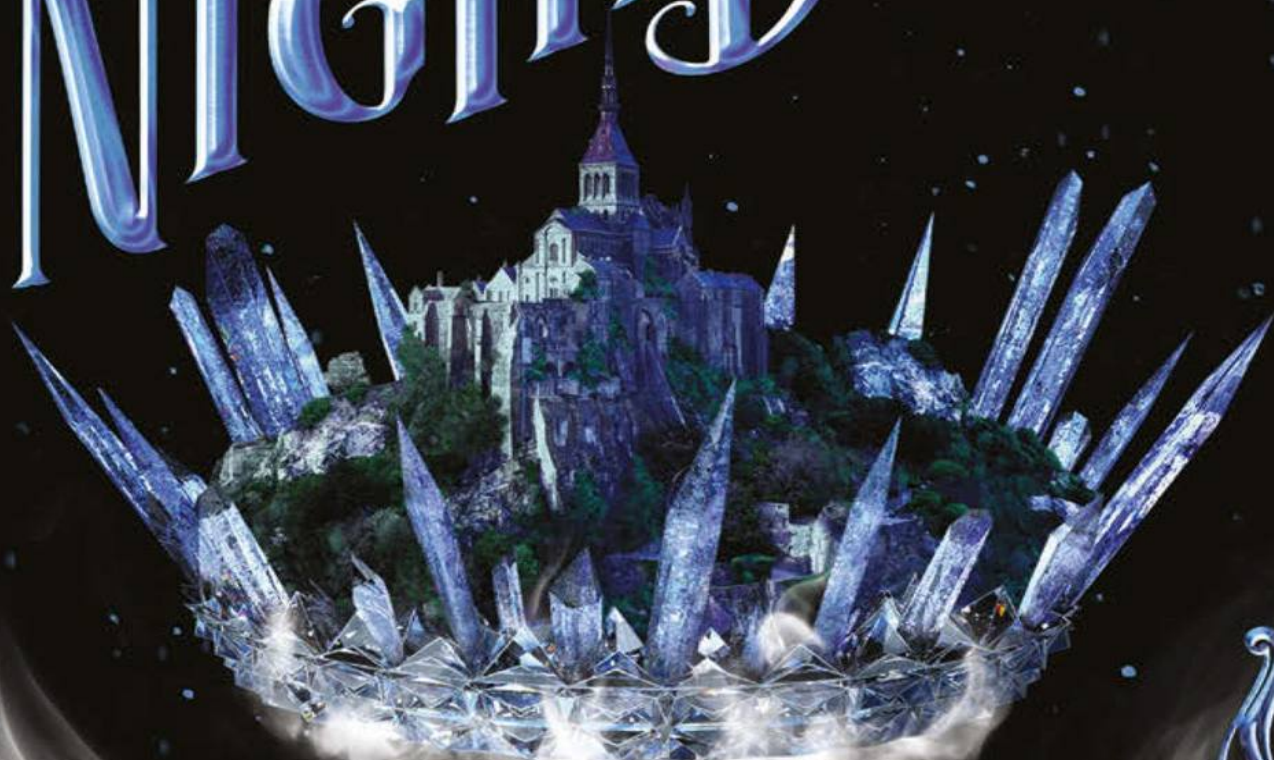


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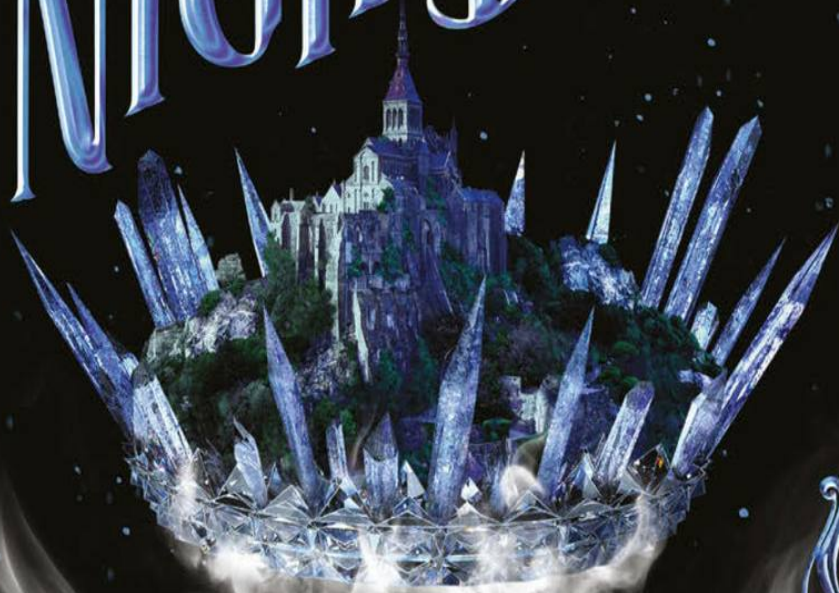
NIGHTBANE



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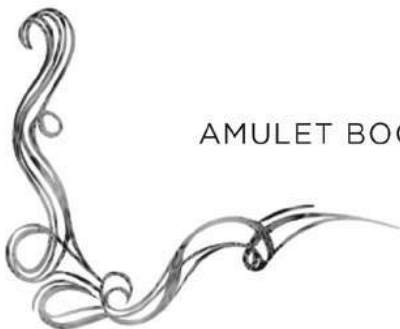
NIGHTBANE

ALEX ASTER

LIGHTLARK #2



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*For Ron—
you make the real world better than a fictional one*

My bane and antidote, are both before me.

—J. Addison, *Cato: A Tragedy*, 1713

VAULT

Isla Crown tasted death on the back of her tongue.

Moments before, she had unlocked the hidden vault in the Place of Mirrors. Inside, power churned, whispering in a language she didn't understand, calling to something deep in her marrow. It felt urgent, obvious, like the answer to a question she had somehow forgotten.

The rest of the abandoned palace was falling apart, but this door had remained closed throughout the curses. Her ancestors had fought to keep it a secret. Her crown was the only key and Isla thought, as she pulled the door open with a scream of a creak, that they must have hidden it away so thoroughly for a reason.

Her heart raced as she peered inside. But before she could get a look at anything good, a force battled through the gap, struck her in the chest, and sent her careening across the room.

The door slammed closed.

For a moment, there was silence. Peace, almost, which had become the most coveted and rarest of luxuries. It was all she dared wish for nowadays. Peace from the pain that pulsed through her chest, where an arrow had split her heart into two. Peace from the thoughts that ravaged her brain like insects feasting on decay. So much had been lost and gained in the last few weeks, and not in equal measure.

For that one second, though, she was finally able to empty her head.

Until it cracked against the stone floor, and her peace was replaced by a vision of carnage.

Bodies. Bloodied. Charred. She couldn't see what realms they were from; she could see only their skin and bones. Darkness spilled around the corpses like knocked-over pots of ink, but it did not settle, or puddle, or disappear.

No. This darkness devoured.

It finished off the rest of the bodies, then turned its attention to her. The tendrils climbed, cold and damp as lifeless limbs. Before she could move, the shadows parted her lips and forced her to drink them. She gasped for air, but all she tasted was death.

Everything went black, like the stars and the moon and the sun were

just candles that had been blown out, one by one.

Then, the darkness spoke.

“*Isla.*” It had his voice. *Grim’s* voice. “*Come back to me. Come back*
—”

A blink, and she was back in the Place of Mirrors, all refracted sunlight and skeletal branches scraping against the remaining glass, reaching for her like hands.

And Oro. He was there in an instant, cradling her in his arms. He was not one for dramatic reactions, which only made his expression of horror more concerning.

Isla reached up and found blood running from her nose, her ears, her eyes, down her cheeks. She looked at the blood on her fingers, and all she could think about was what she had seen.

What was that? A vision?

A warning of what Grim would do if she didn’t return to him?

She didn’t know, but one thing was clear: as soon as she had opened that door, something had slammed it closed again. Something was in that room.

And it didn’t want Isla to find it.

TRUTHS AND LIES

“It rejected me,” Isla said. It didn’t make sense. The power called to her; she could feel it. So why had the door slammed closed again?

The king’s golden crown gleamed as he tilted his head back, studying her. He was standing as far from her place on the bed as the room allowed.

It didn’t matter. Even from feet away, she could sense the thread that tied them together. Something like love.

Something like power.

Oro finally spoke. “You’re not ready. I don’t think your crown is the only key. If it wasn’t meant to be easily opened, the vault’s door could be charmed to admit only a Wildling ruler.”

“I *am* a—”

“One who has mastered their abilities.”

Oh.

Isla laughed. She couldn’t help it. Of course the island would continue to come up with ways to make her feel inadequate. At this point, it was like a game. “If that’s true, then I guess it will remain closed,” she said, staring intently at a spot on the wall. The only Wildling masters still alive were her guardians—and if she ever set eyes on them again, she would kill them for murdering her parents. And for all the lies they had fed her.

Silence came to a boil and spilled over. She could almost *feel* Oro’s concern in the air, a heat tinged in worry. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Of all the things she had been through, being swept across the room by a snobbish door was far from the worst.

She hated his concern, and she hated herself for the anger that had hardened inside her like a blade, that struck out at even something as innocent as worry. Lately, though, she couldn’t seem to control any of her emotions. Sometimes she woke up and didn’t have the energy to even get out of bed. Other times, she was so angry, she portaled to Wild Isle just to have a place to scream.

“I will teach you,” he said.

“You’re not a Wildling master.”

“No,” he admitted. “But I have mastered four realms’ powers. The

abilities are different, but the execution is similar.” His voice was gentle, gentler than she deserved. “It was how I was able to use *your* power.”

It was how he was able to save her. She would have been boiled alive by the core of the island if Oro hadn’t used the bond between them to claim her powers in the Place of Mirrors. That had been the moment her feelings for him were revealed. The fact that he could access her abilities meant she loved him.

Though she didn’t even know what that—love—was.

She had loved her guardians.

She had loved Celeste.

She had, at some point, loved *Grim*.

The vision. Death and darkness and decay. Was it a threat? A glimpse of the future?

The weight around her neck felt even heavier now. The necklace Grim had gifted her during the Centennial had been impossible to remove, and yes, she had tried. It had a clasp, but so far it had refused to open. It seemed there was no real way to take it off. Only she could feel it. Oro didn’t even know it existed.

Isla wondered if Grim was like that necklace—insistent and refusing to let her go. Would he kill people just to have her?

“I have to tell you something.” She considered keeping it to herself. If it had involved only her, she might have. She had broken the curses. She deserved more time to recover. Her cuts and bruises from the Centennial had disappeared, but some wounds were invisible and took far longer to heal than broken skin and bones. “In the Place of Mirrors . . . there was a vision.”

He frowned. “What did you see?”

“Death,” she said. “He—” She found herself unwilling to speak his name aloud, as if that alone might summon him from the shadows, bring him to life in more than just her mind. “He was surrounded by darkness. There were dead bodies everywhere. The shadows were reaching at *me*—” She winced. “It looked like . . . war.”

It looked like the end of the world.

Sharper heat swept through the room, the only sign of Oro’s anger. His smooth face remained expressionless. “He won’t stop until he has you.”

Isla shook her head. “I chose *you* . . . He feels betrayed. He might not even care about me anymore.” Oro didn’t look convinced. She closed her eyes. “Even if he did, do you think he would start a war over me? Risk his own people?”

“I think that is exactly what he would do,” Oro said, his gaze faraway, as if lost in thought. “Isla. You need to start your training, and not just to get into the vault.”

Training. That sounded like far too much effort, she decided, for a person who had to bargain with herself just to leave her room every day. She didn’t use to be like this. Training had been hammered into her like gemstones into a blade’s hilt. It was part of her very essence.

Now, she was just tired, more mentally than physically. All she wanted was time to recover, and why did even thinking that make her feel like the most selfish person on Lightlark?

Luckily, she had an excuse other than her own unwillingness. “You know I can’t.” As king, Oro was the last remaining Origin who could wield each of the remaining Lightlark powers—Skyling, Starling, Moonling, and Sunling. It was supposed to be impossible for anyone other than his line to be born with more than one ability. According to Aurora—whom she had once thought to be her best friend, Celeste—her Wildling and Nightshade gifts were tangled together in a way that made them largely useless unless a Nightshade released them. “My powers—”

“I have a plan for that.”

Of course he did. Her teeth stubbornly locked together. “I don’t have time to train. I have to get back to the Wildlings.”

“They will need you to be at your utmost strength.”

Why was he so set on her training? And why, truly, was she so against it? “It’s a distraction,” she tried. “I can learn later. After they’re taken care of. After we’ve figured out the Nightshade threat, if my vision is even real.”

“You have the power of a Starling ruler now, Isla,” Oro said gently.

When Isla killed Aurora, she had used an ancient relic called the bondmaker to steal all the Starling’s power. The action served as a loophole to fulfill the part of the prophecy that stated a ruler had to die to break the curses. A ruler’s power functioned as the life force of their people. All Starlings would have died along with Aurora, if Isla hadn’t stolen that power.

Now, she was responsible for two realms, when she wasn’t even qualified to rule one.

“Your Wildling and Nightshade powers might have stayed dormant all this time,” he continued, “but this will not. The abilities are too great. If you don’t learn how to control them, they will control you.”

That seemed unlikely. In the last couple of days, she had casually tried

to use her Starling powers. To move a quill. To make a burst of energy off her balcony. Nothing. She would have doubted that the bondmaker had even worked if the Starlings weren't still alive.

"Isla," Oro said, and the tender way he said her name dulled the defensive edges of her anger and pain, just a little.

"Yes?"

He took a step, then another, until she was bathed in his warmth, even though he was still farther than she would have liked.

Oro studied her from the foot of her bed. "Say you'll train with me. And mean it."

"Fine," she said quickly, just because she knew it was what he wanted to hear. Just because nowadays, she would do anything to stop thoughts about the Centennial and what had happened. "I'll train with you. I mean it."

"Your excitement is overwhelming," he said flatly.

"I *am* excited," she said through her teeth.

His look sharpened. "You do realize I know you're lying?"

Of course he did. That was his flair, the extra power rulers often carried from distant bloodlines. She imagined fate laughing at the irony of their pairing: a liar loved by someone who could sense the truth.

Instead of glaring at Oro, she was happy to turn the attention back to him. Curiosity made for the best distraction. Wasn't that all life was, she reasoned, painful moments strung together by distractions? "What does it feel like?" she asked, sitting straighter on the bed.

The thin sleeve of her dress dipped down her shoulder. She watched him track its fall.

"What does what feel like?" he asked, eyes lingering on her newly bare shoulder.

Something thrummed in her chest. She hadn't often noticed Oro staring at her. Until the moment when Aurora confirmed the king loved her, she hadn't even thought he had *liked* her.

One of her bare legs ran the length of the bed, slowly, until her toe reached the floor. Her dress rode high up her thigh, and she could feel the heat of his eyes on her. She did the same with the other leg, until both feet were by the bedside.

He studied her, top to bottom, and suddenly the vault was forgotten. Her inadequacy—forgotten. The betrayals? Forgotten.

Part of Isla wondered if he was still just looking at her to see if she was okay, but no, no, it was far better to believe he was watching her for other

reasons.

“When someone lies to you. What does it feel like?” She drifted over to him, barefoot, her back slightly sore from her rough landing. Her head pounded in pain, the wound just recently healed by her Wildling elixir, but she ignored it.

He remained very still as she stopped before him.

“Does it hurt?” She tilted her head. “Does *anything* really hurt you?”

The look he gave her made it clear he wasn’t going to answer the second question, so she tried the first again. “Do the lies hurt?”

Oro was so tall, he had to crane his neck down to look her right in the eyes. He reached out and ran his thumb across the divots of her crown. “It depends on who’s telling them.”

Guilt sank its teeth into her chest. The idea that her lies had hurt him inexplicably made her hurt as well.

Was that what it meant to love someone?

She had lied to him throughout the Centennial, but he had never lied to her. She knew that now for certain. He was the only person she trusted in the world, though she realized trusting anyone after what had happened was astronomically foolish.

Was *that* love?

Isla placed her hand on his chest and felt him stiffen. He was warm in a comforting way that made her want to feel his bare skin beneath her fingers. He did not move an inch as she got closer—and closer still.

They had barely talked about the connection between them, the undeniable thread. He had let her have her space. She had wanted to take things slow. Not rush in, the way she had with Grim.

But at that moment, she didn’t want any space between them.

She stood on her toes, wanting to bridge the gap between her lips and his, *finally*, but no matter how long she stretched her neck, she couldn’t reach him.

Oro stared down at her and frowned. “Is this your attempt to distract me?”

Absolutely. She didn’t want to master her powers. She didn’t want to think about any of her newfound abilities. Once she started, she would have to think about things—and *people*—that had scarred her, perhaps beyond repair. “Yes. Let me?”

He lowered his head. His golden crown winked in the light.

Then his hands were on her waist. His fingers were long across her back; she arched into his touch. He grabbed her, so tightly she gasped—

But before she could wrap her legs around his waist, he carried her to the bed . . .

. . . and dropped her back onto the sheets.

By the time she made a sound of protest, he was at the door. “Rest, Isla,” he said. “The dinner is in a few hours.” She groaned. It was the first time representatives were all meeting, to discuss the aftermath of the curses. “Then, we’ll begin our training.”

FLOATING FEAST

“Make me look like a sword,” Isla had told the Starling tailor Leto. “One that’s more blood than blade.” A mixture of Wildling and Starling. That was what she wore as she swept into the dining room.

The Sunling nobles had arrived early with their ruler. They were already seated when Isla walked through the doors, and when their eyes went straight to her—sharp and hungry—she had the unnerving feeling of being the very thing they had come to pick at and consume.

Before, she might have cowered under their scrutiny, but now she strode to the table like she didn’t notice. What could anyone on this island do or say to her that they hadn’t already done? Moonling nobles had tried to assassinate her. The others had already judged her down to the bone. In the marketplace, most people avoided her, still hating Wildlings because of their bloodthirsty curse, even after it had been broken. Her new red, metal-woven dress whispered against the smooth floor, feeling almost like chain mail, fighting against the silence shrinking the room.

She quickly marked the Sunling nobles as she passed them by. A man with long golden hair tied into a braid and dark skin, wearing a solemn expression. A tall woman, made up of about a thousand freckles, her hair the color of rust. A man who looked old—remarkable, given that even Oro looked young, and he had been alive for more than five centuries—his spine curved toward the table as if emulating the top of a question mark. He smiled at her, light skin crinkling, but it tipped more toward amused than friendly.

Oro sat at the head of the table, and he was also watching. The king would have looked exactly like he did at the beginning of the Centennial, at that first dinner, if not for his eyes. Back then, his eyes had been hollow as honeycomb.

Now, they burned right through her with an intensity that made any previous thoughts unspool around her. He almost imperceptibly traced her with his gaze. Her bare, tan shoulders. The silk-and-steel corset. The slit in her dress revealing knee-high boots she’d had made, because they were more practical than her heels or slippers. Her long brown hair, with tiny red flowers woven through the ends. She watched him back, for just a

second. His broad shoulders. Golden hair. The sharp panes of his smooth face. He had been paler before, after so many years without sunlight, but now he was glowing, radiant. He was so beautiful, it almost hurt looking at him.

She didn't remember noticing how attractive he was at that first dinner.

Was *that* love?

Oro looked away quickly.

As she took her place next to him, the doors opened, and a breeze blew her hair back, bringing with it the comforting scent of pine and the prickling chill of mountain air. Azul swept in with the current, feet never touching the floor. He was joined by two others, not nobles but elected officials. Skylings ran their realm as close to a democracy as was possible in a system where rulers were born with the bulk of the power, power their people's lives hinged on.

While Azul's hair was as dark as his skin, the woman behind him had hair the color of the sky itself, complete with a bit of white mixed in—a sign she was ancient, just like the curved-over Sunling. Unlike the old man's, though, her posture was perfect. Her skin was deep brown, and she was small in stature.

The Skyling next to her was built like a tombstone, as solid as if he were carved straight from the Singing Mountains. He was white as the cliffs of Lightlark, and so tall Isla couldn't see the color of his hair from the way his face was angled as he stared straight ahead. He was large enough to carry three swords on his belt comfortably, and he dwarfed all of them. Isla had the unpleasant thought that her own sword would look something like a quill in the giant's grip.

Azul came around the table to greet Isla, though his seat was on the other side of Oro. "Your style has changed," he mused.

His, happily, had not. The ruler of Skyling was wearing a tunic with shards cut out of its sides and bulbous sapphires in place of buttons. He wore a ring on every finger.

It was her first time seeing him since the Centennial had ended. *You should have sought him out*, her mind whispered. Another failing.

She wanted to ask how he was doing after watching the specter of his long-lost husband disappear once the storm cleared. She wanted to apologize for believing even for a moment that he was her enemy. She wanted to ask him how the Skylings were faring in the aftermath.

Before she could get a word out, Azul said, "We could make time to meet, if you would like."

“I would like that very much,” she said.

“Good.” He dipped his chin and whispered, “Beware. Someone is always watching.”

He was right. Conversation had started up, but she could still feel attention fixed firmly on her. In the days that she had spent in her room after the end of the Centennial, Oro had told the island’s nobles and representatives that Isla had broken the curses and gained the power of a Starling ruler. The news had swiftly spread among the people of Lightlark.

The leaders sitting around her now had watched her stumble her way through most of the Centennial’s trials. They must have wondered how she, out of all the rulers, had been the one to finally put an end to the curses.

Just as Azul was seated, the doors opened once more, and a single Starling walked through. She had light brown skin, dark eyes, and a sheet of shining black hair. Her clothes were faded silver, more storm cloud than freshly sharpened blade. She froze as everyone turned to face her. Less than a second later, she recovered, walking with her head high. Because of their previous curse, Isla knew for certain that the Starling was younger than twenty-five, close to her own age.

They locked eyes, and the girl frowned. Still, Isla felt an understanding pass between them. Two people who felt remarkably out of place.

“Maren,” the Starling said simply before being seated, by way of introduction, and then she proceeded to focus very intently on the curved edge of the solid gold table.

Only one chair remained empty. Cleo’s.

It didn’t seem like the Moonling would be joining them. Chimes rang through the golden room, marking the hour. Oro stood. “After five hundred years of suffering, the curses plaguing our realms have been broken, thanks to Isla Crown, ruler of Wildling.” She felt eyes on her again. “Over the last centuries, our priority was survival. Today, we meet to discuss how we move forward. I see an opportunity for growth in every sense of the word. To get there, we must deal with the aftermath of five hundred years of our people divided and our powers constricted in the face of new threats.” He looked around at them all. “First, let us celebrate the end of much of our suffering by sharing a meal.”

Oro was seated, and conversations began, but Isla focused only on her unsteady breathing. Nerves rolled through her stomach. The attention had already been turned to her. Soon, there would be questions. What if she answered wrong?

No one knew about her past with Grim. No one knew she was secretly also a Nightshade. If they did, they might have imprisoned her right then and there. Nightshade had been their enemy for centuries. They had been at war right before the curses. If her vision was to be believed, they might soon find themselves in another battle against them.

“We are monsters, Hearteater,” someone said in her ear. “Or, at least, that’s what they think.”

Grim. He was here.

She startled. Her heart hammered. Her gaze darted around the table, expecting to find him close by or to see some reaction from the others.

But he was nowhere. Maybe he was invisible. Her eyes strained to see even the smallest ripple in the air that might give him away. She waited for him to appear before them. Her hand inched toward Oro to warn him—

Nothing.

She knew what she’d heard. Or did she? It could have been her own mind. Grim had said those same words more than a month ago, when he was still pretending not to know her.

The truth was, he had known *everything* about her. They had a year’s worth of memories together that he had made her forget, to suit his own agenda at the Centennial. He had cut part of her life away as easily as Leto shearing excess fabric.

She didn’t know what she would do if she ever saw him again, but she didn’t need to worry about it at the moment.

Grim wasn’t there.

She had imagined it, then. Perhaps her mind had made up the vision in the Place of Mirrors too. It couldn’t be real. Grim wouldn’t kill innocent people to get to her.

She saw flashes of that vision again. Death. *Children*—

“Breathe,” she said to herself, before taking a deep breath, knowing how ridiculous it was that she had to remind herself, vocally, of a body’s basic function. Her nails dug into her palms, trying to keep herself in the moment, as if she were clinging to an anchor instead of becoming unmoored yet again in the shifting currents of her mind.

“Don’t forget to exhale too.” Oro.

Under the table, he placed his hand on her knee. His thumb stroked the inside of her thigh. She knew he meant it as a comforting gesture, but for a moment all her senses sharpened to his touch. Her eyes met his. He removed his hand.

A special drink was prepared, a Sunling specialty. Flaming goblets

were served on floating platters by Starlings, who moved objects using their mastery of energy. Isla noticed they smiled at the Starling representative—Maren—in a friendly way.

Oro casually drank from the goblet, and the flames extinguished, not burning him in the slightest. The Sunling noble with the dark-red hair downed hers in an impressively short amount of time.

Would it burn her if she wasn't Sunling? No, of course not. Oro would never serve his guests something that would harm them. She was the next one to drink from her own flaming goblet.

It tasted of honey and burned like liquor. The flames licking the edge of the goblet stroked her cheeks as she drank, then sank into the dregs of the drink before simmering away completely.

The first food course was pure Skyling. It was a floating feast, served in a flowerpot—miniature vegetables still tied to the roots, flying about, that one had to pin down with their fork to eat. She couldn't place every food by name, but one had the familiar texture of potatoes, was violet in color, and had a surprising bite of sweetness. Some of the vegetables seemed to have minds of their own and playfully evaded capture, flying within the confines of their root leashes. Oro watched her try to pin down an especially active beet, amusement touching the corners of his mouth.

The second course was Starling. The fine silver plates contained a single orb. Once all were served, the Starlings snapped their fingers in unison, and the orbs exploded, revealing a cut of unfamiliar meat, carved into precise pieces. Large saltlike rocks formed a circle around the protein. Isla bit into one and startled when it burst like a firecracker in her mouth.

The Moonling course arrived last.

The Starling attendants mumbled apologies as they delivered the dishes, though they were clearly only following orders. Blocks of ice were presented with live fish still swimming within them. Their eyes were wide as they tried to navigate their quickly melting confines.

Isla felt the heat of Oro's anger—almost enough to set the fish free—though his expression remained impassive.

Before Oro could say a single word, the doors of the room burst open. Isla expected to see a dramatic entrance from Cleo.

A Moonling stood at the entrance . . . but it was not the ruler. The man had long white hair that reached the middle of his torso, nearly the color of his skin, and a staff in his hand.

“Soren,” Oro said. “How nice of you to join us. I presume this is your idea of a joke?”