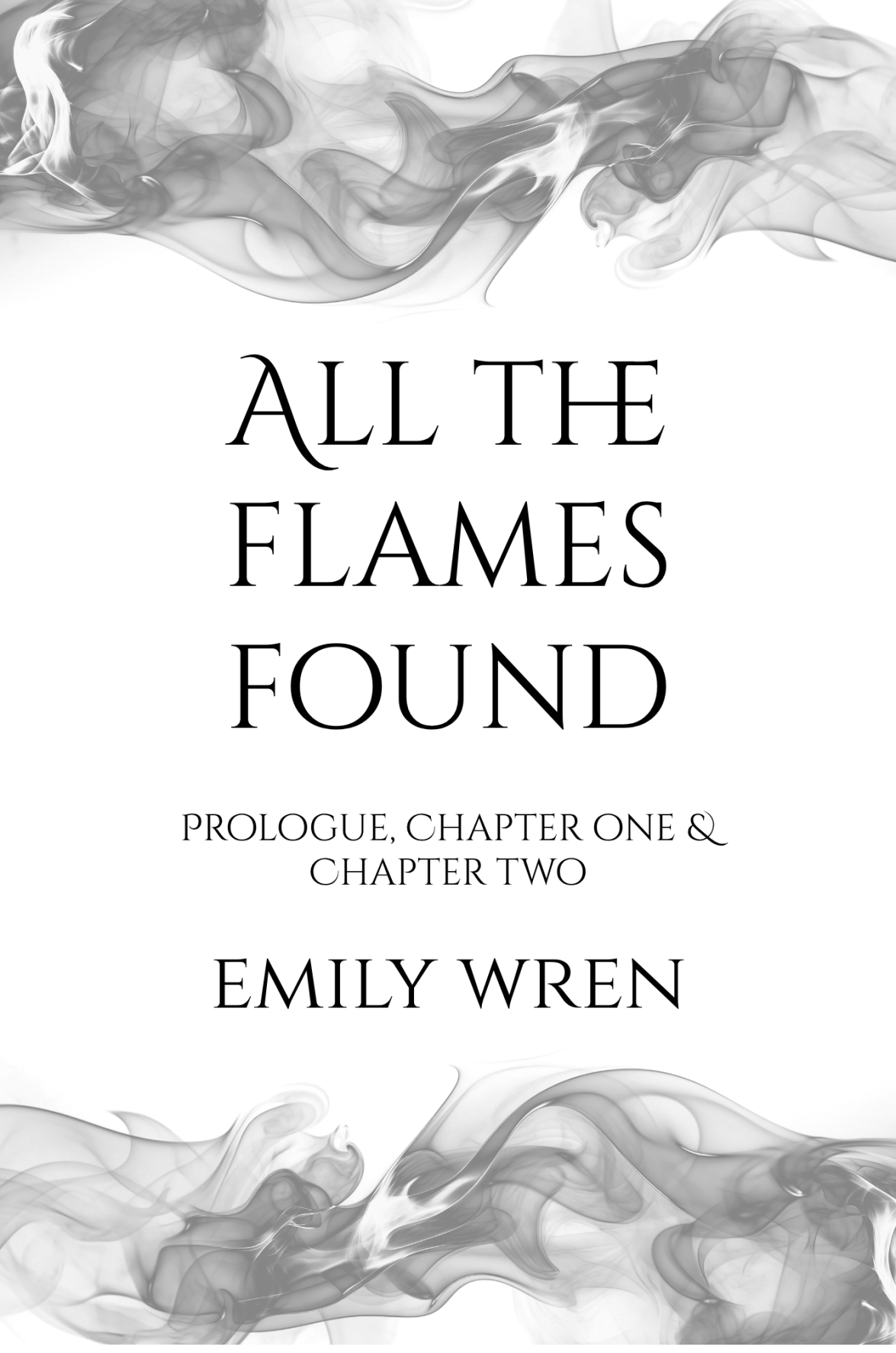




ALL THE FLAMES FOUND

PROLOGUE, CHAPTER ONE &
CHAPTER TWO

EMILY WREN

PROLOGUE

CELESTREA OPERA HOUSE

A bead of sweat tracked its way between Iskra's shoulder blades. She clasped her palms tightly in the pool of silken fabric in her lap, eyes dancing between the settling crowd and the musicians re-entering the orchestra pit below. Anything that would keep her mind from the words being hissed on her left. Yet her ears caught on every syllable.

'Rumours of traipsing about at those establishments,' a nearby lord spat. 'Out drinking most nights of the week. It's inappropriate. I've even heard a rumour she's been spotted at that vampire hovel. For the good of this nation, she needs to be showing stability at a time like this.'

'This is neither the time nor the place for these discussions,' her father murmured to the lord as the lights dipped low for the opera's second act.

'If she would appear to be settling down, it would soothe public concerns in the interim. My son is—'

'Enough,' her mother said with finality and reached out to cover one of her daughter's clenched fists. 'Are you okay?'

A strange simmer had taken root in her stomach throughout the day and now it bubbled over as rage fizzed through her veins. Iskra didn't trust herself to speak. She shook off her mother's attempted comfort and reached forward, gripping the balustrade in front of her. It anchored her as the energy churned, searching her body for an exit. What would be her quickest way out of the building?

All the while, the lord's words ricocheted through her mind.

How dare he.

How dare this man talk about her as if she was a pawn to be bartered away?

Her fingers dug into the oxblood velvet of the railing, and she took slow, deliberate breaths through her nose, desperate to calm her spinning mind and raging body. But the added oxygen only fuelled the heat coursing through her.

A few rows behind, her friends chattered and whooped as the curtains lifted, and the performers launched into the second act.

Sweat gathered on her brow and sternum, the inferno inside her reaching a tipping point. She didn't know what would happen when it spilled over, but she knew she couldn't be in this room surrounded by people when it did.

'Forgive me, Your Highnesses, but I would be remiss not to voice a rising concern the people have for the princess,' the lord continued, unabashed.

Just stop talking.

Iskra stood and her mother startled. 'Darling, what's—'

Her fevered skin contracted and split, and something beneath it tore free. Burning cotton stung her nostrils.

The drumbeat pounding in her head drowned out the incessant voices, but she could still hear the hollow whoosh of the velvet as it caught alight. Tendrils of fire shot across the balcony edge, instantly igniting the heavy curtains on either side.

Snatching her hands away, she shook them, desperate to stop the flames pouring out. But it only made them worse. Flames continued to leak, hitting the carpeted floor with a sharp hiss.

The growing roar was accompanied by a heat unlike any she'd felt before. It pushed and pressed at her skin like a brand, yet she was never burnt.

All around her, the packed opera house began to scream.

CHAPTER I

ISKRA

Iskra Adastra, heir to the Nexus throne, was drunk. Not the giddy, laughter-inducing drunk of celebration, but the face-numbing, head-scrambling drunk masking pain. The elementai wine was doing its job at last.

Her eyes drifted, unfocused, across the cerulescent ceiling. The cavernous walls of the club eddied with patterns like ocean currents pulsing in a frenzy over the dancefloor. The thudding beat washed over her. She moved, arms in the air, swept for a moment into euphoria as the spiked edges of her pain dulled inside the blur of music and alcohol.

She knew the heartbreak of the last few months would come hurtling back soon, but for now, she danced.

Iskra looked up at the VIP mezzanine level. Her friends sat next to one another, the tension between them apparent in their crossed arms and exasperated expressions. They were probably still sniping at each other over the new group that dared to sit near them. At first, she assumed their disdain was because the new group wore far more casual clothes than her friends' crisp suits and silk.

Then she spotted it. Flashes of yellow in their eyes, the wolfish grins, the pack insignia on jewellery and clothing. Lycans.

She didn't know how her friends could insist on going to Hydranis multiple times a week yet squirmed at rubbing shoulders with the elementai.

Still, some of them, Luther in particular, always found a way to make his distaste known.

It was such a joke. Humans were Lightkin, as the lycans were Shadowkin. They were all technically elementai and it was the humans that had initiated the linguistic separation between them and everyone else.

A clammy hand gripped her elbow and spun her round.

Speak of the dickhead.

Oozing excess and entitlement, Luther bent low, his voice straining over the music. ‘Why did you go? I had something I wanted to talk to you about.’ The words slurred at the edges, his pale blond hair freeing itself from its gelled-back confines. She wasn’t the only one lost to the bespelled alcohol.

‘Your rant was killing my buzz. So, I came to dance. But, oh look,’ she gestured between them, ‘here you are.’

His eyes darkened. ‘There should be rules. Lycans shouldn’t just be allowed in.’

‘Elementai in an elementai club? The audacity.’ She rolled her eyes. At least she thought she did; everything was delightfully fuzzy.

Iskra tried to step back, but he clung to her arm. ‘Wait. I need to talk to you. It’s time to stop messing around, Iskra, you need to choose who you’re going to align with—’

She shoved him away, sloshing her drink onto him in the process. ‘I don’t know many things right now, Luther. But I do know – my choice will never be you.’ She wagged her fingers at him before disappearing once more into the throng and praying to anything that would listen that he wouldn’t follow.

Had he always been this obnoxious, or was it a more recent development? She struggled to remember how things were before everything happened.

She’d spent the evening using alcohol to patch over a hole that had been carved into her heart. Now, the thought of a time before tore at it, widening

it. She raised her glass, swirling the dregs to make the particles shimmer, and downed it in one. With fumbling fingertips, she made a quick pass over her face and copper curls, ensuring her mask was still in place.

Masks weren't compulsory at Hydranis, but most people still wore them. The club was Celestrea's premier nightlife destination and open to all. The strict, and bespelled, no-violence policy meant that any tensions between species were kept to just that – tension. The masks, whilst not foolproof, gave a sense of anonymity to the patrons.

It was this obscurity Iskra craved as she whirled across the dancefloor. This, and the floating nothingness that alcohol provided, however briefly.

Minutes, maybe hours later, new arms closed around her waist. She flinched. How long had she been in her own world? The cloying scent of vanilla and nutmeg hit her nose, aftershave so strong it cut through the club's odour of ozone and sweat-slicked bodies.

Once again, she shoved away the intrusion. The stranger stepped back with his palms raised.

'Apologies, an accident,' the man shouted over the bass.

Unsure how one grabbed someone's waist with both hands accidentally, she smiled with practised politeness and moved further into the crowd. The man moved with her.

A frisson of annoyance cut through her haze and she took in the man through heavily lidded eyes. There was something familiar about the face behind the mask, but not enough to mark him as a friend.

He dipped his mouth close to her ear. 'Can I have this dance?' he said on a smile, but the calculation in his eyes was impossible to miss. She paused for a moment as her mind cleared. She recognised him. He was a reporter for one of the more inflammatory national rags.

Fuck.

Her body ran cold.

The flimsy cover of the masks meant nothing if they were letting the press in. She needed to get away from him.

‘Solo dances only tonight, I’m afraid,’ she said with a placid smile. She retreated from his space, heart hammering in time to the music. Winding between outstretched limbs and twirling bodies, she made her way to the edge of the dancefloor. His eyes stayed locked on her and her skin prickled under his gaze.

She should leave. The tunnel to the exit was right there, and men were doing their damndest to ruin her night. But she was loath to return to reality just yet. Her eyes followed the glowing blue rivulets of Hydranis’ interior as they wound across and down the hewn walls to the bar.

Perhaps the night could be salvaged.

The only available space was between a man and a woman who sat, drinks in hand, surveying the partygoers. Apologising as she squeezed into the gap, Iskra zeroed in on which of the elementai-inspired concoctions would keep her emotions at bay.

She ordered an Aeris Iced Tea and watched as the bartender mixed her drink, the shaker thrown in the air to rapturous, drunken applause. But as she took her first sip, she sensed more watchful eyes. The couple’s attention was now on her.

At first glance, she hadn’t noticed how striking they were. She did now. The woman was ethereally pale, her skin lightly dusted with silver, gleaming in the club’s pulsing lights. Inky hair spilled down her back and cool grey eyes peeked out from behind a simple black mask. Her dress was also black. Sleek, elegant and clinging to her honed body like a second skin. However, the woman’s beauty did nothing to detract from the chill that seemed to leech out of her.

The man’s skin was an umber brown, and his cropped, coiled hair caught the glow of the nightclub’s flickering strobes. The blue of his mask matched his piercing sea-glass eyes and complemented his fine suit.

‘Don’t mind me, I’ll drink this and be out of your way,’ she said, offering them an apologetic smile. The man answered with a dazzling grin and Iskra

fought the urge to stare, followed by the desire to tell him her entire life story. Who were this strange pair?

‘No apologies necessary. It’s not often your date gets interrupted by the Crown Princess,’ said the man.

The cold dug its claws more firmly into her. No one was willing to offer her anonymity tonight.

‘It’s not a date. Ignore him,’ the woman said, rolling her eyes. ‘But we *are* intrigued to know what you’re doing over here all by yourself. Bad night?’

‘No. Just needed a breather. It was a bit crowded in there.’ Iskra glanced at the packed dancefloor, relieved when the reporter’s beady eyes weren’t staring back.

‘I’m surprised you’re here at all with the... changes at the Astra Palace,’ the woman continued. ‘Aren’t there more important things you should be focusing on than drinking and dancing?’

All Iskra’s hopes of recovering the night died a swift death. She mentally kicked herself for not leaving earlier. Now she had an even more pressing issue to deal with than people recognising her.

Rage flooded her system, blurring her vision. Scorching heat rushed over her skin, replacing the chill. Her hands trembled. Iskra didn’t trust herself to respond. She had only seconds before her control slipped entirely.

In her hand, Iskra’s drink bubbled before overflowing. The ice had melted within seconds and now, it nearly boiled. She slammed it onto the bar, sticky liquid splashing across the metal surface. Without a word, she charged towards the door.

In her periphery, her security detail materialised from the shadows. A stark reminder she was never truly alone – whether she wanted to be or not.

She made it through the tunnelled entrance, up the stairs and into the night. More guards closed in as she emerged, and she gulped the crisp air, pushing down her rising anger. Strong hands guided her to the armour-plated car waiting to the side of the doors.

She slid into the back seat and took a long, slow breath, willing the energy coursing through her away from her hands. She could feel it subsiding now. Not entirely gone but simmering just below the surface. If she kept calm, it would pass.

Looking up, her eyes locked with the driver's in the rear-view mirror. Kind hazel met her bright blue, and she nearly burst into tears.

Luke? Lucas?

She couldn't remember his name. He wasn't her usual driver, just one of the general palace guards. He'd been around in recent months, but she hadn't spoken more than a few words to him. Ever since Caden died, Iskra had been incapable of doing more than just getting through the day.

'Sorry, I don't remember your name?'

'Luca, Your Highness. Did you have a good night?' His voice was calm, with a subtle honeyed richness which put him closer to his late twenties like her, than her initial assessment.

'Wasn't feeling it. I needed to get out of there.' Her breaths came in short, sharp bursts. How much longer could she keep this up?

'Say no more, ma'am. I'll put the screen up and give you some space.' He tipped his head as he raised the privacy screen, the warmth never leaving his eyes.

Finally alone, the roaring void in her chest ripped open.

Her barriers, so carefully built with alcohol and avoidance, shattered. Memories of her big brother swarmed her, and she thought, not for the first or even the hundredth time, how much she missed him. What wouldn't she do to spend just one second more with him?

But he was gone. She was the heir now.

And it was all her fault.

She let the tears run down her face as the breach inside her howled.

CHAPTER 2

ISKRA

An acrid stench filled Iskra's nostrils, jerking her awake. Bile crept up the back of her throat, and her head swam. She dragged herself to a seated position and blinked.

What was on fire?

She looked down at where her palms rested on the silk duvet cover. Next to her fingers, she could make out black smudges. She snatched her hands away with a yelp. The fabric underneath was scorched.

The charred silk started to crumble, and the hand-shaped marks disintegrated into black dust, exposing the down-filled duvet underneath. Her eyes darted around her.

No, no, no, no – not again.

She hadn't made it to the sofa on her metal balcony last night, instead passing out in her bedroom. Her very flammable bedroom, that she'd been avoiding because of this very situation. She jumped out of bed breathless, hands scrabbling for the jug of water next to it. Splashing the liquid onto the burning holes, she ran to the window and threw it open. Waving her hands, she worked to dispel the smell the burnt silk had left behind.

Waking up to scorched sheets was another reason she went out drinking so often now. It numbed the pain, yes, but it also deadened the terror of falling asleep and waking up to a fire. That all went up in smoke though, if she didn't make it to the more flame-resistant balcony.

What had she been dreaming about? Her heart pounded and her chest ached. She could guess what, and who, haunted her dreams.

A knock sounded at the door.

She raced to open it before they could enter, scolding herself as the room rocked and the evening's alcohol threatened to make an appearance.

The maid on the other side startled. 'Your Royal Highness, you didn't need to get up. I was just bringing your breakfast,' she squeaked.

'Ah, yes, thank you. Please set it at my dressing table.' Iskra's blurry eyes darted to the unmade bed as the maid arranged the tray. The woman began tidying the room, her nose wrinkling as she caught the scent of the burnt bed sheets.

'Oh, I, er... seem to have fallen asleep with incense burning and it singed the bed. I wasn't in the best way when I came home, sorry,' Iskra said, cheeks pinkening.

What was she saying sorry for? She was twenty-eight years old, and a princess with her own staff. She could come home drunk and not apologise for it. She did feel bad about the ruined bed linen, though. Again.

The maid gave a little bob. 'I'll get more linens sent up, ma'am; it's not a problem. Will you be needing our help getting ready for the council meeting this morning?'

Iskra couldn't miss the woman's appraisal of her current state and fought a wince. How long would it take to be presentable? But her grief sat heavier this morning – the payment for a night of forgetting – and she wanted the privacy to pull herself together.

'I'll be fine, thank you.'

The woman gave a curtsy and left, closing the door behind her – no doubt off to enlighten the Private Secretary to the un-Crown-Princess-like behaviour she'd just witnessed.

The ache in her chest deepened and Iskra slumped into her dressing table chair.

‘You look horrendous,’ she complained to her reflection. ‘You’ve got to stop doing this to yourself.’

Her skin was sallow and peaky beneath her freckles. She’d always hated her skin’s normal rosy, white tone because it displayed every emotion in full view. But now, it was nowhere to be seen and she looked ill.

Iskra lowered her forehead to the cool table. Her hangover battered her skull in full force now. She allowed herself a few minutes of whimpering before dragging herself into a scalding shower.

Out of the shower, Iskra sat at her dressing table. She released her mass of copper curls, thanking all the gods she’d had the wherewithal to scrape it into a pineapple before passing out. Satisfied with simply refreshing them, she moved onto her makeup and outfit. There wasn’t much Iskra could control about her life, but how she presented herself to the world was one thing she could. The gnawing sensation in her sternum eased as she sank into the peace of her daily ritual.

The irony wasn’t lost to her that the face and outfit she wore for the outside world didn’t often reflect how she felt inside – especially since becoming heir. But she’d kept up the ritual even on her darkest days; it had become a lifeline she could cling to when her loss threatened to drown her.

When the signs of her late night were nearly erased, Iskra set about banishing her roiling headache and queasy stomach with the coffee and greasy breakfast the maid had brought up. She sent a silent thank you to the chef, Magda, who always knew what she needed.

Finishing her breakfast, Iskra considered her outfit options. Over the years she’d developed a talent for accentuating her body. Her love of plush fabrics and impeccable tailoring had led to no small amount of attention from the Nexus fashion industry, and she frequently had designers sending her pieces, hoping they would end up in the press.

She found a simple wrap dress in rich plum. The material cascaded across her soft stomach and hips, detailing each curve. The starry embroidery

adorning the sleeves was a nod to her family's territory that she hoped her mother would enjoy.

Though her routine had left her calmer, Iskra still felt uneasy. She knew she had to address what had happened this morning – what had been happening for a while now. There were only so many incidents she could hide. But not today. Not when she needed her wits about her for the worst part of the week.

She had to show that she had her shit together; that she could step into this new role with finesse and grace. Most importantly, she had to show that she wouldn't embarrass her mother.

No pressure at all.



Iskra had always thought the council chamber at the Astra Palace was a beautiful room filled with ugly people. It wasn't based on their looks, but the feelings she'd amassed about the council after a lifetime of functions and formalities spent in their company. They'd changed over the years, of course, each member replaced by elections, dismissals or death. But that air of ugliness remained.

There were some she respected. Like Councillor Eldrew, who always had a kind smile for her. But many of the people in this room bored her. Others made her furious with their antiquated opinions. In her previous role as 'the spare', she was seen but rarely required to actually do anything for the queendom. It had been so much easier when this room, and the people in it, weren't her problem.

Now, it was all her problem – or it would be one day. Her future loomed, a vice being tightened, turn by turn. She may not notice it from one day to the next, but eventually, the pressure would crush her. As the days wore

on, and the responsibilities mounted, she feared what that pressure would ignite.

She made her way to her mother, already seated at the round council table. The room never ceased to amaze her – but then it was supposed to, wasn't it?

Part meeting place, part war room, the chamber was designed to host all official Nexus business and beyond. Not that there had been many wars to concern humans in centuries. They currently enjoyed a long run of peace thanks, in large part, to weekly meetings that invited councillors and select representatives to bring forward any pressing issues.

Like many of the official and public spaces of Nexus, the chamber borrowed inspiration from the elements that formed their world: the domed crystal ceiling for air, incandescent torches intertwined with whorls of cherry and cobalt glass for fire and water, the vast oak table that appeared to grow from the ground itself for earth. On the table was carved a map of Cosmordia, with the sprawling territory of Nexus at its heart.

On the walls wound a tableau of celestial brilliance. Inky depictions of the moon and stars raced like oil on water alongside sunbursts and golden rays, in reverence to light and darkness. No matter how many times she sat in this room, she was still mesmerised.

Identical chairs crafted from the same warm wood ringed the table. Smooth and finely hewn, but simple. However, at the back, one chair rose above the rest. Imposing and ornately carved with symbols to represent wisdom and knowledge – known as the seventh element of Cosmordia – the throne revealed the true power. Or at least, it did once.

Iskra reached her mother and stepped onto the base of the throne. From her position above, her mother watched her coolly. She looked so much like Iskra but life – and ruling a territory – had taken its toll. Her father, regal if slightly rakish, sat to her mother's left. He offered a reassuring grimace, not wanting to be there either. She kissed her mother's cheek.

One day, this would be hers. She didn't know how she would possibly bear the scrutiny of it.

Iskra wasn't one to avoid attention. In fact, she'd spent her life cultivating it. She could schmooze her way through events and parties, dazzle delegates from far-off places, and she'd made it her business to be the fun-time friend in her various circles.

For years, no one had ever looked too closely at her, never demanded much of her – apart from show up and sparkle.

But taking the throne was different. It wasn't merely a symbol. The world had genuine issues, and the monarch needed to know how to fix them. Iskra wasn't sure she'd ever know how; her glimmering façade had lost its lustre now, too.

'You're late,' her mother's cutting whisper matched her glare. She was off to an excellent start.

'Sorry, My Queen, all this took longer to put together than normal this morning.' She gestured vaguely to herself as she bowed her head in deference.

'Sit down,' Queen Aliana said. Her voice was curt, but amusement shone in her turquoise eyes. As Iskra slid into the chair to her right, she whispered, 'Love your dress.'

Bolstered by her mother's acceptance, Iskra turned her attention to the rest of the table. The Nexus officials regarded her with the usual mix of indulgent fondness, boredom, and disdain.

One of her least favourites, Councillor Dredarian, reminded Iskra of an overgrown piglet. Without a hint of shame, his eyes slipped up and down her dress. He licked his lips and she suppressed a shudder before turning her attention to Lord Linden Cleaver. Luther's father, Lord Cleaver, was also head of the council. He'd been on his feet since she'd arrived, clearly trying to start the session without her.

'Thank you for joining us, Your Royal Highness,' he sneered, and she fought the urge to sneer back. 'As I was saying...'

The nasal tones of the Head Councillor filled the room as Iskra's will to live drained away. Steeling herself, she fixed her face with what she hoped was an attentive expression. She had to keep up with the meeting this time, or risk another of her mother's talks on how one ought to conduct oneself during state business.

An hour later, Lord Cleaver leaned forward in his seat, hand slapping on the table to punctuate his words. 'Lord Toray's daughter has been taken by those monsters at Sancta Immortui, and we just let them live alongside us unchecked, for gods' sake,' Lord Cleaver said.

Iskra's ears pricked up at 'monsters', just as she received a sharp jab to the leg. She sat straighter in her seat, attempting to shake the vacant expression from her features.

So much for paying attention and not annoying the Queen.

She rubbed at the focal point of that annoyance.

The talk of taxes, policy amendments, and land disputes had ended. They were now onto Lord Cleaver's topic of choice – the elementai. Iskra stifled a groan.

Cosmordia was split into territories, each dedicated to a different element. Originally overseen by the Old Gods before their fall, these territories were the homes of the beings that claimed each order.

In the centre sat Nexus, a beacon of innovation overseen by Vor, the God of Wisdom and Knowledge. Unlike some of the other Gods, Vor claimed no dominion over any specific species, rather welcoming all to live and work together for progress and innovation.

Ancient beings from all territories had flocked to Nexus though they had been born elsewhere. One of the largest sources of migrants were those from the Order of Light. Overseen by Lux, the Order of Light was largely comprised of humans, a species that had no magic of their own. The industrial and scientific advances of Nexus naturally appealed to them, offering a path to advancement that relied on gained skill over inherent ability.

After the Godsfall, when the world was left without alliances to individual Gods, humans sought to make Nexus their own, establishing the monarchy and the council to rule over it.

The other elementai, those born with magical powers, were permitted to remain living in Nexus after the Godsfall, though there was now a marked divide between humans and everyone else. Similarly, humans moved freely into elementai territories, and for centuries, there had been relative peace. But this didn't stop the likes of Lord Cleaver from shouting 'monster' about the many different magical communities of Nexus at every council meeting.

No order received more derision than the Order of Shadows. Once ruled by Nox, the God of Darkness and Death, the Shadowkin were believed to be the most dangerous elementai. The vampires of Sancta Immortui included.

She usually found Lord Cleaver's odious scaremongering tedious and didn't believe it was a sentiment many people agreed with. But now, many of the councillors looked on with rapt attention.

'Taken? Do you mean she was taken against her will, High Councillor?' the Queen asked him. 'Why are we only hearing of this now?'

'Well... ah... Lord Toray is trying to resolve the situation without involving the authorities. He doesn't want to make *a scene* if she can be returned to him quietly.'

Why wouldn't he report her missing if he was so worried?

'Beatrice Toray is, what, nineteen years old?' asked Iskra.

'I believe so, Your Highness, but I'm not sure what age has to do with the severity of kidnapping.'

'Well, she's an adult. Are you sure she didn't visit one of the Sancta Immortui parties and decide to extend her stay?'

The High Councillor purpled as he blustered. His thinning blond hair stuck out in stark relief against his ruddy features. 'Your Highness, are

you suggesting that a Lady of our great Queendom would attend one of th-those debaucheries?’ he gasped.

Murmured dissent broke out at the table around her.

Iskra pursed her lips. She had attended more than one of said ‘debaucheries’, in full disguise of course, and it’d been nothing more than a fun time.

‘What I believe my daughter is implying,’ the Queen interjected, holding a hand up to halt Iskra’s rebuttal, ‘is that if he’s not sounding the alarm, there’s a chance she might be there of her own accord.’

Warmth spread through Iskra’s chest and flushed her face. Her mother’s agreement in front of the council was a relief – even if she’d cut her off to do it.

It was good to see the Queen questioning the council, something she hadn’t done in a while. At least not since Caden’s death, if not before.

‘Even so, Your Majesty, I suggest we ask the elementai delegates to investigate when they get here,’ continued Lord Cleaver, not missing a beat.

‘We can’t let those vampires run riot with our young women; it’s immoral,’ added Councillor Dredarian. Iskra winced. The old toad had subjected enough of her friends to his wandering hands and lustful leers to put her bet on women being safer with vampires. Iskra leaned forward, attempting to speak over the din. ‘You can’t—’

‘The Wrath are at capacity. I will not ask them to search for a girl who might not even—’ the Queen continued as Iskra sat back in her seat, her pulse rising. She’d wanted to make an impression, and now she’d competed with her mother for the room’s attention.

‘I must insist, Your Majesty – how will it appear if you aren’t seen to care about the most innocent members of your Queendom?’ the High Councillor interrupted, ignoring Iskra.

Iskra’s father joined the fray. ‘I don’t believe it’s for you,’ he said, voice frosty, ‘to insist the Queen does anything... *My Lord.*’

Iskra's eyes pricked at her father's defence of the Queen. Once, she was a force to be reckoned with, steadfast and confident in her stances. Any time the Queen spoke, it had filled Iskra with pride, and no small amount of awe. She'd hoped that someday, she too could command an audience like that. But over the years, the Queen had withdrawn. Not knowing what else to do, her father, acting in his capacity as Queen's Consort, began standing up for his wife, joining the council meetings when he could. Though he despised them as much as Iskra did. But even with Caspian Adastra acting as ferocious guard dog, the councillors still pushed at the Queen's oft-crumbling resolve.

The High Councillor's face was now puce. 'This is unacceptable, Your Majesty. More people are dying or going missing every day through altercations with the non-human population, and we sit here doing nothing.'

The Queen opened her mouth to respond but he ploughed on. 'We don't even know what happened at the palace three months ago. The Crown Prince died, and we haven't even discovered the cause of the fire. It could have been a fire demon for all we know.'

The room fell silent.

Iskra stopped breathing. Any casual mention of Caden still floored her.

The Queen and Prince Caspian rocked back in their chairs, mouths agape. The High Councillor froze, his hand raised towards his mouth. He'd gone too far.

An all-too-familiar heat stirred in Iskra. Her palms turned clammy. Sweat gathered on her brow and along her spine. A fire demon? Was that the rumour?

The first bubbles of panic made their way up her chest and into her throat. She needed to calm down.

Just a bit longer.

She could keep it together – but only just. She counted her breaths, desperate not to make this worse for her parents.

Councillor Eldrew, one of the more pleasant councillors, offered her an encouraging smile, his dark brown skin crinkling at the edge of his eyes.

Her father recovered first, snapping to his feet. ‘How *dare you*—’

The Queen put a hand on her husband’s arm. ‘High Councillor, I understand your concern; I’m by no means ignoring what you’ve heard.’ Her voice reached for clarity, but a slight tremble lingered. ‘Because of this, I’ve asked Detective Aiden Emberborn to attend council meetings, from now on. He’ll join the Elementai Affairs Bureau representatives and will be able to offer real numbers, not just rumours.’

Aiden Emberborn. It was a clever idea on her mother’s part. As the territory’s liaison to the Wrath and one of few elementai within the Nexus Police Force, he was the go-to detective on cases that required input from the magical communities. As a fire deity, he had a firm foot in both human and elementai crimes, and would know where the real threats lie.

But gods, Iskra hated him. She’d only met the detective a handful of times, but after each interaction, she’d been left feeling exactly like the vapid socialite she portrayed, and resented being mistaken for.

Thoughts of the prickly detective were only adding to the simmering rage inside her, now threatening to boil over.

Someone at the door cleared their throat, loudly. ‘The term you’re looking for is fyrin, not fire demon, and the Wrath would know if there had been any in the vicinity that night... Lord Cleaver,’ Aiden’s voice cut through the room. The detective looked as he always did, standing in the council room doorway – like the world owed him a debt, and he’d come to claim it.

Fuck. He and the Wrath representatives were already there. With this many powerful elementai so near to her, she felt out of control. The heat inside her started to sizzle and pop. She couldn’t be in the same room as the EAB. She’d be stupid to even attempt it.

How could she handle one of these meetings on her own when she didn’t even have a handle on her own body?

Her hands started to dance with heat, the sweat on her palms evaporating.

Shit.

She jumped up, and stumbled, placing a hand on the wooden table to steady her. A crackle sounded, thankfully covered by the scraping of her chair. When she lifted her palm, a scorch mark lay beneath. It wasn't just flimsy bed sheets this time – it was hardwood.

It was getting stronger.

Slamming her hands together to avoid touching anything else, she threw herself backwards. Panic reared, cutting off her air. She was trapped in a furnace of her own making. Scalp prickling with sweat, she staggered away from the table, her mind racing.

'Mum... er... Your Majesty... I'm so sorry, you'll need to excuse me... I-I'm feeling faint.' She made her way to the large double doors, trying to reach the freedom beyond. Instead, she met Aiden's eviscerating gaze as she barrelled past him.

She brushed past the Wrath representatives behind him. For a moment, she thought she recognised the man and woman, but she needed cool air too badly for her mind to dwell. The breaths filled her lungs, soothing her flushed face but doing nothing for her smouldering hands.

She didn't dare look at them. What if she saw flames? She wouldn't know how to hide them if she did. It was one thing to explain away melted ice cubes and burnt bed sheets, quite the other to explain fire spewing from your palms.

She turned the corner, finally away from watchful eyes. Her heart pounded in her neck. It wouldn't be long before guards caught up with her. Looking from side to side, she ducked through the first door.

So much for not making a scene.

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