Chapter 1

“With timid pause I part the leaves

What wicked, wicked world I see”

A cold wind highlighted the gathered sweat on Jynx’s back. She stood in a courtyard, her feet planted in a rune circle as she held an orb that projected images onto an ivied wall. On her shirt was her den’s insignia, a purple trident signifying combat, magic, and academics. Emphasis on magic.

Hills rolled over the stone wall, fading into blue mountains. Two figures huddled under a tree in the foreground, embracing as they looked out on a world Jynx feared she’d never know.

“Someday,” she said, dismissing the orb, scuffing away the circle she’d carved into the ground with her athame.

The projection disappeared, leaving only the bulky stonework as she returned the blade to her hip.

Another chilly gust sent her sauntering away and inside a gothic structure. She entered, soon shaking off the cold in a white tile bathroom that stretched quiet as a memorial. She walked through hours-old scents to a bookending stall for a quick, scorching shower. Her dog tags retained their heat as she exited into a courtyard. There, a familiar voice greeted.

“Thought I might find you here!”

Her girlfriend approached from across the courtyard, blonde-haired and ebullient.

“Rimola! Hey!” Jynx called back. “What are you doing up?”

It was a rhetorical question–they were both up dreading the competition with the rival Feldgrau den. Running, swimming, ranged weapons, and then a melee tournament. While Eminence focused on magic, Feldgrau focused on blunt force trauma, and the outcome was all but foregone.

“I could ask you the same.” Rimola closed the distance. “Teal highlights? Are you that pessimistic?”

Jynx was naturally blonde, but always had a spell cast that colored her hair according to her mood.

“We’re going to get our asses kicked.”

Spurring her anxiety was the fact that the competition took place the day after Sauin, the most important festival of the year. Sauin was a day for the old gods, and already the bonfires burned, illuminating an ancient forest that wrapped the fields and a solitary stage. There, instructors would put on a mumming performance, frocked and giddy to tell the tale of Karathemis and the Cave.

Rimola rose onto her tiptoes as if to make herself imposing. She still didn’t quite reach Jynx’s nose. “We’ll get a few licks of our own in. I bet you could take half of Feldgrau in a fist fight.”

Jynx went lightheaded at the idea of fighting Rhone Albertson, or Dimitri Kehinde. Nevertheless, she smiled, and gave a doting jab against Rimola's shoulder that sent her back flat-footed.

"You two getting an early start?" a voice piped from nearby.

They turned to see Luca Trevenz. Tall, lanky, and with a monk-like devotion to swordsmanship. Countless hours spent practicing outside left him well-tanned, and his red hair that so often whipped about like fire lay tousled over his ears. The Amaranth symbol adorned his shirt, featuring an open book with a plant sprouting from its crease.

"What do you mean an early start?" Rimola asked. "And sure, use our gym, help yourself to my class notes while you're at it."

"It's early, and I'm starting," Luca said, whipping his hands around to rehearse with an imaginary sword. There was the fire. "Leave it to Shukaku to find a way to break a deadlift machine."

"Is that supposed to… impress me?" Jynx asked, crossing her arms.

"I could care less about impressing you, *Genevieve*." Luca shuffled weightlessly in place.

Jynx recoiled at the use of her real name, wishing *Luca* was short for some mouthful like *Lucanthropy* or something so she could retaliate. Instead, she rolled her eyes, and let out a sigh that could fill an auditorium.

Luca, victorious, jogged away towards the Eminence fitness facility. He turned back as he reached the door. "Break a few noses for me!"

Jynx and Rimola shared a laugh, then started walking, drifting from the campus lights until they became talking shadows. They'd been together since Jynx joined the academy at ten, and since she couldn't recall anyone from before being rescued from the warzone, that made Rimola her first and closest friend.

Upon enrollment, each student at Moorcroft Preparatory Academy or Moorcroft proper underwent a memory wipe in a chamber of reflection pools. Jynx vaguely recalled the anesthetizing water, and the white-masked figure who pulled her from it. That was her earliest memory, a child refugee with her mind's grim souvenirs freshly erased, leaving her with what she hoped were pieces of her actual self.

Since she was older than most upon her arrival, she bypassed Moorcroft Preparatory Academy located further inland and enrolled straight into Moorcroft Military Academy of Life and Sciences. Most who'd suffered through the prep school didn't have the time of day for some green admission who skipped over those years of comradery, but then, Rimola wasn't most.

"I love going away from the buildings at night, you know? Just, far from all the lights, from everything," Rimola remarked, staring with crystal-blue eyes.

Rimola had come to Isle Rasgar as a toddler, falling into the custody of a family who lived along the row houses next to the preparatory academy until she was old enough for a dorm of her own. As a consequence, she knew Moorcroft like the back of her hand by the time Jynx staggered out of the Welcome Center. It was easy to gravitate towards Rimola, whose bright face stood out from the masked instructors and the mission-oriented gazes of the other students. Easier still to fall in love.

“Is that a proposal?” Jynx asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You’re unbearable,” Rimola said with a groan.

“I deal with your puns; you can deal with my eyebrows.”

Rimola paused for a moment, cleverness dancing on her lips. “So, you take the high-brow and I’ll take the low-brow.”

Jynx pinched her eyes shut, but Rimola grabbed her hand and led her stumbling through a courtyard. Gothic dormitories stood like sea stacks all around them, inundated with ivy and connected by cobblestone paths to instructor housing and various administrative buildings. The courtyard’s grass and scattered shrubs laid in shadow while the walkways were illuminated by the incandescent blooms of street lamps.

They whisked away, escaping between rows of holly bushes which guarded the dorm perimeters. As they disappeared into the shadows of a forested hillside, Rimola slowed to a halt, turning towards the Eminence dorms.

“I can’t believe I’ve spent my entire life on this little island, worrying about my grades while the war goes on. It feels so… inconsequential,” Rimola remarked.

Jynx snorted. “Oh, am I inconsequential?”

A playful fist found her shoulder.

Above the dormitory, the twin moons hovered in an otherwise featureless night. Pugnare, the larger of the two, glowed with an aura that alternated from deep blue in the fall and winter to light green in the summer and spring. Aegis, in contrast, glowed mercurial red year-round, circling in an orbit that caused it to at times eclipse its partner. Pugnare had nearly finished its transition from green to blue, with only a trace of the verdant summer holding on.

“Do you think we have a chance at winning? The war, I mean,” Rimola asked.

Jynx thought for a moment as they traced the edge of the campus lights. “I don’t know.”

“Me either. I don’t have scars from before I enrolled, so it’s never felt real,” Rimola said, rubbing her forearms.

Smoke from the bonfires reached them, the pyres burning some twenty feet high, gorging on dry tinder. Sparks flurried into the night sky, racing like fireflies before the cold air snuffed them.

“I’ve got the shakes just thinking about the competition tomorrow, and that, that’s not even *real* combat.” Jynx shook her head. “What would I do on the actual front?”

“Don’t worry.” Rimola flurried a hand through Jynx’s hair. “By the time you graduate, I’ll have been in the field for a year. With any luck, we’ll be in the same company, and I can show you the ropes all over again.”

After orbiting campus, they cut back through the instructor houses. Dozens of structures wielded sharp roofs against the night, the largest of which was the staff housing complex, the Insula. It was as spartan as a barracks on the inside, but sported an exterior that was as ostentatious as any cathedral.

“I always feel like we’re not supposed to be here,” Jynx said.

“Rather be in some bombed-out city?”

Jynx shook her head. “No, I mean, where the instructors live, it’s like they’re watching.”

Her paranoia drew a laugh from Rimola, but they picked up the pace among the hedges and trees that grew in tight proximity to the houses. Soon, they spilled into a meadow, their steps rendered silent by the abutting channel as they crossed to enter a building’s shadow. The

Welcome Center's broad dome and portcullis mouth formed the first memories of everyone at the academy, and within its thick walls, the reflection pools lay in unseen silence.

The chamber was Dean Cendron's first initiative upon taking over the academy fifteen years earlier. Before that, shrieking night-terrors filled the night air around the academy as students relived their horrors. Within a year of implementation, Cendron's decision elevated Moorcroft from an underperforming rehabilitation camp to a gleaming paragon of wartime academia. While the chamber operated on high-level magic, it was never a perfect process, leaving traces of underlying trauma for many of the students, trauma that revealed itself in different ways. Sometimes it showed subtly, while other times it revealed itself with violence.