ALL THE STARS AND TEETH

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There was once a mermaid who loved nothing more than a beautiful conch shell she brought with her everywhere. A sailor, noticing her affection for the conch, stole it. He believed he could trick the mermaid into thinking she’d lost her prized possession, and that she would fall in love with him once he returned it to her. But the mermaid was too clever for his tricks. She shed her fins in favor of feet and went ashore to hunt the sailor down. Upon finding him, she ripped out his heart, ate it, then returned to the sea with her conch in hand. This book is protected by mermaids. Steal it, and you best watch your heart.

Map art by Dave Stevenson
To Mom and Dad—
For your love, eternal support,
and for waiting in the hot sun every time
I dragged you to a million book signings.
I wouldn’t be here without you . . . literally.

To Taylor—
Because we finally did it.
THE KINGDOM OF VISIDIA

ARIDA
Island of soul magic
Represented by sapphire

VALUKA
Island of elemental magic
Represented by ruby

MORNUTE
Island of enchantment magic
Represented by rose beryl

CURMANA
Island of mind magic
Represented by onyx

KEROST
Island of time magic
Represented by amethyst

SUNTOSU
Island of restoration magic
Represented by emerald

ZUDOH
Island of curse magic
Represented by opal
CHAPTER ONE

This day is made for sailing.

The ocean’s brine coats my tongue and I savor its grit. Late summer’s heat has beaten the sea into submission; it barely sways as I stand against the starboard ledge.

Turquoise water stretches into the distance, stuffed full of blue tangs and schools of yellowtail snapper that flounder away from our ship and conceal themselves beneath thin layers of sea foam. Through the morning haze sits an outline of cloud-shrouded mountains that shape the kingdom’s northernmost island, Mornute. It’s one of the six islands I’ve not yet seen but will one day rule.

“Where are we headed?” I ask. “To the volcanos of Valuka? The jungles of Suntosu?” The weather is gentle enough that my words carry to the bow where Father stands, overlooking the water.

Years at sea have wrinkled his tanned olive skin, making
him appear older than his forty years. The wrinkles also make him look stern, which I like. Arida’s High Animancer, the King of Visidia, should always appear stern.

“The sea is a dangerous beast, Amora,” he says. “And you are too precious to lose. But prove your strength to our people tonight, and I’ll know you’re capable of braving it. For now, focus on earning the throne.” His deep brown eyes flicker to me, and he grins. “And on announcing your engagement.”

My throat thickens. Ferrick is a fine enough man, if one dreams of settling down with a childhood acquaintance. But I prefer my daily suitors, and their gifts.

Amabons, ginnada, and dresses from the finest fabrics, all to woo the impressionable princess they believe I am. Boys in the kingdom think they can buy my love and title, and I let them believe it. Nothing can compare to the lavish trinkets of hungry suitors, and I’m not keen on ending their generosity.

“Are you ready?” Father’s words are low but firm; something in his eyes shifts. He’s not talking about my impending engagement.

Instinctively, my hand goes to the leather satchel resting on my hip. The contents inside clatter as I touch their rigid edges.

“I am,” I say, though the words are bolder than I feel. Because even as the king’s only child, my people will not simply hand me the crown and let me lead out of birthright. Here, in the kingdom of Visidia, I must first prove myself to them if I’m to earn the title of heir. And I’m to do it by showing them a proper demonstration of Aridian magic; the magic shared only through the blood of the Montara family.

Tonight, I’ve only one chance to prove I’m fit to claim the title of Animancer—a master of souls. But my people won’t settle for a good performance. They demand excellence, and I’ll give them just that. By the end of the night, I’ll prove to them there will never be anyone better suited for the throne.
Sprawling mountains of ripe green and lush cliffsides stretch before us as the sea tugs our ship toward the docks of Arida, my home island. The cliffsides are thickly shrouded with bioluminescent flora, which, while beautiful in the daylight, will steal a person’s breath when they spread their brilliant purple and pink petals beneath the moon.

It’s magnificent, yet a thick knot of bitterness constricts my chest as we approach. I try to ignore it, but it sinks into my gut like an anchor.

I love Arida, but gods, what I wouldn’t give to turn this ship around and keep sailing.

Our sails bloat as wind hauls us toward the harbor, and Father readies himself to dock. I may be expected to run the kingdom one day, yet Father still refuses to teach me something as simple as sailing The Duchess. As I’m one of only two potential Montara heirs, he tells me travel is too dangerous. Despite my years spent begging, arguing that I should be able to set sail and see my kingdom, he hardly lets me touch the helm.

But that just means it’s time to try harder. Today is my birthday, after all.

I shoo my worries away with the seagulls that circle the main mast and join him. Father’s lips pucker as I smile; he knows exactly what I want.

“Please?” I rest my smooth hand beside his rough one on the helm, craving the sun-kissed glow and sea-roughened calluses he wears with pride—the telltale signs of a voyager.

There’s not much time left before we dock. The waters are growing shallow, beating angrily against the ship as we near Arida. A small crowd of servants and royal soldiers wait for us on the red sand, ready to whisk us away in preparation for tonight.

“No.” Father squares his shoulders to block me out.

I duck around him to claim his stare. “Yes. Just this once?”
Father’s sigh makes his broad chest quiver. He must sense how badly I want this, because for the first time in my life he steps aside and offers me the helm. My free hand grips the smooth wood without missing a second, and I suppress a shudder at how it feels between my palms.

Natural. Like my hands were built for this.

“You must go slowly,” Father says, but I’m only half listening. The ship feels every bit the beast I wanted it to, able to take on the sea’s promise of adventure and conquer anything in its path. It’s strong, fearless, but I sense its reluctance to listen to me. This ship is like my people; it demands only the most deserving captain, and will accept no less.

I scrape my nail gently against the wood and twist the helm, just an inch. The ship shudders in response, considering me. Father lingers close, his hands twitchy and ready to take over should something go awry. I won’t let it.

I am Amora Montara, Princess of Visidia and heir to the High Animancer’s throne. There is no ship I cannot sail. There is nothing I cannot master.

The wind shifts with a gust of air, disturbing the sails and pushing the vessel an inch or so to the left. It’s not a big shift, but the ship is challenging me, and I’m not one to lose. I adjust my grip on the helm to correct it.

I don’t need to look up to know we’re coming into shallow water. I can feel it in the ship’s behavior, in the way its steady back-and-forth lulling stiffens into something rigid and fierce.

“Tighten the grip of your left hand.” Father’s voice is distant, but I do as he says. The ship creaks in response.

I am Amora Montara. I dig my nail into The Duchess again when the ship quivers. The power of Arida is within me. You will obey.

The Duchess groans as we hit the sand, and the impact rattles my chest. I lose my footing and scramble to get a better grip, but the helm is slippery from the ocean’s mist, and my
face slams into it. Jagged wood scuffs my cheek, causing the ship to laugh as it settles into the sand. I pull back, running a finger along my skin. It comes away dripping blood.

The ship has won, and she knows it. I can’t remember the last time anything made me bleed.

“Amora!” Father’s voice cracks in horror. Anger swells in my belly as I glare at the hands that have betrayed me.

Blasted ship. All it had to do was listen.

“By Cato’s blade, you’re bleeding.”

Tonight, I must be perfect. There’s no room for ugly injuries that signal weakness.

“It’s just a scratch.” I shoo him away. “Mira will be able to cover it.”

Father wears guilt in the wrinkles between his pinched brows. The sight of it makes anger rip through my veins like poison. It’s not his fault I’m bleeding. It’s not his fault I cannot command even a ship to listen to me.

I take Father’s arm before he can say anything else.

We descend the bridge of The Duchess, to where Mira waits upon sand the color of fresh blood, standing between several rigid men and women who sport light blazers with rose-gold trim. She wears loose black trousers and a matching top that billows from her small frame, fastened by tiny pearl shoulder straps that shimmer beneath her thick stream of waves as dark and sleek as a raven’s feather. The solid rose-gold trim along her outfit matches the royal emblem she wears proudly on her chest; it’s the same as the others wear—the skeleton of an eel wrapped around a crown of whalebone.

Though she’s hardly older than I am, Mira’s sharp face is prematurely wrinkled from constant anxiety. In her five years as my lady-in-waiting, she’s taken every moment possible to fuss over me, as protective as my parents. When she catches sight of my cheek, she gasps and draws me forward.
“Today of all days.” She fishes a handkerchief from her pocket and rubs it across my cheek. Fierce disapproval lingers in the backs of her squinted blue eyes, and as I await the verdict, she frowns. “The wound’s fresh, so we may be able to conceal it if we act quickly. Come, let’s get you ready.”

I glance back at Father, seeking his smile of encouragement. But it withers into a frown as the officials draw him in, whispering secrets not meant for unproven successors. I take a step toward him, silently begging him to turn and seek my counsel or invite me into the discussion, but Mira grabs hold of my hand.

“You know they won’t tell you anything.” Though her voice is soft, the words feel like claws. “Not until after your performance.”

I shake Mira’s hand away, letting the ship steal my attention. Its wood creaks with laughter as it settles onto the sand, mocking me.

The sound sinks into my bones, and I wonder: If I cannot rule one ship, then how am I ready to rule an entire kingdom?
Ikaeans have enchanted the torchlight, blanketing the crowded path beneath my balcony in dazzling shades of pinks, blues, and purples.

Hundreds of Visidians climb the steep cliffs from the beach’s shore up to where the celebration begins below the palace, some of them using paved pathways while those more adventurous weave in and out of rainbow eucalyptus and up the switchback, choking on jeers and quick breaths as they race one another. A group of Curmanan soldiers wait at the shore to help those who can’t or prefer not to make the climb. They lift children and families into the air and high up the northern cliffs to where the celebration awaits. They’re skilled enough with their levitation magic that it comes easily as their breaths.

The steady thumping of the drums is more intense than it was earlier; every beat clatters my bones while the hollow
rattling of percussion fills my chest. The air pulses with energy and laughter, warm with the scent of richly spiced pork and roasted honey plums.

Every person—young and old—is out tonight. When the time comes for my performance, there will be no hiding from the eyes of Visidia.

“Isn’t it magnificent?” Yuriel asks. “It’s better than the theater out there, with all those fashions and magics. We should get the kingdom together like this more often.” My cousin sits on the corner of my canopy bed, lounging against a duvet of goose feathers as he picks at a platter full of lavish desserts. Sitting there, he looks almost like a goose himself, careful to keep anything that resembles chocolate away from the dyed pink peacock feathers that make up his eccentric suit, but sipping deeply from a crystal glass of plum-red wine all the same. I keep finding myself distracted by the startling brightness of his lavender eyes and the beautiful fluorescent-pink makeup that wings out from them.

“When I rule, I’ll bring the kingdom together for plenty of celebrations.” I step away from the balcony and draw the velvet curtains shut behind me. Saying it aloud heats my blood, making my skin prickle with anticipation for tonight.

In just a few hours, everything I’ve spent eighteen years working for will finally be mine.

My title as heir to Visidia. The opportunity to set sail and see my kingdom. The right to not only learn its secrets, but to command it.

“I’m glad to see you’re confident,” Yuriel says between gooey bites of frosted fudge. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Though Yuriel and I are both Montaras, our similarities end at the blood in our veins. With a father who is pale as powdered snow, my cousin’s skin is several shades lighter than my own copper brown. And while my hair is a mass of dark curls,
his, like all things in his hometown of Ikae, is extravagant. It’s the starkest shade of white, pure even at the roots. Where I’m tall and curved with muscle, he’s soft and delicate—a poster child for Ikae.

But our most distinctive difference is that despite his royal lineage, Yuriel cannot learn soul magic. He gave up that right when he was five years old and accidentally used soul magic to turn Aunt Kalea’s hair fluorescent green.

Though he was too young to be held responsible for this choice, it’s now a duty Aunt Kalea and I bear alone. If I’m not deemed a fit heir, then my people will move on to Aunt Kalea; the only remaining Montara left who has yet to claim a magic.

But that won’t happen. No one in my family has ever failed their performance, and I’ve dedicated too much of my life to be the first.

“Amora?” Mira appears from the connected parlor. Her irises are white and glazed over; the look of a Curmanan using mind speak. “Your parents are ready for you.” She blinks the blue back into her eyes. “When you’re ready, Casem will escort you to them.”

Yuriel wags his brows as I turn away to steal a final look at myself. The scratch on my cheek is hardly noticeable under layers of creams and powders. My crepe gown is made to be eye-catching—royal blue with a tight, structured top embroidered with thin gold whorls that accentuate my curves and illuminate the warmth of my copper skin. It’s tight in all the areas I can appreciate, and with my dark brown curls bundled loosely at the nape of my neck, the created effect is fierce.

Mira offers me a cloak that looks as though it’s been drenched in melted sapphires and dusted with starlight. She hooks it to my gown, just below the shoulders, and my breath catches. It glistens like the sun reflecting off dark water and
stains my fingertips with shimmer as I brush them across the soft fabric.

“You’ve truly outdone yourself,” I tell her, catching the proud smile she tries to mask.

“Ferrick’s a lucky man,” she says. “You look beautiful.”

My excitement shatters. With as much time as it took to fit me into this gown, I certainly ought to look beautiful. And I felt every bit of it before Mira mentioned Ferrick.

“Thank you,” I say briskly, trying to snuff out the thoughts of my soon-to-be fiancé. “I’m ready to see my parents.”

“Good luck!” Yuriel cheers as he pours himself another glass of wine. I leave him behind in my room, boots clicking against the marble floor as I follow Mira out the door. My guard, Casem, waits with his head tipped back against the wall.

As a Valukan, Casem’s able to manipulate the air around him. But Casem prefers weaponry over magic, and doesn’t often practice his skills. He proudly wears the uniform all royal guards and Visidian soldiers wear, regardless of which island they hail from: a striking royal-blue blazer and a shimmering sapphire cape threaded with silver stitching along the trim. The royal emblem of the skeletal eel gleams brightly on his cape as he dips into a bow upon spotting us, though his pale blue eyes linger on Mira longer than they do me. He’s like a walking honeycomb with his suntanned skin and sandy blond hair, and I swear that’s what he melts into every time he looks at her.

Perhaps one day they’ll work up the nerve to kiss and put an end to their constant longing.

“Do you two plan to enjoy the celebration?” I ask as we walk, thankful to have someone sober to talk to. “Or has my father put you both on duty?”

Their momentary silence is enough of an answer.
“I doubt I’ll be needed.” Casem looks over his shoulder, grinning at us. “But watching over you tonight is a privilege. Though, I admit . . . the roasting pork smells like it was cooked by the gods. I wouldn’t be opposed if you managed to stow away some extra food—”

“Casem!” Mira gasps, but the guard laughs and I smile at his gusto.

“I’ll tell the kitchen staff to set something aside,” I assure him as we ascend the stairs, my heart skipping beats as we approach the throne room.

The colossal double doors stare down at me, a looming presence that chills my bones. I pause before it, drawing a long breath as I take a moment to steady myself. Eighteen years, and this is finally happening.

Ornately carved with the map of the land we command, the entire kingdom of Visidia unfolds across the golden slabs, portrayed by a collection of islands inlaid with shimmering jewels. The island of soul magic and the capital of our kingdom, Arida is represented by a bright sapphire that sits proudly in the middle of the map.

My skin warms as I brush my finger across my home island, trailing straight above it to Yuriel’s home—Mornute, marked by rose beryl. A lavish, affluent island, full of stylish denizens who use their enchantment magic to have purple hair one day and pink the next. Mornute is well-known for not only its magic, but also for its lush mountainside vineyards. The island of enchantment produces and exports most of Visidia’s alcohol. Though their ale’s delicious, their wine is by far my favorite.

To the left is Casem and Mother’s home island of Valuka. Marked by a ruby, it’s where elemental magic is practiced. While Mother chose for her affinity to be water, those with Valukan magic may pick between wielding either earth, fire, water, or air.
Below Valuka is an island more elusive to me—Kerost, the island of time magic, portrayed with an amethyst. Though it’s impossible to manipulate time itself, those with this magic are able to change how bodies interact within time, slowing them down or speeding themselves up. We have soldiers and staff here at the palace who hail from all the islands, but it’s been ages since I’ve seen time magic in action. Father’s told me stories of how taxing that magic can be for its users, which is why it’s Visidia’s least practiced magic.

To the far right of Arida sits a thick emerald stone that marks the center of Suntosu, the island of restoration magic. Skilled healers often come to work for the kingdom, where they’re dispatched to healing wards all over Visidia, tasked to care for the sick and injured. But Suntosu is also the home of Ferrick, my fiancé, and for that reason I skim over the island quickly, not wanting to think about having to announce our engagement. I trail my finger upward instead, to the onyx that marks Curmana, the birthplace for many of our royal staff, including Mira. I think of the Curmanans I watched earlier, helping others up the cliffs.

But not all are skilled at levitation; some, like Mira, are skilled mind speakers who can communicate directly into another person’s mind without ever having to use her lips. Father’s employed several of them to work with the advisers on each island, and their magic is how we communicate with one another so swiftly. It’s also a great resource for the kingdom’s latest gossip.

When I go to pull my hand away, my thumb brushes over a tiny hole in the map, to the far south of Arida, and I bend to examine the hole that was once filled with a beautiful white opal.

Zudoh. An island that specializes in curse magic, banished from the kingdom when I was a child. I don’t know much
about their magic—just that it was used for protection. They could create barriers and charms that, when touched, would make people see strange things. But mostly the island was known for its advanced infrastructure and uniquely engineered wood that lent itself to producing our homes as well as our ships. As the southernmost island, its climate is the coldest of any. Winters in Zudoh are said to be harsh and full of snow and blizzards.

I don’t remember much about their banishment, as it happened when I was only seven years old. It’s a tender subject of conversation around the kingdom, often spoken of in whispers behind shut doors. Even Father doesn’t like to discuss it. Whenever I’ve pressed for details, he’s been quick to turn his shoulder and say that Zudoh doesn’t agree with the way the Montaras rule, and that they never will. Beyond that, everything I know about Zudoh’s banishment has been gleaned from keeping an ear to the kingdom’s gossip network.

I’ve heard that Zudoh’s advisers turned on Father during one of his visits to their island, and a fight ensued that left him severely injured. I vaguely remember a brief period when Father took a break from training me and I wasn’t allowed to see him. Back then I’d assumed he was busy; it wasn’t until years later that I connected the dots.

It’s infuriating, being expected to one day rule this kingdom, yet being treated like a child by having so much information kept secret “until I’m ready.”

That’s what I’m looking forward to tonight, more than anything. The moment my performance is over and I’m officially recognized as heir to the throne, I’ll demand to know everything there is to know about my kingdom. No longer will I have to wonder. No longer will Father be able to keep me holed up on Arida, telling me to keep practicing my magic. He’ll have to treat me with the respect the future queen deserves. I may
be one of the few possible heirs left, but I am not the fragile, breakable thing he believes me to be.

“Amora?” Mira’s voice draws me back.

Two palace guards flank my sides, each with a hand resting on the thick handles of the door, waiting.

I draw a breath. “Open them.”

The doors bring a rush of air as they part, knocking a few loose strands of curls free from their coil at my neck and into my eyes. My chest grows tight as my breaths quicken. I glance back at Casem and Mira, both of whom are on one knee with their heads bowed, then step inside.

The doors slam shut behind me.

There’s no need for light in the throne room. Torch- and starlight sneak through the open back wall and flood the cavernous space. Like everywhere else inside the palace, the floor is a striking white marble, though in here it’s partially covered by a thick sapphire rug laced with golden trim. At the edge of it, three thrones made from pearl and whalebone sit at the top of six black marble steps.

There will be four chairs, soon. Once married, Ferrick will sit beside me every time I hold council.

My palms sweat, but there’s no time to dwell on the invisible fourth chair. My parents stand before the two front thrones; the exposed panoramic balcony that overlooks Arida spreads out behind them. The enchanted torchlight that filters in illuminates their profiles and turns their bright smiles into miniature glowing moons.

“Amora.” Father speaks first. “You look beautiful.” There’s a table behind him, though I can’t see what’s on it.

The reality of what’s finally about to happen turns my legs into stone. Shakily I force them forward, step-by-step. Marble pillars loom tall beside me—there are four more between my parents and me. I count each as I move.
One.
One more hour until I prove to Visidia that I’m meant to be their heir.

Two.
Two more hours until I’m engaged to a man I’ll never love.

Three.
Three more hours until I give the command to ready a ship to set sail tomorrow, and demand to know every secret about this kingdom that’s ever been kept from me.

Four.
Finally the nerves come, burrowing into me. Making me sweat.

At the bottom of the stairs I bow, and Father chuckles.

“Come, Amora,” he says. “Come sit.”

I swallow a lump in my throat and climb the steps too quickly as I start toward my chair—the one in the back. Mother grabs hold of my shoulders and turns me around.

“Not that one,” she whispers, pointing me instead toward the largest chair—the one meant for the High Animancer.

My heart is a monster that rages against my rib cage as Father takes hold of my arm and guides me into his seat.

The room looks massive from here. There are no stars from this angle, nor any windows to overlook the island. It’s just me and a stretch of empty space that feels too large.

“One day, when the gods take my soul or the island no longer sees me fit to rule, this is where you’ll sit. You will rule this kingdom, as the gods created you to do.” Father’s voice is distant; my thunderous heartbeat pounds in my ears, louder than his words. “I know your magic, your control, and your strength. For these past eighteen years I have watched it grow within you every day, and I could not be prouder. The power of Arida is strong within your blood, and yet you’ve conquered it. Now it’s time you prove that to our people. Show them that
when my time ends, they may put their trust in you.” Father reaches behind him, drawing two elegantly vicious epaulettes from the table.

The ornamental shoulder pieces are alarmingly tall, encrusted with thick gemstones to represent the various islands of Visidia, and form jagged and dangerous spikes that will surely slice my own cheek if I turn too quickly.

Desire swells, nearly choking me. I never realized how cold or how light my shoulders were until this moment.

“Amora, do you swear to accept this position the gods have offered you by wielding your magic with honesty and fair judgment?” he asks as he hooks the first one on.

“I do.” I grip the arms of the chair to steady myself.

“Do you swear to uphold the laws of soul magic, knowing that every time you wield it, it must be with finality?” Father hooks the second epaulette.

“I do.”

He draws a step back to look me over. “And, most important, do you swear your dedication to protect the people of Visidia by upholding this magic for the duration of your life? Even knowing the consequences?”

I look at Father firmly, my chin high. “I do.”

His eyes beam as the torchlight catches them. “Then may your training end here, and may you be Animancer by sunrise. You have my blessing.”

The gemstones graze my neck and ears, forcing goose bumps across my skin. When I shiver, Mother presses a hand to my arm, her presence steadying me.

“Happy birthday, my love. We’re proud of you.” Mother’s beautiful brown skin glows as radiant as the seaside cliffs at sunrise, the warm amber shade nearly a perfect match of my own. Her brushed-out auburn curls are voluminous beneath
her elegant crown—a series of brilliant shells and coral, with several dried starfish woven in and inlaid with dainty sapphire gemstones. It matches her royal-blue gown, loose and seemingly understated, but woven with rich detail. Ruby-red threading lines her cape and marks her as someone originally from Valuka, and a smattering of tiny diamonds are dusted along her bodice. Her jewelry is what truly shines—fat pearl-and-diamond earrings, sparkling rubies and sapphires that adorn her dress’s collar as it fans out around her neck, and thin rings that make her fingers shimmer as she moves.

Something in her other hand catches the light and gleams. When she notices me staring, she smiles and opens her palm.

“This belonged to your grandmother,” she says, dangling a necklace from her fingertips. The chain is solid gold. It winds around a heavy sapphire that hangs in the middle, teardrops of diamonds dangling beneath it. It’s one of the most beautiful things I’ve seen. “She entrusted it to me when you were a child. These jewels are worthy of the future Queen of Visidia.”

Before I know what’s happening, the necklace is hooked around my neck. Mother kisses my temple, but my parents aren’t finished yet.

When Father draws a crown from behind the throne, all the breath in my body escapes.

The giant headpiece has been constructed from whalebone and plated in ivory. Sixteen pillars of bone spike from the base and spiral at least a foot and a half into the air. They’re sharp as icicles, ready to impale, and are softened only by the indulgent white and blue flowers Mother tucks behind my ear and weaves through the bones.

If there’s one thing I know for certain about this night, it’s that I am meant to wear this crown.
When I present myself tonight, there will be no question of whether I’m the one meant to be Visidia’s future High Animancer, once Father’s time has passed. When my people see me tonight, they will know, just as I do.

I stand and hug Mother first, then Father. Both hold me tight, but are careful not to knock the crown or cut their cheeks on my sharp epaulettes.

“Put on a terrific performance out there.” Mother adjusts the flowers in my hair, giving me one final look-over before smiling her approval.

“Show our people the power of the Montaras is strong,” Father says.

“I’ll do more than that.” I trace my finger along my crown, my breathing easier and my muscles relaxing with each passing second. “I’ll show them I’m strong.”

With the comfortable weight of the satchel on my hips, I’m ready.

Father cuffs my shoulder gently, just once, and offers his hand to Mother.

It’s time.
Every head turns our way as Casem escorts me from the palace and into the thick of the celebration. Heavy vines tangled with glowing pink flowers hang from the cliffside, brushing my shoulders and attempting to snake around my crown as we scale the mountainside, upward to where I’ll perform my ceremony later this evening.

Casem leads me through a sea of people who part for us as we pass, not letting me linger in any one place for too long. As we walk, he breathes deeply through his nose and groans. “By Cato’s blood, I wish my birthdays smelled this good.”

Dozens of vendors are perched along the mountain’s path, offering everything I could have imagined and more—roasted pork, sticky-wet honey cakes, rich banana pudding and sweets from Ikae, raw fish and sugar-glazed mango slices, chicken, fruits, everything. There are even some who sell toy crowns, or sabers inlaid with bold sapphire stones.
Two Aridian women have situated themselves near the wine barrels, laughing boisterously as a royal guard tries to usher them away and to the food stands. One of the women shoos the guard’s hands away with another laugh that’s almost contagious. Behind them, pink and blue torches light the night, shimmering with Mornute’s enchantment magic. They illuminate the figures of both performers and civilians who dance and sing to the beat of the drums, joyous and carefree. Wine-coated laughter bubbles in the air and layers itself on top of the music. On the beach below, others are still arriving on their ships, grabbing food and greeting one another merrily before they begin their ascent.

“It’s the princess!” A Valukan girl’s sharp whisper draws my attention. She stares at my crown with a slack jaw, and those who surround her are no different. They gawk at my adornments before they remember themselves and bow.

Before them, I keep my neck tall despite the weight of my crown, and my shoulders back even when the epaulettes fight me. Though part of me wishes to wave away their formalities, the truth is I crave them. Seeing my people dipped in respectful bows sets my shoulders straighter as my chest swells with pride.

All my life I’ve trained to protect these people, and now they’ll finally see just how capable I am.

As I make my way through the crowd, most Visidians step nervously aside, side-eyeing my crown and epaulettes with awe, while others rush to greet me with offered handshakes. While I recognize the faces of some, hundreds of strangers have flocked to my home to watch their princess secure her title of Arida’s Animancer, heir to the throne. They wear the colors of their home islands, creating a sea of various hues and fashions.

Like Yuriel, citizens of Mornute are adorned in feathers—today’s current fashion trend. One woman has enchanted her gown to look like it’s a single swan feather, with a sparkling
gossamer top that billows out at the waist until it fluffs around her. The man beside her has vibrant blue makeup that wings out from the bottom of his matching eyes. He wears a peach cape with shoulder pads of feathers that flare from his neck. Every few steps he takes, the cape shimmers with the passing image of a flamingo flying over it.

Children of Valuka are dressed simpler, wearing loose shawls and beautiful skirts or linen pants—light clothing that frees their movements. They play around one of the torches, stealing its flame and tossing it back and forth. A little blond girl loses control of the flame and singes the edge of her ruby shawl. Her mother catches what’s happening and swats the girl’s hand. She shoos the children away from the flame and relights it with a wave of her palm.

Magic in amounts I’ve never before seen is happening all around me, and I crave it. A woman with rich violet-brown skin and a soft face framed by cloud-like curls dons a Suntosan emerald cape as she uses her magic to heal the fire-wielding Valukan child. Behind her, a Curmanan man in black robes floats two glasses of wine beside him and carries full plates of food for his family.

In the midst of these people, children and their parents flock to watch a puppet show, one of the dozens of various street performances happening tonight.

“Come, one!” a voice trills dramatically from behind the booth.

“Come, all!” a crowd of children respond automatically, watching with buggish eyes.

Only after their response does the narrator continue. “Come, gather to hear the story of the great Montaras—conquerors of magic, protectors of the kingdom!”

Parents pull children onto their laps, and I wonder if they think this display as wonderfully over the top as I do.
I take hold of Casem’s sleeve as the dark velvet curtains of the booth open for the start of a show, and pull him back into the shadows to watch.

“Really?” he asks, sighing as I hush him.

“Once upon a time,” the narrator whispers, “a vicious monster sought to destroy Arida with its magic.” Lights flicker on in the booth as one of the performers jerks his hand up—it’s covered by a crudely made puppet of something meant to resemble a monster. “This beast was vicious and sought to corrupt those with multiple magics. Back then, you see, no one knew the dangers of it. They were exhausting their bodies, leading to slow, painful deaths as excess magic ate away at them.

“Magic has a way of making a person greedy,” he continues. “The more someone has, the more they tend to want. The beast preyed on this greed by offering others the chance to learn its magic—the most powerful magic the world had ever seen, it claimed. People jumped on the opportunity, never expecting what the monster really wanted from them: their souls!”

Gasps sound from the audience, and beside me, Casem stifles a laugh. I nudge my elbow into his side, stopping him before anyone notices.

For Casem and the onlookers, this is simply another ancient story of our history that we grew up with. For me, this is my blood. My ancestry.

“—the magic was a dangerous, wicked thing,” the narrator continues. “Today, we call it soul magic. It bound itself to soul after greedy soul of those who wielded multiple magics, killing them! But even with half of Arida’s population destroyed, the beast wasn’t content. As its hunger grew, it sought to spread its blight.” The beast chases a series of screaming puppets around the tiny stage before swallowing them. Casem presses his lips together tightly, forcing back a smirk. I let him have this one.
“When all hope seemed lost,” the story continues, “one person took a stand against the monster—Cato Montara!” A regal-looking puppet of my great ancestor jumps onto the stage, drawing applause from the children and adults alike. Many of them lift fake replicas of Cato’s skinning knife into the air and cheer.

“Cato hadn’t yet established the monarchy; he was but a humble, magicless man who sought to protect the people he loved. He made a deal with the beast—if he could convince everyone to be content with practicing only one magic forevermore, then the beast would have to give Cato its magic and leave Arida alone. The beast laughed in Cato’s face and agreed, for it believed people were too greedy for such terms. It didn’t expect Cato could ever convince others to stop practicing all but one of their magics—and yet he did.

“Cato then vanquished the beast with nothing more than a single skinning knife, and because of their agreement, its magic was forever bound to the Montara bloodline!” Children gasp in awe, looking at their toy knives.

The narrator’s voice rises dramatically. “But if we were to go back on our ways, the beast could one day return. So to protect our people from ever being tempted by multiple magics again, Cato designated that people pick only one type of magic to practice, and go to live on the island that would now represent that magic. He stayed on Arida, with those he chose as his advisers from each island, and created the kingdom. King Cato made Visidia what it is now, but”—here, the narrator lowers his voice in warning—“we are not the only ones responsible for keeping the beast away. The Montaras protect us, keeping it locked away within their blood. Should it ever break free from the Montaras, it will seek vengeance on all of Visidia. It will destroy every one of our souls.”
The children start to shift with worry, and the narrator’s voice evens out again, perfectly timed. “But don’t fear; as long as we don’t break our vow to practice but one magic, and so long as we have a capable animancer who’s strong enough to maintain the beast’s power and master its magic, Visidia will forever remain safe.”

Pride warms my skin and peppers it with goose bumps. It’s an incredible show, designed perfectly to preface the performance I’m about to give. I’m so invested in it that I jump as a little boy shouts from the audience, “If the magic’s so dangerous, why do the Montaras still practice it?” He earns a sharp shush from a woman I assume is his mother, though others offer a few quiet sniggers.

The narrator is prepared for the question. His voice is coy and smooth as molasses. “It’s not quite so simple. Magic is a strange thing, my boy; it’s not something that simply disappears when neglected. And Aridian magic is particularly dangerous, for the beast who gave the Montaras this magic is constantly fighting for control over its user’s soul. The magic must be used and exhausted, otherwise it will fester and grow until the beast becomes strong enough to take control.

“When King Cato locked it within the Montara bloodline,” the narrator continues, “he made it his family’s mission to master and contain the beast. Those who do are given the title of Animancer—a master of souls. That’s the reason we’ve gathered here tonight, to watch Princess Amora solidify her position as heir to Visidia by proving herself capable of becoming Animancer. May she one day rule as well as her father, King Audric.”

Nerves seize my chest. I take Casem’s arm to pull him away before anyone notices us, but a snort from the crowd halts me.

“Right, because another lazy ruler is really what we need.” My hold on Casem’s arm slips.
A frivolous soprano responds with a laugh. “Lazy? Please, you’re babbling like a clueless Kaven supporter. The islands are thriving.”

“Perhaps your island is thriving. But hardly anyone’s been visiting Valuka since the hot springs ran dry. Not to mention Kerost, which is barely keeping afloat.”

Several palace guards stand nearby, their eyes sparking with curiosity. They make no move to stop the slander.

From my position behind them, those watching the performance don’t notice me until I step forward to make myself known. “Excuse me?” Silence ensnares the conversations as one by one, faces turn to me in horror. The guards straighten at once. “Just what lazy ruler are you referring to?”

They stare at my crown. At the epaulettes. But their eyes are missing the same awe I noticed earlier. Fear sits in its place.

“We should get moving.” Casem takes hold of my arm and tugs me away from the audience. I let him.

“What was that woman talking about?” My blood burns, heating my ears and neck with annoyance. “Who’s Kaven? What did they mean about Kerost barely staying afloat?”

Casem waves me off with a flourish of his hand. “I wouldn’t worry about it. Clearly she has no idea what she’s talking about.”

“But it’s like they were afraid of me. And the palace guards just stood there!”

His forehead wrinkles. “Amora, you’re wearing a crown of bones, and knives for shoulder pads. Don’t misinterpret their respect as fear. And what would you expect the guards to do? Even fools may speak freely.”

But the words don’t settle me; there’s something more. “I should speak with my father.”

Casem’s lips press into a thin line. “You should be relaxing. If you get too worked up before the ceremony, you’re going to get your magic all riled—”
“This isn’t a debate,” I snap. “I need to speak with him. Don’t make me fight you, Casem.”

Casem’s eyes drop to my satchel, then to the dagger at my side. I’ve trained with Casem and his father, the weapons master for our soldiers, since I was a child. Mother and Father insisted I learn to protect myself, so Casem’s been my sparring partner for years. But he favors the bow, and I can count on one hand the times he’s bested me with a sword.

“Fine,” he huffs, tempering himself with a long breath. “But the king isn’t going to be happy.”

We find Father near the top of the mountain, lingering in a secluded area near the garden’s edge with advisers from all over Visidia flocked around him. Despite the drinks that several of the advisers hold, they’re anything but jovial. When I push past the guards, I see their bodies are taut and expressions serious.

Casem’s father, Olin Liley, is among them in a pristine sapphire blazer with golden trim. The royal Aridian adviser straightens as his son approaches, eyes narrowing in what I can only guess is a warning.

Casem was right—Father doesn’t look happy. But there’s a young man across from him who looks even angrier.

The adviser is younger than the others, in his early twenties at most. His garb is expensive—finely tailored breeches of a soft khaki, an unwrinkled linen shirt, and leather boots that nearly reach his knee. His frock coat is the bright shade of a ruby, and as his cuff links catch the light, I see that they’re embossed with the royal emblem. The trim that thinly lines the coat is a bright gold—he’s a royal representative from Valuka, then.

“We need to figure out a way to stop this,” he argues, face pinched as if thoroughly exasperated. “Please, just listen to me,
would you? Everyone can believe what they want about Kerost, but Kaven won’t stop until he’s—”

“Kaven’s nothing more than talk.” Father’s harsh dismissal causes the Valukan to bristle. But before he can say anything more, Olin sets a hand on Father’s shoulder.

“We have company, Your Majesty.” He nods to me, and Father’s brows lift in surprise as he turns.

“Who is Kaven?” I demand. The advisers snap to attention as I step forward. Their focus shifts to Father, whose fierce expression is amplified tenfold beneath his crown. It’s not quite as tall as mine, but it’s incredible—an ivory-plated skeleton of a Valuna eel. It’s a deep-sea creature of legends; a ten-foot-long beast with rows of dagger-sharp teeth—each the size of my index finger—that our ancestors were rumored to have fought nearly a century ago. Its mouth is so large that Father’s face sits within it. The upper jaw curves around his head, and the bottom half sits beneath Father’s chin, as if eating him. The eel’s jewel-encrusted spine stretches down his back and curves upward at Father’s tailbone.

I wonder if I look half as terrifying in my crown as he looks in his.

“You shouldn’t be here, Your Highness,” Olin answers. “You should be in the gardens, readying yourself for your performance.” His attention lifts to Casem, who wilts behind me.

“And I will be, once someone tells me what’s going on.” I look around him and at the Valukan adviser who now stands tall behind Father. He said something about Kerost, and as I look over the representatives surrounding him, there’s one color in particular I don’t see: amethyst.

“Where are the Kers?” My chest tightens as Father’s placid expression slips. The more I look around, the more startling their absence is. It’s not just a Kerost representative who’s missing.

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In all the excitement of the night, I hadn’t noticed an entire island of my people was missing. “Are they all right?”

“They’re fine,” Father says at the same time the Valukan adviser says, “They’re revolting against Visidia.”

Father groans, turning over his shoulder to glare at the Valukan. The young man glares back at him while the surrounding advisers shift uncomfortably.

“I’m trying to help you,” the adviser presses. “The least you can do is hear me out—”

“You’re all dismissed.” The anger in Father’s booming voice causes the adviser to flinch back. He opens his mouth as though to protest, but screws it shut when his hazel eyes find mine. I try not to stare back as Father says, “I’d like a moment alone with my daughter.”

Olin and the other advisers bow before they push the Valukan boy’s shoulder to get him to move. “Fine! But don’t say I didn’t warn you!” He growls a few choice words as the rest of the advisers apologize for his ignorance and steer the Valukan away.

Eventually only Casem remains, though he excuses himself to a spot several feet away, out of immediate hearing range.

“Strange that I haven’t met him before,” I say to Father. “I could have sworn I knew all the advisers.”

Father grunts. “Lord Bargas was apparently too ill to make the journey, and sent his son in his place. Charming boy, that one. Stormed in here and demanded a meeting like he himself was king.”

Though I don’t want to, Father’s blatant annoyance at the Valukan makes me laugh. It eases the tension in his shoulders, and clears the air between us just a little.

“I wasn’t aware Lord Bargas had a son,” I say, though the adviser certainly looked like the son of Valuka’s lead representative—smooth brown skin, a strong square jaw, and
an almost annoyingly straight nose. He was built similar to the baron, too. A little stocky, with broad, muscular shoulders and arms that the rest of his body hadn’t quite grown into, and the cocky look of someone with wealth to flaunt. “What did he mean when he said the Kers were revolting?”

“No one’s revolting. The Kers are only trying to make a statement; it’s nothing you need to worry about.”

“Then tell me what they’re protesting,” I argue, igniting a twitch that eats Father’s jawline. “Surely it’s something, if they’re trying to make a statement.”

“By Cato’s blade, you’re as stubborn as your old man.” He steps forward, and it’s impossible to determine whether it’s anger that lights his eyes. I steady myself, prepared to argue, but he drops his hand on my head, just before my crown, and the fire within me fizzles out.

“They want something I can’t give them.” Father’s voice lightens from the powerful baritone he used with the advisers and into the soft and quiet voice he uses at home. “Kerost has always been plagued by vicious storms. It’s why we employ groups of Valukans with a water affinity to live there, to help calm the tides and prevent the storms from destroying the island. But the Kers don’t like being dependent. A few seasons ago, I started to get reports of the Kers bribing the Valukans for training. They wanted the Valukans to show them how to control the water.”

His words snatch the air from my lungs. “They wanted to learn multiple forms of magic? But that’s suicide!”

Father grunts, dropping his hand from my head. “If enough people were to practice multiple magics, our hold on the beast would eventually fall. Souls would be ruined, and the beast would run rampant. That’s why I had to remove the Valukans from Kerost, to end the temptation. Unfortunately, they fell victim to a bad storm early last season. And without the help of the Valukans, it destroyed part of their island.”
It’s as though a thousand leeches suck the blood from my veins, making me cold and nauseous.

“What about the Suntosans?” I press. “Did you at least keep healers there to help them?”

“I had to remove them from the situation, too,” he says, and I’m glad to see that there’s at least a hint of shame reddening his cheeks. “It was only meant to be until they agreed to stop trying to learn multiple magics. But then the storm happened, and the timing was . . . unfortunate.”

How could he have kept this from me? And not just him, but Mira, too. As closely as she’s connected to all the kingdom’s news, surely she would have known.

I’m to be the ruler of this kingdom, and I intend to be a great one. But how can I be expected to protect Visidia if I don’t even know what’s happening within it?

“I needed to ensure you didn’t lose focus,” Father says, as if reading my thoughts. “Remember, Amora, until you or Yuriel have children, you are but one of two possible heirs left for the throne. Right now, the most important thing you can do for this kingdom is perform well tonight and claim that title.”

I squint my eyes shut as frustration swells within me, trying to quell it enough to see the situation clearly.

I know tonight is important. And it makes sense that the Kers are angry. But if Father let them get away with practicing multiple magics, Cato’s agreement with the beast would be voided and the kingdom would fall.

However, without the help of the Valukans, the Kers’ homes are being destroyed. We can’t let that happen, either.

“We need another way to help them,” I say. “We can strengthen their understanding of the potential dangers of practicing multiple magics, but we also need to give them stronger materials for their buildings and help them repair. We can’t take away their only source of protection.”
He sets a hand on my shoulder. “And I don’t intend to. But as the King of Visidia, I have to protect all our people. Keeping the Valukans there was a death sentence on our kingdom. But trust that we’re figuring it out, Amora. Trust that I’m going to fix it.”

Of course I want to trust that Father will make things right, but what I don’t understand is why he isn’t already in Kerost, helping them rebuild. If the storm was last season, why are we still standing around trying to figure this out?

“Just where does Kaven fit into this?” My head feels thicker by the second. How have I been so clueless? How has everyone managed to keep this from me?

Clearly wishing the discussion over, Father’s sigh is long and annoyed. “He’s a man who doesn’t agree with some of the decisions I’ve made,” he answers flatly. “But no one can agree with everything I do, can they? He’s no threat to us. Now settle your thoughts. All will be fine for one more night.”

Thinking back to the Valukan’s angry face, I’m not sure I believe his easy dismissal. I want to argue with Father and tell him I deserve to know more, but as I open my mouth, Aunt Kalea comes clambering up the hill with a grin. My aunt doesn’t wait for permission to approach, or even stop to think for a moment that she might be interrupting something important. Carelessly, just barely avoiding my epaulettes, she throws her arms around me with a hearty laugh.

“Oh, my beautiful girl! What a vision you are!” When she pulls away, she bats Father lightly in the shoulder. “How did an oaf like you manage to raise such a radiant woman, Audric? She’s stunning!”

Father laughs. “She gets all her charm from Keira. I’m afraid all she gets from me is her stubbornness.”

“And your sense of adventure,” I add, which makes Father still, his eyes softening. It’s a strange moment; a slow one where
he trails his eyes over me, then onto the crown, as though see-
ing me in it for the first time. When he smiles again, it’s warm
with pride and heats my blood.

“And my sense of adventure.” He turns to his sister and
claps her on the shoulder. “If you’ll excuse me, I should find
my wife before the ceremony, but bring Jordi and Yuriel by
and we’ll celebrate with some wine afterward. I’ve three bar-
rels reserved just for us.” He grins toothily, looking like the
silly older brother I only see him be when my aunt’s around.

“And Amora?” he adds quietly. I turn, nearly flinching back
when he bows his head to me. “I love you. Remember that after
tonight, won’t you? Once you’re officially the heir and are off
on all those grand adventures of yours.”

“Don’t go getting all sappy on me now,” I tell him, trying
to hide my embarrassment. “I love you, too.”

His smile is soft as he bends to kiss my forehead. The teeth
of the eel crown graze my cheek.

And then Father’s gone, leaving my aunt in his place.

She’s lovely in a gown of soft blue. It’s a statement
gown—a mix of Arida’s sapphire and Mornute’s soft hues. It
says she understands her roots are with Arida, but that it’s no
longer her home. She’s a small woman with olive skin similar
to Father’s, deeply tanned and brushed with gold from so
much time spent in the sun. She’s plump and youthful, with
only the soft wrinkles around her eyes hinting at her age.

“I’m so glad I found you before the performance,” Aunt
Kalea says. “How do you feel?”

For as long as I can remember, Aunt Kalea’s hands have
always been the softest, warmest ones I’ve ever known. She cups
them around my arms, holding me close so she can inspect me
with molten eyes. They’re the same eyes as Father’s, but sig-
nificantly less stern. And though she does well at masking her
expression, worry rests in the tightness of her breaths and the
hitch of her words. If she’s to keep her lavish life on Mornute, she can’t afford for me to make any mistakes tonight. And I can’t afford to, either.

Should I fail to demonstrate control over my magic and prove I’ve tamed the beast within me, I’ll be held until Aunt Kalea’s proven she can become the throne’s successor. Given that the law dictates a Montara without fully controlled soul magic cannot remain free, I can’t ignore the possibility that I could even be executed if I’m deemed too much of a risk. Our magic is too dangerous to not be fully controlled.

“Like I’ve been training my whole life for this,” I say. Aunt Kalea searches my eyes for another long moment, and there’s a flash of concern before she pulls me in for a firm hug.

“You can do this,” she whispers, her thick curls tickling my neck. “No one’s more ready for this than you.”

Though I know she’s right, the anxiety that’s been gnawing at me since the puppet show is building. I force myself to smile at her, trying to snuff it out.

Only after Aunt Kalea draws back does Casem hesitantly step forward. “I don’t mean to rush you,” he says, “but it’s time for Amora to get going.”

“Of course.” Aunt Kalea nods, tucking a soft brown curl behind her ear. I try not to stare at the lines of concern crinkled between her brows, or think about how both our futures hinge on whether I deliver a proper performance.

She kisses my cheek before peeling herself away. But before she lets go of my hand, her eyes capture mine, and I’m not prepared for what I see within them. No longer are her eyes the rich brown that match Father’s—they flash a bright, piercing pink, there for one moment and back to brown the next.

“Do your best.” Aunt Kalea’s smile trembles. “Please. For the kingdom.”
The anxiety doesn’t snuff out; it surges until it’s like hands around my throat. The noise I make as her hands slip from mine is hardly human. The ground beneath me is like the sea, swaying as her words sink in.

Aunt Kalea’s learned enchantment magic.

I am no longer one of two possible heirs; I am the only possible heir. Should I fail, there will be no one left to protect Visidia from the vengeance of the beast within the Montara bloodline.

Aunt Kalea showing me this was a warning—should she be forced to accept Aridian soul magic, it’ll be her second magic. The bond with the beast will be severed.

“You were supposed to wait.” My words are as shaky as my trembling hands. “How could you do this?”

“It was an accident.” Her eyes are wet when she reaches back out for me, but I refuse to look at them for another second. I take Casem’s arm. His eyes are narrowed with uncertainty, not having seen her use enchantment magic.

“Take me to the gardens,” I tell him, needing to get away from her as the magic within me stirs. “Now.” Casem obeys without hesitation.

It’s only a short walk to the gardens’ entrance, and my head is still swirling with a thousand thoughts when we arrive. I have to try my hardest to push them to the side and focus on the task at hand, just as everyone has been telling me to do. I can’t let myself be distracted by her betrayal.

Tonight, I must be perfect.

A place of worship, the gardens sit atop the tallest peak in all of Arida, about two miles north of the palace. The entrance is through a cavern that’s covered by heavy vines and thick ivy that Casem pulls back so that I can enter without snagging my adornments.
“You’ve got five minutes before others arrive,” he says as I duck into the cavern, greeted by the bioluminescent flora that coats the walls and helps guide my way into the gardens.

The moment I step into it, the sight steals my breath, as it always does.

These gardens are beautiful in the daytime, but their true magnificence shines beneath the stars.

A field of untamed flowers stretches out before me, some of them tall enough that they brush against my satchel, while others drip from trees in perfect spirals. Much of the flora is bioluminous, petals and bulbs glowing in brilliant shades of greens, pinks, blues, and purples.

I brush my hands across the bulb of a flower that’s taller than my hip, and it rocks back as if in surprise, its petals unfurling at my touch. They shimmer as they open, stretching awake.

Behind them, at the back of the garden, rests a small waterfall that glows as brightly as the flowers, creating breathtaking scenery that many travel from all over the kingdom to see.

At the base of the waterfall, a flat stone slab with a fire pit carved into the center has been erected as a stage for my performance. I take a seat on the edge of one side as voices begin to stir behind me. From the corner of my eye I see my parents enter the gardens, but I don’t turn to them in case Aunt Kalea is there, too.

I press a hand to my chest and draw in a long breath to steady my heart. It doesn’t help much, so I run my finger across the lip of the satchel and bow my head, praying that the gods steady me. It’s a familiar feeling, one that reassures me even as anticipation nips at my skin and buzzes around me. More and more people enter the gardens, heating the air with their chatter and creating a space that’s so full of different colors and styles that it’s dizzying to look at. Before them I make
myself stand tall, refusing to let anyone see just how deeply my nerves run.

I can’t think of Ferrick, somewhere in this crowd with a ring I’m to receive the moment this performance is over.

I can’t think of Kaven, trying to start a rebellion within my kingdom. Or of Kerost, broken and suffering from the storms.

And I refuse to think of Aunt Kalea, who will be Visidia’s demise should I fail tonight.

But I won’t let that happen.

I unhook the satchel from my hip and ready the teeth and bones that wait within.
I’ve spent weeks preparing the contents in my satchel, ensuring every tooth and small bone is ready to be wound with a hair from the prisoner I’m to work my magic on.

Because while this may be a demonstration of magic, it’s also an execution.

I hear the rattle of chains before I see the prisoners they belong to. Ten of them—seven men and three women—and all branded on the neck with two bold Xs, the mark of someone tried and convicted for murder. Tonight, some of their brands are fake.

The guards drag them through the crowd of onlookers and to the base of the stone slab I’m perched upon. Then the guards back away, leaving the prisoners standing below me with fear and rage warring in their eyes.

My magic works in two ways—the ethereal soul reading, and the physical ability to end a soul through death. These
prisoners are here to test the first side of my magic; I’m to determine whom I’m to execute by finding the irredeemable soul among the group.

Never in my life has an execution been public. Father and I perform them annually, late at night and deep within the underground prison, taking only the souls of Visidia’s most unforgivable prisoners to satisfy and quell our magic. For a person to have been selected for this demonstration, their soul would have to be beyond redemption.

The first in line is an older woman whose dark eyes catch mine sharply. I find my magic waiting in my belly and pull small pieces from it, waking the beast. Its warmth licks my skin, inviting me deeper into it by connecting me to this woman’s soul.

Magic spreads welcome heat through my veins and across my temples, and I sink into the power, relishing it. My vision fogs before quickly sharpening to reveal an entire garden of souls before me. They’re the colors of clouds—some like a threatening storm and others the clearest day—and they dance with the wispy motions of smoke. I press my nails into my palms for focus, and home in on the soul of the woman before me.

It’s like a dead starfish—faded, graying, rough, but ultimately still something that was once beautiful. She’s older, and with her age there’s been pain and hardships, enough to muddle and crack her soul.

This woman’s a fake. Someone only here to test me.

I step past her and move to the next prisoner, assessing his misty soul. It’s clouded by greed and wrath, and stained with the signs of murder. But he has remorse for the wrongs he’s committed. He feels his guilt, which means he’s not the one.

Swiftly but carefully moving through the line, magic scorches my core as I search soul after soul.
I know he’s the one the moment I find him. On the surface his gaze is cool, but the deeper I dig, the more rotted his soul becomes. It’s jagged and purpled like a bruise, peeling away at the edges and on its way to fading entirely. The wickedness of it chills me to the bone.

This man’s soul shows the tarnish of someone who has committed the foulest crimes imaginable, worse even than murder. Empty white space shines bright behind the peeling edges, telling me that there’s no going back for him. He holds no remorse for his choices, nor any sympathy for his victims.

“Him.”

Two guards step forward to lift the man onto the stone slab, while the other prisoners are pulled back. A few of them sigh in relief.

Beneath my lashes I peek up at Father. He nods, just barely, and I relax in knowing I’ve already succeeded with the first half of this performance. I picked the right prisoner, and now it’s time to prove mastery over the physical side of my magic.

“What’s your name?” I draw my dagger from its sheath on my thigh and use it to cut a handful of the man’s hair.

His answer comes in a voice so hoarse he has to cough to get it out. “Aran.”

“Aran,” I echo, “I have looked into your soul, and I have seen not only its corruption, but the pleasure you feel from the chaos and pain you’ve caused. You have no remorse for the crimes that have led you here, and I’ve found your soul too far gone to be repaired.”

Chills roll through my spine when he tips his head back and smiles. I try not to wonder who he killed, or if his family is watching from the crowd. As the future ruler of this kingdom, I cannot pity that family, and they know it. Aran certainly didn’t pity the families of his victims.

Silence builds as I steady my nervous breaths, strike a flint,
and let the flames of the fire pit flare between us. “Do you have any last words?”

Aran spits at my feet, but I don’t flinch. Instead, I wrap the sheared hair around one of the teeth in my pile and skim my nail across it. His jaw twitches as he instinctively runs his tongue along the top of his teeth, and I know the magic’s working when I see the very moment fear settles into his bones.

“All right, then.” I hold the tooth above the fire. “Let’s begin.”

I toss the tooth into the flames and the man seizes violently, spitting up a puddle of blood. In the middle of that blood is a tooth that I crouch to pick up, my body pulsing as the magic blazes within me. I sink into the power.

This physical side of my magic is based on equivalent exchange. If I want to hurt someone’s bones, I need to offer a bone first—any bone, but soul bound by part of the person who I want to use my magic on. Tonight, I use Aran’s hair. For everything that’s taken, an equal payment must be given, which is why no one will die until I use their blood.

I could end him slowly, if I wanted to. I could break bone after bone, or drain his blood until he’s nothing but a sack of flesh.

But I get no pleasure in these deaths. It’s my duty as a Montara to use my magic, or the beast within me will get stronger and try to take control. And so Father and I choose one prisoner a year each—the worst of the worst—to help contain our magic.

I make their deaths quick and as painless as I can; but in order to do so I need several ounces of their blood, which is where the teeth come in. Though I could use anything to get the blood—an arm, a leg, an eye—making someone lose a few teeth is the most humane way I know to get the amount I need.
As I work, I know without a doubt that no one will be able to question my skill. I’m in full control of the beast and its magic that rips through my veins. Aran’s blood flows steadily from his mouth as I offer the fire another tooth, and his eyes bulge with fear.

Confident, I peer sideways at the faces of my people and stand tall, wanting them to see me. To see their heir to the throne; their princess, who has spent the entirety of her life mastering this magic not for herself, but for them.

But as my focus centers on the crowd, they don’t watch me with the pride or awe I expect. Horror plagues their faces.

I catch sight of a man covering his daughter’s eyes, face twisted in shock. The replica of Cato’s knife trembles in her hands.

And then I see Aunt Kalea, her lips curled with disgust for a magic she’s never wanted. In my imagination, I see her eyes flickering colors, and have to still my trembling hands before anyone can notice.

I’m doing everything that I am meant to do to fulfill my duty, and yet there’s no respect or love in the eyes of Visidia. There’s only fear and revulsion.

My hands hesitate over the fire as the confidence I built like armor around me shatters. Everything I’ve done has been for them. And yet . . . my own people fear me.

I clutch my chest as the realization buries me, breaths tight. I watch each drop of blood splatter from Aran’s lips to the ground. I hear the sharp intakes of breath around me, and feel the weight of my people’s terror pressing down on me, so heavy that I can’t breathe. Panic climbs from my stomach to my throat, rising and building and clawing.

My attention slips from my magic as I take in the reaction of my people, and the magic within me lurches. This is what it’s been waiting for; my control slips, and the beast springs.
The magic sinks its fangs into me deeper than ever. The once comforting warmth now burns up my fingertips and spreads through my body like wildfire, tearing me apart. It’s as though I’m breathing through a reed, hardly able to find enough breath to fill my lungs. I shove my shaking hands against my sides and try to center myself against the hundreds of fearful faces that look back at me.

But I can’t do it. The magic consumes me.

Raw, urgent power thrums through every crevice of my being as I smear my blood-coated thumb across the prisoner’s tooth, feeling the heaviness of his life force pulsate beneath the tips of my fingers. I toss it into the flames, then take a bone from my satchel and do the same. Aran screams as the bone in his finger twists and snaps. But I don’t so much as flinch as I find another bone and a handful of teeth. I toss them into the fire and rip my way into and through the prisoner’s body, tearing it apart inch by inch.

More gasps sound from the audience, along with indiscernible yells of protest as Aran chokes on the teeth that fall from his mouth. But the noise hardly reaches me through the haze. I don’t feel the heat of the fire against my cheeks, or smell the flame charring my hair as I take those teeth, blood and all, to replenish my satchel.

“Your soul is wicked,” I hear myself telling Aran as he digs his nails into the ground and gasps for breath. “You don’t deserve a quick death.”

The beast whispers mercilessly in my head, telling me to rid the island of this tainted man, and then to find others. Wipe his soul from the earth, and destroy the rest of the prisoners, too. And then why stop at the prisoners? Every soul is wicked in some way, so why not take them all?

Breathless, I’m drawn to the pile of bones at my side. Beads of cold sweat trail down my neck as I snatch one, wind it with
his hair, and dip it into his blood. The fire lashes before me, fervent and seething with hunger. I offer the bone, and it splits and cracks as the flames gobble it up.

Aran’s scream grates against his worn throat as each unbroken bone in his finger snaps one at a time. Even with the pounding of the waterfall behind us, his sobs carry through the gardens.

“Mercy.” He spits up blood with every garbled word. “Please, by the gods, mercy.”

“The gods do not listen to the pleas of the wicked,” I hear myself say. “And neither do I.”

Somewhere in the distance voices shout, but I don’t care what they say. I let my magic eat its way through him, throwing bone after bone into the fire until Aran is nothing more than a heap of mangled limbs on the stone slab. His contorted body lies broken, limbs impossibly twisted. He’s misshapen clay I’ve molded to my will and painted with blood.

I prepare for another strike when a hand grips my shoulder. I turn, snarling at the molten brown eyes that stare back at me. It takes me a moment before I realize they belong to Father. His eyes are wet, and my skin itches with discomfort.

“Amora.” It’s a desperate plea that settles into my bones and quenches the fiery magic. I sway as my vision flickers, the haze fading. “Please, you have to stop.”

The crowd surrounding us roils, screaming distorted sounds that make my brain feel as though it’s being pinched together. I focus solely on Father instead, using him as an anchor to drag myself back into reality. The magic within hisses its protest, baring fangs as it fights to maintain control. I suffocate within its hold, choking as I rein the magic back.

Father holds me tight, strong fingers digging into my skin harder and harder until my vision clears and I gag on the stench of blood. I begin to shake as I take in the stains on my
palms and fingertips, the smoke scalding my lungs. The stones beneath me sway as the realization hits: I lost control of my magic.

Dizziness makes my weight betray me, and I collapse to my knees.

I let loose the beast, and it stole my senses until it claimed me entirely.

Aran lies before me, dead. He no longer looks human, all shredded flesh and mangled limbs. I clench my hands to the dirt as I try to recognize him, but it’s useless. When used correctly, my magic is meant to give someone a swift death. But there was nothing swift about this; Aran was tortured and maimed.

And I’m the one who did it.

I press my forehead against the dirt, eyes stinging as I bend before his body. “I’m sorry. By the gods, I’m so sorry.”

But my apologies don’t matter. As I hear the words Visidia’s people scream, I know even the gods can’t help me now.

“It’s the beast!”

“She’ll destroy everything!”

“She’s the one who should be executed! She’ll kill us all!”

I spot Mother’s face at the front of the crowd. Her body goes rigid while Aunt Kalea’s face falls with horror. Yuriel is between them, his hand clenching his mother’s arm tightly. His once wine-flushed face is now ashen with panic. Father stands before me, back turned to the crowd so that only I can see the terror in his eyes or the raggedness of his breaths. When his hands begin to shake, he presses them tight at his sides. My own hands are coated with blood, and I’m not the only one staring at them.

“I can’t protect you from this,” Father whispers urgently, almost as if the desperate words are meant for himself. Then he says it louder, in a harsh whisper that cracks his voice. “By the gods, Amora, I can’t protect you from this!”
I’ve no time to compose myself before arms yank me up from behind. Two guards slide their hands under my arms, narrowly avoiding slicing their faces on the spiked bones on my crown and the jagged epaulettes as they pin me tight.

“I’m sorry.” Father’s chest heaves. “I’m going to try my best to fix this.”

The world is spinning. Spinning. Spinning. A vicious coolness spreads deep into my bones. It starts in my stomach and spreads to my legs, then down my arms. Prickles of darkness plague my vision and threaten to overwhelm me as the aftershocks of too much magic make their move.

If not for the arms around me, I wouldn’t be able to stand. It’s taking everything in me to rein the beast within me back. To keep it tamed.

I try to keep my eyes open on Father, steadying my vision enough to see him turn his face away and clamp his eyes shut in disappointment. It’s a look that cleaves through my chest and leaves me aching.

Hundreds of Visidians stare back at me without mercy, and I shut my eyes against their yells, wishing I’d let the magic consume me fully.

I barely let myself hear Father as he speaks, his words like a thousand knives.

“Take her to the prison.”