

A Dance with the Shadow

A romantic fantasy novel

Nia O. Veil

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Author's Note

“A Dance with the Shadow“ is a new adult romantic fantasy novel. Its contents might trigger some readers as there are explicit sex scenes, descriptions of violence, sexual abuse, mental abuse, and physical abuse, as well as the death of people and one animal.

For everyone who needs to escape.

Ayria



Pronunciation Guide:

Names:

Sage Griffin

Say-dj Grif-fin

King Lexus Salinger

King Leck-sis

Sah-lin-djah

Queen Milicia Salinger

Queen Mil-li-siah

Sah-lin-djah

Lori Briar

Lo-ree Bry-ar

Riven

Riv-en

Onyx

O-nicks

Kingdoms and Places:

Aurous

Oh-russ

Yona

Yoh-nah

Devontae

Deh-von-tay

Abyseuss

A-bis-ois

Veeralis

Vee-rah-lis



Part One

Royal's Week



Chapter One



Day One

The fast paced pounding of Sage's heart was something she would never get used to. That steady thumping in that awful rhythm, *babum babum babum*, turning quicker and quicker the more seconds passed, the nearer she got to the moment that laid before her. Her death. Again.

Not in losing her life, but in losing her dignity, her worth, everything that made her more than a puppet. Because that was what she would turn into in just a few minutes. A puppet, hanging on strings held by the King.

Nervousness clawed at Sage's stomach, making her unwell, but she needed to pull through. Sage would never get used to feeling like she had no other choice, even after nearly three years...

Now wasn't the time to dwell on the past, Sage told herself. She would go up on that stage any minute now, she needed to focus. Breathing in, she closed her eyes for a second, before breathing out and opening them again. Flexing her hands, she took another second to look down on herself. Sage was standing in front of the big oak doors where she was running a hand down her dress, trying to smoothen out wrinkles that never existed, before said doors finally opened with a loud creak. Snapping her head towards them, her breath hatched in her throat.

“And now, the moment all of you have been waiting for the most, I believe,” the King threw a handsome smirk at Sage through the open doors, “I present to you: my precious *creature!*”

A round of applause boomed from the open doors, when Sage took her first step towards them. The light around her was dimmed by the blindfold over her eyes, but she had no problem making out the different faces in the Great Hall. The expressions on them varied from amazed to unwell, which did exactly nothing to calm the nerves still gnawing at Sage’s stomach. Although this wasn’t her first time being displayed like this, she was anything but comfortable as she stepped into the room.

When Sage set foot onto the podium where the two thrones stood upon, the King took Sage’s hand and softly threw it in the air—Sage’s signal to twirl. The lightheaded feeling in her head made Sage afraid that she would stumble, but she couldn’t allow herself to fail. Not ever and especially not today.

“Look at it, everyone. Isn’t it beautiful?” The King applauded her as Sage came to a stop, the flowy blue fabric of her dress hugging her calves with the movement.

Her covered eyes wandered around the room, taking in all of the decorations that were put up for the feast today—blue banners with the King’s crown on them were hung all over the walls, bluebells and other white flowers Sage didn’t recognize were set up on the tables, where noble guests were seated. Sage recognized nearly every face in the room. After all the time she spent memorizing their faces, names, and ranks, it was only natural for her.

“Like I already said, we have gathered here to celebrate my reign over this kingdom. Three years of wealth and also almost three years of having the pleasure to own this special little thing right here.” The King’s smile was vicious as he looked back at Sage, who was standing close behind him. “For every year that I have had the delight to be your King, we will have one week of feasts and games to celebrate exactly that! The Great Reign of King Lexus! And my beautiful Queen, of course.” The King turned to his wife, seated on her throne at the back center of the room.

Queen Milicia looked beautiful this evening. With her long blonde hair and almost angelic features, she outshone everyone else in the room. And while the crown on top of her head showed her status, there was something else about the Queen that made her look powerful. Her whole being practically screamed royal. Sage was careful not to stand in front of her, as she didn't want to stand in the way when the crowd erupted into cheers once more.

“Let the feast begin.” The King clapped his hands once and the musicians broke into a beautiful song. It was Sage’s cue to gently grab the King’s arm and descend the stairs towards the center of the room. Sage and the King found their place in the middle of the Great Hall, taking the position to start the first dance, with the King holding Sage’s right hand and the left side of her waist. The music changed into the rhythm Sage had practiced to for weeks now and so she and the King started to move.

Back upright, belly sucked in, chin held high and ever so slightly turned to the right, Sage gracefully took step after step, matching the King’s grace with what seemed like ease, when in reality it was anything but that. She felt tense and was incredibly scared of making a mistake. Yes, she had spent most of the past weeks practicing these exact movements, but doing it here, while everyone was watching, while *the Queen* was watching, it was something different. After the first third of the melody, right when the guests started to join the pair on the dance floor, all Sage could think about was to *not mess it up*.

When the dance was about to reach its climax, Sage’s heartbeat began to race even more.

Babum, babum, babum.

This had always been the part she messed up while practicing. Lucky for her, she held her place and easily switched to her next partner—a Lord she recognized from one of the hundreds of portraits she had studied for this exact reason: to impress. Being the King’s favored little pet came with a lot of advantages. Sage knew her life was a privilege, but that didn't exactly mean it was easy.

A few steps later and she was switching to the next partner—a Duchess, leading one of the regions not too far from Yona, the capitol of the Kingdom Aurous, *Sage's home*.

A step forward, one back, another one sideways.

The jewelry Sage wore tonight clinked against the argent shackles she was wearing, the noise seemed to vibrate all the way into her head, too loud to bare.

Before that sound could drown out the rest of the noise around Sage, she tried to center her thoughts on the dance again. Only three switches left, before the dance would end. Sage was relieved, when she found her third partner also followed the King's rules and laid no hand on her. Each and every one of her partners had hovered their hands gracefully in the air next to Sage's waist. Always a few inches away, never touching. The King didn't like it when people touched his *Precious Possession* and everyone knew that. He made sure they did. No one dared to lay a hand on her.

But when it was time to switch partners for one last time before everyone found their first partners again, Sage found herself face to face with someone she couldn't put a name on. Inky black hair, sharp cheekbones, strong jaw—handsome in every way imaginable. Sage tilted her head to the side, trying to remember who it was that she was dancing with, not realizing the true problem that laid ahead. Said someone didn't seem to know about the King's rules, as he didn't hesitate to put one hand on the small of Sage's back, while the other one gently grabbed her stretched out hand. Unlike the other guests, where both partners had held up their hands on their own, the stranger held Sage's hand in a firm grip, guiding her steps the way the King had done at the beginning of the dance.

Shocked, Sage tried to elegantly step away, while still following the steps of the dance. It was no use though; the stranger didn't budge and kept her tucked close to him. With a rough hand that was firmly placed on the small of her back, the low cut of her dress gave the stranger all the access he needed to touch Sage's soft skin. She tried to communicate to him that this wasn't okay. That he shouldn't be doing this, that he *couldn't*. He needed to let her go, immediately. He needed—

It was no use.

The male, clearly not from this kingdom, didn't seem to notice Sage's attempts to shake off his unwelcome touch—one that felt rough and entirely wrong. Sage's hands began to sweat, her head spinning. She could feel the panic rise deep within her, bringing discomfort and nausea, but she didn't know what to do about it.

The young fae let her eyes drift around the room, unsure of what to do, before they slid up to the stranger's face again. His expression was cold, but there was something going on behind his dark yellow, nearly orange, eyes. It seemed like there was something swimming in them, dancing even. Almost like there was something melting behind his cold exterior, something like a hot core.

The last partner switch came sooner than expected and so Sage not-so-gracefully stepped back into the arms of the King. His expression was anything but warm while he had his eyes fixed on the dark-haired stranger. For anyone that didn't know the King the way Sage grew to know him, his face would portray an elegant but neutral expression, all the while Sage could clearly make out the fury that practically dripped from his eyes, drenching everything around him in a pool of misfortune. The way his hands were cramped around Sage's own and her waist. The way his eyes stayed locked on the very Lord who had touched what was *his*.

Sooner than Sage realized the dance ended with a planned spectacle; all of the dancers formed a circle around the King and Sage, that grew wider with three steps being taken, before turning smaller again with two more. With the King holding Sage in a dip, the room exploded in an applause that Sage didn't seem to hear clearly. The pair stayed like that for a second with Sage breathing heavily, her eyes flickering all over the King's face in order to find out what it was that he was thinking exactly. The other dancers around them all took a low bow before joining the round of applause. After the King pulled Sage back up, she let her own eyes wander around the room, finding the stranger standing off to the side clapping along everyone else, a smirk now plastered on his cold face.



The room went quiet, when King Lexus asked for it a little while later.

After that not-so pleasant first dance, there had been some time for the guests to chat, for the King to make himself look good and for everyone to show their love for the Queen.

Sage had been standing off to the side next to the King's throne that whole time. She knew she had no business to wander around the room, not today. Not after what had happened during the dance. The King had had a hard time not making a scene then, and only calmed down after Queen Milicia addressed the crowd. The rage he had felt over someone touching his *Priced Possession* had still been clear in his eyes, when the next part of the feast began.

The sacrifice.

"Please, return to your seats, everyone," the King started, causing the Queen to join him at the front of the throne podium. With her blonde hair and that stunning floral beige dress of hers, the Queen's gracefulness could have outshone the stars if she wished for it.

Sage had always looked up to the Queen. The way she coped with everything—from having to reign at such a young age, to her husband taking what was basically a mistress while trying to keep her from reigning the way she wanted to—the Queen's life had to be far from easy. But she didn't let anyone see that, and for that Sage was envious. The female had never been one to be able to stay focused whenever she was feeling anything but calm, she had never been able to truly keep her emotions in check.

"It is time," the King ripped Sage from her thoughts with his words, "that we pay our respect to the gods above and below." The big oak doors that Sage had entered the room through opened once more. Two guards marched into the room, a baby sheep attached to a leash unwillingly following them. Two more guards strode in behind them carrying a metal tub. Sage grew sick as she realized what was about to go down. She had known that this was bound to happen at some point, but Sage had hoped to have returned to her quarters before it did.

“To gain the gods’ favor, it is with great honor that I, Lexus Salinger...” the King walked down the steps towards where the sheep was now placed in the tub. It bleated once, twice, as if begging for its life and that sound alone broke Sage’s heart. *This so-called ritual was for nothing anyways*, she thought. As if the god and goddess cared if this sheep died today. If anything, the stupidity of the humans would probably enrage them both. That poor sheep didn't do anything and yet

“Offer this gift to the God Above and the Goddess Below,” the King continued, ripping Sage from her thoughts once more. She needed to pay closer attention; she couldn't afford to fuck up again tonight.

A servant brought the King a dagger.

“In order to gain their favor, to have another fruitful year and terrific feasts ahead of us!”

The sheep bleated once more and Sage averted her eyes. When the King stroke, all Sage was able to hear was the unsteady flow of the sheep’s blood from where the King had slit its neck.

“To the gods!” the King cheered, and the mere knowledge that he was sipping the sheep’s blood in that very moment made Sage’s stomach churn.

The King had actually drunk the blood of a baby sheep. Just as the Queen would do afterward

And Sage’s stomach flipped again.

Chapter Two



The rest of the ball passed in a blur of unfamiliar faces and conversations Sage wasn't a part of but a pawn in. Yet sooner than Sage realized, but later than she hoped, she was back in her chambers.

The King wasn't happy.

That thought kept bouncing in Sage's head, while she paced up and down in her entry room later that night. Her thoughts weren't occupied by only that thought; the memory of the eyes of the stranger, who had been undoubtedly handsome, were creeping in the back of her head as well. Just like the feeling of his rough hands, which was still haunting her lower back as well as her hand. And then there was that awful *drip, drip* of the blood in the tub and—

“You let him touch you.”

The doors to her chambers had made no sound when they had opened. Quickly, Sage spun on her heels. It was dark in Sage's entry room, since the only light was coming from the lit fireplace on the wall. The hall, however, was lit with many lights making the silhouette of her King stand out immensely. The blindfold over Sage's eyes did nothing to protect them against the harsh light from outside her chambers where she stood, facing her King, who was still standing by the open door.

“I didn't know what to do,” Sage spoke quietly, averting her head. She didn't want to anger the King even more, but she truly hadn't

known what to do. Not now in this moment and neither back at the ball. It wasn't her fault that the stranger had grabbed her. And what had she been supposed to do anyways? Make a scene in front of everyone? Sage doubted the King would have liked that very much.

"You didn't know what to do?" The King was angry. "You didn't know *what to do*?" he repeated, his voice vibrating with rage. The King took a step toward Sage, making her back off. His voice had turned cold and hard. When the door swung closed, the room darkened once more. The light of the flames danced over the King's features, matching his emotion.

Anger.

"I'll tell you what you should have done," the King roared. His voice was rougher now, angrier. He closed the space between him and Sage, grabbing her by the throat. The sudden movement caught Sage off guard, so when the King pushed her back, her body bumped against the door leading to her bedroom. Hard. Sage felt her windpipe closing up, felt the argon band around her throat pull at her skin with each movement. Barely being able to breathe, she avoided the King's eyes at all cost.

"You should have stopped him. Because now that you're all filthy from his touch, you do realize what I have to do, right?" His hand tightened around Sage's throat, making her lift her eyes to his eventually. The King's hands were warm against her tense skin, reminding Sage of what the blood of the sheep must have felt like when he had cut its throat with a knife earlier tonight. The ring on the King's hand brought in the coldness of said knife, making Sage feel sick. Again.

"*Do you?*" The King pressed. Sage nodded.

"Say it."

Sage opened her mouth to answer, but barely any sound came out. "I know," she rasped after trying again.

"My precious, precious creature." The King lifted his hand from her throat to brush her cheek. His other arm was propped next to her on the door, caging Sage in. Her heart started to race in order to pump blood through her body, to fuel her, so that she would be able to breathe

again. But never mind how hard she tried to calm herself, nothing was working. Her skin sizzled with unexplainable need to get away. To get out. But the King kept her trapped. Not only in this moment, but in this castle, in her life.

“Do you think I enjoy this? Punishing you?” His forehead wrinkled. He let his gaze drift over Sage’s face, down her body and then towards the window on the other wall. His jaw clenched, then unclenched.

“I give you everything. Everyday, I give you everything you need— food, water, a warm bed at night.” His eyes turned unfocused, drifting down to her chest, as if he were no longer in the room with Sage but lost in his own thoughts. “And you thank me, by allowing such—*things*— to happen?” His eyes shot back to Sage’s face fully focused now. She didn’t even dare to breathe while the King studied her, afraid that it would cause even more problems.

“Take that off,” the King said, stepping back from where he had pressed every inch of him against every inch of Sage before.

She knew what he had meant. Her dress. She was to take off her dress. She also knew what was about to happen after she did exactly that and she dreaded every second of it. Knowing better than to show her fear, Sage stepped away from the door that the King had pressed her to just a moment ago, and slipped the straps of her dress over her shoulders. She was careful to not let the straps get caught on the shackles on her wrist. The thin fabric soon pooled in a heap at her feet. Glad for the underwear still covering her most private parts, Sage now stood *almost* bare. The gold chains that still decorated her throat felt cold against her burning skin, her chest suddenly felt heavy. Having learned of past events, Sage knew better than to cover her breasts with her arms. With her chin raised slightly, she instead waited for further instructions.

The King walked towards the middle of her sitting room, undoing the belt around his trousers in the process. Sage slowly made her way towards him, careful not to move too quickly, not to make too much noise. She felt like she was trapped in a room with a predator and maybe that was exactly what the King was in this moment—a predator

about to go on a hunt for prey. Except the King had already found his prey in her.

Not wanting to anger him even more, Sage got down to her knees ever so slowly, until she was kneeling right before the fireplace.

Flames had always drawn Sage towards them. From the moment she had first laid her eyes on a fire, it had been as if the flames were speaking to her in a language that only she could understand. It was no different now. And maybe, just maybe, if Sage concentrated enough, she would be able to ignore everything else, and instead just listen to the flames in the fire.

The first hit came sooner than Sage expected, almost causing her to topple over. She caught herself before that could happen and sat back upright on her feet.

Two more, the fire spoke quietly.

The second hit was stronger than the first one, feeling like burning ice against her skin. Sage prayed that it didn't cut too deep.

One more, the fire continued to whisper.

The last hit was gentler than the first two, or maybe Sage was just losing the feeling in her back altogether; she wasn't sure.

The flames continued to whisper.

The way they moved reminded Sage of dancing, of life, and it was almost like all they needed to do was continue to talk, so that Sage could stay strong. So they did.

The young female felt the King's presence behind her, towering over her.

“You know I don't like to do to this, Sage,” he said, and for a split second, Sage believed him. She could even hear the pain in his voice, like he truly didn't enjoy hurting her. But then his voice got colder once more. “But I can't have you not obeying now, can I?”

“It won't happen again,” Sage spoke quietly, her voice strong nevertheless.

“Oh, I'll make sure of that,” the King's words hit deep.

Realistically, Sage knew that she was never getting out of this life, out of being the King's *Precious Creature*. But she also knew that it was her own damn fault, and she hated herself every day for it.

“Get up, darling.” An order disguised with pretty words. Sage rose to her feet and turned to face the King. Her chin was held high, her eyes not showing the pain she was feeling. If the King hated one thing, it would be weakness, so Sage couldn’t let her pain show. She wouldn’t.

“Look at you.” The King gently grabbed Sage’s chin, his belt on the floor, long forgotten. “This pretty face of yours, hiding what vicious creature you truly are.” King Lexus turned Sage’s head a little to the left, his eyes wandering to her pointy ears. It was like he could see them, even through the fabric of the blindfold covering them. As if he could hear Sage’s thoughts, the King’s hands wandered to the back of her head, undoing the knot of the black fabric. The blindfold joined the belt on the floor.

“Get on the bed.”

Sage’s head flew towards the King again, her eyes searching for his.

“I—” Sage started but the King interrupted her, “I will not repeat myself.”

Looking each other directly in the eyes, Sage only dared to hesitate another second before obeying. She walked over to the door she had been pressed to earlier, opened it and stepped inside.

“You know I have to take back what’s mine, darling.” The King’s words echoed from her entry room.

Sage stood by the bed now, her head turned towards where the King still stood. “Claim you as mine again and get rid of this lingering filthiness on you.”

Sage tried to ignore the remaining ache in her back. It was helping that the words of the King almost hurt her more than his former hits.

She was no *thing* to be claimed, no *puppet* to be played with. She was her own person, no matter how much the King was trying to make her anything else.

The King came up behind Sage, his rough hands roaming the sides of her body. They left their own kind of trace everywhere they travelled—from her hips, over her ribs, up to her shoulders. “Where did he touch you?” he whispered, his head close to Sage’s neck. Hot, wet lips made contact with Sage’s shoulder. *At least he was careful and avoided the*

raw skin of her back, Sage assumed. The very skin his belt might have ripped open only a few moments ago.

“He—“ Sage swallowed the knot in her throat. “The small of my back and my hand.”

“Bend over.”

Sage did as she was told and laid her chest onto the bed, her back screaming at her because of the movement. Gripping the mattress in front of her, she once again prepared for what was about to happen next.

“I’ll make it quick.” The last promise and warning, before he stroked. His trousers were already unbuttoned—when and how he had managed to do that, Sage didn’t know—the King spread Sage’s legs and placed the tip of his length against Sage’s panty-covered core. Pulling aside the thin fabric, he stroked his fingers against Sage’s middle one, two, three times, before replacing them with his length and slipping it in. And out.

Careful at first.

In.

And out.

Then more violently.

Sage centered her thoughts on the dark view outside the window, trying her best to ignore the way his cock stretched her from the inside. Not wanting to be herself right now, she imagined what her life would have been like, if she had never met the King. Maybe she would have lived a humble life somewhere far from any village, maybe she would have gotten her own little house. But who was she to blame the King, when she had chosen to let him ruin her life?

Sage could feel the King’s climax building up with every thrust. Praying that it would be over sooner rather than later, Sage looked upon her reflexion in the window next to the bed. She saw herself bend over the bed, her legs hidden behind the frame from this angle. She saw the King behind her, his head slightly lifted towards the ceiling, his eyes closed, eyebrows pulled together. She saw his hands and how they were placed firmly on either side of her waist. She saw her own head, her face looking directly back at her now. She saw the way her eyes seemed darker in this light and how her hair was all tangled. How her arms

were spread out on the mattress in front of her. Sage pulled her hands into fists, gripping the mattress tightly.

With one last thrust and a grunt that followed after, the King pulled himself out of Sage and came. His arousal spreading all over her back as he finished with his hand—*claiming her*.

Chapter Three



Two hours later, and Sage was once more laying in her bed, facing the window. After the King had finished his business and called for maids to help clean Sage up, she had managed to get back to the place she sometimes hated the most: her bed.

Although none of the hits with the belt had actually cut her skin, her back hurt like hell, so she tried to get comfortable on her side instead.

The King had claimed her. He took everything from her all over again and left, just like nothing had happened. All the while Sage was the one hating herself, not wanting to be herself, not wanting to be where she was, while also being the one who couldn't do shit about her situation. But then again, was it really so bad? The beatings of the King were nothing compared to what Sage had to endure on the streets before coming here. And sex was just that. Sex.

She wasn't saying that the King's actions were right, fuck no. But maybe they were the lesser evil.

The King was a very possessive man. That was the first thing Sage had learned about him. He liked to own things, people even. He liked to keep her on a leash, all locked up and ready to have her whenever he was feeling like it. He liked to use her as a demonstration of power. *Keeping* a fae, a being much more than just any creature, but made to something that resembled a pet more than anything else. Keeping Sage

had brought the King part of his glory, as he was one of the few nobles who still owned a *fae*. But in return it had brought Sage more pain than she had ever thought possible.

Sage's blindfold laid before her on the bed, mocking her very being. Lifting her hand to touch the piece of fabric, the shackle on her wrist glinted in the moonlight coming from the window. Sage thought about all the ways the King had made her lose herself. She wasn't allowed to speak to anyone, really—*only speak when spoken to*, the King would say. She wasn't allowed to leave. She wasn't allowed to show her eyes or ears to anyone but him. Although there would be a spectacle held at the end of the three-week-long celebration, in which the King would push back Sage's hair, revealing the pointiness of her ears. With her mind drifting off, Sage lifted the hand that had touched the blindfold to stroke along her ear. Like a critter in a jar, she would be presented on a silver platter. Again. She understood there was more to the King's cruelty; he lived under pressure to meet expectations and prove his power. He lived a life of where he had climbed his way up from practically being a nobody to a King in more or less than six years.

All of that didn't give him the permission to do what he was doing with her, though. The fact that Sage understood him only made everything worse.

The female's eyes wandered back to the window and the world that laid beyond it and she found herself wondering what it would be like to step a foot outside again. Life with the King had its (few) perks, but also came with many rules. One of them being that Sage wasn't allowed to go outside. At least not without the King.

Mindlessly, Sage lifted the hand that the stranger at the ball had held, examining it like it wasn't part of her own body, but something else entirely. The feeling his touch had left on her hand was like a branding, but pleasant in a way that Sage didn't understand. Since the King didn't like what was *his* to be touched by anyone, Sage had grown a habit of disliking being touched in general, if by the King or anyone else.

The King had marked her back because that is where the stranger had touched her, but why was it, that Sage, even after being with the King, even after having washed, could still feel the lingering hint of the stranger's touch on her hand?



Day Two

The King had forbidden Sage from leaving her chamber today. Yet another form of punishment for something that Sage didn't even have control over. But at least, when Sage had begged the King for access to the library, she was allowed to go there. He had only permitted it because the King knew everyone would be at the feast in the center of Yona today and no one would be in the castle—but a win was still a win in Sage's eyes.

That's exactly where she was headed the second she had tightened the fold around her eyes and opened the door of her chambers the next day.

After three years in the Castle of Yona, Sage knew her freedom and restrictions better than the back of her hand. But when she first came here, she didn't have the pleasure to go anywhere alone. For the first year or so, there were always at least three guards with her at all times. The King had said that they were there to keep her safe, when in reality their task had been to keep her in check. To make sure that Sage didn't leave, didn't do anything stupid. She knew that now, but back then she had been a fool. A fool for trusting King Lexus in the first place and a fool for going with him, for *staying* here. Now, there was nowhere else for her to go.

Wandering around the castle was yet another thing that Sage would never get used to. Not to roaming the big (and in this moment empty) halls and definitely not to the view out of all the gigantic windows.

The Castle of Yona was set on a small hill towards the end of the city, surrounded first by all the noble homes and later by the working-class citizens on one side as well as the Cliffs of Yona that led to the Notvorgywing Sea on the other.

Sage stopped in front of one of the windows that led to the back. The castle was quiet and empty and although the sea was at least a few miles away, Sage swore that she was able to hear the waves crashing into the cliffs. *It was rather fascinating*, Sage admitted to herself, that while she was living a life as nothing more than a living puppet and even though the land of Ayria was split into four kingdoms, each reigned by a King and Queen, and yet, it didn't change anything. It didn't change the steady rhythm of the waves of the waters, it didn't change the ever-changing weathers of the land. It didn't change the never-ending circle of life itself.

Ayria was the land Sage called home, without ever feeling like she belonged to either of the kingdoms it was split into. Not the Kingdom Veeralis which laid in the south-east with its many sand dunes and sunny but dry land, a kingdom which she had never even set foot in. Not the Kingdom Devontae which laid in the north-west with its many forests and sandy beaches, although she had lived there more than half her life. Not the Kingdom Abyseuss in the north-east which still remains a mystery to her and many others. And definitely not the Kingdom Aurous, where she now stood. Right in the capitol, looking upon the open sea.

Sage had to have been lost deep in her thoughts, because when a deep, silky voice spoke behind her, she almost jumped right out of her skin.

“Beautiful, isn't it?”

Spinning on her heels to face her opposite, Sage winced, her back hurting. She silently cursed, hoping the stranger didn't see that her face had crumbled in pain. Yet another thing Sage would never get used to, would never be able to hide: the pain. Let it be physical or mental.

As Sage turned, she came face to face, or rather face to chest, with a male. Lifting her head even further, Sage realized the stranger was none other than the male from the ball yesterday. The rather long locks of his velvety black hair weren't as neatly pulled back today. They looked rather ruffled up, but that didn't take anything from his looks. If anything, it only added to it, making him even more handsome.

“It is,” Sage forced through gritted teeth, suddenly remembering the stranger’s question, if it even was one.

“Are you alright?” The man’s features were pulled together with what seemed like fake concern. So he had noticed Sage’s wince, she heeded. A mistake Sage wouldn’t make again. The stranger lifted his hand as if to touch her shoulder, wanting to offer Sage help, unaware that even that simple gesture could do her more harm than anything.

“Fine,” she said, twisting out of the male’s way. How could the very male that was at fault for her pain stand right here, being so... so oblivious? Did he truly not care about the King’s orders? Or was he frankly unknowing? The anger she felt in her chest shouldn’t be directed at the stranger in front of her, Sage knew that. It was the King that had hurt her. But the female couldn’t help but cross her arms in front of her chest as she lifted her chin. She didn’t even care that her manners weren’t exactly lady-like.

With anger now covering up the pain she still felt in her back, Sage straightened and looked the stranger directly into the eyes. “I don’t know who you are and to be honest I don’t even care, but I need you to leave me alone. The King—*your King* for the time that you’re staying here—has worded his rules and wishes so that I remain untouched. I don’t know why you think that you are excluded—“

“Rules and wishes? Is that what he said?”

Sage grew furious as the stranger interrupted her. “That is what he *ordered*. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” There were guards patrolling the halls and Sage wasn’t exactly in the mood for them to see her and the stranger together. Sage made an effort side stepping the stranger, but he blocked her path.

“I’m sorry if I crossed a line yesterday, I meant no harm to you,” the stranger declared and lifted a hand. He caught himself though, bringing it back down before making contact with her body. *At least he is capable of learning*, Sage thought, before realizing what he had said.

Harm? You did more than harm, you ignorant fool! Sage wanted to shout, to scream at him, but didn’t. *It wasn’t the stranger’s fault that she was hurting*, she reminded herself. Not truly.

“Just don't touch me again,” Sage said instead and walked away, her back straight, not showing the stinging pain it was causing.

But as she continued to walk down the halls towards the library, Sage couldn't shake the words the stranger had said. He had meant no harm... *to her*. He didn't say anything about the King or his orders, he was talking about *her*. *Who did he think he was? And why was he even in the castle in the first place? Didn't he have a feast to attend to in town?*

Not being able to answer any of these questions, Sage banned any further thoughts of the stranger from her head and continued her way to the library instead. She would feel better once she was surrounded by books, she was sure of it.



That evening, Sage sat by the window in her sitting room, gazing over the courtyard that laid deep below. She was awaiting the return of the King, since she guessed the games that were held today would be over soon. *Ridiculous*, she thought. King Lexus had reigned this kingdom for three years now. Three years of the Kingdom of Aurous staying exactly the same because what once worked would continue doing so, right? The King didn't care about the citizens because as long as the noble had nothing to complain about, the citizens were doing just fine, right? Because as long as they were able to contribute their share, let it be food or other resources, there simply couldn't be anything wrong with them, *right?* The citizens sure weren't being forced to work even when they were sick, they weren't going to sleep hungry, they weren't *starving*. Because everything in Aurous, the kingdom named after literal gold, was always perfect. As long as the noble were fine, everything was. At least in their eyes. They didn't care about the horrible circumstances the citizens worked under, they didn't care about the slave-like class system in this kingdom, they didn't care about the women being raped in order to produce more workers. They. Didn't. Care.

What they did care about however, was the feasts being held in order to celebrate the King's *great reign*. King's and Queen's Week; three

weeks of balls and feasts and all kinds of games and markets coaxing the Royal Couple. “Absurd,” Sage muttered under her breath.

A movement in the corner of her eye caught Sage’s attention and ripped the fae from her raging thoughts. People were coming in through the big gates of the wall surrounding the courtyard. *The games must have ended then*, she thought. Eager to catch a glimpse of the King, Sage scooted closer to the window, sitting down on the sill. First, the servants and maids came through the gate, followed by the noble who were staying in the castle during King’s Week. Then the Queen and her guards came through. And, even from all the way up in her room, Sage could see the Queen’s beauty. Her long blonde hair, her sharp cheekbones, the golden crown atop her head. Sage felt awful about the things the King did to her and to think about all the things the Queen must most likely endure, made Sage feel even sicker.

Then, the King walked through the gate, almost swaying on his feet. He must be in a good mood then, Sage almost sighed in relief. Whatever games had unfolded, he looked pleased. Sage preferred the King when he was in a good mood; surely, he wouldn’t hurt her tonight. But for reasons unknown, Sage was still dreading what the night would bring.

Walking over to her dresser, Sage contemplated whether to change out of her flowy green dress or not. As comfortable as the dress was, the King liked to see the shape of her curved body, so she decided to slip into one of her silky dresses instead. Sage chose a blue one and paired it with some gold jewelry the King had gifted to her once. Quickly checking herself in the mirror of her bathroom, Sage returned to her sitting room. She knew she shouldn’t be as nervous as she was right now, the King didn’t like it. But she couldn’t help wringing her fingers together or the nervous tapping of her foot on the floor. Positioning herself by the window again, Sage tried to calm herself, focusing on the people still coming in through the gates.

The participants of the games were the last to arrive, some still on their own two feet, some being carried in by others. Sage wasn’t sure she even wanted to know what kinds of games had been held today or were

going to be held any other day of the celebration. By the looks of it, they were even more brutal than she first thought.

It wasn't long until a firm knock sounded at the door. Without even realizing it, Sage checked to make sure the fold over her eyes was placed right, before she called for the person at the door to come inside. The room was flooded with some more light as the door opened, revealing a maid.

“I am to get you, Lady Sage.”

It was becoming a habit of realizing things Sage would never get used to, because *Lady Sage* sure belonged to that list as well. Sage was no *Lady*, and everyone here knew that. It was just a term used, because there was no word for what she was apparently. Although Sage could think of plenty, like puppet, doll or even sla—

“My Lady?”

Sage must have been glaring at the maid in front of her, judging by the way the maid's face was contorted in worry. “Of course,” Sage said, nodding once. With Sage following the young maid dressed in black from head to toe, the two of them made their way through quite a few long and surprisingly rather empty halls. *It was a fresh and welcome sensation not being stared or whispered at*, Sage admitted.

Not long after leaving her chambers, Sage reached the door to the King's and Queen's private dining room. In that moment, she realized the uneasy feeling in her stomach wasn't due to her light meals that day; her body seemed to sense the upcoming events long before she did.

The maid opened the door and indicated for the faerie to follow her inside. Sage was always stunned by the looks of certain rooms in the castle and this one was no exception. The high ceiling, painted with light blue and gold clouds, the tall walls that were either covered in priceless art or, in case of the wall furthest from the door, floor to ceiling windows covered with thick curtains, the marble floor that shone brightly—everything was perfectly clean at all times. Just as the King wished for it to be. There were guards stationed both outside and inside the room, all dressed in blue and gold—the King's colors. None of

them dared to move even a muscle so it didn't take a lot for Sage to be able to act like they weren't even there.

“Lady Sage, Your Majesty.” The maid curtsied. “Your Majesty,” she addressed the Queen and curtsied once more before leaving the way she came inside.

“Sage, darling, have a seat.” The King gestured to the chair right next to his. While the King and Queen sat at opposite sides of the long table, Sage made her way over to the King’s right. She realized a moment too late that she hadn’t addressed either of the Royal Couple yet.

“You're quiet, Sage. Why is that?”

Mentally facepalming, Sage shook her head once. “I’m sorry, my King. My Queen,” she addressed both this time, curtsying. “How was the feast?” Sage forced a smile and sat on the King’s side. A formal dinner, Sage could do that. She just needed to repeat that a few more times until she believed it too.

“Great, I won every bet I placed.” The King’s features lifted. Sage guessed as much. There had to have been a reason for the King to look so happy.

“I—“ The King stopped, glancing at his wife. “*We* missed you there.”

Of course he did, Sage wanted to roll her eyes.

“I’m sorry I couldn't be there,” she said instead, her mouth tight. She knew what the King wanted to hear most of the times, having learned to read him. Luckily, this was one of those.

“Well, you will get what you want tomorrow,” the Queen spoke from her end of the table. “Isn’t that right, my King? Your little rat will get everything it wants.” The Queen dabbed her mouth with a napkin after having taken a sip of her wine. She had never liked Sage. Either because of jealousy or envy or something else entirely, Sage didn't know. Maybe it was both, maybe neither. It was probably because of how the King acted towards both of them. And for that, Sage couldn't even blame her.

“Yes,” the King ignored the insult, “you are to attend the banquet tomorrow.” The King’s lips curled into a rather cold smile.

Before Sage or anyone else could say anything else, the food was brought in, and she couldn't have been more glad for that. Sage's mouth watered at the smell, the stony feeling in her stomach turning into hunger in an instant. When the table was set with fresh meat and vegetables, all steaming hot, the King offered a small thanks to gods above and below before digging right into the food. After the Queen also heaved a healthy amount of food onto her plate, it was Sage's turn to do so as well. Salted potatoes and corn were her favorite, and although Sage knew it wasn't corn season, there it laid, right in front of her, ready to be grabbed. She had no idea how the royals managed to get fresh fruit and vegetables all year round and although she knew that it was wrong, Sage didn't care in this moment. All she wanted was to dive right into the steaming vegetables.

"The Memorable Banquet will start when the sun sets tomorrow. Someone will get you shortly before then, so be ready," the King informed Sage with a full mouth.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Sage answered after swallowing a mouthful of corn.

"Make sure that yesterday's events won't be repeated," he then warned with a glare in Sage's direction.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Sage answered again. Obedience and compliance—two things the King couldn't live without. And hearing himself talk. "Tell me more about the games today, my King." *Let me know what I missed and rub it in my face, like I know you want to do*, Sage thought.

And while the King gladly bragged about the brutality of today's games, Sage paid enough attention to throw in a few sentences that showed interest, but zoned out enough, so she didn't need to listen to all of the fights in details that she wouldn't forget anytime soon.

Chapter Four



Day Three

Lori

Aside from the King's visits, Sage spent her days either reading or sketching in her chambers, watching the courtyard or garden from her window, or enjoying the company of her only true friend, Lori Briar.

Her mother was one of the menders in the castle and so Lori was well on her way of becoming one too. Well, to be exact, she already was one, she completed her training a few years ago, but she was still learning, nevertheless. Like right now, when she was studying the different effects that incense and peppermint had on inflammations. The first was said that it can reduce inflammations, but it had never been tested on its own, all the while mint was definitely known for its effect to reduce all kinds of sickness all over the oral mucous membrane.

With her thoughts full of all kinds of different effects the healing plants had, Lori was making her way up the stairs to Sage's chambers, when she stumbled into a man while turning a corner. "Oh gods, I am so sorry!" she exclaimed, lifting her head to look at the man's face.

Stunned by the beautiful features, Lori didn't know what else to say at first. She opened her mouth to explain to the stranger once more that she didn't mean to run directly into his chest, but there were no words coming out of her open mouth. Like a fish caught on land, her mouth

was opening and closing, but for some reason it wouldn't work the way it was supposed to be working. Lori frowned, her cheeks getting hot.

"Are you alright, Lady...?" Apparently, the man wasn't only handsome, he was kind as well? Lori grew even more fond of him in an instant.

"Oh, I am no Lady, my Lord. I am a mender," she finally found her voice again. And then remembered that the handsome stranger had asked her a question as well. "And yes, I'm alright. Thank you." She smiled, sheepishly tugging a strand of her bright red hair behind her ear.

"And what is your name, *mender*?"

One would think this would be meant as an insult, but the way his silky voice emphasized her profession made it sound like it was the most important thing in the world. And for Lori, it was. The mender's features melted into something like awe.

"My name is Lori, my Lord," she exclaimed, nervously shifting from one leg to the other.

"Well, Lori," the stranger almost *purred*, making Lori's knees buckle. She grabbed the strap of her bag to keep from falling, not realizing that it made close to zero sense.

"I hope you have a great day." And with that the stranger side-stepped Lori and walked around the corner.

It took the mender another few seconds before she straightened her back and continued her way to Sage's chamber. Oh, she couldn't wait to tell her friend all about the striking stranger she just quite literally ran into, all thoughts of peppermint and incense forgotten.



Lori lifted a hand to knock on Sage's door, when other thoughts entered her head. The two of them definitely needed to think of some knock combination in order to help Sage know that it was Lori at the door and no one else. Before Lori could deepen her thoughts about possible combinations, the door in front of her opened, revealing the familiar features of her best friend. The wicked grin Lori felt her lips

form deepened, when she saw how Sage's shoulders sunk in relief at the sight of her.

"You won't believe what just happened." Lori breathed, not even waiting for the door to be all the way open before stepping into Sage's chambers.

"Do I really want to know?"

Lori fake-gasped at that. She knew that her friend was all in for anything that included castle drama, she knew that Sage was probably dying to know the news already.

"Of course, you want to know!" Lori quite literally stomped her foot on the floor where she stood in the middle of Sage's sitting room. "So sit." She pointed to the settee by the window and walked over to it herself. Sage gave in to the smile tugging on her lips and made her way over to sit beside her friend.

Almost vibrating with excitement, Lori began to explain the recent events, "I was making my way over here, right? And when I turned the corner down the hall, I ran into *the* most attractive man I have *ever* seen!" She almost squealed. She almost even made a move to grab her friend's knees but stopped herself (even though her fingers begged her to move them, tingled with the need to do so even).

"He literally had everything one could wish for. The sharpest jawline I've ever seen, such masculine features and the eyes of one's dreams!" Lori mentally retreated to the moment in the hall, her thoughts drifting back to the striking stranger. Was she foolish for behaving like this? Maybe. But the mender didn't quite care. Not when the stranger had her mesmerized and not when this whole situation would take Sage's thoughts to a better place.

"Like a literal pool of sunshine was caught in his irises. Gods, I am almost drooling just thinking about it!" Lori saw her friend shift at that, her body visibly showing that she wasn't quite comfortable with where this was headed. Or maybe her thoughts were drifting to something else entirely, with the way her body was tensing.

"I realize that I may be overreacting, but he was hot," Lori whispered the last word, not fully daring to say such a thing out loud.

Sage chuckled at that.

“Like seriously hot, he made my profession sound like...” Lori hesitated. “Like sex,” she whispered once more, feeling herself turn red from ear to ear. “And then my name.” She sighed. “He purred it, Sage. Like a damn cat he purred—”

“Okay, okay, I get it, Lor.” Sage laughed. “He was attractive. And...?” Sage grinned. Lori knew that expression like the back of her hand. Sage knew damn well that this was the end of the story, but Lori knew that her friend liked to mess with her sometimes.

“Well,” Lori dragged out the word. She didn't want to give Sage the satisfaction of being right, but that was indeed the end of the story. “That's it I guess, but... There is no but.” Lori frowned, her forehead creasing with wrinkles. She pouted, her bottom lip pushing out.

“I'm just kidding, Lor, you have to show me this *mystery male* at the banquet tonight.” Sage grinned and wiggled her eyebrows. “I can't wait to see what kind of male got you so enraptured, when I know damn well you'd probably prefer his sister!” Sage winked, causing the burn on Lori's cheeks to deepen even further. Sage was right, Lori would pick his sister over the man any time. It had taken Lori a long time to accept that part about herself, but today she wasn't ashamed to admit it.

“But first you need to tell me if you got it.” Sage breathed and leaned towards Lori.

“Got what?” Lori was trying to get back at Sage, acting like she didn't know what her friend meant, but, of course, Sage could see right through it.

“Lor...” Sage warned, the grin on her face turning wider.

“Of course, I got it!” Lori squealed. She made a habit of that today as it seemed, she realized, but didn't exactly care. Today was a good day.

“Give it to me!” Sage was getting more and more excited as the seconds went by.

“Okay, okay.” Lori laughed and grabbed the bag that she had brought with her. Pulling out a book that looked like it would be falling apart any minute now, she handed it over to Sage who grabbed it eagerly.

“Why did you make me search the whole damn archive for this thing again?” Lori scooted closer to Sage, mindful not to touch her.

Her friend placed the book on her lap, stroking the spine mindlessly.

“Because this *thing*,” Sage gave Lori a look, “is very important to me.” Sage turned her gaze back at the old book that was bigger than Lori’s head and read the title out loud, “The Tales of Esphorus the Good.”

Sage smiled.

“My mother used to read this to me and I’ve been searching the library for it ever since I first set foot into it. Turns out the King doesn’t like children’s tales a lot, so he banned them and stored them in the archives instead.” Sage seemed to drift off into yet another wave of thoughts, not that Lori wasn’t used to her friend behaving that way already. Drifting off into whatever was going on behind that blindfold of her’s was something Sage tended to do a lot.

“And since I can enter them and you can’t, you wanted me to get it,” Lori finished for Sage, nodding. “So, what’s it about?” Lori smiled.

The two friends spent the rest of the day browsing through the book. Every so often Sage stopped to explain what happened in the tales and fables in it, telling Lori all about her most favored ones.

Together, the two of them spent what felt like ages sitting on the settee in Sage’s entry room, until the sun was about to set and there was yet another knock on the door.

Sage

Walking down the halls of the castle, the maid that had fetched Lori and Sage brought them both to the Great Hall which led to the gardens on the side of the castle, where the banquet would be held. The room was once again decorated in the colors of the King, with blue and gold ribbons lining the walls and bouquets of flowers on all the tables that were spread throughout the room. There was a long table off to one side, which had all kinds of foods presented on it and another one next to it with drinks. Sage couldn’t wait to dig into all the refreshments later tonight, already anticipating all the delicious flavors the food would provide.

For now, the Great Hall was still rather empty though, with only a few servants still roaming through it in order to set everything up. It made Sage feel a little out of place.

“The King wants you to be here when he arrives, which will be shortly.” The maid, who had gotten them, nodded once before vanishing out of the room, leaving Lori and Sage standing in the middle of it. Feeling like she was on display—and having had enough of that—Sage motioned for Lori to step aside with her. The female was the focus of enough nights already, she needn’t bring so much attention on her today.

The King did arrive shortly after the maid had left, his features brightening up when he saw Sage. “There you are, my creature,” he said as a way of greeting. “You look stunning,” he added, looking Sage up and down, almost undressing her with his eyes. Sage’s stomach flipped. One would think that being favored by the King was a lot of fun, when in reality it was a lot of keeping one’s emotions in check.

“Thank you, my King.” Sage curtsied, before Lori greeted the King and did the same, bending one knee and bowing at the waist.

“The Memorable Banquet will start soon, I want you to be present at all times. You’re allowed to roam freely, but remember: only speak when spoken to. Be kind, always. And don’t, under any circumstances, let anyone touch you,” the King spoke lowly, grabbing Sage’s upper arm as if physically making sure she understood. Which was unnecessary, because Sage knew these rules by heart. She had also learned to know of the unspoken rules. The ones she had only found out about *after* she had apparently broken them over her years of living with the King.

“Of course, my King. Your wish is my command,” Sage said, just the same as she had done so over a hundred, stars, probably even a thousand times before.

“Great.” The King pivoted on the spot and clapped at the same time. He looked around the room, making sure that everything was set the way he wanted it to. His eyes narrowed. Sage was sure that he had found a kinked flower that was out of place in one of the bouquets or a ribbon wrapped the wrong way around one of the poles. There was no

need to explain how cruel the King could be when he found something he didn't like. What Sage didn't like however, was what was about to happen next.

“You, over there!” The King strode away with angry steps. Sage turned towards the windows, not wanting to see the poor servant being yelled at for something that probably wasn't even their fault.

“We will have a good night,” Lori turned to Sage, offering reassurance, and Sage smiled back. The friends settled into a comfortable silence, watching the servants prepare the garden outside. It was remarkable to see them at work, appearing so at ease, when in reality they had to coordinate perfectly with each other and the King and Queen, with no room for mistakes.

The King returned sooner than expected though, making Sage and Lori's little bubble of peace pop. “You,” he pointed at Lori, “you're a mender, are you not? What is it you're mending here? The feast hasn't begun, yet,” he exclaimed angrier than needed. Lori got the hint and quickly left with an excuse after mouthing to Sage that she was sorry.

“My creature,” the King's voice was warmer than before. He stepped closer to Sage, who was still looking out through the glass windows.

Outside, servants were roaming around, setting up the decorations and lights, all in the King's colors of course. Candles and all kinds of sconces and torches would be lighting up the garden once the sun fully was set. *It would look beautiful after dark*, Sage thought.

A hand made its way up Sage's openly presented back, which caused her to jerk and whip her head around.

“It's just me, darling,” the King murmured in Sage's ear, his face and body suddenly closer than Sage was comfortable with. Did he really think she had jerked back because she didn't know who had touched her? Was he truly oblivious to the fact that her back—the bruises he had caused, to be exact—were still hurting her, if less after they had healed a little? Or did he simply not care? Maybe he thought just because one couldn't see the dark spots anymore that they had healed all the way through. Maybe he truly didn't care. Either way, Sage was furious.

She mentally shook her head, banning these thoughts from it. There was no use getting mad, because if she got mad, then it would show and then the King would get mad and no one wanted *that* to happen.

“I cannot wait for everyone to see you in this dress. I had it fabricated just for you, don't you love it?” The King was talking about the blue dress Sage was wearing together with a long piece of thin fabric draped over and around her upper arms. The sleek fabric was hugging Sage's curves in just the right places, while still leaving enough room to imagine the rest. It did fit Sage like a glove. Combined with the jewelry Sage was wearing, the gold headpiece that hung from the roots of her hair to her ears, the matching earrings and bracelets, Sage could admit that she did indeed look pretty. Some might think that the gold jewelry she was wearing was clashing with the argon shackles on her wrists and neck, but that wasn't Sage's problem. These shackles were the very reason for Sage to have to spend her life here, the very reason why she wasn't able to leave, so the different types of metal not matching each other was the least of her worries.

The King's nose grazed the side of her face, his hand slipping lower and lower and lower—

“I do.” Sage forced her body to relax with her next breath.

“This body of yours drives me mad, do you know that too?” The King sighed.

“You flatter me, my King,” Sage spoke quietly, tilting her head to the side, to give the King better access to her neck, although everything in her screamed at her to push him away.

Even after all these years, Sage still felt dirty whenever the King had acted like this towards her. It wasn't that the King wasn't pretty to look at. He was indeed a beautiful male, which probably made the feeling even worse. It wasn't just the insults the King threw at Sage whenever he wasn't in a good mood or simply felt like it either. It wasn't even the fact that the King had a wife and that said wife was the Queen, *Sage's Queen*. Although that was something Sage despised. But no, it was something else entirely.

Someone cleared their throat behind where Sage and the King stood, making them turn around. Standing there was the Queen with a

guard on either side of her. Sage didn't think it was possible to feel even more sick, but was proven wrong at the sight. What the King did to her... it must feel even worse to the Queen, she imagined.

“My Queen.” Sage curtsied.

“Milicia, love.” The King smiled and walked up to his wife. “You look beautiful,” he exclaimed, taking her hand and kissing the top of it.

“My King.” She smiled back at her husband. Sage wasn't sure if the smile was fake or not. Maybe it wasn't entirely either one of them.

When the King spoke in hushed whispers, it was hard to make out what he was saying to Her Majesty, but the look in his eyes said everything Sage needed to know: it was love. Even if only in some fucked up way, there was definitely some kind of love and gratefulness that shone in his eyes, whenever the King looked upon the Queen. And although it somewhat pained Sage to admit, there was a hint of love in the Queen's eyes as well. It wasn't jealousy of the Queen per se, not of her status or her crown, but her abilities. That she was her own person. It was jealousy of her strength. Of what the Royal Couple had. What they were for each other.

Wanting to escape the awkward tension of the situation, Sage zoned out into her thoughts again. Recently it was becoming a habit of hers to do so whenever she didn't feel like being herself. She thought back to a time before the King stole her away and made her his personal pet. A time when she lived on the streets, living day after day just trying to survive. It wasn't easy being fae in a human kingdom. Ever since the land of Ayria had been split into four parts all ruled by humans, the fae became less and less, not needed nor wanted. Most humans didn't necessarily like fae. When the world had been split, the fae were being kept as workers at first, their long lifespan making them the perfect workmen, or they were sold on markets or if Fate was on their side, they managed to flee the cities and lived their life far from them.

That had been what Sage was about to do a little less than three years ago, shortly after she had heard the news of the new King of Aurous. When she had wanted to use the opportunity of a shift of rulers. When she had made a run for it and tried to escape her life on the streets of Devontae. When she was still hoping that she could make