

CHAPTER ONE

THE SCREAM TORE FROM OPHELIA'S THROAT AS she shot up from her pillow, her tangled red hair billowing around her face. Her eyes darted around the space, frantic to find something familiar and safe.

"Your Highness!" her lady, Nell, cried, rushing to her bedside and taking her hand. "What's wrong?"

Ophelia's damp shift clung to her chest, and a bead of sweat rolled down her forehead. She wiped a hand down her face and sighed as she peeled herself from her bed.

The nightmares were becoming more frequent.

"Nothing, it was only a nightmare."

"A nightmare?" Nell asked, standing with Ophelia. She moved with Ophelia, helping her change out of her shift. "What sort of nightmare?"

Walls of fire and the echo of screams flashed through Ophelia's memory. She closed her eyes and pushed the dream to the depths of her mind that she might not linger

on it longer. She rolled her shoulders and gave Nell a small smile. “Nothing, I’m sure. It’s already fading from memory,” she lied—terror still coursed through her veins. “No need to worry.”

Nell nodded, uncertainty bending her brow as she helped Ophelia into a fresh shift, then a pale blue dress.

Lady Nell had been by Ophelia’s side as her lady-in-waiting since she was a child. Nell was Ophelia’s adventurer. Her closest friend who would run head-first into hell by Ophelia’s side if such were required of her. In Ophelia’s world of propriety and tight boundaries, Nell kept her sane.

Ophelia sat on a stool in front of her vanity mirror, and Nell began working to tidy her lady’s hair. Ophelia focused on the dampened light of the morning sun peering through her window to clear her mind, hoping the dim rays washing over the chill stone floor of her chambers might stir a new branch of thought.

Normally, the nightmares faded from her mind once she woke up and began moving about her day, but this morning was different. Ophelia’s mind continued to spin, and the fear and panic were stronger, heavier. They stuck with her like cold syrup at the back of her throat.

Once Nell finished with Ophelia’s hair, the two of them left her chambers.

Ophelia was thankful it would be a slow day for her; the entire castle was too busy preparing for the upcoming fall tournament festivities to pay her much mind. It would be easy for her to slip to quieter places or snag a bottle of wine from the cellar if she so desired.

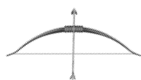
The thought of fresh air after waking up in a stifling panic appealed most to her. Maybe target practice in the courtyard

with her bow or a ride out in the wood on Blaze might calm some of the disquiet within her.

Yet, as the day trudged along, not even the comfort of a warm breeze from the final dregs of summer could blot the memory of her nightmare from her mind.

Its claws scraped deep into her thoughts, affixing itself to the forefront of her mind. It dragged her back to the valley, reminding her of the hot, coarse embers that burned under her fingers, of every waft of smoke and every wave of heat that crashed against her face, of the jolt of the ground with each of the mysterious creature's crushing steps.

A shock of panic jolted through her body, and she closed her eyes against it, tight knots of dread twisting her stomach.



Sleep evaded Ophelia that night.

The fear of what she would find in her dreams drew her into the castle corridors, willing her to find solace among the shadows.

She knew the shadows well. They were a solemn friend, flickering their welcome to her along the dimly lit walls, anchoring her to reality when the nightmares only promised her darkness.

But the flames that cast those shadows, burning brightly atop their torches, could not be trusted.

Fire was wild. It had no master. It could be contained and made useful, but should it decide so, it could strike down anything or anyone in its path— a reality that haunted her each night in her dreams.

She followed her familiar path through the castle, careful

to veer away from the torches as she walked, but the quiet and the flickering shadows of the corridor did nothing to settle her. The flames still blazed, dancing atop their torches, mocking her.

As Ophelia rounded a corner, a slumped old man suddenly swerved out of the way, narrowly missing her.

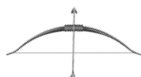
“Oh! Your Highness! I didn’t—!” Gaius stopped, leaving his excuse to burn up in the torchlight.

“Master Gaius?” Ophelia asked, concern bending her brow as she gazed into the unusually bleak expression painted across his face.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” he stuttered, readjusting the collar of his robe. “I was lost in my thoughts and didn’t hear you coming.”

“No worries at all.” Her shoulders relaxed, and she gave him a reassuring smile, stepping to the side to let him pass. But his lips barely turned up in reply.

“You should be in bed,” was all he said. The softness normally held in his tired gray eyes was replaced by something unfamiliar, stern. He shuffled past her, his robes whispering along the stone floor, then he disappeared around the corner, leaving her alone and no less unsettled than before.



Gaius returned to his study, startled. Magic radiated off Ophelia in tendrils of darkness. He squeezed his eyes shut, shoving down the image, ignoring thoughts that threatened to breach the guard of his mind.

After a moment, he released an unsteady breath and made his way to the familiar spot in front of his study’s

window. Rain fell, cold and dreary, pitter-pattering on the icy windowpane as the silver rays of moonlight dimly lit the courtyard below.

This will be the last peaceful rain.

Gaius sensed it—the message whispered by the magic. He felt it dance between the falling drops, not with the joy of the first fresh autumn rain but with a grieved sorrow, mournful of something that had not yet come to pass.

“The weather troubling you this evening, Master Gaius?” Lyla asked with a smirk, her brown eyes glittering as she entered the study from the back room. She placed a cup of tea on her master’s desk.

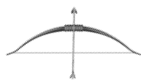
Gaius hummed. “The magic is grieved.”

Lyla’s smile dropped as she approached him, moving to stand by his side. “What does it grieve?”

The old mage closed his eyes again and took a deep breath, opening his senses to the agitated energy. It hummed, vibrating the air with an ominous purr. It flowed around him, within him, stroking the doors of a memory long sealed shut. It pulled and pried at the hinges, rattling the knobs, fighting against Gaius’ will to free the memories he fought so hard to keep locked away.

The doors finally swung wide, releasing his memories, forcing him to remember and acknowledge what he knew was coming.

“The end of peace, the coming of a peril long forgotten, and a fatal destiny called upon to be fulfilled.” He turned to face her. “The ripples in the magic whisper of death.”



There was fire.

So much fire. The ground was ashen and desolate. Plumes of smoke burned Ophelia's eyes, burned her lungs. Screaming. There was screaming off in the distance. The shrill cries of suffering grated against her ears. There must be a village nearby. There were people. She had to get to the people.

She had to get away from this place.

Her eyes darted, searching desperately for a break in the fire or a downed tree she could climb over to get out, but there was nothing. She was trapped. The clearing where she stood was completely walled off by tall poplar trees consumed in angry flames. Flames that whipped and burned in harmony with the screams they caused.

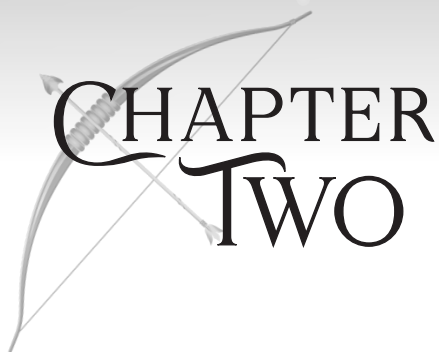
A deep roar struck the sky, seeming to crack it in two, and the ground shuddered under its weight. Ophelia's hands flew to cover her ears. She sunk to her knees in panic, shallow breath prying itself from her lips in uneven pants. The creature slowly made its way towards her. She knew it was coming. She felt it coming—its looming presence creeping closer and closer towards her, shaking the ground under each of its devastating steps.

She slowly lifted her burning eyes, the blazing trees bending and distorting as the creature moved through the wood. Its two ferocious eyes, glowing red with rage, peeked between the trees, then narrowed in on her.

Her heart sank to her stomach. The overwhelming impulse to run urged her to move, but her knees remained planted to the scorched earth. Fear coursed through her veins like a poison, paralyzing her, absorbing all her volition to move. She sat there, helplessly staring back into the ominous eyes across the clearing, as if death had already claimed her.

The creature then fully came into view—a colossal, ash-gray wolf, standing with shoulders high above the trees, skulked out of the darkness of the wood, baring its teeth, emanating a deep growl.

It charged forward, and Ophelia's eyes flew open.



CHAPTER TWO

THE ROOM WAS STILL DARK; THE SKY THROUGH her curtains was not yet bruised purple, telling her dawn was still far off. Ophelia heaved a deep breath pressing the heels of her palms to her eyes.

Another nightmare. The same one.

She still felt the heat from the fire licking at her face, and terror still coursed through her veins, but this time she had finally seen the creature.

It was a giant wolf. And it tried to kill her.

This couldn't continue. Two months had passed since the nightmares began, and they had only worsened. Between the fear, anxiety, and the lack of sleep wrought by these nightmares, Ophelia could feel herself breaking. She needed help and soon.

Wiping the tears from her face and rubbing her eyes, she decided she would consult Master Gaius later that morning.

Master Gaius was a gifted mage and healer, earning his

position as the king's royal mage long before Ophelia was born. His natural giftings in magic, and the skills and knowledge he had acquired over the years as a result of his studies, gave him insight into certain things other than healing—specifically dreams, visions, and world events.

It was that knowledge and insight she relied on now. Hoping he might be able to give her some clarity or understanding of these nightmares.

Once the sun fully rose and Nell finished preparing Ophelia for the day, the two ladies made their way to Gaius' study. The Mage's door was already wide open when they arrived, ready to receive whoever might need assistance from the physician.

"Master Gaius?" Ophelia asked as she poked her head into his study.

It was a large room, with one wall-length window to the left that overlooked the courtyard and a desk that sat at the back of the room. Behind Gaius' desk was a bookshelf that scaled the entire back wall, accommodating his immense library of medicinal and magical literature. The wall to the right contained another tall shelf of tiny compartments containing jars filled with an assortment of powders and liquids of different colors and textures. There was a table set up in front of this wall for examining patients, performing operations, or, in the most desperate circumstances, taking naps. The warm, sharp scent of spiced herbs that Ophelia had come to associate with Gaius' study wafted into the corridor.

As she stepped inside the door, she found Gaius standing in front of the window, peering out into the soggy courtyard below. He stood with his shoulders hunched forward and his hands clasped behind his back, seemingly lost in thought.

“Good afternoon, Master Gaius,” Ophelia said, speaking louder this time, realizing he hadn’t heard her before. Her words jolted him from his daze, and he turned to meet her.

He peered over the top of his glasses and smiled brightly at the sight of Ophelia. “Your Highness. Please come in,” he said, motioning for her to take a seat. “To what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from you on this lovely day?”

“Well,” she sighed, clenching the sides of her dress. “I wanted to speak to you about something that has been troubling me as of late. Do you have the time for a consultation with me right now?”

“Of course, my child! Please feel free to unburden yourself. I will offer whatever help I can. Lyla!” Gaius called, as he, Ophelia and Nell sat facing each other in the seating area in front of his desk. A few moments later, Lyla appeared from behind a curtain that separated the study from a back room.

“Yes, Master Gaius?” she responded. Lyla was about a head taller than the old man, with blonde hair that fell down her back in a single braid. Her dark brown eyes were always warm yet held secrets Ophelia never could decipher. Lyla had been Gaius’ apprentice since before Ophelia was born and was just as familiar to her as Gaius was. “Ah! Your Highness! What a surprise! It is a pleasure to have you pay us a visit today,” she cheerfully exclaimed before returning her attention to Gaius. “You called for me, sir?”

“Yes, please prepare some tea for the princess and me while we chat, would you?”

“Right away,” she nodded and returned behind the curtain.

Gaius’ gaze settled back on Ophelia. “So, what’s weighing on your mind, my dear?”

Ophelia folded her hands in her lap then began. “I have been having a recurring nightmare these past two months.”

Gaius hummed. “And what do you see in these nightmares?”

Ophelia then recounted what she could remember—standing in the middle of the burning clearing, the screams of people from a nearby village, the helplessness and paralyzing fear she felt from being unable to find any way to escape, and the giant wolf, with terrifying, red eyes, that lunged to attack her just before she woke up.

“Last night was the first time I saw the wolf. Before, I would wake up just after seeing the red eyes.” Ophelia bit the inside of her lip. “What do you think it means, Master Gaius?”

The wrinkles in Gaius’ forehead deepened, seeming to weigh the cost of something in his mind before finally asking, “Your Highness, do you remember being told the story of The Guardian Spirits as a child?”

Ophelia raised an eyebrow. “The one about two guardian spirits set in place by Nature—one over the terrain and the other over the waters—to watch over our world?”

“Ah,” he nodded with a smile. “That’s the one.”

“What about it?”

“Well, what you are familiar with is, what I would call, a re-imagining of a different story. A legend.”

Ophelia’s head cocked to the side. “And what legend would that be?”

“It is a legend about the Vilici—in the story you know, they are called the two guardian spirits,” he explained as Lyla returned to the study with a tray of tea, placing it on the short table between them. Ophelia prepared herself a cup

of tea, letting its warmth and aroma calm her restlessness, and listened as Gaius continued. "You know how it begins: Upon the creation of this world, two guardians were instated to steward it and all it contained, each being given specific domains to care for.

"The first Vilicus was the steward of the sea. From the deepest trenches to the rising and receding tides, her domain was the balance of the waters. The second Vilicus was the steward of the land. From the highest peaks to the deepest canyons, his domain was the balance of the earth. The existence of one Vilicus compels the existence of the other. Both are vital to the harmony and balance of the world. Peace among the domains abounds as long as both stewards are in place.

"In the story you are told, that is the end, is it not?" Gaius asked. Ophelia took a sip from her tea and nodded. "Well, my dear, there's more," he said, leaning forward to set his teacup on the table and rest his arms on his knees.

"As time passed on, the world began to change, and mankind began to toil in and inhabit the land. The Land Vilicus, Pyotr, grew contemptuous towards mankind, not deeming them worthy to share his domain. Mankind became no more than a pestilence to be eradicated, and so, Pyotr set out to do just that.

"The Sea Vilicus, Mira, however, saw mankind as new life which fell in the Land Vilicus' domain. She believed he should guide and correct mankind to live and exist peacefully as part of the land. But Pyotr could not accept mankind and caused horrific disasters in efforts to extinguish them from his domain. He sent earthquakes, landslides, fires, and even prevented the earth from producing nourishment. This

caused great suffering and loss among mankind but also caused suffering and loss within the land itself. The result was chaos.

“To stave off the chaos and mend the imbalance, Nature itself provided the solution. A single individual, a member of mankind, was endowed with unfathomable power for the purpose of restoring harmony. This individual became known to history as the Sapphire Mage due to the color his magic assumed when he wielded it.

“The Sapphire Mage bonded with the Sea Vilicus and together they became the inviable force which halted the acts of Pyotr. With their combined strength, they sealed him inside a great mountain, where he remains, lying dormant until the spell which seals him wanes.

“Distraught by the downfall and, ultimately, the loss of her counterpart, the Sea Vilicus was lost to the ice. She set herself to hibernate as well until such a time arose that required the use of her power again.

“It is said that one day the Land Vilicus will be awakened, break free from the mountain, and continue his mission to eradicate mankind from the world.”

Ophelia took a sip of her tea, confusion painting her brow. “Well, that certainly is a compelling tale, Master Gaius, but what does it have to do with my nightmares?”

Gaius leaned to retrieve his teacup from the table and raised it to his lips, taking a sip. “Each of the Vilici, being guardians of the natural domains of our world, were given the ability to take on specific forms which would allow them greater ease and access in maintaining peace and stability throughout their domains.”

“Like what?”

“Well,” he replied, gently setting his cup on the table, returning his arms to his knees. “Both had original forms that would lead anyone who encountered them to think them human, but they also had beast forms that allowed them to move freely and over wider distances throughout their domains than their human forms did. The Sea Vilicus took on the form of a great blue dragon, while the Land Vilicus took on the form of a giant wolf.”

Ophelia’s cup clanged into her saucer, and her heart jumped in her chest. “Are you saying the wolf from my dreams is this Land Vilicus who has resolved himself to eradicate mankind from the world?” She swallowed and shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

Gaius shook his head and raised his hands to placate her unease. “I just noticed similarities between the wolf in your dream and the wolf of the legend,” he said hesitantly. “Menacing wolves in dreams are not uncommon. They can indicate forthcoming sadness or can represent possible concerns you might have regarding your social position—perhaps your issue with suitors has caused your mind to fret about a marriage in your future?”

Ophelia frowned. It had been some time since any lords had graced the castle with their presence to seek her hand in marriage, a fact which allowed her to breathe easier than caused her mind to toil. “Perhaps, but I don’t think *that* issue warrants the size of the wolf nor the destruction surrounding us.”

“Well then, that leaves forthcoming sadness as our only other interpretation, and that is not something I would like you to leave my study with on this fine day,” Gaius replied with a tight smile.

Ophelia narrowed her eyes on him. "Then why tell me the tale of the Vilici at all if it has nothing to do with my dreams?" she asked, chancing a quick glance at Nell. Confusion was laced across her lady's brow as well.

"As I said, I was merely sharing the patterns that I noticed between your dreams and the story. It is simply coincidental, I assure you," Gaius replied then quickly turned to Lyla. "I had forgotten. We are expected to pay a visit to little Michael this morning, Lyla." His apprentice's brows sank. "We must hurry; his cough has gotten worse." Turning back to Ophelia, he continued, "Apologies, my dear, but we must pack our things."

Ophelia bit the inside of her cheek, annoyed that the old mage didn't have more to say about her dreams, or, she suspected, wouldn't say more about her dreams. A churning unease settled in her stomach, but the old mage appeared set to leave their conversation where it was. "All right," Ophelia said, pursing her lips as she stood to her feet. "Thank you for seeing me today."

"Of course," he said, standing and bowing. "Oh! Before you leave, I have a tonic that may help ease your sleep. Lyla, would you please get it for her?" he asked then shuffled off behind the curtain.

Lyla's eyes bounced between Ophelia and Nell as she gave them a tense smile. "We appear to have errands this morning," she said before walking over to Gaius' wall of specimen jars.

She scanned the shelves for a moment before finally reaching up to the third shelf from the top and grabbed a small bottle of clear liquid. "Mix three drops of this tonic with your drink at dinner. Drink it normally while you eat,

but make sure you drink it all. You should feel the effects soon after you finish your meal. It will help you fall asleep quickly and allow you to sleep more peacefully through the night.”

Ophelia cleared her throat as Lyla placed the bottle in her hands. “Very well. Thank you. Please give my regards to Master Gaius.” Ophelia handed the bottle to Nell, and they left the room.

Once the two ladies were gone, Gaius emerged from the back room, the lines of his face hard-set with tension. He met Lyla’s gaze. “Go straight to Lord Lucias and let him know I need an audience with the king immediately.”

Lyla frowned with confusion. “What about young Michael’s cough—?”

“Michael is fine,” Gaius said sharply. “Tell Lord Lucias it is an urgent matter regarding Princess Ophelia but mention nothing else.”

“Y-yes, sir,” she replied with a hesitant nod, then set out to find the king’s courtier.