

Chapter 7

The portal pulsed a vivid violet as Iris approached it alone. Their gaze searched the mob of tourists, making sure none of their eyes were on Iris before they stepped a foot into the inky indigo chasm. Iris's legs wobbled when they appeared in the tunnel and they raised an ear to the sky listening for the scrabbling of claws or an inhuman howl. They used the barren tree branches to hold themselves up, their eyes skimming for the glimmer of teeth so as not to be caught by a ravenous portal creature. They clomped towards the shimmering black hole marking the other side.

Iris was halfway to the portal when a mix between a howl and a human scream echoed through the clearing, sending a shiver down Iris's spine. They quickened their pace, but every step was like trying to walk along a trampoline while several people bounced on it. The ground beneath her vibrated with every step, the tenuous magical connection between worlds frayed with every step, threatening to snap.

Out of the corner of their eye, Iris caught a glimpse of matted fur and twisted horns. The creature's hooves pawed at the ground and the fetid stench of rotting flesh hit Iris's nose. A snarl erupted beside them. Iris broke into a run, diving for the black circle writhing just a few feet ahead.

Iris's arms scraped dirt and they bit their tongue to keep from crying out when their chin scraped the ground. Their hands went over their head expecting to be torn apart, but when the world around them was silent, they peeked through their fingers.

There were mounds of sand as far as the eye could see. A pool of water sparkled in the distance, and if they didn't know better, they'd think it was a mirage. The sun painted the sky flamingo pinks and monarch butterfly oranges as it set over the horizon.

When Iris pushed up off the sand, the wind whipped past them, sending a shiver through their body, and they shrugged the backpack off their shoulders.

Claw marks ran along the pack's fabric and a shirt spilled out of the opening. Iris gulped. *That could have easily been me. Maybe I should have brought Ro'im with me to make myself less of an easy target*, they thought.

Most of the clothing in the pack was shredded or torn including the lone sweater that they'd packed. Iris sighed and ears pressed against their skull, feeling like a hammer to their head, but instead of fighting the change, they slid off their clothing and tossed it into the destroyed bag.

They let the change run through them like a shot of adrenaline. Their pulse quickened, and a howl ripped through their throat. Bones cracked and reformed and fur slid from skin. Claws slid from fingertips and Iris lowered to the ground.

Their surroundings were painted in shades of red and blue. The sand along their feet was now a blue tinged white. Iris lowered their snout to the ground and picked the bag up in their teeth. Their snout wrinkled at the lingering scent of rotting flesh from the Soul hound's saliva.

Iris's feet flew along the sand, kicking it up in all directions as they ran. The sun had almost set when they reached the metal arch with intertwined wolves marking Luna's clan. Iris was home.

A familiar voice shouted "Iris! Is that really you?"

Iris's ears swiveled at the sound of their name, and they turned to see long black hair change to fur as Luna leapt into the air, landing paws first into Iris's side and toppling them to the ground. Luna's snout nuzzled against Iris's fur. *I thought I smelled you, but I had to see it with my own eyes. When you didn't come back from the human world, I'd feared the worst.* Luna swatted Iris with a paw. *Why didn't you come back sooner? I'd thought it was because you were dead. I never thought you'd abandon your own clan. We were supposed to lead together you, me, and...Kito.*

I'm sorry Luna. I... Iris couldn't finish the thought because Luna sniffed Iris and a growl escaped her throat.

Luna pinned Iris down with a paw. *Why do I smell an enchantress on you? You aren't working for Opal, are you?*

Iris shook their head. *No, it's nothing like that. I've been training an enchantress. The one that Opal wishes to kill, but that's a long story. Perhaps we should shift back first?*

Several other shifters were looking on at the two of them. Iris spotted a handful of wolf shifters, but they'd taken in other shifters since Iris had left, probably refugees from the war. The golden gazes of an eagle shifter with his wings spread and a lynx shifter with her golden gaze tracked Iris's every move.

Luna's gaze met Iris's and then her fur rippled, and bones cracked. Iris turned away when she transformed. *I think I've spent too long in the human world. Why am I embarrassed to see my own girlfriend naked?*

Luna nudged Iris. "Come on. There's no need to be shy all of a sudden."

Iris huffed but raised their head. *Please let the transformation work.* Iris focused on calming their emotions. At first nothing happened, but when they closed their eyes fur shortened, smoothing

into skin as the rest of the clan watched on wearily. A hawk shifter kept flicking his gaze between Iris and Luna with his feathers ruffled.

Iris crossed her arms over her bare breasts and Luna raised an eyebrow. "I know you've been gone awhile, but I've never known you to be the modest type," She said. Her lips curling up in a grin.

Iris's face flushed. "A lot has changed since then, love."

Luna turned to face the group and put an arm around Iris's shoulder. "This is Iris.." Luna turned to look at them. "Is it they or she right now?"

Iris gave a small smile. "They."

Luna cleared her throat. "They were a former coleader to this clan and one of my partners. Iris aided us in obtaining a truce with the Kitsune clan several generations ago. Regardless of what you may think about their prolonged absence from this clan, if you harm them, you will face severe punishment, understand?"

Iris felt a glare on them that raised the hairs on their arms and legs. Luna called out, "Ze'ev. Don't you dare."

A sandy colored wolf stalked towards Iris with hackles raised and fangs bared. Luna barreled after him, picking him up by the scruff of his neck. He turned and attempted to snap at her, and she smacked him on the nose. "You know better. Go back to your tent until you can learn to be polite to our guest."

A girl with auburn hair that matched the wolf's fur bared her teeth and spat. "She's no guest former leader or not. She's an intruder, and she reeks of enchantress magic. That thing around her neck holds one of their illusions. If she's an ally, what is she hiding?"

Iris's hands reached to the necklace Amy had given them. "I'd completely forgotten about this. I wore it on the plane in case..."

Iris placed a hand over their mouth. Luna nudged Iris's shoulder. "In case what?" she whispered.

Iris threw a glare at the twin wolf, Ayla. "Thanks a lot."

"It's your fault for not being entirely honest," she sneered.

Luna ran a hand through her hair. "Iris what aren't you telling me?"

Iris rolled their shoulder, "I'll tell you about it, but I'd like to speak with you alone."

Luna nodded. "You're all dismissed. Please continue about your day. I will speak to our guest, in private."

Gradually everyone left the clearing, and Luna pushed Iris to the cobbled stone walls of the home Iris had once shared with Luna and Kito. Despite the chill outside, the inside of Luna's home warmed Iris's skin the moment they stepped through the door.

Luna gestured to a brown fabric sofa in the small living room, and Iris plopped into the chair while Luna perched on one of its arms. "Tell me what happened while you were gone. I thought you were dead. I mourned your loss."

Iris pursed her lips. "I'm sorry. I didn't want you to see me after what the humans did to me."

She placed a hand over Iris's. "Iris I missed you. You'll always have a place here." Luna placed a hand on her chest. "No matter what the humans did. I'm sorry you didn't feel safe enough to come back here." Tears gleamed in her eyes, and Iris wiped them away with a thumb, but one of their nails started lengthening into a claw, and they jerked away.

Luna's eyes flickered to Iris's hidden hand. Her head cocked to one side. "Why did you just lose control of your shifting?"

Iris sighed. "The humans experimented on me. They captured me when I was in animal form thinking I was a regular wolf and when I transformed in their lab...they toyed with my molecular structure, and it changed me, made me unstable. I can't control the changes anymore. It's like when we were kids only worse. That's why I have the necklace."

"I'm sorry. I had no idea. Maybe one of our healers can help you?" She took Iris's hand, the one with a lone claw protruding from the skin and threaded their fingers together.

"Unfortunately, I don't think what they did is reversible," Iris's lips turned down into a frown.

She squeezed Iris's hand. "We can at least try. If need be, I will track down the humans that did this and make sure they fix this. If they can't, they'll pay with their lives. What they did was beyond evil."

Iris brushed hair from Luna's face. "Right now, we have bigger problems to deal with. We need to save Amy and her sister from Opal before it's too late."

Luna's gaze darkened, and her back stiffened. "If that's the case, you should consider her lost. Even with an army, we hardly stand a chance at defeating her. Look what she did to gemstone forest and the sorceress clan."

Iris lifted her chin, so their gazes met. "I have never known you to back down from a fight."

Her eyes filled with tears. "A lot has happened in your absence...Opal's assassin killed Kito."

Iris placed a hand over their mouth. "How? When?"

Luna's voice cracked when she spoke. "The bastard killed Kito by cutting off his tails one by one."

Luna held up her arm to reveal a long, thin, pink scar. "When I heard the shrieking, I went over to his home."

Luna's voice sounded hollow, and Iris gave her leg a light squeeze. "It's okay. You don't have to talk about it if it's too painful."

She gulped. "No. You need to hear this in case you ever see him. He's a shifter. A hawk shifter. When I tried to stop him, he lunged at me with talons and it caught me by surprise. He'd clawed into my arm, and I'd flinched away, but I should have jumped on top of Kito. I should have stopped him or screamed and called for backup, but instead I just ran away while he got torn up. I ran for help, but by then it was too late. I can't let that happen to anyone else," She said the last words so quietly that Iris barely heard them.

Iris pushed back Luna's bangs and kissed her forehead. "It won't happen again. We'll stick together so it can't."

Luna shivered. "Before you came here, he paid us a visit."

Iris bit her lip. "Damn. I didn't expect him to get here so quickly. What did he say?"

Luna covered her face with her hands. "Opal has a teleportation mage on her side. He warned us that you would come. He said if we joined you in the fight, our clan would meet the same fate as Gemstone forest, and he offered sanctuary to any shifter that brings Opal your head."

A shiver went down Iris's spine. *That explains the angry stares and why that younger shifter tried to attack me.* Iris pulled Luna into a hug. "I will not force your people to fight, but just know that the enchantresses will not fight. Amy's own people abandoned her when Opal went on her rampage, and she has few allies. Regardless of your decision, I will go and save her. I can't stay here knowing Opal is hurting her." Iris placed their hand over their heart.

Luna gave a weak smile. "Risking your life for others. Why does that not surprise me? I can't let you have all the fun. I'm coming with you."

"Are you sure?"

Luna pressed her lips to Iris's collarbone. "Dearest. I would follow you into hell itself and even you wouldn't be able to stop me." Then Luna's head cocked to one side, and she picked up Iris's bag. "Your pack is glowing. Is it meant to do that?"

Iris cocked their head to one side and reached into the bag. They saw a stone glowing golden brown. Iris's eyes widened. "That's right. Amy gave me this so she could communicate with me. Maybe she's sending a message." Iris pulled the stone out and placed their hand on it. The message "'Opal's weakness. Malachite curse,'" appeared in the air.

"What is a Malachite curse?" Luna asked.

Iris stared down at the stone. "I think I remember. Amy told me when working at her shop to be careful with Malachite. Those gems absorb toxins like radiation and the poisonous residue from some spells. It can be enchanted so that if it breaks all toxins held within it seep into you, slowly killing you."

Luna rose from her chair and straightened her back, lifting her chin high. "This is good. We have a weakness we can exploit. We have a chance. I will speak to my people, but even with this knowledge I don't expect many to join. Few are willing to face such a powerful threat."

Iris nodded. "I understand. Thank you for helping me even if I did abandon the clan."

Luna cupped Iris's cheek. "I knew you'd never leave unless it was to protect someone. It's okay to take actions to protect yourself and your heart. Now, come with me. We'll greet our clan together." Luna reached out her hand and Iris took it, following Luna into the courtyard.

Luna strode as lightly as an air elemental with a gust of wind beneath her feet. She put her hands to her mouth and gave three long, sharp whistles. Wolf, lynx, fox, coyote, eagle, and even a rabbit, and oxen shifter appeared in the clearing.

The prey animal shifters hung towards the back in human form, but their scent was unmistakable. The rabbit shifter smelled of clover and wildflowers. He was short with messy platinum blonde hair and hid behind an ox shifter with a massive chest and broad shoulders with swirling tattoos adorning his warm brown skin. His black hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

Luna cleared her throat, drawing everyone's attention. "You may have noticed that we have a visitor here," She said, gesturing to Iris. "I know we thought them dead, but they're back to request our aid in saving Amy, Opal's most hated enemy, has been captured and Iris plans to rescue her."

"Why should we help them? They abandoned their position as leader when they abandoned us." Ayla snapped.

Luna looked direct in Ayla's eyes, making her squirm. "Because Iris is still your leader just as I am whether you'd like to acknowledge that or not. And we've received word about an exploitable weakness that we might be able to use to take her down. While I will not force you to join this fight, I will be joining this battle with or without you. And regardless of what that hawk shifter told you, you aren't safe if you choose Opal's side. Attack my guest, and I will consider it treason, and we all know the punishment for treason."

Low murmurs hummed through the crowd, and Iris's gaze skimmed over dozens of scowling faces. Ayla and Ze'ev, the same brother and sister that had shouted insults at Iris earlier, stepped forward. Ayla dragged her brother by the wrist. "We will join you!" Ayla said with her chin jutted up.

At that, Luna held up a hand. "Your brother almost hurt Iris earlier and you're both still too young to join a battle. You're still learning to control your shifting."

The girl's eyes darkened, and she shouted. "Our parents died because of Opal. I'm sorry for our actions earlier, but Iris abandoned the pack. How were we supposed to react?"

Her grip on her brother's hand tightened, and he mumbled. "I'm sorry for earlier. I let my anger control me. Coming back after almost five years like nothing had happened." He stared down at his palms. "Did we mean nothing to you?" His gaze searched Iris's.

"It's not about that. I had to help a friend who was being hurt by Opal too. I guess you can say she's like an adopted pack member to me now, but it doesn't mean I forgot about you."

The young shifter squared his shoulders. "I think I understand." Determination glinted in his eyes when he looked up at Luna. "Can we join you, please?"

Iris's gaze darted to Luna, gauging her response. She placed a hand on the young shifter's shoulder. "You can join us, but I'm keeping you away from the front lines. If it gets too dangerous, you'll be ordered to run. Understand?"

The twin shifters saluted her. "Yes ma'am." and then moved to stand beside Luna.

"Anyone else?" Luna asked.

The remaining shifters whispered amongst themselves, but no one else stepped forward. Iris's heart dropped into their stomach. *This isn't nearly enough.*

Iris was ready to sink into the floor when a man with a shock of hair the color of desert sand and a strong vanilla scent like a cactus flower lingering on his skin stepped forward. *That can't be him, can it?* His broad shoulders and cold scowl caused other shifters to move aside as he cut through the crowd, and when she passed him, she caught fox tails peeking out from the

waistband of his pants. A Kitsune and Kito's brother at that. *He's much bigger than the pint-sized hyperactive teen I remember.*

Eiji stood beside Luna and placed a hand on her shoulder. "I'll join you. I have an ally in the west. If we can convince them, we'll have a better chance at surviving this fight."

When his hair fell over his face, and he smiled at the crowd of shifters, he looked so much like Kito that it tugged at Iris's heartstrings. It must have created the same reaction in Luna because her voice caught when she said, "Are you sure, Eiji?"

He nodded. "Like you said. Regardless of what side we pick, we aren't safe here. Especially if you won't be here to lead and protect the clan."

Luna's gaze dropped to the floor. "I'm sorry I couldn't protect your brother."

Eiji squeezed her shoulder. "It's not your fault. You did everything you could. No one expected one of our kind to betray us like that," his gaze flicked to Iris when he spoke.

Guilt pricked Iris at the double meaning behind his words and stare. *As if I don't feel bad enough about not coming back, Eiji. I can't take the disappointed look from you.* Iris shied away from Eiji's gaze. Eiji spoke to the rest of the clan. "If you refuse to fight, you shouldn't dare call yourself a shifter or a member of this clan. Unless you want shifters to be known as cowards."

That drew a few hateful stares from the crowd. The oxen shifter pushed through the crowd, towing the rabbit shifter even though the smaller shifter dug in his heels, protesting each step. Iris raised an eyebrow at the rabbit, but he crossed his arms over his chest. "If he's fighting, I'm fighting. He won't give me a choice."

Luna cocked her head to one side. "Are you sure you want to do this? You are both prey shifters."

The oxen shifter bit his lip. "You shouldn't have said that."

The rabbit shifter narrowed his eyes and pointed a finger at Luna. "First of all, we have names. I'm Shophan and this is Abir. Second of all, do you think we can't be useful just because our animals are the kind that normally get hunted? Well newsflash for you, there's a reason we're able to survive. I'm fast and good at hiding and he's stronger than most of you. You'll need 'prey shifters' like us if you're going to get through this mission without dying."

His nostrils flared and Abir pulled Shophan into an awkward side hug. "Sorry. He really doesn't like being called a prey shifter, but I'm joining you and he goes anywhere I do." Shophan flushed when Abir patted him on the head.

Iris looked over to Eiji, "So who is this mysterious ally to the west?"

He pointed in the direction of the forest that led to the glass mages, and she cocked her head to one side. "The glass mages? Why would they help us? They're complete recluses."

Eiji blushed. "Because I may have created an 'alliance' with their leader. His name is Enzo."

Luna blinked. "By alliance. Do you mean you...?" She gestured at the air, "Use your Kitsune wiles on him."

Fox ears popped up from his head, and his face flushed fuchsia. "Maybe a few times, but that's not important. What's important is they might be willing to help us. You're welcome."

Iris coughed to cover a laugh, and Eiji led their small group west towards the misty forest that led to the glass mages.

The transition from the desert to the forest drenched Iris's body in sweat and caused their clothing to cling like a second skin. Birds with the heads of women swooped overhead, and they all placed earplugs in so as not to be tempted by their song.

A hooved creature with a woman's face and snow white wings swooped through the treetops and landed just above Iris's head. The branch strained under its weight. The creature opened its mouth and let out a loud caw, but when she didn't react it flew off. Fairies the size of thumbnails buzzed around like mosquitoes, but none of them dared swat the pesky creatures for fear of angering the dryads that lurked in the depths of the forest.

The mist in the air grew thicker as they pushed onward, sending a shiver down Iris's spine. Hopefully, that didn't mean they were getting closer to the Druids. Iris had no desire to walk into this thick magic mist especially considering the Druids usually weren't far behind when it appeared, and they weren't thrilled with the idea of coming into contact with those religious zealots. Especially seeing as how they could be more than a little temperamental.

Iris reached out and grabbed onto Luna's sleeve as they continued through the mist. One of the Sirin flew overhead singing their enticing melody. Luna turned back to Iris and smiled. Luna's thoughts whispered in Iris's mind. *It's just a little further. On the way back, we can ask them if they have a safer path through the forest.*

Iris gave a weak smile and tightened their grip on Luna's sleeve, but said nothing. They pushed further through the forest, and when Luna moved aside a branch, it snapped back hitting Iris in the forehead. A face appeared on the tree, and Iris mumbled. "Sorry." before continuing on.

When a rushing waterfall came into view, their group paused to fill up their canteens. Everyone removed their ear plugs now that the Sirin, or owl women, had moved on to a calmer part of the forest with a massive pool of midnight blue water.

As Iris glanced at the water, and as they dipped their canteen in the water, their skin itched. Iris caught a glimpse of silver scales lining the top half of their left arm and the side of their neck. But looking down at the endless depths of the water set Iris on edge. *Thanks, body. There are probably mermaids in this water especially considering it's a dark pool of water in a magic forest. My choices are possible death by mermaid or death from lack of oxygen. That's great.*

Iris glared at the water. They dipped a toe into the cool placid pond. Luna grabbed their arm "What are you doing? That's dangerous."

Iris held up the arm with the scales. "I don't have a choice."

Iris jumped into the water's depths and heard several shouts of "What the hell are they doing?" and "Do they want to die?"

Scales grew along their skin, spreading to their whole body. Lungs became gills and they went from struggling for air to breathing freely.

Iris froze when shimmering indigo and silver scales glided through the water just under Iris's tail. Their gaze drifted up to the dorsal fin jutting up from between pale shoulder blades that glowed in the water like phosphorescent moss. Their curtain of silky black hair and raspberry red lips would lure Iris in like a moth to a flame if it weren't for the sharp rows of shark-like teeth screaming at them to stay away.

The mermaid swam towards Iris, her long fangs bared in a spine-chilling grin, and she stroked Iris's scales with a long, curved fingernail. Iris shuddered and propelled themselves back with their silver fins.

"Interesting. It looks like you know what I am. Does that mean you're a shifter?" Iris tried to push themselves back, but the mermaid gripped Iris with her long, black fingers. "It seems you are. I've heard their flesh makes a delicious meal, is that true?"

Iris opened their mouth and dug their lower fang like teeth into the mermaid's hand. She snarled and released her grip on Iris. Iris spun around and swam up towards the surface, hoping their body would change if they left the water.

Two mermaids swam up from the depths to join the first. "Get them before they get away," the first mermaid shouted.

Iris reached out with their mind, *Everyone. Red alert. There are mermaids in the water.*

A splash rippled the surface of the water, and a mermaid with a violet tail bolted towards the disturbance. She wrapped her arms around a small shifter with light brown hair, Shophan, and dragged him into the water. Iris dove for him, looking back and forth between the mermaid closing in on her and the one leading the small shifter to a death by drowning. *Come on body change, become something more useful than a regular fish.*

Iris imagined pink flippers and a long snout. Instead of gills, they pictured lungs and a blowhole. At first nothing happened, but then their tail elongated, and their scales shed, turning into a leathery hide. They risked a glimpse to the side and saw pink. *Yes.* They thought and raced towards the mermaid letting out a loud screech.

"Where the hell did an Encantado come from?" The mermaid grumbled and dropped the shifter, swimming away. Iris grabbed the shifter by his shirt collar using their small razor sharp teeth and propelled themselves up out of the water. When Iris's head broke the surface, they let go of him and sucked in a breath before diving back down.

Several of the others' thoughts reached Iris's mind. "What is an Encantado doing all the way out here?"

"I thought Iris was a wolf shifter, how did they change into a dolphin?"

"Who is that? I don't remember bringing a dolphin shifter with us."

Iris tried to will themselves back into human form, but their flesh felt stiff and unchanging. The mermaids circled, but didn't approach Iris. Iris swam towards one of the mermaids and butted into her with their snout and then bared the tiny razor-sharp teeth that lined their mouth.

The first mermaid skittered backwards, and the rest followed suit. Once they were out of view, Iris's body shifted, and they swam full force towards the water's surface as fins contorted changing to legs mid stroke. Their lungs shrank, causing their body to burn with a desperation for air.

Iris burst to the surface with one hand and one fin. They tread water until their tail fin turned to legs, so they could pull themselves onto dry land. A shivering Shophan clutched onto Abir muttering. "I knew coming on this mission was a bad idea." as the other shifters stared on at Iris.

Shophan glared down at a couple of those gawking at Iris and reached out to help Iris up despite the teeth marks on his hand and the blood still dripping down from his skin. "Thank you for helping me. I didn't hear your warning in time."

As Iris pushed themselves off the floor with Shophan's help, their chest rattled as they sucked in air, and their legs shook. Damp rainbow hair clung to their face.

Eiji whispered. "Are you okay, Iris?" He reached out a hand for Iris whose eyes widened as his hand reached for them.

Luna stood in front of Iris and held up a hand. "They'll be fine. Just give them some time."

Iris shook as they risked a glance up at their comrades. Some of the shifters' jaws dropped and others cocked their head to one side in confusion.

Ze'ev, the wolf shifter twin, broke the silence. "Is anyone going to explain why what we thought was a wolf shifter just changed into a pink bottlenose dolphin?"

Iris tried to laugh, but their lungs burned with water and it turned into a cough. Luna answered instead. "They were experimented on by humans. It's a long story."

Shophan tightened his grip on Abir's arm at the mention of experiments, and Iris turned away to avoid their gazes, trying not to focus on how naked they were sitting before them.

Eiji cleared his throat and Iris felt fabric brush the side of their chest as he shoved a shirt and pants at them. "You might not care if we see you naked, but the glass mages have a different idea of modesty. Get dressed."

Iris used their hands to wipe away any excess moisture the best they could before slipping the clothing back on to their damp body. The damp fabric clung to Iris's skin, and they picked at it as they made their way along the forest trail toward the city.

By the time the trees began to thin out, the searing heat had dried Iris's wet clothes and been replaced with sweat brought on by the humidity and unrelenting sun.

After what felt like hours of walking, the rainbow sheen of glass of clear bridges criss crossing over the city came into view as the mist cleared.

Modern day skyscrapers of silver and glass spiraled upwards as if trying to touch the heavens. Massive silver windows adorned the sides of buildings and beautiful glass lamps filled with fire magic dotted the side streets. *How are there elemental mages here? I thought they were all in the human world.* Iris thought as they entered the town.

There was no one stationed at the entrance to the town, but Iris supposed that made sense considering all sides of the town were surrounded by a forest teeming with aggressive, territorial magical creatures, an ocean, and the ravaged wastelands of bygone elemental and shifter clans.

Far off in the distance on the eastern horizon, waves of silver and gold magic undulated in the skyline over the sea. Its tendrils decorated the sky like haphazard paint streaks. It was the

lingering reminder of why Clarent and Excalibur had been separated in the first place. Their magic was too powerful.

One step into those magical claws would sear skin and steal your life from you minute by minute. A shudder ran down Iris's spine as they stared at the magic, but the sound of "Hey there my little fox." turned Iris's head.

A mage with curly red hair and bright blue eyes ran right past Luna and into Eiji's arms. Eiji returned the red-haired man's embrace and pulled him in for a kiss on the lips.

Eiji pulled back from the kiss with a wide grin on his face. "Do you have a sixth sense for Kitsune or something like that, Enzo?"

Iris blinked. *This is the glass mage's leader?* They raised an eyebrow as they appraised him. *He looks like he's maybe twenty, and he's a good six inches shorter than me and I'm not that tall.*

Eiji caught Iris staring and said, "Don't let his looks fool you. He's almost as old as I am, and you know how slow Kitsune age."

Enzo got up onto tiptoes to plant a kiss on Eiji's cheek. Then, he hooked an arm around Eiji's neck and turned to face Iris. "He's right you know. It's one of the glass mage's many secrets, but I have so much more to show you. Follow me."

Enzo let go of Eiji's neck and led him along by the arm. They all followed behind Eiji and Enzo, and Iris noted that Ze'ev and Ayla stayed glued to Luna's side. Iris couldn't say they blamed the twins. This place was completely different from what they were told.

Iris pointed to the lamps dotting the streets. "Do you have elemental mages here too? Those look like their handiwork, but I thought they all fled to the human world."

Enzo grinned at the street lights. "You have a good eye. We purposefully spread that narrative, so their enemies wouldn't continue to hunt them down. During their mass migration to the human world, we offered sanctuary to displaced mages in the destroyed clans adjacent to use. We love having water and fire elementals since they're quite compatible with our magic. That's actually how we were able to craft our most powerful spells. The alliance was a certain Kitsune's idea," He said and elbowed Eiji.

Eiji pursed his lips, "He gives me too much credit. They were already allies of the glass mage clan. I just suggested offering sanctuary after the war displaced many of them. Having them in the human world was a disservice to the glass elementals and the plant mages too."

Enzo smiled. "He's too modest. If it weren't for him, we would've been overrun by the enchantresses and sorceresses ages ago, but they've mostly left us alone since they don't believe

we're a threat. I'm glad because otherwise we would be part of the rubble," He said and jerked his chin towards the ocean.

As they walked through town, Iris's thoughts drifted to Amy and the message she'd sent with the calligraphy stone. Iris bit their lip. There was no way to send Amy a message back or offer a thank you. *Please don't do anything too reckless. Survive until we get there.*