

PART ONE
THE
Wind
MAGE

Chapter 1

COLLIN

“Are you nervous?” Klaus asks, pulling me from my reflection in the mirror. I am sixteen now, the age which the next king marries. In two more years, I will be taking my seat as ruler of Clearwater Kingdom and the protector of this realm and others.

“No. I have been waiting for this day for almost a year.” I turn to him and smile with the confidence I feel. I love Lily with all my heart, and I am so happy to make her my bride finally. “How could I hold doubt with marrying Lily? She is perfect in every way. Beautiful, graceful, kind, and giving. She is going to make a wonderful queen for our people and me.”

“Yes, she is. Lily is amazing, but I can’t praise her as well as you do.” Klaus chuckles. My younger brother is my best friend, and we have been inseparable in our solemn lives. The only person who has ever drawn me away from him is Lily. He knows Lily just about as well as I do. “I can’t wait until I get to stand where you are with Aria. I miss her.”

“If you love her, Klaus, I’m sure she is just as amazing as Lily,” I tell him, happy that he finally has noticed someone. All the young ladies around are half in love with him, but he doesn’t even notice. His good looks always draw them in, but it is his kind heart they all fall in love with. “I can’t wait to meet the one who has stolen my little brother's heart.”

“Another year,” Klaus sighs, and I feel sorry for him. Lily and I grew up together, have always been in each other's lives. The few stolen moments we have shared have heightened our desires for our wedding night. I am ready for marriage and to love her completely. I will do anything for her.

“The year will pass quickly, hopefully.” Seeing sorrow in him at not having Aria and still having to wait one more year to marry her, I try to reassure him. “Maybe you could visit her next month. Get another one of those spectacular kisses you told me about.”

“Don’t make fun of my naivety, Collin.” He hits me in the arm and props up in my window seat. “I just may tell Father yet of yours and Lily’s little hidden spot. Or should I say spots?”

“Don’t think it will make much difference now.” I chuckle as I brush my hair. “We are about to be married, after all.”

“Well, then let's go and test that theory,” Klaus says, heading for the door to my room.

“Get back here! You will just embarrass Lily,” I shout at him. Sure, Lily and I have messed around some, but we haven’t consummated our relationship yet. We aren’t waiting just because it is expected of us but because we both agreed we want it to be special. We have been friends for most of our lives, and it is a big step moving into marriage and the chance of creating a child. I’m still not sure about kids right away, but Lily wants them. If it makes her happy, I am more than happy to fill her belly with them.

Klaus turns and comes back, crashing down on my bed, and sighs. “It’s been almost a year since I have seen Aria. Another year to wait. I need some joy in my life.”

I chuckle at his melodrama, but in the last year, I have seen a change in Klaus. There has been a sense of loneliness about him. This girl has affected my brother in a way I’ve never seen before, and I know she has to be the best match for him. Klaus would not fall in love with just anybody.

He has told me everything about her. How sweet her voice is, how soft her long brown hair is. The amazing kiss they shared and her being in his arms. I don’t think he has ever kissed another girl. He has always been blind to those who flirt with him.

He closes his eyes and speaks again. “I can see her clear as this day—every moment we spent together replays in my head. I remember what her skin felt like as I held her hand or touched her face. The glow of light in her eyes, like there was a magic behind them that called to me. I want nothing more than just to take off and go to her.”

“Then maybe you should,” I tell him. “No one knows of her, and I still don’t understand this big secret you and Father arranged for your marriage, brother.”

“I don’t understand the need for the big secret either, but when I met Aria, the reason didn’t matter anymore. They told me she was to be my future wife, and I believe that we will be together with every part of myself. Like a true destiny, one that is happy and full of love. But they also made it clear she must live in the dark of our world. Until the time comes when I can protect her.”

I turn to look at him as he shares this new information. Klaus has never mentioned this need to protect her to me before. What is it about this young woman that makes her need Klaus’s protection, and why his?

I realize suddenly why Klaus has undertaken so much training in the last year. I even asked him about it a while ago. He said it was to catch up to me and kick my ass for a change.

“The training you have been doing. Klaus, is it to protect her?” I ask him to confirm my suspicions.

He looks at me and then gets up, moving to the window again and looking out. “You remember the stories we were told as children of the Elementals? The bonds they formed and how they all came together to save the realms?”

“Yes, but my favorite parts were of the ogres and dragon,” I say with a smile. “Lily had a thing for the Elementals and their powers. You liked the witches and Mages.”

He looks at me from the window, and I see the seriousness in his face. “The legends hold the truth from our past, Collin. Ogres and dragons may have died out just like the magic did in the Elementals. With it, it took the ability to shift or heal. It has shaped the way we live now. As for the witches and Mages, many believe they still exist.”

“Do you think they exist, Klaus?” I ask him.

He turns away and looks out the window again. “Meeting Aria was like a spark of magic, and I saw it reflecting in her eyes. It was so tiny and deep, I couldn’t believe I saw anything, but I did. It brightened before me as I looked at her, drawing me in. I think it was my soul connecting to hers. It felt bigger than this world, and I have felt more alive than ever before since that moment. Like a bond had formed just as the Elementals once did with each other.”

“You think she is an Elemental?” I ask him, the disbelief audible in my voice.

“No...she is something more,” he tells me, ignoring my doubt. “And I am in love with her. I will protect her at all costs as her mother told me I must. That includes staying away from her until our marriage. For her to remain in hiding until then and no one but my kings to know.”

“You mean Father and me?” I ask, understanding why he never would let me tell Lily of Aria, the girl who has stolen Klaus’s heart. I had mentioned once to her that Klaus liked some girl, and when Klaus found out, he had raged at me with a wooden practice sword. I promised I wouldn’t mention it again, and I haven’t. Not until now. “Why us and no one else?”

“I don’t know, but what her mother says, I believe. Father says she has the sight and saw the future,” he tells me and turns toward the door. “With what I felt with Aria, I have to believe it is for the best.”

“What are you doing?” I ask, not wanting to drop this conversation. I feel like I am starting to see something in Klaus that I haven’t been looking for. A determination in his future with this girl. I must meet her soon and see what is so special about her.

“You should finish getting ready. I will go and check on things.”

“Let them know I am ready.”

“Will do,” Klaus says as he opens the door. “Hey, Collin...I am pleased to see this day finally. You and Lily are perfect for each other.”

“I know,” I smile at him, knowing he is happy for us. We both love Lily, only I am the one in love with her. “I’m just happy she didn’t fall for that sweet smile of yours like all the other girls.”

“What girls?” he asks me and seems serious about the query.

“The ones you never notice. Now go on and see if the family is about ready,” I tell him, laughing. “I am anxious to bind myself in this marriage and move on to the wedding night.”

“Spoken more of a horny goat than a loving husband,” Klaus jokes to me.

“You would get it if Aria came to your bed last night as Lily did mine,” I tease him. “Now, go on, little brother, before I start to make you blush.”

He laughs as he leaves me alone. I take this chance to slip away, moving to the secret passage near a shelf in the backside of my room. Lily should still be in her room, and I know the way well. Slipping to her door, I knock loudly and hear several women squeal on the other side. They die down after a few seconds, and I knock again, hearing them mumbling now.

“Collin? Is that you?” I hear Lily call on the other side and crack the door open.

“I want to speak to you for a moment. Send everyone away,” I tell her. I hear her doing as I say, and a few mumble in protest that I should not see the bride. I call out to them all, “I will not look upon my bride until she is walking down the aisle to me. I want to see that glorious smile that she has and the happiness in her eyes right before I take her as my wife. To me, it is more special than the kiss we will share.”

In response, the women sigh collectively, and I smile at my own charm. They finally leave, and Lily comes back to the door.

“I thought I told you to keep that sweet mouth of yours to yourself. I don’t care to share you with another woman or have them look at you as I do,” she goads me.

“I had to get them to leave somehow. Besides, tonight I plan to put this mouth all over that body of yours.” I can’t resist teasing her as she did me last night. “I plan to lick every square inch of you before I take you as my wife.”

“Now, that sounds like a reason to marry you,” she says with a giggle. She is just on the other side of the door, and I can hear the smile in her voice as she speaks cheerfully, “Considering what you do to me with your touch, I will marry you, then.”

I smile significantly to myself at her playful suggestion. “I bet you look beautiful in your dress. I can’t wait to see you.”

“I can’t wait to see you,” she says softly. “Collin...about last night. I know I shouldn’t have come to you like that. I wasn’t thinking clearly with all that wine in my head.”

“It is fine, Lily. We have been messing around for months. The anticipation of the wedding is so close, it was bound to catch up with us,” I tell her, not ashamed one bit of what happened.

I had gotten back from my party only to have her show up just as I was climbing into my bed. I had my clothing off already and was under the covers when she came into my room. The nightgown she had on was sheer and short, showing me her beautiful young curves. She crawled up the bed onto me, and I was instantly hard.

She lifted her silky sheath over her head, baring her beautiful body to me, and I couldn’t help but touch her. I pulled her down into my arms, kissing her with all the need I had felt for so long. She pushed me back on the bed and kissed down my body. The blanket that was covering me came off, and my hard erection jumped up at her. I watched her eyes widen, and then she took it in her hands, rubbing it gently as I had shown her before. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the feel of her touch.

It was only when I felt her mouth surrounding me that my head shot up. “Lily.”

“Shhh,” she replied as I slipped from her mouth. It was the sexiest and most erotic thing ever to see. “I want to taste you.”

“Oh, gods,” I moaned, watching her lips cover me once more. Though we had been fooling with each other for years, we hadn’t gone this far before. We were waiting for our wedding night, but at that moment, I came unglued.

“I wanted you to make love to me,” she confesses to me now through the door. “I didn’t want to wait any longer.”

“I know, and I felt the same. Honestly, if Hubert hadn’t come in to see if I wanted a nightcap, I would have taken you, Lily,” I tell her. Hubert, my manservant, had gotten an eyeful of us naked in my bed, Lily on top of me. “You felt so good, and you were so beautiful. I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Collin,” she says sweetly.

“I can’t wait to show you tonight just how much I want you.” I run my hand down the doorframe, picturing it as her. “I am going to lay you on my bed with not a stitch of clothing on and spread those thighs of yours. I am going to make you come with just my tongue and taste that sweet nectar of yours.”

“Umm, like I tasted you last night?” She teases me now with the memory, and I am starting to get hard at that thought again. “I want you to fill me with it. With our children.”

“And I plan to, with many of them,” I say, smiling. “At least five of them. All boys and one girl just like you.”

“How about five boys like you and five girls like me?” she says with a chuckle.

“Woman.” I laugh at her. “You plan to keep me busy, don’t you? How do you plan for us to find the time with five kids?”

“I guess we will just have to be creative. But honestly, Collin, I want a baby right away.”

“Then I will give you one,” I say lovingly. It scares me for us to have a child, but I feel Lily will know what to do. I will just learn to be a father. “Just maybe not ten, I think I will become jealous of your attention.”

“We will leave it in the gods’ hands,” she tells me. “I want to see you.”

“You will see me soon enough, love,” I say with a sigh, wanting the same. “As you walk down that aisle, I want you to know that I’ll be reminding myself how lucky I am. To be marrying the love of my life and my best friend. That I will do everything in my power to make you happy, even give you ten children if that is what it takes.”

She laughs, and I love that sound. “And I want you to know, I am thinking about the boy who kissed me the first time under that sycamore tree. How you held my hand at the fair and all the days after. That, to me... Nothing could ever make me happier than spending the rest of my life with you.”

“I will see you at the altar, then?”

“I will be there, love,” she promises softly.

“I should go down and wait for you,” I say, stepping away from the door. “Don’t take too long, okay?”

“I will be right behind you,” she assures me.

And she is. Just as I reach the altar and speak with my father, the music begins to inform me of her arrival.

She is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. A white bodice fits her upper body, hugging her curves, then there is fabric in a massive bell of lace and silk. Her soft brown hair is pulled back with curls hanging down, and a delicate floral lace lies at the top down the back. With pink and white flowers in front of her, she takes her father's arm and moves down the aisle toward me.

Our eyes are glued to each other. So much so, that the world around us tunes out for a moment. I revel in the silence that engulfs me, until suddenly there is a massive explosion, and the church shakes. We are under attack.

Chapter 2

COLLIN

The Sun State attacking us comes as a huge surprise. The treaty we have with them is just a year old and has been in good standing since it was made.

The agreement states that the Sun State will stay out of Mountainside and Earthgate if we allow free trade within the kingdom of Clearwater. Trade is their most fundamental structure for survival. By allowing for free trade within our kingdom, they became a more prosperous state. But every deal has a give and a take. To allow for the trade, they had to promise to leave the other realms alone. Earthgate and Mountainside do most of their trades through Clearwater as well, and we want to promote civility between all the kingdoms. We became the middle ground in the last year, and things were working out, as far as we knew.

Besides a few civil problems that have developed in Earthgate and Mountainside, Clearwater has not had any issues. Father sent forces out to the two realms to give warning to the Sun State that they needed to back off from trying to rule over the others. But I can see now that it was a ploy all along to catch us weakened so they could attack.

They set us up. Traders on the inside attacked and breached one of our gates. The enemy waited for the opening on the other side, and soon the city flooded with soldiers, bringing the battle to the streets. The captain of the guard informs us that there is fighting on the other side of the kingdom. My father, King Bjorn, and I sprint to our horses to help. I look back at Lily standing in front of the chapel with fear in her eyes. I mouth the words "I love you," and then turn to follow my king.

Klaus is with us, not far behind. He has trained as much as I have even though he has not fought our enemy before. Peace was made before he became of age to go to battle. I am just a year and a half older than he and have little experience myself.

We take up arms against our enemy, all of us together, fighting right alongside our guards. Brave men are laying down their lives for their families and homes. Blood is running on our soil as men on both sides fall.

The enemy starts to pull back, and within the hour, we have them outside our walls once more.

"Father, they are regrouping and will attack again," I say as we all rest just on the other side. My bridegroom clothing is ruined, and I wince when I think of how I must look. I can't help but think of Lily and that we will have to postpone our wedding. That the day we have been waiting for will not be today. Today is for bloodshed, not happy ever after's.

"We can't hold them with so many of our warriors in the other two realms," our father tells us dejectedly as he paces. We need a plan fast or else the whole kingdom could fall. "Klaus. Take a small party of guards and gather the women. We must get them to safety. I want you to take them to Mountainside if the kingdom falls. There is a man there, a great warrior named Rayland and another man named Hoarse. Find them, and they will keep you all safe."

He turns to me then. "We must meet with King Rollin or whoever is leading his forces. Pascal, send a messenger to the other side. Have it arranged."

"Yes, your Majesty," Pascal says, turning quickly and rushing to the gate. Several hours later, after the women of the kingdom are safely away and heading for Mountainside, Father and I ride out with a small party and through the enemy to the seashores. King Rollin, along with his son Nile, is waiting for us there.

“Rollin, why have you forsaken our treaty this day?” my father bellows for all to hear as I stand beside him. I am allowed to speak in such a meeting, but my father urges me not to now. Nile shows the same respect to his own father. One day, I will have to deal with him, and he is just as cruel and complicated as his father.

“You mean the treaty where your kingdom holds all the power?” King Rollin demands as he moves closer to us. “I needed to make a point to you, Bjorn. The Sun State is not weak, and I will not bow to your law.”

“The treaty is more than fair to all the realms,” Father says. “You took from the others not in trade but in threats. They did not want to deal with you. Peace was settled among all of us.”

“With you holding all the pieces!” The anger directed at my father from this man pierces the air as the two stares at each other. “The great King Bjorn who keeps the peace. But the great King Bjorn has made a grave error. His forces are spread out between the realms, leaving his kingdom vulnerable to attack.”

“With the treaty, there was no need for strong guards. This was a day for my people to celebrate the future of the next king and queen.”

“And they still can,” Rollin tells him as he motions behind him. A girl, maybe ten or twelve, walks up beside him. She is dressed in a pretty white dress, but her face shows her fear even though she is trying to be strong. “If your son takes my daughter as his queen, that is.”

“No.” I refuse the idea of marrying her instantly as I look at the child. I don’t realize I’ve spoken until I look at King Rollin and then my father. He disapproves that I spoke, but now that I have, I continue. “She is just a child.”

“She is small, but she is thirteen. Just of age, and her cycle has started. She is more than able to produce an heir,” King Rollin says sternly.

“Even so, she is too young. That you would force this on her at such an age only shows your true character, Rollin.” Father turns back to him. “But I am willing to speak terms with serious consideration if you back off today.”

“My terms are that the marriage happens today. I have everything set up to have it performed here and now. Then my warriors will back off.”

“Two years until the marriage, and she stays with us in that time frame.” My father sets his terms and adds, “You know I will keep her safe, and she will be with my family.”

My heart is racing with anger and fear of losing Lily. I do not like any of the terms laid out, but I remain silent. I understand that the most crucial goal is to get them to pull back today.

“I will agree to two years, but only with the consummation,” Rollin says. “The marriage still proceeds today and is binding. Not to be broken by man. I have even a Mage to perform the ceremony to make it so.”

I look to Father, and I see his face turn to surprise and then to alarm. “You have a Mage here?”

I am not sure if Mages really still exist, but apparently, my father and this king do. Legend states that Mages are bound by truth and can see the future. There is a power that surrounds them and it holds all to believe their visions.

“The last in the world,” Rollin says with a smile. “It took me years to find her. Mystery and legend change over time, but she is real.”

“I want to speak to her,” Father demands, and I wonder what he is thinking. “If she is a true Mage, then she will have the true sight to know our rightful path. I want to know if she is real.”

“She speaks in riddles, but she has declared my daughter to marry your son.”

“If so, I would prefer to hear it from her,” he says to Rollin.

“So be it,” Rollin says, turning and motioning to several men to move away. Behind them stands a small canopy with what looks to be an altar. A woman stands in the sand, facing out to the ocean. Her long silver hair blowing in the breeze is the only movement of her still body.

My father sighs as I look back at him, and I see his concerned look from earlier slip from his face. Something about the woman alarmed him, but now it is gone. Does he know her?

“Stay here,” Father says as he moves forward alone through the enemy to the old woman. I watch him walk through Rollin’s men with the confidence that none would touch him without command.

“She speaks only the truth of her visions,” King Rollin says to me now with a smile that says he knows he has won. “A Mage is bound to see them come true, no matter the cost.”

“You, a king, believe in such myth and legends?” I ask him, wondering why he would say such a thing to me.

“A king should believe more than most,” he says with a laugh at me. “It is said that they guide us, the chosen kings, to rule. A king with a Mage by his side is an immensely powerful king indeed.”

“Why is that?” I turn to look at my father, who is speaking with the woman. I am curious as to what they are saying, but they speak alone.

“Mages lead their kings,” Rollin says as Nile pushes the girl child back behind them and to a woman. They enter a tent, not far away. “We all don’t have them, only so many generations claim one as theirs. But a Mage lives a long life, and in that time, she can guide many kings. Her power is endless until her death.”

“If that is so, why is she helping you?” I ask him, looking him square in the eyes. My father is the true king for the people. Not this man nor his son, who lead with iron fists that only hurt the people.

“Because I am the king,” he says with his smile dropping. “You probably will never see one and what they can do, considering she is the last. But her final visions decree you are to marry my daughter, and I will see it done.”

I don’t answer, though it is on the tip of my tongue. I will not marry his daughter but Lily, as I plan. There will be no wedding today if not with Lily.

Father slowly rises after a while and comes back to us. He looks at me, and I can see the pain in his eyes, but he says nothing as he faces King Rollin once more.

“Your daughter will marry my son,” he says, and my heart stops beating. “The Mage has spoken, and I will see it through. But not today, nor with Collin. She will marry Klaus, my second son.”

“No!” Rollin shouts his anger. My heart pulses with relief, but I am struck with surprise that my father can say such a thing. Klaus could not marry this girl no more than I could. He loves another, and arrangements have already been made for them. “I want this final today and with the future king. Not his second, no matter his rank.”

“Your Mage speaks the truth, as you well know,” Father says to him now. “She does not say the name Collin to me, but Klaus.”

“You lie!” Rollin shouts, and his guards’ line in formation.

“You bring a Mage here to tell me the truth, and then you don’t believe it for yourself!”

“She has told me that my daughter will marry the future king, your son.” Rollin takes a step forward, and so does my father.

“She tells me your daughter calls my son’s name for help. The name she chooses is not Collin, but Klaus. You have it wrong, Rollin. You always have it wrong.”

Hell breaks loose then as the two kings attack one another, and everyone else rushes in. The battle is on. Swords clank together in a deafening sound as men roar. I have little time to react as Nile comes at me, his sword raised. He is older than I by several years and is much stronger. His kingdom is violent and always at war, so he has an advantage in experience and size. Still, I put up a fight with all the training I have, blocking his sharp blows.

Our skills are not matched, but I have speed over him. He is a left-hander, like me, and our blades meet in a more natural flow than others I have fought. We fight, father and son side by side against father and son, as two armies collide around us. Our army is well outnumbered, but our men are loyal, and they fight bravely.

“You think you are too good for my sister?” Nile mocks as he swings for me. I have no idea where the girl is now, but I hope she is safe. It isn’t right that they put her in the mix of all of this.

I don’t answer him but focus on my attack. He could quickly get the best of me if I allow him to distract me. Swinging to my left, I dodge his last blow and clash swords with another warrior I come close to, deflecting his blow. Not thinking beyond that split second, I plunge my sword into his thigh, and he crumbles. I turn back to Nile as his sword swings down on me. I lose my balance at the blow as I block it and fall to the ground. He moves swiftly, stabbing down at me, and I roll and jump back to my feet.

“You choose wrong, and now you will die,” Nile says, attacking me again. “Don’t worry, though, I will make sure your other bride ends up in my harem. Just like your little sister.”

Assuna is my adopted sister. My parents took her in when she was just a baby. She is just turned thirteen, and my anger flares at Nile’s suggestion. How could he even think to add one so young to a harem? And not my Lily. She will never be his, I swear to it.

“You’re the one who’s going to die, you sick bastard,” I say as I enforce my attack, and he falls back a few paces. He deflects my sword and backs up more, all the while smiling at me. He backs up to the royal tent, and I

follow, fighting him as others give us way. I don't know what he is doing until he moves inside the tent and I follow him.

"As you can see, I have already captured them," Nile says as he points his blade in their direction. All the women I love are here: Lily, Assuna, my mother, the nursemaid, and Lily's mother and sister, Atlas. They all have their hands tied behind them and mouths gagged, but all look well. The only two free are Nile's little sister and her maid, sitting in another corner, who looked just as scared.

Klaus is there also, lying unconscious at their feet. He has been beaten, his face swollen and bloody. His shirt is half-torn off him, and blood is running from his side.

"Your brother caused some problems. I thought I was going to have to kill him," he says as I look back to him and see the smile he wears. "Father would have been upset, since he has plans for you both if you do not agree. Meaning I can't kill you just yet."

I realize too late that this is a trap. He has lured me in here, and as he launches, his speed is so fast, I start to lose ground. I miss a block, and the blade slices through my arm. I miss another, and it goes into my leg, almost making me stumble to the ground. Suddenly, a sharp blow lands in my face and then another.

Someone is at my back now, holding me as Nile punches me in the gut and then the face again. I try to pull free, but each hit is making me lose focus. "Your kingdom is mine before you even get a chance to rule. Now you will die in sacrifice for my power over all the realms."

He beats me, ranting on about his plans for me, for my sister, and for Lily until the man behind drops me to the ground. I can barely breathe or see as I try and rise on my forearms. The pain in my ribs is agonizingly sharp as I try to breathe. Even as painful as it is, I try again, needing more air, but only a little makes it inside my lungs.

The ringing in my ears makes everything else go mute. I have no idea what is going on around me and try to adjust my vision and focus.

I see Nile blur as he moves toward Lily. He yanks her to her feet and pulls her up against him. I move to get up, and the man behind kicks me low in the gut. Breathing becomes even harder as the pain shoots deep in my center. I cough, and blood comes out of my mouth, making me realize I must have a broken rib puncturing a lung. Considering how hard it is to breathe, it must be bad.

I hear a loud roaring in my ears, and Nile's voice starts to clear, and I hear his words through the cries of my family.

"She is a beauty, Collin. One that I plan to enjoy well. Tell me, have you claimed her body yet?" he asks as he runs his hands down the front of her. I see her shivers, the tears in her eyes, and I crawl toward them. *Don't touch her!* "Don't answer, then. It will be a pleasure I will have in finding out on my own."

"Sto...op." Just the single word is almost impossible to say. I can't breathe enough to speak more.

"Our forces are starting to take control of the outside." The man who holds me speaks now, not but a few feet from me. I haven't bothered to look up at his face but know by the sound of his deep voice he is an older man. Strong, too, as I have been unable to get away from him.

"Good," Nile says, throwing Lily to the side. She lands on the ground beside Klaus, still unconscious. He has to be hurt badly to have not awoken from her landing on him. Nile bends down in front of me. "You can end all this, Collin. Save the rest of your men, yourself, even the fate of these women. Marry my sister and join us, or lose everything."

I look to Lily, regretting what I am about to do. "I will..." I struggle to say, "but one day...I will have her watch...me kill you."

"Now, you can't talk to family like that, Collin," Nile says, standing back up and jerking Lily up to her feet. "There is a price to pay for such insults."

I struggle to get to my feet, but the man beside me kicks me once more in the back. I cough up more blood and know that it is filling my lungs. I am not sure I am going to survive this. But I have to help the others. I must find the strength to get up.

"Let's find out if she is a virgin after all," he says as he pushes her hard at the table in front of me. Lily hits it hard and starts to cry as she fights to stand up, but her hands are tied behind her back.

Somehow, I am on my feet, and I lunge at him. The other man in the room is right behind me, and I know he is too strong for me as I am. Instead of hitting Nile, I hit the table and grab a steak knife off it. I turn just in

time and plunge the small knife right into his heart. The man slumps to the ground, and I turn my attention to Nile.

Somehow, Lily gets her hands free. She reaches for a fork on the table and stabs it into Nile's thigh. He is stunned for a moment, backing away from her, and she turns to him. I reach for her, but Nile is too fast and grabs her arm, throws her to the ground. I stumble against the table, and he turns to me, kicking me hard in the side, and I roll off the table. He is on top of me the next second, bringing his blade down, and I catch his wrist just before it pierces my throat.

I already can't breathe, and my strength is not the same as Nile's. I feel my abilities slipping to hold him off as he bears down with his weight.

Suddenly, Lily is there, pulling him back with her arms wrapped around his throat. It gives me just enough advantage as he falls back with her.

I take a moment to grab for the blade the dead man dropped.

Nile rips Lily from around his neck by the arm and backhands her across the face, and she falls.

Leaping at him, I am slower than I thought, and he quickly grabs my arm, twisting it. The pain forces me to drop the knife. He turns me around and locks his arm around my neck, cutting off what little air I can breathe.

"I would kill you now if I didn't have plans for you," he grits out as he squeezes hard, and my vision blurs. Everything is starting to become dark, and I know I am on the verge of passing out. "Your death will come soon enough and will have a greater value as I bleed you dry."

"No!"

My eyes flutter closed as I see Lily leap at him once more. I want to tell her to stop, not to cause herself harm, but I'm slipping away. I see her thrust forward a knife she holds, stabbing Nile in his side, and he roars in pain as he drops me to the ground.

He pulls the blade out and turns it on her, stabbing her in the chest.

"Nooo!" I don't know how I manage to speak or even move, but I scramble on the ground, closer to Lily, as she falls in front of me to her knees. Her white wedding dress starts to fill with blood as she places her hands on the handle of the knife and pulls it out slowly. She looks down at me as she falls forward, and I wrap her in my arms. She tries to speak, but nothing comes out except her tears as she rests her head on my chest.

Her face already swelling from the blows before. The tears streak through her makeup, her hair half down, half up. She gasps for air as I do. I touch her soft hair as I look into her beautiful eyes. They speak to me of the love she has, and slowly they fall closed. I don't try to breathe anymore.

Lily is lying in my arms, dead. I failed her and all my family. Death can take me, as well.

Chapter 3

KLAUS

I hear chanting in front of me as I try and lift my head. I can't hold it up well, I am so weak, and my hair is falling forward and into my eyes. But I can see the fire burning in front of me, feel the heat of it on my skin, and it is hot. The fire is close, and my skin is bare, and I realize that I am tied up by my arms from above.

The realization of the defenseless position I am in hits me, and I become more alert as I move and the pain attacks my body. I feel like my body was run over by a herd of horses. My arms are the only thing I can't seem to feel, but I can't even move them. I am sure they are out of place at the shoulders.

The one chanting is dressed in black; the face is hidden from view as my life is held up before me. The blade in their hand is already covered in blood, but it isn't mine. Blood covering a blade like that means it ran deep into the flesh. It would be a killing wound, and I'm not dead.

"Are you sure it is him and not Collin?" It is the king of the Sun State who speaks as he blurs in and out of my sight.

"By and by, I am bound to the kings of the realms." This old woman speaks as she slashes the blood-covered knife through the air in front of my body. "You want the power to rule all the realms? I give it to you now. But all kingdoms fall in time. Rebuilt to be made, as worlds change, people change. But not I. I stay the same until, by and by, death be found."

"Then do it, old woman, so my power can reign. This better be the last. I am tired of having to drink their blood. A foul taste, it is."

"Blood is life, it makes all things possible. To feel that life, you must consume its blood," she tells him.

The king moves away and goes to sit on the other side of the fire with his son Nile. I only met him once before and briefly, but Collin has told me of the man. He has traveled with our father more, sat at the tables of kings where I was the second son and not allowed. I would have to earn my role to sit beside my brother as his council.

The old woman walks around the fire to me. She lifts her face and looks right at me.

"Hold to true love, Klaus," she speaks to me quietly now. "I will see you have it twofold."

I roar feeling the knife on my chest as she cuts through my flesh, bringing me to full alert. The haze of consciousness is gone now as the fire of my blood pours from my flesh.

"The heart must bleed because the heart is pure," she says as she collects the blood into a cup, all the while looking into my eyes. *Why is she doing this to me?*

She moves away, and I watch as she offers the cup of my blood to King Rollin and Nile. My vision starts to blur as I watch them drink it, and the woman chants around them, splattering my blood around them in a circle.

To the right of me, there is nothing but beach. I hear the ocean, the sound soothing to me as I start to feel myself slipping away. I fight against death, knowing it is coming. I turn to my left, and I see Collin hanging beside me. His body is lifeless, the same cut over his chest.

"No," I moan, feeling the loss of my brother. With it comes the knowledge that my family must all be dead or on their way to it, just as I am.

We should never have left. Somehow, they had known where we would escape the city. Leagues from the kingdom, almost no one knew of the tunnels except those high enough who might have one day need to use them.

Outnumbered four to one, we didn't last long in the open with the women. I fought well until a giant beast stood before me. He was built like an ogre from the stories I have heard but looked like that of a man. He grunted at me as he swung his large arms. I jumped back and struck my blade across the man's shoulder only for it to barely make a slash. He overpowered me in his anger, striking at my body, and I flew into the air. I hit something hard with my back and then my head, and that is the last thing I remember until I awoke tied and awaiting my death.

To wake here only to die alongside my brother. What cruel fate would bring someone back just to see this?

I think of Aria then, my mind wandering to my memories of her. I hope she will stay safe from all this. If I die here, I would be leaving her to never know what truly happened to me. Would she wonder why I never come for her? Would she mourn me when she learns of my death?

She would. I am sure of her love even now after so long has passed. I don't know which I would prefer her thinking: that I am dead, or that I choose not to come. All I care about are the tears I could already see in her eyes. The sparks of light that only I seem to be able to see. The magic that is inside of her and that will never be able to touch her again.

I couldn't tell Collin what she was. Not completely. But Aria's mother had told me when I asked about the eyes. She just smiled and hugged me and said, "I knew you were the one in my vision. The one who could see her for what she is."

She then told what Aria is and why we are drawn to each other so. I wasn't sure if I should believe her at first, but then I went to Aria by the water, and when my eyes fell on her and she smiled back at me, I knew it was true. And that I would do anything to protect her.

But I have failed to protect her as I hang from a tree, near death. My brother at my side, his life already taken. The world is growing dark now, the fire becoming dimmer. My body does not feel so hot anymore, but cold. I close my eyes and listen to the waves of the ocean wash across the sands. The sound of the fire crackling is peaceful even though I can't see it anymore.

"Go in peace, my king. Your sacrifice will become your salvation."

The old woman's words seem a comfort to me even though she has taken my life. But I don't fight it any longer. I let myself go entirely and into silence.



"Rise up, my boy, and stretch your legs." The old woman speaks to me again, and I open my eyes and fight the blur in them. "Got the eyes of a wolf now, my boy, by and by, keen for sight. Go slow in your new form."

Shaking my head, I feel some of the cloudiness fall from my eyes. The world looks different, the colors have changed. I see the sharpness of a blade of grass in the distance, and then it blurs. I look up into the trees and see the veins in each of the leaves before I lose focus.

"You too, boy, time for you to get your wolf legs," she says again, and I look as she pets a medium-sized black wolf, waking him as well. He whines and starts to cry, and she strokes his head. "Loss is never easy, by and by. You grieve now as you shall, but you still have a life in you, so up you go."

She is gone. Dead. I failed my true love. It is Collin who speaks, only I hear his words in my head.

"That she be, but she is with you still," the old woman says, speaking with him. "Don't let her death be in vain. She dies for love, that is the great death one holds."

I will kill him. Collin speaks again in my head as he shakes and slides from her grasp.

"Time will tell who kills who. That part of your stars is not yet seen," she tells him. "You will hide and grow strong for the day it is shown. Revenge for love is good revenge, by and by."

She says that a lot, and I am not sure what it means. But Collin is inconsolable, and I can see now that he is the black wolf pup. Looking to myself, I know that I am like him but white.

What the hell did you do to us? I ask her, my voice coming from my head.

"Weak in age, not yet full-grown men, you need protection from those who seek to kill. Dead, they think you are, but I am smart, you see." She smiles at me and then gives me a wink. "Blood from the heart gives life, not take it away. Painful though it was, you live now to fight another day."

But our family? I ask her then. *Where are they?*

“So sad to say, I could not help them as I can you. Kings rule my powers, the only life I can control. Your family is gone into the afterlife...” She looks to Collin then and says, “Just as she.”

She? I question and look at Collin again. He is lying on the ground. No hope for life, so unlike the brother I know. It must be Lily. She is gone. *But how?*

“Life for life, a great death. Honor be her soul and cherished in the afterlife. He does not see, lost in the loss, he be.”

She speaks in riddles, but oddly she is easy to understand. Still, I do not know why she has done what she has.

Why did you give my blood to King Rollin and his son? I ask her then.

“Bound to all kings, since my king has passed. I have no say, no control over my power, then. They want the blood of future kings; I give it to them. But I do not kill as they want. I hide you all in nature. Scattered across the realms.”

Why do you do this?

“The new Mages are soon to come of age. They shall choose the next of kings. Bound in my power, I cannot kill a possible king, good nor bad. I live only to protect until the new age comes to power.”

You're a Mage? I ask her, and she nods her head. *And Aria...she is one of the new?* She nods again.

“You see, you know where your faith lies.”

And Collin? I ask her then, looking at my brother.

“Kings should work together, just like brothers,” she riddles. “I give you a new life, one to protect until the others come. Bound to it, you are until then.”

She gets up then and moves to the edge of the mountain, and I follow her. Holding her hands up in the air, she closes her eyes and breathes in. “She is coming home. Life for life, you all have suffered a loss.” She looks down at me, and I up at her. “I bring you here to be with her. It’s all I can do.”

Thank you, I tell her, knowing that she has saved mine and my brother's lives. I still am not sure why, but I have a feeling it has to do with Aria. The Mage speaks as if Aria would soon be coming here. If that is so, all I have to do is wait for her.

“Without her power, she is weak to man. Her mother is no longer there to protect her and hide. If discovered, and she is lost, the realms will fall to ruin. Chaos will take over if a Mage cannot select her king. By the power of the last Elemental magic and the life of a Mage, it is the only gift of magic left in this world.”

Are you saying I will become her king?

She is quiet for a moment but finally answers. “Yes, but your status will change. Twofold is your destiny, my king.”

What does that mean? I ask her.

“You will see when you need to see,” she says, looking at me. “Take care, little wolf, of yourself and of her. I will come for you one day and give her the power to release you.”

She starts to fade away, and I call to her, *Wait! What about Collin?*

“His life is on him now,” she says sadly. “I cannot stay.”

But he is...broken. Lily was the love of his life, I tell her.

“Love grows, dies, is reborn. He has a future if he is brave enough to face it. And true love will find him again. But he will have to fight for it.”

She fades away then and leaves me alone. Not alone but with Collin, who is a broken shell of my brother.

I walk over and look down at him. He wants to die because Lily is gone. How am I to help him? I can't just leave him here like this. He is my brother and the only family I have left.

Thinking of them, I know the Mage spoke true of their passing. The world has changed in the blink of an eye with us all falling. I lie down beside him and let myself wallow in the pain also for a time. Collin is so deep in his misery I am not sure if I can pull him out. I can't imagine what he must have seen and been through. To think that he may have watched Lily's death, her murder, before his eyes... I couldn't even bear it. And what of our mother or our sister? I have so much I want to ask him, but it isn't the time.

Mother and Father both gone. The kingdom and its people under the new rule. No telling how they are faring. Assuna, my little sister, adopted when left at the castle doorstep. She just turned thirteen and lost at such a young age. At least she was with my parents.

And Lily, my friend for almost all my life. Never a day went by I hadn't followed her and Collin around as a child. I must find a way to bring Collin somehow back from losing her. I need him with me more than ever now.

I will give him today, at least, to mourn. I need to as well. But we can't remain here long. Aria is coming, and I must be here for her.

The Mage said her mother is gone. I wonder how she has come to such a loss also.

I lie beside Collin for hours, trying to think of what to do. He sleeps and weeps, cries out in pain for Lily most of the night. He had to have seen her death to be like this. He loves her so much, and for this to have happened all on his wedding day... All his dreams of the future lost is more than I can understand.

I can't imagine how I would feel if it had been Aria and me.

I have to find a way to draw him out of his nightmares. I must give him a reason to carry on. He is my brother, and I love him. I cannot see him waste away in despair. Not when the Mage gave me hope for his future.

I will find a way to help him. I will make sure he comes with me. I will give him a reason to live again. And I will protect Aria too.

A new day is starting, but fog hinders the sun from shining through. Like our lives, everything is unclear. I sigh and wait beside my brother, but then I hear it. A whimper in the wind. Soft cries of pain that I can feel deep in my heart.

I sniff in the air, a pleasant smell that gives me comfort as I hear the whimpering sounds again. They call to me.

I look down at Collin, who is still sleeping. I don't want to leave him, but I must know who it is. I take off into the fog and over the rising hills, following the scent that pleases me. I know it has to be her—my Aria.

Chapter 4

ARIA

“I just wanted a kiss from the girl, Papa,” the young man says as he looks down at my mother’s lifeless body, my small, trembling body covering her. “The woman told me I had no right. I am your son and Lord here now; I have every right to any woman.”

“You shouldn’t have pushed the issue so hard, Tristin. These commoners are not used to being ruled just yet. Now she is dead, and I will have to show force to keep them under control.” The large man reprimands the young man, imparting wisdom coolly without even sparing us a glance.

“Can I take the girl?” he asks then. “I want her.”

“You can have her, but not yet. She will not be going anywhere,” the Lord tells his son. “First, I must get control of these people when they see this one dead. You shouldn’t have struck her so hard.”

“I didn’t realize I would kill her,” the young man says in his defense. He is almost abashed, but then he justifies himself. “I just wanted to show her, her place.”

“Come then, we should gather our men to make a stand.” The older Lord starts to walk away, and I feel a small tinge of relief that they will leave me to grieve my mother.

But then the younger man bends down to me and whispers in my ear, “I will be coming for you soon, little one. I will get that kiss you denied me and so much more.”

I awaken with a start, shivering as I hear the last of his words replaying in my mind. I am lying under the lean-to, alone. Hoarse, my mother's friend, is nowhere nearby, and I sit up and look at the fire. I hold my hands out to it, letting the heat seep into my cold fingers. It is a cold morning, the ground is wet, and a thin fog lies over the land.

I look around, wondering where Hoarse may have gone. He will be sure to come back, I tell myself. I know I just have to wait. I don’t know the older man well, but he was a friend of my mothers for a long time. He is also a friend of my father’s, and after all that has happened, he is taking me to my father’s home.

I look out over a vast land of forest that covers the mountain in front of me. Maybe it is being alone for a time, but it suddenly hits me that this is where I am going to live. In these mountains with my father, alone. I will live, and somehow, I am going to have to make the best of it. My life will never be the same again, and it saddens me to think of all the people I am leaving behind.

My best friend, Megan, and I played together every day as far back as I can remember, but I am leaving her behind. She is the same age as me, and our mothers often joked we could have been twins. I don’t recall a day not having her in my life, but now, I may never see her again.

Her brother is a year younger than us, and Thomas has always been a pain, pestering us constantly. Even still, he is my friend, and I am going to miss him also.

Their mother, Jane, was my mother's best friend. We all shared and lived in a small house, the five of us together. All the fun times we had are now gone; they are just memories now.

Jane took care of me the days immediately after we buried my mother. I was so depressed I barely even left the bed. Even Megan could not get me up. Three days later, Jane lost her patience with me.

"What do you think your mother would say to you right now?" she yelled at me. "She would be disappointed in you for just lying around."

I was shocked at her tone. My mother had just died, wasn't I allowed to wallow in self-pity for a while? The anger at her disappointment bubbled in my throat until the words fell out. "They killed her!" I screamed back, tears running down my face. "How can you go in that bar and serve them like nothing happened?"

"They are the masters of this realm, Aria. You cannot fight them," she said sadly. "Your mother knew this, but she fought anyway, and it cost her life."

"Why?" I shouted again as the tears continued to fall. "Why did she fight them?"

I knew the answer already. She was protecting me from the young Lord who had come up to me by the river. We went there once a week with a picnic to do some fishing. Just mother and daughter. But I had wandered around the bend to pick us some pecans for a pie.

That was when the handsome young Lord had come up to me, offering a shiny gold coin. I'd never seen a gold coin before and had been curious. He said he would give it to me if I would come and make friends with him. When I refused and turned to walk away, he grabbed me and slung me against the tree. I let out a short scream before he covered my mouth. But my cry was enough that it had alerted my mother.

I struggled with him as he held my face and forced his lips to mine. He was too strong for me. My mother attacked, pulling him off me. He backhanded her across the face, and I had watched my mother fly backward, hitting the ground...her head hitting the stone.

"She was protecting the thing she loves most," Jane said, bending over and hugging me. It was ruled an accident, so the young Lord had no repercussions, but everyone knew the truth. "I can't tell you your mother's secret right now, but one day, you will know."

"I can't stay here," I told her, sobbing. My mother died because of me. And that young man, his words were still in my head. He was going to find me soon. "I can't be around them."

"I know," she said, still rocking me. "That is why I am sending you to your father."

"What?" I said, pulling back from her. My papa, the hermit? I was thinking of going to Clearwater to find Klaus. But I just needed to rest first. I wanted to smell my mother's blankets for as long as they smelled of her.

"You just said that you can't stay here," Jane said softly, breaking into my plans and brushing my hair back. "You belong with your father now, anyway. He is a good man; your mother loved him very much."

The idea confused me. "But I don't know him." I really did want to see Papa, but...would he want me to stay with him? If he couldn't be around townspeople for too long, could he even tolerate me?

I saw Papa twice a year. He would come to visit us, but we never went into town. And when he did visit, Mother was always with us. They laughed and joked around, and I knew they spent those nights together. Sometimes I even wonder if he came to see my mother and...not really me.

“And I don’t want her to go,” Megan said from the door of the room we shared. She walked into the room and sat on the bed beside me. “Please, Aria, stay here with us. What about Klaus? He will be coming for you next year. Don’t you want to be here for him?”

“Yes, I do but...those men are here, Megan,” I said, looking away. “I see their faces, and it reminds me of them standing over my mother. Not caring that she was dead. I want to scream, but I can’t.”

“But if you go to your father, how is Klaus going to find you?” She took my hand.

“I will tell him where Aria is,” Jane spoke up next, and we turned to her. “Aria, you need to do what’s best for you, and right now, it is not living here. When Klaus comes, I’ll lead him to you. I know how you feel about him. Your mother told me he was a good match for you, and I believe her.”

“Okay,” I agreed with her, nodding my head. Maybe my papa could protect me until Klaus came. What that young Lord said to me brought fear to my everyday life. Mother told me stories of Papa as a great warrior. I didn’t know that side of him, but I saw him as an intelligent man. Someone kind and honest. I always enjoyed having him come for his visits.

“No! I don’t want you to go!” Megan said, standing up. “We have always done everything together. We intend to be married together, have our children together. You’re going to ruin it if you leave.”

“Megan!” her mother shouted at her. “Aria has lost her mother. She needs her father at this time, and if you love Aria, you will see she needs to do this.”

“But I love her more than he does,” Megan said as she started to cry. She looked at me, and I could see the pain in her eyes. We were sisters and connected in everything. Being away from her would be like losing a limb. “Do what you have to. But it’s never going to be the same if you leave.”

“Megan, please,” I begged of her, crying myself. I was going to miss her so. “Don’t make me choose.”

“I’m not,” she told me, taking a deep breath, trying to calm herself. She already knew I had, and I nodded my head. I told myself that it wouldn’t be for long. Klaus was coming, and we would both be married just as we planned. We knew that the time when we would marry and separate would come, but we had been looking forward to this year together. We had made so many plans.

“I will work something out with Rayland for you two to be together,” Jane told us as we all hugged. “Megan, I promise you’re not losing your friend. And Aria, we will always be here for you.”

We were hugging and crying when Thomas came barreling through the house. He saw us in the open doorway, and out of breath, he said, “Georgie says for everyone to get in the house and lock the doors. He says there are Lords about everywhere, and the word is they are looking for someone.”

My heart stopped beating for a second before I leaped up in the bed. “Oh no, Jane. They are coming for me!”

“They wouldn’t be looking for you, Aria. Most likely a thief,” Jane said, trying to calm me.

“No, Jane, the young Lord Tristin. He said he would be coming for me,” I said, jumping out of bed, not sure what to do. I had to get away. Leave! Now!

“Aria, are you sure?” She stepped in front of me, stopping me for a moment, taking me by the arms. My mother was gone, and Jane was who I had left. She was trying to do what was right for me, but she didn’t understand. I smiled sadly at her and removed her hands from my arms.

“Yes. I hadn’t thought about it until now. Because of Mother…” Gods, we had just buried her three days ago. Would they still be coming for me so soon? Maybe I had it wrong, and they were not looking for me.

“Thomas, I want you to run a message to Hoarse right now,” Jane said, going into our living room. She penned a quick note and handed it to him. “Go straight there and come back only with Hoarse.”

“But what about the Lords? Georgie said—”

I could see he was scared to go out. “Please, Thomas.”

He looked at me and took a stronger stance. He turned and slipped out the back door, not saying another word. Thomas was a pain, and we fought all the time, but there is sibling love there. As if he was my own little brother, he knew I needed him.

“Let’s get your stuff packed.” As we started to work, Jane laid out what we were going to do. She is resourceful and quick on her feet. “Tonight, you’re going home with Hoarse. If they are looking for a child, then they will be looking at families. They will come here at some point. Hoarse lives alone and is single. They will never look for you there. Tomorrow, he will sneak you out of town and take you to your father. Not many in town know of your father, and those who do will never say anything. We will say you left to live with family in Clearwater.”

I glanced at Megan. “But then I won’t be able to come back to the village.”

“In time you can return as people forget. Besides, Klaus will be coming soon, anyway. He will take you with him then.”

That was true, but it was still shutting the door to more time with them.

She nodded abruptly and wiped a frown from her face. “You two take some time to say goodbye,” she said as she moved to the door. “I will go pack some provisions for your journey. Hoarse will be coming soon.”

She left us, and we just hugged. “When Klaus comes… and takes you back to his kingdom… make sure you write and tell me… about the wedding,” Megan hiccupped between sobs.

“I promise.” I pulled back, and we wiped at our eyes. “At least you don’t have to wait for me to marry. Daniel will be pleased you won’t be putting him off any longer.”

We both gave a soft laugh, and she said, “Yeah, well, there is that.” And we laughed a little more.

By the time we finished packing, Thomas had returned with Hoarse. He spoke in private with Jane, and Thomas walked up to me. He was shorter than me, but I knew he was stronger. Just as a brother could pester a sister, he had always been there for me.

“I’m going to miss you, Aria,” he said, and pulled me into a hard hug. I clung to him also, knowing this might be the last time we saw each other.

“I love you, Thomas. I will never forget you,” I told him softly.

He pulled back and wiped at his tears, looking down. “I love you, too.” And then he turned abruptly and sprinted to solitude at the back of the house.

Jane and Hoarse returned, and I said my goodbyes. Hoarse picked up my bags, and we snuck out into the dark, running through back allies and pigpens, until we reached his house. I slept a little in his bed that night while he stayed close to the window, looking down the street. The next morning, before the sun breached the horizon, his sled was packed, with me crouching inside a box as we left the village.



In the last two days of our travels, Hoarse tells me that he visits my papa four times a year. Twice to collect furs and twice to receive tools he has made for Hoarse to sell at the markets.

I have seen him before with my mother. Whenever we were at the markets, Mother would always stop and say hello to him. They were friendly with each other as strangers usually are, and I thought nothing else of him.

As he tells me things, I begin to realize Hoarse will be just about the only other person I will ever see other than my father. My mind wanders again back to Megan, Jane, and Thomas. I hope I will get to see them again.

How am I even going to live without seeing them? My heart felt as though it was being cut out when I said goodbye.

All my life, I have lived in the small village of Mountainside, but there is little good about it anymore. My mother and I shared a small cottage, with Jane's family, off the back of a bar where they worked as entertainers. Mother did a little of everything, from dancing, singing, playing music, serving drinks, and yes, on occasion, sharing herself with some stranger passing through.

Even though I am only thirteen, I understand what she was doing. I asked her once why she would do such a thing, and she told me that sometimes she was just lonely for a man. My young age belies my knowledge. To me, men are ugly, abrasive, cruel, and smelly. She laughed at me when I told her this and said that one day when I was a woman, I would understand.

On my birthday in the spring, Papa would come to town. He would bring me a gift, and we would spend the day together. He always made another trip down before the snow started to fill the mountainsides.

Our night together was treasured, and after breakfast the next morning, he would hug me tightly like he would never let me go. But he always did. Turning, he would leave us both until the next year.

It always hurt when he left. My mother tried to explain that my papa was a hermit and lived in the mountains alone. That he couldn't be around people and the noise of a village for long. It hurt him because fighting in the war had driven him mad. She told me he saw ghosts and that he couldn't see the difference between them and the townspeople. Being alone was better for all of them. It still left an emptiness in me for a father.

Soon, I will be with him. What is it going to be like? Changing from spending one or two days a year to every day together? What if he doesn't want me to stay?

My deep thoughts are broken when a movement along the top of the hill catches my eye, and I stare at the area. Looking hard, I see some kind of animal slouched down, sliding forward. I can only make out a dirty white blob of hair on the ground, the heavy mist making it hard to see. Even though I don't know what it is, I don't think it means any harm. Otherwise, wouldn't it have attacked me by now?

"What are you?" I say to myself softly as I watch the moving mass of hair. It stays low, continuing to move closer. As it comes within a few feet of me and the fire, it raises his head high, and looks right at me. I gasp, seeing that it is a wolf pup with amazing blue eyes outlined in beautiful white fur.

He tilts his head to the side as he slowly moves closer. I stay relaxed, seeing that he is curious about me. He's not that big, still a small pup in many ways, and he is also alone.

“Where is your mother, little pup?” I ask him when he inches just a few feet away. Does he have a mother somewhere out there, I wonder, or has he lost her like I have mine?

I reach for the bag in front of me, knowing there is some food inside. Taking out some bread, I pinch off a piece before placing it in my mouth. I then pinch off a more significant bit and hold it out in front of me.

“Are you hungry?” I ask, offering the food. He whines a little before jumping up and taking the bread right from my hands. “You’re a friend, aren’t you?”

I tear another piece off and pop it into my mouth before holding out the rest to him.

“Get on!” A shout startles me from behind, and I jump. Hoarse is stomping forward, waving his arms as he shouts at the pup to go away. The pup takes off over the rise in the mountain, leaving the bread behind. Hoarse stops by the fire, looking at the pup’s disappearing figure, and then turns to me. “You don’t feed the wildlife, Aria. They can be friendly, but they will also turn on you.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, looking down from his glare. I hadn’t feared the wolf pup, I realize, which surprises me.

“Wolves can be dangerous. Even young ones like him.” He finishes putting in before he bends over and starts picking things up. “Eat something and then help me pack up. We still have a few hours’ travel.”

“Yes, sir.” I eat the bread and cheese and help him pack, but all morning as we continue on our way, I keep looking back. It feels like the pup is still with me. I don’t see him for the longest time, and then there he is. Right over the last rise, sitting at the top. It looks like he is waiting for us to go over the next rise.

I smile and turn back around. There is something about that little wolf. I plan to get to know him if he sticks around.