

# 3



The fire I've come to depend upon consumes me with an excruciating wave. In the madness, I sense my father, beckoning the flames on—willing them to devour me whole. A high-pitched note penetrates my ears, and I realize it's my screams.

I can't view Lucas. I can't sense him.

The only thing I feel is torment.

*Oh, Kinsman. Please don't let me die this way.* I beg it over and over in my mind.

I struggle to breathe. Dots dance in the darkness of my sight. My body moves of its own accord. I have no control over it.

A cool, sweeping breeze washes over me. Gray mist, like a watery shadow, reaches out from the air toward me. *"I am here. Take my hand, Tambrynn."*

The voice is steady. And it's female.

*"Mother?"*

*"I'm going to break his hold on you. Now, Tambrynn. Take my hand."*

Closing my eyes, I shut out the furious heat and realize my hand is clutching my necklace, my knuckles white. I take a moment to unfurl my fingers, and then I'm reaching out. Dim voices are like whispers in the wind, some urging me on, others urging the fire to end me.

An aching, frigid hold freezes my hand in place. The searing ice crackles up my arm and across my body. "*Breathe.*"

For a moment, I witness a dark-haired woman with tanned skin. Her brown eyes are not my mother's, though they are kind. She is plain, with nothing striking about her to become memorable. Her essence is there and then gone, as is her ghostly presence.

Astralee? Could it be her? No, it wasn't. Her essence isn't the same. This woman's aura is alive in too many ways, where Astralee's was—not.

I gasp. The fire is gone. I'm on my back, dirt and debris covering me as if I have been rolling on the ground. My skin is untouched by the fire, though I'm sure my flesh is no longer there.

Lucas grabs me, and I'm yanked into his embrace. "Tambrynn. Are you all right?" He thrusts me back away, his eyes sweeping me from top to bottom. "You were on fire. How—?"

"Well, youngling, if she had been on fire, throwing yourself at her would not have been the best choice." Audhild pushes him out of the way. "What happened?"

Fear that the inferno will return makes me scoot back away from them. "I don't know. When I fell, I landed on my injured side, and then—" I wave my hand up and down as if to explain the blazing onslaught.

"Yes, but you reached for something, said a word I couldn't understand. Suddenly, the fire disappeared." Her animalistic

eyes dilate, and she squints at me. "Something happened. I felt it, but I couldn't see it."

I hesitate. How can I explain? "Someone came to me after I prayed not to die." I swivel to lean more comfortably, away from my throbbing side. "A presence came to me. Told me to fight and to take their hand. So, I did."

"Do you know who it was? Was it Astralee? You said she saved you once." Grandfather joins us. Sweat glistens on his forehead.

I run my fingers through my dirty hair. "No, it wasn't her. I would've known. It was someone else. Someone full of ice."

"I'm glad they saved you." He sits crossed-legged next to my uninjured side. His concern and fear stretch through our bond. "Whoever it was."

I nod. "But, if it's not Astralee, then who could it be? How can anyone else travel through the Betwixt?"

"I've only heard of guardians or strong voyants moving freely in the spirit realm. Voyants can reach out with their visions, but none that I know of have ever had contact with anyone in the visions. They only witness them." Audhild motions for me to come back to the firepit.

Rekspire sits on one log, quietly watching us, an unreadable expression on his face. Anxiety and fear radiate off him.

Lucas is on his feet before I can think to stand.

I take his hand, stand, and drop it. "I don't want to hurt you."

His smile is the same mischievous one I adore. "I would walk through fire to save you, my lady."

"I know. And I would die to save you from it. So, I fear we are at an impasse." I lightly tap his arm with the tips of my fingers. A pang twists inside my chest. I thought after I put the

paste on, I'd recover. However, this has been the worst flash so far. How long before I am free from these unwanted flames?

I glance around. "Where'd my father and his pets go?" Instead of viewing a forest through a light haze of the spell, there's only an impenetrable milky wall around the area we'd created for our campsite.

"I'm unsure. After you reset the displacement spell, everything out there disappeared." Grandfather waves his hand toward the border as he sits down next to Rekspire, patting his leg.

Lucas takes a seat on the log opposite the other two, and Audhild sits on the ground. I gently rest next to Lucas. The space between my shoulders pinches, and I stretch to ease the discomfort. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

Grandfather grunts. "I don't know. It's never happened to me before. Not even at my keep. I don't know what power you put in that spell, but it blocked your father and his beasts fully." His stubble bristles as he rubs his hand across his face. "You're becoming more powerful each day."

Lucas rubs my back and then slips over to the ring to build a fire. "It couldn't have happened at a better time. I thought your father was going to come through the barrier."

Fear at what I may have unintentionally created makes my heart race. "Will we be able to take it down and leave?" Another thought hit me. "How will we know Thoron's gone?" I drop my head into my hands. "What have I done?"

"You saved us," Rekspire speaks for the first time. "Your heart is strong. As strong as that of any worthy dragon. You did what any good leader would do if they could, though few of us are as capable as you are becoming. Thank you."

Audhild stares at him for a moment before turning toward me. "Fear not, youngling. Thoron is not a patient man. Even if we must wait, it won't be for long."

We eat the last of the supplies Lucas traded for. Though I try to get comfortable, the discomfort from my injury makes it impossible to relax. Each time I rest in one spot long enough to make it warm, I panic and relocate to a cooler area. So far, I've shifted around six times.

Our campsite isn't big enough to keep moving, so I sit up and lean against one of the oak trees. The bark bites into my back as the ground numbs my bottom. Through it all, my side thrums and aches.

Lucas lays on his stomach on an eldrin-made mat beside Grandfather, who has a separate mat. He sleeps fitfully, flopping around almost as much as I do. It's warm—too warm, Grandfather claimed—to lie inside a tent, so they didn't set it up. Little breeze moves inside our bubble. Will we run out of air?

Audhild lets out a loud sigh and rises from her spot near us. In the blink of an eye, she changes from her dragon form to her womanly one. "Can't sleep either?" she asks as she sits against a tree next to mine.

"Between the pain and fear that I'm going to burn to death by my firebird fire, no." I rub my tired eyes, now gritty from having too little sleep the last few days of travel. "Whatever I did made it impossible to see the moon, so I'm not even sure what time it is."

Despite not being able to view anything, she glances up to where the sky should be. "It's early morning, not quite sunrise yet."

Of course, she would know. "Aren't you tired?" Her eyes are baggy and lined more than normal. Perhaps my moving around had kept her from getting her full rest.

"I am used—" she says and then stops. "When I was

younger, I was used to smaller naps between activities. I will be fine.” She twists her head to the side. “I sense a disturbance.”

I reach out with whatever senses I have but notice nothing. My necklace is also cool, resting blandly at my throat. “Are you sure?”

Grandfather abruptly wakes. Rekspire snores and jerks, waking up. “Guardians?” he questions groggily.

“We have no guardians here.” Grandfather’s voice is gruff, his eyes alert.

Rekspire dusts dirt off his clothes. “Well, some kind of magic is happening on the other side of this camp.”

“Is there any way to let the shield down, alerting no one to our presence?” Audhild whispers, her eyes closed and head still canted sideways.

Grandfather glances at me. “I don’t know. I didn’t wield the spell this time.”

They all look at me except for Lucas, who remains asleep. I don’t wish to wake him. The ache between my shoulder blades twinges. “Do we have to?”

A pulse washes across my senses. My necklace heats for a moment and then cools. I drop my head and twist my fingers through my unkempt hair, snagging them. It’s all the answer I need.

Fear reflects in the whites of Grandfather’s eyes. “Did you leave any blood behind when you put the antidote on your wound?”

Audhild gasps. “That’s how he found us.”

Alarm builds in my chest, squeezing my heart. “What do you mean?”

“Tambrynn, do you still have Thoron’s gastrolith?” Grandfather scrambles closer to us.

“Lucas—”

Grandfather twists around and shakes Lucas's leg. "My boy, wake up. We have an emergency."

Lucas jumps to his knees. "What? What's going on?"

"The gastrolith." Grandfather stabs his hand out toward him.

Another wave of power ripples across us. The embers in the fire hiss, and sparks dart into the air.

Lucas digs into his pants pocket, handing Grandfather the dragon stone. "Is that Thoron's power?"

"It's the Eye of Fate." Audhild stands and wipes her hands down the hem of her shirt. "Possibly spelled with your blood to direct it into breaking the barrier to get to you."

My heart stutters. "Can he do that?"

Grandfather takes the stone and throws it into the glowing embers at the edge of the pit. "Not if we can stop him." He mutters a few words over the gastrolith. It emits a low whistle in the heat.

"You don't have everything you need to destroy it, old man." Audhild knocks it farther into the fire with her bare hand. "The curse might be gone, but it is still powerful enough to deflect simple spells."

"We're going to have to improvise." Grandfather's voice is rough. Determination shines from the depths of his dark eyes. The stone glows orange. He waits for it to get red hot and then stomps the fire out around it. He kicks it out of the pit. It darkens to black, like a coal.

He and Audhild exchange a look I can't read. He nods, and I'm surprised since I didn't know they could mindspeak to each other.

Grandfather picks the stone up. "Tambrynn, when I tell you to, pull the barrier down. Everyone, get ready. It will take all of us working together to overpower Thoron. And no matter what happens, don't let him capture you."

Fear becomes a hand around my heart, grabbing it and holding on tight. I stand stiffly, ignoring the pang from my still-healing side. My necklace warms as energy snaps around my hands.

“Circle around, younglings. We must have each other’s backs.” Audhild stands opposite me, facing the other direction.

Lucas changes into a large bird. His claws are long and sharp, and his head comes up to my waist. *“I’d change to a dragon if I could to protect you, my lady. This is the best I can do, at the moment.”*

My breath hitches painfully, thinking of him going into danger once again. *“Please be careful.”*

*“Always.”*

Rekspire and Audhild change as well, leaving only Grandfather and me in our normal forms. I unclasp the dagger, and Grandfather holds an eldrin curved blade and a walking stick. I close my eyes and pray silently for protection.

Another barrage of energy shakes the ground beneath us. My barrier wavers.

“Now, Tambrynn.” Grandfather calls out.

I reach out with my ability and *call*. As with the flood, it takes a moment for it to respond, but then the murky boundary clears, then drops. Noise explodes around us, as do gusts of furious energy that whip leaves and debris into a whirlwind.

The sun is only beginning to rise, and the light is hazy. However, the sight we’re met with isn’t one I expected. It’s much worse.