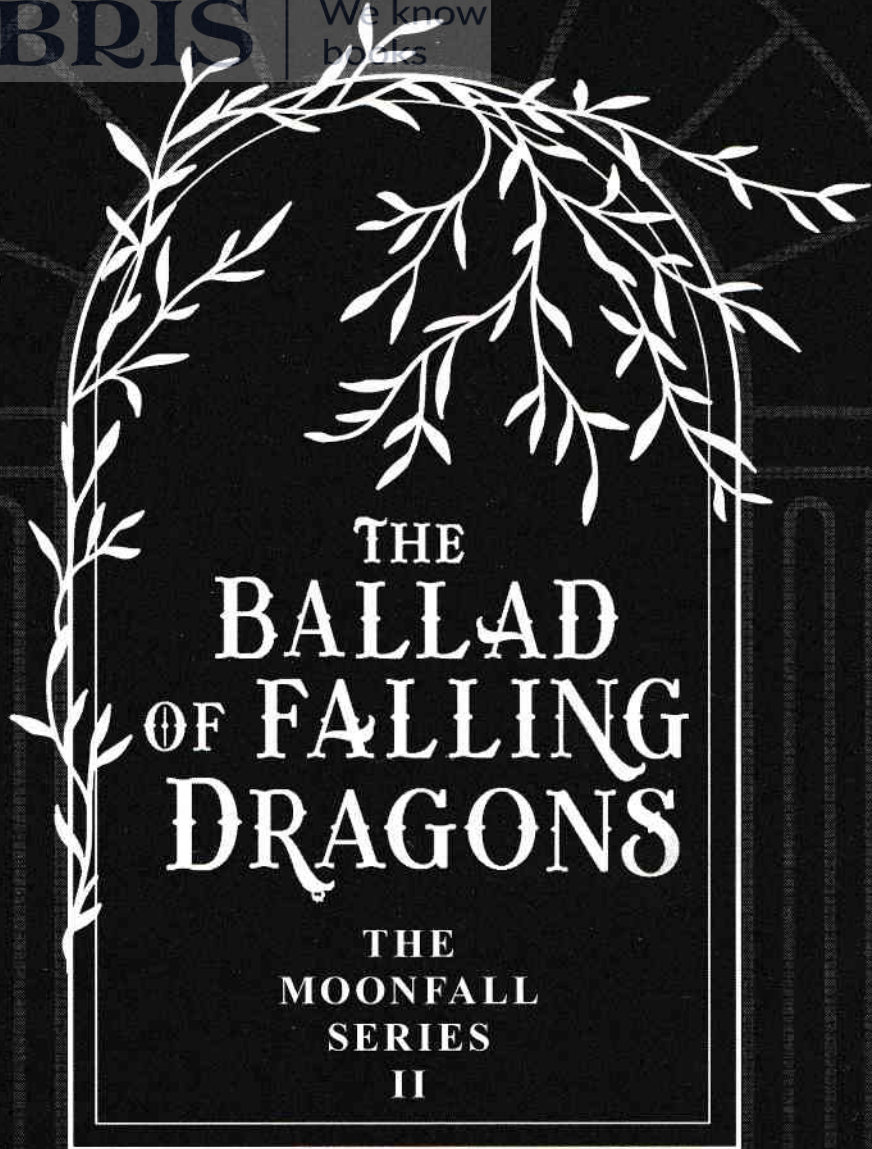


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THE
BALLAD
OF FALLING
DRAGONS

THE
MOONFALL
SERIES
II

SARAH A.
PARKER



HARPER
Voyager



It was unnaturally quiet that dae, the Loff a sheet of tempered glass that offered only the sharpest reflection. Not a breath of wind ruffled the grass or squealed past honed corners, the volcanoes that blistered Gondragh quelling their grumbled ruckus for the first time in many phases. Not a single rock rolled out of place unless ordered to, the action swift and without strain. Even the clouds refused to weep, like a crumbled face holding breath before the anguished sob.

It was as though Ignos, Bulder, Clode, and Rayne had pooled their consciousnesses . . . elsewhere. As though they'd been watching.

Listening.

Folk mulled over the strange occurrence, and those who could hear the Creators' songs would later speak of it as a bad omen, given what was to unfold that dae. That the large silver Moonplume moon perched in the sky above The Shade was about to wobble from its lofty perch.

First came a scream from the mouth of someone buckled with too much pain and loneliness. Like bursting a seam that had been sewn too tight. Then came the words—tilled from a thirsty heart, without much thought beyond hope of easing the ache in the female's chest.

What happened next had the Creators screaming with equal might, their voices hitched with foreboding.

Then . . .

Slátra pitched from the sky like a luminous egg, plummeting with such velocity that fire plumed in her bouldered wake. Those who witnessed the event and lived to tell the tale would later say the ground around them seemed to heave a sigh of acceptance, right before the moon struck with such force the entire world rattled for a beat, like a shudder. Fitting, given the event would later bring about a reckoning that was well overdue.

The Creators watched as a female hatched from that moon, stumbled free of the beautiful, luminous wreckage with eyes a crush of glitter and ink, blood leaking from a bone-deep gash in her head. As she tore toward Arithia with vicious intent . . . before she was captured. Subdued. Tossed in a cell beneath a mountain that housed a male who frothed with bloodlust.

Watched as she was tortured. Hardened.

Sharpened.

They knew the end began here, amidst this echo of something that took place so many phases ago. That the male this moon-fallen fae once loved roamed the plains with a heart full of ache and a mouth full of words that could crumble the world to dust. That he could end things faster and with more ferocity than any moonfall.

That fate was working against them to make things right, herding them into a corner too small and suffocating.

They didn't fight, for they knew they were in the wrong. Knew that if they did, they would lose. For the dae they laid their little trap and tore Caelis to shreds, packing him into a cage that crushed him into a screaming mulch, there was but one thing they hadn't counted on. Something bearing a potent strength that would forever go unmatched.

Love.



Kaan
CHAPTER 1

I feel around the cold, calcified ridges of a jagged hole in Slátra's side, a particularly sharp edge nicking the tip of my finger. Pain barely registers, the sensation akin to the song of a lost friend. Treasured almost; many of the scars on my hands attributed to this beautiful silver moon.

To her.

With slow steps, I move farther around the bundled Moonplume to another hole, this one so deep I can fit my entire arm in and only just feel the back. Something I check for the thousandth time, making sure the shape is clear before I move on to the next. Imagining I have the missing pieces in my hands, setting them back in place.

Not a want.

Not a simple desire to finish the job, like completing a complex puzzle.

But a soul-deep urge that's propelled me since she pitched from the sky, pervading my dreams and every waking breath even *after* I found Raeve—beaten and bloody in that cell.

I press my palm flat between Slátra's closed eyes. "You will be whole again," I rasp, throat so tight I have to clear it. I put my head against hers despite the bitter cold that bites my skin. "I swear on my existence, I will not rest until I've found every last piece and brought them back to you."

She doesn't move. Doesn't open her eyes and reveal her secrets. Certainly doesn't fill this jagged hole in my own chest, like something's out of place. A feeling I've grown too familiar with over the many phases since Elluin left.

I look down into the smooth hollow that cradled her before she hatched as Raeve, and a different sort of hurt flares in my too-soft heart . . . impossible to ignore.

My thoughts drift to her whereabouts. To how Lírí howled and howled once she seemed to realize Raeve was gone. That Raeve had left her here in The Burn, had chosen to chase revenge on her own.

To step away from love.

I felt every high-pitched bay through the fibers of my being. Still do whenever I step foot in that cavern or let Rygun's thoughts filter through me from where he's nesting at the mouth of it . . . Though the small Moonplume seems to be howling less now. Like she's giving up.

Somehow, that's worse.

I press a kiss between Slátra's eyes and make for the stairs, brushing the frost from my beard as I step from the frigid ebb of her silver light, up toward reality. Pushing past leafy vines, I exit into the balmy air grown heavy from the storm now rumbling in the distance, past sodden blooms dripping into puddles.

As I reach the door to my suite, the sound of flapping parchment wings draws my attention skyward.

I offer my hand for the approaching lark to settle on, my heart lurching with the realization that it could be from Raeve. Perhaps a note telling me she cares for me, but that she won't be coming back. Something she couldn't bring herself to tell me to my face.

Not a breath moves through me until I flatten the lark and read the message from start to end, written in the native tongue of the clans.

Not from Raeve.

Relief floods me like a guzzle of icy water.

I reread the message from Terros, valuing the update on his journey to Bothaim with Rekk saddled behind him, being flown toward his imminent demise.

Happy to hear of their progress, I refold the lark and pocket it. Weather permitting, they should land in Bothaim in two or three cycles.

Raeve will be waiting, no doubt. Ready to skin Rekk alive. Hopefully make him beg for death before the end.

Hopefully shed the bloodlusting itch from her veins.

Shoving the thought down, I lurch the door wide and push past the curtains. Make sure they're pinched shut before I move deeper into the suite, brushing my fingers over my lute. Frowning, I pause to lift it from the rack, settle it against my hip, and drag my thumb across the frayed strings . . .

The tenor that strums free boots me in the chest, strained and with a strident overtone. An echo of the hurt that's been strung through me since Elluin left so many phases ago.

The tune of my heartache. Of my love and sorrow.

I should've replaced the strings long ago, but that would change the sound. Something that didn't feel right. Especially since she's the only one I've played for since Slátra carried her into the sky. A private tune to her spirit in the hopes it would hail her heart back to me.

Perhaps I should've played harder.

Clearing my throat, I set the instrument on its rack and unstopper my chalice of burnt brandy, pouring a drink. I sip, the liquor blazing a path into my gut as I open the small table drawer and retrieve the glass vial I stuffed within over thirty cycles ago.

A pang of guilt strikes me at the sight of the whirling mists inside, like it's caging a small tornado.

Oops.

I sink into the leather armchair and take another swig, put the glass aside, then set the vial on the table and pop the cork.

Borg pours out in a gush of grumbling mist, churning and spreading as he gathers size. He folds over himself, then stretches larger than a pallet-sized throw—almost completely transparent—before constricting into a dense, wafting mass again, just bigger than me, black eyes gleaming with—

Rage? No. Disappointment.

That's worse.

"The absent king returns," the disgruntled waif mutters, floating before me like a pale storm cloud tethered to his vial.

"Borg. I've missed you, too."

"Your actions contradict." He extends his mouth longways; a messy hollow torn through. "Next time you think to stuff me in a drawer, *don't*."

I dip my chin, hand fisted against my chest. "You're right, my friend. That was thoughtless. Please accept my humble apologies."

"Depends." Another stretch of his mouth—sideways this time. "Did you find me a prettier jar?"

Shit.

"Still working on it—"

"*Lies.*" He gusts forward so fast the hairs on my arms lift. "Over a hundred phases and I'm still in the same ugly thing, plugged in place with a *cork*."

I arch a brow. "It has a large window . . ."

"Pointless when I'm tossed in a drawer like an afterthought."

A small smile pulls at my lips. "Fair point."

Borg sniffs long and deep, getting right up close to my mouth, like he's about to thread in there and invade my organs. Never fails to make a shiver climb my spine. "I smell the drink on your breath."

"Indeed."

"You've come to feed me?"

I reach for my glass and bring it to my lips, forcing him to retreat enough for me to take another blazing sip. "Depends," I hiss past clenched teeth, playing the usual game.

He offers me a gaping grin, then wafts back, pretending to pick mist from beneath his foggy fingernails. "I still haven't heard from your Elluin, nor have the others. Though a well-fed brother in Gore recently came across a fae who had spirits *clamoring* to speak with her. Curiously, some were members of the fallen Neván family."

My heart almost lurches free of my fucking rib cage.

"For a hefty nibble," Borg continues while my blood boils, gaze still cast on his nails, "I could ask my brother to inquire about the messages they were hoping to pass—"

"You will tell your brothers to stop searching for Elluin's spirit immediately," I growl with such might the room trembles, hands fisting so tight a fissure *pings* through my glass. "Or *anyone* in correlation with her."

Borg wafts his hand flat against what I imagine is his chest cavity, like I just wounded him. "But you swore to feed me for an *eon* if I managed to connect with Elluin's spiri—"

"Or I'll tip you back into the Mists."

Shriveling to the size of a woetoe, he peers up at me, eyes huge within his trembling body.

He doesn't want to go back there. He's *much* better fed with me.

"And once we locate the rest of your precious moonshards?" he snipes, puffing back to his regular size and posturing over me. "What of me *then*? Will you tip me back into the Mists? Or perhaps leave me in a drawer until you grow so old and senile you forget I even exist?"

His words pinch, softening my regard. I know how it feels to be capped with a cork and tucked in a drawer, hidden away.

"I still have use of you, Borg. And plenty of painful memories to keep you as overfed as you've been these past hundred phases. Though if I were wise," I mutter, tossing back another swig, "I'd trade you for a brother with a sweeter appetite."

This time both his misty hands flatten against his chest. "You wouldn't dare. I've been a *humble* servant."

A *hungry, sadistic servant*. But morbid as it is, this waif knows me almost as well as Rygun does.

He's tasted most of my agony, my loss. Every time he brings something painful to the surface, I'm reminded to live each moment with intention. To honor and love with my whole heart and thus stave off the fester of regret.

Mostly.

"I wouldn't dare," I confirm, meaning every word. "You're a loyal ally and a *much-treasured* friend."

Borg deflates—everything bar his puffed chest—and returns to picking mist from beneath his wispy nails. "Treasured as I am, I have bad news for us both, given my current state of near starvation."

I lift a brow. Decide against reminding him it's impossible for him to *actually* starve.

"Unfortunately, I have no news to report on the whereabouts of any more of your beloved shards, though the Moving Mists are migrating farther north than they have in over a hundred phases." He splays his fingers to inspect his handiwork. "I'm hoping one of my brothers within will spot something soon."

I nod, pushing down the pang of disappointment. "Good to know."

He gets to work on his other hand, coy as he says, "Perhaps there's something *else* you want to know?"

Hard to ignore the greedy hitch roughening his voice.

"There is, actually. I'm looking for information on the whereabouts of three folk."

He surges forward so fast I suck a breath, almost cross-eyed with the effort to maintain his gloomy eye contact. "Go on . . ."

I take another gulp to forge myself some personal space, my next words hissed. "Veya, my sister. Kyzari, my niece. And Roan, my alchemist. I've sent them all larks," I say, swirling the liquid in my glass. "I'm impatient to hear back."

An understatement.

The chasm left by Raeve's absence is packed with restless anxiety that feels like lightning bolts, forking into all my tender muscle and sinew. I'd let Grihm beat me into a pulp just to draw the focus elsewhere, but he's not around. *Nobody's* around.

"Ahh. Let me consult." Borg gusts to a respectable distance, withering into a sheet of mist that drifts across the ground.

"Take your time," I murmur, then fill my mouth with another gulp. Doing my best to numb myself.

I've almost emptied the glass when Borg recongeals into his regular shape. "I have information on your alchemist," he announces, voice pitched with hungry glee. Like a loyal beast that just caught a rodent and dumped it on my pillow.

"Nothing on the others?"

"Not at this stage. But my brothers are listening."

I nod and pour myself another drink that I drain in three deep gulps, burning my throat raw. "What are you craving this dae?"

"Young Kaan," he blurts, vibrating with excitement—his fingers clawing at the air like spindly tick legs. "Something truly mouthwatering, given you stuffed me in a drawer for so long."

"Fair," I mutter, thumping my empty glass on the table. Truth be told, it could've been worse.

Given the current state of things, reliving *any* memory from after Elluin left for Arithia might've kicked me over the edge.

I tip my head against the headrest and close my eyes, feeling Borg encroach like a sticky cloud wafting against me, hands padding at my shoulders, neck, then jaw, fingers splaying around my cheeks.

He finally finds balance.

There's the distant, cyclonic sound of his mouth opening, heaving with intensity until it overshadows the thumping pound of my heart. Then the plunging sensation, like a cold tongue is slithering down my throat, shoving past my physical layers.

Through the fibers of my soul.

Still, it pushes . . . finally slitting up into the shape of a hook fierce enough to flay me from within.

I fist a particularly painful memory nesting in the embers of my volcanic insides, lift it up, and wrestle it onto the hook. Borg hums with glee, dragging it up in steady increments—



“He’s just a youngling!” Mahmi’s voice is so loud and sad it makes my heart hurt. “Please, Ostern! Please, have mercy—”

“Get her back to the Fortress!” Pahpi growls over his shoulder, his big hand squeezing my arm so tight I think my bone is going to snap as he charges across the courtyard, dragging me behind him. Four of my fast, scrambling steps for every two of his.

Guards rush to grab Mahmi despite her big, swollen belly, hauling her back the way we came.

She screams my name so loud her voice cracks, cut off as the doors slam shut between us.

Pahpi’s dragon circles overhead, close enough to stir the air, blasting sand into my eyes.

I screw up my face, blink really fast, trying to force my tears back down. If I can just stop crying, maybe I’ll be allowed to run back to Mahmi and make sure she’s okay.

But the tears won’t stop. No matter how hard I try, more keep coming out.

We pass from the courtyard, under wiggly trees, down some jagged stairs while I scramble to keep up.

My legs finally give way.

The burning ground grates skin from my knees and hip, leaving a trail of blood. Like one of my clay markers smudging across the parchment.

I’m chafed raw, stinging all over by the time Pahpi lets go of my arm and stands over me like a tower. As I scramble back, my hand falls down the edge of something, making my heart jump.

I peek over my shoulder at the hole behind me, like a dark throat waiting to swallow . . .

A warm wetness spreads through my pants.

“Look at me, Kaan.”

I wipe the tears from my eyes so I can see Pahpi clearer, the sun blazing at his back making him look like an angry shadow.

His dark hair is tucked beneath his bronze crown, sitting just above the deep lines crushed between his hard eyes. My gaze drifts to the three beads dangling from his ear . . .

Red.

Brown.

Clear.

My chin wobbles as I look at the orange mug in his fist, shaped with my own hands. And with no help from Bulder.

Pahpi is always telling me to shape this, shape that, shape, shape, shape! But the things I give him are never good enough because my words come out in bits. But I'm good with my hands. I thought maybe if I made him something perfect, he'd be happy.

All I wanted was a smile . . .

"Why are you crying?"

Because my heart hurts.

Because I worked for daes and daes on that mug for Pahpi, only for him to look at it like he's looking at me now. Like he's disappointed.

I wipe more tears from my eyes. "I d-d-don't know . . ."

"Is it because I've hurt your feelings?"

I glance at the mug in his hand, cutting back to Pahpi's big brown boots. Easier to look at than his angry face.

"Your heart is too soft, Kaan. Just like your mah's. Just like this mug."

He squeezes his fist.

CRACK.

Shards of pottery crumble across the ground like the shattered bits of my heart.

I swallow my sob, but it burns going down. Like I just swallowed the sun.

"I know you think I'm hard on you—your grandpah was hard on me, too—but you forget you're the son of a king, born with shortfalls that could tarnish the Vaegor legacy."

The words come out like a dragon's growl, big and hurting.

Pahpi crouches, his red riding leathers tight across his wide shoulders as he points at the shards. "The time you spent shaping that gift should've been spent on your stutter. Spent shaping yourself into someone worthy of the crown that's been worn by a Vaegor ever since the phase our ancestor first mounted a Sabersythe."

I study the crown on his head. All those sharp points poking toward the sky.

How do I tell him I don't want to be worthy of it? That I just want to be worthy of a hug, or a smile.

Of him.

His face softens. But then he looks at the two beads Mahmi's been braiding through my hair since I first heard Ignos and Bulder . . . though not Clode or Rayne like Pahpi hoped.

His upper lip peels back. "Show me something I can be proud of, or you're better off as a servant."

He shoves me.

Though I'm expecting it, it doesn't stop my belly from dropping so fast I almost spew, falling backward into the dark.

I hit the ground so hard my breath stops. My ears ring and my head goes light. I drag in a breath, feeling another hurt in my chest—like something broke inside me, now digging into important things.

I look up at the light above, round and pale like a Moonplume moon—

Pahpi leans over the edge. His neck muscles strain as he says a phrase I've never been able to get right, no matter how many times he's tossed me in this hole.

Bulder shudders around me, then chomps shut—caging me in a darkness so hot and thick it clogs my throat. But I manage to speak, stuttering a command that only makes Bulder break into bits that slam into my head and almost crush me. I try again, so much dirt and broken stone packing around me that I can barely move.

The scared feeling in my chest takes over.

I scream, cry, claw at the jagged darkness. Beg Bulder to listen to my broken words. Not that any of it helps. Not that it ever does.

Because my words don't work properly.

Because I'm not a tri-bead like Pahpi.

Because I'm weak, soft-hearted, useless—

Borg stops drinking, loosening his hold on me. Like hooking a fish through the guts, then releasing it into the Loff despite the fact that its innards are hanging out.

I gasp, eyes wide open as the memory slithers down and coils back amongst my insides, frantically checking my surroundings. Reassuring myself that I'm not trapped beneath the ground, trying to stutter free. That I'm in my suite where I'm safe and alone, excluding my gluttonous waif.

Borg gusts back with a groan. "Poor sweet boy," he drudges out, seeping down into a misty cushion of satiated glee. "That was *deeeeeelicious*."

With trembling hands, I pour myself another half glass I toss back, then slam it on the table. "Glad it sufficed," I grit out, leaning forward to knead my eyes. "Roan?"

"My brothers who dwell in Bothaim's dungeon have spoken with him."

My spine snaps straight. "What do you mean the fucking *dungeon*?"

"Don't murder the messenger," he drones, far slower than I wish he'd speak. "Roan regrets to inform you that he—and this is a direct quote—'messed up and will go on trial before the Tri-Council for allegedly stealing the Book of Voyd.'"

My heart plummets so fast it makes my head spin. "When?"

"Three daes," Borg drawls, yawning as he shrinks to a small thread of fog, feeding himself into his vial without another word. Leaving me alone with the silence.

I stare, mind spinning, unable to waft away the reek of impending war.

"Dammit," I mutter, then cork the vial and stand, pocketing Borg. I

stalk to my door and yank it open, coming face-to-face with Pyrok at the threshold—red hair askew, hand raised in a fist like he was just about to knock. Looking like he rolled off his pallet, then stumbled straight here.

I meet his gaze, preparing to break the news that his younger brother is awaiting trial in Bothaim, when I notice his pale complexion. That, and the uncharacteristic panic in his wide green eyes.

My gut drops.

“What is it?”

A furry miskunn hand comes up to rest on his shoulder, gripping gently. I frown. “Lumo?”

She peeps into view, her pale-pink eyes so big within her small face. “It’s here.” She clambers higher, pulling up until she’s crouched on Pyrok’s shoulder, her colorful smock gathered around her small trembling body as she reaches out her hands.

Frowning, I take her in my arms, quick to tuck her against my chest. She bundles her long limbs and nuzzles in.

I stroke the pale fur on her face, glancing back at Pyrok. “Has she seen something?”

“Yuuup.” He reaches back and scratches his head. “There’s, ah—There’s a moonfall coming.”

All the breath escapes my lungs.

“A bads one,” Lumo murmurs from where her face is hidden amongst the folds of my shirt, her voice barely audible over my thundering pulse. “Lumo scared.”

My heart squeezes, arms tightening with protective urge.

Not for the first time, I wish her visions had started when she was a bit older, not fresh from the cold pouch of her slain mah. Seeing such things is hard on anyone, let alone such a young pup.

“Do you know where it’ll land, Lumo?”

“Not *one* moon.” She snuggles deeper into my chest, like she’s seeking comfort. “*Many* moonses.”

Creators . . .

I spare a glance at Pyrok still scratching the back of his head, his complexion almost green, making it look as though he’s about to fold forward and vomit—a quiet conversation passing between us.

“How many, Lumo?” I cup her cheek and rub behind her ear, hoping to bring her comfort. “Did you see how many will fall?”

She peeps up.

Eyes brimming with tears, she curls her tufted tail around her head, trapping my hand against her cheek. “Too many.”



Curled atop my straw-stuffed pallet, I stare out across the filthy ground of my small, compressing cell, through bars barely visible in the dull lantern light. Watch a puddle of gathered mildew get attacked by the slow drip . . . drip . . . drip loosening off a stalactite, churning over my interaction with the Scavenger King.

What have I done?

I should've told him to eat shit and die, rather than race to hide a call to arms amongst the whorls of my signature. If the lark is going where I think it's going, I've implicated someone I love. And for what?

Me?

I wallow in my mistake, suffocated by the immense weight of the mountain above, realizing what I am.

Bait.

Plump prey that found refuge in a trap. There can be no other answer.

Perhaps the lark won't make it to Kaan? Perhaps it's going to Pah instead and my uncle won't be dragged into this?

The thought brings little relief. Certainly not enough to lift me off the ground and reinvigorate my hunger to escape this horrible place.

I tap my foot against the cold stone, jingling my chain, trying to stimulate my mind. Dredge up a single drop of hope or energy to *do something*. To work this problem over and find a way out.

To fight.

But the silence has never been so loud.

The walls so close.

My shackle so tight.

Maybe Pah's miskunn has worked out where I am. Maybe an army is coming for me, ready to break me free and drag me back to Arithia.

A bigger, prettier cell to suffocate within.

I groan, then glare at the rusty pan of slop by the bars; the last meal I was dished up. Offal and stale bread garnished with gorging grubs.

Perhaps I'll get sick and die before anyone gets here at all?

I squeeze my eyes shut, spiraling with the scenario. Picture myself dead in this cell, the diadem cracking free like a tick thirsty for another host strong enough to contain the Aether Stone.

Except there isn't one.

Without a host to feed the ravenous runes, Caelis will be released. Will be whole again, yes, but upon seeing me dead in this cell, he will *rage*. In my heart, I know he'll rip every m—

The faint sound of fluttering wings before something lands in my palm. I open my eyes.

nee

I frown so deep the skin around my diadem pinches, studying the three scripted letters on the little lark's abdomen—impeccably joined. The handwriting smooth and delicate.

Perfect.

As it should be, given I took a cane to the knuckles every time my quill slipped even slightly out of line. A royal title stands for naught when your pah condones you to be treated like a coin that's never polished enough.

Looking at those letters, it's hard to ignore the heavy lump in my chest. Something that feels a lot like she's learning *she's* dead all over again. That she bled out giving birth to me. That I'll never know what she smelled like. The tone of her voice.

How it would've dipped and peaked when she told me she loved me.

Perhaps I've dropped into a state of morbid insanity and I'm simply imagining the lark's presence?

I latch on to the notion like a bloodthirsty parasite, gorging myself, squeezing my eyes shut so hard they ache. Determined the lark I whispered to Mah phases ago is *not* currently belly-up in my hand.

I open my eyes—

nee

Damn.

Perhaps I'm dreaming? Perhaps I dreamt the signature, too?

I close my eyes again, murmuring to Caelis. A hollow song that ices my lips until I fall into a half sleep, drifting somewhere cold and high amongst the stars. Somewhere we can hear each other. Sing to each other safely.

Love each other.

Somewhere Caelis is *whole* and not mulched within the stone embedded on my brow.

Surf's there, rather than caged in the royal Moonplume burrows hidden beneath Arithia. Something that's always hindered us from exploring the skies as one and forging a sturdy bond.

For the first time ever, I feel her presence in my chest. Feel her vivid