



## CHAPTER TWO

# To Fail

Witnee awoke to two things: warmth, and light. And she immediately knew they were both very wrong.

She peeled her eyes open and blinked, blinded by the brightness around her. Her arm cushioned her head on the hard surface beneath her; her other hand curled in front of her on top of a damp, grey wool blanket. She recognized it immediately, even with her sleep-addled brain, and jerked upright with a quick breath. Her heart thudded into the base of her throat, pounding so hard she could hardly breathe past it.

The blanket Nells had laid out for their picnic last night was covered in dew. The basket he'd brought had been kicked to the side. He sprawled out behind her, one leg stretched off the blanket into the dirt. His arm draped over her hips.

Witnee's breath stopped in her chest. She edged away from him on her elbows, sliding out from under his warmth, putting the mandatory distance back be-

tween them. But it was too late. They had been together all night. The cleansing she would have to go through to get ready for the rituals...

She launched to her feet, peering through the gaps between the laurel trees. Daylight filled the spaces, still pale grey but slowly colouring with the light of the approaching sun. Witnee's chest squeezed with pure terror.

It couldn't be dawn already. How could she have been so careless?

Her toes dug into the cool, damp earth as she leapt away from the blanket. She almost sprinted toward the pasture before the sight of Nells' sleeping face stopped her. She couldn't just leave him here, unaware. He wouldn't be in half as much trouble as she would, but his father might still use the switch on him.

"Nells!" she hissed, her voice barely more than a whisper in the quiet morning. He had promised not to get her drunk. Had she drunk so much wine that she hadn't realized she was falling asleep? "Nells, wake up!"

She kicked a spray of dirt at him. He startled from sleep, blinking the soil from his eyes and squinting up at her with a sleepy hum. "Hmm— Wit?"

"Wake up and go home, by the Light! Hurry!" With her hands shaking like trembling leaves, she turned and sprinted toward the pasture. That was as much warning as she could give him. She had her own hide to save.

She raced through the pasture, startling Ursa and Patch who were already grazing near the east livestock