



MIDNIGHT
ON THE
CELESTIAL



JULIA ALEXANDRA



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PRELUDE



We are swept into a sea of dancers, the desperation and terror that has become our daily uniform buried in the tide of one night of freedom. The faces of the people I've come to know, to care and fight for, warm me like the rush of my magic.

"How can you dance when everyone's watching?" he says, bending down to my ear.

An unbidden wave of heat prickles along my skin at how close his mouth is to my cheek. *So the performer gets stage fright offstage.* "Pretend you're onstage. You can criticize my foot placement to make it feel more real for you."

"Very funny."

I twirl myself under his arm, pressing close to his chest. He may be all sure of himself with the guests, but around me, he's shy. There's something frustratingly attractive about that. The truth is, once he finds the courage to dance with me, he's much better than he knows. The muscles of his arms and the effortless flexibility of his legs and spine outpace my stiffer movements I learned from formal dancing at our estate's balls. He whirls me around the dance floor and makes it feel like we're flying.

For a moment, I swear we are.

Until I hear the screams.

CHAPTER 1



Father hosts a yearly soiree where I summon every dead person in the province.

The festivities flood the ballroom of Father's grand estate, and I'm the party trick. Even now, as I stare out from the dais over the mass of guests in their finery, I wonder how many more spirits I have left to bring back. Twenty, maybe thirty, if some of our guests expect both grandparents. I look forward to this all year, but I'm also starving.

Father's servants have pulled out all the stops, as they often do. The rich mahogany floors of Damarcus Estate gleam like a mirror's surface. Gold chandeliers hang from the arched wooden rafters, lighting the banquet table. A maroon tablecloth stretches under the weight of platters of roast chicken, decanters of wine I'm not allowed to drink when Mother's looking, and towering trays of chocolate truffles filled with raspberry sauce.

Those are my favorites, though I doubt I'll get any before midnight. The line to the dais is almost out the door. I crane my neck, surveying the guests crammed in front. A forced smile tugs at my lips, and I smooth the front of my dress to mask twitching fingers. I wasn't expecting this many people.

Mother places her hand on my arm, digging gold nails into my skin. "Rosaline, take Lady Sandralyn's hand."

My lips purse at Mother's clipped tone and her insistence on using

my full name for the evening. But one look from Father's scrutinizing brown eyes and lowering bushy brows assures me now is not the time to argue with her.

It's an important night for the Damarcus family. I know that better than anyone.

Lady Sandralyn stands on the step below me and reaches out to grasp my hand. My insides writhe when I think of her clammy palm in mine, but the momentary repulsion is necessary. I close my eyes, arm steady as our fingers clasp. The electric spark of her life flows from her veins to mine. Her hand trembles with the fear and awe trapped beneath her skin. The dizzying exhilaration of summoning takes over me. Heat builds in my fingertips and races up my arms. The comforting warmth gathers in my chest, expanding with each breath I take.

Nothing feels better than this.

"Who do you want to see?" My words come out soft, but sudden nerves flutter in my stomach like caged fireflies. Where is this coming from? I'm never nervous. Then again, this could be my last Resurrection Ball. Pushing the thought as far down as it will go, I open my eyes to look at Lady Sandralyn. Father tells me this puts non-Morphics at ease. *Let them look in your eyes and see that you appear human before showing them you're not*, he often says.

"I want to see my father," Lady Sandralyn murmurs, a whispered secret between the two of us. "He . . . he died last year." She swallows hard. "I'm sorry. I've never done this before. Should I tell you what he looks like?"

"No need." The bonds between family are stronger than with any other deceased spirits. Without warning, my eyes drift to the family portrait on the far wall across from the dais. It stretches from ceiling to floor. My gaze lingers there.

Easy to bring back family members as long as they're not mine.

My palm heats, itching with the energy of Lady Sandralyn's life force. I dig deeper and search through every particle for the bright connection to her father. I cannot afford any mistakes tonight. Panic claws up my throat as I reach for him, but I force myself to stay calm. Relief eases the

MIDNIGHT ON THE CELESTIAL

tension in my shoulders as the familiar pull of the spirit beckons me. There he is. A hot bubble of fire in her cool energy.

A floating sensation makes it feel like I'm lifting off the ground, but I'm still standing in uncomfortable four-inch heels. Wisps of glowing white light burst from my clasped hand, and a body takes shape.

The spirit of a man stands beside Lady Sandralyn, but he appears solid and lifelike.

Lady Sandralyn sucks in a sharp breath, and her eyes brim with tears. The crowd gasps and erupts into applause upon seeing the emergence of yet another spirit. Father beams, eyes shining with pride. I bask in this moment, letting the warm tingle of admiration wash over me. It's not only the adrenaline pumping through my limbs or the warm gaze of my father that makes me look forward to this all year. It's the way I control this moment. The power I wield on this night fills me with more satisfaction than any drink or delectable truffle ever could.

But I watch closely. When resurrected spirits stay for too long, their solid forms begin to rot. Their bodies stink, and they take on the wounds of their last moments of life. That tends to scare the guests, so I cut the interactions before they get to that point.

"Thank you, Lady Roe. Thank you," Lady Sandralyn says, relieved.

The spirit of her father places his hands on his hips. "What happened with my estate?" He narrows his eyes at his daughter. "You better not have let your husband make those renovations."

Good, this spirit feels like talking. Sometimes they don't.

After a few minutes, Mother clicks her nails against the green hourglass on the small table beside us. "Time's up," she says. Lady Sandralyn won't see her father again until next year. I roll my shoulders back and lift my chin as Lady Sandralyn leaves. There *will* be a next year. I force myself to think it. I've proved myself thus far tonight.

Father places his hand on my shoulder. He smiles, laugh lines crinkling around his eyes. Not everyone gets to see this side of Lord Cyrion Damarcus. He's one of those people who saves his smiles for those who earn them. "You're doing beautifully, Roe." He hands me a round glass bottle with indigo liquid inside. My cheeks heat, but I snag it from him,

hoping our guests won't notice. I've been taking this concoction each night at dinner to steady my nerves and focus while summoning, but it's embarrassing to need it.

My father's gift as an alchemist allows him to create potions that aid with a variety of ailments. Before Father found the right mix of ingredients, I became overwhelmed and unable to stop unwanted spirits from bursting forth and following me throughout the day. This was a nuisance at home and rather disturbing in public—spirits don't always look pleasant.

I swallow the indigo potion and relish the familiar taste of warm cinnamon and the tingling in my nostrils as it sizzles down my throat. My nerves from this evening give it a bitter aftertaste. "You've been up here long enough." Father takes my empty glass and kisses my cheek. He waves his arm over the line of guests and indicates the crowded dance floor. "Take a break."

"Thank you." I curtsy to the long line of strangers and acquaintances. Anytime I bring back a whole host of spirits, I pay with deathmares. I definitely won't sleep tonight. That's the way it is with Morphia. Every power has a price.

Our guests do their best not to groan, but they've waited over an hour. Let them wait.

I descend the dais, careful of my heavy maroon skirt, and do all I can not to race to the refreshment table. The best I manage is a fast walk across the dance floor. I stop at the table and drink two glasses of sparkling berry punch and grab a handful of truffles before I realize who I'm standing beside.

I curse internally but plaster a wide smile on my face. "Having a good time, Eliza?"

"Yes," she answers as she folds her hands over her lilac bodice. Her light brown hair bobs as she nods. I've always been jealous of her perfect brown ringlets and light blue eyes, but that sneer she's got on her face is all Mother. She can keep that. Sparkling sapphire jewels decorate her long, sheer sleeves. With my gold beaded bodice reflecting the light of the chandelier, the two of us must look like a constellation of stars. Neither of us hold back on fancy occasions.

MIDNIGHT ON THE CELESTIAL

And tonight is more than a fancy occasion. Tonight, Father reminds everyone why he is Lord of Damarcus Estate and a member of the High Council. Tonight, we celebrate my eighteenth year of life and the impending trial that comes with it.

I swallow hard and shove the fear as far down as it will go, grateful for the potion helping me focus. Eliza won't get to see me shatter.

"I hope you're having a good time, dear sister," she says. "After all, it may be your last."

Her choker is tied so tight it threatens to sever her windpipe. If only. My fingers pulverize the small napkin in my hand, but I won't let her ruin this for me. Annoyance contorts my words into a sharp-edged hiss. "Let's not do this now. Come stand on the dais with me."

Eliza scoffs and pops a dark chocolate-coated strawberry into her mouth. The rosy undertones of her pale cheeks flush bright red. "Please. They don't care about non-Morphics. You're the one they want."

I don't say the words burning like fire in my mouth. She could've been like me. She could heal broken bones and cure sickness with her tears, but she gave up her life as a mender. Voluntarily.

She peers down at me. She may be a lady, but she's got the intensity of a hurricane and she turns it on me. "I'm surprised you're acting so calm about all this. You have two days left until your trial. Less than that, really. Aren't you worried?"

Her voice lifts on the last word. She's loving this. Usually, she can't get to me, but she knows I care about my gift. If I fail my trial, the High Council will strip the Morphia from my body. I'll never resurrect again . . .

A spike of fear cuts through the buffer of contentment the soiree creates for me. I long to plunge into the sea of dancing bodies, allow the expensive silks to sweep me up as the protective cocoon of tonight forms around me.

I grab a chicken drumstick with silver tongs and ignore her. The servants would give me looks if I grabbed it with my hands. I sigh, feigning indifference. "All I have to do is prove to the judges my Morphia isn't dangerous. It's not too hard."

Eliza crosses her arms over her chest, reveling in the crack in my

enjoyment. She leans in so close I can smell her wisteria perfume. “Reginald’s coming over to dance with you. Enjoy the rest of your night.”

This time, I curse aloud. Reginald’s the son of a gem miner and *very* proud of it. I’m proud of my father too. He’s the only Morpich on the council, but I try not to work it into every conversation.

Reginald bows low before me, fluffy hair bouncing as he inclines his head. He holds out his hand, gemstone rings gleaming in the candlelight. “My father said I should ask you for a dance. As he’s an incredibly intelligent man, I’d be a fool not to listen to him. As would you, Rosaline Damarcus.” He clears his throat and adjusts the buttons of his crushed blue velvet coat.

I struggle to keep my lip from curling in disgust and take his hand to silence him. “Thank you, Sir De’Lacy. I’d be honored.” The words come out half choked and taste bitter in my mouth.

“Take my handkerchief before we go. You have chocolate on your face.” He pets my arm with fingers greasy from eating roast chicken. “If people see you dancing with me, you’ll want to look your best.”

The waxed mahogany dance floor creaks with the weight of a hundred dancers. People come from all over our province for this ball, traveling for days in over-packed carriages for a single night of resurrection. With my trial looming, Father says my gift has even attracted wealthy families from the northernmost provinces of Tamarynth. Most of them are on the dance floor now, red-faced and laughing. They’re drunk on the thrill of seeing their dead come back to life.

It’s all wondrously normal for me. Like breathing or blinking, I don’t think about it. Except when it doesn’t work. My eyes drift back to the family painting on the wall.

“You stepped on my foot.”

“Sorry,” I mutter. Reginald smells of garlic and grease, and I breathe to the side. I drag him to the right side of the dance floor, where there are vast glass windows. Being closer to the starlight and sweeping green hills of the front lawn gives me my breath back.

Reginald’s hand moves down the bare skin of my shoulder blades and settles on the small of my back. “Imagine my powerful family name at the end of yours.”

MIDNIGHT ON THE CELESTIAL

I shrink away from his touch. The soft chords of violin music envelop us. Damn. It's a slow song. I'll be lucky to make it out of here without a unity proposal.

Through the windows, I glimpse a spirit outside until I realize the apparition is me.

Thick, dark auburn hair hangs down my back, swinging with each turn. Pale skin glows back at me, corpse-like in the window. When I look down at my real body, the ghostly illusion shatters with the constellation of freckles dotting my arms.

Picture-perfect, but there's a gaping hole in my chest. Even as I try to enjoy myself, a hollow pit threatens to consume me. Is this my life if I fail my trial? Dancing with men and women, trying to decide whose ornament I'd like to become?

Easy for Eliza. She's always wanted to teach at a boarding school like Mother did before she moved on to summer semesters at the University of Credence. Their goals are different from mine. Much different. And—

When did Reginald put his hand on my ass? With ladylike grace, I squeeze his shoulder until he has no choice but to raise his hand or lose the arm. I'm torn between wanting to run from the dance floor or smack him in the face. Both are equally appealing.

My eyes sweep the room, settling on a tall young man wearing a deep emerald-green coat at the edge of the dance floor. He bobs along with the music; a tattoo of a spider is etched into the warm brown skin of his neck. A gold pin of a hawk in flight fastened to his lapel marks him as a member of the esteemed Morphic hunters.

Jasper cranes his neck to lock eyes with me, but his lopsided smile slips when my eyes widen in a silent urge for him to hurry.

He shoves through the crowd to get to me, treading on toes and jostling men of high standing.

"Roe," he says, pushing Reginald aside and holding his hand out to me, "I'd love a dance if you're game." I allow him to pull me away from a disgruntled Reginald. Jasper swings me in a lavish twirl. "Thought you needed rescuing, kid."

Jasper will always call me kid, even when I'm fifty. He's twenty-five now. The same age Leith should be. His soft eyes remind me so much

of my brother that I want to cry. I force myself to look over Jasper's shoulder and focus on the family portrait. There he is. Forever eighteen.

Leith had blue eyes like a sky after a storm and dark brown hair cut short. He stood as tall as Father and had the long eyelashes and sly smile of his mother. We may have been half siblings, but Leith was never half anything. A golden pin in the portrait marks him as a member of the Hawks, just like Jasper.

As a Hawk, he hunted and imprisoned rogue, dangerous Morphics. Morphics who escaped their failed trials and fled. Morphics who hurt other people with their abilities. He always said he did it for Eliza and me. The two people he loved more than anything. *I don't want anyone to be afraid of you*, he'd say to me. *That's why we take the bad ones. You're not like them.*

But I've never been able to resurrect him, to talk to him again. Leith doesn't come to me like the other spirits do.

Jasper pokes me in the ribs. "Quit daydreaming." He looks over his shoulder and follows my gaze. "I know he'd want you to relax a little. He always said your gift was beautiful."

"Not just beautiful." I lift my chin, emboldened by my successes in summoning this evening. "I could be useful. I'd bring back victims the dangerous Morphics killed, talk to them. They can help us track rogue Morphics."

Jasper spins me around and dips me, incorporating some fancy footwork as a few girls watch us. "Not this again." He stops and pulls me to the side. I set my jaw, preparing for another warning. "Joining the Hawks is dangerous. You know that better than anyone. Besides, it's not me you have to convince. It's your dad."

I'm about to roll my eyes hard enough for Mother to sense it across the room when a hand lands on my shoulder. "It's time," Father says to me.

With one last stomp on Jasper's foot, I follow Father back to the dais. The people in line, who've been talking quietly and sipping drinks, straighten when they see me coming. I ascend the steps, wishing I'd eaten more than a few truffles. My legs quiver beneath me, and the dryness in my mouth makes it difficult to swallow. The usual pride I feel

MIDNIGHT ON THE CELESTIAL

from summoning is replaced with the unfamiliar urge to tear from the room without looking back.

Father places his arm over my shoulders and squeezes, addressing the crowd. The music putters to a stop. I straighten my spine. “As always, thank you for coming. This is a very special time for our family, and I’m so grateful you all get to be a part of it. We have some guests from all nine provinces of Tamarynth tonight, but I know the residents of my province of Credence are especially excited for Roe to pass her trial. I’m certain she will take her place on the High Council one day.”

Cheers erupt, and I should smile, but a wave of dizziness makes me unsteady. Father’s words regarding the importance of tonight echo in my skull, thundering so loud that the applause fades to a dull buzz. As a man approaches me, I grab his hand but can’t focus on his energy. I’m distracted by the nauseating texture of a callus by his thumb. Perhaps I should have taken a second dose of Father’s potion. I know this man but can’t think of his name. He’s asking to see his late wife.

Jumbled thoughts cram my brain, making me sweat. It’s hard to breathe. Why is it so hot up here? The small, cruel voice comes back, sounding too much like Eliza. I could fail my trial, and if I do, they might take my Morphia. Or worse: They might send me to the *Celestial*—a place more dangerous than prison for Morphics.

Wisps of silver light shoot from my palm in blinding rays. I can’t control it. My chest heaves with the strain of trying to hold back. I’ve *never* lost control like this before. It’s as if my nerves from this evening have finally broken free, a wild energy eager to escape my tenuous grasp. The body of a dead woman stands before us, not solid and rosy-cheeked the way she should be.

Rotting flesh clings to the protruding bones of the woman’s shoulders, and her cracked yellow teeth part as she opens her mouth. Oozing black goop drips from her eyes onto her stained nightgown. Translucent skin stretches over her arms, but chunks of flesh are missing from her neck and collarbone.

The scent of decomposing corpse hits the room, and people slap handkerchiefs over their noses. Guests run for the doors.

The dead woman trembles, clutching frail arms to her bleeding chest.

She yells at her husband, slimy spittle running down her chin. “I was sleeping, Derrick! You woke me up, and now it hurts again.” She moans as blood blooms on the front of her nightgown.

People scream. She can't hurt anyone. She's not solid, but none of our guests consider that. I freeze, unable to make myself move. With my mouth as dry and brittle as her exposed bone, I can't form the reassuring words racing through my head. *She can't hurt you. She can't touch you.* My chest is so tight I can't take a breath. I can't make the magic stop no matter how much I want to.

I'm not used to seeing the guests' unbridled horror, and the fear of what they think of me immobilizes my mind and body.

Father pinches my arm. “Stop this. It's going to be okay, but you have to stop.”

Eliza's smirking face peers back at me from the crowd. I close my eyes and sever the connection, like cutting a string. But it's too late.

The faces staring back at me are wide-eyed and gagging behind handkerchiefs. They're all thinking it, just as I am. I've never believed it until now.

My trial is in two days, and I could fail.

CHAPTER 2



Most children who ruin celebratory balls might be punished with a day of answering their father's letters from disgruntled Tamarynth residents or sorting their mother's twenty-pound Morphic history books.

My father offers me a hunt.

My rain-sodden cloak hangs like a leaden weight across my shoulders. The moist smell of damp earth mingling with wet horsehair tingles in my nostrils. I relish the sensations of the forest. Although I wish I'd gotten the chance to braid my hair and eat breakfast, I don't complain about the early hour.

This is the first time Father has let me ride with the Hawks. Although he's made it clear he expects me to spend the next few years learning from him about what it takes to sit on the council, he's starting to come around to the idea that I may have a future with the Hawks. Letting me go on this hunt is his way of saying he *might* agree to my joining in a few years. I just have to figure out a way to convince him I'm ready now.

His words from this morning come back to me and replace my initial surge of excitement with a stone sinking in my gut. *This is not a punishment, nor is it a reward. What happened last night cannot happen again. This hunt will show me and the Hawks you're ready to start training with them.*

Even if Father lets me train, I'll be lucky to spend one evening a week

with the Hawks. If he gets his way, I'll spend the majority of my days shadowing him in his council duties and the rest, attending university. Although I've tried to argue that Leith started training seven days a week when he was sixteen and became a full-fledged Hawk at eighteen, Father reminds me Leith didn't make it through his first year. As if I need that reminder.

Grayson leads our group of hunters atop his broad gray stallion. He hasn't looked at me once since we rode out before dawn. No longer all lanky limbs and shy grins, twenty-five-year-old Grayson Caddel has filled out with muscle. His hair glistens dark gold, and his pale skin has splotches of pink from the cold rain. I catch a flash of his green eyes as he throws a glance over his shoulder, a gaze that reminds me of the sensitive eighteen-year-old boy I used to see in Leith's company every day.

"No Morphia on this hunt. I mean it, Roe."

Gray may have been my brother's former lover, but that doesn't mean he plans on giving me special treatment. It's been seven years since Leith died, and Gray's lost the carefree smile he used to have when he and my brother would steal away into the barn together. His warning chips away at my confidence, frigid as the icy rain pelting the back of my neck.

I incline my head in a stiff acknowledgment but turn my attention back to the forest. I ride a dark bay Thoroughbred with one hand on the reins and the other on the arrows in my quiver. At the slightest sound, I prepare to draw one. I don't care that all the Hawks snicker at me.

"Careful," Jasper croons, letting go of the reins to wave his arms. "There could be an attack at any moment."

If he were closer, I'd knock him off his horse, but some of the Hawks are less accustomed to me than Gray and Jasper. After my brother died, many of his friends took me under their wing, but not every hunter appreciates their powerful boss's teenaged daughter coming along on a mission. They'll need to start seeing me as one of them. No better time than under a cloudy gray sky with rain plastering our hair to our faces.

Several of the Hawks sneak nervous glances in my direction. Many were in attendance last night and witnessed my disastrous performance. I fight the sag of my shoulders under the weight of their suspicion. I can't let them see their doubt bothers me.

MIDNIGHT ON THE CELESTIAL

A piercing scream sounds a few paces ahead of me, yanking me from my thoughts. Although the sharp shriek makes my hair stand on end, none of the Hawks stir. My heart threatens to stop beating as I fight to stay calm. My horse shifts beneath me and exhales a nervous snort. The scream comes from a woman riding on horseback ahead of us. She's lost control of the reins and narrowly misses colliding with a tree.

The girl locks eyes with me, and the fear in her ice-blue gaze is almost enough for me to gallop forward to help her. But before I can react, the horse missteps and the girl tumbles onto the ground. Her shout of surprise is followed by the wet smack of her skull colliding with a rock. Blood seeps into the dirt as the horse sprints away. When no one else reacts, I slowly realize this is nothing more than a waking deathmare. I take deep breaths to remind myself it's not real.

The worst part of the deathmare closes in at the end. Spirits reach out to me, smothering me with their hands as they try to use me to visit the mortal world. I cannot move, and I'm grateful my horse keeps pace with the other Hawks while I try to calm myself. It's been fourteen years of deathmares, and I still can't stand the feeling of skin against mine.

When I use my Morphia and summon spirits, I pay in waking deathmares or horrific deathmare dreams while I'm asleep. The worst part is, sometimes I can't tell if they're real.

This time, a dark thought seizes hold of my mind and won't let go. I don't want to see a stranger die in the forest that stole my brother from me. The bitter sting of disappointment lingers. It's like a cruel joke to see another person's death in these woods. As if the forest is sending me a reminder that no matter how much I want it to, it will never show me Leith.

"So, what do we know about this Morphic?" I ask, desperate to redirect my thoughts from the woman's glassy stare and slack-jawed mouth.

One of the young women smirks. She urges her horse forward. "We know he's destined for a nice, long stay in Malachite Prison."

The Hawks break into a trot. We weave between tall trees with glistening green leaves and spiderwebs dappled with raindrops. Mud and rocks squelch underfoot. I suppress my shudder and try to pass it off as a reaction to the cold.

Malachite is the prison for Morphics who run from their trials or commit crimes. I've never been, but Father tells me it's a frightening place. Since he works closely with the Hawks, our estate isn't far from the prison. Mother talks about how unsafe it is every other night at dinner. *I don't care how thick the forest is, Cyrion. It would take those prisoners less than an hour to get to us. Think of the children,* she'd say through gritted teeth.

I clear my throat. "I meant, what's he done?"

Gray holds up a closed fist, indicating for us to stop. He swings his leg over his horse, patting its flank as he dismounts. He crouches, examining a pair of footprints embedded in the mud. "A mender," he answers, standing and swinging back up onto his horse. "He's been luring families with false promises. Takes their money but doesn't heal anyone."

Frustration tightens in my gut. Morphia magic is sacred to me, and I can't stand when someone uses it to hurt others. It's Morphics like him who make people afraid of us. All menders should technically complete two years of service in their province's infirmaries, which I'm guessing he skipped too.

"Don't worry," Jasper says to me. "We've got him now."

As if on cue, Gray brings his fist down fast. The Hawks draw bows and arrows, galloping forward with only the strength of their knees to keep them from falling. Morphic crafters enchant their arrows to fly as fast as the bullets from a pistol. They can enhance weapons, but their magic fades. Father wishes the Hawks would carry pistols, but the council thinks there's some sort of justice in having rogue Morphics taken down by their own weapons.

I urge my horse into a gallop and pull an arrow back on my bowstring. My blood pumps with adrenaline.

A man wearing a deep green cloak and torn trousers weaves among the trees on foot. The labored gasps of his breathing and the snap of twigs are the only sounds he makes as he runs. Gray raises his voice and orders the man to stop.

He doesn't.

We're gaining on him, but he has a major head start. Another sound floods my ears. A sound I don't think Gray recognizes for what it is. The

crash of a large body of water slamming into rocks. We're close to the divide between Credence and Windmere Provinces, which means he's heading for . . .

"Damn," Jasper yells. "He's heading for Windmere Falls."

The woman scoffs and releases her bow to clutch the reins. "He wouldn't jump, would he?"

The man runs in a straight line toward the sound of water. Gray holds out his hand as we ride hard to catch him, but the undergrowth's thicker and the rocks more slippery. "Don't shoot! We catch him unharmed unless we have no other choice."

Jasper coughs. "I think we're coming up on no other choice."

Without waiting for Gray's signal, a Hawk to my right releases an arrow. It's a narrow miss. Another arrow from somewhere behind me grazes the man's leg. I grimace at the spatter of blood and the way it reminds me of the deathmare woman's cracked skull.

Before I can stop to think, my body heats. The chill from the rain leaves me as my arms tingle with white-hot energy. I catch a swift shake of Gray's head as he realizes what I'm about to do, but he can't stop me. This is what I'm good at—made for, even. I close my eyes, allowing my horse to guide me. The blues and grays of the realm beyond life call to me, and I reach for a spirit.

Sorry, Gray, but you'll thank me later. Wispy silver threads of light spring from my fingertips and shoot through the trees. Concentrating, I pull the spirit with me and throw it down in the fugitive mender's path.

A vast oak tree falls from the sky, landing with an echoing boom in front of the mender. The dead oak slams into the ground, and I hold on to the image. I focus on the rough brown bark and the sticky sap embedded in its grooves. I'm not limited to human life energies.

Please don't turn into a corpse tree. It needs to look real.

The Hawks scream in surprise, and the man skids to a stop. He doesn't realize it's not solid. He stops long enough for our horses to reach him. Gray jumps from his mount and clasps crafter-made bindings around his wrists.

My first prisoner.

The man begs the Hawks to free him. The sound sends a sharp pang

through my navel. He may have been swindling people, but who knows what they'll do to him at Malachite Prison. I send up a prayer to the Riveners that they'll watch over him. Riveners guide spirits across the divide between this world and the after, but they also watch over us in life. I have to hope they'll spare some mercy for this man. At Malachite, prison guards could siphon the Morphia out of him against his will and lock the jars of his magic away on the *Celestial* cruise ship. It's what could happen to me if I fail my trial.

A feeling like cold skeletal hands wrapping around my throat holds my voice captive. I throw up a prayer for myself too. With any luck, the Riveners will take pity on a girl who also bridges the gap between the living and the dead.

I leap from my horse and follow Gray toward the prisoner. Gray mutters harsh words under his breath, avoiding my eyes. Jasper prods the man in the back until he seats himself atop Jasper's horse. The man's eyes shine with unshed tears.

An urge to grab his hand overtakes me. It's an odd sensation as I'm usually uncomfortable with physical touch from resurrection, but his misery seeps from him in tangible waves. The pressure in my navel spreads to my chest.

Tomorrow, this could be me. The thought propels me to take one step closer to the man atop Jasper's horse. "How could you do this?" he spits, his tears hardening to anger. "To your own kind?" He knows the tree was mine. The bark has started to decay into crumbling gray flakes and smells of acrid rot.

The man lunges forward, revealing a knife tucked away in his boot. I gasp as the glint of silver cuts toward my chest. He wields it with two hands, catching the edge of my cloak. The Hawks around me notch arrows, but only one flies.

I stumble backward as an arrow pierces the man's upper arm. A woman with long black hair unbound rides toward us on the back of a massive chestnut mare. She lowers a large bow. The prisoner slumps, the arrow sticking out of his shoulder.

Lysandra Jamison pulls back on the reins and skids to a stop beside us. "Careful there, wild girl."

“Are you okay?” Gray asks. Any anger he harbored toward me for disobeying him dissolves. When I nod without speaking, he looks to Lysandra. “She’s not coming with us to the prison. Will you see her home safe?”

The knot in my stomach tightens. There’s no way he’s leaving me behind, but I can’t find the words. What’s gotten into me? I’ve dreamed of hunting with the Hawks since Leith left on his first mission, but maybe I’m not cut out for this.

All the Hawks in my province are non-Morphic. I can understand why most Morphics aren’t eager to hunt their own kind, but I’d never had any qualms about it. Like Leith, I believed capturing the dangerous ones would make people less afraid. But then why did seeing that man in cuffs rattle me?

All I know is I don’t want to take this man to prison. Even if the Hawks don’t go inside, it’s still eerie getting close. But it’s better they think almost getting stabbed is what makes me hesitant. I’d rather be seen as scared than sympathetic toward a prisoner.

Lysandra’s blue eyes linger on Gray. He hasn’t had much to say to her since her son, Leith, died. She nods. “Of course.”

“I’m fine,” I say, knowing Gray won’t leave unless he hears it. For a moment, his eyes soften as he looks at me. He’s the boy who made me wildflower crowns, and I’m the girl who chased bullies with rat spirits as he and Leith egged me on. He nods to me, looking like he wants to say something, but thinks better of it. He checks the man for additional weapons before swinging back up onto his horse.

“Come on,” Lysandra says. “I’ll take you home.”

The Hawks ride off together. Unease raises the hairs on the back of my neck, and I can’t shake the feeling that I should have joined them.



Windowless, with dark maroon walls and a thick rug stretching over wood floors, Father’s study is more a cave than a room. Many centuries ago, before society evolved and learned the intricacies of Morphia, the non-Morphics used to call us witches. Despite it being an ancient, often

condescending term, Father reclaimed it and ran with witchcraft as inspiration for his interior design.

The moment Lysandra and I step inside, the simmering heat of a bubbling potion kisses my skin. Father stirs the cauldron with a bare hand. As an alchemist, Father's gift of potion mixing makes him valuable to the council. Two decades ago, he designed a potion that sears through rock for efficient access to gem deposits with minimal damage to the environment. This saved the council many angry letters and made my father famous throughout Tamarynth. Just last year, he brewed the cure for the Breathless Blight that spread through Kalenar and crowded the infirmaries for weeks. While this cure earned him respect and continued to prove his usefulness, it also ignited further questions about Father's power. If he could cure a blight, could he cause one too?

Alchemy earned my father his place on the council that makes decisions for the realm, but one wrong move could jeopardize his standing. Even though my father's proved his usefulness, some of the council members still worry that his magic is dangerous. Alchemers are the only class of Morphics who pay no price for the magic they create. Not to mention, there are some potions Father and his alchemist ancestors have been banned from experimenting with. Potions that lengthen life, erase memories, and act as poisons.

Father was once asked by a man visiting from the province of Laverne what was to stop him from making a potion that controlled people's minds. Father didn't deign to answer but told me later it is the same thing that stops a man from killing his brother. He is not a bad person.

I can't imagine conjuring spirits without paying dearly with the deathmares I've come to know so well both when I'm asleep and awake. Sometimes I'm jealous of Father tinkering with new potion recipes for hours on end with no consequences. Although he's quick to remind me even alchemers have limits. His father showed him the basics before he died—potions for cleaning, simple medicines, and those to briefly increase strength or speed. But it takes lots of experimentation and failed attempts to make complex concoctions.

When Father finally notices me, he yanks his hand from the potion and steps out from behind his desk. He wipes his hand on a cloth and

wraps me in a tight embrace, resting his chin on the top of my head. “I shouldn’t have let you go,” he whispers.

“I’m fine,” I manage, but tears prickle at the corners of my eyes.

Lysandra stands back from us. Her eyes settle on the potion on Father’s desk. Even after Father dissolved their union and married my mother, he maintained respect for Lysandra and above all, his son.

Leith should have been an alchemist. The gift of alchemy passes from father to son, but Leith was born non-Morphic. This wouldn’t be unusual as Morphia runs through families randomly, but alchemists are different. Father and Lysandra were shocked, but I never heard them complain. If anything, Father almost seemed grateful Leith was not burdened with the task of producing potions for the realm. Lysandra swallows hard, blinking back tears. Seeing Gray and the potions in one day must bring the memories back to her.

I avert my eyes from her before our gazes meet. The guilt I feel around Lysandra clings to me like the pungent stench of death. She’ll never see Leith again. Never get the closure of speaking to him because I can’t bring him back. I’ve tried time and time again, grasping her hand so hard my knuckles turn bone white. Nothing happens. It’s like I’m up against a block. I fail her every time.

I pull away from Father. His brows pinch as he adjusts his waistcoat. Something stern in his expression makes me take a step back. Whoever brought him the news of the fugitive mender’s attack must have also shared that I used Morphia during the hunt.

“You must do well tomorrow,” he rumbles. “There is no alternative.”

Yet there is. My gaze wanders to the oil painting hanging over the mantel.

A grand black cruise ship drifts in calm aquamarine waters with a glowing lavender mist around the bow.

The *Celestial* was created as a vessel to contain the Morphia magic extracted from dangerous Morphics who fail their trials. The cruise ship was not only a place for wealthy patrons to experience the wonders of Morphia magic at low risk but also a way to give Morphics one last chance to keep their abilities.

Father’s eyes follow mine, and his mouth tightens. “The guests hold

the staff to impossible standards. It is a punishment, a dangerous one not to be taken lightly.” He returns to his potion and drops an eagle talon in the liquid bubbling a pale green color. “Promise me if something happens, you won’t board the ship.”

Lysandra places a hand on my shoulder as I bristle, but I tear free of her grip. “You’re saying I should let them suck the Morphia out of my body and leave me—”

“Like your mother and sister . . . and brother, I might add,” Father finishes calmly. “Non-Morphic.”

Lysandra freezes at the mention of Leith, but I run blazing hot. How dare he use my brother to influence me. Mother’s always been non-Morphic and wanted Eliza and me to give up our abilities. Eliza was only too eager, not wanting to be used and employed only for her healing, but Father understood what it meant to me. Resurrecting the dead makes me feel the most alive.

I thought he cared as much as I did.

The pit in my stomach grows, weighing me down. He does care, but the realization settles like a physical barrier between us. If I had to go to the *Celestial*, it would embarrass Father.

It’s not going to happen. He’s only telling me this because I panicked yesterday. It’s my own fault if I lose control during my trial. If I am dangerous, they *should* take it from me.

Still, I can’t deny the impact his words have on me. Doubt is a weed. It adapts to my excuses and grows as he waters the roots I’m desperate to rip from the ground. Even if he’s right, I can’t look at him.

With as much calm as I can muster, I leave Father’s study before he can see his words have shaken me.

Lysandra follows on my heels. We emerge outside together on the raised porch overlooking the sprawling gardens and green grass of my family’s estate. I breathe in the earthy smell of mushrooms and fragrant herbs Father uses for his potions. The caw of ravens and crunch of carriage wheels turning over gravel meld in a harmony of sound as I close my eyes. I know the creak in every floorboard of this estate, and I’ve grown so used to the smell of sage that it’s strange when I enter a home without it, but I can’t imagine any of this without my magic.

MIDNIGHT ON THE CELESTIAL

“I want to give you something,” Lysandra says.

She reaches into her woven bag and pulls out a homemade book. “A gift before your trial.” I take the book from her, then flip gingerly through the pages. Sketches of Leith and me. She must have been watching the two of us, and I never realized she was there. Leith and me plunging our hands into icy streams for fish. Leith helping me learn to ride. The two of us sitting under a tree as he read aloud from a book.

“You’ll do well tomorrow,” she says. “I know it.”

I blink hard to clear my lashes of rain droplets and tears. My eyes shut as I fight to swallow the spiked lump in my throat until Lysandra grips my arm tight and squeezes.

A carriage marked with the official Tamarynth seal, pulled by large black horses, groans as it bumps along the stony path to Damarcus Estate. My mouth dries, and Lysandra’s hand on my arm is the only thing that stops me from running back inside.

They’re here.

The judges for my trial have arrived a day early. And they’re sleeping under my roof tonight. One thought holds me hostage as I watch them.

The trial is tomorrow. The trial is tomorrow. The trial is tomorrow.