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LIGHTLARK

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LIGHTLARK
CURSES AND POWERS

Wildling

Curse: Must eat human hearts to survive—
and kill anyone they fall in love with

Powers: Control of nature and affinity with animals

Starling

Curse: All die at twenty-five

Powers: Can harness energy from the stars and
perform telekinesis

Skyling

Curse: Have lost the ability to fly—
thousands fell to their deaths from the sky

Powers: Control of wind and weather

Moonling

Curse: The sea becomes deadly every full moon

Powers: Control of water, healing abilities,
and the power to freeze

Sunling

Curse: Will burn in the sunlight

Powers: Control of fire, light, and heat

Nightshade

Curse: Will perish outside after nightfall

Powers (vary based on strength):

Ability to turn invisible and read emotions;
stronger individuals may be capable of mind control,
shadow-wielding, and spinning curses



PROLOGUE

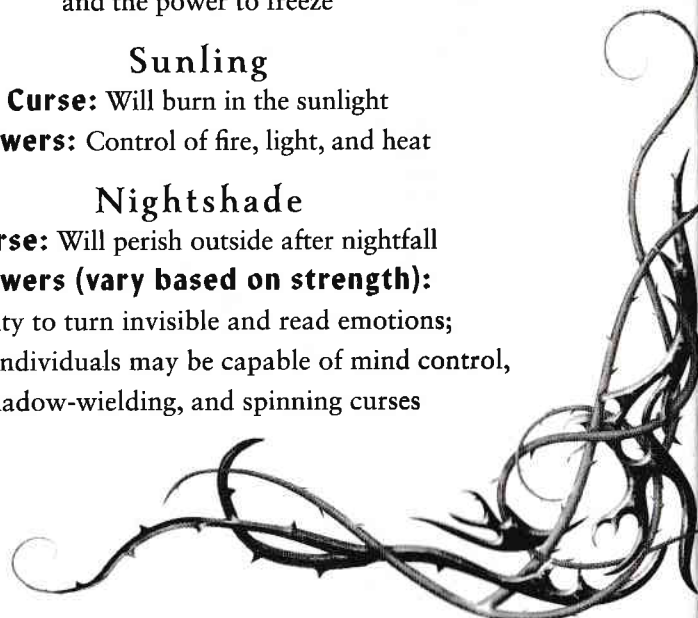
Bodies fell from the sky like stars that had lost their grip on the galaxy. Children in gold burned in the marketplace. Silver-clad people painted the island in heaps of lustrous gray, limbs still knotted together in the last throes of panic. The hearts of lovers were stabbed through with shaking hands and sharpened blades.

The curses were spun and felt in minutes, and Lightlark became more dead than alive.

It is said that by the end of the day, six rulers of six realms came together before an oracle who spoke a prophecy.

*Only joined can the curses be undone
Only after one of six has won,
When the original offense
Has been committed again
And a ruling line has come to an end
Only then can history amend.*

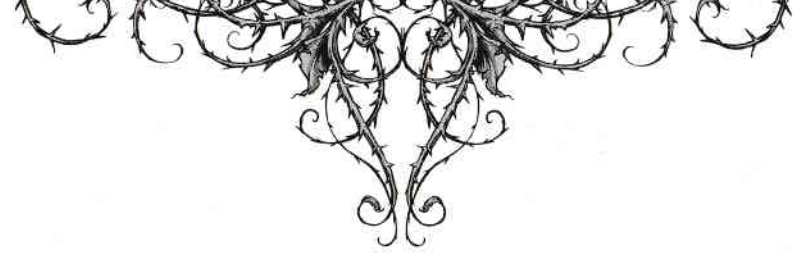
Blood and pain allowed access to the deepest depths of power. With the island on the brink of destruction, the six rulers sacrificed themselves to give their heirs the chance to break the curses, and with that power, the Centennial was created. Lightlark would disappear and emerge every hundred years for one hundred days, to give the six realms a chance to use the prophecy to save them all.



A cursed storm began to overtake Lightlark as it vanished to somewhere else entirely. The new Sunling ruler—and the new king of Lightlark—stayed on the island, while every other new ruler fled, taking some of their people with them. They formed the newlands, hundreds of miles away from each other and where the island once was.

Every hundred years, rulers returned to Lightlark, desperate to break the curses.

Every hundred years, they failed.



CHAPTER ONE

ISLA

Isla Crown often fell through puddles of stars and into faraway places. Always without permission—and seemingly on the worst occasions. Even after five years, portaling still made her bones groan. She held her starstick tightly, her breath bottled in her chest like the rare perfumes on her vanity, the glass room spinning and fractured colors bleeding together, until gravity finally pinned her down like a loose thread in the universe.

And it was safely tucked down the back of her dress, along her spine, by the time the door swung open.

“What happened to your hair?” Poppy shrieked so loudly, Terra came rushing in behind her, the many knives and swords at her waist clanking together.

Her hair was the least of her worries, though she didn’t doubt it resembled a bed of moss. Traveling between the realms’ newlands with her starstick had the habit of undoing even Poppy’s most tightly wound coils and firmly made braids—an unexpected perk, really.

Isla didn’t pretend to be an expert at using the device. In the beginning, the puddle of stars took her unexpected places. The snow villages of the Moonling newlands. The airy jubilees of the Skyling newlands. A few lands that hadn’t been settled by any of the six realms at all. Little by little, she learned how to return to locations she had been to before. And that was the extent of her mastering of the starstick. All she knew for certain was that somehow the mysterious device allowed her to travel hundreds of miles in seconds.



Terra sighed, hand dropping from the hilt of her blade. "It's just a few loose strands, Poppy."

Poppy ignored her. She rushed over to Isla, wielding a brush and a vial of syrupy leaf oil the same way Terra had taught Isla to brandish weapons years before. Isla grinned at her fighting teacher over her charm teacher's shoulder and cried out as Poppy roughly removed the pins. Poppy shook her head. "Have to start from scratch." She stuck the clips between her lips and spoke around them. "I leave you alone for an hour, and you're a mess. Even locked the door for good measure! How in the realm did you manage to mess it up in your own room, little bird?"

Own room. Her room was not her own. It was an orb of glass, the remnants of an ancient greenhouse. But the panes had been painted over. The windows had been sealed. All except one door had been removed.

She was a little bird, just like Poppy and sometimes even Terra called her.

A bird in a cage.

Isla shrugged. "Just some swordplay." Poppy and Terra were her only family—though they weren't family at all. Everyone who shared blood with her was long dead. Still, even they didn't know about the starstick. If they did, they would never let her use it. It was the only key out of the bird's cage. And Isla had been locked inside not just for her own safety—

But for everyone else's.

Terra eyed her suspiciously before turning her focus to the wall. Dozens of swords hung there in a shining row, a makeshift mirror. "Pity you can't bring any of them," she said, a finger trailing across the wall of blades. She had given Isla every single sword, presented from the castle's ancient store. Isla had *earned* them after each training achievement and mastery.

Poppy scoffed. "That's one Centennial rule I agree with. We don't need her reaffirming all the other realms' horrible views of us."

Nerves began to swirl in Isla's stomach, leaves dancing in a storm.

She forced a smile, knowing it would douse Poppy's frustration—her guardian always *was* telling her she didn't smile enough. Isla hadn't met many people, but the ones she had were simple to figure out. She just needed to uncover their motivations. Everyone wanted something. And some things were easier to give. A smile for a charm teacher who had spent nearly two decades teaching her student manners. A compliment for a woman who prized beauty above all else. "Poppy, pretty as you are, all of their horrible views are true. *We are* monsters."

Poppy sighed as she slid the last pin into Isla's hair. "Not you," she said meaningfully.

And though her guardian's words were wrapped in love—*good*—they made her stomach pool with dread.

"They're ready," Terra said. She took a few steps toward the vanity. Isla watched her through the mirror, its edges spotted with age. "Are you?"

No. And she never would be. The Centennial was many things. A game. A chance at breaking the many curses that plagued the six realms. An opportunity to win unmatched power. A meeting of the six rulers. A hundred days on an island cursed to only appear once every hundred years. And for Isla—

Almost certain death.

Are you ready, Isla? a voice in her mind said, mocking and cruel.

Her fear was only tempered by her curiosity. She had always longed for more . . . everything. More experiences, more places, more people.

The place she was going—Lightlark—was made of more. Before her guardians had discovered it and had it sealed, Isla used to sneak through a loose pane of glass in her room and down into the forest. It was there that she met an Eldress who had once lived on Lightlark, the way all Wildlings used to before the curses were spun. Before most of the realms fled the island to create new lands in the chaotic aftermath. Her stories were fruits in a tree—sweet and limited. She spoke of kings who could grip the sun in their hands, white-haired

women who could make the sea dance, castles in clouds, and flowers that bloomed pure power.

That was before the curses.

Now the island was invisible. It had vanished somewhere else entirely, surrounded by its cursed storm.

One night, Isla had found the Eldress at the base of a tree, on her side. She might have thought the woman was sleeping, if her tanned skin hadn't become bark, if her veins hadn't turned to vines. Wildlings wielded nature in life and joined it in death.

But there had been nothing natural about the Eldress's passing. Even at over five hundred, even away from the strength of Lightlark, she had died too soon. Her death had been the first of many.

And the fault was Isla's.

Terra repeated her question, dark-green eyes the same color as the leaves and ivy that wrapped around the Wildling palace, a skin over everything. The same color as Isla's. "Are you ready?"

Isla nodded, though her fingers trembled as she reached for the crown in front of her. It was a simple gold band, adorned with golden buds, leaves, and a hissing snake. She placed it atop her head, careful not to interfere with the clips that kept her long, dark-brown hair out of her face.

"Beautiful," Poppy said. Isla didn't need to hear the compliment to know it was true. Beauty was a Wildling's gift—and curse. A curse that had gotten her own mother killed. Which only made the fact that she supposedly had her mother's face all the more unsettling. Poppy met Isla's eyes through the mirror and said fiercely, "You are enough, little bird. Better than any of them."

If only that was true.

Isla could feel a jolt of panic breaking her features in half. What if this was the last time she ever saw her guardians? What if she never returned to her room? Her hands acted on instinct, reaching for each of them, wanting to touch them one last time.

Before she could, Terra gave her a stern look that made her go still.

Sentimentality is selfish, her stare seemed to say.

The Centennial wasn't about her. It was about saving her realm. Her people.

Chastised, Isla straightened her spine. She stood slowly, the heaviness of her crown far greater than its weight. "I know what I must do," she said. Each ruler arrived at the Centennial with a plan. Terra and Poppy had hammered theirs into Isla since she was a child. "I will follow your orders."

"Good," Terra said. "Because you are our only hope."

The Wildling castle was more outside than in. The halls were bridges. Trees extended their arms into the corridor, branches catching gently on her dress as if to say goodbye. Leaves rustled at Isla's sides as she walked through the endless chambers she wasn't allowed access to, Poppy and Terra right behind her. Vines crept across walls. Birds flew in and out as they pleased. Wind howled through the halls in a breeze that made Isla's cape billow behind her. She wore deep green to honor her realm, a fabric that clung to her ribs, waist, knees, and pooled at her feet. Her cape was made of gossamer, sheer enough to make its traditional purpose for modesty obsolete. And that choice represented her realm just as much as its color.

Wildlings had always been proud of their bodies, beauty, and ability. They had always loved wildly, lived freely, and fought fiercely.

Five hundred years before, each of the six realms—Wildling, Starling, Moonling, Skyling, Sunling, and Nightshade—were cursed, their strengths turned into their own personal poisons. Each curse was uniquely wicked.

Wildlings' was twofold. They were cursed to kill anyone they fell in love with—and to live exclusively on human hearts. They turned into terrifyingly beautiful monsters with the wicked power to seduce with a single look.

Thousands of Wildling men and women had been killed off since. Love became forbidden. Reckless. Fewer children were born . . . and

daughters had always been more common for their realm. Though love had various forms, men were killed more often when the rules were broken, and they had slowly become a small community of mostly warrior women. Feared. Hated. Weak, since fewer people meant less power being used. The Centennial was the only chance to end their curses, to return to their previous glory again, to regain the power they so badly needed. *Isla* was their only chance.

You are our only hope . . .

She heard them before she saw them. Chanting their ancient words, clashing their blades together like instruments. Wildling control over nature was on full display. Flowers bloomed and spilled over the balcony, down into the hall, not stopping until they reached her feet. They grew exponentially, doubling over themselves in a puddle of petals and rising to her ankles. According to lore, a thousand years before, Wildlings had been able to grow entire forests with half a thought, move mountains with a flick of their wrists.

Now, hundreds of years after the curse and just as much time away from the island's power, their abilities had dwindled to barely more than party tricks.

Isla walked carefully over the flowers until the castle walls ended and she faced hundreds of cheering Wildlings.

The trees above bloomed cherries and berries and bloodred blossoms, which fell onto the crowd in a colorful rain. Animals crept from the woods and into the group, sitting beside their companions. Wildling powers varied in their mastery of nature, but they often included affinity with animals—*Terra* had a great panther named *Shadow* she spoke to as easily as she communicated with *Isla*. *Poppy* had a hummingbird that liked to nestle in her hair.

When *Isla* nodded, the crowd fell silent.

"It is my honor to represent our realm this Centennial." *Isla's* pulse quickened, a drum along her bones. She looked across the crowd, at stunning, hopeful faces. Some Wildlings wore dresses made from bits

of fabric woven through with leaves and vines. Some wore nothing at all except for the swords draped down their backs. Some had clearly just fed, their lips stained deep red. *Isla* looked and tried her best not to tremble. Not to let her voice crack, or stumble, or make them question for a moment why their ruler often hid behind the thick walls of her castle. Why attendants were banned from entering her quarters. She tried not to wonder how many of these Wildlings had heard this same declaration a hundred years before, from a different ruler—how many of them were even left, after the recent string of deaths. She made a promise, because that was what her people were looking for. Reassurance. Strength. "I vow to shatter our curse once and for all."

They would have every right to be worried. *Isla's* failure would doom them all for at least another century. And there had been four failed Centennials already. *Isla* clenched her back teeth together, waiting for them to see right through her—waiting for her perception of what they wanted to be wrong.

But the morning air ignited with yells and blades raised high overhead. Birds screeched from the treetops. Wind rustled leaves into a roar. Relieved, *Isla* walked down the stairs, smeared in petals, nature blossoming at her feet as the crowd parted, making a path toward their most ancient twin trees.

Their roots crested into the air, then braided together, forming a towering archway, round as a looking glass. The other side of the forest waited beyond, safe and familiar. But that wasn't where she was going. *Isla* swallowed. She had been preparing for this moment her entire life. *Terra's* and *Poppy's* hands found her shoulders.

Isla walked through the portal that only worked once every hundred years, her last words to her guardians fresh in her mind: *I will follow your orders.*

And wished they hadn't been a lie.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ISLAND

The portal rippled closed behind her, choking the cheers into silence. Only Isla's ragged breath remained. She took a single step forward, and light like a thousand dying stars and suns blinded her.

She teetered to the side. An arm reached out to steady her.

"Open your eyes," a voice said, dark and striking as midnight.

Isla hadn't even realized they were closed. With a blink, the world stumbled then steadied, this portaling far worse than using her starstick.

The face belonging to the man looking down at her was amused. And familiar, somehow. He was so tall Isla had to tilt her chin to meet his eyes, black as coals. His hair spilled ink across his pale forehead. Nightshade, no question. Which meant . . .

"Thank you, Grimshaw," Isla said firmly. She quickly straightened and looked around, hoping no one had seen her stumble. She could practically hear Poppy and Terra in each of her ears, scolding her.

But besides Isla and the Nightshade, the cliff was empty. She turned, and a tiny choking sound rasped against the back of her throat. The sea raged angrily hundreds of feet below. She had almost joined the jutting rocks and ended her plans at saving her people before the Centennial had even started.

Ended *all* her plans.

"That would have been inconvenient." The Nightshade ruler grinned, revealing a single dimple, completely out of place in his cruelly cut face. "Call me Grim, Isla."

Grim. What a terrible word, Isla thought, worn with pride. Still, the name suited him. There *was* something grim beneath that grin, a faint shadow that might become monstrous in the dark.

"Have we met before?" It wasn't that he knew her name, no. That was expected. It wasn't even that he pronounced it perfectly, like a snake's hiss, with all the letters sounded out. There was something else . . .

That grin faltered. "If we had"—his eyes dipped for just a moment—"it wouldn't have been just once."

Isla could feel her face get hot beneath his gaze. Other than rare, closely monitored interactions or her secret travels to the other newlands with her starstick, she hadn't spent much time with men.

Especially men who looked like him.

Especially men who didn't seem to be terrified of her and her Wildling curse.

She frowned. He *should* be afraid. If a Wildling wished, they could make a person fall off a cliff in pursuit of them. Their power to beguile was impossible to resist—though forbidden during the hundred days. The Nightshade must have thought he was safe.

He was not.

Each Centennial was a giant game, a chance to gain unparalleled ability. It was said that whoever broke the curses by fulfilling the prophecy would be gifted all the power it had taken to spin them—the ultimate prize.

Was his flirting meant to distract her?

Isla glared at him.

And Grim grinned even wider.

Interesting.

Every hundred years since the curses had been cast, the island of Lightlark appeared for just a hundred days, freed from its impassable storm. Rulers of each realm were invited to journey from the new lands they had settled after fleeing Lightlark, to try to break the curses binding each of their powers and the island itself. Every realm except

for Nightshade, that was. Nightshades had the power to spin curses, making them prime suspects for having created them in the first place, though they denied it. This year, it seemed as though the Lightlark king was desperate.

It was the first Centennial Nightshade had been invited to.

Grim took her arm once more. Before Isla could object, he gently moved her to the side. A moment later, the giant marking on the edge of the cliff—an insignia representing all six realms—glowed gold, and someone else appeared from thin air, right where Isla had been.

A pale-blue cloak cracked with wind before settling against bare, very dark shoulders and muscled arms. The man had eyebrows larger than his eyes, a sculpted chin, and perfectly coiffed stubble that framed his pink mouth. Azul, ruler of Skyling. Isla had known their names since the time she could talk. Azul and Grim were both ancient, more than five hundred years old. Alive the day the curses had been cast. They were legends—compared to them, she was no one.

Centuries were apparently not enough time for Azul and Grim to have become friends. The Skyling nodded curtly at the Nightshade, and Grim's smile turned wicked. Mocking. Azul turned to Isla and bowed fully, reaching for her hand.

"Nice to have new Wildling blood this Centennial," he said. His bright eyes met hers, then studied her fingers, each covered in rings with gems as big as acorns. Though the rest of the realms liked to view Wildlings as savages, their wealth was unquestionable. Control of nature had its advantages. "Clouds, I've never seen a diamond that big."

To Isla, it was just a rock. Pretty, of course, but nothing in spades ever seemed too special. Jewels were made when great power was wielded over nature, and over the centuries the glittering gems had bloomed beneath the ground in the Wildling newland, rising up eventually, blossoming like flowers. It was difficult *not* to trip over some sort of precious stone in Isla's lands, which she only knew from texts, and certainly not from personal experience.

As far as Terra and Poppy were aware.

Terra always said those glittering rocks were the reason they had such a steady supply of hearts. Thieves from other realms, foolish and bold and wicked, sneaked onto their territory for the diamonds.

Isla smiled. So, the Skyling liked jewels. She slipped the ring right off her own hand and onto Azul's longest finger without missing a beat. "It complements you much more than it does me."

Azul looked like he might object—but didn't.

Someone else appeared, stepping easily past them, as if walking through portals was as seamless as the tide coming in. She turned to Isla. Her frown seemed to come as easily as most people's smiles. "So, this is the new pet?"

An ember lit in Isla's chest. The rest of the realms viewed the women warriors as savage temptresses, predators that lured lovers, then feasted on their hearts.

And Isla really couldn't blame them. Because that was very nearly the truth.

But Wildlings were so much more. At least, they had been. And still could be.

Though part of her wanted to say something she would likely regret, Isla knew the ruler *wanted* her to bite back. She was trying to tempt the monster out of Isla, to show the rest of them she was nothing more than a bloodthirsty beast. Instead, Isla bowed. "An honor to meet you, Cleo," she said, nodding her head in slight reverence. Cleo was the oldest among them, even older than the king of Lightlark, who also ruled over all Sunlings. Her age was at odds with her perfectly smooth, youthful face. Though most of the rulers were hundreds of years older, it was almost difficult to tell the difference between them and Isla. Almost.

Instead of making another insult, Cleo simply raised her chin at Isla and sneered, looking at her green dress as if she had stepped onto the island naked. Compared to the Moonling's clothing, she might as

well have. Cleo's white gown had long sleeves like milky beams of moonlight, a neckline that reached her chin, and a cape that completely covered three-fourths of her body. The skin Isla *could* see was so fair, her veins shined through, blue streaks on a slab of white marble. She was not only many shades lighter than Isla but also far taller. Her face was long and pointed in three places, cheekbones and chin, sculpted like a diamond.

The insignia glowed a final time, and a girl stepped forward, stumbling ever so slightly. She was the silver of stars, from her long, straight sheet of hair to her twinkling dress to her gloves, which reached her elbows. She smiled sheepishly at them, heart-shaped face going wide, then stood tall. "I suppose I'm the last to arrive?"

Cleo channeled her distaste right at the girl. The ruler of Starling, like Isla, was new. Starling's curse had been one of the cruelest. No one in their realm lived past the age of twenty-five.

Isla stepped forward and offered her hand. "Celeste, is it?"

The Starling smiled warmly. "Hello, Isla."

"Enchanted," Grim said, offering a bow that seemed to mock the one that Azul had given just moments before.

The Skyling frowned for just a moment before he offered Celeste his own fingers, now glimmering with Isla's diamond. "More new blood. I have a good feeling about this Centennial."

Cleo raised an eyebrow at him. "She better hope so," she said, nodding at Celeste. "She won't be here for the next one."

The Starling's face fell. And the Moonling simply turned around, her white cape floating slightly behind her.

"Don't feel too special," Azul said with a wink. "She's this unpleasant to everyone."

The rulers began the path to the palace, and Isla's heart tripped in anticipation. She had been so focused on them, she hadn't gotten a chance to truly take in her surroundings. The rest of the century, the island was encased in its storm. But now the clouds had cleared.

Lightlark was a shining, cliffy thing. Its bluffs were white as bone, and sunlight rained down in sheets of misted gold. One of the original sources of power, its ground still thrummed with it, singing to Isla in a humming siren song. She could feel its force with each step, each breath. She drank the island in greedily, like the wine she was never allowed to touch. Equally addictive and dangerous.

Poppy's lessons ran through her head, facts on paper that were now real and solid before her.

Thousands of years ago, the island was cut into several pieces, so each realm could claim a shard. Nightshades left the island shortly afterward to form their own land. Wildlings left after the curses. The pieces that remained were Star Isle for the Starlings, Sky Isle for the Skylings, Moon Isle for the Moonlings, and Sun Isle for the Sunlings. Then, there was the Mainland, where all the realms had traditionally gathered together. It was the Centennial's base.

It was also historically home to Lightlark royalty.

The Mainland castle loomed nearby, set high on a cliff like a crown jewel, jutting precariously out over the sea. Large enough to be its own city. Which was good, considering its main inhabitant could not leave it.

Not during the day, at least.

Isla must have been staring at it, because Celeste sighed next to her. "Do you think he's watching us?" she said quietly.

He. The Sunling ruler and king of Lightlark. The last remaining Origin, with blood from each of the four realms that still had a presence on the island. He could wield each of the four Lightlark powers.

And, by all accounts, he was insufferable.

On Lightlark and beyond, love had a price. Falling deeply and truly in love meant forming a bond that gave a beloved complete access to one's abilities. They could do whatever they wished with it. Wield it, reject it. Even steal it.

Knowing very well how many people wanted access to his endless stream of power, the Lightlark ruler was untrusting. Paranoid. Cold.