

# *Wings of Fate*

Those we love cannot die

## Chapter One

The moonbeam devoured the stars. The light glowed through my wings; plumes of obsidian feathers reacted with the magical essence of night. Platinum astral flares glided across the midnight sky, creating mesmerising patterns. Once a year; a reminder of my birth.

They faded out of my field of view. Forsaking me. As a youngster, I used to think I was special, believing that the stars were allies who would come and rescue me.

But that was a hopeful, naïve dream.

The solitary window met the roof of the dungeon out of reach. A glimpse of freedom. A sharp breeze broke the mute atmosphere. I unfurled my heavy wings, fluttering echoed throughout the hollow chamber. A sharp pain caused me to grimace as my muscles contracted.

Light-exposed lines on the wall show the number of moons I had witnessed. I picked up a tiny jagged rock and etched another line, this one more defined to signify the astral event. I exhaled, admiring my handy work as I leaned against the wall.

Refocusing my attention on the sky; my wings ruffled at the freedom the stars illustrated. The Xemi horde resided above. Their murky, sinister eyes haunted my nightmares. Especially in the first days, when I still wished someone would set me free.

Xemi obliterated my home during their invasion. They had been on the offensive for countless moons before that. No one was spared. In the beginning, the guards would kick the door, sneering about how I was alone in the world.

I took away a loose brick at the base of the wall, uncovering a shallow hole. I reached in, retrieving the delicate tattered remains of a diary. A souvenir from an ally who once showed

me how to draw. The pages contained a female figure with wings and no face. I scrawled my name persistently, not wanting to forget it. Arya... Arya...

I opened to a faded page, replacing something from long ago. Scribbling lead on paper was exhilarating, allowing my mind to voyage to a world away from here.

The distant echo of footsteps jolted me from my trance. I placed the book in the shallow hole, replacing the brick. The moon suddenly deserted me. I remained stationary against the wall, inhaling shallowly.

The Xemi sentry halted in front of the bars of the door. I squeezed my eyes tight, not wanting to see him. Bars clattered as he banged a wooden bowl on the floor. He huffed and turned; I counted as the boots stalked away. One, three, four... I exhaled as the comfort of silence returned. Glad they remembered to bring me food.

The necessity for sustenance urged me forward through the darkness. I extended my arm through the bars, searching for the bowl. I battled the piercing, bone-chilling cold that bit my fingers as I retrieved it. I withdrew ten steps, counting until my wings touched the wall. I slid down, shuffling my wings to a more comfortable position.

My gaze fell on the icy gruel. It splashed up the side of the bowl. My stomach twisted in disgust. I fingered at the cool liquid paste. The speed of consumption was important when eating the gruel.

An Owl bellowed out somewhere above. Jealousy creased my wings. I hurled the bowl back through the bars and reclined back beneath the window. The rain began as the initial signs of dawn broke. I closed my eyes and pictured the Owl stalking the wind, in a realm beyond this prison.

## Chapter Two

*Weighty boots infiltrated the house. Closer, closer. The ground quaked as they ascended the stairs. The door buckled. Time slowed. Giant arms hoisted my tiny body from under the bed. My wings hit out, but he forced me to kneel.*

*Before me, a pale violet-skinned female was being held to the floor, her wings hitting out as she fought against the Xemi commander. She faced me.*

*'No,' she begged. The Xemi Queen strolled through the door. Insectile wings jutted out of her red-skinned back. Her lifeless eyes drilled into me, turning my stomach to granite.*

*She came to a stop in front of the female and nodded. Suddenly, the ground thudded against my bones. Pain rattled through me, causing my teeth to crack. The boots circled me. Carefully, I attempted to sit up.*

*The sound of metal being unsheathed echoed throughout the room. The commander who restrained her stepped forward, stabbing the woman through the chest. Blue blood sprayed everywhere as he pulled the sword away. She slumped, falling away from him.*

*Warm blood painted my hands. As I crawled across the floor, I grabbed the woman, her face coming into view for the first time. Her eyes rolled back as morality abandoned...*

*Mother?*

The walls quivered around me, startling me awake. Disoriented by my fear, I gagged against the dense, dusty air. Bars clinked, crafting a deafening harmony.

I pressed my hands to my ears, wings enveloping me. Who could be attacking? Would they release me? Were they aware I was here?

I trembled as the wall crumbled around the window above me. Debris poured down. The steel bars persistently clanged and screeched in response. Are the walls strong enough?

I shrieked as the bars from the window crashed onto the floor, just missing me. My mind raced as the erratic thunder rained down.

The noise dispersed, leaving a ringing in my ears; I inhaled deeply, attempting to steady my quaking heart. The dust settled in the sunlight that engulfed the space. The impenetrable door had held strong. Sadness churned in my stomach.

Shaking my wings off, I sprung to my feet. I held my breath and listened intently. Silence. I surveyed the caved-in wall, parts held strong. I stepped over and reached for the edge of the jagged brick. I gripped the edge of the wall, biting my lip to ignore the stone cutting into my palms. I carefully attempted to pull myself up. My muscles groaned at me, causing me to slip, slicing my palms. My wing caught the edge of the wall and I launched myself up.

I lay on the ground, trying to recover my breath. The sunrays caused my eyes to sting. I blinked against the pain. A beaming smile made my cheeks ache. I leapt up, stirring my wings and tucking them in tight. I wiped the blood from my palms on my rags, staining them blue. The mud on the floor caked my feet, a strange sensation. I was thankful for it.

I peered down into the dungeon, skimming the groups of five tallies that stretched out along the remaining walls. I wiped my tears away with my hand. A long time to be alone. I was not solitary in all of it.

The explosions had largely destroyed the building above. Blasts resumed, forcing me to follow the wall to the left. I ducked between round buildings, increasing my pace.

A narrow opening appeared in the stone wall. I forced my wings against my body and lunged through. Ignoring the brick, tearing into the flesh of my chest and arms. I inhaled deeply and pushed myself free of the wall. I stumbled and landed on soft grass, tumbling down a slope.

Standing at the base of a hill that the Citadel stood upon. I sighed in relief as I looked out to a meadow encompassed by trees.

Vibrant yellows, reds and blues fluttered in the wind. Lightheaded giddiness filled me. I broke into a sprint across the grass. My legs faltered as I reached the treeline. The ground scraped my knees, causing me to wince.

My fingers savoured the feel of the blades of grass. The realisation caused tears to stream down my cheeks. Plucking a small red flower that lay next to me. The fragrance was sweet. The sounds of shouting from the Citadel shattered my attention from the flower's allure. I ignored the terror that crept in. Springing to my feet, I headed into the forest. I could not allow them to capture me.

As I staggered through vines and fallen logs, the shadowed canopy obstructed the light. Glowing fungus gleamed on the tree trunks, making an unsteady path. I followed it, ignoring the burning sensations that radiated all over my body.

I lifted my wings, opening them slightly, to prevent them from snagging on the floor and becoming damaged by twigs and thorns. My legs and back ached as my energy diminished. The cries of birdsong cascaded through my surroundings. The further I trekked, the warmer the air became. My lungs struggled against the humidity; I rested on a fallen log, revelling in the sweet scents and warm breeze.

Behind a clump of bushes to my left lay a shallow stream of water. I sunk to the ground, cupping the water in my hands. Bringing it to my nose, I inhaled and dipped my tongue. An inferno ignited inside me, and I hastened to guzzle more, wishing I had something to hold the liquid in. Satisfied, I wiped my mouth and cleaned the dirt from my hands and feet, relishing in the cool water. I swallowed the growing fear of being alone.

I spread my wings, avoiding trees and foliage, enjoying the weight of them against the breeze. Feeling stronger, I continued my venture further.

I reached a clearing. Coal black ground marked the signs of fire. The charred trees circled and spread. Devastation stretched out as far as I could see. Misery gripped my stomach. I sobbed at the anguish of such annihilation. No life remained.

A twig cracked behind me. I stepped to the side, slipping, dragging my hands down, grabbing nothing but ash and dust. Landing hard inside an immense chamber. I cried out as my wings bore my weight. Mud and soot covered my body.

A sticky substance encased my wings, preventing me from moving. The stench of rotting flesh made me gag. Something in the shadows moved, a terrifying clicking sound rose from the shadows, causing me to stop.

Silence. I began thrashing, freeing my left hand. I saw it then, eight hairy legs, a hard exoskeleton, and a deadly stinger protruding like a tail. The gigantic fangs twitched, glowing strings of white hung from them. Two coal eyes accompanied by four oval pools of black glinted in the low light.

Terror coursed through my body. My body tensed in terror. I assumed my fortune had changed when I escaped from one cage, but it was brief, as I found myself ensnared by another terrifying beast.

Tears stained my cheeks as I strived to break free. But my wings and strength betrayed me. Fear threatened to engulf me. I held my breath. The only sound was my heart pounding against my chest.

The predator observed me carefully as it crept over the rock. I liberated my other limb. A strangled scream ripped from my throat, as it grabbed me with its hairy legs. Jabbing me with its stinger into my stomach. I cried as pain coursed through my body. The repulsive arachnid started wrapping me in a stickier substance, twirling me. Nausea filled my stomach.

Suddenly, the creature froze. Dropping me. It retreated to the dark corner it had sprung from. There was a swift scraping sound against a wall. I groaned, attempting to escape from the entanglement, ignoring the rising pain in my stomach. All I could do was watch as the enormous creature hid.

A body thudded on the floor against the wall. My body tensed. Time seemed to slow as I struggled to inhale, as my stomach cramped.

The figure moved against the wall. A light appeared above him, revealing a male in leather armour with a blue sash with symbols of fire across his chest. A hood concealed his face except for his topaz eyes. They needed no illumination at all. His sword flashed in the light.

Our eyes met as the creature lunged from its hiding place. The man struck with his sword through its abdomen. The beast let out a wail that shook the ground. Its corpse collapsed stiffly on the ground.

The man was in front of me then. His blonde curls and topaz eyes filled with worry. Carefully, he worked, slicing the sticky snare away from my body. Lifting me effortlessly with one hand. I winced as pain jolted through me.



‘Easy, stop moving,’ he said. His voice was gravel in my ears. I halted and gulped in air as he leaned over me. I avoided looking at his face. He smelled sweet, like honeysuckle and lavender.

He took away the restraints that held my wings. I jumped up quickly and swayed, causing me to fall against him. A rise in pain caused me to double over, coughing. His hands felt foreign to my skin as he caught me. I looked at his hands, violet like mine.

‘Careful, being barefoot in here could be dangerous,’ he said. I winced as something sharp stabbed me in the foot. He scooped me up. I stiffened as he carried me through the cave into a tunnel. His powerful, cosy arms made me uneasy. I struggled against his chest and tried to hit my wings at him, but there was no power in them.

We reached the clearing I had fallen from. I hit him with my wings and stumbled away, landing on the rough scorched ground.

‘Sorry,’ I hissed. Steadying himself, he gripped my hand, pulling me up. My strength failed me as I leaned into his warm chest. He examined me then. Blood oozed out of the wound on my stomach. Blue glittered against my violet skin. His eyes darkened as he took in my dishevelled appearance. My wings shifted to shield my body.

‘It’s lucky I heard you when I did or else you would have been that beast’s dinner,’ he paused, ‘how regrettable that would have been.’ I stepped away, trying to hold myself up. My wings drooped. His eyes drifted lower. I tracked his look, feeling vulnerable. The fabric was torn exposing stomach.

A satchel appeared at his feet; he knelt, grabbed my elbow, and pulled me closer so he could inspect the wound.

‘That looks painful. The Aranid sedates its prey,’ he said, checking the satchel and offering me a sack.

‘Water, drink,’ he said, splashing some into his hands. I snatched the waterskin from him, bring it to my dry cracked lips. The soothing effects of the water dimmed the pain.

‘I suggest you sit while I tend to your wound. It may hurt,’ he said, standing pulling the satchel to his shoulder, turning me towards a boulder. I observed the charred, abandoned wood. The howling wind and the darkening sky created a red hue. I collapsed on the ground, feeling exhausted. I moved my wings as I leaned into the cold stone. He crouched, taking the waterskin from me and pouring some on the linen. He pressed it against my stomach. I whimpered as pain seared, causing my body to tense. The force of his touch made me nauseous.

‘So, how did you become ensnared in an Aranid’s lair?’ he said, wiping the wound.

‘I fell into the hole, and couldn’t get out,’ I said through clamped teeth.

‘And before that?’ he said, raising his eyebrows, applying more pressure to the injury.

‘A long story,’ I growled, exhausted as he pulled me forward, wrapping the cloth tightly around my abdomen. The heat it provided felt unfamiliar. I leaned into his shoulder; too tired to resist his warmth. My wings sagged around us.

‘I’ve not seen anyone with wings in many moons,’ he said, pushing me against the boulder, putting space between us. Returning me to the familiarity of the cold.

‘They were a gift,’ I struggled to say as a haze started dragging me toward sleep.

‘My name is Ezra,’ he said.

‘Arya,’ I replied. My name felt odd to say out loud after so long.

## Chapter Three

I jolted awake, buried in unfamiliar warmth and softness. Uncomfortable, I pushed the heavy black skin away from my body. The icy air bit my skinny frame, causing me to shiver.

Glancing down at the wrapping of linen around my torso. I stiffened; he had removed my rags. I blushed, cocooning my wings to shield my body from the cold. Where am I? Where is Ezra? I gulped in air, trying to calm my nerves as my hands shook. I touched the inner part of my wing.

The round room was scarce of furniture. A jagged mirror hung on the rounded wall, next to a small circular glassless window. Beautiful brown bear fur hung across from me. A shallow fire pit lay in the centre, underneath the gap in the thatched roof.

Suddenly, light pooled as the bearskin was thrust aside. Ezra strode into the room, smiling.

‘You’re awake, I was just coming to switch your dressings,’ he said, a frown furrowed his brows. I looked at him, taking his black tunic and tight leather trousers. A belt hung at his waist carrying his ruby handled sword and leather-bound dagger. I blushed as he caught my stare.

‘Why am I naked?’ I asked shyly, pulling my wings tighter. My heart hammered against my chest.

‘I had to bandage your wounds, and I was worried that those rags would create an infection,’ he said, snapping his fingers and garments appeared on the cot before me. My jaw dropped. He winked and faced away. I hastily pulled on the red cotton tunic dress that gathered on my waist and flowed out into a knee-length skirt. The fabric moulded around my shoulder blades, freeing my wings. I shook them. The warmth made my skin prickle. I almost yielded to the security that it created. I shook my head, coughing.

‘Thanks, you can turn around now,’ I said, sitting on the edge of the cot.

‘You have Magica? I thought the Xemi had destroyed it,’ I said, trying to hide my amazement.

‘No, not all. It is weaker than before but still useful,’ he said. I gawked in amazement.

‘Why don’t have you wings?’ I whispered. I flinched as caught a tender area of my stomach.

‘That is a story for another time. Currently, I need to get us some food,’ he said, snapping his fingers, and the satchel appeared. He sat beside the fire pit and stacked the wood that appeared. He struck two pieces of flint together, the sparks cascaded, igniting the wood.

‘Why not light it with Magica?’ I whispered, clamping my lips. I had not intended to speak.

He chuckled, ‘I cannot manipulate fire,’ poking the fire with an iron rod, ‘But you should know that, having abilities of your own.’

‘I don’t have magic, only my wings,’ I mumbled, looking away. A bewildered look caused me to eye him warily. My attention fell on the flames licking the sides of the pit. I could not dispel the growing knot in my stomach.

‘You don’t have to do this,’ I said. He swivelled.

‘Do what?’ he asked, a puzzled look etched his features.

‘Thank you for saving me, but you don’t have to help,’ I said, quickly getting up, and pacing around the fire towards the bearskin. He clutched my wrist.

‘What’s wrong?’ he said. I hit him with my left wing, forcing him to his knees.

‘Arya, please, it is not safe out there. I’ll take you to my home,’ he said. I paused, unsure what to do part of me wanted to run, but his tone created uncomfortable anxiety I struggled to ignore, building to the point of frustration. My hands shook.

‘You don’t even know me. I am nothing more than some female you found in the woods,’ I said, clenching my fists, trying to calm my nerves.

‘Just come sit, eat, we will discuss it,’ he said, staring at me. I chewed on my lip, considering running, but he would capture me quickly. I tottered back to the cot and slumped down onto it. Glancing at him as he peeled vegetables and put them in the boiling water. I fidgeted nervously.

‘What traits were you given?’ I whispered.

‘Water,’ he said, swivelling and opening his palm. A translucent horse appeared in his hand; he pushed it forward. The horse cheerfully galloped around my head. I reached out and touched it, causing it to disperse.

‘Wow,’ I breathed, smiling. I envied his talent. I watched as he added more ingredients from his satchel to the pot.

‘Water Magica has the potential to be impressive. Flame is the toughest element to wield,’ he said, looking at me. The weight of his eyes caused me to tuck my wings. The knot in my belly intensified, stealing my breath.

Ezra’s eyes darkened as he said, ‘Your wings are truly unique.’ Fear overwhelmed me like a wave. I sprung up and withdrew until the wall was against my back. I slumped over, put my hands to my face, and spread my wings around my body, screening myself from him. I struggled to contain the sorrow. The realisation of being free and the change in Ezra made my heart ache.

Fingers lightly brushed my wing, and I relaxed, pulling them behind me. Ezra crouched before me. I clasped my hands trying to stop shaking.

‘See, I might not know everything, but I know you are safe here,’ he said, returning to the fire, where two wooden bowls and beakers appeared. I calmed down, wiping my tears with the hem of my skirt. Silence hung in the air.

‘This was my house when I was young,’ he said, dividing the contents of the pot between the bowls. I watched, waiting for him to continue. His muscles under his ebony tunic tensed as he moved. I looked away and inhaled deeply as he approached me.

‘Before the war, I was still a babe mind, but when the Xemi attacked here, they slaughtered everyone,’ he said, offering me the bowl and sitting beside me. The heat felt odd against my fingers.

‘How did you survive?’ I said, enjoying the warmth against my fingers.

‘The Chief of The Ravensblood Brotherhood discovered me a day later under that cot right there, wrapped in a bearskin,’ he said, smiling.

He peered at the bed for a moment, his expression almost mournful. He looked away and ate.

‘The Brotherhood?’ I asked.

‘You will see tomorrow. Now eat,’ he said, miming eating, before taking a bite of his own.

‘What is this?’ I inquired, not accustomed to seeing anything but cold mush.

‘Rabbit stew, I caught them while you were sleeping,’ he smiled. I eyed the food and looked back at him.

‘Don’t tell me you never had rabbit stew before,’ he said, eyes wide.

‘No, The Xemi fed me for many moons,’ I whispered, feeling brave, I brought a spoonful to my lips. Vibrations delighted my tongue, flowing through my body.

‘Incredible,’ I said. I attacked the bowl. Ezra stared, mouth agape, as I gobbled up the food, each mouthful more thrilling than the former. I emptied the bowl and leaned back. Relieved my wound was no longer hurting.

‘Anyway,’ he coughed, glancing away from me, ‘I mostly survived because of my Chief. He raised me with his daughter, but the Xemi killed her when I was around eight,’ he said. Grief wrinkled his face. I sighed, feeling sad for him. He took the bowl from my fingers and placed them both to the side.

‘How did you find yourself in the Aranid s’ grasp?’ he asked.

‘You already asked me that,’ I said, shivering, suddenly cold. I grimaced, attempting to get up. My muscles suddenly felt sluggish. He raised me to my feet. I let go of his hands and staggered forward, falling into him, feeling light-headed.

‘Is everything okay?’ he asked, guiding me to the cot. I nodded.

‘You said it was a long story, and with the storm that’s coming in, we have some time,’ he said, helping me to sit on the cot. My wings coiled around me.

‘I was in a Xemi dungeon,’ I whispered, concentrating on breathing. He sat on the edge of the cot, at my feet, his legs hung off the side. I distanced myself away from him.

‘How long for?’ he said, holding my gaze, his topaz eyes gleaming with questions.

‘Around three thousand moons,’ I mumbled. Discussing it felt strange. Especially with him. I mean, who was he really, some person who saved me from an Aranid. I pursed my lips, not wanting to think about it any longer. Ezra clicked his finger. A steaming beaker appeared between us. He handed it to me, and I nodded in thanks.

‘It’s hot chocolate, nothing fancy,’ he smiled. I smiled back, delighting in the warmth against my fingers. I took a small sip. The rich creamy taste soothed my anxiety.

‘How did you survive?’ he asked, taking a sip of his own drink.

‘A guard would arrive once a moon or every few moons delivering me some mush-type substance. They never spoke.’ I said, devouring the guilt of a vivid memory.

‘Why don’t you have wings?’ I inquired, trying to change the topic. I shuddered, taking another sip. I glanced at him as he pondered this question. He peered at my wings, and quickly averted staring at the floor.

‘Xemi annihilated the sacred lands leading to a loss of Magica. Lynai stopped being born with wings. It has been detrimental to our clans,’ he said, stroking his smooth chin. ‘That makes you rather remarkable.’ The weight of his words made me feel uncomfortable.

Ezra took the beaker from me. I hiccupped and burst into laughter, clutching my aching ribs. It was bizarre to laugh. I struggled to breathe, trying to regain control between hiccups.

‘Evidently, the chocolate works nicely. Most kids have that reaction the first time they experience it,’ he smiled. Young ones? I stared at him, stunned.

‘There are children?’ I whispered, feeling fatigued. He added more wood to the fire.

‘Yea, some were birthed in Xemi camps, others rescued and brought to the clan. You will see when we get home,’ he said, draping a skin on me. He snapped his fingers as another cot appeared beside mine.

I wanted to tell him I have no home, but sleep fogged my mind.



## Chapter Four

*Blood, so much blood, warm against my skin. Arya, a faraway voice called out. The blood dripped on the floor, creating pools of sparkling blue. Someone hoists me up, but I fight them, hitting my wings out over and over until I am released, falling onto her broken body.*

I sprang upright. I look down at my hands, spotless. A wave of calmness help quell my trembling palms. Ezra hunched over his cot, rubbing his chest, groaning.

‘Are you all right? That was intense,’ he gasped, wincing, and sitting up. My heart thudded in my chest. Confusion surged through me.

‘What happened?’ I asked, yawning, and stretching my wings.

‘You were screaming. I tried to wake you, but you hit me with your wings,’ he said, rubbing his ribs.

‘Sorry,’ I wavered, fatigue resurfacing.

‘How are your wings in such great shape,’ he said. We sat facing each other on my cot knee to knee. The proximity to him made me nervously shift my wings creating a flapping sound.

‘I don’t know, I just got lucky I guess,’ I said, biting my lip, feeling the weight of his stare.

‘What is this place called?’ I uttered softly. He clicked his fingers, a small map appeared between us.

‘We are in a small abandoned town called Novantae. I found you here, on the outskirts of Fell Woods,’ he said, gesturing to land covered in trees. ‘We need to head north to Crescent Isle, across the river here,’ he pointed to half a moon-shaped piece of land cut off from the mainland.

‘Why,’ I asked, my voice came out scratchy I coughed.

‘Xemi patrols cover this area,’ he said. A couple of small beakers and a pitcher materialised in the air between us. He decanted the liquid into the beaker, handing it to me. I nodded, bringing it up to my lips. I took a long, dragging gulp, hiccupping. ‘Go slow,’ he warned, drinking from his own beaker.

Pointing at the map, he said, ‘We need to get here by tomorrow nightfall. These lands will swarm with Xemi patrols.’ I stared at the strange symbols and letters on the map. My head throbbed. I pinched my nose. ‘Drink, the water will help,’ he said, pouring more water into the beaker. I swallowed a long sip. As the water encountered my stomach, it lurched.

I vomited over the map, splashing us both with watery chewed stew and stomach bile. Chunks covered Ezra’s hand. I fell from the bed on unsteady feet. I hit the ground, causing me to cry out.

‘Damn,’ he muttered, as he poured water from the pitcher over his hand. I settled against the floor, my skin relishing the coolness. Blackness embraced the world.

## Chapter Five

The sensation of movement pulled me from a fever dream that ensnared me. Sweat clung to my skin.

Brilliant blue eyes came into focus as I gradually opened mine. My muscles spasmed as I attempted to sit up, but powerful hands pressed me down.

The stench of air induced me to gag. Are we safe? I wanted to ask. Fear sparked in those stunning eyes. They lingered on the backs of my eyelids long after sleep subdued the aches.

*The moon was bright as I stood in a familiar spot on the cliff edge.*

*'Jump' a far-off voice seemed to call. I spread my wings as a breeze followed and I stepped, falling. Down. Down. Down.*

'No rabbit stew, hot chocolate, and water... around two moons ago, why is she still unconscious?' said voices around me. I am ok, I wanted to tell them, but I could not gather the strength.

## Chapter Six

I gasped as I opened my eyes. Pain spread across my back as I sat up, flexing my wings. Sunlight poured through the small gap at the peak of the tent. My head spun; we were no longer in Ezra's childhood home. Unease gnawed at my stomach, causing my hands tremble.

'Finally,' Ezra said, as he entered the tent, carrying some linen. I tracked his strides as he marched towards me, thirteen to where he halted beside me placing the linen on the table. A pitcher of water appeared in the air. 'I'm sorry that I almost killed you,' he said. Despair clouded his dark eyes, he seemed exhausted.

'I'm ok,' I said, my tone raspy, I grasped at my throat.

'Have some water,' he said gesturing to the beaker floating beside me, 'No, I shouldn't have let you consume so many things in one go.' He perched on the cot.

'Where are we?' I asked.

His shoulders sagged. Someone stepped into the tent. He rose to his feet, putting a gap between us. A tall female with pale red skin and insect-like wings came into focus as the tent brightened. Xemi. I instantly recoiled.

'No!' I shrieked, the terror in my voice caused them both to freeze.

'I had to,' he whispered softly. I kept my eyes glued to her. Her repulsive green wings glinted against the light.

'I won't hurt you,' she said, with her hands open, 'You are safe.' I glared at her, the words not sinking in. My hands shook as panic started rising higher and higher. Ezra embraced me

as I sank to the floor, weeping. How could he betray me? I pulled away from his touch and wrapped my wings against myself, shutting them out.

The memory of Xemi's claws made my skin crawl. I sobbed uncontrollably. Why would he fetch me here? He knew they held me prisoner. How could he be so irresponsible to bring me back to my captors? I hitched a breath; a hand touched my wings. I shook them forcing the hand away.

'Arya, relax,' Ezra whispered. Rivers of sorrow consumed me once more. Soft footsteps disappeared, leaving me alone. Rocking back and forth, I struggled to regain control.

It was dark when I finally got a grip on my fear, steadying my quaking heart. I lowered my wings. Ezra perched on the cot covering his face with his hands. I sniffed. His sullen eyes met mine. Evidence of his tiredness was in the dark black that gathered under the pools of topaz. He let out a sigh, tugging at his hair.

'You know we didn't mean to scare you; I assure you I would never put you in danger, but the Nerium was fighting against the food you consumed, and your body shut down,' he said softly, closing the gap between us, he knelt, taking my hands. I inhaled sharply, wanting to push him away, but also grateful for the contact. I jerked my hand away from him, feeling conflicted. I avoided his eyes. He retreated, creating space between us. 'I've never treated anyone who consumed Nerium for so long before,' he paused, 'I apologize that we are here, but I didn't know what else to do.' The food the Xemi gave me was to subdue Magica, a plant so dangerous it was once forbidden across the entirety of Niafell. Someone had taught me that, but the memory fractured. I struggled to follow his words as tears rained from my eyes.

'Go away,'

‘We are in a tiny Xemi rebel camp. There are folk here who may despise us, but they took a stand against the Queen and have assisted our clan in gaining territory,’ he lifted me up and put me on the cot. The room span so I lay on my side. ‘I encountered Nova battling up north a few years ago. Our leaders sought to form an alliance,’ he added. Nova strolled through the cloth door, I tensed. Her clothing a blue tunic and leather pants did not hide her grotesque form.

‘Ezra have her drink this,’ she handed him a beaker. I took it from him. The heat was remarkable. I fixed my eyes on the clear liquid, my mind racing. Not all Xemi were evil, but they held me captive. They were malicious. They killed the woman in my nightmare.

‘You are safe now. I promise, that is the last of the antidote that you need to take,’ Nova said. I glowered at her. She sighed and left. I sniffed at the drink; the weight of Ezra’s stare compelled me to press it to my lips. The warm liquid helped dim my fear. Feeling slightly better, I set the beaker on the side table, my hands shaking.

‘We will leave when the moon is up,’ he said, sitting on the cot next to me. The quietness was oppressive, unlike before. ‘I am really sorry I made you sick,’ he said, staring at his hands.

‘I feel much better,’ I said. He glanced at me, and something flashed in his eyes, he blinked, and it vanished. Too exhausted to think about it. I fidgeted with the edge of my wing trying to settle my nerves.

‘You look worn out,’ I said.

‘I have not slept in three moons, I had to get us here, I was afraid that you wouldn’t get better,’ he grew quiet, as he stood to leave.

‘Don’t go,’ I whispered, reaching for his hand. I pulled him towards me making more space for him on the cot. He lay at the opposite end, his legs warm against my wings. Having him close was better than being alone in an enemy camp.