

The Star

Rays from the moon shone past the crystal dome overhead, glinting off the pristine, white marble of the dais. Surina shifted in her chair to lift her wrist to the moonlight, grimacing when the corset of her hazy-blue chiffon gown pinched at her waist. She ignored the discomfort, completely enraptured by the way her new diamond bracelet caught the light, and grinning like a gods-damn fool when it reflected the silvery glow at her like water droplets beneath the stars.

A soft, whimsical number started up in the great hall of the throne room. The harmony of notes and chords reminded Surina of a dream she'd once had, where she was soaring on the back of a seraphim. Every dip and glide of that beautiful creature sent her heart aflutter. Only a fae with centuries of life could learn to play this divine, bringing someone to another place in their mind.

Her stare drifted over to the Moon Throne on her right—vacant, as it had been for almost an hour now. For some reason, Surina thought this Solstice would be different. Probably because it was the first time Ezra had promised her a dance. So here she was, patiently awaiting the king's return, every minute passing like a whittling knife, carving away at her pride.

Ezra is your friend, she reminded herself for the millionth time tonight. *He'll be back. He promised.*

Nightwoods don't have friends, Suri. They have pawns.

Blaine's words from earlier that morning charged right to the forefront of her thoughts, and as much as Surina tried to tell herself that Ezra was different, she couldn't help but wonder... More and more frequently, Ezra had been canceling their weekly dinners, insisting he had too much to catch up on in court. What if he'd simply realized there was nothing of value to gain through Surina and he was tired of playing pretend? And maybe it was her fault for expecting a *king* to care about some silly dance on a night like tonight. Ezra didn't owe her a dance—he didn't owe her shit. She should just be grateful he'd cared enough two years ago, when he'd stopped that fire beast from ending her.

Rising warmth in her palm had her head perking up from where it rested on the back of the chair. Slowly, she turned her hand over to gaze upon the scar there. An uncontrollable tightness began in her chest, and she could hear her pulse drumming in her ears.

Her hand responded to the disquieting sensation by curling into a fist, which snuffed out the memories of that dragon with surprising efficiency—not quick enough, though, as the voices in her head seemed to sense her distress, brief as it was.

The chilling rake of invisible claws raised the hairs along her neck and back before the first one spoke, its voiceless words a dark caress in her mind.

What do you fear, my moonflower?

“Getting five minutes alone,” she muttered under her breath.

You are never alone, the other one whispered into her mind, its kind and tender winds sweeping over a bare shoulder.

A tickle lingered where the winds had grazed, so she scratched the itch away. “I was being sarcastic. And that’s not exactly a reassurance.”

“Did you say something?” A third voice chimed in, only this one wasn’t in her thoughts.

Surina glanced over her shoulder at Galen, who was leaning against her brother’s throne, arms folded across the leather and steel of his knightly uniform. He looked like she felt—hopelessly forgotten.

“Nope,” she lied, leaning forward to collect her skirts before rising from the chair. “I’m tired. I think I’ll head back for the night.”

“The party just started,” Galen countered wearily, the yawn that followed his objection not really aiding in his case.

Surina swiveled to survey the throne room.

Save for the orchestra, there were only about a dozen or so fae who remained once the formal portion of the ball came to an end. Many of those who stayed after the Awakening only did so because they owed allegiance to the Court of the Sun, plus Moira, who was engaged in conversation with the two priestesses overseeing the gifts bestowed on the newly changed fae. The rest of tonight’s immortal onlookers had gone into the city, as the moon permitted. With the Solstice being the longest night of the year, there

was much to celebrate. Which was exactly what Surina planned to do, once Galen was dismissed from his guard duties for the evening.

“Yes, truly a night to remember,” Surina mumbled, wondering if Blaine managed to nab any bottles of wine from the kitchen.

“Alright, smart ass.” Galen pushed up from the side of the marble throne, pausing where the steps began. “I’ll walk you back.”

Taking the hand he offered her, they descended the steps together, nearly making it to the doors when a male’s voice halted them.

“Off to bed already, old man?”

The male who chided Galen, with a wry smile crinkling the skin around his glassy blue eyes, was Galen’s cousin, Lord Kian Castmont.

Upon approaching the two of them, Kian offered Surina a gallant bow, then slapped a hand against Galen’s back in greeting. “Nadia just bet everything she owned on your ass.”

Galen’s head canted in question. “That I’d be in bed before midnight?” A subtle chagrin bloomed a soft red in his cheeks—something that always seemed to happen when Nadia was around.

Kian’s brows lifted with muddled amusement. “She said I wouldn’t last two minutes in the ring with you. I said I only need thirty seconds.”

A vicious gleam of a challenge entered Galen’s features, and he beat the side of a closed fist against Kian’s chest. “Want to bet your fancy title on that?”

Swatting away his cousin’s hand, Kian barked a laugh full of pure, male pride. “Nadia’s waiting at the garrison,” the lord said, nodding towards the door he reached for. “Let’s see if you’ve still got it after sitting on your ass all these years, cousin.”

Is that how others saw Galen? Not as a fearsome warrior or a direct descendant of the Castmont line, but as some pampered knight, sitting in a glittering palace.

“I can’t wait to make you eat those words, *cousin*.” Galen smiled, victory already shining through his disposition as he straightened his spine, seeming to ensure the inch or two he had on Kian was that much more noticeable. “I’ll take Suri to her room and head over.”

“A hundred guards are patrolling the palace tonight,” Surina piped in for the first

time—probably a little *too* excitedly. If she got Galen to leave now, though, she wouldn't have to sneak back out to get to Blaine's room. Lying straight through her fucking teeth, she said, "I'm just going to bed anyway."

Galen's eyes narrowed on her, deliberately scanning the points of her ears. Like Cyril, Surina's ears tended to turn a bright shade of pink when she was lying—or pissed off.

"Promise me no detours," Galen asked of her.

Surina rolled her eyes, ignoring Kian's muffled snicker as she hissed her reply. "I promise."

Appearing far too pleased with himself in having riled her so quickly, Galen shoved Surina into a bear hug that crushed all the air from her lungs. Despite her initial squirms and breathless complaints, he held firm. "Happy Birthday, Suri," he murmured into the top of her head.

The muscles in her neck and shoulders eased, and for a moment, the guilt of her lies sat at the tip of her tongue. That is, until Galen pulled from the embrace and flicked the tip of her ear.

"Don't stay up too late reading those perverted books. You have training in the morning."

"They're not perverted, you're just a—" Surina huffed, her skin now like molten lava as a few heads turned in their direction. Thanks to Galen, they probably thought their princess was some disgusting deviant. "I hope Kian kicks your ass," she snapped at her guard.

"I plan on it," Kian chimed in, still waiting for his cousin by the door.

"Yeah, yeah." Galen waved both of them off, shouldering past his cousin as he called back to Surina. "See you in the morning, Suri. Bright and early."

After a chorus of farewells from the rest of her family, and Moira reminding her not to be late for training tomorrow, Surina slipped into the deafeningly silent halls of the west wing. The Solstice was probably the only time when sound, music, and laughter from the east wing surpassed that of the western side of the keep. She wondered if that's where Ezra was, celebrating the longest night of the year with his court—with his mistress.

Surina peered at the diamond bracelet on her wrist, the anticipation of seeing Blaine now completely overshadowed by the gods-awful end to an almost perfect birthday.

Because her birthday fell on the Solstice, she had always been content with doing gifts and birthday celebrations early in the morning, leaving the evening open for holiday festivities. Galen's gift to her this year had been a needle-like dagger that he'd purchased from a merchant in Stonefarrow. It was crafted to be hidden in plain view, placed in a girl's hair like a decorative pin. Cyril immediately confiscated it, of course, as he did with the majority of Galen's gifts to her. From Leirie, Surina received a potted morning glory, which her friend had transported all the way from her family gardens in Cillica. The color was a misty blue, and in the center was a brighter, golden hue. It was like dawn, eagerly bursting through the pale morning sky. And from Cyril and Dahlia, she'd received a stunning pair of satin slippers to wear with her new dress for the Solstice Ball. Perfect for dancing, Surina had thought upon seeing them.

Despite not wanting to admit it, the gifts she'd gotten from her friends and family couldn't hold a candle to Ezra's—a book from the Britonian Empire, translated into their language.

The morning sat fresh in her mind, too, like she was reliving it as she meandered through the halls.

“Is it a love story?” she'd asked upon receiving the book, excitement bubbling up in her voice as she ran a hand over the incredibly detailed artwork on the cover. It looked brand new, though Ezra had shrugged off her questions regarding its origins.

“Not everything has to have a love story,” Ezra had contested, thumping the back of its hard surface as she tried to skim the prologue.

Setting the book down on the table, she'd frowned at him. “Everything worth reading has a love story.”

He'd rolled his eyes at that, the corner of his mouth tilting up into a knowing grin. “Fine, it's a love story. Nothing like the filth you read these days, though.”

Her mouth fell right open at the accusation. “I do not read filth! It's intimate and sweet!”

The memory of his rich laughter had lingered in her smiles all morning, and it

wasn't until Ezra had left that Surina found her second gift from him—a dainty, diamond bracelet, which bookmarked a chapter that was titled, *The Star and the Oak*. Surina lifted that bracelet into view.

No longer under the starlight, and instead catching the warm light of the chandeliers, the bracelet was far less mystical, but it still had a frail charm to it. Like the diamonds could be crushed between her fingers with ease.

Surina's steps slowed as she neared the entry to the kitchen, where she knew her leftover birthday cake would be sitting all alone in the root cellar. Telling herself that it was because she hadn't eaten in hours, and not because she was intent on a pity party, Surina diverted from her original path to go to the kitchen instead. Blaine could wait a few more minutes. She hadn't promised to meet him tonight anyway, only that she'd try.

Upon entering the kitchen, the enchanted sconces that ran along the walls were still lit. As she glanced around, though, there was no one to be seen. Malachai must have left in a hurry to celebrate the Solstice with his son.

A loud pop from the embers in the hearth had her heart skipping a beat and her magic tethering to the water in the air. Surina huffed a laugh, pressing a hand to her forehead to soothe the rising fever of burning-hot fear. "My gods. You seriously need cake," she said to herself, but the second she thought this night couldn't possibly get any worse, she opened the heavy metal door to the connecting root cellar.

In the center of the space, lying on the floor, was a supine male body resting at the base of the shelved meats and produce.

By the Mother, he definitely wasn't resting, and that wasn't just *any* body...

Surina charged into the cellar, the door groaning until it slammed shut behind her. The cold stung her palms as she threw herself onto her hands and knees. "Ezra?" Brushing a hand down the cool contours of his face, he didn't feel any colder than usual. Not like what she'd imagine the cold of death would feel like. And by what she could tell from a quick scan of his body, there weren't any signs of injury. To be really sure, though, Surina pressed a palm to his chest, leaning forward to bring her ear to his nose.

"Please don't let him be dead," she prayed to Eira, the Divine of Life.

An answer to her prayers returned in the form of a strong heartbeat and an irregular whisper of breath, which tickled her ear. It was faint, but still a breath,

nonetheless.

Surina whipped backwards, intently searching his features. “Ezra, are you...” There was no pain to be found. Only his blue-green eyes, shimmering with a sinister humor. She had been right to think his breathing was irregular, because the fucking snake was *laughing*.

“It’s comforting to know that at least one person would miss me in death.” Ezra patted her hand—the one that had been searching for his heartbeat.

She tore that hand away, her skin already turning pink as a flush began to consume her entire body. “You’re a jackass.”

This time his laughter was brighter, full of honest delight.

Shaking her head and trying to convince herself not to freeze him to the floor, Surina gritted her teeth together. “How did you even know I would come in here?”

He at least had the decency to stop laughing before answering, though he didn’t bother sitting up. His head rolled against the ground to face her completely. “I didn’t. I was hiding in here and heard you mention cake, so I thought I’d give you a little scare. The cake is behind you, by the way. On that shelf.”

How typical of a fae to use their hearing for evil...

“Hiding from what?” The question came out pretty snappy, which she thought was warranted, considering he’d been in the fucking root cellar the entire time she was waiting for him to come back.

“Giselle,” Ezra said plainly, raking his fingers through his striking midnight hair in one smooth sweep.

“You locked yourself in a cellar to hide from Lady Giselle? Why?”

A snide, short laugh alluded to his next words. “Have you met her?”

That was apparently all the explanation he thought Surina should need, because he didn’t elaborate any further.

Ezra patted the space beside him, his lips parting into a full flash of ivory canines. “Care to join me?”

Her blood might have warmed under a smile like that, if *he* hadn’t been the source of her shitty night. She sighed, and instead of sitting beside him—or *leaving*, like she should have done—she chose to plop down where she was, shivering when the frigid

floors bled through the fabric of her gown. “Trouble in paradise?”

The question was meant to be a crude joke, but his smile vanished entirely. “The only paradise I seem to find anymore is in solitude.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No, Surina. Yours is the only company I can tolerate.”

Tolerate? What a fucking joy she must be. “You flatter me, Your Majesty,” she grumbled, stretching for the glass dome that housed her tiered, chocolate cake. Once the cake was seated in her lap, she peered around the cellar in search of any utensil that could be used for eating.

Rising from his recline and propping himself on an arm, Ezra nabbed a small fork from the nearest cheese board. “I didn’t mean it like that. I’m happy you’re here. Truly.” He tested a smile, offering her the utensil in what looked to be an apology.

Plucking the silverware from his hand, she carved through the chilled outer layer of icing. The cake wasn’t as tasty as she’d hoped, but maybe that was because the king was there, watching her every move like it was the first time he’d seen someone eat.

“What?” Surina said with a full mouth.

“I’m just curious what brought you in here.”

“I wanted chocolate.” He didn’t need to know *why* she felt the need to cure her night with dessert.

Ezra’s voice quieted, and there was an awe as he spoke. “You know, fate can take you to unlikely places. Even when you don’t realize it.”

“So it’s fate’s fault that I wanted chocolate? I thought I was just stress eating.”

His light laughter made that dim, frigid space feel like a warm, wide-open field in the middle of spring. “I know you’re pissed at me, Surina. You think I forgot about our dance.”

I waited for you in the throne room like a fucking idiot, she nearly blurted, so she shoveled down another bite, giving herself some time to formulate a response—one that didn’t sound as pitiful. “I’m pretty sure you disappearing into a root cellar for over an hour counts as forgetting.”

“And if I say that I’ve thought of nothing else all day?”

“Could have fooled me.” Gods, was this really worth getting flustered over? What

did it matter if he forgot? He had an entire court to worry about—an entire *kingdom*.

Faster than her vision could follow, Ezra rose from the floor and lowered into a crouch beside her, so close that she had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes. “Nineteen now and you’re still as stubborn as ever.”

Surina shivered through the drifting chill of fog that poured from Ezra’s flesh, and the cool smell of mint and pine that followed. “You’d think Cyril would have just given up already and shipped me off to be a priestess.”

He cracked a smile. “You’d make a terrible priestess.”

“Because of my foul mouth?”

At that moment, his stare dropped to her mouth, but it didn’t linger there for long. It slowly slid over to her shoulder, where golden waves cascaded down. “Because you would have to cut your hair.”

Breath caught in her throat when the shocking cold of his hand grazed her bare flesh as he lifted a tendril.

His fingers glided through the glossy strands. “That would be a fucking tragedy,” Ezra whispered, nearing the end of the golden wave.

A snarky reply found its way to her lips—something that instinctively happened when she didn’t know what else to say or do—but she managed to keep it to herself. Instead, her mind miraculously scrounged together enough sense to counter with, “Both of the priestesses had hair tonight.”

Upon reaching the tips of her hair, he let go. “The initiates don’t. They cut it as part of some renewal ceremony, *and* as punishment for any priestess who acts outside of their codex.” Ezra’s features shifted into something far more spirited than before. “You wouldn’t last a day without breaking one of their laws.”

“On the bright side, I wouldn’t have to spend so much time doing my hair in the mornings.”

The corner of his mouth twitched, and he slipped the cake from her lap, standing up to place it on a small table.

“I was still eating that!”

Rather than return the cake, he extended an upturned palm to her. “Come on. I promised you a dance.”

Searching for any form of regret for that promise in his eyes, her cheeks warmed when she deduced there wasn't any. Still, Surina didn't immediately take his hand. "Won't Lady Giselle find you if you leave?"

"She's probably in the city by now." An icy haze permeated his disheveled, formal suit to gather around her skirts on the floor. He flexed his hand, the movement an obvious way to goad her into taking it. "It's your birthday, Surina. Live a little."

The last time she tried to *live a little*, she'd ended up in the apothecary for over a week with a sun burned into her flesh and ceaseless nightmares. Then again, if Ezra had been there at the start, perhaps none of it would have happened in the first place. Or perhaps they would have burned alongside one another. When faced with Ezra, though, the beast chose to flee rather than fight. And if Ezra could take on a dragon king and survive, some rogue dragon wouldn't have stood a chance.

His smile was electric as her hand slipped into his, and he lifted her from the floor. Reaching around her for the door handle, his chest pressed into her shoulder when the heavy metal door to the cellar groaned open, and her heart did something it never had with Ezra.

Ezra is your friend, she reminded herself for the last time tonight—for an entirely different reason than before.

Without saying anything else, they left for the throne room that was doubling as the ballroom for the evening.

In Surina's absence, fae from Ezra's court had begun to gather around the foyer to the throne room, seeming at a loss for words when they saw their king leaving the west wing. Her steps slowed, but the strong arm that pressed into her back, ushering her towards the small crowd, quelled those nerves.

"You have nothing to be afraid of with me," he whispered to Surina, so soft that the others likely didn't hear—and she could have sworn that was his thumb brushing her spine...

For her own sanity, Surina told herself that it was just her own hair, tickling the space of her back that the dress didn't cover. "I'm not afraid," she contested, albeit, a little weakly.

The doors parted for them, and a flash of a smile came and went from Ezra's face.

Fae now littered the entire ballroom, and based on their darkened glares, they weren't very pleased to see that their mortal princess had returned—to include Cyril.

Ezra's frigid breath tickled her ear. "Ignore him. He's forgotten how to have any fun."

But Surina couldn't ignore him, or any of the others, for that matter. "I should leave. They don't want a mortal here, and I don't blame them."

A snappy movement at her wrist threw her into a pirouette of frosted air. The blur of the room quickly settled into blue-green irises. "*I want you here. To hell with the others.*"

Never had she been this close to Ezra, and only the gravity of his stare kept her from fleeing.

Ezra motioned to the orchestra behind him without looking away. In seconds, the low, somber tune the orchestra was playing rose into a familiar melody. The king pressed his palm into her back. Like falling snow, his touch was chilling—gentle. "Do you know this dance?"

Surina nodded, her lips unable to form a single word. Thankfully, she had dancing lessons years ago to prepare for the Court of the Sun hosting a number of human nobles. Even so, Surina could tell right away that she was outmatched. The longer they swayed and spun, though, the more the nerves in her blood surrendered to the refined motions of the king. Their first dance came to an end, only for the orchestra to seamlessly transition into the next. They found one another's tempo fairly quickly, and while she didn't come close to Ezra's level of grace, he didn't seem to care. Or if he did, she was too lost in the feel of him to notice. *Divines*, the way he blended into the evening ballroom made it feel like she was dancing with some dark and mysterious shadow—as if she was dancing with the night itself. A cold, winter night...

Suddenly, Surina plummeted, and her leg flew up to tuck around the king in an attempt to save herself from falling. She realized a little too late that the strong arms securing her had no intention of dropping her, as Ezra was only doing what the dance required of him—dipping her backwards for the finale.

Soft, breathy laughter raised the hairs on her arms and neck. "The leg is a nice touch," Ezra purred, a rogue grin spreading his lips wide.

Fierce heat shot through her veins, washing her entire body in a molten flush. Surina cleared her throat, untangling her leg from around the king. “Apologies. I’m a little out of practice.”

“Could have fooled me,” he murmured, using her exact words from earlier, when she’d basically called him a liar. Those damned hands of his took their sweet time skimming up her back and through the thin veil of sweat that coated it before standing Surina upright. The moonlit pool they’d halted within revealed a starlit masterpiece of a male. Even his lips looked to be sculpted from marble...

This is a mistake, she told herself. A disastrous, *ruinous* mistake. She should have just freed Ezra from his promise when she’d found him in the root cellar. Her heart sank—she’d crossed a line in asking the king to dance with her. The request had been innocent at the time, but the way her blood warmed now made it impossible to deny the shift in the air. Could he sense it too?

Surina’s gaze diverted to the floor, and she abruptly rendered a curtsy to the king. “Thank you for the dance, Your Majesty. If you’ll excuse me.” Then, she turned on her heels and left—*fled*, was more like it. Her room should have been the next destination, and it would have been, had the walls of the west wing not started to close in on her like a marble tomb. Even the corset surrounding her ribcage began to constrict.

Air—you need air.

Barreling through the nearest set of doors, Surina threw herself into the night. Careful not to leave the blessing of light that the windows offered, she clung to the marble balustrades of the veranda. The mound of snow that had collected there dusted her gown. A spiteful winter breeze battered against her face. Before long, the sheen of sweat on her skin froze over, leaving a harsh sting. The pain was welcomed and kept her mind somewhat occupied.

“I’ll admit,” a low, silken voice called from behind her, “I’m not the *best* dancer, but I can’t say that my dancing has ever sent a girl running before.”

There was no point in turning around. She already knew who followed her out. “I’m sorry. I needed some air.”

Ezra stalked forward, his steps nearly silent as he came to stand beside her.

In her periphery, she saw his head swivel towards her, but she was too afraid to

face him—afraid of what her heart might give away.

Through Ezra's magic, the vicious winds settled into a gentle whisk of air. "You were having fun. What changed?"

To distract herself from the intoxicating smell of him, Surina etched swirls into the powdered snow on the balustrade with her index finger. "There were too many people watching. I guess I just got nervous."

"Stage fright?" An unpleasantly snide laugh blew through his nostrils. "Do you expect me to believe that?"

Her jaw clenched. "Why would I lie?"

The halted winds at his command wavered. "I can only assume it's to preserve my feelings, for some reason. Did I overstep in there?"

Desperate, Surina scoured for anything else that could be credited to her hasty egress, but nothing came to mind—apart from the truth. "No, you didn't overstep. You never have."

"Then why won't you look at me?"

Fuck.

Left with no other choice, Surina faced him, raising her head high to give the illusion of confidence. It was an effort to keep her voice steady. "Happy?"

Expecting some snarky reply, she was taken aback when all he did was quietly study her appearance. He didn't look all that upset, either, just tentative. She prayed he would say something—*anything*—to break this gods-damn silence.

Out of nowhere, he lifted his hand to her face.

Though she held firm initially, her lips parted to suck in a breath when his knuckles grazed her cheekbone.

"You said I've never overstepped." Starting a new, wintry path, Ezra dragged his fingers down the side of her throat until he got to her pulse. "Will you stop me if I do?"

Was this a test? An experiment to see if Surina had gotten over her fear of fae after nearly dying to one year ago? Whatever his rationale, there wasn't another person in this world that she trusted more with her life. "I'm not afraid of you, Ezra."

Those wary eyes of his softened when she said his name. "My life would be so much easier if you were."

“You want me to fear you?” Having fallen into the tenderness of his voice, she was startled when he gripped onto the hair at the base of her skull. The tautness wasn’t enough to hurt, but it did force her to lift her chin.

Ezra leaned in, slowly tilting his head so that the slant of his lips lined up with hers. “I want you to push me away, Surina. Because I can’t stop myself from wanting you.”

By the Mother, this wasn’t about her *blood*. This was about what she’d felt earlier—what *he* must have felt too. But this was wrong, wasn’t it? To want him? For him to want her? It had to be, and yet, Surina couldn’t think of a good reason why. Ezra may be her king, but he was so much more than that. For years, he’d been her friend, her mentor—even her *savior*. No male has ever been able to light the kindling in her blood the way Ezra was right now, and he wanted her to stop him? She couldn’t let go of this feeling—she wouldn’t.

Surina seized one of his lapels, which prompted a dangerous spark within his eyes. That look made her heart go fucking *wild*. He appeared as the Ezra she knew, but different—more nefarious.

The corner of his mouth bent into an unholy, anticipative grin, mere inches from her lips.

A whip of wind rushed past before either of them could pounce. At first, Surina thought it was because Ezra lost control of his magic, but then a deep, rumbling command snapped her out of the hazy fervor.

“*Surina.*”

Surina drew back from their near-kiss, and at the door to the west wing stood a perfect image of her late father, apart from the golden hair. It was strange that such kind, green eyes could take on the form of something utterly petrifying. “Cyril.”

“Return to your room. Now.”

Clearly, Cyril knew exactly what he’d stumbled upon, so there would be no evading the truth. Instead, she tried to reason with him—not her cleverest idea. “It’s the Solstice. You said I could stay—”

“Go to your room,” Cyril boomed, his voice carried by a harsh wind. “I will not repeat myself again.”

A rage not unlike her brother's roiled inside her, festering as she conjured little ice crystals at her feet. Even the ground beneath her slippered feet grumbled alongside her flaring temper.

"Surina," Ezra whispered hoarsely, unknowingly stopping her magic from tethering to more elements and growing into something far worse. "Do as he says."

It was unlike Ezra to bend to the whim of others, so when she turned to him, hoping to find some reasoning behind his quick mood shift, she only found what she believed to be regret. Was it regret for almost kissing her, or regret for not getting the chance to? By the way he avoided eye contact with her, she guessed the former.

"Fine." Surina was unapologetic in her reply. She could tell Cyril expected her to put up more of a fight than that, and she would have, if not for the plan she was formulating in her head—Surina would sneak out of her room to demand an explanation from Ezra.

She wanted the truth of what he felt, and she would get it from his own lips.