

Peacemaker: The Portal Wall

By Viveka Mercury

Trigger Warning

As a responsible author of this Romantasy (Fantasy & Romance), I'm compelled to warn readers of potential triggers. This sample includes on-page memory nightmares of child abuse, off-page child abuse, and PTSD.

The whole novel includes on-page memory nightmares of child abuse, off-page child abuse, PTSD, and explicit sexual content.

Please consider these warnings before continuing.

Prologue

The full moon floats in the sky halfway between land and Elysium. On any other night, the sight would be nothing of note. Just a normal full moon.

Tonight is different.

Tonight, the moon's amethyst color drips with an unspoken omen.

Most citizens in Lyraxia see it as a sign of upcoming prosperity. I know the truth. Sybilla told me she received the Amethyst Moon Prophecy. The moon signifies new hope for our people and the birth of a great soul, the Peacemaker.

I gave Sybilla my word to not speak of the prophecy to another. In the wrong hands, knowledge of future events can alter fates and destinies of countless citizens and bring catastrophic consequences to not only the realm of Lyraxia, but Thornwood as well. I kept my word until yesterday. I shared the prophecy with another. One other. A person I trust implicitly.

I jump at the sound of pounding on my front door. A summons at this hour usually means the birth of a new soul. As one of two Seers in Lumenvale, it's my duty to perform their Naming Rite.

Sybilla and I promised to let the other know when the one born of the prophecy entered this lifecycle. The babe whose Naming Rite I'll perform this night must be the one she's expecting. A rush of adrenaline spurs me into motion. I leap from my parlor's settee to answer the door. I expected to find a family member of the new soul on my front stoop, but that's not who nearly pounded my door of its hinges. My eyes widen in surprise at seeing two Lumenvale Guards.

I have a bad feeling about this.

“Good evening, Dorian. Gunter. What brings you here at this hour?”

My heart races at Gunter's tortured expression. Dorian, however, is in high spirits. "Your presence is required at House Gervaise to perform the Naming Rite." Dorian is a known brute. Brutes in any position of power are dangerous.

"Give me a moment to collect my things," I say as Gunter averts his eyes. I leave the parlor and enter my workspace. The Naming Rite pastes are on a cupboard shelf under the washbasin. Sybilla created a special paste for the Amethyst Moon babe months ago and sealed it with Majik. I add the sealed jar to my leather satchel and swiftly drape a black cloak over my shoulders.

"Thank you for your service. I'll make my way to Livia and Wendel's home. If you'll excuse me, I'll be on my way." Gunter and Dorian exchange a look and turn to me.

Dorian is the one to speak. "We're to escort you." Dorian quickly averts his eyes but not before my mind's eye catches a glimpse of the path before me. My closest friend betrayed me. I fear for the little's lifecycle.

I duck my head to hide the hurt and horror I know shines in my eyes. Once I've cleared my face of emotion, I raise my chin and wave a hand in a gesture that says, 'lead the way.'

With each step, my heart beats faster, my breathing shallow and quick. As we approach our destination, I concentrate on taking slow, deep breaths before the panic brewing inside my being consumes me.

I respectfully knock on the door in three short raps at the same time Dorian pounds it with his fist. Heavy footfalls come from inside the home, indicating Wendel comes from the back of the house. When the door opens, Wendel eyes widen when they land on Dorian.

I break the silence to address Dorian. "Thank you for the escort. Enjoy your evening."

Gunter reluctantly announces, "Our instructions are to stay by your side." I turn my head,

take another deep breath, and whisper a silent prayer to Hariti, goddess of littles, to protect the new Gervaise soul from harm.

I face Dorian. “Do you think Wendel will allow your presence during this sacred rite? The ceremony is intimate and includes only those with whom the parents wish to share the occasion.”

“Gervaise has no say in the matter. We are here by order of the Lumenvale Council.” Dorian then turns to Wendel, “Please step aside so the Seer can perform her duty.”

Oh gods, this is not good.

Wendel’s expression is defiant, but he ushers us inside leading us down a corridor. Dorian, Gunter, and I follow him into a bedchamber on the left. Wendel approaches his wife who clutches the babe securely to her chest. He whispers, “Evangelia is here to perform the Naming Rite. Dorian and Gunter escorted her here and are also present.”

Livia sits atop a four-poster canopied bed with gauzy white curtains tied to each post. She lifts her eyes to acknowledge her visitors glowing with pride and joy. No one else is in the chamber, not even a Healer. “Livia, who attended the birth?”

She shifts her bright blue eyes to her heartmate and says, “Wendel was the only one present. Our girl came so fast we had no time to summon a Healer. Wendel sent word to Avia to check on us. We expect her arrival shortly.”

“In that case, proceed with the ceremony, Seer, and be quick about it,” Dorian orders.

I approach Livia, reaching for the bundled babe. With eyes brighter than the stars, Livia says, “She’s beautiful, is she not? Her eyes are stunning, are they not?”

I take the precious bundle with care, look into her amethyst eyes, and know she is the soul foretold in the Amethyst Moon Prophecy. Emotion steals my voice as I see the challenges

she will face in this lifecycle.

“Your beautiful little’s name is Vesna.” I return Vesna to Livia and retrieve Sybilla’s sealed jar of paste from my satchel. I close my eyes and draw an invisible pattern on the jar lid with my finger to release the sealing Majik. I scoop a liberal amount of the paste from the jar just before it falls out of my hand and shatters against the wooden floors.

Chapter 1

Vesna

23 Years Later

I sit in the corner of my tiny bedchamber hugging my knees to my chest, my ten-year-old body shaking with fear and tears. The only light comes from a candle atop the small wardrobe, illuminating the storm-filled figure above me. I cower in the corner between the sparse wardrobe on my right and a small hay mattress on my left.

“YOU KILLED MY SISTER! YOU should’ve died! If you hadn’t been born, my sister would still be alive. I would’ve killed you the night the Lumenvale Guards brought you to my house if it wasn’t against the law. Your father, my best friend, was so distraught HE KILLED HIMSELF! Couldn’t bear to live without her. Couldn’t bear to look at you.”

It’s not just his words that hurt. I feel his overwhelming anger spewing over me like hot lava.

He hovers over me in another drunken rage, spitting in my face. He swings his open right hand down, slapping my left cheek so hard my head bounces off the wardrobe. The back of the same hand slams my right cheek against the wall above the mattress. He slaps me again, and again, and again, my head flying back and forth until my cheek spurts blood. The newly opened gash is from the obnoxious ring he wears on his middle finger.

Darkness encircles my vision and I know I’ll pass out this time. But before I do, I hear the end of Uncle Karnax’s tirade. “You’re the most pathetic excuse for a Majik I’ve ever seen! You can’t do anything right. You are worthless...”

I wake with a gasp, shaking from the adrenaline flooding my system ready to fight for my lifecycle. Little does the adrenaline know there’s no one and nothing to fight in the present.

I sit against the headboard of my bed and wait for my breathing to return to normal. My uncle punished me for killing my mother until I was seventeen when I beat the shit out of him.

One of my two friends, Jac, trained me to fight like a soldier. He trained me in weapons and hand-to-hand combat. I wasn’t ready to defend myself against my uncle until I had a place to go. I knew he would kick me out of his house the moment I raised a hand against him.

My mother died giving birth to me. My father, overwhelmed with losing his heartmate, killed himself. Two Lumenvale Guards delivered me to my last living relative, Karnax Keller, the

older brother of my mother. My mother and uncle were very close according to him.

I often overheard him recounting stories to Winnie, his wife, of his misadventures with my mother when they were littles. When he drank, Uncle Karnax punished me for killing his beloved sister. Slapping my face wasn't the worst of it. He liked to punch and kick me too. Once, he grabbed me by the hair and rammed my head into the door jamb so hard it left me unconscious. I woke the next day in the same spot lying in my own excrement.

I'm not ten anymore. I turned twenty-three last month. I've lived in a four-chamber tenement with my best friend, Shereen, since I was seventeen.

Sitting up in bed, I toss the lightweight quilt off my legs. The white cotton gown I wear sticks to my skin with the cold sweat of my nightmare. How does one get past nightmares of abuse? They're becoming more frequent and intense. Before I take a shower and wash the ugly memory off my body, I make the bed. I hate getting into an unmade bed at night and I'm more likely to make it up the moment I slide off of it.

I grab a lightweight robe from the wardrobe and stretch my senses to Shereen. I feel her sleeping, but it's light. I know she'll wake soon. It makes me nervous to know someone waits for me to finish anything, even a shower. I must be quick to finish before she fully wakes.

Sybilla, Lumenvale's only Seer, told me I was an Empath at fourteen and that I have a soulmate in this lifecycle. Everyone visits the Seer on or after their fourteenth Naming Rite. The reasons are two-fold. First, the visit reveals your Majik, though most develop signs of it by age ten. Second, the visit reveals a heartmate or soulmate bond in your current lifecycle.

Heartmates are mortals with or without Majik meant to find each other and raise a family if they choose. Heartmate relationships are the second strongest bond between two individuals.

Soulmates are the strongest bond, with or without Majik, and semi-immortal after their

Joining Ceremony. Having a soulmate indicates you're soul lives its final lifecycle before passing to Elysium or Perdition.

Those without a heartmate or soulmate in their current lifecycle are mortals with or without Majik and usually select their own mate. When an unmated soul passes, Psyche, goddess of souls, calls the soul to Abyss to await their next lifecycle. She works closely with the three Fates: Lachesis (destiny), Clotho (creation and individual paths), and Adrasteia (strength of individual paths and choices).

No one knows the number of lifecycles a soul lives. I've heard tales of those who've had many chances to lead a kind and fruitful lifecycle. Having a soulmate is a reward from the gods. The gods consider the previous lifecycles when deciding to reward a soul with a soulmate. After so many chances, the gods may never bless one with a soulmate but send them for judgement by Thanatos. Upon judgement, Thanatos sends the soul to Elysium or Perdition.

At fourteen, Sybilla told me my Empathic abilities would grow powerful as I matured. At twenty-three, I feel not only the emotions of others but can alter those emotions when I'm in their vicinity. I also feel the state of their body and mind. The totality of my Empathic ability is what makes me the perfect Healer's Assistant.

Sybilla's final words to me that day were of the potential power I would possess once I turned twenty-one. She promised to fully disclose those powers when I returned to her. It's been two years since I turned twenty-one and I've been avoiding her ever since.

In the bathing chamber, I grab two soft towels and a linen rag from the shelving cabinet, hang my robe on the hook of the chamber door, peel off my nightgown, and step into the modest shower stall. I relax under a stream of hot water, letting it sooth my stiff neck and shoulders. Feeling Shereen's mind stir, I quickly finish and secure my violet robe a moment before Shereen

knocks on her side of the bathing chamber. I invite her inside and launch into my usual tirade.

“I’ve got to brush my stupid hair. I swear, it’s more trouble than it’s worth. Hair everywhere. Knots and tangles. Hair clogs in the shower. The cat devouring stray hair strands. No living creature can digest hair strands. You’ve seen it; the cat poops stringy turds that don’t break off. The turds swing like windchimes from that damn cat’s asshole. I hate it! What do you think? Should I cut it? I like your hair. Suzie could cut it between healing requests today.”

“Vesna! We have this conversation at least three times a week and it ends the same each time. You’re not cutting your beautiful argentine hair because you’re young and gorgeous and when you finally cross paths with your soulmate, he or she may want to grab a fistful of it when romping between the bed linens. *And* it’s the second most attractive thing about you. I simply won’t allow it.” Shereen would be right if I intended to look for my soulmate.

I don’t.

I have no desire whatsoever to welcome another into my circle of two friends. Besides, it’s not like I know what love feels like or how to give it. I would make the worst soulmate ever. My other half is better off without me.

“Why did you cut your hair before finding a mate?” I love Shereen’s hair. It’s buzzed starting above her ears and around her head. Thick layers of chestnut curls cover the top complementing her olive skin and turquoise eyes. She doesn’t have to brush her hair. She applies a stiffening paste with her fingers and voila; she’s done. I, on the other hand, spend at least thirty minutes brushing and styling mine.

“You know I don’t have a heartmate or soulmate in this lifecycle, so who I choose to settle with, if I settle, is my choice and I don’t care what he or she thinks about my hair. They accept me as I am, or I’ll find someone else. Which reminds me, you need to pay a visit to

Sybilla.”

Gods. Save me now. Why can't she shut up about it already? Two years. That's how long she's been bugging me to visit Sybilla.

“We both know you have a soulmate you haven't crossed paths with. Don't you want to find him or her and start building your future? Plus, I'm dying to know all the stuff she didn't tell you when you were fourteen. I know you have more Majikal abilities. You must be something unique. Your amethyst eyes alone scream *I'm special*, not to mention that silvery-white hair of yours.”

Most people with a heartmate or soulmate find their other half before they turn twenty-one. The ones who don't line up outside Sybilla's workspace door at the crack of dawn the morning of their twenty-first Naming Rite to learn the identity and location of their other half.

I don't know the reason I hesitate to find my soulmate. Maybe it's because I want the darkness of my past to clear my head. Maybe it's because I don't deserve that kind of happiness with another. After all, I did kill my mother.

I haven't shared my reasoning with Shereen because it's hard enough to bear the weight of my own guilt and shame without feeling her pity. Instead, I say, “You know how I feel about it. If it's meant to be, Hera, the goddess of marriage, will bring us together when the time is right. I'm not ready. Anyway, I'm finished here. The chamber is all yours. I'll review and organize the missives and replenish your supplies for today's healing requests.”

“Thanks, Vesna. I don't know what I'd do without you.”

“You wouldn't answer half the missives leaving you hungry and homeless, that's what.”

With a chuckle, Shereen shoos me through the door to my bedchamber.

I slip into one of several lilac tunics and white leggings and fasten my white pair of

sturdy ankle boots. All Healers and Healer's Assistants wear the same colors so citizens can easily find us in an emergency. While I'm not fond of white leggings and boots for obvious reasons, I do like the tunic's color and its square neckline. The garment clings to every curve highlighting some of my best physical features. I'm five foot, seven inches, and have a muscular build with a nice figure. I have Jac to thank for the muscles. He keeps me on my toes with physical training.

Fully dressed, I open the bedchamber drapes and allow the sun's morning glow light my space. I work through the tangles in my hair while standing in front of my desk and staring out the window overlooking the courtyard.

I wonder if Sybilla would tell me everything except the soulmate part. I'm very curious about what she withheld nine years ago. I think I'll ask her. Besides, if she tells me my choice is all or nothing, I'll accept it. I just won't act on the soulmate part. I'm not worthy of such a bond.

Finished with my hair, I walk through the parlor straight to the woven basket attached to the front door. A slot in the door allows for missive deliveries through its hooded wooden opening. Delivered missives are never emergencies. Urgent missives arrive with a knock on the door. I collect today's missives from the basket and proceed to the kitchen for a slice of toasted bread. While I eat my strawberry preserve covered toast, I read and organize the today's requests.

As a Healer's Assistant, I'm responsible for reviewing and prioritizing healing requests. I estimate the time needed to fulfill the requests based on the severity of the illness and travel time. When we have more requests than we can answer in a day, I write my own missive to the requestor and reschedule our visit for the following day.

Healers are Majiks who can heal most injuries and illnesses of Majiks and non-Majiks. While I'm not a Healer, my unique Empathic abilities help the Healer with diagnosing illnesses

as well as calming emotions and relieving pain.

Finished with breakfast, I gather the organized healing requests and walk to the far end of the parlor which houses our workspace. A decorative screen of pink and white lilies separates the workspace from the parlor giving the illusion of a separate chamber. I place the missives on the wooden worktable against the back wall. Cabinets on either end of the table house healing supplies. Shereen and I grow our own herbs in window flowerboxes for healing tonics and pastes. We purchase other healing provisions such as bandages from Cerulean Market.

Cedar coins are Lyraxia's form of payment for goods and services. Lyraxia is a place where no one has too much or too little. Every person has a job or role to serve in their lifecycle. We're compensated for our work by either goods, services, or cedar coins. Healing the sick child of a seamstress may yield an offer of a credit account, an article or two of clothing, or cedar coins. The patient or patient's parents choose how they wish to compensate our services.

Citizens too old or unable to provide a good or service do not go without. The city assigns an Order to clean their home and assist with other domestic duties. A variety of Artisan workers, each specializing in a different trade, perform services like fixing a leaky faucet or replacing broken glassware. Farmers allot food provisions, and seamstresses provide clothing. In Lyraxian society, it is our duty and our pleasure to provide for those who cannot provide for themselves.

I sit at the worktable against the back wall in one of two high back wooden chairs, fetching my tanned leather crossbody satchel from the right cabinet. I replenish my missive supplies in case we run behind and need to postpone a request. Setting my satchel aside, I replenish supplies in Shereen's white leather Healer's bag. Her bag has an emblem of a Cerulean Blue and Silver swirl, Lumenvale's insignia representing it as The Portal Trade city. I finish

stocking Shereen's bag as she enters the workspace.

“So, what have we today? Anything good?” Shereen's idea of “good” is anything complicated or out of the ordinary.

“Nope. Just the usual. Looks like an easy day barring emergencies. You need to eat something before we leave. Your abilities suffer when your energy is low.” Healing takes a lot of energy. Shereen rarely allots extra time for anything, not even her morning meal.

“I'm not hungry. I'll eat when we break for midday meal.” I shake my head knowing her composure will change before we take our break.

Chapter 2

Vesna

“Who’s next?” Shereen asks looking pale and exhausted. Her lack of sustenance this morning stresses her body. I’ll have to make her something to eat on our way out the door. She’s obviously not going to feed herself.

“Althea Lambert complains of chest pains,” I give Shereen a look that says ‘here we go again.’ Althea is one of the city’s hypochondriacs. Every time she gets the hiccups, she sends a missive. I imagine she complains a lot at home. I’m not sure how her poor mate lives with her day in and day out.

“She sends for us practically every week,” Shereen says with an exasperated sigh. “You think we can break for midday meal after this request? I’m famished.”

“What do I always tell you? You. Need. To. Eat. You’re an adult now, it shouldn’t be so hard to grab a slice of toasted bread or a handful of fruit.” I feel cranky myself. I don’t think it’s from hunger. It feels like I have somewhere to be and I’m running late. “Yes, we have time to stop after this visit. I know we’re close enough to go home for food, but I feel like eating out today. What do you think?” Shereen and I earn a modest living and can afford to eat out from time to time.

“You read my mind. I’m too hungry to eat a lonely sandwich in our tenement.” We stock our cooling cabinet and pantry with quick food. Both of us are too tired to cook when we’re home.

We round the corner and make our way north on Whispershade Avenue. Althea’s house is the last one on the right in all its orange glory. The house is like her. It screams ‘look at me.’ Shereen knocks on the front door while I open my senses and feel her mind and body’s

condition. I turn to Shereen and say, “Same as last week.” Shereen sighs as Althea opens the door with her face contorted in pain. It’s not really pain. She just knows how to arrange her face in a way that would convince anyone but an Empath.

“Oh, thank the gods you made it this morning. I was about to send Harold to fetch you. It’s gotten worse since I sent the missive last night.” She’s very convincing, I’ll give her that. Althea gestures us inside and plops her large rear on a sherbert orange settee in her modest parlor. The settee sits right in front of a picture window like seats at the theatre. I’m sure nothing happens on this street without her notice. I often wonder how she manages to leave her ‘post’ to take care of personal needs during the day. For that matter, does she allow herself to sleep in a bedchamber or does she curl up on the settee every night in hopes of witnessing her neighbors committing nefarious acts?

Even though we already know Althea’s heart is fine, Shereen puts on a show of concern while placing a stethoscope to her heart. “Just breath normally.” She then moves the stethoscope to Althea’s abdominal cavity. “Your heart sounds excellent. I hear no signs of distress. Vesna felt no illness in your heart. What’s causing the sharp pain in your chest cavity is the pressure of unreleased flatulence in your abdominal cavity. Tell me, do you eat a lot of beans and cabbage?”

Althea moves to sit upright on the settee at the same time she releases a loud rumble of windy odor. Yep. Smells like beans and cabbage. No wonder she has chest pains. “Oh my! Forgive my body’s rude outburst.” Althea waves her hands back and forth in front of her face trying to clear the suddenly thick, smelly air. “I feel much better now. And to answer your question, yes, I eat a lot of them. It is Harold’s trade after all. Thank you for coming today. Can I pay you in dried beans?”

“Of course, Althea,” Shereen replies. “I suggest you reduce your bean and cabbage

intake. It will be difficult, I know, but I think it will reduce your recurrence of chest pains. Use what Harold harvests for trade and buy something, anything else to eat.” I turn around and choke on a laugh. I don’t know how Shereen keeps a straight face.

It’s just before noon when we leave Althea’s home. We walk South on Whispershade Avenue towards Plaza Street, the main road leading to Cerulean Market. Shereen’s listing our meal options when the hairs on my neck tingle. The weather isn’t cool enough to explain the sudden goosebumps spreading across my body. I look around. I know someone’s watching me and I have that feeling of being late for an appointment. I turn my head right and see the source of my willies.

Sybilla. The Seer I’ve avoided these past two years. She stands on her front stoop with hands on her hips watching our trek up the road. A shiver runs down my spine like it did when I saw her on my fourteenth Naming Rite. I don’t know why I’m so uneasy. My closed lips raise in a terse smile and I lift my hand in what I hope is a friendly gesture when Shereen shouts, “Hi Sybilla! How’ve you been lately? I haven’t seen you in a while.”

Gods, does she have to be so loud? I envision nosey neighbors rushing to their windows to watch what I expect to be an unavoidable conversation. “I’m doing well. Thank you for asking,” she shouts back with an enthusiastic wave of her hand, gesturing us to her front stoop.

Gods, kill me now.

We walk up the pathway to her home stopping at the foot of the front stoop steps. “Vesna! I expected to see you the day you turned twenty-one. I know you’re headed to Cerulean Market for midday meal, but would you mind coming inside a few minutes? It shouldn’t take long.”

“Sometimes it’s creepy how she just knows things.” Shereen whispers then gives me a pointed look. “You know, this is serendipitous.” Her glee makes me want to smack her stupid. “I

think the gods are telling you it's time to stop avoiding your future."

I shoot her a filthy look.

We walk up the steps as Sybilla turns and moves to open the left door of her home which leads to her personal living space. That's weird. Sybilla's home is one of a few in Lumenvale that has two doors side by side. The right door leads to her workspace and the left leads to her parlor. It's not until Shereen bumps into my back that I realize I came to a complete stop in front of the left door's threshold.

"You okay?"

I nod my head not at all sure I mean it. I'm going to regret this; I just know it.

"You're not going to regret this. I promise," Sybilla chuckles. Shereen's right. That's just creepy.

A calming peace settles over me the moment I walk into Sybilla's parlor. It's then I realize she's right. I won't regret this. The urgent need to be somewhere important is also gone. That's weird.

Sybilla turns to me and pulls me into a tight hug. I don't like hugging. I never hug. I allow Shereen to hug me because I've known her my whole life and those hugs only come when she begs. Close contact with others is always uncomfortable for me. My uncle and his family weren't affectionate with me. Uncle Karnax coddled and spoiled his two sons rotten, both much younger than me. The affection showered upon my cousins seemed exaggerated in my presence.

To make matters worse, my 'contribution' to the family home was sitting with the hellions while my uncle and his wife went out. It wouldn't have been so bad if I had any real authority to properly supervise the little devils. Uncle Karnax forbade me to correct unruly behavior or enforce bathing or bedtime rules. Of course, I was the one punished when my

cousins broke the rules or otherwise engaged in bad behavior. The monsters knew I couldn't assert authority over them. I think they enjoyed watching my 'punishments' for their misdeeds.

As Sybilla's thin arms embrace me, I relax and wrap mine around her frail body, the right side of her face touching mine. "I'm so sorry, Vesna." I feel her body shake. She's crying. Why is she crying and what is she sorry about? I open my senses and feel the crushing weight of sorrow, guilt, and something else I only feel when I hug Shereen. It might be love, but I can't be sure. I don't know what love feels like. It's a foreign concept to me. I know what it looks like. I've seen it between Shereen's parents. I've also seen the unconditional love a mother has for her children. I just can't feel it myself and I don't know how to return it. Why does Sybilla feel love for me? I'm nothing. I've met her once in my entire life and that was no more than a few minutes on my fourteenth Naming Rite.

She pulls back and wipes the tears from her cheeks with the linen handkerchief. "Our conversation is long overdue." I throw Shereen a questioning look to which she responds with wide eyes, raised eyebrows, and a shrug of her shoulders. I follow Sybilla to her inviting and spacious parlor. Floral wallpaper in pink and lavender clings to the walls. Artfully arranged framed photos hang between several built-in shelves around the chamber, most of which hold books and other sentimental nicknacks.

Sybilla never interacts with clients in her parlor. A citizen's parlor is personal and meant to host family and friends. "Sybilla, why are we in your parlor? Shouldn't we be in your workspace?"

"What I must tell you is personal. I thought the parlor would be more comfortable. Besides. I don't serve tea and bisquites in my workspace." A look at her settee table shows refreshments formally arranged and begging for our attention. I shoot a wide-eyed look at

Shereen, who responds with a slight shake of her head and shoulder shrug. “Please, sit anywhere. Make yourselves comfortable. I have hot spice tea and chocolate bisquites. Our conversation shouldn’t take place on an empty stomach.” Sybilla turns to Shereen, “Vesna’s right. You need to eat before morning healings.”

Again, creepy.

I take a seat on the left side of her mahogany leather settee in front of the chamber’s fireplace. Shereen sits to my left in a leather wingback chair of the same color. She instantly pulls the lever on the outer right side of the chair lifting the footrest. I swear, I can’t take this girl anywhere.

Sybilla settles herself to my right and faces me. I chance a glance at Shereen when she lets out a low moan, her eyes closed. She appears spent for the day, and it’s only noon. Sybilla reaches for the tea kettle. I watch as she pours tea into three teacups. Shereen lifts her head and pushes the footrest back into the chair. She rises to collect a teacup and unselfconsciously drops four sugar cubes into the steaming liquid. She stirs her tea and snatches four chocolate bisquites. I don’t know how she eats so much sugar without rotting her teeth.

Oh, wait. She’s a Healer.

Sybilla drops one sugar cube in a cup, stirs, and hands it to me on a saucer with one bisquite. “Yes, I know you only take one lump of sugar in your tea. Now, eat. I have nothing to say until you have something in your stomach.” I sip the spicy tea, enjoying its warmth and cinnamon clove flavor. The way the heat spreads across my chest is comforting. The moment I take a bite of the bisquite, Sybilla speaks.

“I’m so sorry, Vesna. What I must tell you will be a lot to take in. Under other circumstances, I would not have this conversation in the presence of another. However, I know

you two are close and you'll need Shereen's support."

She gulps a deep breath and announces, "Your mother did not die in childbirth, and your father did not kill himself. Two Lumenvale Guards executed your parents the night of your birth."

Chapter 3

Vesna

A few heartbeats pass before I'm able to collect my thoughts enough to speak. "My parents were executed." The voice coming out of my mouth is flat, emotionless. Wait. That's not right. A sea of emotions clouds my mind.

Tangerine Orange. Shock.

Banana Yellow. Disbelief.

Misty Gray. Numb.

Blood Red. Anger.

Sapphire Blue. Grief.

My mind can't seem to settle on one. The emotion colors swirl in my head like a violent cyclone. I must've loosened the grip on my saucer because Shereen is suddenly next to me taking it from my trembling hands.

"Yes, Vesna. Lumenvale Guards executed your parents. Two of them escorted Evangelia, Lumenvale's second Seer, to your parents' home the night of the Amethyst Moon. They executed Evangelia as well."

"What?" I ask. I've heard citizens speak of that night in Cerulean Market. The merchants discuss the prosperity enjoyed throughout Lyraxia and they attribute it to the night of the Amethyst Moon. My eyes are amethyst. What does this mean? Why were my parents executed? A drop of liquid on my right arm clears my mind of the swirling emotion colors. I realize tears silently stream down my face. "Is there something wrong with me? Am I a bad omen?"

"No, there's nothing wrong with you and you are not a bad omen. The Amethyst Moon was indeed an omen; one connected to a prophecy. A prophecy about you. I know because I'm

the one who received the prophecy. As a Seer, I also know exactly what happened that night in your parents' bedchamber." Shereen's cup clashes against the saucer she holds involuntarily whipping my head left. She stares at me with wide eyes, her bottom jaw desperately trying to escape her face. I turn back to Sybilla and see unshed tears threatening to spill from her eyes.

"What is the prophecy and what does it have to do with me? With the Amethyst Moon?"

"For your safety, I will not reveal the prophecy's details. What I will say is it's neither good nor bad. *You and your choices* will unravel the prophecy's meaning."

Damned Seers. Always so cryptic with their non-answers.

Sybilla gives me a minute to absorb the information before continuing. "All who knew of the Amethyst Moon Prophecy are dead. That is all except the traitor who ordered the executions that night, me, and now the two of you. The reason I will not share the details of the prophecy with you is because knowing them will most certainly alter your course in this lifecycle. Let me be clear: Knowing the Amethyst Moon Prophecy exists is a threat to your life and mine. No one can know what I've shared today. Should word get back to the traitor that another has knowledge of it, the traitor will have that citizen executed without a trial." Sybilla pauses to sip her steaming tea.

Clearing my throat, I ask, "Who is the traitor?"

"I don't know the citizen's identity. However, the traitor has a connection to the Lumenvale Council or Lyraxian Convocation. Only a member of either can order executions. Vesna, I see two distinct and vastly different paths in your future. The path you choose will decide the fate of Lyraxia and Thornwood." Again, so helpful.

Thornwood is the realm north of The Portal Wall, a wall erected over four centuries ago. Citizens in Thornwood are non-Majiks while Lyraxia has both non-Majiks and Majiks. We had

no choice but to create The Portal Wall to stop the Thornwood monarchy from seizing our lands. The Thornwood Royals ruling at that time wanted to seize our four territories bringing them under Thornwood's control. I ask the most obvious questions. "Why not execute me? If I'm the threat, then why am I still living? Isn't killing one better than killing three?"

Sybilla takes a deep breath and says, "The law does not allow the execution of littles and adolescents. There are extreme circumstances that demand the execution of those under twenty-one, but we usually incarcerate adolescents under that age for a term commiserate with the crime committed."

"Back up a sec. You said any member of the council or convocation could order an execution. I thought an execution decree required a unanimous vote from all five council or convocation members. Does this mean the whole council or convocation is aware of me and the prophecy?" I ask.

"No. In rare circumstances, one member of the council or convocation can issue an execution decree if he or she has evidence of an imminent threat to Lyraxia. I believe the person who ordered your parents' executions manufactured evidence of a conspiracy between them and Evangelia to overthrow the Lyraxia Convocation and turn our realm into a monarchy like Thornwood."

"Oh gods. Uncle Karnax was right. I *am* the reason my parents are dead." I say feeling white horror pulsing through my veins.

"No, Vesna. You were an innocent. You're not responsible for their deaths and I want you to push away those thoughts. I know they plague your mind. I know the atrocities you've endured in your short lifecycle." I feel a wave of my own anger wash over me.

"Did you know what he was doing to me all this time?"

“Yes. I knew.” Her guilt, shame, and regret paint my mind in a mixture of Rusty Orange, Pumpkin, and Sienna.

“How could you know and do nothing?! I was a helpless little! I had no one. Not another living soul to turn to for help. Even the Healer summoned to mend my injuries knew of the abuse and did nothing! What kind of citizen sits back and allows a little suffer under another’s depravity?”

“Again, I apologize. I *am* sorry for what you suffered and my lack of action to stop it. If I had intervened, it would’ve changed who you were destined to become. The Fates wouldn’t allow it. I knew of every harsh word, every beating. I felt your loneliness and desire to end your lifecycle. When you came to me nine years ago to learn of your Majik and soulmate, I saw defeat and resignation in your eyes. That’s when I sent Jac to you. As a member of the Lyraxian Army, Jac had a reputation for his fierce fighting skills even though he was only nineteen at the time.”

Something clicks into place. “I met Jac walking home from school soon after my fourteenth Naming Rite. He befriended me and eventually convinced me to train like a soldier.” I trained with Jac for years. His training kept me sane and brought me out of the shell of my hopelessness. Jac was there for me as a friend and trainer until I was seventeen and old enough to work a trade and support myself.

“When I secured a job as Shereen’s Healer’s Assistant, I beat the shit out of Uncle Karnax. I felt his fear. His fear of me. He demanded I leave his house with only the clothes on my back. I haven’t seen or spoken to him since.”

“Your mother, Livia, and your father, Wendel, were two of the most generous and kindest citizens to walk this realm.” I feel Sybilla’s potent sincerity as tears stream down her weathered face. My parents died because of me. It doesn’t matter how they died or by who’s hand. They

died because someone thought I was a threat.

“I want you to know Livia was much loved by her family, friends, and the citizens of Lumenvale. Wendel was well respected and an exceptional Healer. Before you took your first breath, your parents loved you more than their own souls. I imagine they are watching over you in Abyss.” A burst of anger scratches my throat. If my parents watched over me, why did they let me suffer? For that matter, why didn’t the goddess Hariti intervene on my behalf?

Sybilla breaks me out of my tumble into self-pity. “Many thought the Amethyst Moon was an omen of prosperity and good things to come as I’m sure you’ve heard. In a way, they’re right. Lyraxia enjoys prosperity in trade with Thornwood thanks to our crop bounty and rich textile production. The continued prosperity will depend on which of the two paths you travel.”

“What are the two paths before me? Which is the right one?”

“I can’t answer those questions. You must choose the correct one when it presents itself to you.”

“Well. That was helpful.” I turn to see Shereen perched on the edge of her chair deeply engrossed in our conversation. “What about her soulmate? Is he or she part of the prophecy?”

“Shereen! I told you. Again. This morning. I have no interest in learning about my soulmate. I’m not ready. I can’t imagine sharing a lifecycle with another. Maybe not ever.” I turn to Sybilla and ask, “Can you tell me about my other abilities? I don’t want to know anything about my soulmate yet. I only want to know about myself.”

“Very well. But before we go any further, I need to perform your Naming Rite.”

“What do you mean? The Seer performed My Naming Rite the night I was born.”

“No, Evangelia did not perform the Naming Rite. She looked into your soul and saw your name. A guard executed her before she began the rite. I believe the timing was intentional. An

unperformed Naming Rite stifles the new soul's Majik meaning he or she won't come into their full potential and the traitor knew it. That citizen incorrectly assumed no one would find out about your unperformed Naming Rite. He or she believes it is the only way to ensure you will not fulfill the prophecy. It's why you continue to live. I'm certain the traitor's kept a close eye on you over the years and continues to do so. You need to live and behave as though someone watches your every move."

"I'm being watched." It's a statement, not a question. Sybilla was right. I'll need Shereen's support. "The Naming Rite. You said you need to perform it. Where do you want me?"

Chapter 4

Vesna

Sybilla rises, placing her teacup and saucer on the settee table. “Leave your teacups here and follow me to my workspace.”

We stand and follow Sybilla as she makes her way to a corridor on the right side of her home. She ushers us through the open door of her workspace, the walls of which are a soothing shade of lavender. Suspended shelves climb the wall on my left. The right wall boasts a long narrow cabinet with a sunken washbasin and faucet. Above the washbasin are four more suspended shelves, each the length of the cabinet. All shelves in the workspace spill over with books and jars of various epoxies, tonics, and potions.

The workspace is bright with sunlight shining through the two front windows. The open windows invite the fragrant blossoms of the Limelight hydrangea bushes into the chamber giving it a homey feel. A round white oak table and chairs sit in the center. “Please, take a seat while I gather what’s needed,” Sybilla says turning to the cabinet. I sit in a chair with my back to the corner. I sit with my back against a wall or corner wherever I go. I don’t like surprises, and I’ve been on the most unfortunate end of many in my short lifecycle.

Sybilla dampens a small white cloth under the faucet. She opens the left cabinet under the sunken washbasin and snatches a jar of paste off a shelf. She walks to the table and sits in the chair to my left and opposite Shereen. As she settles, I ask, “What’s in the jar?”

“The jar holds the paste I will use for your Naming Rite. Every Seer has a selection of pastes and chooses the right one for the babe after seeing into its soul. I made this paste,” she flicks a finger to the jar on the table, “especially for you, the one born with eyes of the Amethyst Moon. I received the prophecy long before you were born, but I made the paste after I felt your

conception.” she continues. “Your essence is strong. Even inside your mother’s womb, I felt it. Your paste includes bay laurel to guard against misfortune, lavender to ward off evil spirits, basil for prosperity, rosemary for protection and blessing, marjoram for spiritual protection and happiness, and a touch of honeysuckle to amplify blessings. I divided the paste into two jars and gave one to Evangelia after sealing both with Majik. I didn’t know which of us would perform your Naming Rite the night of your birth.” I listen with rapt attention, taking in the history of my existence.

“I told Evangelia of the Amethyst Moon Prophecy the day I gave her the paste. I told her to prepare the day the Amethyst Moon rose and not to speak to another soul of what was to come. I believed she understood the risks of having such knowledge. Evangelia gave me her word she would secret the information.”

Sybilla uses her right index finger to draw a complicated pattern on the lid of the jar. A faint *click* echoes in the workspace just before she removes the lid. “I’ll apply the paste to your forehead as I speak the words. Once the words are spoken, one of two things will occur: for babes with Majik, the paste will glow bright white and fade, leaving no paste behind; for those with no Majik, the paste does not glow and remains on the forehead until removed with a wet cloth. We know you have Majik, so I expect the symbol will glow and the paste will disappear. Once the Naming Rite concludes, I will see all your Majik and your level of power. Before you ask, yes, you have more than Empathic abilities.”

I glance at Shereen then return my focus to Sybilla. Sybilla sees my apprehension and rushes to dissolve my fears. “I know you don’t want to know anything about your soulmate, and I will respect your wishes. However, I’ve already seen when and where your paths will cross. The circumstances will not be ideal. You will know your soulmate when you make eye contact

with him. He will also feel the connection.”

“So, my soulmate is a ‘He?’” I really didn’t want to know that. This knowledge makes it real. Up until now, having a soulmate was just words.

“Sorry Vesna. I wasn’t thinking.” I see the emotion color Sea Blue in my mind and feel the sincerity of her apology. “Tell me, what is the extent of your Empathic abilities?” I look at Shereen who nods in encouragement. She and Jac are the only ones that know about my advanced skills.

“I can influence emotions in another person. It comes in handy in my vocation as a Healer’s Assistant. I calm overwhelming emotions such as fear and panic. I also reduce or eliminate pain, physical and emotional.” I inhale the fresh breeze blowing through the windows. “I don’t have to touch a citizen or look them in the eyes. I don’t even have to be in the same space. Most of the time, I sense one’s emotions before entering their home and project my influence before.” I feel Sybilla’s shock. I contemplate withholding the rest, but she’s a Seer. She’ll know one way or another after my Naming Rite. “I also take inventory of one’s emotional and physical state. This gift is useful when treating young babes who are unable to communicate their illnesses. It’s also useful to know when Shereen wakes in the morning. It’s my cue to vacate the bathing chamber.” Shereen and I chuckle while we watch Sybilla’s eyes widen.

My mind sees the emotion color Bannan Yellow. Disbelief. “Interesting. I know of only one person with that level of Empathic ability. He lived over four centuries ago.”

“Four centuries,” I ask. “Did he live when we raised The Portal Wall?”

“Yes, he did. His name was Fynn. He was an integral part of the events leading up to The Portal Wall’s erection. We should start.” Sybilla dips the first and middle finger of her right hand into the jar and comes out with a liberal amount of the paste. She faces me and brings her fingers

to my forehead. The paste is thick and cool. She draws a pentagram within a circle, her fingers working in one continuous motion as she recites the Naming Rite.

“I beseech the god Theseus, walk with Vesna, and give her wisdom and strength to choose the right path for the good of all.

I beseech the goddess Philomena, give Vesna courage and power for the many challenges she will face in her lifecycle.

I beseech the goddess Eirene, be at Vesna’s side to encourage peace with all those she meets on her path in this lifecycle.

I beseech the goddess Hespera, guide Vesna through the coming transition and changes.

I beseech the Fates, Lachesis, Clotho, and Adrastea, be with Vesna and guide her as she fulfills the destiny you have chosen for her.”

The paste warms on my forehead and Cerulean Blue light glows on my forehead. The light fades but ignites a second time and fades. It ignites a third time before fading out completely. I touch my forehead and feel no paste residue. Sybilla’s eyes are set in a wide, unblinking gaze. She’s not here. Her mind is somewhere else.

Without warning, my entire body ignites with the same Cerulean Blue light, pulsing in conjunction with my heartbeat. My surroundings fade until only the light remains. As the pulsing continues, a well deep within my being fills with warmth and light. The pulsing blue light dims, and I’m left with a feeling of complete and utter peace. A sense of fulfillment of something I didn’t know was missing envelopes me like a tightly swaddled little. Shereen stares at me with her mouth open wide enough to catch flying insects, shock stretching her eyelids to a painful width.

Sybilla is in the present with a coiled mass of emotions I’m too overwhelmed to read. “Sybilla? What’s wrong?” I don’t know what she expected, but I know it wasn’t this.

Sybilla’s face leeches of color as she struggles to find her words. She clears her throat

and rises from her chair. “I need a few minutes. Would you be so kind as to wait in the kitchen? The bathing chamber is to your right, and the kitchen is in the back. Please make yourselves at home. I have food and drink. Eat. I didn’t expect to keep you so long. I know you’ll need to be on your way shortly to finish the day’s healing requests.”

Shereen and I exchange a look and exit the chamber. I feel exhausted and ravenous in a way I never have before. Shereen grabs my hand as she says “Let’s find something to eat. You must be hungrier than I am, and that’s saying something.”

Chapter 5

Vesna

The door closes as we exit the workspace. We take turns in the bathing chamber before making our way to the kitchen. I inspect the contents of Sybilla's cooling cabinet and find cold cuts, cubed cheeses, green grapes, and Strawberry Fizzies. I collect two bottles of Fizzies and grab the meat, cheese, and fruit containers. Shereen meets me at the kitchen island with salted buttery crackers, two plates, and two linen napkins. We go about serving ourselves in thoughtful silence. After eating half of my lunch, I speak.

“What *was* that? As a Healer, you've seen Naming Rites. Was mine normal? I couldn't see anything but blue light.”

Shereen takes a healthy swig of her Fizzie and faces me across the island. “No, I've never seen anything like it. I don't know what that was, Vesna. The rite usually unfolds the way Sybilla described. But you, your whole body ignited. All I saw was your silhouette encased in the most beautiful shade of blue. I was screaming at you to look at me, but you just sat there, your head falling backward with every breath inhaled and forward with every breath exhaled. I don't know what it means. I expect that's what Sybilla's working through right now.”

“I thought she would have all the answers after the Naming Rite. Why did she shoo us from her workspace?” I can't help but feel discarded. My logical self knows that wasn't what she did, but it hurts just the same.

“When Seers perform a Naming Rite, they document what they see and feel in a logbook. That's what Sybilla's doing right now. To my knowledge, no one reads another Seer's logbook. Not even fellow Seers. All citizens consider Seer logbooks sacred. They hold many secrets that could alter fates and destinies should the logbooks fall into the wrong hands. Seers Majikly seal

the logbook in a space somewhere in his or her home. I expect the sealing Majik mimics the kind that sealed the jar of paste she used.”

“What happens to the logbooks when a Seer dies?”

“When a Seer dies, his or her Majik seal locking the logbooks dissolves leaving them and other sealed objects unprotected until the Seer’s replacement moves into the home. It’s the new Seer’s responsibility to retrieve the logbooks and deliver them to the Central Archives.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“The Central Archives store many books of knowledge including our histories and journals of deceased council and convocation members. However, a Majikly sealed underground chamber holds all Seer logbooks. A local Millinian seals the chamber. Only the Lead Archive Keeper knows the identity of the Millinian. The Lead Archive Keeper takes possession of the logbooks until the Millinian unseals the chamber, places the logbooks inside, and reseals it. When the Lead Archive Keeper dies, the Majik sealing the Seer logbooks dissolves and the Millinian must return to reseal the chamber after appointing a new Lead Archive Keeper.”

“So, who tells the Millinian the logbook archives need resealing when the Lead Archive Keeper dies?” I ask.

“The Millinian feels the seal dissolve. Majik is a living part of the one who creates it. Empaths and Healers are two examples of Majiks that do not leave a living part, an imprint, of their Majik behind.

I’m perplexed. “If no one is allowed to read a deceased Seer’s logbooks, then why do we keep them?”

“That’s a question I hadn’t thought to ask. I don’t know why we keep them. Someone at some point decided to keep Seer logbooks. I have to assume there’s a reason even if no one

knows what it is.”

“Seers also use logbooks to record premonitions and prophecies. It’s like keeping a personal journal. No one is meant to read another’s journal, but it helps the author process their emotions and make sense of events occurring around them. That’s why I lock myself in my bedchamber the second we get home. I’m writing the day’s events and my feelings in my personal journal.” Shereen looks at me as though this was something everyone does or at least knows about.

“I didn’t know you kept a personal journal. I know you keep logbooks to document your Healings.”

I feel Shereen’s confusion mixed with a little shock. “You don’t keep a personal journal? How do you carry the emotional baggage of your childhood abuse much less the exhausting emotions you pick up from those with whom you cross paths every day?” I hadn’t really thought about it like that. I can see myself writing about the emotions I feel during a day’s work, but I could never write about the abuse. Shereen just confirmed no one destroys all journals or logbooks after the author’s death. I couldn’t bear it if anyone else read my haunting memories.

The door to Sybilla’s workspace opens a moment before she appears in the kitchen. “Have you had enough to eat?” We nod in response. “Good. Would you join me in my workspace. We have much to discuss.” I stand and begin clearing the table. “It’s okay, Vesna. I’ll take care of that later.”

Sybilla returns to her workspace and extends an arm inviting us to take a seat at the table. Shereen and I return to our seats, but Sybilla sits directly across from me, hands covering an open logbook. I don’t feel anything coming from her which makes me nervous. If she’s deliberately hiding her emotions behind a wall, then what I’m about to learn must be grave or at

the very least, overwhelming.

“Vesna, how do you feel?”

The question takes me off-guard. “I feel...full, not like when I eat too much, more like I had an empty hole inside me that’s now full to the brim. Does that make sense?”

“It makes perfect sense.” She turns to Shereen, “Before I continue, I need a promise from you.” Shereen nods for Sybilla to continue. “I need you to retrieve my logbook about Vesna when I die before it’s moved to the Central Archives.”

Chapter 6

Rik

“Fredrik, have you heard a word I said?” My father lets out an exasperated sigh. Truthfully, no, I didn’t hear a word he said. I tend to tune him out when I hear his “King Tone.” That tone implies I won’t like the words rolling off his tongue.

“Sorry, Father. I didn’t sleep well last night. I’m listening. Please continue.” The smokey gray walls of my father’s office reflect my current state of mind. I sit at the far end of a long black-granite oval table with my two siblings. I straighten my back and move forward in my chair hoping the uncomfortable position will keep my mind on the topic of our conversation. Kylo, my older brother and heir to the throne, sits in the middle chair at our end of the table. I sit on Kylo’s right while my twin sister, Felicity, sits on Kylo’s left. My parents, King Darius Rowan and Queen Bina Rowan, face us from the other end.

Father’s angry eyes shift to me. “First, you do not command me. Second, you will address me as *Your Majesty* when in my office, the Throne Room, the Great Dining Hall, and any other gathering that includes citizens outside this family. How many times must I remind you?”

Gods, save me now.

We’re all starving and the delicious aroma of a hot lunch wafts in from the west kitchens. Father has yet to realize meetings are completely unproductive when its attendees are starving. I look away from the suffocating anger seeming to pulse off my father in waves. “Again, Your Majesty, rest did not find me last night.” Frankly, sleep has eluded me since discussions of my potential betrothal began three months ago. When I fall asleep, I dream of a beautiful slivery-white haired women with amethyst eyes before waking in the middle of the night. The dream is so vivid and lifelike that I find myself unable to think of anything else much less return to bed.

Now that Father has my attention, he gets to the point of this meeting. “Aclana is threatening to break from Thornwood Kingdom and become a sovereign nation. The Portal is in their territory. If they control The Portal, they control the trade with Lyraxia which means The Crown must negotiate terms with Aclana costing the kingdom gods know how much more coin for the same merchandise. I will not allow that to happen.”

Oh, no. The scent of our hot midday meal is stronger which tells me the staff is laying out the feast as we speak. How am I supposed to keep my mind focused on Father when the delicious aroma increases the rumbling in my stomach?

Father drolls on about what we all believe to be a non-existent threat. “If Aclana declares independence from Thornwood Kingdom, we will have war. And let me be clear: Aclana will remain part of my kingdom!” He’s losing control of his emotions, something that’s happening more often. “We must nip this in the bud. Now! Drusilla Actos arrived at the palace three months ago. She’s adjusted to court life like a true princess. She will make a good wife and companion and will bring Aclana to heel.”

Returning to the original topic, I ask, “Has Aclana sent word or given any other indication in the Advisory Committee meetings of their desire to become a sovereign nation?” The Advisory Committee includes the Lords of all five Territories plus Kipling, the capital of Thornwood and home to the Rowan Palace Stronghold. Also, part of the committee is each territory’s Lieutenant General of the territory army, and the General of all Thornwood Armies and Guards (me). The five territory treasurers, the Royal Treasurer, and the Portal Guard Commander complete the committee membership.

Father’s already downed three glasses of bourbon and it’s not even one o’clock. “I’ve received no official word, but I have gut feelings during the meetings that if we don’t join

houses, we face rebellion.” Father’s paranoia is increasing with each passing day along with his drinking. Something isn’t right. “Fredrik, we’ve discussed a union with Lady Drusilla of Aclana for months.” The harsh lines of my father’s face become more exaggerated every time we have this conversation. He has yet to reach his sixth decade of life, but he appears in his seventh.

“Your Majesty shouldn’t Kylo marry first as he is heir to the throne. He’s also older than me by four years. His marriage to Drusilla would form the bond you seek.” I’m tired of this conversation.

My older brother finally finds his voice, “I’m not marrying that bitch!”

I face Kylo with a knowing look, “And you think I should marry *that bitch*?” Father seems to bend over backwards to please Kylo while Felice and I are just the Royal extras.

Kylo is in love with Balthezar, a member of Father’s Royal Guard. He thinks no one knows they’re sneaking around. Felice and I know about their relationship. I think our mother knows or at least suspects, but no one’s discussed it openly. Father seems oblivious to his own son’s desire to mate with another male.

This realm is bigoted. Harsh, but true. The law treats same-sex relationships as treason. It treats mixed-color relationships as treason. It treats relationships between slaves and free citizens as treason. I haven’t seen my father actively enforce these laws, but he hasn’t abolished them either. Does that make him a bigot like every other supreme ruler before him? I can’t say for certain my father would have Kylo executed if he ever found out about Balthezar. He might only charge Balthazar with treason.

I really don’t understand such thinking. Everyone says this is the way it’s always been. At what point can we question how things have always been and alter them to fit our society as it is today. I genuinely believe people are destined to be together by fate. Fate doesn’t consider

gender, color, or even social status when she brings mates together, whether sexual or platonic.

“STOP! Both of you.” Father turns to me and says, “Drusilla’s taken a shine to you and if you would give her a chance, I think you’d find her quite charming.”

“I *have* spent time with her, Your Majesty. She’s a power-hungry socialite. Her only motivation is to become a princess. She’d marry Felice to achieve that goal.” Father sucks in a sharp breath. I know exactly how to end this conversation. “Drusilla’s a viper and would take advantage of every opportunity to use her power as a princess and exploit every weakness of The Crown and our family. I believe she’d go as far as helping her father take The Crown for himself. This is the very lord you’re complaining about.”

Kylo’s eyes widen with surprise when I voice a perfectly accurate observation before he collects himself enough to speak. “Maybe Rik’s right. Does Lord Actos have other worthy females in his territory?”

As in my father’s words, I want to nip this in the bud. “Hold on. That was not my point,” I look at Mother because I know she’ll understand. “Didn’t you and His Majesty fall in love at a ball organized specifically to choose his wife? If I remember the story correctly, His Majesty’s parents hosted a ball for all eligible ladies in Thornwood Kingdom. As the night ended, you caught Father’s, er, His Majesty’s eye and wed within a fortnight.” My mother’s eyes soften at the reminder. “Don’t you want that kind of love for your sons? Your daughter?” I know I’ve convinced my mother when I see her dab the tears from her eyes. Father, on the other hand, shifts uncomfortably in his seat, face transforming into affection when he looks at Mother.

He clears his throat before saying, “I’ll discuss this with Her Majesty. You do have a point about Kylo; it’s far past time for him to marry. We need royal heirs.” Kylo pales and glares at me while I choke on a laugh.

I lean left to Kylo. Felice instantly positions her head right so as not to miss a single word. “Kylo, I’m more than happy to marry. The ball I know Mother will insist upon hosting will be for me. You can name any of my younglings from the union as your heir to the throne. Don’t worry about anything. I love you too much to see you sacrifice the happiness you’ve found.” Kylo’s eyes burn with unspoken relief and gratitude.

I’ll keep my word. I won’t allow my brother to suffer because of this kingdom’s biases.

Chapter 7

Rik

It's well after two before I make it to the training yard. Father's growing paranoia demands more rigorous training of the Royal and Portal Guards. I rarely have a moment to myself.

"Portal Guards," I shout. "Let's discuss the plans for this week's Portal Trade."

The twelve guards, all weary from training, shuffle to meet me in the middle of the training yard. I take mental note of the approaching men as a head count. Joxer, Magnus, Sigurd, Cedric, Murdock, Xerxes, Quillon, Zenon, Eirik, Galen, Quinlan, and Damian. Everyone's present.

"Joxer, you'll communicate with the rebels. Cedric, you'll be with Joxer to negotiate price and ensure we're not cheated. Zenon and Eirik will escort the rebels' four bandwagons while on our side of The Portal Wall. Quillon will stay at my side monitoring trade progress. Murdock, Magnus, and Sigurd will guard our backs on the Thornwood side while we're engaged in business. Xerxes, Damian, Galen, and Quinlan will transport our bandwagons of merchandise to the rebel side of the wall."

"You know the drill. We travel at first light to Sun creek Lodge. We leave at sunrise the next day and arrive at The Portal late Thursday morning. Once trading has concluded, we'll travel to Briarvale Inn for the night. We leave at sunrise the next day and should return to the palace gates by early Friday evening. Since this is not your first trip, you know to pack lightly. Any questions?"

Of course. Damian. "I understand Cedric is the best of us when negotiating with the rebels, but why is Joxer always assigned the position of negotiation? I haven't seen him work

another position since I joined The Portal Guard.”

I pin Damian with a glare I'm sure reflects how sick I am of this question. “As I've stated before, Joxer is the most amiable of the Portal Guards. In his years of service, he's developed a friendly rapport with the rebels. They see themselves as our equals, or our superiors. Joxer gives them no reason to believe otherwise. His past performance has proven his value to hold such an esteemed position during trades. Anything else?”

When no one responds, I say “You're dismissed from training for the afternoon. Rest and pack. Gather water and food stores for the group. The east wing kitchens should have everything packed and ready to go. I need those supplies loaded on the bandwagons tonight. Do not wait until morning like last week. Be ready to leave the southeast gates at first light. Thanks guys.”

I decide to take my own advice and leave the training yard for rest and preparation. My chambers are one floor above the east wing kitchens, which I find very convenient on restless nights.

I access the east wing through the courtyard door and enter the kitchens. Before the door closes, Emmeline squeezes me in a bear hug, kissing my cheeks. “And how's my Emmeline today?” Emmeline, the east wing Head of Kitchen Staff, has always taken a shine to me. She's the motherly type. She's short and plump with a loose bun of auburn hair at the nape of her neck, gray hair strands mingle with the auburn ones. Her sea green eyes are a stark contrast to the red freckles splashed across her pale white face. Thin lines around her eyes, mouth, and cheeks are marks of her easy laughter and jovial spirit.

“I'd fair a lot better if you'd visit more often. What's kept you so busy lately?”

Gods, I love this woman.

“Father insists on more severe training of the guards and armies. He's just keeping us on

our toes.”

Emmeline huffs out a rough laugh. “I don’t know what’s gotten into your father lately. Marjorie, the west wing Head of Kitchen Staff, tells me he prefers drink over food these days, and he’s prone to unwarranted outbursts. I don’t know how your dear mother is coping.”

“You know better than to listen to idle gossip.” The grin spreading across my face does nothing to discourage such behavior.

“But it’s so much fun! What else do I have for entertainment?” Emmeline wears a look of mock innocence.

“Don’t worry about my father. He’s fine.” I pick an apple from a fruit bowl on one of the kitchen islands. “You say you want entertainment? Well, how’s this: I’m ninety-nine percent sure Mother, Felice, and Kylo will plan a ball for the sole purpose of selecting my wife.”

I choke on a bite of apple when Emmeline snatches me down into another hug. “It’s about time! Look at you, you’re every girl’s dream: tall, dark, and handsome.” I am quite tall at six-foot-four, and my hair is so black it has violet undertones in direct sunlight. The handsome part I already knew. I see how others look at me plus Emmeline reminds me every time I see her.

“Don’t you know me by now? I don’t want a woman only interested in my looks or my title for that matter. I want someone with whom I can talk. I want her to be the light in my eyes. I want her brave and strong. I want her full of passion and compassion. And I want her to call me out on my bullshit.”

I look back at Emmeline and see her dabbing her teary eyes. “Oh Rik. You’re too good for any woman in this kingdom.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. I’m excited by the prospect, but I’m afraid I won’t find someone I can be myself with.” I swallow the sudden burn of emotion in my throat before

Emmeline notices and weeps outright.

I'm completely comfortable with only a handful of friends, but it's not friendship I seek. I'm so lonely, it hurts. I want to find my true love. I'd give away my title, my birthright, to find a woman with whom I can connect. "Would you send the evening meal to my chambers tonight? I've seen quite enough of Father today and wish to avoid the Great Dining Hall. I also need rest for tomorrow's journey."

"Don't you worry. I'm making your favorite." Emmeline makes her way to the cooling cabinet and extracts various foods for cooking.

"I'll bring back something special for you from The Portal this week." I kiss Emmeline on both cheeks. Her giggles follow me as I make my way to the hallway on the other side of the kitchens. Finally in my own chambers, I head straight to the bar and pour a healthy glass of whisky. A soft knock kills my moment of solitude. I know who it is before she says a word.

"Rikky? Where are you?" My sister is just inside the door. Knocking, to her, simply announces her arrival. She never waits for an invitation inside. I love my sister, but our similarities begin and end with our hair and eyes.

"I'm in the lounge drinking whisky. Want some?" I toss a healthy mouthful down my throat and relish the bite of that first swallow.

"Gods yes. I need a drink after today. I'll have what you're having." Felice plops her pampered ass on a barstool facing me where I stand behind the oak bar. Surprisingly, she's wearing the same mint green gown from this morning. She usually changes outfits several times a day. At twenty-five, she still loves playing dress-up.

"I've been with Mother since our family meeting. I snuck her to my chambers, and we had a nice long chat."

My curiosity peaked, I ask “How’d that go?” If I ever have anything to say that I don’t want repeated, I make sure Felice is nowhere in sight. She couldn’t keep a secret if her life depended on it. Kylo is almost as bad.

“Good. Father agreed to host a ball in your honor for all fair maidens in the kingdom. Also, she shares our concerns about him.” She must have a daily word count to hit. I don’t think she’s taken a breath since she opened her mouth. “I told her what you said to Kylo. By the way, she already knew about him and Balthazar. She thinks like we do about those terrible treason laws.” My head spins trying to retain the information she shares. I don’t think a word sits in her head before falling off her tongue. I’ve heard her speaking out loud to no one. It’s exhausting. “She’ll begin the delicate process of convincing Father to renounce The Crown. He’s having trouble remembering things as well. Did you know that?”

“No, but I’m not surprised. Has she consulted the Royal Medic?” That’s a yes or no question, right?

Wrong.

“She has. He’s making excuses to see Father more often so he can get a better idea of what’s going on. If the behavior is due to a physical ailment, then he’ll insist Father undergo tests and treatment. If the behavior is due to a mental ailment, then he’ll help Mother convince Father to step down for the good of the kingdom.” I have a sneaking suspicion she spends a lot of time with Emmeline.

I’m ready for a change in subject. “I’ll be gone the next three days for The Portal Trade. I’ll want details of what you, Mother, and Kylo plan when I return.” I know saying it out loud is more for my benefit than hers. She’ll be bubbling over with said details the second I step inside the east wing Friday evening. “Why are you on Portal Duty? You’re a prince and going to The

Portal is dangerous. The Portal Commander is the one responsible for Portal Trade. Look at you. You're exhausted."

"Felice," I suck in an irritated breath and pinch my eyes closed. "Uther fell off his horse two weeks ago. He can't walk, much less ride. Or stand. I'll be on Portal Duty for the foreseeable future." There. That's the end of our conversation.

Wrong again.

"Then why must we trade every week. Can't we change the trade schedule to every other week?" Gods, how am I always in endless conversations with this woman. I love my sister more than my own life, but I've got a long journey ahead of me and hours of sleep to catch up on.

"If we traded every other week, I'd have to hire more guards and purchase more bandwagons. The trip would take more than three days and honestly, I don't think the crops we receive would survive two weeks."

Felice lets out an exaggerated sigh. "Fine. Bring me something special?"

"You have more than enough special things." As the only girl, Father spoiled her rotten. I'm older than Felice, but only by three hours and thirty-seven minutes. Felice took her sweet time introducing herself to the world. Mother says Father was a nervous wreck, pacing endlessly while he waited for her arrival. He was discouraged after my birth thinking the second youngling would be my identical brother. He often speaks of the relief he felt when he learned he had a princess. Makes me feel special every time I think about it.

"I hate to cut this short," I lie, "but I need to prepare. We leave at first light." Please dear Hermes, send this woman on her way.

Felice puffs out her lower lip in a fake pout. "Okay. I want a hug first. I'll miss you."

I walk around the bar as she hops off the stool. She jumps into my arms without warning,

nearly sending us both stumbling to the cherrywood floor. “I’ll be back before you know it. Besides, you’ll be in deep negotiations with Mother and Kylo over the ball we’re hosting.”

“You’re right!” Is that a mischievous glint in her eye? “Be safe and come back in one piece.”

Now I’m worried.

Chapter 8

Vesna

Shereen vocalizes her unending stream of consciousness as we walk to our first healing appointment after Sybilla's shocking revelations. I don't hear a word she's saying. It's background noise at this point. I'm still processing everything I learned. I see nothing while walking the familiar path towards Plaza Street. When I hit what feels like a brick wall, I stumble back a few paces. My mind clears enough to see a thick, hard chest in my face. A human. I walked straight into another citizen.

"Vesna? Sorry about that. I didn't mean to startle you. I tried to get your attention. Shereen, you look like you're coming unhinged. What have you two gotten yourselves into this time?" It's Jac. Sweet, gorgeous Jac. The state of his hair and sweaty clothing tells me he's been training all day. I see Jac's concern pulsing Indigo around his body. Lord. Is he really that concerned or did my Naming Rite amplify my Empathic abilities?

"Hi Jac. Um, sorry about running into you. We just left Sybilla's house. You know. My twenty-first Naming Rite visit." My words come out like a question. "I'm lost in my own head. I can't promise my foggy brain will clear, but I'll try to focus on a conversation."

Jac laughs at my attempt at humor. "So, tell me. What changed your mind? Last I heard, you were avoiding Sybilla like the plague."

Gods, was I ever. How did this happen? A nervous laugh escapes my mouth. "Well, we didn't plan the visit. It just sort of...happened."

"You just sort of went to Sybilla's house and just sort of had your twenty-first Naming Rite visit?" Jac's aura transitions to Magenta. Amusement. I no longer see emotion colors in my mind. I see them color a body's aura. That's new.

Without taking my eyes off Jac, I shift my head left to Shereen. “Do you see that?” I ask, rudely point my finger at Jac a second before he slaps it out of the air.

“Don’t point at me,” he chuckles.

“See what?” Shereen’s gaze shifts to where Jac slapped my finger out of his face.

“Jac’s glowing. His whole body. It’s glowing Magenta.” I let my eyes shift to Shereen only to find her glowing Indigo. Concern.

Shereen steps in my line of vision. “No Vesna. I don’t see anything. Do you see a glow around me?”

“Yes.”

Distracted by a rainbow of colors surrounding me, I look at the crowd of citizens coming and going around us. Everyone’s aura is colored: Colored with their emotions. “Good gods. Those adolescents are about to break out into a brawl.”

“What adolescents?” Shereen’s face pales as she follows my gaze and witnesses a fight begin between five adolescents on the street corner one block south of where we stand. She looks back at me and asks, “Are you okay to continue today? I can handle the remaining appointments. I only have a few.”

“Would somebody please tell me what the fuck is going on?” That’s my Jac. He doesn’t mince words and he has an extensive vocabulary.

I turn away from the adolescent brawl and speak softly to Shereen, “Yes, I think I need to go home. Sybilla said Percival will pay me a visit later today to discuss The Portal Trade and my responsibilities as one of The Portal Crew.”

“Hello? I’m standing right in front of you unless I finally got my wish to be invisible. Oh, that would be awesome. There are so many filthy things I could do if I were invisible.” When Jac

is not the center of attention, his mind gets creative.

“Sorry Jac. Do you have anywhere else to be this afternoon? If not, walk me home and I’ll fill you in,” I tell him.

Shereen whips her head back to me. She’s pulsing Scarlet Red. Fear. “Remember what Sybilla said and what we both promised.”

“What the hell kind of promise did you have to make after your visit?” Jac’s aura shifts to Chili Red. Irritation.

I ignore Jac and say, “Don’t worry I’ll keep that promise. I’ll just tell him all the other stuff.” I turn to Jac. “Come home with me. I have cold Watermelon Fizzies and cinnamon cakes at home. And yes, you can take a shower, but I have to draw the line at borrowing my clothing.” Shereen giggles while Jac rolls his eyes.

“Hang on. How did you come to join The Portal Crew? It took two years before they offered me a position,” Jac says.

“Sybilla sent a missive to Percival the moment she finished documenting my Naming Rite. Before we left her home, his response said he was eager to have me join.” Jac senses my need to collect my thoughts, so we walk in companionable silence along Plaza Street and head to the tenement building on Silverthorn Road.

Jac is twenty-eight now. He has a heartmate in this lifecycle, but she doesn’t live in Lyraxia. I don’t think he’ll ever settle down with a mate. The town gossip says his tenement’s door revolves with a string of beautiful women. I’d ask Jac if it’s true because we’re friends, but I’m not comfortable discussing the topic, not even with Shereen. I can’t say I blame him for the women. He’s a gorgeous hunk of six-foot two-inch sculpted muscle. Honey hair touches his shoulders when it’s not tied in a leather thong. His golden-brown eyes would melt anyone with

one glance. The cleft chin, sharp nose, and high cheekbones complete his flawless face. I can't help but feel a form of attraction to him. He was the first male in my lifecycle to ever treat me like a human being. It's not hard for someone, and I mean me, to form a crush on such a kind and generous soul at a vulnerable time in her lifecycle. I'm sure all the time we spent together training and hanging out contributed to my schoolgirl crush.

Geez. I wish Vesna didn't have a soulmate. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever met. She's fierce and loyal and she has a fight in her that scares the shit out of me.

I look at Jac, his aura is Blush Pink. Attraction. "What did you just say?"

I didn't say anything. But I thought it. Oh gods. She's a Telepath. How is that fair? An Empath and a Telepath?

"Jac, I only found out today that I *might* be a Telepath. I didn't know until just now or I would've warned you."

"Gods, Vesna. I'm so sorry. I meant no disrespect." A flush creeps up his tanned cheeks.

"Your thoughts are your own and you never need to apologize for them. I'll just have to work harder on my shielding. Though how I'll get past *seeing* everyone's emotions color their aura is beyond me. It's one thing to see them in my head. It's quite another to see them around every person in my line of sight."

"Tell me how you see and feel emotions. I never quite understood it and hadn't thought to ask before now." Now that I think about it, I don't remember having the color conversation with Jac.

"It's hard to explain. Each emotion is a distinct color. Before, I would see the color in my mind in addition to feeling the emotion. Now, I see emotions color a body's aura. Anger is Blood Red, Amusement is Magenta, Disbelief is Banana Yellow. I could go on."

"The ability to see emotion colors will come in handy as part of The Portal Crew not to

mention your new Telepathic ability.” Jac turns thoughtful in the next few paces. “Can you make a list of emotions and their colors. I’d like to memorize them. At The Portal, you can speak all the colors you see, and everyone will just think you’re crazy.”

“Gee thanks, Jac,” I deadpan. “I don’t know. There’s so many. It’ll take a while to make a complete list.” It’s a clever idea. I know Shereen will want the same information.

“Start by writing down the most common ones. As you write them, I’ll memorize them.” I consider the idea for a moment. We know not to trust Thornwood. We’ve been on the bad end of many negotiations in the past. Knowing Thornwood’s emotions can reveal their intentions and motivations which would give us the upper hand. And Jac is right about one thing. My new Telepathic abilities will be useful in negotiations. Of course, this means I’ll have to disclose my new Telepathic ability to Percival. He may wish to position me as a negotiator. Sybilla told me to trust Jac with everything but the prophecy and that’s only because knowledge of its existence endangers his life. She also told me to listen to my instincts when it’s time to share my abilities with Percival.

We reach my tenement door on the third floor of the twelve-story building. I extract the keys from my satchel and unlock the door. Jac follows me inside. “Wait. What do you mean she documented your Naming Rite?” I tell the whole story of my parents’ and the Seer’s executions the night of my birth and how the reason I didn’t know the truth was for my own safety. I also went into detail of what happened during the Naming Rite today.

“Gods, Vesna. Everyone who crosses your path knows your special. There’s a spark of pure unadulterated energy inside you that screams, *I’m awesome*. What other Majiks do you have. I know there’s more.”

“Slow down, Jac. Why don’t you take a shower. You’ve been training all day and frankly,

I don't want you to leave. I want you here with me when Percival drops by to brief me about tomorrow's journey to The Portal. I'll tell you about my Majiks after your shower."

"Wait. One more thing. Can you project a thought into someone else's head? You hear thoughts, why not project them too?"

"I told you. I experienced it for the first time only moments ago. You were there, remember? I haven't had a chance to play with it." Now I sound like a kid with a new toy.

"Humor me. Try to send me a thought."

I clear my mind and scream:

Get in the shower before I start throwing things at you.

"Oh. My. Gods. Did you just tell me to get in the shower and that you're going to throw things?" Jac's aura is Tangerine Orange. Shock. Well, that makes two of us. "I'm thoroughly impressed. We should work on speaking with our minds while I'm here." I shoot an exasperated look at Jac. "I'm going, I'm going. And, just so you know, I keep spare clothing and bathing essentials on the bottom shelf of your bathing chamber cabinet." And with that bit of information, he's gone.

I take my satchel to the workspace table and clean it out. If this Portal Crew position is permanent, Shereen will need another Healer's Assistant. Unmated Healers and Healer's Assistants usually share living chambers which means I'll have to move out. I go to my bedchamber and change my clothing. The bulk of what I own are Healer's uniforms. I'll have to break down and buy travel clothing. Today.

Gods, I hate shopping for clothing. I never know what to buy. I want to look stylish; I just don't know how. I wish someone else would do it for me, but I don't make enough to hire a tailor.

Dressed in a roomy gray tunic, black leggings, and fuzzy lavender slippers, I return to the kitchen. Wait. Jac says he has clothes *and* bathing essentials here. Is he getting it on with Shereen? I am *so* going to grill her about it. No, I won't. I really don't want to know.

And what were those thoughts I heard from him? I must've misunderstood what I heard. It sounded like he had a crush on *me*. His aura was pulsing Blush Pink. Attraction. That can't be right. He's five years older than I am. Who would be attracted to me. I'm a mess. I have no friends except Shereen and Jac. I wouldn't even be friends with Jac if we hadn't 'accidentally' crossed paths nine years ago.

My suspicious mind, conspiracy theories, and the ability to know the state of a person's emotions leaves no one fit to be included with my inner circle of two friends. Now that I see emotion colors in auras, I'll never trust another soul. One can hide behind pretty words and convincing body language, but you can't hide emotions and intentions from an Empath turned Telepath.

I come to a complete stop just inside the kitchen. Why did I walk into the kitchen? Oh, right. Drinks and snacks. Jac just turned off the shower. He'll sit at the kitchen table in a few minutes expecting food. That man can shovel down some food. I don't know how he affords to stock his pantry.

I remove two plates from a cabinet and the platter of cinnamon cakes from the pantry and place them on the table. I grab two Watermelon Fizzies from the cooling cabinet and add them to the table. When I turn back to the pantry, I let out an embarrassing screech. Jac's sitting on a stool at the breakfast nook watching me.

I sigh and move the platter, plates, and Fizzies to the nook.

"No napkins?" I let out an irritated grunt and pluck two linen napkins from the drawer on

the right. I slam the napkins down beside the plates. Jac chuckles, opens both Fizzies, and hands one to me. After inhaling two cinnamon cakes and downing half his Fizzie, he breaks the silence. “Okay. Spill. What did you learn about your Majiks?” His tone reminds me of Shereen when she’s pressing me for gossip.

“So, you know the extent of my Empathic abilities. Now you know of my Telepathic abilities. Sybilla told me of other Majiks I may have. She also told me the Majiks that manifest would grow immensely powerful with time and practice. She gave me a few meditation techniques to help strengthen my mental shields. She said I’ll need them to keep my sanity.” Jac’s head falls back with an offensive belly laugh.

I’m overwhelmed by what I learned today. I don’t need him laughing at me. “If you laugh one more time, I’ll stop talking.” Jac schools his facial features as I continue. “She asked about the extent of my Empathic abilities before the Naming Rite. I told her everything. After the rite, she said it was highly likely I’d be a Healer.”

“Oh, nice! You and Shereen will make quite a team.”

“Shereen will need a new Healer’s Assistant,” I say, a little deflated.

“Why would she need a new one?”

“Hello!” I wave a hand in front of his face. “I’ll be gone three days a week with The Portal Crew. That girl doesn’t eat unless I remind her. *And* I organize all her healing requests. Working without a Healer’s Assistant isn’t an option for her. Of course, this means I’ll have to move out.” A traitorous tear slides down my right cheek. Jac glows Turquoise. Sympathy.

He uses his napkin to dry my cheek and gives me a hesitant smile. “We’ll figure it out. I know of several mated Healer’s Assistants. I’m sure we can find someone to replace you without kicking you out of your own home.”

I take a breath and continue. “Sybilla also noted Seer traits. She said everything flashed before her so fast, it was hard to be sure. She encouraged me to carry a journal and jot down any odd or seemingly irrelevant thoughts that pop into my head. It’s an effective way to confirm Seer Majik. I also have generalized Majik. She said I’ll likely have a talent with healing remedies, grooming concoctions, and spellcasting.”

“Grooming concoctions! I need a tonic to make my hair lay flat and not try to fly off my head in the dry heat.” That’s Jac. He latches onto the most insignificant Majik.

I snap my fingers in front of his face. “Jac! Focus! With all that’s happening, I’m not wasting my time on a fly-away hair tonic for a pretty boy soldier.”

“Hey!”

“The last thing she told me is that I am the Peacemaker.” I suddenly take an interest in my half-eaten cake. I’ve never heard that term, and I don’t know anyone who has. I couldn’t bear it if I saw amusement pulse around his body.

“Peacemaker? I’ve never heard of such. What kind of Majik is it? What abilities come with it?”

“Sybilla told me she’s known of only one other Peacemaker who lived over four centuries ago. His name was Fynn. Fynn lived through the erection of The Poral Wall. She said he was part of the negotiations with Thornwood Kingdom before and after the wall went up. His job as a Peacemaker was to bring peace between both realms. Fynn’s mistake was he tried to unify both realms to live one way of life. Thornwood has only ever lived under the rule of a monarch and that wasn’t changing anytime soon. Lyraxia would never choose to fall under the rule of a monarch. It’s why we went to war.”

“Fynn instilled equality for all Lyraxian citizens and stabilized our leadership by forming

a council in each territory which included representatives of that territory,” I continue. “As you know, the representatives consist of one Millinian, two Centurians, and two non-Majiks. He also formed the Lyraxian Convocation as the supreme leader of our realm.”

“Does she expect you to unite the realms? That’s a lot of pressure. I can’t begin to imagine what it will take to bring peace between us.”

“Yes, it’s a lot of pressure!” I close my eyes already embarrassed over my outburst. “Sorry, Jac. All she told me was not to make Fynn’s mistake by trying to bring down their monarchy. Though how I’m supposed to bring peace between the two realms is beyond me. I’m also capable of destroying The Portal Wall.”

“What? How is that even possible? I’ve searched the Central Archives and read everything written about The Portal Wall before and after it went up. Nothing in those books explained how the wall came into existence. If we don’t know how it went up, how will you destroy it?” My thoughts exactly.

“I have no clue. I do know I have two paths in front of me and the fate of both realms hangs on which path I choose.”

“Let me guess. She didn’t tell you anything about those paths. I swear. Seers are so high and mighty with their vague prognostications and their habit of hoarding information. Promise me if you develop Seer Majik, you won’t withhold valuable information about me.”

“I can’t promise that Jac. Knowing too much about your future could alter your course and have a ripple effect on the lifecycles of those around you.” I understand his frustration. I feel it myself. But I also understand the necessity of withholding information about future events.

Jac shoves the last cinnamon cake into his mouth and washes it down with the remaining half of his Fizzie. He gestures at my unfinished cake, a question in his eyes. I shake my head

which he takes as permission to snatch the cake off my plate. After consuming my half-eaten cake, he wipes his mouth and hands on the napkin, then stands and gathers the plates, platter, napkins, and empty Fizzie bottles. I watch him walk through the kitchen door next to the nook and head to the washbasin. Domesticated. That's another thing I like about Jac.

“Domesticated! What am I, a wild animal?”

Gods save me. “You heard that?”

“I heard you say I'm domesticated and you liked that about me.”

“I didn't say it out loud.” I wasn't projecting thoughts to Jac. I was feeling a strong emotion, Strawberry. Heartwarming.

Jac whirls around and pins me with a thoughtful look. “I heard that like you spoke it out loud. It was your voice I heard. The first time, it was only words in my mind. Voiceless.” He crosses the kitchen to stand in front of my stool. “Think it again.” I do. “I didn't hear anything.” I shrug my shoulders. “Were you feeling a strong emotion when you thought it last time?”

“Yes.” No way am I naming that emotion out loud.

“Say it in your mind and conjure the same emotion you felt the first time you thought it.”

Jac stares into my eyes while I feel my heart warm and think:

Domesticated. That's another thing I like about Jac.

Jac's eyes widen and search mine as if they hold the keys to destroying The Portal Wall.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Your eyes, Vesna.”

“Yeah. I've got two of them just like you. Phenomenal.”

“No, I mean your eyes changed.”

“Changed how?”

“First, they were a swirl of chocolate and violet. Then they settled on a vibrant shade of violet before returning to amethyst.” Well, that’s new. “What were you feeling?”

Now it’s my turn to blush. I look down, but Jac lifts my chin and locks eyes with me. “I felt warm and safe.”

“There! It happened again. Your eyes did the same thing. Do you think your eye color will change along with your emotions?”

“No. The emotion I felt was the color of a strawberry. Whew! I was worried for a second. The last thing I need is for anyone to see my emotion color.”

“Ditto! Except, I’ve got no choice. You’ve always felt my emotions, now you see them beaming around my body *and* now you know what I’m thinking.”

“Sorry about that Jac. Truly. I promise to be careful around my two best friends but be patient with me. I need time to strengthen my shields.”

“I think you’d be more comfortable if I stood at your side during The Portal trades. We’ve known each other a long time, plus I’d hate it if you had a strong emotion and projected your thoughts into another crew member’s mind. I agree with Sybilla. Only share your abilities with those that need to know. Live your lifecycle like someone’s watching you.”

“I’d feel more comfortable working with you. Do you think Percival will pair us together?”

“I always drive a bandwagon. However, I think we can convince Percival to switch re-assign my position if he knows about your Empathic and Telepathic abilities. Tell him how you practiced projecting thoughts to me. Let him believe you can do it because we’re so close. We don’t know if you can project thoughts to others and we won’t know for sure until you try. But if he believes pairing us together will give Lyraxia an advantage over Thornwood, he’ll do it.”