

Prologue

"And these clauses about threats? Her parents seem really concerned about making sure she will be safe here," Princen Alexis said, looking down at the two parchments before them. One was written in the curls and loops of the letters of their language, the other in angles and lines of the syllabary of Shān. But they both said the same thing.

"I have the finest assassins and mages hard at work to ensure no one who holds us a grudge would harm her."

"Like who?" Alexis felt a pang in their side, they had never known of any enemies. They had never heard of plots on the lives of their family, the royal dungeons were empty, and their parents were loved as some of the kindest monarchs Lebedia had ever had. Who would wish them ill?

"Leave that to me, I am still Czar. It is my task both as ruler and your father to make sure you and your bride come to the throne secure. It is mostly a formality." Alexis' father stood up and waved his hand, dismissing the notion and Alexis' anxiety.

"I do not think I am ready." Alexis sat back in their chair, letting out a sigh.

"I was not ready either," their father said, reaching his hand across the mahogany table and laying it on his child's.

"But you got lucky. You and mother, you understand each other. You love each other."

"You will be lucky, too. This marriage is important, Alexis. We need to settle this dispute, it's been too many generations. Your marriage to Princess Yi Zhen will bring peace."

"I know, but—" Alexis pulled their hand away from the Czar. They needed to do this for their country, for their people.

"Is there someone else? Someone here at court?"

There were dozens of "someone else's"; kisses behind curtains, hands held a second too long during dance practice, sidelong glances when attending lessons. But there was nothing serious, nothing that was worth troubling their parents with. Nothing that had ever lasted more than a few fluttering weeks.

"How did you feel when Lady Natalya came home?"

It was not the question the Czar was expecting, his jaw dropped and he stared at his child. He sighed. "She had been sent to be a lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth, her parents wanting her to be in the kingdom of Ahrian. Their family were distant cousins to the Queen Elizabeth, and wanted to support her. Natalya also wanted to undergo the magics she needed for her transformation away from Lebedia, away from the court, especially after Maria was engaged to me. She is your mother's first love. I knew that. I knew that she loved Natalya as my parents lay out the betrothal agreement before me, just as I am doing now. But Natalya was gone, far away on the other side of the continent, and your mother had the most beautiful eyes."

"She came back though."

"She did," he said, nodding. His hands were interlaced in his lap, and he kept looking down at them, as if they held drawings of these days gone by. "Your mother loved me. We adopted you. Named you heir. But I knew she still loved Natalya, and it was with Natalya that she had always wanted to have a child. I could have let it break my heart. I could have let it break hers. I could have locked her in her rooms and banished Natalya. She could have ran away in the night and traveled with Natalya. It was the hardest time of our

marriage. We cried, we said mean things to each other. We threw compromises long settled back in each others faces."

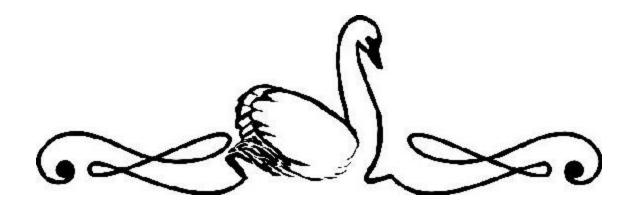
He stood up, grabbing his cane and walking from the office and into his sitting room. Alexis followed, unsure if they should bring the paperwork with them, but decided to leave it there.

"Your mother is more passionate than I am, which is to say, I am not. Which is why you were adopted. I kept waiting for her to throw that in my face, to lump it in with the way she hated how I slurped my soup, or how she got so annoyed by how I would bite my nails sometimes. I kept waiting for her to scream that I did not care that she longed to give birth and how she gave that up for me." He went to the fireplace and rested his arm on the mantle, his forehead on his arm.

"That's when I knew that she loved me, truly and deeply. She was not asking to leave me, rather, she was asking if she could bring Lady Natalya into our family. I love her so much, Alexis, I would give her the world if I could. How could I deny her another partner? How could I not want her to have as much love as she could?"

"I did not know. You three make it look so easy to love, to be kind to each other. I do not know if I can take on the responsibility, the duty—"

"We were not ready either. Which is why we made a mess of it at first. We messed up, we had to learn how to communicate. We had to learn how to ask and how to tell and how to understand. You will not feel ready to rule when I die, no matter when that is. I did not feel ready, then, either. I still do not, honestly. You will not feel ready to parent when you look at your first child. But you will learn. Bring the paperwork here. We can sign these and send off the envoy to go fetch your future wife."



Chapter 1

It sometimes felt as if the lonely sorcerer had willed her into existence. She was lost, wandering in the woods he had made into his kingdom, and he had accepted her without question. His ocher eyes made no more than a cursory sweep over her before he extended his hand.

"Do you need help?"

"I don't know," she told him, her back against a tree, hands gripping the bark, her long white hair a tangled mess around her. No one had ever spoken to her before.

"My name is Ivan. Do you have a name?" He took a step back, looking around as if for searching for clues.

"I'm not sure. I have not needed one before." She let go of the tree and took a step towards him, her head tilted to one side.

"How old are you?" He squinted at her, and she shied away from his gaze. It felt as if he was looking inside of her, seeking something unseen.

"I don't know."

"What *do* you know?" He shoved his hands in the pockets of his toolarge robe.

"I woke up in the lake a few days ago." She looked behind her and pointed to the only lake the forest held.

He furrowed his brows, and ran a hand through his shaggy brown hair. "You seem to me to be a little shy of two decades old, you do not remember

anything before a few days ago?"

"Should I?" She shook her head.

"I suppose it does not matter. You can stay with me, if you would like."

So she followed him. He carried himself through the woods as though he expected the dawn-poppy, ferns, and orchids to bow before him, and the towering oak and maple trees to move out of his way, an easy smile on his face and his hands clasped loosely behind his back.

His castle was a large thatched cottage with a stone chimney, and he invited her to live with him inside of its moss-covered walls. She fell into his life easily enough. She claimed a small room in the east as her own, and then claimed a name of her own—Katya— from one she read in a book. She accumulated charms and trinkets to solidify her sense of belonging. This arboreal king kept his own belongings in some sort of order, but she could not differentiate it from chaos. Despite the lack of discernible organization, she soon found a trove of books and journals. She loved to look through his journals detailing the creatures in his kingdom, marveling at the accompanying hand-drawn illustrations. Everything from the looming *leshy* to the irritating mosquitoes indexed and accounted for.

If there was a strangeness to living with a sorcerer, she did not at first recognize it as such. She never noted that neither of them seemed to age, nor that both of them had some affinity for the animals in the forest. She never wondered what he had thought of her when he came upon her. Somehow, years passed. During that time she never truly encountered another human and had no standard against which to measure her own life.

"These insects make a sweet substance," she said one day. They were both seated at the oaken kitchen table, one on either side. Ivan was either sorting his ceremonial dagger collection or hunting for one that was missing, Katya could not tell which. He nodded in what passed for a response.

"Do you think we could construct a home for them?" Her words came out all in one breath, and her eyes were wide as she shoved the open book in his face. "Here," she jabbed her finger at an illustration. "We could build it in the back garden, the book says this 'honey' is good for baking, in tea, and to keep wounds from festering."

"Katya, I am busy!" His shoulders tensed and he tapped one of his knives on the table with slow *thunks*.

She raised an eyebrow as she looked at his dagger collection and then back up at him. "With what?"

"You are impossible." He threw the dagger down and grabbed the book from her, "let me see the book. Should be simple enough to build a hive for them, the problem would be getting a queen to relocate."

"Could you use... well, you could do that with magic, right?" She tried to keep her voice light. Despite living with a sorcerer, his magic made her uneasy. She could never place why. At least, not in a way she wanted to verbalize, even to herself.

He put the book down and squinted at her, frowning. "I could, of course."

"We could try to coax a queen without magic first, but maybe I would ask for a small bit of magical help if it has been a few weeks and there are no bees."

He leaned back, rubbing his chin. "But with the seasons changing, you would want them established sooner rather than later."

Her shoulders sagged. "We could wait for next year."

"You asked about magic, but now you seem to want to avoid it. What is going on?" He leaned forward again, resting his elbows on the table and his chin on his fists.

"Nothing." She grabbed the book back, clutching it to her chest. Her face felt like it was on fire, and she suddenly wanted to be anywhere but here.

"All right, I will not pry, but if you want to talk about whatever is bothering you, I am here."

She was glad when he made no comment the next day when he found her taking a saw to the woodpile. The construction of the beehive distracted her for a little while from the pile of books she still had to get through, and the joyful arrival of a queen and her workers prolonged that diversion. She screeched when she went outside that morning to check for new inhabitants.

"What happened? Are you all right?" Ivan said, standing disheveled and out of breath in the doorway.

"I think I have bees!" She beamed, not taking her eyes off of the tiny entrance.

"You scared me! I thought you were hurt!"

"I'm fine, come look at my bees!"

She felt his arm settle over her shoulders as he kneeled down to peer

inside. "You did it! We should celebrate tonight."

He went into town that afternoon and came back late. Ignashino was outside the woods, a fair bit of distance away, and Katya had never been there, though she often wondered what it must be like. He was frowning when he came back home, his brows knit together in worry. Katya was about to ask what was wrong when he dropped a pouch on the table.

"You can make a better garden," he explained. "I think there is about 30 different types of seeds in there. I hear the honey tastes different depending on what sorts of flowers the bees pollinate."

"Thank you!" She opened the pouch and sorted out the smaller pouches inside, each containing seeds of different sizes and shapes.

"I am probably going to be busy a lot these next few days." He sank into a chair, leaning back and closing his eyes, his hands interlaced in his lap.

"Oh? With what? You looked worried earlier, is everything all right?"

"I do not know yet, worrisome news from the capital. I overheard some conversations today. I want to look into it."

"What sort of news?"

"I should not have said anything, I will keep us safe." He pulled a crumpled paper out of his cloak pocket and uncrumpled it in his lap. Katya craned her neck to try and read it, but he tore it up and threw it in the fire, then stormed into his room and locked the door behind him.

Katya did not linger long on his dour mood, instead she threw herself into gardening and reading while he was gone most of the time over the next few weeks. She returned to her neglected pile of unread books. As the pile dwindled, she asked Ivan if he had any more hidden in a cranny she had not noticed. He stared at her for a long time, as if she was a puzzle he was trying to solve, rubbing his chin. She was beginning to think he would not answer her when he got up from his desk, and headed into his room, motioning her to follow.

She hesitated, her stomach in knots. She'd never been in his room before, and her eyes leapt from one corner to another as she entered, taking in all the odds and ends, tools and instruments, he had collected. He heaved a trunk out from under his bed, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a key. He held it in his hands, scrutinizing it. He took in a quick breath and then opened the trunk. "If you are interested," he said as he stood back up and backed away from the trunk, allowing her to approach and look inside.

All the books held inside of this trunk were on magic. She backed away, but she wanted to lean closer, she wanted to pull out each book linger on the title, her fingers tracing the inlaid gold lettering. Her heart was racing, the desire to flee from or dive into the trunk twinned and paralyzed her. Ivan looked at her and frowned, his brows knitting together. He let out a sigh and closed the trunk.

Katya wanted to yell, to tell him to wait, but the words would not leave her mouth. Instead of locking the chest, he dragged it out of his bedroom. Katya followed him, one uneasy step after another, her heart still pounding in her head.

"I'll leave these here, so you can get them if you are interested."

For days she resisted, glancing at the books in the trunk while holding one of the better worn, but mundane tomes in her lap. Magic was *his* thing. But there might have been more to her hesitation than that. "Katya," he said to her one day, "I can tell you want to read them, why not just read them?"

She turned to stare out the window.

"Are you afraid? I do this sort of thing every day."

She glanced at him, his shaggy brown hair falling over his thick eyebrows and covering his eyes, and then returned to her intense study of the insects milling outside. She was afraid. She was afraid that the books might contain the answers to the questions that had lodged in her heart and scratched at her core every time she took a breath. Where did she come from?

She did not want to be preoccupied with that question, she was here now. She was here and happy, and that should be all that matters. Looking into magic might mean finding more questions instead of answers, it might means years of desperate searching and crushing heartache. It was better not think about it at all.

It was frightening, too. Ivan seemed exhausted after larger spells, and when he got something wrong, a rare occurrence, it could be catastrophic. It was a reasonable choice, she told herself, to stay away from magic.

Except.

He out running an errand the day she opened the first book. She learned magic in the hours he spent away from the cottage, stealing away a text and secreting it back into the trunk when she thought she heard him approach. She learned that all magics required a source of power that you could not create something out of nothing. Each form of magics had laws or

rules or ceremonies, but most of the books suggested that regardless of the form of magic, all required a small bit of life as the sacrifice, be in the caster's own well of aether, or that from the earth, or trees, or creatures.

Some darker texts suggested that great feats could be accomplished by using all of the life of a creature. Illustrations accompanied these somber spells, knives being pressed to the throats of birds or goats. She did not linger on these pages.

She read about conjury, witchery, thaumaturgy, celestialism, and sorcery. All different forms of magic, each with their own styles, instruments, and accouterments. She read vociferously, a magpie stealing spells and styles and stratagems to make for herself a nest of daggers and crystals and wands. Soon, the magic she had feared came to her easily, and soon she was doing simple magics without error. She could light a candle, conjure a wind, and call a storm, and summon earth golems. She could make a healing tonic, or brew a pot of poison, and she could identify both by smell.

She thought she kept this learning to herself, but she was caught. She had stayed up late the night before, reading by candlelight in her room, her door closed. But she still needed to wake at dawn to tend to the chickens Ivan had purchased for her from the nearby town a few weeks prior. After that, there were even more chores to be done. Ivan, disguised as always, left after lunch for an afternoon of bartering his teas, charms, and tonics at a market. She was exhausted by the time she settled in at the kitchen table for more reading that night.

"Katya, go to bed."

"What?" She sat up, the candle burned out, and looked around.

Ivan snapped his fingers, and several of their wall torches sprung to life. "I said, you should go to bed. I cannot imagine a book to be a good pillow."

She looked down, the book still open to a page on using the stars to divine the future. "Oh, you're right." She tried to slam the book closed, hiding it as though she were a child caught with an extra sweet.

"Wait!" He called. Katya turned around, sure she had been found out. "I got you something while I was out," he said. He pulled a ceramic mug out of his bag. "This should keep your tea warm much better than the one you have now."

"Oh! Thank you!" She took it from him with her freehand, keeping the

book's title still out of sight by clenching it to her chest. The mug was hefty and glazed with a beautiful blue paint. She always appreciated the small gifts he brought back for her when he went to town.

"Were you thinking of invoking the Boar?" Ivan gestured at the book that Katya clung to her chest. *He* had *seen*, she thought. *He saw the exact page the book was open to*.

She acted as though she had not heard him as she gathered her skirt and stood up, placing the mug on the counter in the kitchen, and then turning to head into her bedroom.

"Celestialism was never my strong point, maybe we can go the lake tomorrow night and see which stars are out, make some charts?" She paused in the doorway, her one hand braced on its frame as she tried to quiet the war in her head. He could teach her a lot, but if she took him up on his offer of mentorship, what might happen next?

"We can do that, but I would want to learn at my own pace, this feels like a private and personal journey for me. It's not that I don't trust you, but that I want this for myself."

"I understand," he said as he headed to his own room.

The following night they headed for the lake, scrolls and ink and quills bundled in small bags thrown over their shoulders. Ivan meticulously set ups his supplies, neat stacks of scrolls, quills laid out just so. Katya plopped to the ground and scattered her materials in a mess that was more of Ivan's style than hers normally.

"Have more care, Katya!" Ivan said as he unfurled a cloth star map in front of him, smoothing out the edges. "This is very complicated, and you need to get the measurements precise."

"You're one to talk, who was it that lost their reading glasses this morning?"

He sighed, shoulders sagging in defeat.

"And, where were they, Ivan? Your glasses? Where were they?" He rolled his eyes.

"Weren't they in with your candles? No! No, they were inside one of your empty candle jars."

He held up his hands. "You win! You win! It's getting dark, we should be set up already."

Katya grinned and began re-organizing her tools. They each

approached the craft in their own way, but their excited squeals were near identical in their enthusiasm as the night passed and they charted the heavens in search of answers.

"Look!" Ivan cried, startling Katya from the math equations she was scratching into the ground with a stick. "A falling star!"

Katya leapt to her feet, determined to give the star chase. She raced through the clearing and into the wood, and a coven of crows followed behind, drawn to her laughter. She felt each leaf beneath her heel and smelled each flower in bloom as she passed by. Further behind, she felt Ivan's presence, unsure if he was chasing the star or her.

She neared the edge of the woods, watching the star fly past the horizon. Just ahead of her was the edge of the forest, and beyond that open fields. She could keep chasing, but as the thought crossed her mind, she felt a wave of dizziness and nausea. Ivan's hand found her shoulder and pulled her close. "Go and catch a falling star," he said, a smile on his face.

She let out a laugh, the moment of unease passing. "What does it mean?"

"Change. I think it means that everything is about to change. And I am very ready for what that change may bring."

Copyright © 2017 by Dax Murray

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2017

ISBN-13: 978-1521970621 ISBN-10: 1521970629

Second Edition

Moon Cat Books P.O. Box 8074 Silver Spring, MD 20907

daxmurray.com

Cover Illustration Copyright © 2017 by Laya Rose Art
Cover design by Louisa Smith, Juneberry Design
Cover design by Dane Low
Book design by Aurelia Fray, Pretty AF Designs
Chapter opening illustrations © 2018 Aurelia Fray
Editing by Jen Anderson of Clearing Blocks Editing