

A
BOND
so FIERCE
AND
FRAGILE

COMPELLING FATES SAGA

SOPHIA ST. GERMAIN

A Bond so Fierce and Fragile

COMPELLING FATES SAGA

BOOK THREE

SOPHIA ST. GERMAIN

*To the ones who pour out their souls and ask for nothing in return—I hope
you find someone who would wage war on fate itself to give you the world.*

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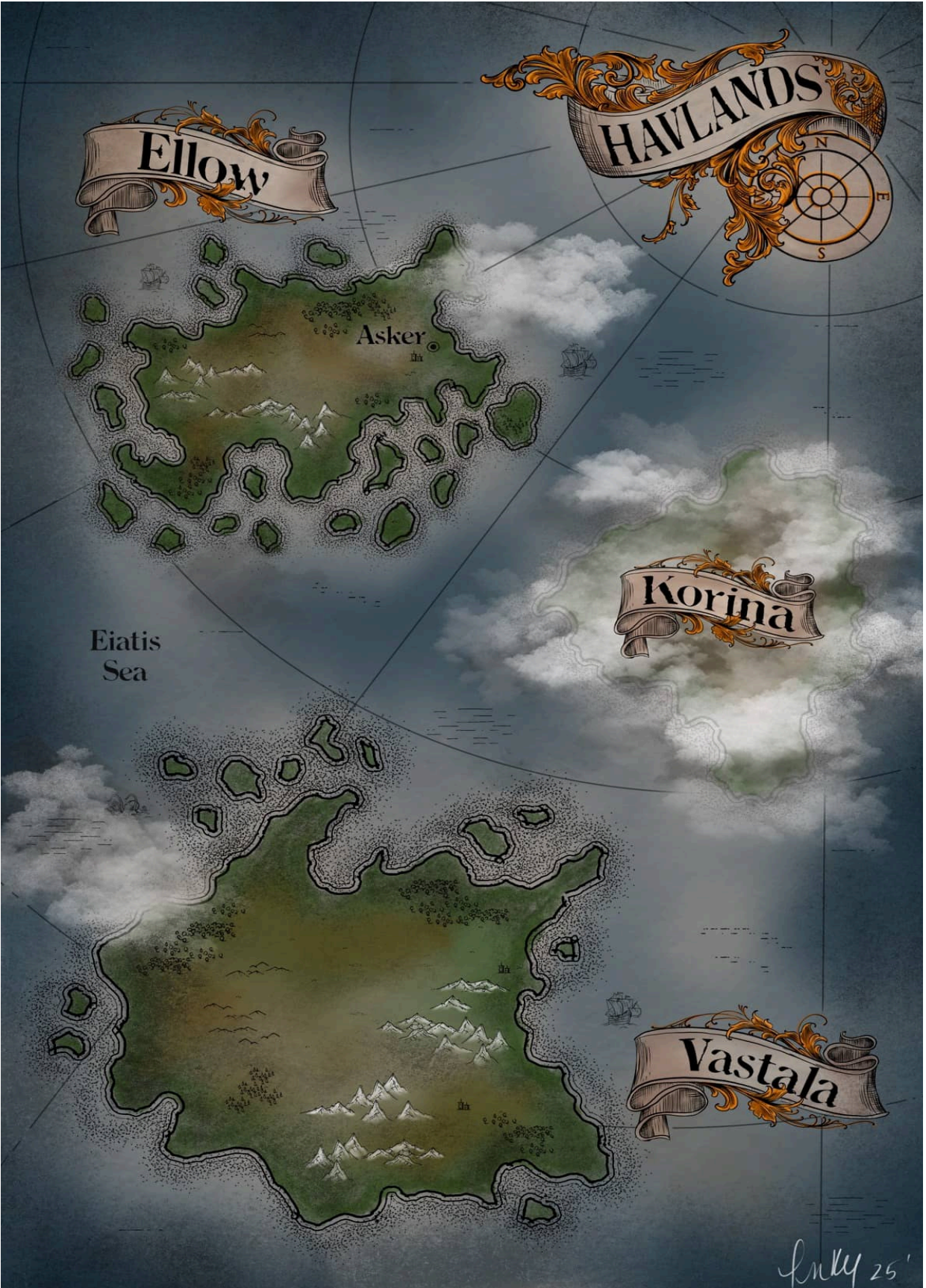
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Elow

HAVLANDS

Asker

Eiatis
Sea

Korina

Vastala

fukky 25'

Chapter 1

Lessia

Merrick grinned at her as he opened his arms, and Lessia couldn't help but break into a run to reach him where he stood upon one of the cliffs beneath her childhood home, his silver hair dancing around his face in the warm summer breeze.

The sun blasted her skin as she pushed herself to move faster, and she had to fight to keep her eyes from closing against the bright light as her feet dug into the sand to close the distance between them.

But as Merrick's arms wrapped around her waist, she gave up and let her lids fall shut, allowing her other senses to take in the male she loved.

Merrick.

Her mate.

His wild scent whirled around her, and she couldn't get enough of how it filled her nostrils—nor how it filled her with that sense of freedom, of casting off shackles, of being utterly and entirely herself.

"I missed you," he murmured into her hair, and his heart began pumping faster, the drums tapping against her own chest and filling the air like a soft melody.

Pulling back, she finally opened her eyes to his, and the ones that usually held the darkness of the night sky were now nearly pure silver, the flecks appearing to whirl as they flickered over her.

“I missed you too,” she whispered before she crashed her lips against his.

The groan ripping from him nearly sent Lessia to her knees, and only because his strong arms held her did she not tumble down onto the white stone beneath them.

Gods, she had missed him so much.

Lessia wasn't sure how long it'd been, but any time away from him was too long.

She'd gotten too used to him always being there.

I'm here.

I'm always here.

Lessia smiled against his mouth, interrupting the kiss, and when Merrick pulled back to search her eyes, she let her lips pull even wider until he also broke into a grin.

“I'll never get used to that.” Merrick shook his head so wildly his hair flew around it, sparkling against the blue sky behind him. “I'll never get used to you being mine.”

Lifting her hand to caress his cheek, her palm rasping against the silver stubble growing there, she responded, “I'm always yours. Always.”

Merrick brushed his lips against hers again. “As I'm always yours.”

“Are you coming or what? We've waited forever!” A voice broke through the clear air, and Lessia hadn't thought her smile could go any wider, but her cheeks began hurting when her sister impatiently waved at them from behind Merrick's tall frame before she sprinted up the trail toward their home.

After a final look at Merrick, who nodded and released her, she grabbed his hand and began dragging him the familiar path up to the stone house where she'd grown up—where she'd spent her first twelve years of life.

Large green bushes flanked the road, and the birdsong she remembered loving as a child filled her ears as copses of trees popped up on either side.

The sound of small animals rushing across the forest bed joined the chirping and the wind rustling the leaves, and Merrick pulled at her hand when a rabbit crossed their path, to stop her from stepping on it.

Lessia drank in every sound, every smell, every familiar curve of the road.
She'd missed this island so much.

Thirteen years...

That's how long it'd been since she'd last been here.

Her favorite place.

Her home.

She felt Merrick's eyes on her and quickly tried to shake the melancholy that had begun filling her upon remembering the night she'd left, upon remembering the mother who'd made this place a haven.

The mother who was no longer.

The hand wrapped around her own tightened its grip, and when it pulled her to a stop once more, gently tugging at her to turn around, she let it.

"It wasn't your fault, Elessia." Merrick tried for a smile, but the darkness that now filled his eyes betrayed him.

And when a second voice—another familiar one, but this one filled with anger and resentment and disgust—broke the gentle melody floating around them, his grin collapsed completely.

Lessia spun around even before her father could finish his sentence, her heart shattering at the twisted grimace on his face.

"Of course it was her fault." Alarin took a step toward them, and Lessia's blood ran cold when she realized his white tunic and breeches were splattered with something dark...

Something red?

Despite the warning blaring within her, Lessia sniffed the air.

Iron overtook all the summer scents that had twined around them before.

Blood. It was blood that painted her father's clothing—blood that ran down his hands, dripping onto the light stone lining the path as he continued to walk toward them, his amber eyes crazed as they flitted between her and Merrick.

"She killed her sister. And then she killed her mother." Alarin stopped a few feet away, but drops of spit still landed on her face as he forced the words out. "She's a monster."

“No.” Lessia stumbled toward him, but Merrick’s grip on her hand held her back. “No, Father. Frelina is alive! I just saw her.”

Her father’s face crumpled with pain, before his arm shot out behind him. “If she’s alive, how do you explain the graves?”

Lessia didn’t want to look, but she couldn’t stop herself from following her father’s shaking hand, and when it revealed two white stones—one with *Frelina Rantzier* carved into it and the other *Miryn Rantzier*, both with dark stains marring the shiny fronts—a scream burst from her lips.

“You should feel pain,” her father spat. “You killed my mate. My daughter. You should suffer like I have.”

No.

No, this was all wrong.

Lessia shook her head, barely able to see through the tears that welled up in her eyes.

Still, when her father unsheathed a sword hanging by his waist, she didn’t shrink back.

Instead, her eyes fixed on the graves of her sister and mother.

Two of the people she’d loved the most.

She did deserve this, didn’t she?

If they were dead...

If they’d truly left this realm to move on to the afterlife?

It must be her fault.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noted the sword flying through the air, the whistling sound brushing her ears, but it wasn’t until Merrick’s hand ripped from hers that she snapped her head up.

Tears spilled down her father’s cheeks as his arm fell to his side. “Now you’ll know.”

Know what? It was as if her thoughts refused to collaborate.

But then a gurgling sound—a horrible, wet, blood-curdling gurgling sound—reached her, just before a loud thump accompanied it.

Turning her cotton-filled head, she found Merrick’s body crumpling to the ground, the sword he ripped from his gut clinking as it fell to the stone.

His arms and legs splayed out in strange positions across the grass-peppered path, almost as if he'd taken a great fall.

Lessia wasn't certain if the sound that split the air came from her own mouth.

It was animalistic, a primal roar of pain that should break worlds apart, that should carry all the way to the Old World... perhaps even to the gods.

And when that thread she'd just begun to notice, the flicker of awareness between them, went dark, something broke inside her.

Hands flying to her chest, she fell to her knees beside her mate.

"Merrick!" Lessia's voice sounded as if from far away, as if it wasn't her own anymore, as if the pain was too great to let anything else in. "Merrick!"

She dropped her hands to his face and forced it her way, but the eyes that met hers...

There was no light behind them.

No dancing silver flecks.

No deep darkness.

And his face?

There were no hard lines that she loved to watch soften.

There was no twist of his mouth to hide a smile.

"Merrick!" She snapped her head down to his chest, but no heart thumped against it, and no air drove it up and down.

Another eerie, spine-rattling sound exploded through the air.

"Now you know," her father echoed. "Now you know how it feels. What you did to me."

She couldn't look at him.

Not when anger began working its way through the pain.

Not when that anger turned to rage, and her magic flitted to life behind her eyes, burning under her skin.

He'd killed him.

Her father had killed Merrick.

A hiss flew through her clenched teeth.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she gripped Merrick's bare arm to keep herself from storming toward her father and from allowing the voice in her mind to urge her to avenge her mate.

To kill like he'd been killed.

As Lessia dug her nails into Merrick's smooth skin, something touched the edge of her consciousness.

Don't lose focus.

Her forehead scrunched.

How many times do I need to tell you not to lose focus?

Merrick's deep voice bounced within her mind, and her eyes flew open.

He still lay there beneath her, chest unmoving and face serene, the bloodied sword beside him and the wound it had caused still oozing blood, pumping it from his gut, and Lessia fought another cry weaving its way up her throat.

Focus, Merrick's voice snapped.

I'm trying, she wanted to scream back, but the words caught in her throat when she dug her fingers further into his arm.

Her eyes trailed the golden skin.

The *smooth* golden skin.

As she released her grip, her eyes followed the marks her nails had left.

But...

There was no dark traitor mark.

She glanced at the other arm, but it was as smooth as the one she'd held—no raised scars, no black letters contrasting against his skin.

Lessia moved to look at her own arms, realizing with a start that the skin on them, too, was smooth and unbroken.

No traitor mark.

No outline of the blood oath she'd once sworn.

It... it wasn't real.

This wasn't real.

She pushed at her mind, forcing it to focus.

What was the last thing she remembered?

There had been water.

A ship.

The king.

Loche and Merrick standing before her.

Suffocation.

Something warm being pressed into her hand when cold lips collided with hers.

Pain shooting up that same arm when heavy wetness surrounded her.

She took a shallow breath.

The king had figured out she was the one the curse spoke of.

And this?

This wasn't real.

She could see it now.

The muddled edges of her consciousness, the mistakes that whichever of Rioner's guards was doing this to her had made, the impossibility of being back in her childhood home.

Lifting her head and making her stiff legs straighten, she captured her father's eyes again.

Only now, those eyes were a few shades darker, the golden-brown hair more auburn in the flickering light of the sun.

"Rioner." Lessia clenched her fists when the king met her glare head-on. "So you dare meet my eyes now?"

The cool laugh he let out should have made goose bumps rise across her skin.

But she was done being afraid of him.

Absolutely fucking done.

Merrick had trained her for this.

She'd decided to walk this path.

To save their realm, whatever the cost might be.

And the king was terrified of her.

She could see it in the slight creases around his eyes—the twitch of the palms hanging by his sides.

He was terrified of the curse and her magic.

A corner of her mouth lifted.

He should be the one to cower now.

Wiping the straggling tears, she let the magic sizzling under her skin burst out of her eyes as she stepped toward him.

The Fae king didn't move as she locked eyes with him and purred, "Don't look away."

"I won't." Rioner's mouth twisted into a cold smile. "But you realize this cellar is filled with guards, don't you? They'll kill you before you have time to take a breath if you so much as threaten to stain my robe."

She made herself smile back at him, trying to get the smell of iron that still filled her nostrils to fade.

It wasn't real. Nothing of what had just happened had been real.

"See, I don't think they will. They know of the curse, I assume?" Lessia cocked her head. "I've understood you can't kill me yourself. Perhaps not even order it."

Rioner's brows popped up for the smallest of seconds before he caught himself. "I thought your mind was clear. The guards told me you hadn't broken yet." He began turning away, his eyes still meeting hers over his shoulder. "They must have been mistaken. I'll need to find another to help with this mission."

"Don't turn your fucking back on me!" Lessia nearly tripped over an uneven stone as she followed him. "Where are you going?"

Rioner halted. "You're demanding to know where your king is going?"

Something like unease coiled deep within Lessia's gut. "Stop playing coy. We're past that point, aren't we, *uncle*?"

A shocked laugh escaped Rioner. "Uncle? That's a new one." He waved to someone she couldn't see. "Her mind has gone. Please take care of her."

The salty breeze shifted into a worryingly familiar one, and Lessia's magic faded away with every whiff of iron-tinged stale air.

Sounds she never wanted to hear again drowned all others.

And then... the darkness.

Darkness that engulfed everything—that nearly swallowed the king as he walked toward a thick stone door.

Her eyes widened.

Not to get used to the shadows that danced all around her but because she recognized that door.

Lessia met the eyes of a dark-haired Fae standing guard beside her.

A Fae she also recognized.

The memory of agony had her muscles flex, but she pushed it away, forcing herself to speak up again. “I know this isn’t real! I left this cellar years ago! This isn’t real!”

Spinning around so his robes flew all around him, Rioner drawled, “You’ve been in these cellars for years, Lessia Gyldenbergh. I thought I had use for you—something only a halfling could do—but alas... I’ll have to find another.”

“No!” Her greasy hair slapped against her skin as she shook her head. “No!”

This wasn’t happening.

It wasn’t real.

It couldn’t be real.

Focus.

She tried to get Merrick’s voice to give her strength.

“Merrick,” she whispered. “Merrick, please help.”

She needed him to growl at her.

To make her snap out of this nightmare.

“Yes?”

Her eyes flew to the king again.

Then to the dark ones of the male who opened the creaking door.

A choked sound traveled from her chest when Merrick’s passive eyes trailed across her face, then moved back to the king.

“Do you know the halfling?” Rioner asked as Merrick pulled the door wider for him.

“Never seen her before.” Merrick’s eyes didn’t seek hers out again. “Is she important?”

“No. Perhaps you can do me the honor of killing her? I need more space—”

Her heartbeat slamming in her ears muffled the rest of the king’s words, and before anyone could react, Lessia sprinted forward, grasping at the king’s robe and pushing him up against the wall.

“Merrick would never look at me like that,” she snarled as she gripped his head and forced his eyes to her own. “You can’t fool me into believing this is real.”

“Lessia, no!”

She ignored the vaguely familiar voice fighting to break through the haze of rage.

“You can’t breathe,” Lessia purred softly as her magic sizzled to the surface once more. “The air in this room is gone.”

She couldn’t help the smile that pulled at her features when the king tried to draw a wheezing breath, and when his eyes bulged after only seconds, the grin turned into a humorless laugh. “Doesn’t feel too good, does it? I hear you like to drown your enemies.”

“Stop! It’s not what you think.”

That voice again.

Who was that?

Lessia nearly turned her head, but when the king’s face turned blue, she couldn’t deny herself the pleasure of watching him suffer.

“I think water replaced the air in your lungs. Can you feel it?” she cooed, savoring the fear in the amber eyes as the male shook his head.

“Please!” someone begged, and this time the voice tugged at her heart. “Lessia!”

Tugged so hard her heart skipped a beat.

Frelina. That was Frelina’s voice.

Focus.

She whipped her head around, but the cellar was empty.

Where had the guards gone?

As she brought her eyes back to the king, her question got stuck in her throat.

Soft, bright amber eyes met her own.

Not muddled, hard ones.

Her father's eyes flooded with tears as he grasped at his throat, the gurgling sound no longer pleasing her but driving a cold sweat across her skin.

"Lessia! Please!" her sister called out again.

Was this another mind trick to stop her from getting to the king?

Focus.

Rubbing her arms, she tried to get her mind to close, tried to force the magic within it away, tried to understand what was real.

As she trailed her fingers across the scars, the letters marking her arm, she reminded herself that the king had had her sister and father.

The letters were real.

They couldn't create those by capturing her mind.

It's the same one.

That's what Merrick had told her.

You and me.

They were real.

Elessia and Merrick.

They were real.

That meant...

Fuck!

Lessia quickly pulled on the magic that had drifted away.

"Breathe. You can breathe!" she urged her father, and when a rattling sound rumbled in his chest, she released a breath, catching him when his knees buckled.

As she pulled one of her father's arms over her shoulders, her magic burned behind her eyes and she snapped it inward, the way she'd done when training with Raine, Kerym, and Frelina, and upon finding blazing green

eyes—the eyes she'd cursed for so many years—she screamed at them to get out, to leave her alone.

And as soon as they flickered, her walls flew up.

The cell vanished.

Only the sound of water remained in the small wood-encased space, and as Lessia looked around, she realized the room they stood in was a ship's cabin, with the heaving water sloshing against the sides of the vessel.

Her father still hung limp by her side, and as she glanced to her right, she found Frelina, Kerym, and a male who must be Thissian chained to a wall.

Whipping her head around to the other side, her heart stopped.

Rioner actually stood tall there, a lazy smile on his bent face.

And beside him...

Three of the vilest guards she'd gotten to know during her stay in his cellars.

The green-eyed one, the one she believed was named Torkher, flashed his teeth, but when she couldn't help but show her own back, Rioner slammed a hand into the Fae's chest as he made to approach Lessia.

"That was quite the entertainment." Rioner fixed the gilded crown atop his head. "I thought you might kill my dear brother."

Lessia's nostrils flared, but she kept her mouth shut, her gaze following the guards who began filing into the rounded room from either side of her, their eyes trained on her and the other prisoners.

"See, you were right. I can't kill *you*." Rioner's frosty smile lifted further. "But I can kill everyone around you. Make you watch them suffer until their last breath. Force you to hear their screams every minute of every day until you're begging to be able to kill yourself. I think it shall be quite entertaining as well."

"Fuck you," Lessia snarled, tightening her grip on her father and inching toward her sister and friends.

"Such a mouth on you." Rioner chuckled as he began walking toward a rounded metal door. "I'll see you tomorrow, little halfling. And... I think perhaps we start with the other Faeling."

Red colored her entire field of vision when Rioner jerked his head toward her sister.

But she didn't have time to respond before the first door slammed shut behind him, closely followed by the other two, the metal clangs telling her they were bolted shut, leaving them all in the little light that shone through the gaps in the planks of the side of the ship.