

Book 1

Chapter 1

Though the early morning was black as pitch, Rayan's feet moved quickly through the narrow path up the hill, deftly avoiding the punctured soles and twisted ankles of hundreds before him. The trail was no newer to Rayan than was his own name; a wry smile stretched across his face as he recalled the scars he'd gotten tumbling into the rocks and brambles, each one telling a story, of foolish decisions, pretty girls, or, as was most often the case, both.

As he crested the hill, he ran a hand along the massive tree, the spirit who had overlooked and protected Rayan's colony for over a century, feeling the inscriptions of the Reges and Reines over the years. That the strongest of his people sought its guidance was a calming sentiment, taking away some of the anxiety he felt as the first hint of light appeared over the ocean.

As he sat upon the meandering roots and gazed off toward the water, Rayan heard another nimble pair of feet clambering up the path. He knew their owner before he turned, but he loved seeing her face when he teased her anyway.

"Hey *Reine*, couldn't sleep either huh?"

"I swear, you better quit calling me that or I'm gonna report you for being here after hours." Mikti bit her tongue to suppress a smile, feigning anger as she took a seat next to her friend. "And no, of course I couldn't. It's definitely worse for me; *Ricky's* being real quiet about it so you know something's up."

"Huh," Rayan grunted in agreement, turning his eyes back toward the sunrise. He knew the reigning Rex was a boisterous man, and his silence about her future was always sure to engender Mikti's irreverence toward her father. "You know he's not going to give you a crappy job though."

"His dad made him a plumber, you don't think he wants to do the same to me? Teach me a lesson in 'humility' or whatever?"

"He's not his dad," Rayan retorted.

"He wishes he was."

The pair fell silent for a few moments, and Rayan turned to study his friend's face. She pushed a blonde lock of hair behind her ear and he saw genuine worry in her eyes. His normally cheerful companion stared straight ahead, her eyes reflecting the storm in the distance. He too, turned forward and decided to brighten her spirits before the assignment ceremony just a few hours away.

"He didn't tell you what I'm getting, did he?" Rayan smirked, knowing Mikti had found out weeks before and relished the ability to lord it over his head. She turned toward him with a grin, the usual mischievous twinkle in her eye back with a vengeance.

"Yeah he did, he made up a new job for you as my servant, so whatever garbage job I get you'll have to do too."

"Like I don't do enough for you already?!"

"Nope. Not a thing." Mitki laughed but placed her hand over Rayan's as a tacit thank you. They turned again to the horizon, ablaze with the light of the new morning washing over their home.