion raises his eyebrows, daring me to argue.

Okay, I hate him, too, but I also hate jogging and sore feet, and which is more irritating right now?

It's a hard choice, but eventually I cross my arms and glare at the ground without saying anything.

Yet my stomach clenches with an annoying delight at being trapped in his arms again.

I hate him.



Urion was not the first.

Before him, there was another Sterkte male who was willing to take on my bad attitude, believe it or not. I have long since moved on to bigger and better things—in multiple ways—and put him behind me, but he was still the first.

Zane. That was his name, and he was as badass as he sounds.

I was only twenty when I began taking notice of him. He kind of forced himself into my attractions because he was so adept at breaking the rules, and, well, I am nothing if not a rebel. My whole *life* is a rebellion. It was only fitting.

I still remember the first time he was on duty as my Sterkte guard in my room. We had not talked much before, and I assumed that night was going to be just like any other, except I would lie awake for hours because of how aware I was that it was Zane hunched in the corner. I had emerged from the bathroom in my too-large white tunic, what I had considered to be my pajamas, and paused my march to the bed to glance at him. “You can sit down, you know.” I’d told him. “Nothing is ever going to come for me.” I knew it for a fact.

His dark eyes had looked into mine then, and before I knew it, I was pressed against the wall, his hands in my hair, his mouth pressed against mine. At first I was frozen, but *damn*, it felt *good* to be kissed. By him. To be kissed by him. My hands were clutching his shirt and my mouth was moving against his eagerly, and I felt more alive than I had even known I could while still in the Hallows. A spark was growing in my chest and I was tingling with the thrill of his touch. I would learn later that I can feel even more than what I had in the time I was with Zane, but right then I thought I was higher than I would ever be.

To my great displeasure, he pulled away after a minute. Somehow my mind was able to form some semblance of a thought. “They’ll hear us.” I whispered regretfully.

Zane smirked. So irresistible it hurt. “The only reason someone sits in here every night is because we *can’t* hear through the door, Nova.”

Then his hands drifted down my body to my bare thighs and he watched as I shivered. “Oh.” I swallowed. “Good.”

Zane was not nearly as good a fix as Urion is. While Urion covers the hole, Zane merely kept me from thinking about it for the time being. Maybe it is because Urion and I have more chemistry, or my older age is making me more immune to the emptiness. Or maybe I am just willing to give up more of myself to keep the missing piece of my soul from eating me alive.

Either way, it did not matter, because, only a week later, he was gone, and I realized that, with or without him, I was still alone.

And I always will be.

Chapter 9

I dream about my mother that night. My imagination paints her with short hair cropped to her chin and eyes as blue as the sea. Her dark skin shines in the light of the moon, and she wears a loose white dress that I recognize. It is one of my white dresses.

She is standing in water, water just like that in my other dream, when the blood moon dawns, but tonight the moon shines full and silvery, centered above my mother's head.

"Nova," her lips move, and a sweet, deep, dazzling voice says my name. She focuses on me, smiling. "My beautiful daughter. Give me your hand." She reaches out with her own long fingers, waiting patiently for me to do as she asks.

I know, somehow, that she means my left hand, and I place my palm in hers without hesitation. She engulfs my hand in both of hers and clutches me, staring intensely into my eyes.

"Heal, my Nova. Heal yourself. Heal your people. Heal your *kingdom*." Then she opens her palms so that I can have my hand back, and I look down at my palm.

The cut I received that horrible day I found and lost tiny William, the cut that was just beginning to close, was gone.

And when I look up again, so is she.

All that is left is me and the moon.



I am disturbed.

The cut on my hand is still there—I checked beneath the bandage—so I know nothing truly surreal happened.

But I have retained Soirus' words and I am chilled to the bone. *There is an old tale that is whispered behind backs that the Nag...the Nag have special powers that apply to...that apply to healing....Some even believe that your mother may have been able to heal the sick Kaiser if she had wanted to.*

According to the dream I just had, the rumors about the healing powers of the Nag are true.

But does my dream hold any credibility? I have never dreamed about my mother, so...does that make it even more important, or just something I am finally thinking about?

And if my mother could have healed my grandfather, why wouldn't she? What would make her let him die?

What frustrates me even more—even more than I have ever been about the subject before—is that I never even knew my mother, let alone well enough to be able to answer such questions about her character.

"Do you usually run this fast?" Xander asks me, breaking my train of thought and bringing me back to earth. I told Soirus I would go jogging with him over my dead body—I still have not forgiven him, or even talked to him until then—so he found a solution. And there I was thinking I could finally get a full night's rest. Silly me.

I glance at him and then realize that I am almost sprinting through the grass. I slow down immediately. Efficient, not hard! What was I *thinking*?

I was thinking that my life sucks. I answer myself glumly.

“Sorry,” I apologize sincerely. I really am sorry. No one should ever have to do anything so physically taxing so frigging early. Especially not *every* day. Then I blurt, “Do you believe the Nag have healing powers?”

I expect to receive the same look I always get when I ask questions about humans, like I am some crazed, untamed lunatic, although some may comment that me actually possessing those qualities is debatable.

But Xander only keeps jogging and replies seriously, “No humans have ever held powers.”

Well, then. I am the only one questioning this belief in a, let’s see, *million* mile radius. Wonderful. That’s how I prefer it, anyway.

“So you do not think my mother let the Kaiser die.” This statement is basically a question.

Xander shakes his head. “No.”

I’m starting to see that Xander usually only says the bare minimum. My pulling a real sentence out of him is quite an accomplishment. I’ve only done it twice.

When jogging with someone with whom my feelings are neutral, time seems to pass much faster. We reach the camp and I practically rip my boots in half to get them off my feet before thrusting them across the campfire. I know that I now have to go pick them up because my Sterkte guardians refuse to actually *serve* me, but I desperately needed the release.

One of my boots lands dangerously close to Urion’s upturned face, which rests casually on one of his forearms, and I know that I desperately need *another* kind of release, as well. The thud of the boot wakes him, but he does not act surprised nor flinch from its abrupt proximity. He just waits for me to retrieve it.

“You’re such a gentleman.” I say sarcastically as I snatch it off the ground.

“Sterkte are not trained to be gentlemen.” Is his excuse.

“Well, *that’s* for damn sure.” At this, he lazily turns his blue gaze on me, and I feel my skin getting hot. His mouth lifts into a devilish smile, as if he knows exactly how he is making me feel, and I scowl and stomp past him to where my other shoe landed.

Douche.

But my skin still burns, and I still want him.



The next three days are so uneventful that the only thing keeping me from losing my mind is the ever-changing scenery. The world is so beautiful. *My kingdom* is so beautiful. My heart glows with pride when I remember that it is all mine.

I start to suspect that Soirus is leading us on the most deserted path he can find by the end of the second day that we go without seeing *anyone*. I do not ask him about it the third day, though, because he orders me to work on my sword-handling, stamina, and stealth.

I only listen because there is literally nothing else to do.

I run next to the caravan and weave in and out of the horses and use the carriage as something to jump on an off of. My companions ignore me completely (I think), but that is alright for once, since I am a sweaty mess and I do not believe I have or can ever look any worse than I do now. I do not need to impress any of the Sterkte here, but it's nice to look nice sometimes. Well, all the time.

By the end of the third day, I can feel the buzz of the moon fast approaching. I have always felt connected to the nighttime, and love to study the stars, but I didn't wonder if maybe it has to do with my power being associated with the moon until now. Still, this does not explain why my nerves burn like the sun whenever I go into a fit. It is all so confusing and headache-inducing.

I have begun cleaning myself at the end of the day now that I exercise constantly, so when we finally stop for the night, I follow Urion to the water nearby. I do not say anything about how I already know where it is: I can feel it in my bones. Instead I note how far from the campsite we are.

When Urion turns to go back to camp after "showing" me the pond, I calmly pull my hair out of its braid and say, "You're just going to leave me alone? That's a first." I run my hands through my hair and look over my shoulder at him, my eyes glinting roguishly.

He turns and lets his eyes wander down my body, considering. My heartbeat speeds up as he grins and comes towards me, removing his shirt.

"My mistake." He says, sliding his hands under my tunic and kissing me.

Our clothes land on the ground one by one as we move deeper into the water. My hands tangle in his hair greedily as our tongues intertwine and his fingers caress my body. I hope he doesn't realize how much I need this, or else he will figure out how to use this weakness against me, and I won't be able to stop him.

Though right now, I don't know if I'll ever *want* to stop him.

We stay twisted up in each other for about a half hour before we decide we need to get back before the others come looking for us. It's a good thing I take a while to bathe or else we would have already been caught.

As Urion slips on his clothes and tries to make his hair as dry as possible, he grins at me. "Being out in the wilderness is turning you a bit wild, Nova."

I glare but say nothing as I slide into my clean tunic.

“What, are you mad at me for giving you what you want?” He raises his eyebrows.

What did he just say? “Give me a break, Urion.” I wave him off.

This only seems to encourage him, because he swiftly moves behind me, sliding his hands to the bare skin of my stomach and leaning down so his teeth skim my ear. Chills sparkle against my spine as I go still. “Fine,” he murmurs, his lips brushing the soft skin beneath my earlobe. “Tell me you don’t want me, and I’ll stop.” One of his hands fingers the hem of my trousers, and I can’t help the small gasp that escapes me. “Tell me, Nova.” His tone is daring me. Daring. Oh, I want to hate him right now, but I’m too busy trying to breathe normally. “Tell me.” He testily bites my ear and I press my back against his chest, wanting more of him. Again.

He knows I can’t say it. I can’t let him go. He doesn’t know why, but he knows, and he is not afraid to use it.



The worst kind of danger is the danger you don’t even know you are in.

Urion is becoming this kind of danger to me. I need to get out of it.

Now.

Chapter 10

That night, I lay outside, watching as an increasing number of stars appear to see what is happening in the world below. I have chosen a star for William, a small one that, despite its size, shines so bright that it competes with the larger, closer stars. Thinking about him out there, safe and beautiful, gives me hope that everything will turn out okay. We might not all make it, but everything will be okay.

For this one, small instant, I am at peace.

But Soirus’ life purpose is to make sure this never lasts, and he doesn’t plan on failing now.

“We will stop at the library tomorrow, but we don’t have time for you to dabble around anymore. We need to keep moving so that we do not miss the deadline.” He tells me, crouching down near my legs.

I square my jaw, my eyes going hard, and try to decide whether I want to honor him with a reply. Please. I’ll take all the time I want, *thank you*. It’s not *my* fault we’re cutting it so close!

“Nova, the Institute is not like the Hallows. It is a place to learn, not a prison. You will have plenty of time to interact with others while you are there.” He speaks this like he believes I’ll actually get in. Nice try, Soirus. I’m not buying what you’re selling.

When I still don’t reply, he sighs, frustrated. “After the library, we will be avoiding other beings. We’re getting too close to the Meridian to risk news travelling.”

I snort. I can’t say nothing any longer. It’s too tempting. “Like you haven’t been doing that already.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “We have just been lucky.” He responds.

“You mean *you* have just been lucky. No more humans to cause you trouble. You say the Institute will let me explore, but you can’t *seriously* expect them to let me cross the Meridian. Have you forgotten? I am already insignificant to them—granting me favors will be the *last* thing they get around to! I’m not asking you to let me examine every single town with a microscope, Soirus. I’m telling you to let me get to know my people. Yes, *my people*. Humans are a part of this kingdom whether you or any other Sprite likes it or not, because *I* am in charge. *Me*. I get to decide who is inferior. And, frankly, I don’t give a damn what anybody else thinks. You can thank the Aanleg and the stupid Hallows for that.”

He’s full-out glaring at me now. Like I’m the one with the problem. “Nova, we don’t have time for that. And we are most definitely not changing our path.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m sure we are not taking the most straightforward path, Soirus. I know you too well, now. We are changing the path, and we will have time.” I say simply, my voice gaining an authoritative quality that I have had only a couple times in my life, despite my high self-esteem.

“No.”

I sit up to meet his glare head-on. “You underestimate me, Soirus.” I tell him.

“I don’t think I do.” He doesn’t think I can win this.

Challenge accepted.

I smile wickedly and shrug, then fall back into the grass. “Go away.” I say without looking at him.

For once, he does exactly what I order.



Arguing with Soirus is exhausting, but it does keep me on my toes.

On my jog with Grant the next morning (I have been running with a different Sterkte every morning, save for Soirus), I pay extra attention to our surroundings, and when we pause for the half-way break, I eye my guardian.

He can most definitely stop me from doing anything stupid. I won't make it very far if I try running.

How did green-eyes do it? I wonder, not for the first time. I picture those eyes and that kind smile and I am at a loss for words. *How did he outsmart the Sterkte?*

Grant notices me observing him. "What?" He snaps. He is still holding a bit of a grudge from when I last teased him about losing the green-eyed Sprite. I smile in amusement at this.

Well, there's no harm in asking. Yet.

"How did he do it?" I know he knows exactly what I am talking about, but I make sure so he can't try being a smartass. "How did the Sprite get away?"

Grant scowls at the horizon and the slowly rising sun. I have noticed that the runs are getting a little bit longer each day. It has been getting on my nerves.

Even though he is upset, he turns to me and replies. I am surprised he's answering me, but I hide it. "He knew how to confuse us. He can...he knew how to confuse us." He can...he can *what?* Come on, Grant! "And he knew the territory much better than we did." That's all he gives me.

I am itching to force the whole truth out of him, but I know this will not help my cause. I take a deep breath to steady my nerves. Time to try a different tactic. "So he was faster than you." I say, hoping to irritate him into giving me what I want to know.

It sort of works. Grant glares at me. "No! It had nothing to do with his—or our!—physical capabilities." He spits at me.

If not physical... "So he is smarter than you." I state. He really is making this too easy. This is fun.

"If he was smarter than us, he wouldn't have been found in human territory in the first place." Grant growls. "His magic was confusing, alright? Not like anything we have ever been exposed to before. And that's saying something, after coming out of the Institute." He adds defensively.

Grant, you are the best.

He has unknowingly given me more information than he could ever realize. Now, not only do I know what it takes to escape him, I know that they have been trained to recognize and maneuver through countless powers, and that, in the Institute, the use of one's power is expected.

I am giddy and fearful all at once.

Oh, how Soirus has underestimated me so.

I can't wait to prove him wrong.



All Sprites possess a kind of magic in them. The strength of their powers varies from each Sprite, and anyone can be powerful, and anyone can be weak. Sprites with many different levels of power attend the Institute, because, to become Sterkte or even Aanleg, strong powers are not needed. Only resilience and trustworthiness. The Wyshied, with the work that they do to work through any issues brought their way, require more powerful Sprites.

But no one is as powerful as the Reign family.

This is what makes Mavern's ascent to the Kaiser throne even more incredible. There is no way he ever should have been able to steal the kingdom from my family, strong band of supporters or not.

So what did he do right?

Or, more importantly, what did my father do wrong?



Well, I guess I *can* wait until after the library to prove Soirus wrong.

I catch the scent of the village—or city, more like—about three miles from the first sign. It is a shabby, faded wooden board with the word “Glistendane” written in green, capital letters across it. This is the first place that I can match a name to, and now I can visualize where we are on the map that I have stored in my head from those long, excruciating lessons with Zeheb.

Zeheb. I never thought I would feel a kind of loss in my chest when thinking about him. I can hardly admit to myself that I miss his old, grumpy eyes and ugly red velvet couch.

But he would know what to predict about the strange owl that was my savior. His knowledge would actually be *useful* right now, unlike good-for-nothing Soirus.

It takes much longer to get to the downtown area of the city than it did for the towns because, well, this is a *city* and it is much larger. People are everywhere, though, walking in an unordered fashion all throughout the streets, bustling to work, grabbing groceries, completing chores—I don't complain about being locked in the caravan because I am too busy gawking out the window. The buildings are growing taller and taller every minute, changing from wood to metal and brick as we burrow deeper into town. And the smells! They pound my senses: food, cloths, tools, animals—anything I can think of. They smell dirty and fresh all at once, and I am in awe.

I notice many citizens gawking in our direction, as well, and I remember that I am in a Sterkte carriage and Sprites are a once-in-a-lifetime (a human lifetime, that is) sight. And their presence in human territory is usually not without consequence. Bad consequence.

I am here to help you, I wish I could tell them. I want to tell them that I *will* do something, but I cannot. I don't even know if I am telling the truth.

From all of my town visits, I have now grown used to seeing the majority of the humans in dirty clothing with messy hair and bare feet. The ones I notice now are those without these

qualities, though, even with their obvious differences, they are still hard to distinguish through all of the other people. When I see people like this, they are usually in dark suits carrying some sort of briefcase.

But still, these humans look weary and exhausted, and have an arch to their backs that implies a long, hard day trying to get by. When they look at the caravan and the Sterkte, all I see is disdain. It saddens me, and I feel a twinge of guilt at something that I have never been guilty about before.

My Sprite blood.

But really, why haven't I felt guilty about the Sprite half of me before? After my days on the road, and even in the Hallows, all I have witnessed about Sprites is that they are unkind and uncaring, while humans have seemed to possess the, what I would deem, superior traits.

With one green-eyed exception, that is.

Now, four Sterkte stay with the horses and the cart as the other three escort me into the amazing brick building labelled simply 'Library.' I shiver as the smell of paper and ink completely overtake my sense of smell and I breathe in deeply, grinning like a fool. The quiet is sudden and inviting, and only a few people wander around skimming the shelves. I am free to explore.

Soirus turns to me. "Hurry up." He says, motioning to the endless rows of books.

The young girl of about eighteen that was once concentrated on the papers on the desk in front of her is now frozen, staring at us. Her hazel eyes are wide as she takes us in, probably praying that we do not need help because she is obviously the librarian. She has sun-darkened skin and freckles that consume her face, and she looks small and frail in the wide wooden chair where she is seated. When she notices my features, her expression goes from fear to shock and then amazement, and my Sterkte companions are the last thing on her mind.

She stands immediately. "If I may help in any way, don't hesitate to ask." She says in a polite tone, her eyes fixated on me.

I smile nicely at this. Her instant respect is uplifting. At least *someone* acknowledges my authority, even if she has no idea who I am. "Thank you." I say, and she looks delighted just to hear these words, coming from me, directed at her.

The Nag are more influential in the human world than I ever imagined.

I wonder if my Sterkte recognize this, too.

It takes me about two seconds of browsing the shelves to realize my complete failure will be guaranteed if I do not ask the librarian for help. I dance to the desk. She is waiting eagerly.

"I was hoping you could help me locate a book. It's called *Night Hymn...*" I recite the name for her, watching her eyes to see if any recognition sparks to life in them.

Nothing.

A whole string of cuss words goes through my brain just then, but I try to keep a leash on my temper. It's not her fault.

She tries to find it anyway. We both know it's not here, but she still tries. Finally, she admits defeat and turns to me, shoulders slumping. "I'm sorry. I wish I could help you." She apologizes sincerely, shaking her head. "We don't get...we don't get many books to begin with. The ones we have are very special to us. If you're looking for something specific, it's usually a long shot." She explains to me. I nod, though I am confused.

They don't get many books? Why? How do they learn to keep up with the times?

"It's alright," I tell her, but I am not able to keep the disappointment from tinging my voice. She lowers her eyes.

"I was hoping..." She begins, then she motions for me to follow her and weaves her way through the library to a back corner of books covered in black leather. She grabs a couple of them off of the shelves and turns to me hopefully. "I was hoping that maybe you could help us. Give us more information about...about the Nag. About your people."

The shame hits me like a hammer. I stand there, staring at the books, speechless.

I know nothing about the Nag except for the very minimal things I have learned from Zeheb and on this trip. I can't meet her eyes as I murmur, "I never...I never lived with them. I cannot help you." I have never been so ashamed.

She says nothing for a minute. "Oh," she finally mutters, some of the brightness of her hazel eyes dying with my words. "Alright." She turns to put the books back.

I reach out and use my hand to block the empty spaces on the shelf. "Wait! Could I see those?" I may not have found what I was looking for, but this opportunity is so much better.

The girl eyes me and nods. "Of course." She hands them over and rotates to return to her post. She just about jumps out of her skin when she almost slams into Xander's tall form. He is so big that her head only comes up to the middle of his chest. It's like putting a twig next to a hundred year old tree. The age difference is pretty accurate, too. "Oh! I'm so sorry!" She sounds so afraid that I look at Xander to see if he pulled out his sword.

No weapons have been unsheathed.

But, I remind myself, she has never been so close to a Sprite, let alone a Sterkte, before.

Xander, stiffens and moves slightly to the side so she can get through. But it doesn't matter anyway.

Because a second later, a loud *boom!* echoes through the building, and the ceiling comes crashing down on us.



The Sterkte are swift. They have trained for years at the Institute to be able to react swiftly and intelligently in unexpected situations.

Xander does not fail in this now. In fact, he is too good.

He launches himself at me and we go flying between the bookshelves, and somehow he manages to nudge one bookshelf enough so that it tips over us into the one next to it, blocking us from a majority of the ceiling clumps and wedging us under a pretty protective shield. I hit the ground hard, and Xander's firm body is no light feather, so for a moment I am seeing stars. My ears ring, but I know the world is still crumbling around us.

It takes me a second to realize Xander is saying something.

"—with Grant..." He pants, one of his arms straining to keep the books and the ceiling from crushing down on us. On me. "Go, Nova. *Go.*" His breathing is off, I notice. I search his eyes to find what's wrong. He hovers over me, clenching his teeth and squeezing his eyes shut, desperately trying to hold it together. Slamming noises overhead make him wince even more, and I hear a voice behind me.

"*Nova, come on!*" Grant. He crouches at the end of the bookshelf that Xander has knocked over, peering through the small slot and reaching a hand out towards me. "Give me your hand!" The panic in his eyes is palpable.

I glance at Xander again and he nods. I grab onto a shelf and slowly pull myself up towards Grant, shoving books out of my way as much as possible. Slowly, my hearing is coming back, and I can hear yelling and screaming and a distant roar, and then my brain processes that I am smelling smoke, and rubble, and dust.

What is happening? I wonder frantically. I reach up to grab another shelf as dust showers on my face and in my nose, and I cough and close my eyes as I pull myself up again.

Grant grabs my hand the next time I reach above my head and quickly tugs me towards him. As he does, I look down towards my feet to make sure Xander is following us.

My heart stops and my stomach feels sick at what I can see clearly now.

Xander's arm is crushed between the two bookshelves, and his body has been weighed down by tons of enormous, heavy ceiling shards that he had been struggling to protect me from. Even the strongest Sterkte cannot escape something so dense. Now that I am with Grant, Xander has slumped to the ground, his arm twisted unnaturally above his head.

"No," I whimper as Grant frees me from underneath the shelf. "No." I say again.

"I have to get you out, Nova." Grant grunts, though the remorse in his voice is obvious. He begins to lift me into his arms.

"No! Help Xander! No!" I screech, squirming. If I had not just been slammed against the ground by Xander (and, apparently, the ceiling), then maybe my squirming would make a

difference, but now that I am handicapped, it doesn't loosen Grant's grip at all. My eyes sting with dirt and tears as he ignores me and stands. "Grant, no!"

Grant is gritting his teeth, but not with the effort it takes to keep a hold of me. "I have to save *you*, Nova. So stop fighting me." Right as he says this, a loud *crack!* Sounds from up ahead and he pauses as the place where I just was—the place where Xander still is—is crushed by pieces of the building that are so big that the ground around us cracks with the weight. Grant grips me tightly—desperately—and I go limp, as we gaze at the broken pieces around us. I barely notice that the pieces that should have crushed us have slid off around us as if we are protected by an invisible, impenetrable wall.

Grant turns so that we are no longer facing that way. "Stop fighting me." He repeats, his complete defeat making him sound less like a Sterkte and just like someone who just suffered a great loss.

"The books," I whisper in a last attempt to go back, but I don't move a muscle as he walks through the rubble towards the door.

Even though, without *something* for me to leave this place with, nothing was worth it.

Without those books, Xander died for nothing.

Chapter 11

I let Soirus do what he wants. He can go whatever way he wants. I don't care anymore. I don't care.

I play it over and over again in my mind, each time noticing more details in my peripheral vision: books around us on fire, smoke and dust clouding the air, the librarian girl's bloody foot sticking out from under a pile of rubble, my own blood smeared where I was dragged from under the bookshelves. With every detail, I mourn in greater amounts, sinking farther into myself and feeling the place where William stained my soul grow and devour even more of my heart. I do not have the energy to sob anymore. Now the tears just fall down my cheeks and I do not make a sound.

We left then, and I feel even worse at having to leave those people—*my* people—to clean up and sort through that disaster alone. A place they had found so sacred, holding knowledge that they worked so hard to find, now completely gone. I know they will be lucky to scavenge anything useful from the destroyed library.

I lay in the caravan, unmoving, for the whole rest of the day. No one speaks, not even as Beni cleans and wraps my wounds and checks my vitals.

My memory provides me with flashbacks to Xander, when I asked him if he liked to read, when he told me I could get into the Institute, when he asked me if the Sterkte could teach me how to properly bury the dead. It is ironically fitting, that he died in a library.

It is also ironic that we could not bury him properly.

What do they say? I think hard back to that day when this pain began and I lost a tiny, blue-eyed human boy. I whisper the words so softly that I barely hear them myself.

“Met krag, wysheid, en liefde, die moedige kan vind die ewige lewe in die sterre.” *With power, wisdom, and love, may the courageous find eternal life in the stars.* I close my eyes and say it again, a little bit louder this time. “Met krag, wysheid, en liefde, die moedige kan vind die ewige lewe in die sterre.” I pull my knees to my chest and try to finish the chant, to bring it to a close. “Long live...the House of...” My voice catches, and I shake my head, the tears burning my eyes as I bite my lip to keep from breaking down. I stay that way until we finally stop, and someone opens the door to the carriage and holds out a hand. I don’t move a muscle.

But when he says, “Long live the House of Reign. Long live the Kaiser.” I look into those dark eyes and know that he was right. He does not underestimate me.

Maybe I am underestimating him.



I may be broken, but I am put together enough to feel a paranoia creeping in having all too much to do with Soirus. No one has any idea what happened in the Glistendane library, but somehow, miraculously, the only ones of our group affected by the explosion were Xander and myself. Somehow, miraculously, the ones to enter the library in the first place were me, Xander, Soirus, and Grant. Somehow, *miraculously*, Soirus made it out unscathed and Grant is the only one in possession of the one extremely useful power that kept both him and me from getting crushed after he pulled me from beneath the bookshelf.

Miraculously.

It is all too much of a coincidence. I do not trust this for a second.

And I think it was Soirus’ idea.

He did not underestimate me. He knew I could find a way to get what I want. I am a very creative half-blood. So he did the one thing that leaves me immobile long enough for him to get his way: he killed someone.

I am sure of it by the time the door opens and Urion stares at me, ready to run.

I move robotically to get ready, my entire body feeling weak but alive at the same time. The adrenaline from my nerves is keeping me from collapsing, since I got very little sleep that night. I secure my boots to my feet and take off without a word to Urion. It doesn’t matter. He keeps up easily.

We run a farther distance than I have before, and this time it is obvious, but I could not give a damn right now. When we stop at the halfway point, Urion lets me take a few breaths before speaking.

“I wish it had been me.” He admits without looking at me. “He didn’t deserve something like that.”

My heart twists and I hesitate for only a moment before grabbing his hand and pulling him away from the road, down the steep hill, to the path of large bushes that obscure us from view. I push him down to the ground and position my knees on either side of his waist, kneeling over him with my hands on his chest. He stares at me with sad, blue eyes as I murmur softly, “No one deserves something like that. Not even you.”

He reaches up and pulls me down to him, and I let him make me forget about everything except his smooth skin against mine.



We are almost to the Meridian now.

Even without Soirus telling me, I know. My senses for everything—especially smell and hearing—are higher than I ever knew they could go. My connection to the rising moon, and even the dawn, is so strong that I am aware of it even in my sleep. My stomach is forever restless with power.

I am able to be aware of the dawn in my sleep because, since we are so close to the Meridian, Soirus has stopped making me run so early in the mornings. He does not want to risk me being sighted. We have come too far to lose everything now.

I just go with it, but I do not trust him in the least. A day has passed and I feel the absence of Xander like a hole in my gut, the smell of the Sterkte missing an essential ingredient. I wonder if they smell it, too.

They’re damn good at acting like they don’t.

In order to distract myself from thinking about everything awful that has followed me since I left the Hallows, I instead try to predict what I am going to encounter when we reach the Meridian and the Sprites that guard it.

Everything I think of involves me being stuck in human territory.

Maybe I’m too depressed to come up with anything positive.

So I decide to play with these powerful pulses that I am feeling in my veins. I try to come up with something for myself to take a shot at.

What do I want? I contemplate, fiddling with my fingers.

Xander to be alive. William to be alive. To protect my people. To be respected. To be *accepted*. My throne.

Ugh, I'm thinking too deeply. The only way for me to truly be accepted and respected as a Kaiser is for me to be a full-blooded, non-human, non-Nag Sprite. A Sprite with regular hair and regular skin and a regular size—

I just about faint. Then everything looks different, like there is a veil over my eyes, and I blink, trying to clear it, and I begin to reach up to wipe my eyes with my hands when I notice something.

Holy crap. My hands are white. I jump, scared out of my mind, then blink again to make sure I am not delusional. No, they're white. I yank open the door and leap out onto the path. Everyone jerks to a halt and turns to glare scornfully at me until they see me.

“What in the...” Thorn mutters as Beni and Fenley leap down and draw their weapons to attack.

My eyes widen but before I can say anything, Soirus yells, “Stop!” and the two Sterkte freeze. Everyone does. Even me.

There is a piece of hair in my face. I only notice it because it is not white. It is black.

Holy hell. I did this. I changed my appearance.

I can change my appearance! I laugh humorlessly in wonder. “I can change what I look like.” I say to no one in particular.

No one says a word for a long while. Finally, a familiar voice behind me speaks. “She looks like a Sprite. A full-blooded Sprite.” Urion.

Soirus looks grimly at my new appearance and then nods. “Just in time to cross the Meridian. Even if they scent her half-blood, they will not know her true appearance.” He means they will not see my white hair. He relaxes slightly. “Things will be a hell of a lot easier, now.”

Well, I can't argue with that.

Something that I lost some time ago—I can't place when—comes alive in me just then. I stand up straighter and lift my head higher as it gives me confidence.

Let's do this, I think.

I am ready.



To cross the Meridian, there is only one requirement.

You are a Sprite.

As long as someone lives up to this expectation, he or she will have no problem getting past the guards that patrol the line separating the inferior from the superior. So, with a little bit of magic, hopefully I will pass as enough of a Sprite to beat the law.

I will have to change it later, but baby steps.

Soirus saying that I changed myself “just in time” was a bit of an understatement. We leave the carriage hidden in a clump of trees and I am finally allowed my own horse, one of the carriage horses. I can’t ride Xander’s horse, Keye. It makes me feel weird and hollow just thinking about it.

Instead I saddle up Rivvet, his beautiful black coat gleaming in the sun, and climb into the saddle. I feel exhilarated as I remember how much I love riding. I pat his neck affectionately and we head off towards the small, glittering line that I we can see in the distance now.

The metal fence of the Meridian.

Smells are beginning to change and disappear and the birds that have been chirping happily throughout our trip are quieting as we approach the border. The hairs on my arms are beginning to rise as the air grows increasingly humid and cold. There is a prickling sensation on my skin that I dislike. A lot.

So this is what it’s like crossing the Meridian.

No wonder very few actually do it. It’s like the Sprites make it unpleasant just to discourage others from crossing.

Actually, they probably do exactly this, now that I think about it. It makes complete sense. To them, at least.

The horses prance nervously, noticing the change in atmosphere as well. Rivvet shakes his mane as if to try and rid himself of the dewy thorns that pick at his coat. I rub his neck to try and sooth both him and myself a little.

That’s when I realize that everything is silent, and that we are surrounded completely by a gray, damp fog. The only visible thing is the luminous metal wall, gleaming as it stretches a hundred meters above us.

In other words, impossible for humans to scale.

That includes me. I think. These newly discovered powers might change things.

I glance at the others, wondering if they feel just as uncomfortable with the situation as me and Rivvet. While the other horses all act the same as skittish as mine, the Sterkte are completely unfazed.

So it’s just a human thing. *Damn*, Sprites are irritating. I can only imagine how horrible the experience of coming near the wall is for full-blooded humans. Soirus was right about how there were no more towns or cities or anything the last day it took for us to get here. This must be why.

By the time we stop inches from the metal, the tingling feels more like ants crawling all over my body, and even my eyes are being affected. At this rate, it’ll be pretty damn obvious to the guards that I am not a Sprite. I am squirming uncontrollably over here!

Urion gives me an odd look. He obviously does not understand how real the struggle is for us inferior folk. I rub Rivvet's neck in hopes that it will keep me from slapping myself where I am most sensitive to the tingling like a lunatic.

I am actually surprised that they do not know the effect the wall is supposed to have on humans. Granted, Zeheb never told me either, but does he even know? And if not, then why?

The strong scent of soil and rust slams into me right before a sliver just big enough to fit us on our horses opens in the Meridian and a Sprite with long, dark hair appears. She wears grey clothes that blend in perfectly with the fog that is eating away at my sanity. She eyes each of us carefully before her eyes jerk back to me and narrow. "What is this?" She asks in a deep, foreboding voice. So she can smell my half-blood. I am not surprised.

Still, I can't even be slightly concerned about not getting past the wall right now. *This? I am not a this!* Has she *lost* her mind? I clench my jaw from spitting this at her. If I can't keep my calm now, I will not make it through the Institute placement tests. *Breathe, Nova.* I tell myself. *Just think about running her down with your horse, don't actually do it.* This makes me feel slightly better.

Slightly.

"She is with us." Is Soirus' explanation for my presence. At least *he* acknowledges that I am a living, breathing organism.

When the Sprite woman purses her lips and contemplates this, I understand perfectly why she does not pester him for more details.

The Sterkte are one of the highest classes, lower only than the Kaiser. A Meridian guard should not question the decisions of a Sterkte if he or she does not want to end up in the Reign Dungeon.

So the woman nods. She steps aside and lets us pass through the fence, and I have never been more relieved for something in my life because I am five seconds away from going completely insane and scratching my skin off. I pity the horses—they have a larger surface area than I do, and are not even half-Sprite.

The moment we step across the Meridian, everything changes. As my eyes drink in the scene in front of me, I realize that I have been living in a fool's paradise for eleven days. Nothing can compare to this.

The road ahead is smooth, dark brick laid perfectly to create a nice, easy path for us. On either side lay fields of flowers of every color imaginable, swaying in the gentle, warm breeze. The sun shimmers and everything is brighter—more vivid, has a sweeter smell, and sounds altogether happier. In the distance, a forest of pine trees sits quietly, and in front of us, giant, vibrant green treetops await us. I am gaping at the beauty, not believing my own eyes. This is my land. This is my kingdom.

Something within me forces me to remember what lies on the other side of the wall; the completely different world we came from not a minute earlier. It is obvious now that Sprites have taken everything good. They left the humans with the land they did not want. The land that is not rich with life and nutrients and color.

As we begin trotting along the new, brick path, I notice that the landscape is not the only thing that has newfound life. My travel companions are sitting taller, more proudly in their saddles, and the horses lift their legs higher with more elegance and poise. I am amazed. I had not realized that Soirus could feel contentment, let alone look it.

The Sprite guard follows us inside and the wall shuts with a *swish* behind us. Then, to my astonishment, she strides into the grass and disappears into thin air. I do a double take, but no, she is definitely gone.

“She is a Vervaag. She can exist in one place while still keeping an eye on another. Most guards are.” Grant tells me, looking smug at my lack of knowledge. I want to smack him but I just whip my head back around and continue riding. I easily forget about him; Rivvet is practically pirouetting with happiness at being here, and it makes me want to laugh.

Then I remember that one Sterkte did not make it back to this wonderful place, and I do not feel like laughing. *He should be here*, I think miserably. I cringe to think of the Sterkte that have been my guardians as my family, but they are the closest I have. Losing them...I can assume this is what losing a loved one feels like.

I glance in Urion’s direction. *Well*, I correct myself, *a platonic loved one*.

Only an hour later, we begin passing little Sprite neighborhoods, not even towns, and seeing Sprites wandering around the yards, gardening, playing with one another, building things, everything! I stare at as much as I can, my head spinning back and forth as I try to catch it all before it is gone. We’re moving too fast! I want to tell Soirus to slow down but the horses seem so happy...ugh, decisions!

We cover much more ground now that there is not a caravan to be lugged around. Eventually Soirus moves our group into a canter and we fly down the roads, with other Sprites moving quickly out of our way but not seeming to mind us. They, unlike humans, are used to the Sterkte.

Moving like this, in a group, racing along the beautiful red bricks, makes me feel, for the first time, like I belong here. I belong in this world. I am their equal.

There is something so right about me being here. My power burns steadily in my core, waiting to be discovered, to be used, and for a second, I close my eyes and let myself believe that what I told William all those days ago is true.

That everything will be okay.



There are inns here!

I never saw any when visiting the humans, but maybe I wasn't looking. Either way, there are *obvious* inns here, or we stop to stay at one that night.

Now, though one might not think it, I quite enjoyed roughing it out in the cool, scratchy grass. I did not mind bathing in the lake or river water and sitting near a campfire every night. Granted, I did not sleep on the cold, hard ground, but I could have. At least I think I could have.

It wasn't that bad when Urion and I laid on it midway between our morning run.

I really need to stop being so vulnerable and generous with him. I know he is dangerous. Just how dangerous will yet be determined if I don't stop convincing myself that I cannot stay in control of myself without his wonderful, distracting body.

Even though I am pretty sure I can't.

Dammit, why am I so weak?

Four Sprites come to take our horses to the stables, and I give Rivvet one last parting pat on the neck. He was very helpful, and I am grateful. Then Soirus lead us inside, and the Sterkte crowd me like magnets. I can barely see the light through the cracks between them, so I shove at them until they finally break so that I have open walking space in front of me to see where I am going.

"Don't you think people are going to wonder who I am if you're being so damn protective all the time?" I grumble to them. I see them consider this. At least this has them thinking.

They're so annoying. But at least they're finally acting like they consider me somewhat valuable. Although Soirus already explained why with complete, unveiled honesty because he'll "never lie to me." He's such an ass. And a liar.

The Sprite innkeeper, a short man who looks somewhat like I would picture a lumberjack to look like, with a plaid cotton shirt and crazy, brown eyes, is more than happy—more *afraid* than happy, that is—to give us three rooms, one for me and my night guardian and the other two to be split between the remaining five Sprites.

The Urion diet starts tonight, I decide then. Grant—no, he's too prickly—Fenley—no, I know him the least—*Thorn* will be my lookout. It hurts to know that, if he had been here, I would choose Xander without hesitation. But he is not. So I cannot. I feel a cloud of hatred towards Soirus and examine the lobby of the inn to distract myself.

The lobby is warm, decorated with colors of deep orange and brown. The floor is made of a dark wood, and straight across from the door, the room is split down the middle into two hallways going left and right, towards the rooms, I am guessing, by a large staircase that leads up to the second floor. The check-in desk sits to one side of the door while a fireplace with three large, orange, comfy couches surrounding it sits to the other. A lively, crackling fire is going in the fire place, casting a flickering glow on the couches.

And on the Sprite napping carelessly on one of them. The only parts of him I can see around the back of the couch are the stretch of his elbow sticking out from under his head and the top of his black, short hair.

The hair has grown about a quarter of an inch. And I cannot make out any of his features or catch even a whiff of his scent. But I know who it is instantly, and my heart pounds with a wild sort of delight against my ribcage as I recognize him.

It is the green-eyed Sprite who got away.

Chapter 12

If my Sterkte realize, I have no idea what they'll do. They lost him once; they won't underestimate him again. Truthfully, in his current state, that will not be a problem. I can't let them recognize him. They have already scoped out the whole room, that's for sure. They are more likely than not keeping an eye on him just to make sure he doesn't do anything suspicious. The only reason he hasn't been full-out tackled is because that lovely, leafy scent is nowhere to be sniffed.

But while I am busy desperately trying to come up with a distraction, Grant and Urion glance at each other in a sort of comprehension and, before I can stop them, are silently across the room, peering over the couch. My heart drops to my stomach.

Why do they have to be so perceptive?

In seconds Urion and Grant have dragged the Sprite to his feet, waking him from his slumber. The innkeeper calls something to them that I don't try to comprehend, because then I am stunned into a frozen silence as, while Grant steadies the Sprite, Urion pulls back his arm and punches the newfound escapee in the gut so hard that his eyes bug out and he doubles over.

I know what they're doing. They're temporarily handicapping him so that he doesn't fight them as they take him away, like they are doing now.

Like *hell* are they going to take him somewhere without my supervision! They obviously have bad intentions, and I don't like it at all.

I scurry away from the four remaining Sterkte before any of them can even get a pinkie on me and run back to the door from where we entered the inn. Grant and Urion pause in basically dragging the Sprite out the door when I reach them and Urion growls, "This doesn't concern you."

He has lost his mind. That is the only way he would ever say that to me right now. He lost his mind and has convinced himself that I lost mine instead.

I mean, do I *look* stupid?

“You must be joking.” I reply in an amazingly even tone, considering what he just said, and cross my arms. I raise my eyebrows daringly.

Urien glances behind me and then he and Grant continue out the door. I move to follow but...I can't. Panic blazes through me as I try and fail to move forward, or even move in general. *What's wrong with me?!* My mind screams for probably half a second before I understand perfectly what is going on. And then I am just mad.

I swear I'll kill them all one day.

Around me, the innkeeper hands the Sterkte the room signs and points them in the direction of our rooms, and then I am trailing after them, against everything in me. We turn left down the main-level hall and eventually get to our designated locations, but I am too far inside my head, fuming, so I do not pay attention.

When Beni has closed the door behind me—he is my roommate for the night; I didn't even get a chance to choose—the magic that controlled me disappears, and I can do nothing but stand in the middle of the room, glaring at nothing. I don't think I have ever been so angry with them before. Except maybe Soirus.

“You might want to shower.” Beni says simply before flopping onto the couch that sits next to the one window in our room.

My mind can't even register the insult. Or maybe I am just finally becoming immune to them after all these years.

Then a thought hits me, and I take a deep breath and try to calm down. *I can hear them*, I remind myself, *if I listen*. My Sterkte won't even block it—if they can—because I never told them!

Wow, it has been proven: I am a genius.

Keeping up my 'I'm Gonna Kill You' act, I slink to the bathroom and shut the door. *Should I get in the shower?* I contemplate. The noise might interrupt my hearing but it will make the others less suspicious of me. *Shower it is*. I strip off my clothes and climb into the running water, barely registering how it hasn't even warmed yet. Once inside, I stand with the droplets pouring onto the back of my neck and close my eyes to concentrate. First I try locating them with smell, but...something's off. I can't find them. *Relax*, I tell myself, remembering how well I had heard when I was lying on the top of the caravan just days ago. *Just relax*. I focus my attention.

It works instantly. The sounds around me are still prevalent, but noises from the other rooms and the lobbies increase by the second. I ignore them completely, only searching for something in the darkness that has fallen outside. I register the second my hearing reaches the barns where the horses snort and stomp, but I am still not picking up Urien's and Grant's voices. By the time I have strained to reach the edge of the trees that rest about a mile east, I am extremely frustrated and beginning to tire from the effort. I almost pull back, but then—

“—erkte that way, dumbass.” Urion snaps in annoyance. Oh jeez. But my heart flutters at my success. *Damn*, I’m good!

“I am not insulting you. I’m telling you the truth.” That is a lively, disgruntled voice I don’t recognize. That is the green-eyed Sprite. I try to picture the scene in my head, but I have no idea what expressions Grant or the green-eyed Sprite are making. I can only predict Urion’s face. And I don’t want to think about Urion. I shift in the shower.

“Well, we don’t believe you, so try again.” Grant says, in a way that makes it obvious that he is implying that they are not stupid.

The green-eyed Sprite replies in a way that implies that maybe they are. “How the *hell* was I supposed to know the lot of you were out there with the Nag?” My eyes flutter at his mention of me. “No Sprites ever go past the Meridian for anything good! I thought I would be safe to roam without having to run!” He exclaims in a frustration that I know very well. I have felt it myself plenty of times.

“So you can see,” Urion growls in a low, threatening tone through his teeth, “why you being in human territory has us where we are now.” I just *know* the Sterkte has put his face inches in front of the green-eyed Sprite’s. I tense.

Green-eyes does not sound too affected. “So you can see why seven Sterkte warriors surrounding a beautiful Nag woman would be of great interest to me.”

Did I hear correctly? I forget to listen for a second because I am still trying to process his sentence. Well, a small part of his sentence. A “beautiful Nag woman?” Is this a dream?

No one—not even Urion—has ever called me beautiful. I used to stare into the mirror at myself, wondering if anyone ever would. I gave up on that three years ago, finally deciding that maybe I just am not beautiful at all. I am too human to be beautiful.

But hearing the green-eyed Sprite say that I am beautiful...something changes in me then, like when I open my eyes, I will finally be able to hold my head up and feel attractive. Because, according to some—well, one—I actually am.

Focus! I snap at myself, and I zone in again.

“—got it?” Urion sounds extremely unhappy now. I guess complimenting me is just forbidden.

“I wouldn’t do that.” The Sprite sounds tired now, and maybe slightly offended. “I feel differently than they do about it all. As you might have guessed.” He adds quietly.

“I don’t think I believe you. Urion?” Grant waits for his input.

Though I missed part of the conversation, I still want to strangle him for not at least *trying* to have an open mind. I can already guess what the green-eyed Sprite is implying.

He does not hate—or even dislike—humans. Or me.

I could faint with surprise.

Actually, I realize, I could just faint because I am straining so much to listen. *Just a little longer, Nove, come on.* I try to encourage myself.

“You’ll stay with us.” Urion concludes. *Excuse me?* I think.

“I...I can’t. I can’t! I have placement exams in *two days!*” Green-eyes says in a slightly flustered tone.

He is going to the Institute. Just like me.

Urion and Grant huff. “*You?*” Urion laughs. I do not understand why he sounds so disbelieving. “For what? Wyshied classes?” He remarks in a way that makes it obvious that he thinks both the Sprite taking Wyshied classes and the Wyshied in general are ridiculous. I bristle even though I can never mention this to him for various reasons. He acts like he knows Green-eyes and knows he cannot make it into the Institute! Why is he such an ass?

“No,” the Sprite replies. “I am going to be a Sterkte warrior.” He says slowly, as if he still trying it out on his tongue.

The actual Sterkte chuckle mockingly at him. “We’ll see about that.” Grant says. But I barely hear this because I can’t do it anymore. I am losing all of the strength left in my bones to hear the conversation, and finally the outside world fades and I am left standing in the shower, drained and wet.

But everything is okay.

Because he is coming with us.



I sleep amazingly peacefully that night. We are on the road as soon as daylight dawns and I bask in its warm rays, my power reaching for the sun hungrily. The green-eyed Sprite whose name I *still* do not know now rides Keye and, for some reason, I am more comfortable with this than I know I would be if one of the Sterkte was riding him. But it still jabs me in the gut.

Rivvet is happy to see me. I am happy to see him, too. I really enjoy riding him, and I feel like we bonded over the horrific Meridian prickling experience.

When Beni lead me out to the stables, all of the others, including Green-eyes (who, by the way, now has a bruise around his eye and on his jaw), were already waiting staring at me. I pretended to be confused about his presence and looked at Soirus questioningly, but he shrugged, just expecting me to go with it.

I would not have just “gone with it” if I didn’t already know everything.

So I didn’t.

“What’s going on?” I asked in an authoritative voice, not letting a little shrug be the only explanation I got.

Soirus sighed. “We have a guest who will be accompanying us.”

At this, I examined Green-eyes. The side of his mouth tilted in a hint of a smile like it had at the festival and I had to look away not to return it this time. I glanced at Urion then and he was stiff. I stifled a grunt.

“Why?” I asked, turning back to Soirus instead. “What’s the problem?”

“The *problem* is that you know too little to question us, Nova.” Soirus said heatedly.

Oh, so he wanted to play *that* game?

I threw the next line in his face. “And whose fault was that, Soirus?” I inquired flatly. I mounted Rivvet and we went on our less than merry way.

Now I am completely aware of Green-eyes. I can smell his scent clearly, the aroma surrounding me like a fresh, dynamic tree. Just being in his presence makes me feel better. Knowing that someone else is going to go through the same tests as I am soon is comforting.

So why haven’t I talked to him yet?

I try to answer my own question but stop myself short. Wait.

I don’t get shy. I am *not* a shy person. There is *no way* that Green-eyes is going to change that today.

Now I *have* to talk to him.

The next time we bring the horses to a trot to give them a break from cantering, I force myself to do it.

I locate him using his scent and then slow Rivvet so that the Sprite comes up next to me. Beni tries to push me forward again, but when I threaten to jump onto Keye *with* Green-eyes, he finally quits.

I turn my full attention to the Sprite then, and find that he is looking at me amusedly with those lax, grassy eyes. My pulse quickens. I ignore it.

“I never did get your name.” I begin, tilting my head a bit sideways.

He smiles then, in a way that seems to make everything else come alive around him, and tells me. “It is Leveren Riviere. Just call me Lev.”

I inspect him for a second before speaking again, and he waits patiently, his calm eyes scrutinizing something over my head. “I’m Nova...” I say distractedly, becoming interested in what he’s so taken by behind me. I turn to look but I see nothing out of place. I spin back towards Lev. “What are you looking at?” I ask, slightly irritated.

One of Lev's hands rubs the back of his neck confusedly as he admits, "I just...I am used to you looking very...different." He tells me gently. Then he squints. "Is this your actual coloring?"

I look down at my hands then. They're still light! I had forgotten all about my appearance transformation until now. None of the Sterkte had reminded me.

"No!" I say quickly. "I...it's easier—being here—looking like this." I explain, running a hand along my opposite arm. I'm embarrassed to be looking so much unlike myself and I glance at my Sterkte, wondering if changing back to my normal caramel skin and white hair will have them nagging me.

Lev nods. "I'm not saying it looks bad. You're still..." He pauses, and I raise my eyebrows, waiting for him to finish. He doesn't. "It took me a second to recognize you. But no one could forget those eyes." He meets my gaze then, smiling like he is remembering something.

Something like the solstice festival, perhaps?

I note that I feel the same way about his eyes, but I don't mention it. "I don't *want* to look like someone else." I tell him truthfully. "But to look like the..." I cut off and glance around to make sure our small group is only one close by. "Like the Nag..." Lev meets my eyes and gives me an understanding nod.

"Though it is pretty obvious that you are a half-blood to any Sprite. Maybe if you just change your hair, you won't have to worry about looking as different." He suggests lightly.

I blink at this. I have to say, he is right. There is no way I will ever be mistaken as a full-blooded Sprite. I am too small and my scent is too strange. Changing my skin will not make a difference.

I am not used to complimenting others. I don't intend on getting used to it now. I just will my skin to return to normal and look at my Sterkte to see their reactions. Beni rolls his eyes and Urion looks highly irritated (to my great pleasure), but otherwise, they do not even twitch. I grin and turn back to Lev.

He is staring me again. "It was that easy for you? You must be a Vel. Is that all you can do?" He inquires curiously, leaning forward slightly in fascination.

My Sterkte tense. I ignore them. *A Vel. So a Vel can change itself.*

"I don't know." I shrug, completely honest. Then I narrow my eyes. "So what are *you*, then? What can *you* do?"

Lev sits up tall and grins, looking back towards Grant and Urion, and I follow his gaze. They are gripping their reins in deep dissatisfaction. I look at Lev. This must be how he escaped before. My toes tingle with anticipation.

"I am a Reuk. I can eliminate scents." He informs me rather proudly. "We are the rarest form of Sprite. There has not been one in over seven hundred years. They do not teach about the

Reuk in schools anymore; the occurrence of one is so improbable that they do not find it necessary. That is why your Sterkte had no idea what to do when I utilized my abilities in Glistendane.”

I listen with fascination but try not to let him see how much this interests me. “That’s why I did not smell you at the festival either. Until...” I let him finish for me, knowing he understands what I am asking.

“I directed my scent at you.” He confesses. “I had been watching you from the second that I saw your hair—I hope that doesn’t creep you out too much—and when you started coming further into town, I wanted to see if you actually were a half-blood. So I sent you my scent. Unfortunately, I was so focused on you that I let it drift a little too far and your Sterkte got a nice whiff, as well.” He frowns at this.

But I am stuck a little bit farther back in his account of that evening. “Why didn’t you just smell for me? To tell whether I am a half-blood?” I ask. That would obviously make the most sense. Any other Sprite would. *Does.*

At this, Lev looks away, his face obtaining a slightly disappointed expression. Then he says softly, “I am nose-blind. I cannot smell other Sprites.” He says. But he looks at me almost roguishly from lowered lashes, making my chest squeeze, and adds, “But it sure as hell makes me a better fighter.” Then he glances pointedly towards my Sterkte. Urion snorts.

I cannot even imagine. Not being able to smell my food? The ocean breeze? That lovely, leafy perfume he radiates? I would be missing so much of his persona! It would be horrible!

I highly dislike how attached I am to Lev’s smell. I need to break myself of this immediately.

I haven’t spoken in a while, and Lev smiles in amusement. “No more questions? I was so sure you would come armed and ready. If not, I have a few—”

“Oh, I have plenty of questions, trust me.” I cut him off fervently. He smiles at this. I wonder in annoyance if I’ll ever get used to his smiles. “Let’s start off with why you—” I am beginning when Soirus *rudely* interrupts. As always.

“We need to pick up the pace!” He calls to us. I glare at him though he does not meet my gaze, but I know he did it purposely.

But when I glance unhappily back at Lev as we push the horses into a canter again, his bright green eyes shine with that innocent light that calmed my soul that night in a dusty, happy town.

And, for now, I am at ease.



Only Sprites can smell the specific, identifiable odors that living things give off. Most Sprite senses are more advanced than those of the humans, which is why Sprites are the only prized

warriors in the kingdom. I do find it to be unfair, but it is unfair because we cannot choose what we are born as. But, in just about every way, being born as a Sprite is found to be superior.

Even I'll admit that my Sprite qualities are the most useful. The only thing that my human half has helped me with has been talking to humans. Seeing as humans make no decisions about the fate of the country, this helps me not at all. I have yet to be treated as an equal by those who will make a difference.

Although I have yet to see any kind of condescension or superiority in Lev's miraculous eyes. He seems to be more amazed at my culture and abilities than anything. I do not know what to make of it. Even Zeheb, someone who prized knowledge, was not nearly so interested in me as a half-blood or a Nag. He taught me nothing of my mother's heritage and close to nothing of the ways of Sprites. He even failed to inform me of the many different titles given to Sprites possessing the same powers. It is like he wants me to fail in claiming my throne!

Knowing that smartass, he probably does. I think discontentedly. He sure hates me enough for it to be true. And I know the Sterkte are aware of how uninformed I am, but letting Lev find out that I know all of nothing about Sprites would be like willingly digging my grave and climbing inside. It would just be too humiliating to endure while breathing.

But another part of me tries to convince the stubborn part of me that Lev has been the only Sprite to eagerly give me important information. Except for his blindness, but who would be eager about that? I mean, seriously. That sucks. It was exactly my problem while training in the Hallows.

Actually, now that I remember our conversation, he *expects* me to have questions. Most likely about him, but still. *He probably knows Urion and Grant did not tell me anything about what happened last night.* I realize. *He probably knows the Sterkte don't usually tell me anything at all.*

This makes me search through my memory for that moment, when I had first seen Lev and he was walking away from us. He had turned back to me and inclined his head.

Like he was nodding to his Kaiser. I remember thinking.

But maybe I have this all wrong. Maybe he knows exactly who I am and believes the Sterkte tell me everything. Maybe he thinks I am asking about him because I am the rightful heir and I want to know about my people. Or maybe he pities me because he is loyal to Mavern and knows I will never be accepted as the true Kaiser.

It upsets me, thinking about this last possibility, more than I imagined it would. I remember that scent, those eyes, that smile, and I don't full-heartedly believe Lev could be that way.

But he is a Sprite. And Sprites do not accept half-bloods so easily. Mischievous blue eyes come to mind and I clench the reins in my fists.

I have learned that the hard way.

Chapter 13

Dinner is had next to the most brilliant lake that I have ever had the glory of witnessing. I spend half of the time just staring at the water, listening to the birds and bugs, enjoying the low hum made by the waterfall to the left of us. The fresh breeze is nice, as well, but with Lev's stupid delightful smell, it does not matter.

Which is another thing I do half the time we are eating—thinking about Lev. It would be irritating if he wasn't so damn nice. But he is untrustworthy, so I do not allow myself to like him as much as I could.

I hear footsteps and recognize Urion's vanilla scent before he sits next to me. I am sitting separately from everyone else, not wanting to be disturbed with their presence while eating. Of course, Lev doesn't count, but he still has left me alone for now. I am slightly disappointed, I will not lie. I have so many questions!

"We don't trust him." He says to me, picking at the grass. He watches me as I consider this.

I decide not to tell him that I am not so stupid to trust Lev so easily, either. "And why not?" I ask instead.

Urion looks annoyed that I'd ask, but frankly, I couldn't care less how he feels right now. I'm too overwhelmed with other problems. Like figuring out Lev's angle. And getting into the Institute. And what powers I possess. Lev's got me thinking about that, now, too.

I do briefly congratulate myself on not craving his touch in the last twenty-four hours, though. I am making some serious headway in my diet.

"He knows too much about you, Nova. He knows you are of the Nag. He knows you came from human territory. He knows we protect you because you are important in some way. He knows *too much*. It is dangerous for all of us." Something new has crept into his voice, at first so subtle that I don't acknowledge its presence. But, by the end, I hear it loud and clear.

I could slap him, I am so angry. They must be insane if they think I'll let them do it.

"Don't." I say, quiet and hard and sure. Every bit of my voice proves my bloodlines.

"Nova, we can't risk—" He tries to get me to understand, but there is no way I would even *try* to understand this.

"Leave." I can barely contain my rage. I wrap my arms around my knees, staring hard at the water. I can't look at him.

“*Nova*, you’re not—” Now he is getting angry.

I don’t give a damn how angry he thinks he is. He needs to think again about who gets to be angry in this situation, because it sure as hell is not him.

“*Now*.” There is no question that this is an order. And with this final order, I have put him in a very fragile situation. If he tries to convince me, he is disobeying me and proving that he does not actually see me as the rightful heir. If he does not listen, *he* is the one that is untrustworthy.

Urion growls and stands stiffly before storming away. I try to calm my burning skin. My power has multiplied tenfold in the last ten seconds, and now I am putting all of my effort into calming down and keeping myself from boiling over. My ears are ringing and my hands trembling as I glare at the blue waves lapping the small, rocky shore. Why they would even *think* about doing that....

“You,” A calm, attentive voice says behind me, “are more likely to get into the Institute than I am, at this rate.” Lev settles down two feet away from me, near where Urion sat, and smooths his hand thoughtfully over the place where Urion had broken off pieces of the grass. Just him being there seems to make the grass a more vibrant green; the broken strands less noticeable. “You have as much courage as the best warriors in Saam.” He continues, looking at me with a small smile. “Even I can’t bring myself to talk to the Sterkte like that.”

I am not like you, I think to myself, but I acknowledge how true this is in more ways than just my mother’s blood.

“*Nova*.” Lev says, in a way that implies he is waiting for me to look at him. Slowly, I turn my head and meet those lively green eyes. At once, my skin is cool and my power is tranquil, my heart feeling at peace and strangely wild at the same time. I don’t understand how he does it. I don’t like that he can. “You don’t have to protect me. I am not exactly sure why you would anyway. We are both in the same situation, aren’t we?”

I stare at him, not saying anything. Just breathing in that lovely smell.

“Why are you so important to them, *Nova*?” He rewords his last question, not pushing me but not letting me off the hook so easily. I turn my head away, unsure of what to say. “What did you do?”

Well, I know how to answer this question.

So I look into those brilliant eyes and say simply, “I was born.”

He continues to observe me for a minute. After that, he stops prodding and just sits there with me, two feet away, and we watch the water ripple in the sunlight, until it is time to continue our journey to the Institute.



I end up avoiding Lev for the rest of the day. It is under my own advisement, not Urion's, but it gets on my nerves that it seems like I am listening to him.

I'm not. I hate him. I'm not.

Him and those stupid, calculating blue eyes and that stupid, muscular body.

Crap, I need to stop thinking or else I might start craving him again. And I was doing so well.

"Grant, what are you called, huh? I know what you can do so you might as well tell me now. I'm just gonna find out later." I say to the blond Sterkte. He stiffens at my acknowledgement but listens anyway. He's bored, too.

"A Beskerm." He says shortly, not even sparing me a glance.

I don't know *why* he acts like he doesn't like me. We all know it's a farce.

"Beskerm. Hmm...Does it run in the family? Is it supposed to?" I prod, holding in my laugh as his shoulders slump at my constant pestering, like he has become a victim of some horribly annoying little child.

I have to admit; knowing so little about the Sprite world makes me feel like I am a little child who has yet to get to the class that teaches everyone about the many powers of the Saam Sprites. Except the class I am going to is much more advanced than that. So I think that I have a right to be pestering him so much.

"I don't talk about my family." Is Grant's reply. I frown.

This simply will not do.

"Oh, come on. I'm not even really asking about them—I just want to know if powers are genetic. It's a yes or no question! I could not care less about your life's story, Grant Turriss." I tell him honestly.

He jerks his head around to look at me in surprise then. "How do you know my last name?" He asks suspiciously.

I grin wickedly and shrug. "You told me once." I lie, patting Rivvet's neck.

"No, I didn't." He says with complete certainty.

I smile wider. "Why do you care," I begin, my eyes scanning the sky in a somewhat-made-up fascination. It really is beautiful, though. Such a light, wonderful blue. "If I know your last name? You know mine. Isn't that more dangerous than me knowing yours?" I say before I realize that I probably just accidentally exposed myself to Lev. Or at least made him about a thousand times more aware of my importance to the Sterkte.

I can physically *feel* the holes Urion's laser eyes are burning into my flesh at this moment. Grant looks completely displeased. I internally sigh.

Besides. Lev is the least of my issues, for the time being. My eyes slide cautiously over to the left where he rides Keye, lazily running the long fingers of his right hand through the horse's dark mane as he watches our surroundings with acute attentiveness. Which is why he notices when I look at him, and he easily meets my gaze and lifts the side of his mouth in my direction. I quickly look back at Grant to keep my sanity.

When he is around, he calms the fire burning in my stomach, but starts a whole different kind of storm in my chest. I am afraid that if I get too close to him, I will be in even more danger with him than I am currently in with Urion. Though Lev is proving to be a great distraction from that.

Which is the whole problem in the first place.

Ugh, this is impossible.

Why do I have to *feel*?

What *do* I feel?

Let's never think about this again, shall we? I tell myself, focusing on Grant once more. "I think I make a valid point." I conclude.

Grant growls and glares at me. The growl would have been sexy if he didn't look so menacing, I'll give him that. I raise my eyebrows.

"Powers are inherited. I inherited mine from my father." He replies at last.

"Fascinating." I say with the slightest sarcasm. I had already guessed this, anyhow. The inherited part, not which parent Grant got his Beskerm-ness from. Then I get very bold. "So my father was a Vel, then?"

A deathly stillness falls over the Sterkte then, and Soirus yanks his horse to a stop, the rest of the group scrambling to follow. I stare at him defiantly, and a few feet away, Lev examines the lot of us inquisitively.

Soirus turns his horse to face mine and slowly approaches me. I think this is meant to be intimidating, and it would be if I didn't dislike his existence so much.

I still believe he killed Xander.

I should probably tell someone my theory soon.

Unfortunately, the only someone I want to tell my theory is the only someone that has not ridiculed me once and the one someone whom I know the least about and knows the least about me.

Leveren.

So I will instead continue to keep my mouth shut.

Oh, the struggle.

Soirus bores his eyes into mine and says in a low, quiet, threatening voice that makes me wonder if he has forgotten who I am. But he can't have forgotten because we are talking about my father. "We *do not*. Mention. Your father. On this side of the Meridian. From now on, your *mother* was the Sprite. *Do you understand?*" He leans in to make sure I am feeling the full effect of his words.

To my great displeasure, I am feeling the full effect of his words. I can tell, out of everything that he has told me, that this is the one absolute thing that I must follow in order to make it anywhere. In order to make it.

They cannot think my father was the Reign Kaiser.

They cannot think that I am the Reign heir.

I nod unhappily to Soirus, and he sits up straight and stern and moves back to the front of the line to continue leading us towards the Institute.

No one talks for a long while, until finally, Grant answers the question I have long given up on.

"You did not inherit the Vel from your father." He tells me in a deep grumble. "We don't know where it came from." He states.

I look at him, searching for the lie, but there is none.

They don't know why I am a Vel.

That familiar, aching emptiness engulfs me then, and I am overcome by it as we ride for the rest of the day in silence.

No one knows.

I am more alone than I ever imagined.



We ride well into the night before coming upon another inn. We go inside and get our rooms, and then split accordingly. Lev goes to rest under the watchful eyes of Soirus and Beni, and I can honestly say that I feel sorry for the Sprite. No one deserves that kind of torture.

I am too hollow to notice who is sent to be the lookout in my room until the door closes and we are alone. A whole chorus of swear words races through my brain at that moment.

"I want someone else." I say as strongly as I can. It's no working very well.

Urion ignores my request. "Why are you so attached to that Riviere Sprite?" He asks in a frosty tone. His eyes are like ice in the small, dark room. I sit on the bed, exhausted from the day's hard riding and arguing.

I lean back on my palms and look up at him through narrowed eyelids. "Why do I have to be attached to not want you to kill him?" I inquire calmly. I hope.

Urion moves closer, irritation swelling off of him in waves. I tilt my head in amazement. Is he... *jealous*? I must be delusional after all.

“He threatens everything you have worked for—everything you hope to *achieve*! Even *you* should see that!”

What the hell does *that* mean?

I open my mouth to say exactly this but Urion shakes his head and keeps going. “You are so self-centered and naïve and ignorant sometimes! You don’t even *know* the guy!” He bellows.

I stand up, my face burning with anger. My hands ball into fists as I yell at him. “So I guess you’ve got him all figured out then? You know *exactly* what he wants from the humans, *exactly* why he was in human territory, *exactly* why he is the only one that can look at me without disgust? Well then, Mr. “I Know It All,” please, *do tell!*” My face is inches from his now, my eyes burning and my chest heaving. His vanilla scent is *not* helping.

He smiles in a way that seems cruel but soft at the same time. “I know that he is not as non-judgmental as you seem to think he is.” He answers in a relaxed voice. “And I know that he is playing you like a fiddle with those eyes of his.” He reaches up and brushes a hand against my collarbone. I burn where he touches me, and I want it. Oh, no.

“What are you talking about?” I ask angrily, but I am already weakening as his fingers move along my shoulder and down my arm.

“He didn’t tell you, did he?” Urion smiles knowingly at me as he leans forward and brushes his nose against mine. “Maybe you should listen to me more often.” He suggests, and I want to say no, but he is already pulling the hem of my tunic up, and I am already letting him.

Urion knows he does not have to explain what he means to me. He knows that, already, I am doubting Lev and losing faith in my own opinion of the Sprite. He knows me too well.

I would use the emptiness as my excuse for giving myself to him again, and it is, but that is not the most prominent reason for my relapse.

The real reason is because I am afraid.

I am afraid that the one Sprite I thought could be something true to me does not exist at all.



Losing an almost-friend is an awful feeling.

I did not realize I was *this* attached to Lev. Having to suffer (but enjoy) his pine tree scent while we travel but not acknowledge him whatsoever is proving to be an enormous struggle. I want to know what Urion was talking about last night, but I don’t want to talk to Lev. Well, I do, but I don’t.

It’s complicated.

Lev is well aware of the change; that much is obvious. He looks confused, but he does not try to talk to me. He just keeps Keye to my back left side. Smart Sprite.

But, if anyone knows me well, then anyone knows that I do not do well with not speaking my mind.

We stop for lunch outside of a small town near an odd park with obstacles that little Sprite kids play on. I wish I could join them.

Lev does.

I ignore him for a while, staring into the trees across the street, drumming my hands on the table. I watch a large brown bird sail overtop of the leaves, and my enhanced vision recognizes the night bird easily.

This is when I lose my cool control.

I scramble to my feet and head straight for the park. Thorn and Beni try to grab for me but I shoot them a look filled with daggers and they hesitate long enough for me to make it halfway to the obstacles. They stay close on my heels, though, and I want to trip them both. Seeing them land face-first on the ground would fix all kinds of problems.

Some of the older kids notice me—probably my scent—and snicker unhappily at my advancement. Lev, being ever so observant, spots me quickly and swiftly jumps down from the deck he was sitting on, talking to a Sprite boy who cannot be more than five, and practically runs towards me, his eyes wide. Beni and Thorn prepare to pounce. I cross my arms.

“Do you have a death wish? Their parents would *literally* kill you if you tried going on that playground!”

“I have my bodyguards.” I reply, as if my Sterkte would have even let me get that far. “But I got what I wanted, so it doesn’t matter.” I turn to the Sterkte. “Go away.”

They stay put.

“Fine.” I huff, grabbing Lev’s arm roughly. “*I’ll* go away.” I stomp to a small table about a hundred feet away and shove Lev onto the bench on one side, very mindful of the fact that he could have easily stopped me at any time.

Why doesn’t he ever stop me?

The Sterkte follow but, amazingly, stay far enough away that I can pretend they are not intruding and focus on my green-eyed target.

“*What* aren’t you telling me?” I snarl at him, standing over his large body with my hands on my hips and my eyes ablaze. “Why were you in human territory? What do you want with them? *What* aren’t you telling me?!”

I am so frustrated with being ignorant. I am tired of not knowing and not understanding and being lied to. Everyone is that way to me, and I can’t deal with it anymore. If he is just

another one of them, I don't need any more acquaintances like that. The Sterkte can do what they like with him. I don't care.

A pang in my chest at the thought of the Sterkte doing what they want with him tells me loud and clear how much I actually do care, but I push it aside. *Far* aside.

Lev's eyes discern my facial expression for a long while, and I wait (rather impatiently) for him to start talking. When he takes a deep breath, I feel myself straightening in eagerness.

"I think what Urion has been convincing you I have lied about," He begins. I am put in a state of shock just by the fact that he knows Urion is behind this. Are we that transparent? No, because Soirus has not said anything... "is my family." I freeze at this, staring at Lev as he stares at me, those beautiful eyes unwavering. "My father," He says slowly, "is an Aanleg Trustee," Now Lev takes a breath, as if he is finally nervous, "for Kaiser Mavern." He finishes, watching me closely.

It is like a stab to the stomach. Tenfold. I stand there, barely breathing, barely seeing, as my mind whirls.

Mavern. Kaiser... Kaiser Mavern. He is no Kaiser! He does not deserve the title of the Reign family! I think angrily. I glare at Lev, my stomach beginning to churn as my power grows stronger and angrier with every word. "So you are loyal to...*Kaiser Mavern?*" I ask through gritted teeth.

I know I should not focus on this; should not let him know how important this matter is to me, but I can't help it. I need to know if he is willing to blindly follow Mavern just like every other Sprite that stayed when my father was killed. When my *family* was killed.

Hopefully he just interprets my interest as a Nag human hiding above the Meridian who does not support a Kaiser that treats her unfairly.

I don't think that is too far-fetched.

Lev's eyes go round and he looks all around us before whispering, "Why would you ask me that?" in astonishment.

I just purse my lips and wait. His mouth hangs open and then he slowly shakes his head in disbelief and looks down at the ground, a bitter laugh sounding from his throat. Then he looks at me beneath long, dark lashes with eyes lit in amusement and...something I can't place.

"I am loyal," he starts carefully, glancing back at my Sterkte. I realize what he thinks has to say before he says it. "to the Kaiser." He pronounces, nodding.

But I keep staring at him, and eventually he meets my gaze again, and I see his amusement, and that unidentifiable something, but also...

Defiance. The same kind of rebellion that lives inside of me; inside of my heart; that grows every time I see my people, my land, my kingdom. That grows every time I feel that

stirring in my stomach, telling me I am close. I am close to where I am supposed to be. Where my Sterkte protectors have been fighting for me to be.

And I know Lev is not loyal to Mavern at all.

He is with me.

He just doesn't know it yet.

Chapter 14

Leveren being related to one of Mavern's Aanleg is definitely a flaw of his.

But it is also a strength. I can use this. I can use him.

I am ashamed that I am thinking about using Lev. It makes me feel funny, like I am betraying him somehow.

I am also ashamed that I am ashamed that I am thinking about using Lev. This is my *kingdom* on the line, here! Lev can help me to save my kingdom! He should feel *honored*, not betrayed! I should not have to *apologize*!

Of course, I am only fighting with myself, because all of this is happening in my head. It is really distracting me, too, because I am supposed to be going to sleep.

I didn't talk to Lev for the rest of the day, which made Urion ecstatic, I'm sure, but it was not because I was mad at him still. We had come to an unspoken agreement at the picnic table where Mavern is concerned, and, though we did not talk afterwards, I now know we are both on the same page.

This gives me a giddy feeling in my chest, and I throw my covers back and jump out of bed, heading straight for the bathroom, to try and distract myself from why I am feeling this way.

I have barely shut the door when I see a tall, dark figure standing outside of the window. I almost scream for Thorn, but that wonderful aroma sweeps over me and I inhale deeply before slinking over and trying to quietly open the window. I have no idea if Thorn's terrific hearing can detect the noise. I look skeptically at Lev and he grins.

"Soundproof." He motions to the door, and I nod. I notice his bruises from Urion's fist are healed and gone now. It's been, what, a day? How I wish I could heal that quickly.

"What are you doing? How did you even get away from the Sterkte?" The only way those Sterkte would have let him leave would be over their dead bodies.

Maybe they're dead.

I guess the thought makes me a little remorseful. I was not exactly the kindest to them, though it was their own damn fault. Should I say something for them? Probably the honorable speech most give...I don't get very far in wondering, though, because Lev interrupts my thoughts.

"I drugged them." Lev replies instead. I am only faintly disappointed. I am more impressed than anything. How he even managed to get drugs past them in the first place is astounding. Then he points to his nose. Right. "No matter what they learned about herbs in the Institute, they can't detect them if they can't smell them." He winks.

I cannot even try to hold back the giggles that are taking over my body. "They are going to *kill* you." I snicker delightfully.

Lev looks at me skeptically. "Not with their track record, they won't." When I laugh even harder, having to cover my mouth so I don't get too loud, his mouth lifts into a smile.

His eyes take in my night shirt and trousers, and he seems satisfied. I settle down enough to raise an eyebrow at him. He smiles again. "I have not had much time to practice my fighting skills in the past couple of days." He explains to me, looking around to make sure nothing suspicious is happening outside. Then he looks at me sheepishly and says, "I was hoping that you would be willing to practice with me. If you're not too tired, that is." He rubs the back of his neck anxiously as I think it over. "I'm afraid if I ask the Sterkte, they'll use it as an excuse to handicap me in multiple ways." He adds.

He's probably right about the Sterkte, but he is definitely right about needing to practice. We are going to be at the Institute soon, and exam day will be upon us faster than we expected. Without plenty of practice, we'll be doomed.

Plus: I have never fought against a Sprite that cannot smell. I had never even thought about it being a factor until recently.

A little change never hurt anyone.

I'll pretend that's true for now.

But first: "How do you know I'm going to the Institute to be a Sterkte warrior? What if I want to be a Wyshied?" I don't even mention the Aanleg, since that is so improbable. But it's true—did he just assume I am going for Sterkte training?

Lev eyes me in a way that says I am underestimating him. I didn't realize I was. "You move like you have been trained in the arts of speed and precision. I saw how graceful your dancing was." He points out, taking my mind back to that beautiful evening in a very different place. I fight to keep myself from blushing. "I see how strong and observant you are. You have to be going for Sterkte training. Aren't you?" Now his tone is slightly unsure but mostly convinced.

I bite the side of my lip, contemplating this. I am processing all of this information, but my mind keeps lingering on the fact that he has been paying attention. To *me*. And apparently, I have been unknowingly acting like the Sterkte all along.

Is Soirus hearing this? Oh, right, he's knocked out.

Oh well.

I take a deep breath.

"Alright," I agree, nimbly maneuvering out the window and placing my bare feet onto the soft, wet grass next to him. Soirus would kill me himself if he could right now. All of my Sterkte would. Maybe that's why I feel little guilt in giving in. "Lead the way."

Lev walks about twenty feet from the adjacent side of the inn and stops next to a young, gangly tree. "Here is good." He states, waiting for my approval.

I furrow my brow. "So close to the inn?" *What if someone hears us?*

"I'd rather not be impaled once the Sterkte come to, yeah? Might slow down my progress towards becoming one a little." He crouches into his fighting stance.

How long will his drug last? "Right." I concede. "Just a little." I move so that I am copying his position, keeping an eye on his every move in case he wants to try tricking me. "I'm just gonna let you know now," I say lightly, "that I'm not used to smelling my attackers either."

I expect him to say something along the lines of "Well, that's even better for me! You don't know how to use your biggest weapon!"

But instead, Lev smiles, his green eyes catching in the starlight, his silhouette illuminated by the moon as we carefully begin to circle each other. Then he says softly, "Then it's a pretty even match, isn't it?"

I am so intrigued that I can't suppress the smile this time.

And with that, he launches himself with full force at me.



I had not considered being afraid of Lev ever before just now—now that he is almost upon me. I slip away easily but feel my adrenaline spike at the provocation. He is not smiling anymore: his face has taken on a deep look of concentration that might've made me grin if it was not directed at me. I try to muster up the same amount of focus as he advances again and I block him. It stays like this for a few minutes, with him throwing punches and kicks and me blocking them. We are moving fast—faster than I have ever practiced before. The effort burns my muscles but it feels good, especially when I note that I am keeping up. I guess Soirus taught me something about combat after all. If he was capable of being proud of someone other than himself, I think he would be proud of me now.

I feel something come alive in my gut and I desperately squash it down. *No*. Using my power now would be cheating. I need to know I can do this without it. I clench my teeth with the effort it takes to keep up with Lev and not let my magic get out of hand.

Finally I manage to turn the tables, using the tree behind him as an asset, and now Lev goes on the defense. Unfortunately, he stays that way for about five seconds before besting me enough to switch sides again, but I have to give myself credit. I am not a complete failure like Soirus always said I was in our lessons.

“Is that all you’ve got?” I tease breathlessly, ducking and stepping back to avoid his fist and his sweeping foot. Lev blinks as if comprehending what I said, and then lets out a breathy chuckle.

“I’m not Sterkte yet, Nove.” He reminds me almost playfully, taking a jab at my ribs but missing when I lean sideways. Truthfully, I am proud that I managed to move in time, because hearing him call me ‘Nove’ made me almost immobile with delight. He has a (sort of) nickname for me. The only other nicknames I have ever had have not been in the least bit pleasant. I am used to handling those—I am not used to dealing with pleasantries. Though I can’t complain.

He makes it so hard for me not to trust his motives. Even locked in battle.

I am handling my breathing just like Soirus has yelled at me about various times, and slowly I begin to get my own hits in, aiming for the weak spots near his neck and torso, where the nerves are. I am not hitting them exactly, but I am making contact, which is a great start in my opinion. I do notice the difference in his choices because of his blindness to smells, especially since I am using my new strength to help me now. Where the Sterkte would have known my hand was about to land, Lev has more trouble. He has to be much more observant to sight and sound and every little movement I make, which makes his job harder but also is making him a much better opponent. I can admit that I find it very interesting. I also wonder if, without my sense of smell, I could be that good at fighting him.

We did not come to an agreement on when to stop or take a break. The combat continues for a while, each of us growing more tired every minute but neither of us giving in. I am dripping with sweat and I can see that he is, too, and I am just relieved that I am keeping up with his pace. He may not be an actual Sterkte yet, but his fighting skills are plenty good enough for me to believe that he is going to be one in the future.

And I’m keeping up! I think to myself joyously.

My joy lasts for about a second more before a cinnamon smell washes over me and a swift form is between us. Lev tries to duck, but it does nothing to keep Thorn from throwing Lev through the air. I gasp as he slams into the gravel road at least thirty feet away.

Thorn zips towards him, and all I can do is watch in shock as Lev launches himself to his feet and the two become trapped in their own battle, Lev mostly moving swiftly out of the way of Thorn’s blows. I jolt back to reality and run towards them, seeing quite clearly in Thorn’s movements that he is set to kill Lev.

Why are they so damn protective? I am not a weakling!

“Thorn, stop! Thorn!” I shout angrily, halting a short distance away. I have a feeling Thorn’s fists could cause a lot of damage if they make contact with Lev or myself. He threw Lev a *bit* too far for me to be comfortable interfering.

Though, at this rate, I might *have* to interfere.

The power I clamped down on earlier is rising as Thorn ignores my yelling, and I circle them warily, staying about ten feet away with my hands rolled into fists, trying to hold down the storm in me. *We are too close, I know. I will not be able to hold it back. It is too strong.*

My vision is flashing, that awful dream fading in and out, and when I turn my head up, the crescent moon is becoming more glaringly red. “Thorn!” I repeat. I try squeezing my eyes shut but that only brings back the eclipse. It is coming way too fast; taking only seconds to emerge. I am shaking now, standing in the middle of the road with my body trembling violently. “Thorn!” I try one final time, the cry more frantic than anything.

But he stops. Not because of my yells, I know. No—because I am glowing. My glowing vision has turned everything to daytime, the startled blue-green of Lev’s eyes entrancing, Thorn’s spiky brown hairs sharp as knives. Everything about me is burning, my organs and my lungs drowning in the dark ocean within, and I fall to my knees in agony, gasping and tangling my hands in my hair.

It came too fast. Too fast.

Thorn can do nothing for me now. He violently yanks Lev back behind the tree we were using before, squinting through the blinding light searing from me.

I put my hands on the rough gravel in front of me, trying to steady myself, my eyes watery but on fire.

Everyone will see, I think in despair. Everyone will know I am not just a half-blood. My hair is white again, brighter than ever. Everyone will know.

And then it is there. Its black eyes force themselves into my gaze, and I focus with everything I have as it tucks its wings into its back. Darkness creeps from the edges of my eyes, and I feel like freezing air is being wrapped around my skin and the water in my chest is evaporating. I am getting weaker and weaker, but I hold on to that darkness; I force myself to give it everything.

Then, white eyes as bright as the stars are the last thing I see before I fall to the rocky ground and the darkness takes me away.



He’s dead.

That is my first, painful thought when I awaken the next day and see a tall, dark-haired form with ears sticking out of his head lying on the floor.

They killed him. I feel numb. They killed him because he saw me.

Dark eyes suddenly block my view of Lev's body and Soirus checks my expression. "You are extremely lucky we have an extra day. Otherwise I would have woken you much sooner." He tells me discontentedly.

I am not listening to him. I'm just trying to see Lev again. "You...you killed him?" It was supposed to be a statement, but it comes out as a hoarse question. Probably because I need my theory to be confirmed.

Soirus frowns at me, confused beyond all belief, and then he turns around, glancing down at the ground, then back at me. His confusion turns to annoyance. A lot of annoyance. "Riviere is not dead, Nova. Unless you are telling us that you wouldn't mind it?" He says with way too much hope.

My chest swells happily and I close my eyes in relief. Then I remember the last part of his answer and glare at him. I don't think he needs any more of an answer. "What did you do to him, then?" I ask accusingly.

Soirus lifts his chin angrily as a different Sterkte enters the room and moves to stand next to him.

Urion looks over me before replying. "He'll be fine." His tone is regretful. I roll my eyes. "Though he'll probably have a concussion." Urion shrugs and crosses his arms at this.

I jerk up, my eyes going wide and my mouth dropping open. Exhaustion eats at my bones but I ignore it because this is too important. "*What?* He can't have a concussion! The placement exam is...tomorrow? Tomorrow! How is he supposed to get into the Institute with a *concussion?!*" I squeal, pounding my fists on the bed. Doing this makes me feel somewhat childish, but this is what these Sterkte drive me to. There is no way to keep one's sanity when surrounded by them *all the time*. It is just not possible.

Urion shuffles towards Lev's figure and nudges his side with the toe of his boot. I glare between Urion and Soirus, the two Sprites that have made this trip both bearable and impossible to deal with. The two Sprites who are the greatest danger to me, for the time being.

Then I glance at Lev. What makes him any different? At least I have known Urion and Soirus for years, and they know and have accepted (supposedly) who I am. But Lev? He has no idea who my father was. All he knows is that I am half Sprite, half Nag. And that I am important.

Unless he has guessed more about me.

Either way, if he plans to tell his uncle anything about me, then I will be headed to the stars before I can even see those leafy green eyes again.

If I say that I at least want to be able to see his eyes once more before Mavern kills me, am I being a little too dramatic? I wonder to myself.

Yes. I am. So I won't admit it then.

I'll just know it's true.

"He was never going to be allowed to take the exam, anyway. It does not matter for him." Soirus says simply.

Um, *excuse* me? Not going to be allowed? Under whose authority?!

I laugh loudly at this. "That's funny. Because that's a joke. You're joking. Right? You must be joking." My brain cannot process his statement as anything more than a joke.

"We have told you repeatedly that he is a threat to our cause. He will not be leaving our custody, Nova. He will not be going to the Institute." Soirus is being completely serious. This is not a joke. Unfortunately.

My instinct is to retaliate; to yell and argue and yell at them until I get what I want.

But I have to be honest.

I completely understand why they are doing this.

Lev is unknown. He is the Sprite that none of us are close to and none of us can attest for. He is free—he can choose whichever side he pleases for whatever reasons he pleases. He is technically untrustworthy—though I have a hard time not trusting him—and, yes, he does threaten our cause. *My* cause. My claim as the true Kaiser.

So I can see why my Sterkte are doing this. I can see the logic.

But remembering those bright eyes and that dazzling smile, the tree aroma and those silly ears, and that little human girl that offered him the lily two weeks ago...I can't give in to their opinion of him. Not yet.

I bow my head, thinking, my hands twisting together unconsciously. Then I sigh and gaze into blue eyes and then brown ones, contemplating. Finally, I speak. "Okay. I understand." I nod. Soirus raises his eyebrows in what can only be amazement. Urion straightens in surprise. I have never given in so easily. Though I wouldn't exactly call it 'giving in....' I bite my lip for a second before continuing. "So someone will just have to come in with us and keep him in check." I shrug. As if I really believe Lev needs to be kept in check.

Both of their faces drop once more. Soirus growls. "There is nothing we can do once inside. You cannot change our minds." He waves off my suggestion. I roll my eyes.

"That isn't fair. You're punishing him for having the misfortune of being in the exact same place as we were! You and I both know he never meant any harm to us. He *still* doesn't. I am not keeping him from becoming a Sterkte. And plus, his *father* is an Aanleg Trustee for *Mavern*! I am going to need to learn as much about him as I can so that I can infiltrate the

system!” I do feel bad about using Lev’s family relations in this way, but it’s for his own good, so I should not feel guilty. I am really surprised that I am fighting so hard for something for *someone else*. Usually I only focus on my wants, because I have the authority to get whatever I want.

But maybe this is something I want. No; I *know* this is something I want. I want Lev to be there, in the Institute, with me. I do not want to be alone. And Lev is the only one that I truly consider a...a friend. Lev is my friend.

Lev is my first real friend.

Hopefully he considers me a friend, too.

Ugh. When did I become so sappy? This needs to change.

“You don’t have to.” Soirus states matter-of-factly. I glare at him suspiciously. “After you stake your claim and take your rightful place, he can try out at the Institute as many times as he wants.” He tells me. He says this like he doesn’t believe Lev will make it into the Institute any of these times, and I am flooded with my hate of Soirus once again.

I shake my head. “No. He has done his time waiting, just like me. He is going *now*. And if you all don’t like it, then I guess we all have our own opinions.” I am not budging an inch on this.

Soirus curls his lip in a snarl at this, and Urion growls, “This is not your decision to make.”

Like hell this isn’t my decision! Is he serious right now?

“Do you want to say that to me again? Have you *forgotten* the whole reason why I am *here*?” Now my hands are in fists and I am climbing, albeit unsteadily, to my great displeasure, to my feet so that my words have more of an *umph*. He had better take note. “Let me remind you, then. Because this *is* my decision, Urion. *All of this* is my decision. *Not yours*.” I am glaring furiously between him and Soirus, portraying my position quite clearly, in my eyes. They are looking very put-off, and Soirus is about ready to break his jaw with how hard he is clenching his teeth. It is quite entertaining, but now is not the time to show this. Serious face, Nove. “Lev will be going to the Institute tomorrow with me. He will be taking the exams. So you all had better get used to it now. Because that *is* my decision.”

They say nothing, just returning my fierce glare with angry eyes, not wanting to hand over authority even though it should not even have to be handed over. I should already have it.

Too much has been lost on this journey. Too many, including myself, have had to give up things—sacrifice things—for me. For them. For Sprites. I am tired of it.

No one else is losing anything. There will be no more sacrifices.

I am ready to start helping my people and my kingdom.

I am ready to take back what is mine.

Chapter 15

Lev has a concussion. I express my concern for how this will affect his performance in the assessments, but he waves this off without worry, saying it'll be healed by then. I think to myself that he is strangely reserved as we head off, but then I backtrack. He has never seen me in one of my fits before. He is probably confused as all hell. Of course he's reserved!

Does this mean I am going to explain any of it to him?

I think not.

But I get the feeling that he is hoping I will. He is hoping that I trust him enough to be honest about what happened.

Except I don't think I do. I still have questions about him, too. He never explained why he was in human territory, and he has never outright told me that he is not a Mavern enthusiast. Just because my instinct and my excessive experience with reading expressions tells me this is so, hearing it would be a nice touch.

So we both keep to ourselves for most of the morning, riding obediently alongside the Sterkte. I am keeping my mind busy noticing that the number of Sprites on the road with us increases the closer we get to the Institute, many of them looking to be around Lev's age. A lot of them glance in our direction more than once, their eyes filled with wonder at seeing real Sterkte but also disapproval at the presence of a half-blood this far across the Meridian. I try not to take it personally. I know immediately that they are all most likely going to the Institute for the same reason as Lev and I. Seeing the sheer force of them makes my stomach twist apprehensively. I need to distract myself.

I turn to Grant when we slow down for a while. "What was it like?" I ask, trying to make my voice sound confident and curious. "Going in for your placement exam, I mean." They have never caved and told me anything about the Institute before, but really. I need all the help I can get.

He takes a deep breath as if gathering all the patience he can muster up and looks at me unhappily. But I think he sees something on my face, something I can't quite mask, and he eases up a little. "There were thousands of us in the beginning," He concedes, knowing what I am really asking. "Most Sprites are about seventy-five to eighty going in. I was sixty-four." He says proudly, stifling a grin. I can physically feel the others rolling their eyes like they've heard it a hundred times. I almost find it amusing. I briefly wonder how old Lev is, but I shove the thought away as fast as possible and focus on Grant. "We all gathered into the auditorium and sat at a desk in our designated areas—Sterkte, Wyshied, and Aanleg. The Sterkte sections always outnumber the others by hundreds, at least. The Sterkte is always recruiting; it is where age

matters—Wyshied and Aanleg, it doesn't matter how old you are. It is not about your physical abilities." Grant tells me like I have not put this together on my own already. It is quite obvious, actually.

"Once we were in our places, the Wyshied and Aanleg were taken out and the Sterkte sat down to take the first test—the Geslepe. It tests how quick-minded you are and how well you think through your decisions when on a time crunch." He cuts a glance in my direction. "Good luck." I scowl but don't interrupt. "When that test is done, we are called on and taken into a separate room for the second assessment: the Stryd." At this, his eyes take a faraway look as he remembers his time in the Stryd. He does not look happy but he doesn't look disappointed, either. What am I supposed to get from *that*? I'll have to make a point of asking him what happened when he took the Stryd. "Two are chosen at a time. Those are the two that have to fight each other for the place." His gaze focuses on me again. "The winner is not necessarily guaranteed a spot, but the Sprite that loses is done. They don't get to take the final test." My blood runs cold at the threat of being cut from everything that I have been working for so suddenly. The stress is overpowering. I swallow as Grant continues. "That is the last exam of the day. The males and females are separated for the remainder of the evening and assigned to rooms, and the next day the final exam takes place with all of the Sprites in the same room. It is called the Sjarne. The *Charm*. Which is basically what it is. You showcase your power to everyone, like you're charming your way in."

Any confidence I had instilled in myself escapes out of my gaping mouth just then. Grant actually has the audacity to look apologetic at the bomb he has just blown up in my face. I jerk Rivvet to a halt, staring disbelievingly around my Sterkte. They never told me.

"Nova—" Soirus turns his horse and begins to try and calm my nerves.

I'm not having it. Not now. "I can't do that. I can't do that." I say, my vision shifting so that I am not so much looking out into the world as staring blankly into space.

"Nova, you'll be fine—" Soirus tries again, but I keep interrupting. I do not even care, or notice, that it is beginning to rub him the wrong way, because I am too frantic. I can't do this.

"In front of *everyone*? I can't do that! I can't...I can't control that, Soirus! You know that as well as I do!" I exclaim, shaking my head. All these years he has been telling me blatantly what I can and cannot do, and now when it matters most, he can't even be honest with himself! I was more right than I thought about being the only one without a pea-brain out of the lot of them. Do they realize what is at stake?!

"Nova!" Now Soirus is right next to me, his hand reaching out and clutching my shoulder so that I can feel his intensity as well as see it. I am still shaking my head while he talks. "You have to, alright? You are going to have to figure out what to do and how to control yourself. You have been doing it all the way here, you can do it now. You had to have known something like this was coming. I know you have been hiding how strong your power is from us, so this should not be too daunting for you." He accuses, letting go of me and sitting back in his saddle.

I narrow my eyes at him. “*Soirus.*” I hiss. I do not care if Lev hears. He can know! I am basically screwed. “*I don’t even know what I can do.*” I emphasize all of my words so that he can pick up on how important this is.

Soirus just looks at me. I feel my panic rising to the next level. “Are you even *hearing* me? I don’t know what I can do! I don’t know how far it will take me if I use it!” I am conveying my fears in the least descriptive way I can, but he is making it so hard to keep from spitting it all out. I am about ready to rip out my hair in frustration. My nails are already digging into my palms.

My instructor opens his mouth to reply when a different voice resonates over the pounding taking place in my ears.

“Nova.” He says, his voice as calm and soothing as the first time I laid eyes on him.

I spin my head around, my wide eyes staring at him desperately as I clutch Rivvet’s mane in my hands. He meets my gaze steadily, those light eyes carrying that kindness that will always have me mesmerized, and I could swear he knows. Not who I am, per se, but what he does to me. What he does *for* me. And his next words all but confirm it.

“I’ll be right there. Just do what you can, and if you don’t trust yourself, I’ll be right there. Just think about me. Think about the solstice festival in Glistendane. The yellow dress and the flowers and the music.” Strangely enough, just hearing the words now is relieving some of my panic. I stare desperately into those green orbs and hang on to his soft voice with all of the hope I could never show the Sterkte. They are too busy with their own hopes to notice mine.

“If you can’t control it, just try guiding it in one direction. The Institute is where we *learn*, Nove. They do not expect you to already know everything. They just want to see that you want to learn.” He smiles that gentle smile that brightens everything and I feel my thoughts settling, understanding what he is saying and knowing he is right and I can do what he says. I can do that. “And I think you already have the wanting part down pat.”

Technically, I am still unsure whether the Sterkte planned on actually listening to me and letting Lev take the placement exam, but I think about it. Even if Lev isn’t there, I can probably calm the storm inside of me just thinking about him being there. Or about where he has been. Just hearing about the solstice is already doing wonders.

His father is an Aanleg Trustee for Mavern. He is a full-blooded Sprite who, for an unknown reason, was wandering through human territory. He has seen my true appearance, he has witnessed my true power (well, sort of), and he knows I am of great importance to my Sterkte. *And* he knows that there is something about Mavern that makes me want to strangle someone. Leveren Riviere is dangerous to me.

And yet, with all of my doubts, he is the only one who has ever been nothing but kind to me. He is the only one who has ever been able to calm the flames that eat at my stomach, and sooth the pain that eats at my soul. He is the only one who has ever called me beautiful.

He is the only one that I have ever considered my friend.

It takes me a few seconds to realize he is not talking anymore, and that we are just looking at each other, our eyes locked together like there is nothing else in the world. It is only when Rivvet adjusts his position that I am yanked back into reality and I tear my gaze away and down towards my hands. I breathe in and out deeply and nod. “Okay,” I close my eyes. “Okay, I can do that.” I look at Soirus earnestly and repeat it. “I can do that.”

The wheels are spinning in his head as he gazes at me and then moves his eyes behind me towards where Lev sits on Keye. He takes him in and looks at me again, and then he looks at the other Sterkte, all of whom sit rigidly on their horses, waiting for his next move. Soirus looks at me again.

I know before he says anything. Soirus, my Sterkte, need me to succeed as much as I need myself to succeed. If Lev’s presence can get me into the Institute...then they will make sure he is there to help me get into the Institute.

My decision is officially accepted.

I win. In the most unexpected way, I win.

Finally, Soirus turns his horse around again and nods his assent. “Then let’s go.” He and Beni begin to force their way through the increasing crowd of Sprites overtaking the road, and we all follow obediently.

But I am now lost in thought, clutching Rivvet’s mane and letting him be the brainpower for now.

I recognize that I did not technically win the argument. I cannot take it as a win if the Sterkte only agree to do what I say because it is in their best interests. They need to listen to me because I am their ruler. Granted, I would not want them to sit back and let me destroy lives or anything, but that has never been my reason for ordering them around. I barely order them around at all! The least they could do is respect me when I actually tell them to do something.

I’ll admit, there have been times when they do. That time when Urion threatened Lev at the lake and I told him to go away, he listened. He didn’t want to. But he did.

And once, in the Hallows, I got into an argument with one of my personal guards and told him to switch places with a border guard. He listened to me then. But he was such a jackass that I think he could tell I was going to lose it if he did not do what I said right then.

Small steps, I reassure myself. They are listening to you now out of selfishness. Prove to them that you are worthy of being in charge, and they’ll listen to you because they should.

I am quite proud of myself of this thought. It is something Zeheb would tell me. In a meaner, less believing tone.

I have been so busy on this trip that I have not thought about my old Wyshied teacher in at least a week. Just recalling his name now sends a slight pang through my stomach.

Wait.

Do I *miss* him? I'll never tell him if I do, that's for sure. He would laugh outright at me and probably brag about not missing my snobby stubbornness in the least. Or my inexperience.

But I remember him clearly, and when I really consider it, I do miss some things about him. His books, for one. I would love to just sit in his library and read endlessly. And then I could check out what *Night Hymn* is really about. His maps, too. He hid them from me because he had this thought that I would attempt—and apparently succeed, which actually means he has faith in my abilities. Now I feel appreciated!—to escape the Hallows and run. Was I that desperate? Yes. Did it show that much? Probably. I am figuring out that I do not hide many feelings too well. I should probably be worried about my feelings for Urion showing, then.

And maybe I would have considered it; running. I definitely threatened it to Zeheb once when I was younger, about fifteen. He was driving me up the wall, and then he dared to hand me back a test I had taken with almost all of the answers marked incorrect. Incorrect! And I *know* he just did it to spite me. I know *exactly* what the Wyshied symbol is *and* what it represents. Douche. Either way, my threat had been empty, and with how well Zeheb seems to claim that he knows me, I feel as though he would have known that, too. But I was well aware that there was even less for me outside of the Hallows than there was inside. Especially after Urion came into the picture.

Heat rushes through my body remembering Urion and my time together, and I clamp down on my feelings and push forward.

I was wrong about there being nothing outside of those deathly grey walls. I know Zeheb knew it. All of the things he never told me—I cannot even begin to understand why. I needed to know! Knowledge is power, but it also keeps one from looking like a complete idiot. Which I am sure I did when I walked into that first human town two weeks ago and Leah came up to me.

Speaking of Leah, I miss her too. I wish I could have sat down with her and actually talked about the struggles she has faced and way she is treated under Mavern's rule. The way all humans are treated. Maybe then I could have some inkling about what I am going to do with this mess of a kingdom once I finally claim my rightful place on the throne.

Suddenly, Rivvet sneezes violently, jolting me out of my mind. I quickly lift my head and blink like I am being pulled out of a daze. Then, something huge and glittering and white catches my eyes, and I stare in utter astonishment.

It is the Reign Institute of Sterkte. And it is magnificent.

It looks like the castles should, from the stories I rummaged through as a child, made of sparkling white stone with long, large windows lining the four-story walls and large watch-towers at each corner and beside the enormous arch of stone that implies an entrance. The arch connects two wings of the Institute, and on either side of the arch, from our position on the path, I can make out the form of two beautiful fountains spewing the most glorious, crystal-clear, sparkly water I have ever seen. And planted firmly on each of the watchtowers framing the arch is a massive snow-white owl statute, with wings outstretched as if they are about to take flight and eyes as purely golden as...well, mine.

And then I realize.

Reign eyes. They have the eyes of the Reign family.

I look uneasily towards Lev, who is openly admiring the ginormous structure just like I was. Then I look towards the sky and thank the invisible stars that gold is not just the color of the Reign. I had not thought to worry about my eyes until now.

Soirus slows with the traffic that is now engulfing the road we were traveling, young Sprites eagerly nearing their destination with hungry excitement. He falls back so that he is walking next to me, nodding for Grant to take his place. Then he turns to address me.

“We cannot go into the Institute with you. We will walk you to the gates, but we will not enter.” He informs me.

I feel my wild energy return just hearing the superb words. “Really?” I ask excitedly. He nods solemnly, his eyes trying to convey that this is not actually a good thing. That all depends on whose point of view it is. I grin. “Soirus, don’t act like you are not excited to be rid of me. I have been nothing but a pain in your ass since my first day of training. You’re finally free! You know, you should go get drunk and find a pretty Sprite woman to satisfy your time now that you can do whatever you want.” I suggest joyously. Soirus stiffens. “Unless you’re into men,” I muse, rambling happily. It is making him anxious and I love it. “Then you should go find a man. Are you interested in men, Soirus? Is that why you love torturing me?” I inquire, grinning wickedly. His jaw is tight and shifts back and forth as his eyes harden and he glares at me. It is so hard for me not to laugh right now.

“I am not talking about this with you. Just know that once we are gone, you need to be a better Sprite trainee than you have ever been. You need to utilize all of your sense to the max and be vigilant for any threats from the Sprites around you. They will not like the fact that you are in their midst. You know that well enough.” Hell yes, I do. He ignores my pestering, to my great discontentment. I frown but absorb his advice.

He hesitates, narrowing his eyes, and I tilt my head. “What?” I ask suspiciously. He lets a large breath out and does not look at me during this next piece of advice.

“Stay close to Riviere. Unfortunately, he is your only possible ally, though all of his motives are questionable. Don’t trust him,” He adds, staring at me sternly when he articulates this, but it is lost in my triumphant smirk. “But don’t trust the others more.”

With this, I look back towards Lev, who is obviously listening intently because that is just who he is, as I have learned. When he sees my glance, he meets it with bright green eyes and smiles in that contagious, wild, dangerous way, like we have just outsmarted my Sterkte in their own game.

And, as I return his expression wholeheartedly, I feel like, in a way, we have.



I am so delighted to be liberated of them that I make them all give me a hug. I think it is necessary, after everything we have been through, for this to happen, even though I pretty much hate them with a passion. I have only four regrets as I make my rounds (I use the term “only” very loosely. Four is a ridiculously high amount of regrets).

One: that Xander is not here for me to hug goodbye. My hatred for Soirus burns whenever I see the empty place where he should be, and that happens quite often. There is no reason why Xander should not be here today. I will never forgive Soirus for this.

Two: I cannot prove (for now) that Soirus was behind Xander’s death. I have no allies. Well, I do have Lev, but I have not known him for as long as is acceptable for me to share my thoughts on Xander’s killing, or on Xander at all. I am not comfortable enough with him to be sharing my deepest, darkest emotions. How about no.

Three: I do not get to pester Grant with all of my questions anymore. It is actually really entertaining whenever I am talking to him. He is the most reactive of the group and I love making him angry. And he is easy to annoy. I love it.

Lastly: Urion. I know before I get to his firm structure that hugging him will be the hardest—even harder than hugging Soirus. We have definitely been through our fair share of complications, and most of them were the good kind. I do not think I have touched him without at least kissing him in three years. I guess it is time for me to get used to breaking records, anyway. But letting go of him now...a small but prominent fear enters my core at the thought of having to face that terrifying emptiness that engulfs me without the fix that Urion has brought me. How long can I last with that feeling in my soul before I go completely insane? I most definitely do not want to find out.

I hug Fenley and Beni briefly, since I never did enjoy either of their company very much, and then I move to Thorn, who frowns but lets me do what I want since this is the last time he has to deal with me. I squeeze Soirus a little when I hug him, more because I am hoping to hurt him somewhat before I go, and say to him, “It’s okay, Soirus. You don’t have to admit that you like males in front of everyone if you’re not comfortable. I’ll keep your secret.” I offer him an innocent wink and he all but shoves me away from him and stands rigidly in place. Oh, yes, hugging him was totally worth that.

When I get to Grant he stays completely stiff in my embrace. This only makes me hug him longer. When he takes a deep breath, I can just feel him rolling his eyes. I am definitely going to miss this. I step away and sigh. “Grant, I guess me leaving will make things a lot less stressful for you.” I begin.

He raises his eyebrows. “You bet your ass it will.” He agrees.

I grin amusedly at this. “Yes, so you won’t have to try and hide how much you really enjoy my presence any longer. Do not even try to argue. I know the truth, Turriss.” I use his last name just to spite him, and from the flash in his eyes, it works. He just makes it so *easy*! How am I supposed to pass it up?

“That’s not—” He tries to object, but I turn to Urion and he knows it’s useless. He growls and stomps to his horse angrily.

But I do not feel like laughing at him anymore, because now Urion’s blue eyes are holding my gaze and I am suddenly remembering why I am never able to let him go. I move towards him to make it less obvious that there is something more between us than there was for the other Sterkte, but I do not think that I could even fool a blind person right now. My skin is burning as he places one arm lightly—tensely—around my shoulders. Even this is a bit overboard, seeing as none of the others made any move to hug me back.

Being encased in his arms is torture. I feel the heat travel all the way down to my toes, my hands wanting to dig into his shirt and my muscles wanting to relax in his embrace. In order to keep myself from doing just that, I quickly move back two feet and try to slow my breathing.

Why the *hell* was I excited for this again? I never think things through. It’s a problem.

A mischievous glint enters Urion’s eye. “Don’t think you can get rid of us *that* easily, Nova.” He croons. He crosses his arms and I am acutely aware of the fact that his muscles are bulging even through the loose fabric of his tunic. Damn, why is he always so *sexy*? Can he not just *try* to be ugly for me? Is that too much to ask?!

I smile wickedly even though it is possibly the hardest thing I have done in my life. “I am guessing that you aren’t exactly welcome inside, so as long as I stay within the walls...” I let him put together the rest.

His voice deepens as his eyes look deep into my soul. “But you were never one to stay inside the boundaries. I doubt that’ll change at all.”

No, I never do follow the rules, do I? The look in his eyes takes me right back to that king-sized bed in my Hallows bedroom, all those nights with his warm body next to me, our skin touching through every hour of the night.

Assigning limits only makes ignoring them even more exhilarating.

I have to look away and clench my fists to keep from giving in to the only thing my body wants to do right now: kiss those full lips. I look at the ground and turn my head, and when I finally lift my eyes, I am staring into a whole different set of irises that send shivers down my spine and leave Urion in the past.

Lev stares at me, no doubt reading the whole scene that just took place, and when I finally rest my gaze on him, he begins searching my eyes, looking for something that I don’t quite understand. I am still struggling to figure it out when he clears his throat and moves his eyes toward Soirus, his hand lifting to rub the back of his neck absentmindedly.

“You had better make it into the final test.” Soirus warns him with not even a hint of kindness in his tone. I groan but do not interrupt. Instead, I turn to examine the walls of the Institute. Now that we are only about a hundred feet away from the buildings, I can see that they are made of beautiful alabaster stone, the windows framed in black marble with glass in various

shades of yellow and gold and orange. The owls guarding the entrance have a wingspan of at least twenty feet, and their golden eyes seem to stare straight at me. The arch stretching between the creatures is engraved in huge capital letters reading:

REIGN INSTITUTE OF STERKTE

with a symbol underneath the words catching my eye and keeping my attention as I recognize it all too well:



It is the Trinity Knot; the left bottom corner representing power, the right bottom corner representing intellect, and the top point representing love.

It is the symbol of the Reign family.

I am so entranced to see the sign being used so openly in the Sprite world that I completely miss the conversation happening right next to me and Lev has to put a hand on my arm to get my attention again. I jump a little bit and he smiles encouragingly, mistaking my jitteriness for nerves. But I guess I am kind of nervous as well.

“Ready?” He asks, taking in the Institute with me before meeting my gaze again. I briefly glance back to see my Sterkte one last time, but they have miraculously disappeared into thin air. Amazingly, I feel a pang of loss for the only companions I have ever known. A lot is changing now.

I work my jaw as something passes between Lev and I. We are in this together. We don’t technically need each other, but it feels like we do, and having someone there that I know makes this a lot easier for me. It might even make the experience a lot easier for him, too. I sure will feel less like an idiot if this is true.

I’ll pretend it is, then.

“You have no idea how long I have been waiting for this.” I tell him truthfully. Though he probably would think twenty-six years is by no means *long*.

Lev smiles and walks towards Keye, patting the stallion’s neck before readying himself to climb into the saddle. “You have no idea how long *I’ve* been waiting for this.” He counters.

True. I smile in response and mount Rivvet, sighing. “You don’t think they’ll stop me?” I ask uncertainly, gripping the reins. Lev swings his leg over Keye’s saddle and settles in for the short ride through the gates.

At my question, Lev looks quite smug and seems to sit up taller in his saddle. His green eyes sparkle with a mischief less taunting than Urion’s and more like an invitation to join the fun that he is about to have. My chest expands as a wild sensation flows through my veins at this one simple look. “Not with me, they won’t.” He replies, grinning crookedly.

I narrow my eyes and shake my head, but I know he means that his family connections will keep others from asking too many questions. His smile rubs off on me quickly, and I have to look away. “Fine,” I shrug. “I’m ready.”

He chuckles and spurs his horse forward eagerly, and I follow Leveren Riviere into the crowd of Sprites hoping to earn their place in the classrooms of the most notorious school in Saam.

Chapter 16

I have no idea why Mavern has kept the Trinity Knot.

It is a symbol of what he is not. It is a flaw in his system; it reminds the Sprites that he should not be where he is. At least, it reminds *me* that he should not be where he is. Maybe I should not generalize my high opinions to the public just yet. It never goes well when I try and share them with the Sterkte.

Zeheb actually managed to teach me that the Trinity Knot was chosen thousands of years ago to be the official symbol of the Reign family because it encompasses the core values to describe the rule of my father and his ancestors. And, hopefully, me. Power, as in the great magic that is believed to be possessed by Reign household to help the kingdom thrive eternally. I know very well that this “great power” is very much a real thing, seeing as it consumes me every time the moon goes red and the only way I can control it is by staring into the black eyes of an owl that, now that I really think on it, is definitely not just any normal owl. I’ll have to look into that when I actually find the time in my schedule for life-reflection.

Intellect; for the wisdom and open-mindedness essential to being a generous, honorable leader. Love. The final value is basically self-explanatory, but it is my favorite. It represents the compassion and selflessness every Kaiser should provide his or her kingdom, from even the smallest plant to the largest beast; the youngest human to the oldest Sprite. The knot symbolizes the necessity of holding all three values close to one’s heart to truly be a worthy Kaiser.

I find this quite interesting seeing as all of those before me have thoroughly struggled in fulfilling the ‘Love’ aspect of the mark. And without fully embracing all of the values, how can the heart be balanced and true in its supremacy?

I may not be a Wyshied elder, and I may not have seen or experienced everything I must in order to form the educated opinion on much of anything that Sprites do, but I know one thing for a fact: The answer to this question is simple.

It cannot.



My first thought is Lev is wrong. My second thought is they know exactly who I am. My third thought is maybe Lev is right.

Okay, Lev is right.

I will never let him know that I doubted him on this for a second, though.

But from the look he gives me after, he already knows. Damn his observation skills!

It started out okay. We slipped into the crowd headed for the Institute and no one was the wiser. All the other Sprites were too excited to get past the threshold to sniff around for the faint stench of human blood that I am cursed with carrying.

That is, until we reached the threshold, the stone owls looming high overhead on either side, the Trinity Knot hanging like a storm cloud right above me. It took a lot of effort not to crane my neck to see it again. As Sprites entered, they were forced into a line, which is why there was such a crowd gathering near the entrance as an increasing number of hopefuls arrived. We waited for a good half an hour before we finally reached the front of the line, during which I received plenty of dirty looks and shoves. I was surprised no one said anything to me until one Sprite male looked me up and down in disgust and then glanced towards Lev before angling his horse so he could better ignore me. I turned my head to examine Lev. His jaw was tight, his chin low as he watched everyone surrounding us—*me*—with that annoyingly accurate observation skill he seems to have mastered. I could tell when another Sprite glanced at me just by the way his eyes fixated on one thing with an intensity that, if pointed at me, would have given me shivers down my spine. The Lev I had become accustomed to had taken a backseat while the stern and precise Lev that I had a glimpse of while we were fighting took over. I would have grinned to myself if I hadn't been in such a controversial position right then.

We stepped into the front and my hands clenched tightly around Rivvet's reins, my heart hammering against my ribcage. Lev walked Keye under the large arch with ease and dismounted casually, the two guards on either side of the arch not moving an inch from their posts. I moved Rivvet forward to follow.

The guards were suddenly there, one of them holding his sword against my neck, the other keeping Rivvet from skittering away into the Institute's beautiful lawn. The absence of my Sterkte was dually noted at this point.

I froze, my eyes wide and staring at the grey-eyed Sprite that had his sword pressed against my jugular, my mouth dry, positive that I was about to die; that they knew exactly who I was and my black hair was not fooling anyone. This was just spectacular—I was going to die before even Zeheb, a Sprite who is basically picking out his gravestone, he's so old! Lev was so wrong.

“What are you doing here?” The grey-eyed Sprite growled, no small amount of hatred coating his voice like a dark, cold blanket.

I could hardly *breathe*, let alone answer his question. Time moved so slow that I felt like it was an eternity (an eternity of me being *murdered* a thousand times over by those awful grey

eyes) before Lev inserted himself between the Sprite and me, his eyes roving the sword nonchalantly.

“She’s with me.” He said softly, keeping his eyes glued to the guard’s face as the Sprite glared at me without letting down his weapon. Lev’s chin lowered half an inch more as he said, “Tare.” At this, the so-called ‘Tare’ shifted his grey eyes towards Lev and wavered, still defiant. “She is with me.” Lev repeated, his tone still soft but carrying something far more imposing below the surface, like his gaze had earlier.

I did not realize I was holding my breath until the sword was gone, my skin sore from where the blade pressed against my throat. I reached a hand up and feel to make sure that I was not bleeding, because the stars know my blood hasn’t caused enough trouble as it is.

The guards stepped back to let me pass, and green eyes met mine, the slight shine of satisfaction brightening his irises, and Lev nodded for me to continue. I did, and only realized my stomach was churning in an all too familiar way when Rivvet stopped next to Keye. Lev climbed back onto his horse and met my gaze again. His eyebrows rose. Fine, he was right. I asked innocently, “What?” and turning Rivvet to follow the stone path leading to the building. Out of the corner of my eye I could see him break into a smile and shake his head before kicking Keye to follow.

Just looking Lev in the eyes calmed my nerves, and now I finally allow myself to look around the inside of the Institute walls.

It is stunning. The building of the Institute itself creates a U shape around the courtyard, with the center visible through the entrance arch. The lawn expanding in the courtyard and around the Institute is the beautiful green that shines even in the night, cut to perfection and littered with amazing trees with small, deep pink and purple flowers. Cutting through the grass to make a path are clean tan stone sidewalks that create a neat network of avenues leading to the large white steps expanding along the entire inside border of the Institute. A ginormous fountain rests in the very middle of the courtyard, water being sprayed out through multiple spouts and creating a figure that almost perfectly shows the Trinity Knot, and a statute holds out its hands in the middle of the fountain so that the Knot looks to be hovering just over them. I stare at the statue for a while, examining the face and build. It is a male with long straight hair and a beautiful, kind face, smiling down at his hands.

I twist in my saddle to address Lev. “Is the statue of anyone specific?” I inquire, looking at it again and tilting my head.

Lev looks at the statue as well. “Yes.” Now he watches me as if to gauge my reaction. “It is Prince Kwaai. The last heir to the Kaiser throne.”

It takes everything I am made of and more not to stop Rivvet. I go rigid but I try to act like this statement has not affected me and I nod before facing forward again. I am fisting my hands around the reins again so that they do not shake, because this is something I have not prepared for. This is something I did not think I would have to prepare for.

I want to look again, just once, back at the statue, but I force myself to keep going. Now is not the time to get distracted. I have to focus on what I am here to do. I set my shoulders and look straight ahead.

Now is not the time to admire incredible statues.

Even if they are statues of my father.



Kwaai. Prince Kwaai Reign. Heir to the Kaiser throne. Mavern has kept a lot of things.

I never say his name. Or hers. Letting myself say, or even think, their names makes them real. Makes them actually have been in existence.

Makes them gone.

So I never do it. I never say their names.

But Leveren Riviere has said his name now.

That empty part of me, when he said it, caused all of my thoughts and desires and feelings to go black. They disappeared and all I became for those seconds was a broken emptiness that was without Prince Kwaai Reign and Princess Suné Janhu. And it was worse than it had ever been.

But then my nails dug into my palms and I snapped out of the trance and shoved away that awful darkness and reminded myself what is important. Because, this time, Lev was wrong.

There is one more heir to the Kaiser throne.

And she is now one step closer to where she is supposed to be.



The horses and bags are given to stable workers and we trail the other Sprites up the large stone steps and through the incredible doors directly across from the entrance. I do not have much time to examine the interior, other than to notice that it is also made of the white alabaster stone and has ceilings that seem to extend miles into the sky. We are rushed through the long white hallway and inside heavy glass doors to a huge room that was composed of a small speaking area and thousands of deep purple, plush seats on terraces so that the speaker is always easily visible. On the floor, two Sprites watch the new potential students take their seats with muted interest. One of the Sprites sits calmly in one of the two chairs, her long grey hair and dark purple robe betraying her age and her position. She is one of the Wyshied. Her light brown eyes observe the scene ahead of her patiently.

The other chair sits empty. The second Sprite is also betrayed by his uniform, and his restless pacing comes as no surprise as I easily identify the black tunic and pants, and the golden belt strapping the sword to his side. He is a Sterkte warrior. He crosses his arms and his impatient eyes travel over to the door where Lev and I are making our entrance, and he is

suddenly as still as my father's statue. His surprisingly light blue eyes narrow to slits and then he recognizes Lev and he cannot help himself from approaching us in a sort of lethal, controlled saunter. I hold my ground as Lev acknowledges the Sterkte.

When the Sterkte Sprite is finally looming over us—well, not Lev, but he is imposing enough for it to seem like he looms over us both—he leans back slightly with his arms still crossed and inquires flatly, “What the hell are you doing?” His eyes are directed at Lev, and so is the question. I note that he smells of apple and caramel, and I can't help but compare it to Lev's nature scent. My insides feel happy just scenting Lev, and I know he wins.

Lev does not seem intimidated in the least, meeting the Sterkte's gaze confidently. “I am taking the placement exam.” I stifle a smile.

The Sprite leans forward slightly now. “That's precious.” He says in a way that implies that this is definitely *not precious*, and his appearance makes it clear he could not care less. “So what the hell is a *half-blood* doing here?” He hisses, pointing accusingly at me.

I am half tempted to swat his finger away from me like a mosquito. I stretch the fingers on my hand to keep myself in check. I am well aware that very many eyes are on us. I swallow.

Lev is a rock beside me, steady and strong. “She has come to take the placement exam as well, Zorn.” He says calmly, like this is obvious and Zorn is being ridiculous. I almost laugh when Zorn's jaw clenches and steam practically shoots out from his ears and nose in his rage.

“*Why?*” He punctuates angrily through his clenched teeth, looking like he is barely keeping himself from punching Lev in the face. Well, he has more control than Urion.

Lev glances at me and then back at Zorn. “You should ask her.” Is his reply.

I sure do not feel like laughing anymore.

Hold on a second there, Leveren. Rewind. That is a terrible idea! The Sprite obviously wants to chop my head off. Talking to me is *not* the way to handle this.

Zorn and I at least agree on this. He spins on his heel without another word and storms back to stand next to the Wyshied female, who is now curiously and disdainfully eyeing Lev and me.

I spin towards Lev and almost punch him in the arm but then decide that I might get killed for it and hold back. Lev is being saved from many a punch today. “Are you insane?” I sputter, glaring at him.

Lev grins at me and I am even angrier at him for making me want to smile because of it. “You'll have to talk to them eventually, Nove.” He reminds me, heading up the steps to find a seat. I trail behind him, still glaring at his back.

“Not right now, I don't.” I reply. Lev chuckles and chooses a row about fifty steps up, sliding down almost to the middle of the section and falling back into the seat with a sigh. I ignore the dirty looks I receive as I sit next to him.

We are silent for a few moments, and then he begins talking. I lean closer to listen, his smell soothing my soul. “Zorn is the Apprentice General—the second-highest Sterkte in command.” I do not interrupt to tell Lev that I know the rankings. I decide to just go with it. I like hearing him talk anyways. “When General Keith steps down, he will take his place. He and my father are good friends; the Carneys—that’s Zorn’s last name—come over to have dinner with us very often. Father has been trying to set me up with Zorn’s youngest daughter for a while.” He admits. “It’s not working.” He adds next. I laugh at this, trying to imagine his father encouraging him to talk to the female and Lev nervously trying to avoid doing just that. Lev smiles bashfully at me and continues. “Gwenyth, the Wyshied sitting down there, is the Superintendent of the Institute. She will only watch the last exam and will have the final say on who does or does not get into the Institute.” I eye Gwenyth, her long robes flowing onto the floor around her like a puddle, her hands folded neatly in her lap. She looks like a decent Sprite, but I really cannot say what she will be like to me. “She is also a good friend of my father’s, but their relationship is more... mentor-like, you know? She is much older, and Wyshied, so it makes sense.” He nods, his bright eyes taking in her still form thoughtfully. I watch him instead, how his eyebrows lower and a crease forms in the middle of his forehead. His hair is sticking in all different directions wildly, too long to easily take care of but too short to control. I press my lips together to keep from smiling.

“Do you see them as friends, too?” I ask, keeping an eye on his face to see if it gives anything away.

Lev’s eyes dart to mine and he shrugs. His face is controlled. I can read nothing. “I respect them both, but we...” He sighs. “We disagree on much.”

My curiosity pikes. “Such as?”

Lev half-smiles, looking at his feet and lifting a hand to rub the back of his neck. “More issues than I thought. But that’s all you’re getting right now.” He tells me.

I will admit, I am a bit surprised. He has never outright refused to give me information. I sit back in my seat now, and he meets my eyes, knowing what I think about his reply. We stay that way for probably a minute, his green-blue scrutiny calm and wild, not guarded but not surrendering to my probing. I feel free and tense at the same time, my breath quickening but my breathing steady, as he looks at me. Finally, I face the front of the room again, crossing my legs, and say, “How’s your concussion?” I see Zorn continuously glancing our way, glaring at Lev while ignoring me altogether. Such a pleasant Sterkte.

Not that I expected anything better.

Lev grins crookedly. “Fine.” He is still watching me with those eyes and it’s hard to concentrate. Or, more likely, not concentrate. On him.

“Good.” Is all I reply to this. He smiles even wider and I bite my lip to keep from giving in to the responding grin that is trying to force its way out of me.

Suddenly, a body plops down in the seat next to me, the wind it causes rustling my loose strands of hair and producing goosebumps on my arms. I freeze, and I sense Lev to my left, his muscles tight. I risk a peek out of the corner of my eye and see a heart-shaped face smiling in my direction. The smile is not kind but it is not cruel. The shock of seeing a smile that is not Lev's is almost overwhelming. I turn my head to look at the Sprite.

She is beautiful. Her eyes are large and round, a pretty chestnut color lined with long, dark lashes that have a hint of silver on their edges. Her nose is small and soft, and her mouth framed with small but round pink lips and perfected with straight, white teeth. Her hair flows in voluminous wheat-colored waves around her face and shoulders, a lively pink lily flower tucked into her left ear. She smells of lilies and roses, and I understand why.

"You are a half-blood." She says in a surprisingly strong voice, her eyes sliding over my attire with a snake-like curiosity. She does not wait for me to reply. "I am impressed. You have managed to get into the Institute, though I cannot imagine why one of your kind would want to." I curl my toes in my shoes when she says "your kind," but keep myself calm. The fact that Lev directs his scent my way definitely helps. I practically drink it in. "And," she leans forward to eye Lev, "you have *Leveren Riviere* as your *chaperone*?" She giggles with a forced giddiness. "You are doing better than most full-blood females!" She clucks her tongue and shakes her head, sitting back. I am taking personal offense to this statement. Lev is not my *chaperone*. The word sends angry chills through my veins and I inhale the pine scent deeply. "What is your name, half-blood?" She invites me to speak.

I don't answer for a few seconds, watching how her long, light pink nails tap the arm rest between us, creating a very irritating clicking noise. I consider flicking them away but decide I should at least attempt being nice first. She hasn't actually insulted me. Yet. Though calling me a half-blood probably counts as an insult. But I'll let it slide.

Plus. She's the first Sprite here to actually ask for my name.

"My name is Nova." I tell her evenly. "And you are...?" I narrow my eyes at her as she processes my words.

She purses her lips, and I watch her consciously make the decision to acknowledge my question. "I am Adelaide. Adelaide *Lillan*, to be precise." She raises her thin eyebrows and I know what she is hinting at.

Soirus and I discussed this once during our long journey through human territory, while I was riding contentedly next to him on the caravan. We chose something quite common for humans, and I just so happened to like it enough to accept it without argument. "Herrod. Nova Herrod." I realize that this is the first time Lev has ever heard me supply a last name. I feel a small tinge of guilt that it is not true.

Adelaide smiles again, this time in a way that I can only take as condescending. "Well, Nova *Herrod*," She folds her hands together merrily, "whatever you may be here for," she glances back at Lev for a split second, her eyes glittering almost flirtatiously. My gut twists and I

wish I could tell her to mind her own damn business. “Good luck.” Her tone makes it clear that she is quite positive I will not be successful in “whatever I may be here for.”

Bitch. I barely bite my tongue in time to keep from saying exactly this.

Instead, I smile innocently and say, “The same goes to you.” I make sure she can hear how much I believe she will actually be successful, too. She tries to glare evilly at me but I have already turned away. Lev rubs a hand over his face once, but not in time for me to see that he is trying to wipe away his amusement. I get a surge of satisfaction at this.

It takes another hour for the rest of the Sprites to file in and take seats. By the time the glass doors show no other Sprites approaching, I am surrounded on all sides by arrogant, young Sprites that openly ignore me. Many talk to Adelaide, chatting about their parents and whom they have encountered. A few greet Lev warmly, most of them flirty females that wink and touch his shoulders and arms excessively. My hands grip each other and I begin counting the number of black-haired Sprites in the room, and then the number of blond Sprites, and then the number of red-heads.

This distraction does not work in the least.

I still want to twist the all of the overly-interested females’ arms *very forcefully* behind their backs.

It annoys me that I am so protective of Lev. *Why are you acting crazy?* I wonder to myself. *Get it together! He is not Urion!*

At this I must concede. If it was Urion being touched in this way, the only thing that would keep me sane would be...well, Lev.

Ugh. There is no winning.

“Thank you all for choosing to be here with us today.” Gwenyth begins, finally standing and moving a few steps forward as she addresses the room. She is surprisingly small. All of the conversations that were taking place between the hopefuls die a quick death, and the room goes silent. All eyes focus on the Wyshied elder. Gwenyth smiles. “We are so pleased to have so many young Sprites wanting to attend our Institute. We wish you all the very best of luck.” She gazes around the room, and her eyes hesitate on me for the briefest of moments before continuing. “We will first split you all into groups—the Wyshied students will follow me to a new location, while the Sterkte students will remain here to be instructed by Assistant General Carney for the first assessment.” I feel my stomach drop at this revelation. I try not to glance at Adelaide as I think to myself, *Just my luck*. “Thus, I will now lead the Wyshied students out,” Gwenyth motions for them to stand, “and say to the rest of you how wonderful it has been to be in your presence, even if for a short time, and I sincerely hope,” she smiles kindly at the room, her hands folded in front of her, “to see you tomorrow.”

Chapter 17

Zorn—excuse me, *Assistant General Carney* (like hell am I calling him that)—makes the rest of us spread out until there is a seat between every Sprite. He openly glares at me as I take my new seat, no longer next to Lev because I ended up being in one of the must-be-empty places. Leaving Adelaide down there next to Lev is, strangely, more nerve-wracking than Zorn’s glower, though. I get the feeling that he is tempted to kick me out now that Wyshied Gwentyth is gone, but he holds himself back, if only for the hope that I’ll fail out all on my own.

I cannot blame him for hoping.

We all remain silent as Zorn paces along the floor, watching us closely. Then he stops, gives a brief nod to someone we cannot see, and suddenly a small metal desk swings out above our legs from where it was hidden in the back of the seat in front of me. I glance around and see that the same has happened for everyone else, but not the empty seats. I would begin looking around for whoever controlled the desks, but I get distracted by the stark white booklet and the thick white marker that materialize on the desk, the words ‘PLACEMENT EXAM: GESLEPE’ written boldly along the top sheet of the booklet. A line runs across the bottom of the sheet and, next to it, a square box spanning about an inch and a half both ways. I immediately know what the line is and proceed to write my name with the marker. Though it is white, my writing appears on the paper in a bleeding red that seems to tingle on the page before setting into the paper. This is no ordinary marker.

“Your name goes on the line, your thumb-print in the box.” Zorn explains shortly to us. “The sheet will read the print—you do not have to color your thumb.” He says this like he knows some of us would be stupid enough to do it. I may have been. I press my thumb in the slot and watch as my print appears in a shimmering green color before disappearing again.

I swallow, finally beginning to feel nervous. It had not seemed real until now. I risk a glance at Lev, who is studying the cover of the booklet curiously. I even peek towards Adelaide. *Do they feel nervous, too?* I wonder, thinking about how they have an advantage considering their education was provided above the Meridian, and probably with less holes than mine.

“Do not try to cheat.” Zorn’s voice rings out around the room as he narrows his eyes at us. I know—and so does everyone else—that there must be a Sprite here that can detect our cheating, and he knows he does not have to explain this. “You may begin.”

In sync, all of the hopefuls and I flip the first page of the test. I grab the marker for support as I read the first question.

Transcribe the Chant of the Dead.

I blink as I feel my muscles constrict, my hands curling into fists as my mind involuntarily jerks me back to that awful place made of dust and hate and bread and those huge,

innocent, beautiful eyes that suffered with the pain of loss. I remember holding William as his blood drenched my shirt and feeling the heartbreak of knowing he is no longer walking on the earth; instead resting safely in the stars. I remember Xander, his dark, living eyes staring at me sadly as he asked to help. I blink again and am brought back to the present, where I now am left with the pain and the knowledge of my failure to my people.

I take a deep breath. And I write down the chant.



The Geslepe questions assault my memories like punches to my lungs. It is amazing that I do not reach the last page gasping for air. My brain travels between times, taking me to the Hallows, Zeheb's lessons, my Aanleg's intense training, my long journey to the Institute—as if I am there again; all of it taking place now. I am shaking with something close to exhilaration but also verging on fear.

Who can be chosen as an Aanleg Trustee?

Come on, now. Seriously?

What significance does the Triad have to the Kaiser?

Is this a joke?

Illustrate the symbol of the Sterkte.

Now this *has* to be a joke.

What is considered the Waarheid Siener?

This last question would have stumped me if I did not summon up a couple of things. First, if the study of the Ancient Tongue had not been included in the torturous class sessions I clawed my way through with Zeheb. I had been about ten years old: “This is a very important one, Nova. *Waarheid*. It means ‘truth.’ See that you remember it.” I had learned the conjugations for ‘see’—*sien*—already, so understanding the question is no hurdle.

The other: If, near Glistendane, we had not miraculously run into that mysterious old human woman on the road before the Solstice Festival.

“Only the owl can see true,” she had said.

The owl is the Waarheid Siener.

Why had Soirus and Zeheb not explained about the owl?

I already know that it is the symbol for the Wyshied, but its importance to *everyone*.... I would be steaming with fury if I wasn't in the middle of something vital to my survival right now. Instead, I move to the next questions.

By the end, I am feeling ridiculously confident but also ridiculously mentally drained. And Zeheb and Soirus didn't think I could pass that? Seriously? Though, I'll admit that, without that long, agonizing two weeks travelling to the Institute, I would not have passed.

I sit in my seat for a bit after I finish, not because I am anxious about being done before most of the room—which I am, and it is really boosting my self-esteem—but because I am anxious about walking down there period. Finally, I gain the courage to move and close my booklet, preparing to stand, when it disappears again, dissolving like it had before.

Now I just get irritated. All of that internal self-pride pep-talking for nothing. I clench my jaw and lean back moodily in my seat while the desk retracts itself.

Whatever.

When the last Sprite completes the test thirty minutes later, Zorn does not miss a beat. Who needs rest, anyway?

He reminds me frustratingly of Soirus.

“For the Stryd, you will be assigned an opponent and a room. You will report to your assigned place and the Wyshied leader in your room will tell you the rules of combat. And then you will fight.” So Grant was right, then. The exams have not changed. “The winner has chance at being accepted and will advance to the third test. The loser,” He looks sternly around the room and his voice gets louder, “is done. If you lose, you leave. The Sterkte are here to train those who have the experience and intelligence it takes to win. You do not belong here if you cannot prove that you do as well.” His eyes catch my own for a second and I can see he is sure—and delighted about it—that I will not make it.

I stare at Zorn, even as he looks away. That expression...he has no doubts in his mind that I will be the loser. I am immediately suspicious but I have no idea what I am suspicious about. After practicing with Lev, I know Soirus was right to rank me at the same level as the incoming Sprites. So what would guarantee me a spot in the reject pile?

I cannot figure it out until Zorn points at me and then slowly grins and points at my opponent and says, “You...and *you*. Room one hundred and five.” And then a part of me dies as my heart falls to the floor and Zorn stabs it with his shiny sword.

I do not know how he knew *exactly* how to *so perfectly* ruin my chances. He probably has no idea that, even if I win, the last test, the Sjarne, will be near impossible now. I close my eyes and try to breathe as my new rival turns to identify me.

Because, in order for me to pass the Sjarne, I need my opponent to win.

Because my opponent is Lev.



Lev is as still as a corpse in his shock. The blazing fury in his eyes is like none I have ever seen before, not even in Soirus' dark gaze. He knows Zorn did this on purpose. I think everyone

knows. I mean, who *didn't* see us walk in and/or sit together? Adelaide's jaw hangs open as astonished amusement brightens her irises. I want to punch her. Though I want to punch Zorn more.

Lev is still staring at me, and I can tell he is about to shake his head and defy Zorn, so I stand, portraying with my eyes to him that we have to go. Now. I still practice my breathing as I condescend to meet Zorn's self-righteous gaze and nod. Then I maneuver my way to the steps and robotically head for the glass doors once more.

Literally. Once.

Because I am done for.

I watch Lev follow my lead. He does not look at Zorn, probably because it looks like he is having a very difficult time staying calm as it is. This is a first. Lev is always calm. His nerves do not help minimize mine, and my hands clench and unclench as I wait for him.

When he reaches my side, his green eyes flicker to my face and then to the door, clouded and furious. He nods, and, with all eyes on us, we take our leave.

In the hall, Lev immediately takes the lead. I want to say something, but he is walking too fast, and he is too unstable, and I do not know what I would say anyway. Should I tell him why I have to win? Should I reveal who I am so he understands? Is he trustworthy or will he turn me in and get me killed? I think he is too good to just kill me. Maybe. I don't know! Ugh! *Just* when I was thinking things were looking up. This is all just a disaster now.

I have to beat him. I have to make it to the Sjarne. It does not matter that I will most likely fail without Lev; if I do not even make it that far, there is absolutely no chance at all for me. I have to beat him.

But. This is Lev. *Leveren Riviere*. The Sprite who is always kind to me. The Sprite who has a smile so magnificent that it is like seeing the sun for the first time, and I cannot resist smiling back. The Sprite who is the only one to ever call me beautiful.

The Sprite whose father is one of Mavern's Aanleg Trustees.

The Sprite whom I know is as good a warrior as me.

What I do not know is if he is *better*.

I guess I will not have to wonder for much longer.

In no time we have reached the large, grey metal door marked '105' in white numbers. I take a deep breath and reach out to grab Lev's arm just as he pauses and turns slightly towards me.

"Lev—" I begin, but he shakes his head.

"No matter what happens, it'll be alright. Okay, Nova? No matter what." He assures me, his green eyes boring into mine like he needs me to understand that he is telling the truth.

I am silent for a while, but finally I manage to whisper, “Okay,” and he turns the knob on the door and pushes it open.

The room is huge. It spans at least fifty yards long and twenty wide. The floor is white marble, but has been mostly covered by black mats. There are windows on the wall just to the right, facing the courtyard with the statue that I cannot think about currently. I quickly look away. To the left of the door, a table is set up to seat three, and the Sprites sitting there eye us curiously, if not scornfully. I am most definitely not what they were expecting.

One of them is Wyshied, in the same dark robe as Gwentyth had been clothed in, while the other two are Sterkte that seem almost more interested in Lev than they do in me. One of them, a female, has long brown hair and brown eyes that narrow at Lev unhappily, while the other, with spiky red hair and pale blue eyes, advances so that he can greet Lev. I hear him mutter, “Your father has been waiting for you,” and Lev nods as we reach the table. *His father*, I eavesdrop curiously. Though they did not exactly make it challenging to overhear.

The Wyshied Sprite stays seated as we stop in front of him. “Thumb prints.” He points to two sheets in front of him that read ‘PLACEMENT EXAM: STRYD’ and have the same small box on the cover as the Geslepe had earlier. We do as instructed and the Wyshied snatches them back. “The first to fall fails the Stryd. You may fight how you see fit, although killing is frowned upon.” *Frowned upon?* The hell? If this was *anyone* but Lev I’d have the good sense to be concerned for my welfare! Killing is probably only “frowned upon” when a half-blood is in the room. Douche. “No weapons or powers.” Too bad I am already using my power to hide my identity. Oh well. “Remember: you are being graded.” He looks at us sternly before continuing. “You may begin.”

We glance at each other and then retreat to near the center of the room. We settle about ten feet from each other, bow respectfully, and take our fighting stances. Then, as if on the same wavelength, we both begin circling the other cautiously.

You have to win, Nova. I remind myself. “*No matter what,*” Lev had said. I take a deep breath.

He strikes first, and I duck and counter with a jab to his ribs, but he is fast and blocks the blow, returning the favor with a punch to my abdomen. I dance away just in time to avoid him. This is not practice anymore, that’s for sure. No one is joking around now.

Giving him an idea of how good you are was not very smart, I realize, but it’s too late to do anything about that now. Not that I knew what the exam required from us anyhow.

But...did he? The Institute is strict about keeping its methods under lock and key, but he knew he had to prepare for it by practicing his skills. Maybe he just figured they would give us a physical exam. Maybe I am overthinking this.

But he said he wanted to practice his fighting skills. Not work on his physicality. My mind wheels are spinning so fast right now, and Lev can tell. He uses the distraction as an advantage and moves to displace my feet.

Focus! I yell at myself, barely jumping out of the way in time. But I recover and send blows to his side, and he grunts with the force. I'd feel bad, but I am so confused about everything that I decide to just fight. Ignore everything and *fight*. I *need* this win.

Every move either of us makes is blocked and countered, blocked and countered. I vaguely remember fighting him before, when we were both keeping up and when the only possible end in sight was the stamina of whomever turned out to be less durable. But we never found out who that was.

I try everything—all of the kicking moves Soirus taught me, angling my strikes near nerves or tender spots, even circling him to make him dizzy. It's like he was right there next to me, receiving lessons in the stale grey of the Hallows. I begin to grow fearful that he will out-last me. Strangely enough, my power is not churning in my stomach like it usually does. I would be concerned, but I am too intent on my current state of affairs.

I cannot lose. Not now.

I fake a punch to his jaw and use my other hand to aim for his ribcage while he is distracted.

My fist connects so forcefully that he stumbles back.

I am stunned. I had not thought it would actually hit. I had not been holding anything back when I threw the punch because I thought he'd block it. He always does.

I quickly follow with two more punches, and he blocks the first, but the second flies through his defense and connects near the area I have already weakened. Lev returns the favor but I offset the punch and swiftly jab him in the chest. He grunts and backs away to regain his bearings.

But this isn't right. He has avoided these hits from me before. He should be able to predict these things from me.

I don't let myself ponder this, though. I just keep him engaged, trying to weaken and distract him to the point where I can risk getting close enough to trip him. I am sweating profusely and starting to feel some of my energy drain. Luckily, he looks about the same. We are a good match.

It happens so fast that I do not even process what it means until it's over.

He is too hasty. He doesn't think it through; doesn't review how much training I have received; how vulnerable he makes himself by doing it. All I see is a blur, and I sidestep and elude his attempt to stun the nerves in my arms, and then I use my forearm to shove his neck down and twist my leg up to hook one of his. Then I quickly pull his arm around his back, flipping him so that he is no longer facing down, and rapidly pull myself away as he reaches desperately to grab me before he hits the ground.

But he is too late, and all I can do is stare, my breathing heavy, as sweat runs down my back and he stares at me with those innocent eyes.

I beat him. I passed the Stryd.

I won, and I have never felt so terrible about it in my life.

I open my mouth to say who-knows-what but a voice sharply cuts through the still air before I can speak. “You’re dismissed.” I look up at the judges, displeased frowns masking their faces. The two Sterkte sit with their arms crossed, the Wyshied writing rapidly on our sheets. “Return to the Geslepe testing room. Leveren, you know what to do.”

My heart is racing and I don’t know if I can move, but when Lev stands, all I can think is that I have to talk to him. In the hall. Did he mean what he said before we went in? Or was he just trying to make me feel better?

I practically run out the door. Lev follows slowly, closing it softly behind him.

“Lev, I—”

“Nova.” He looks at me, not moving, and I wait, not breathing. Then he smiles crookedly, almost sadly but not quite. I don’t really understand his expression, to be honest. “I told you it would be alright. Don’t worry about me. I’ve told you this before.” He watches his boots.

“Lev,” I repeat softly, guilt at snatching away his hopes and dreams in a matter of seconds beginning to weigh on me heavily.

“Nova.” He says, meeting my gaze again. “I mean it.” We are lost in a moment of silence, me close to tears and him forever calm. He swallows. “Go. You shouldn’t keep them waiting.” He smiles gently at me as I hesitate. I don’t want to just leave him. “Go, Nove.” He turns to start walking the opposite direction. I clench my fists.

“I’m sorry.” I call to him, hating this. Hating myself. I told Soirus that nobody else was going to lose anything. I told Soirus that I would not take anything else from anyone.

When will I actually start offering something good to my people?

As I am painfully making my way around the corner, I hear him say my name again and I glance back.

He stands next to a side exit door, one hand on the handle, the other hanging hopelessly by his side. My heart clenches and I try to memorize his smell, his face, his shape, his silly ears. I do not want this to be goodbye.

“Yes?” I reply, trying to make my voice steady.

“Be careful.” He warns, opening the door. Light from the sunny courtyard streams in, illuminating his features and causing half of his black hair to turn golden for a brief second in time.

And then my only friend leaves me to face the Reign Institute of Sterkte alone.

Chapter 18

I barely make it back to the Geslepe testing room without Lev. Already I feel lost without him.

This is pathetic.

I hate how much I miss his comforting presence.

Zorn is less than thrilled to see me enter again. I am less than thrilled to see *him* again. He basically throws me a piece of paper and launches me back into the hall so he doesn't have to look at me.

I want to strangle him. He's the one who got Lev kicked out in the first place. I think I may hate him as much as I hate Soirus.

Though Zorn did not kill Lev.

Yet. There is no time like the present.

I have to lean against the wall in the bright hallway to keep from throwing a tantrum or crying. I take long, slow breaths, very aware that none of them smell like pine and leaves and longing to break something because of it.

Once I regain a reasonable amount of my sanity, I examine what is on the sheet I was given to distract myself from my tragic, screwed-up life.

It is an instruction sheet, telling me what I am to do with my miserable self now, with a map of the Institute's many levels folded within. I jump when two Sprites walk out of the room. They glare at me with loathing before moving past me, probably to Room 105 where my life went to hell.

Everything decent is taken away from me. Urion, William, Xander, Lev—I have lost them all, and I do not know why I can't change my cursed fate. Soirus told me my father was fated to fall in love with a human. I was fated to be born.

Well Fate sure holds a grudge against my bloodline for it, because it has done nothing decent for the Reign family since.

My pity party comes to an abrupt halt as a figure stops in front of me.

"No." An infuriatingly familiar voice says in complete disbelief. Her pretty laugh echoes through my ears and I grit my teeth. "No! No way! *You?* The *son* of an *Aanleg Trustee* couldn't beat *you?* This has to be a mistake. Did you drug him?" Adelaide rambles, finding great amusement in my despair. She shakes her head as I glare at the floor. "And after all he did for you." She muses. Then she laughs lightly again and pushes into the room.

I am seething now. Who the hell is *she* to talk to me about Lev? And here Fate comes again, destroying every possible victory with a new obstacle! Of *course* Adelaide had to pass. I just cannot get a break.

I almost rip the papers in my hand in half, I am so frustrated. I try to read what is on them but my anger makes it impossible. Great, now I need to calm down *again*. I should seriously consider researching meditation. I think it would benefit me immensely in situations like these. And I seem to have a lot of situations like these.

I still have not composed myself when Adelaide returns, holding her own set of papers.

“I have thought a great deal about it and decided you drugged him. It is the only way.” She picks up right where she left off.

I push away from the wall and confront her. “Lev is too smart to be drugged by anyone, and I don’t give a damn what you think about what happened in *my* Stryd. So stop whining about it and get over the fact that *I* won and *he* didn’t.” I intend to glare at her for a good, hard time so that she understands that I am not in the mood for her crap, but she ruins my plans with ease.

“Ooh, grouchy little half-blood.” She raises her eyebrows and purses her lips. “I’ll be honest: it is not like I see you passing the Sjarne anyway, seeing as you half-blood types are all so weak, so I’ll let your bitchy comments slide, but next time? Keep your mouth shut.” She snaps, her brown eyes promising trouble, and then she turns to walk away.

I would bite back, except her words have me thinking. Half-blood types? As in plural? She has met another half-blood? I had never thought...I had never considered that there may be other half-bloods. Why would there be other half-bloods? Sprites—they all hate humans.

Unless not all of them do. Which would indicate that so much of what I have been taught—what I have thought, my opinions—is wrong.

All of this is possible. If Adelaide is not messing with me.

Which she very well could be.

Never mind. I still hate Sprites and their idiotic mind games.

The instructions tell me where I am to stay for the night and where dinner and breakfast are served. The floors of the dormitories are separated by gender, with two floors from females and two for males. I have been assigned a room on the fourth floor, and I cannot bring myself to mind the three flights of stairs because I will have a glorious view.

I locate the dorm wing and begin climbing the stairs, fascinated by the tall, crystal windows and the fresh, green grass that runs all the way up to the white wall. The trees sway carelessly in the breeze and I imagine what it feels like to feel the air swirling through my hair. The halls are clear, so I do not have to worry about bumping into any Sprites at present, and I calmly search for my room, my three-story walk having lulled my nerves.

My lulled nerves charge back to electric shocks the second I open the door to my assigned room.

Adelaide whips her head around, stopping her conversation with a different Sprite that is relaxing in a plush, lilac chair, her long legs curled underneath her. She eyes me unbelievably as Adelaide shrieks, “Are you *kidding* me? I *swear* this is my punishment for every *hellish* thing I have ever said to my mother!”

I roll my eyes, seriously contemplating going back out, slamming the door behind me, and asking Zorn to give me a new room. But wait. I hate Zorn more than I hate Adelaide. I think.

So I come inside the room before shutting the door.

“You must be the half-blood Adelaide has been rambling about.” The other Sprite says, observing me before looking amusedly at Adelaide while she pouts with her arms crossed and slumps onto a stark white couch. The room is surprisingly fancy; far more luscious than I have ever seen. I take it in and realize that there are also four luscious beds. So there will be four of us in here. Lovely.

“Yes,” I answer, finally meeting and holding her gaze. She needs to grasp the fact now that I am not an easy target. Though my being here should prove that already. “Nova Herrod.” I decide to include the last name.

“Hm.” She nods. Her eyes are very dark, almost black, and her hair is the same color, cut short to frame her round face. Her lashes brush her cheeks as she blinks at me. “Baai Sheya.” She offers after a few seconds. She inclines her head. “But I go by Shey.”

I shrug and look around again. “So have you claimed a bed?” I ask Shey and Adelaide.

“You can have the one by the window.” Adelaide suggests lightly.

I narrow my eyes. “So you can push me out the window while I’m sleeping?” I accuse.

She smiles innocently. “I would only do that if I thought you were actually a threat, half-blood. But it is a good idea....” She looks up at the ceiling as if pondering it. “Anyway, it is the bed furthest from mine. That is why I told you to take it.”

Well at least we can agree on something. And I was looking forward to the view. “Fine.” I say, walking over to the window bed and falling on the plush, lilac comforter. It feels like a cloud after days of sleeping on a bed of nails. I could fall asleep now if I close my eyes.

I turn my head to gaze outside, able to see over the border and along the path leading to the entrance of the Institute. Just hours ago, Lev and I stood there with my Sterkte. Now, it is only me.

“So Leveren Riviere, huh?” Shey’s voice saves me from suffering through my most recent memories. I twist almost eagerly to give her my attention. “Hell, what I would give to just *stand* next to the Sprite, let alone travel with him.” She shakes her head, her eyes taking a

faraway look as she thinks about Lev. My chest tightens with displeasure, but it fades slightly when I remind myself that I am friends with Lev and she is not.

I stifle a smile.

“What about him?” I ask casually, fingering my comforter and propping my head up on my hand.

“Uh, he’s a frigging *god*. Like, who the hell *cares* that it took him so long to come to the Institute, as long as he’s here with *me*! Except now he’s *not*, but then you come along and I can squeeze all of the juice out of you! Come on, Nova, is his personality as incredible as his body?” She pesters impatiently.

She is talking about Lev, I know, but I never really thought of him in this longing, predatory way. Now she has me going back to all of the moments I spent with him, looking again at him with new eyes; new eyes that are not so obviously clouded with thoughts of Urion or William or Soirus or Xander.

As always, his eyes catch me like a fish in a net, and I am stuck in that enchanting sea-green tunnel for a decent amount of time before I let my eyes wander. I review my first memory of seeing him, when he was leaning next to the flower shop in that happy town, his hands tucked away in his pockets, his smile crooked and kind and like a fresh summer breeze. He so effortlessly took away the tsunami raging inside of me and replaced it with a wildfire, free and happy and warm. I remember his words when Urion and Grant finally captured him, and I can just imagine his sensuous mouth forming the words “beautiful Nag woman,” I can just *see* the way he said it.... Something deep in my core stirs at the thought.

No. I am not doing this to myself. I grit my teeth together and maneuver my way through a response that will satisfy Shey. “He is kind and funny and smart, so I guess so.”

Shey watches me closely. “That’s all you have to *say*? This is *Ren Riviere!*” Ren? I’ll have to ask him about that one. If I ever get the chance. “The Sprite is seriously the best thing to happen to all of Sprite-kind since Mavern elected his father as Aanleg!”

A thunderous anger threatens to boil over when she mentions Mavern’s name. I can barely keep the growl out of my voice. “Sorry to burst your bubble. That’s all I’ve got.” I flop back to stare at the ceiling. It is painted white with tiny silver swirls creating intricate designs all over. My eyes follow them mechanically.

“Well Adelaide was there. She can tell me what it is like being so close to him.”

Oh Adelaide was there, all right. There making me want to slap that flirty grin off her stupid face.

No. I am *not* jealous. This is *Lev*.

Lev. Not *Ren*.

Although ‘Ren’ is a pretty attractive nickname, too.

Since when do I find Lev's nickname attractive?

"He is an absolute *angel*, Shey. I mean—it was all I could do not to *launch* myself into his strong, magnificent arms." Adelaide gushes, going into detail about his perfect facial features and the way his eyes shined in the lighting and how his mouth curved at the edges.

Maybe it'll end up being Adelaide getting murdered in her sleep.

Ugh. I miss Lev. He would be able to distract me from all this talk about him.

That makes no sense, Nova. I tell myself. But I do not care.

Our final roommate does not show before dinner, though all of our luggage somehow appears in the suite around five, so at the scheduled time of seven o'clock, Adelaide and Shey lead the way down to the cafeteria. I trail behind them, because they are still talking about random crap that I am not interested in. I do end up staying close to them the whole time, though, because they are the only Sprites here that I know and no one bothers me when I am with them. I get a few sniggers and angry looks, but I am left alone. Small mercies.

When we return to the room, there are many more Sprites for me to be wary of bumping into, and I stick close to the walls. We finally make it back and are getting ready for bed when a knock stops us all in our tracks. We still haven't moved when the door opens.

"Hello?" A small voice asks, peeking around the door at an oddly low height. When the door fully opens, it is revealed why.

She is sitting in a wheelchair.

Not only this, but she does not have her full legs. They stop just before the knee, her pant legs tucked under her body so they do not hang in front of the wheelchair.

She sits in the doorway, waiting for one of us to say something. Adelaide, as always, launches herself into the conversation. For once I am grateful, since it seems that I have, by some miracle, nothing to say. "Your bed is over there by the half-blood's. Sorry for your misfortune." She does not sound sorry at all. "I'm Adelaide, by the way. You must be the Sprite we have been waiting for. Wyshied test take longer than expected?" Her tone is not friendly, but I get the sense that it has to do not with the new Sprite's condition, but with her obviously being a Wyshied prospect.

Well, hopefully she is. The assumption is obviously going to be made.

The Sprite takes it in stride. "Yes," her small voice replies. "I finished early so they let me talk to professors for a while. I got caught up there and lost track of time." She smiles and pushes her wheelchair forward so she can close the door and block out all of the hall noise. She tucks a loose piece of straight brown hair behind her ear and introduces herself. "I am Anna Turris."

Everything fades to nothing as I stare at her. She can't be....

But I see it. It is so painfully evident in her nose and her eyes and her chin. She says her name and all I can do is stare at Anna because she looks *just like him*.

I am just now comprehending that my Sterkte had lives before they left to protect me. They had families.

And Anna is part of Grant's.



I dream of them sitting together, talking about life, laughing and smiling and happy. The Turriss siblings, reunited after twenty-six years. Then the dream changes, and there is Soirus, with a wife and child, and for once he is truly happy, not mad at the world. And then I see Urion. But he has no one, it is just him, staring at me, reaching out a hand, and I am there, taking it, because as soon as I touch him, the empty feeling inside of me is covered up again, and when he kisses me, I feel like I have my own kind of family, too.



“You will lay on the table and stay still as the Wyshied attach the wires. Then, when everyone has exited the room, you will summon your powers. Show us as much as you can—we need to know what we could be working with. But do not break anything. We cannot have you destroying the place when there are others that need to be tested. You—go.” Zorn points at an unlucky victim in the front row, motioning for him to enter the lab first.

The rest of us are seated in a room much like yesterday's, except, instead of a floor for the instructor to teach on, there are fifty glass windows that look down on a lab room with a cold, glass table set up in the middle and four machines waiting at each corner with wires hanging from the holes in them.

They look hella creepy and I do not want to go in there. I trust those demonic machines as much as I trust Zorn.

Not at all.

She sits in the seat next to me, watching the first Sprite spread out on the table with a small frown. Her scent is dark and sweet, like dark chocolate with pecans and plums in the center. I would not mind it if I at all liked pecans.

The Wyshied potentials have been mixed with the Sterkte students again, and Anna sits at the end of the first row next to another Sprite female that she seems to get along with. I find myself glancing her way for various reasons every once in a while, and I clutch my arm rests to try and force myself to stop being weird. And rude.

I cannot imagine not being able to walk. I wonder if she ever has been able to walk. If not, maybe she does not really know what she is missing and thus does not notice.

For her sake, I hope this is the case.

Her state also has me thinking about my mother. The dream I had so long ago, when she healed my hand and told me to do the same for my people. It gives me goosebumps thinking about it, but I am stuck going over it in my head, unsure what she was trying to say. If that dream was even real. It was probably something I made up after hearing Soirus and Xander talk about the Nag.

And yet it seemed so real.

Watching the others before me have those wires attached to their foreheads, inner wrists, and the soles of their feet makes me increasingly anxious. What do the creepy machines detect? How am I going to summon my power but control it so that not all of it blows up inside of me and keep them from figuring out just how powerful I am? There is no way that is happening. I will be dead by tonight. For sure.

I am sweating in the cold grip of reality when Zorn points at me unhappily and says, “You.”

That is forever the word he uses whenever he plans on destroying my life. And succeeds.

My sweaty palms push me to my feet and my heart beats against my ribs as I crawl down the steps and open the door to the staircase that leads into the lab. Snickers follow me through the metal and disappear when the knob clicks into place. It smells musty and cold, which I find to go perfectly with my miserable existence.

Zeheb should have never encouraged me to do this. I will never forgive him for sending me to my grave. I am too young to die, dammit! And too important!

Too soon I have made it to the bottom and have pulled the glass door out of my way. I make myself look composed as I place my hands on the table of death, but that awful churning is already acting up and I know I am over. My veins already feel hot.

I slip off my shoes and socks, thinking that at least I do not have to wear those uncomfortable, heavy boots, and carefully position myself on my back on the table, and as soon as my hair touches the glass, the Wyshied are there, placing the sticky ends of the disturbing wires on my body, their hands on my feet making me tense up even more. They remind me of centipedes climbing through my toes. I have a crushing hold the sides of the table to keep from shuddering. My knuckles ache from the strain.

And then the movement is gone, and an old, white, crinkled face appears in the corner of my eye for a split second to say, “You are ready,” before I am closed in the lab, my own special kind of prison. A thousand curses are streaming through my brain as I breathe deeply, doing everything I can not to panic. I am not ready for this at all.

Maybe if I get up now they will just kick me out without suspicion. I know Zorn would be beyond himself. Adelaide as well.

My eyes unintentionally flick towards the line of windows above me, my body’s horrible way of reminding me that everyone is going to see me fail.

But I forget all of that when my eyes catch on something—*someone*—sitting in the front row who had not been there before.

I want to scream with frustration and relief. *I hate you I hate you I hate you! You scared me senseless! By the stars, thank you!* is all I can think as I bite my lip to keep from crying with beautiful reprieve.

Because those are his eyes. Those are his eyes; those are his ears; that is his face; there is his crooked, glorious smile....

My body deflates and, for a fleeting instant, everything is right.

He is here.

Lev is here.

Chapter 19

Him being here clears my mind: I actually begin using logic to think again, instead of fear. I do not need to activate my full power potential—just display the transformation abilities I recently discovered, don't blow up the whole building.

I take a deep breath, and then another, and then I close my eyes and begin imagining new traits that I want to have. I think of a longer nose, extremely pale skin, longer legs, a heavier build; hopefully these things are actually being demonstrated and I am not just assuming they are working. I open my eyes and turn my head to look at my arm to make sure, and when my skin changes to a bright blue color, I am satisfied. I return to my normal self, minus the white hair, and prepare to be released.

A sharp tingling in my feet and arms and head keeps me from disconnecting myself from the machines. I blink in confusion—It is like the weird robots refuse to let me go. My brow scrunches and I am about to reach up to my head to yank off the wires when an electric pulse so violent shoots through my body that I seize up, my back becoming entirely straight, my whole body stiff.

What the hell is going on? I mentally panic, my eyes wide as more pulses begin jolting into my veins. My vision blurs and my teeth clench together as I try to ease the pain. I painfully shift my head sideways again to try and see one of the machines, and that is when I notice. Staring at a white ceiling conceals it, but seeing my caramel skin against the shade on the table makes it noticeable enough for me to go into complete panic mode.

I'm glowing.

Is that what the machines are supposed to do? Make sure everything is put on display so nothing can be hidden.

Oh, these Sprites are thorough.

And I'm going to die.

My breathing is becoming increasingly labored as I try to think, think, *think!* I keep my head turned so I can see how deep I am. The electric pulses combined with the burning that is starting to occur inside of me make it so hard for me not to writhe in pain. I am sweating now as the heat is becoming overwhelming. The electricity definitely does not help.

Damn, I am baking! I take another deep breath, but now I feel as though I am breathing in flames. I squeeze my eyes shut, but this does nothing because my eyelids still shine as bright as the sun.

Sun. Bright. Eyes...bright eyes. Another shock shakes my body and I gasp, but through the growing agony, somehow I hold on to bright eyes. *Bright eyes, bright green eyes, green-eyed Sprite, Lev. Leveren Riviere.* I desperately grasp his name, remembering. *"I'll be right there."* He told me. *"Just think about me. Think about the solstice festival in Glistendane."* I can hear it; the wonderful music, the humans laughing and singing and yelling with joy. *"The yellow dress and the flowers and the music."* I see it; the beautiful dress I was wearing and the amazing flowers I had on my head, the dancing and the shops and the setting sun, and then Lev, leaning there on the building, his magnificent smell blocking out everything. I smell it now, and I inhale deeply again, and it is a cool breeze in a scorching desert. The machines send their volts through me again, but I see wild, curious eyes and the pain is gone. I feel the tingles of the wires again, but I am vaguely aware of the fact that I am blocking the currents from harming me now. My eyes flutter open and I easily turn my head to examine my surroundings.

The glow is gone.

A door opens on the far side of the room and my eyes follow the Wyshied as he yanks the wires off of me (with an annoying lack of gentleness), glances over the information collected by the machines, and nods at me to leave.

I can hardly believe it.

I did it.

I waste no time in booking it out of there, snatching my shoes off the floor and practically running to the exit door. It takes a great amount of self-control that I decide to reward myself for having later not to look up to see what Lev's and Zorn's faces read.

The exit stairway leads all the way to the back of the lecture room where everyone else sits. This would be a serious issue for my lungs if Soirus hadn't torturously yanked me from my beauty rest every time decided he didn't want to sleep like any normal person. Douche.

Admitting something he forced me to do is benefiting me is extremely difficult. I have to convince myself that doing this does not mean he is not a terrible Sprite.

I hate him.

I open the back door and completely forget about the dark-eyed Sterkte, though, because then green eyes are peering through the doorway at me in anticipation. Lev steps aside so that I can fully enter the room and smiles, and all I can do is shake my head and stare at him. After a few seconds, he leans forward and whispers, “We should probably sit so Zorn doesn’t break something.” He suggests, his eyes darting to the front of the room.

I nod, and we end up sliding into a couple of seats near the back. There are considerably more open seats today, which obviously makes sense. Lev and I are mostly secluded in our back seats.

I speechlessly watch another Sprite get attached to the demon robots. I can feel Lev’s presence next to me, patiently waiting for me to ask.

Fine, I’ll bite.

“How?” I murmur, not taking my eyes off the front of the room. Out of the corner of my eye I see Lev’s head turn towards me, and for a few seconds he is silent.

“My father is an Aanleg Trustee.” He responds, watching for my reaction. I raise an eyebrow but keep my face composed. I am not very surprised at this explanation. Lev finally copies me and stares down at the Sprite in the lab, who is now beginning to levitate and use an unseen power to lift the machines and the table as well. “And I am a Reuk.”

At this, I look at him. He meets my gaze and shrugs. I shake my head again, but this time a smile pulls at my lips as I turn away.

“How do you think I did?” I ask cautiously, my heart rate speeding up in my anxiety.

Lev sighs. “You contain very much power for a half-blood.” He begins, not in a mean way. Still, this makes me even more nervous and I rub my palms together to keep them from getting clammy. “Probably as much as any normal Vel Sprite, if not more. We have never seen a Vel who can glow like you did.” He admits. I stiffen. I hope he doesn’t notice. “They will be curious as to why you can do that.”

Damn those demonized machines and their stupid electric currents!

“So, if only for that fact,” Lev concludes, “you’re in.”

I have to refrain from grabbing his arm as I stare at him. “What?” I say as calmly as possible. Which is not very calmly.

Lev grins at my expression and sits forward. “I said you are in, Nova Herrod.” His smile grows as I digest this information, gaping in amazement, my heart racing with happiness now.

If he is right about curiosity being a weakness for the Institute, and my power being a very peculiar thing....

Then I have defied all odds and made it into the Institute of Sterkte.

Me. A half-blood.

Can I just take a moment to bask in the fact that I was right?

Finally, I slowly let myself smile as I look into Lev's bright green eyes. "You had better be right, Leveren Riviere." I tell him in a mock warning tone.

He leans back in his chair again, his smile becoming more mischievous and confident, and winks those long black lashes at me. Some part of me is thrilled by the gesture.

"Trust me," He replies. "I am."



Lev is right.

Waarheid Sun

NOTES:

- Go back and explain what she learned about the other Sterkte prophet