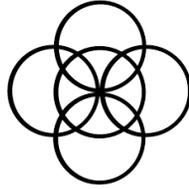


Summer

Seasons Within, book III



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SUMMER

First Edition

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Chapter 1

Sound of Silence

THE BLINDING WHITE LIGHT dimmed down until it was barely noticeable.

Oh, man... I should've been used to this by now. Gaia rubbed her eyes, she was bothered by the bright flash, and dizzy from the sudden movement.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and found herself staring at an iron fireplace. She could feel every sensation the room gave her as if she were really there. The crackling sound of the wood burning, the warmth of the fire against her skin and the sweet scent of sugar and cinnamon.

"La, la, hum, huumm," she heard a beautiful voice coming from behind.

She turned around and found a twenty-nine-year-old woman, humming a Celtic lullaby as she baked a scrumptious apple pie.

Oh, my! That smells delicious. Gaia's stomach growled hungrily at the sight of that incredible dessert. That pie was like the king of pies. It had it all, the crunchy pastry arranged like an elegant net with a sprinkle of sugary cinnamon and dozens of juicy apples. Perfect.

The woman bent down, opened a crystal oven and placed the pie above a metal tray. With a snap of her fingers, a flame crawled from her palm to a thick piece of log that stood beneath the metal tray.

"And now we wait." She sprung back up, pushed her curly black hair away from her face and smile. "Why are you looking at me like that?" she laughed. "Oh, I know what you want." The woman took a small piece of apple from the mixture's leftovers and walked towards Gaia. "Here you go, big boy." She gave the sweet apple to a two-year-old boy seated inside a corral playing with a wolf toy that was carved on a piece of wood. "Don't tell daddy I let you try it first."

The toddler giggled. "Papa knows."

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"Yes," she took another piece of apple and took a bite. "But that's only because your daddy is a know-it-all."

"Love him." added the little boy.

"A lot." the woman kissed the boy's forehead and returned to the dark mahogany kitchen.

As the woman cleaned and hummed, Gaia took another peek at the house. It was beautiful. Decorated mostly with white colors and furniture made of marble or other stones. The couch had a huge thick quilt, and the walls were covered with vines and red anemone flowers. It was the perfect mix of elegance with coziness.

Gaia turned around and froze in front of the toddler. *No way...* His ruffled black hair and a white skin contrasted beautifully with a pair of intense black eyes that were staring back at her... *Hunter?* She cried as the clear image of baby Hunter smiled at her. *This was your house? She was your mom?* Gaia glanced at the singing woman, she looked so happy, so alive. *What happened?*

Toddler Hunter sat on the quilt and played with a set of wooden toys. As for Gaia, she couldn't stop herself from wondering, was that the way she was with her own mother? Playing with her toys while her mom Tanya worked next to her? Had her mother showed such loving affection towards her? Was she this in love with her father? Whatever the answers were, she couldn't wait to get those memories back.

"What's wrong, my love?" asked Hunter's mother, finally getting Gaia's attention. She was so distracted by her thoughts, she didn't even notice when a tall, brown-haired man with freckles on his face, walked into the house.

The man sat on a marble chair that was closest to the stylish wooden fireplace. His hands trembled. "I..." his voice trailed off.

"You found who did it," Hunter's mother gasped.

"I'm so sorry, Ana," he nodded. "It's worse than I thought."

"Who?" she asked. He remained quiet. "Xander, who did it?" Ana asked again, only this time, Xander passed her a bunch of letters written on homemade paper. Her eyes opened wide as her lower lip quivered with fear. "Longcastle?! How's this possible?" her breathing quickened. "Has Hans seen this?"

He shook his head giving his wife the negative answer he knew she feared. "He left with Nobu to Wintercliff." Xander undid a few buttons from his linen shirt. "They're scouting the Jankovic boy to join The Six."

No way! He's talking about Veter! Gaia huffed.

"The Six? I thought the Parliament denied that plan."

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"They did." Xander stood up and hugged his wife from behind. "But you know Hans." He gave a deep chuckle. "He decided we should still assemble it. Even if it's behind their backs."

Just like Donovan would, Gaia laughed. He might be identical to his mother, but his way of thinking seemed just like his father.

Ana's hands trailed his arms and intertwine her fingers with his. "I don't like this situation, my love. We should wait for them to arrive."

"We can't wait." He kissed his wife's cheek and rested his forehead on her shoulder. "It's just a matter of time before Longcastle figures out that I have the letters."

"This is bad," she shivered. "This is really bad."

"Relax, woman," he hugged her tightly "We'll make it."

"Against Longcastle? Not a chance, my darling. A man who sold the worlds to Azazel is not someone we can win against."

He did what? How?!

But it was too late to find out. Another bright white light shone intently until it blinded Gaia.

She lifted her gaze and noticed that all the trees were tall, spindly and full of spikes. The musky air, the fog and the thousand thick vines that hung from tree to tree made her feel as if she were in the middle of a lost prehistoric forest.

Where am I? She strolled around the area as she paid attention to everything that surrounded her. The pale trees, the orange dirt, the lack of animals, anything that could give her a clue of her whereabouts.

Nothing.

The place was so captivating and strange that it managed to take the 'Longcastle' enigma out of her mind. At least for now.

Wow, this place is beyond weird. How is this one of Hunter's memories? What did you get yourself into, little guy? Gaia slid her hand over one of the plant's spikes. I'm sure Priy would love it. She would make a sword with one of these spikes and spend hours preparing for a dinosaur attack... Crap! Please, let there be no dinosaurs around here. Please!... Well, unless it's as cute as 'Petrie,' then sure! A smile crept on Gaia's lips as she remembered all those times she watched 'Land before time' with Priyam, over and over again. *Ha! I could picture Edan's terrified face if I go back with Petrie and be all, Hey! Guess who has a new dino-pet. Priceless.*

CRACK! Gaia turned in the direction where the sound came from and saw a couple running as fast as they could.

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That was random. She thought as there were many things she found strange about that couple. Like the fact that they were dressed way too elegant to be running around those peculiar woods, and the fear they had on their blurry faces.

Who are they? What are they so afraid of? Gaia tried to find out, but the image was too unstable to tell. To unfocused.

Gaia ran quietly through the forest trailing the couple's footsteps. The closer she got, the easier it was to sense their desperation.

The couple hid behind a tree and Gaia followed. She stood so close to them that she could now recognize who they were. Hunter's parents.

They looked so different. Unlike in Hunter's previous memory, Ana's hair wasn't wild and curly, it was pulled into a tight bun wrapped with varying strings of pearls. Her outfit wasn't a loose, flower print dress, but a silky elegant, coral one with a long tail. His father was carrying Hunter and using his long suit jacket to cover the toddler's body.

"What are we going to do, Xander?" Ana panted. It was clear they'd been running for a while. "We should go back."

"We can't. We need to get to Mor." A loud growl was heard from the distance. "They found us." He shoved Longcastle's letters in one of his jacket's pockets and hung it on Hunter's back. "Ana," Xander called to her with his deep voice. "Take him, hide."

"No, no, no." Ana clung to her match's fitted vest. "You can't leave us. You'll die."

"If I don't then *we'll* all die." Xander kissed his woman goodbye and passed the child to her arms. "Take care of your mother."

"Papa." Little Hunter spoke. His hands peeked through the long sleeves of his father's suit jacket.

"Be a brave boy and no matter what you see or hear, *don't* make a sound." Xander kissed Hunter's forehead, he pinched his match's cheek with affection and ran towards a nearby mist.

Ana leaned against a tree. She hugged Hunter, using his back to hide her sobs. Her knees gave up as she slid to the ground, curling into a protective ball that covered Hunter's body. They were perfectly hidden. In there, in silence, covered by dirt and plants, there was no way anyone could find them.

A few moments later, Gaia heard a horrifying growl coming from inside the mist.

No! No!... She knew that noise from memory. *Draaks.*

The beasts flew, and the trees shook. The swishing sound of blazing flames let Gaia know Hunter's dad was a fire wielder. And a good one. Only not good enough to survive three more Draaks. With a soul-chilling scream, the man cried his last breath and died.

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Hunter's mother covered her mouth and sobbed. She heard the scream and was now devastated. Suddenly, Hunter stood up.

Scared, Ana rush towards her baby boy. "Don't," she whispered, but it was too late.

"Papa!" little hunter screamed with all his strength. And just like that, the beasts turned towards Hunter's cry.

Terrified, the woman stood up and tried to outrun the beasts, but it was impossible. Something she already knew. A Skuggor came from the shadows, and with a single swing of one of his scorpion's tails, he killed Hunter's mother. Unsatisfied with just one kill, the beast turned towards the boy.

Hunter, run! Gaia screamed in vain. There was no way Hunter could hear her. This was his memory, and there's no way to change what had already happened.

The Skuggor jabbed one of its tails and missed. Hunter was agile. He crawled and jumped around the bushes that covered most of the orange dirt making it almost impossible for the beast to catch him. Hunter saw a ditch between a bunch of fallen trees and ran as fast as he could. The spikes from the trees cut his skin leaving some of the scars Gaia had seen on his body before. Angry, the beast tried to reach the boy, but he was small enough to fit inside the ditch and managed to stay out of reach. He was safe now.

Gaia cried and knelt on the ground. Her knees were too weak to sustain her body. She rested her hands on the dirt, and her left hand landed on top of one of the letters.

They died because of this? Gaia lifted the paper and tried to read the letter. It was full of blood and dirt, so it was barely legible. She moved it closer and managed to distinguish bits of the writing; 'the discovery of a new weapon,' 'they don't know,' 'Le Gardien de la Vie,' 'I'll take her to you' and something about the Resurgence. As for the rest, it was undecipherable.

Luckily for Gaia, the least unstained part of the letter was a wax symbol of a brilliant cut diamond with an 'L' engraved in the middle, stamped right next to the signature of the man who betrayed them... *Z. Longcastle.*

Nauseous, Gaia fell to the floor breaking the bound with Hunter's Oak tree. Her hands grasped one of Hunter's Oak roots as she wept. Every bit of information she collected from that memory rushed into her thoughts; how happy Hunter's mother was, the fact that his parents were called Xander and Ana, the scouting of The Six behind the government's back, the letters of Z. Longcastle and the murderer of his parents. It was all too much.

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Don't make a sound... She remembered the last thing Hunter's father said. "Hunter," she patted the Oak's trunk. "You kept quiet for us? To keep us from getting harmed?" she leaned her forehead against a thick branch as her tears rolled down the bark.

Chapter 2

Kostus

EVA, A WOMAN IN her mid-twenties with watery chocolate-brown eyes, stepped outside of the kitchen with a bowl of fruit. She was singing *'Immigrant Song'* by *Led Zeppelin*, one of the many songs she had stuck in her head after hearing Pink's cassette tape over and over again. Although, if someone asked her, her personal favorites were mostly from *Frank Sinatra*.

Eva danced across the main room. Her brown and light-green hair was tied in a tight ponytail that swung every time she made a sudden movement. With a cute dance move, she twirled on her heels and noticed Edan leaning against the balcony rail. He was lost in thought. "Not good," she sighed and walked towards him, only to stop halfway. "Donovan!" she yelled at the sight of a flower vase that was on the wrong table. "Stop moving my F-ng precious furniture!" she semi-cursed as she placed the vase back to its original place.

"Something wrong?" asked Edan after hearing her screams.

"Animal boy keeps messing up my Feng-Shui." She leaned the bowl of fruit against the balcony rail and took a deep breath. "She's still there?" he nodded. "How's she feeling?"

Edan shrugged his shoulders. "Confused, happy, lonely, sad, it depends on the memory she sees."

"Angry?"

"I haven't sensed it lately."

Eva let out a long sigh. "Good."

"Not good," he squeezed the rail so hard that he left a burn mark. "She spends her time resting on the tree. It has been three days, and she hasn't spent more than an hour away from it."

"Everyone deals with grief in different ways. Also, we have no idea how does it feel to connect with a soul-bounded tree. Imagine being able to see into the soul

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of a lost loved one? What if you lost her and her tree was the only place you could feel her again? Re-live every moment?”

“I would move into that tree,” he ruffled his light brown hair. “Although, there’s a silver lining here... sort off,” he stared in the direction of Hunter’s oak, even if he couldn’t see Gaia, their matching made it possible for him to feel her. “She keeps visiting me,” he smiled. “I’m pretty sure she’s been checking on all of us.”

“No wonder. I thought it was strange she stayed away for that long without contacting the group.” Eva grabbed a soft, juicy peach from the bowl and took a big bite. “I didn’t know she mastered the Visits already. She’s amazing.”

“She doesn’t know it either. I mean, she knows she can expand her mind through Nature. She experienced it for the first time when her necklace broke and her mind traveled through the mountains and snow, but she has no idea that it’s called Visiting or that it’s one of Mother Nature’s most powerful traits.”

“Wait,” Eva rolled her sweet treat with her fingers and took another bite. “If she doesn’t know how Visiting works, then she has no idea her match can see her when she does it?”

“She has... no clue.”

“What?!” Eva gasped. “That’s like eavesdropping.”

He smirked, looking relaxed for the first time in a while. “Well, it’s more like pretending to be asleep when someone is giving away reckon information.”

“No, it’s not.” Her brown eyes squinted in a deep glare. “Oh my, you’re not going to tell her. Are you?”

“Absolutely not.” He leaned closer and deepened his smirk. “Neither are you, miss Morality.”

“Don’t *you* dare to give me that extremely rare, charming smile of yours. You know I *hate* keeping information.” Eva pouted. She took the last bite of her delicious peach, threw the pit into the forest, and then pointed her palm towards the peach’s pit. “Arg! I’m not happy about this but Okay. I won’t say a thing *if* you promise me you’ll tell her. Or as the chief of Moonstrand I’ll have you locked up,” she flicked her hand, and the pit grew into a stem that spun and spun until it evolved into a leafy peach tree.

“I promise.”

“And when I ask you to promise me you’ll tell her; I don’t mean you’ll tell her on her deathbed.”

He chuckled. “Cross my heart.”

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“Okay then,” she rested her elbows on top of the balcony rail. “You should relax. Besides your semi spying/betrayal, it’s all good news. Just give her some time.”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have the time. The Parliament already called for us.”

“I’m aware of that.” Her lips turned into a wide smile. “It’ll be Okay.”

“I know it will,” he grinned making tiny wrinkles under his green eyes. “She’s magnificent. Terra will love her.”

“She is, and yes, without a doubt, Terra will adore that girl,” Eva poked his chest with her finger. “Though I was talking about you.”

“What about it?”

“Don’t give me that innocent face, Edan.” She frowned. “Even after all the obstacles they put for you to trip on, you gained the trust of your team and ended up being the leader. You also broke the code and reunited a year earlier. You matched with the future queen’s soul and worse; you didn’t change who you are and proved them wrong.”

“Let me guess, they’re angry?”

“Furious.” Eva smiled. “Anyway, gotta go arrange everything for Roa’s arrival,” she passed the bowl of fruit to Edan. “Take this with you; some food will do her good.”

“Roa’s coming?” He twisted his thick eyebrows with confusion. “What about Adriana?”

“You know her. She’s most likely doing something—”

“Irresponsible,” he scoffed with annoyance.

“Yeah, probably,” Eva laughed out loud. “Now go with Gaia before Roa gets here.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, just keep your squirrel-boy away from my furniture.” She waved goodbye as she left towards the forest’s entrance.

Edan took the bowl and walked through the forest. The place was full of life. Some men were playing their instruments as they rested in the shade of a tall sycamore tree. Kids played tag around the main building, most of them using their elements to gain some advantage. A group of teens including Pink and Floyd were bathing a saber-tooth while Monky, a short woman with brunette hair and clothes full of paint, yelled at them for painting the poor animal blue. Across the bonfire,

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Mr. Butcher, a lovely elder man with sky blue eyes and a matching white hair and beard, was finishing a toddler's class about different kinds of trees while some monkeys and raccoons helped women tangle gorgeous flowers into crowns at the same time they concentrated in their chitchats. A small part of Edan dared to admit he'd missed that. The union of everything.

The peace between Nature and Terrians.

Edan was a few yards into the forest when he smiled at how different that place was from the central area. Deep in the woods, the place was quiet. The trees reigned in there. The breeze was soft and smelled like flowers. There was no music in here, only the singing of a group of Quetzals. He kept hiking his way across the Big Rakau up to Hunter's tree.

Then he saw her, curled between a bunch of roots with her eyes closed. Her red hair floated on the wind while a few rays of sunlight warmed her up. She was beautiful.

Trying not to startle her, he reached the tree and placed his palm against the Oak's trunk. "Red?"

Gaia opened her eyes and saw Edan staring at her from above. *Great way to wake up*, she thought at the sight of her match smiling at her with a bowl of food on his free hand. "Hi," she yawned. Between the crying, the visions and the drain her elements had on her energy, she felt more tired than ever. "What do you have in there?"

"Fruit. Eva sends it," he pointed at a space beside her. "May I?"

"I don't know," she raised an eyebrow. "Are there any grapes in there?" She loved Earth's grapes, but Terrian grapes were something else. They were sweet, juicy, bright green and as big as a cork. Untouched by chemicals.

"Lots," he took one out and ate it with a grin.

She shifted her weight, patted the root behind her and Edan sat down circling her body with his legs. He then pulled her so she could rest her back against his chest. "There you go."

"Great, I'm starving." She took a couple of grapes and ate them at the same time, humming at the pleasant taste. "They're so good. Thank you."

He passed his finger softly over her red puffy cheek. "You were crying. Bad memory?"

"Horrible," her eyes turned watery as she ate another grape. "I know why Hunter never spoke to us."

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“Is it Okay if you tell me about it?”

“His family was on the run. I have no idea why or from what but they looked terrified, Edan. So scared. I tried to find the reason, but I couldn’t get any answers.”

“They’re memories,” he hugged her closer and kissed her on the forehead. “It’s impossible to find out something Hunter didn’t even know himself.”

“Yeah, I assumed that would be the case,” she nuzzled against him. “Besides it all happened so fast. Beasts began to follow them. They reached a hiding place, his father passed Hunter to his mom, and he asked him to be quiet no matter what... and...” her voice broke into a quiet cry.

“He didn’t stay quiet.”

“His screams got his mother killed,” she bit her lower lip to stop it from quivering. “I think, in a way, he was afraid that if he spoke he would harm us as well.”

“Bloody hell,” Edan felt a punch in the stomach. “That kid... I swear I never met anyone more courageous.”

“Edan,” she mumbled under her breath curling against his body. “I’m sorry for this. Me, staying all day in here. I know it’s not healthy... at all, but, it’s not just Hunter. There’s a lot of pain in this land. Families separated, kids without parents. Did you notice how most of the population is thirty-years-old and younger?”

He nodded. “The older generations were lost in the war.”

“All of this is wrong,” she leaned her head on his neck.

“Then end it.”

“How?”

“You’ve been doing it for these past months.” He reached her right hand and traced her Five Fold symbol with the tip of his finger. “Observe, learn, grow and claim your place. I have no doubt you’ll make this better, worth it.”

“Would you be there with me?”

He leaned closer and kissed Gaia’s bare shoulder. “Every step of the way.”

“Good,” she placed the bowl next to her and leaned her entire back against Edan’s chest. “I like your stubble.”

“You do?”

“It’s spiky, but it looks very good on you.” She passed her fingers over his chin. His unshaven beard tickled her fingertips. “Makes you look relaxed. I also like your new outfits, you look like a hot *Robin Hood*.”

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“I have no idea what you just said, but you seem happy, so I guess it stays.”

“It definitely stays,” she passed her hands over the thick leather over his arm. “I’m also very much in love with your leather wrist gauntlets.”

“The people from Moonstrand use them to protect their arms when they slide off or climb vines or trees,” he explained her. “You should start wearing yours too.”

“They look better on you.”

“They’re for your protection.”

“Fine, I’ll try to use them,” Gaia grinned and closed her eyes. In there, she could feel the contrast of his warmth and the cold air hitting her bare legs. It was the perfect weather. She took a deep breath and smelled the wet dirt, the grass and the sweetness of the flowers. Just like she did on the day her necklace broke, and how she’d been doing for these past days, she concentrated and pushed her mind further, expanding it through Moonstrand. Her mind traveled like an astral projection, as she saw the river, its fresh water sparkling with the sunlight. Gaia’s mind followed and reached the Big Rakau. It was as beautiful as ever. Huge, majestic, standing in the middle of the river.

Too bad it’s early in the morning. She loved seeing the Big Rakau at night. Besides how bright some plants looked at night, the constant falling flower petals of Rakau shone with a neon green so intense; it seemed like the stars were falling from the sky.

She looked up at the sky and saw it, a part of the jade colored temple that was inside Rakau. The temple of Honua.

She could see the mark engraved on one of the roots, and her body shivered at the idea of having to get the same mark. Not something she wanted to think about now.

Shaking the thought away, she pushed further and traveled through the gorgeous mix of palms, pines, sakuras, maples, and hundreds of other trees, all the way until she reached the main building. She saw Monky and Mr. Butcher walking through the forest, arguing about teaching Priyam and Icarus the best way to see hidden messages in the paintings. Though to be honest, Priyam was paying more attention to the Terrian mark she had now tattooed on her shoulder than to what they were saying. How could she not? The day that Willow carved the branch with a stunning lilac magnolia over her shoulder so she could pass the door’s barrier to Terra, she indirectly made one of Priyam’s wildest dreams come true; to have something that

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connects her to her best friend's magical world. Straight out of the type of fantasy novels she loved to read.

A few trees from them, she could see Floyd, with bright blue hands, and Willow, debating over practice targets. Angry, Willow warned him not to use a tree, or he'll be the target next time, a statement that caused Gaia to laugh as much as Pink was laughing beside her twin.

"What do you see?" asked Edan, amused at her reaction.

"The twins have blue hands," she laughed.

"They painted a poor saber-tooth blue. Monky made them clean up their mess."

"Of course they did," she smiled widely. "Now, Floyd's giving Willow a hard time," she answered without opening her eyes.

"I thought that would be Veter," he curled a strand of her wavy red hair around his finger.

"He's too busy walking with Shui. Just like Priy, Icarus and Monky, it looks like they're going somewhere on the other side of the forest."

"Is Donovan with them?"

"No." Gaia chuckled. "He's flirting with a local girl."

"Figures."

Gaia pulled at her conscience, and her mind came back to where she was. "Edan?" she whispered, her voice shaking. How could it not? After all, she was terrified of asking Edan about Him. Especially about His last words. Words that kept hunting her for the past few days.

"Yes?"

"Back on Earth," she took a deep breath and let it out. "Azazel had the chance to kill me, but he didn't. Instead, he lifted me up and..."

"And?" his body got tense, yet she remained quiet. "Red, what did he do?"

"He called me his queen."

Edan flinched, and Gaia saw it. She didn't imagine it, he was bothered. Only she couldn't tell why. "You're everyone's queen," he managed to say.

"I... don't think he meant it that way."

His marked jaw tensed so much, she thought it would break. "There's no other way."

"Don't you think it could be that I--"

"G!" Priyam's screams interrupted their conversation. "G! Come, you need to see this."

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“Priy I’m not in the mood,” Gaia complained half annoyed yet half relieved her conversation with Edan got cut off before it got heated.

Priyam took Gaia’s hand, tugged her up and away from Edan’s arms and Hunter’s Oak tree. “Yeah, don’t care.” she snorted. “Later, Fireball.”

Priyam pulled her towards the furthest end of Moonstrand. She was in a hurry. Jumping logs and making crazy attempts to evade being hit by the trees while Gaia did her best to survive the journey.

“Princess Gaia,” bowed a Moonstrand villager as soon as he saw her. “Hello.”

“Good day,” she smiled back for seconds to everyone around her as Priyam dragged her through the forest.

“Look mommy!” a little girl with purple ponytails pointed at them and clapped. “The princess and her human sister.”

“Good morning, lady Gaia.” said the mother.

“Good morning to you too!” Gaia waved with her free hand at the distance. “Priy! Could you slow down? Can’t even say ‘hi’ back to them.”

“Good morning, Lady Gaia,” cheered JP, a cute and very smart ten-year-old with bright brown eyes and a hedgehog mascot that he carried around on his vest’s pocket.

Priyam stopped cold, and Gaia smiled at the adorable young boy, “Good morning, JP,” she managed to say without being dragged.

“Are you done?” asked Priyam without letting go of her best friend’s hand.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Good. See ya later, JP!” Priyam resumed her task of pulling her towards a part of the forest Gaia had never been before. The water in the river was bluer than it was in the central area, the trees were taller, and the smell of freshly cut grass was stronger. A current of wind blew among the trees creating a unique sound. Flower petals and shiny dust flew towards the same direction Priyam was pulling her. It was as if Nature itself wanted her to reach her destination. To get up. To move on.

Finally, the forest ended on a small hill. Priyam stopped, and they both stared with awe at a large field full of all kinds of bright flowers, bushes with fruits and gorgeous plants.

Dandelion seeds flew all over the fresh air making it look like fairies flying all around them. The sun shone bright, the crystalline water from the river shimmered

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with the rays and right in the middle of the field were the most beautiful horses she'd ever seen. Their lush, silky fur shone against the sunlight. Stunning.

Gaia noticed that Monkey, Veter, and Shui were already there, combing the animals and washing their... *wings?*

Yes, those horses had big long bird wings attached to their backs.

"Pegasus?" Gaia gasped at the realization.

"Yes!" Priyam jumped from excitement. "Pegasus, G! They're freaking Pegasus!"

Both friends hiked down the hill and walked towards the animals and the rest of the group.

"They're real?" Gaia couldn't believe her eyes.

"They always were," said Monkey as she helped Shui brush some of the Pegasus' hair. "Most of the creatures humans think were made up fairy tales, mythological or magical are actually real. Look around, this is how Earth was supposed to be."

Gaia walked closer to one of the majestic animals. His dark lavender hair was silky and perfectly combed while the rest of his body and wings were a few shades lighter. "How's this possible?"

"The mending," Shui wielded water from the nearby river so that she could bathe the Pegasus.

"The Mending? How cool!" Priyam gasped. "What's that?" she asked after stealing a golden sugar cube from Veter's massive hands and feed it to a black Pegasus.

"A group of highly trained Terrians that cross to Earth to bring the animals that are about to be extinct or to restore Nature after any disaster, little Prismo."

"Seriously?" Gaia's gray eyes opened wide. "Terrians do that?"

"Yes." Monkey passed the brush to Veter so he could continue helping Shui. "When you were living in Truckee, did you ever hear about a fire that was put out or a forest that was declared dead but suddenly revived?" Gaia nodded. "That was them. The Menders. Any crisis like hurricanes, floods, fires, tornados, earthquakes, they're all a consequence of humans' poor way of taking care of the planet. Nature tries to fight back, so we go there and find a way to contain it and restore some of what was lost."

"I had no idea Terrians help humans like that. It sounds incredible," Gaia's skin was covered in goosebumps over the excitement.

LELE ITURRIOZ

“And check this out, they have unicorns near Nádúr, mammoths on the mountains of Wintercliff and mermaids in Lakefall,” Priyam clapped as she squeaked with enthusiasm.

“Mermaids?” Gaia was left breathless. Seeing mermaids was every little girl's dream. Especially after growing up with someone like Priyam, a bottomless pit of information regarding fantastical stories, creatures and *Disney* movies. “Seriously?” she asked. After all, even for a place as magical as Terra, the idea of having mermaids seemed straight out of a fairytale.

“I know.” Priyam's lips curled into satisfied a smile. “Some *Peter Pan* thing going on here. I asked if they had *hobbits*, they don't.”

“Priy,” she laughed out loud, and it felt nice. It had been too long since she felt this relaxed and content. “*Hobbits* aren't mythological creatures.”

She slid her fingers across the silky hair of the dark-golden Pegasus and pouted. “It was worth the try.”

Mesmerized by the creature in front of her, Gaia took a few steps closer, caressed the lavender Pegasus' jaw, and it bowed to her. “They're so pretty.” She circled the Pegasus and saw her match leaning against a tree studying her reactions from afar, “Look, Edan!” she waved at him. “Can you believe it?!”

“They're gorgeous,” he waved back.

“You feel it?” Monky asked him with a massive grin on her lips.

“Yes,” he smiled widely. “She's happy again.”

“Very,” Monky squeezed Edan's arm and walked closer to her future queen. “What do you say, Princess, do you want to ride them?”

Priyam panted as she placed her hands over her chest. “Shut up, can we?”

“Excuse me,” with a soft chuckle, Gaia raised her eyebrow into a soft curve. “We?”

“Yeah,” she patted her best friend's back. “Like I'm letting my sister fly on a Pegasus all by herself.”

“You all heard her,” Gaia turned eagerly towards Monky and Edan. “What do *we* have to do to ride them?”

“Just ask them,” he said.

Gaia glanced at her. “There you go. Wanna go first?”

“Don't look at me, you're the one who speaks animal.”

“You do know they still understand you, right?”

SUMMER

“Of course I know that,” she mumbled closer to her so she could be the only one that would hear. “But how would I know they said yes? I don’t wanna find out it refused the ride, the hard way.”

“That would be really funny to watch,” her friend glared at her, and she chuckled. “Fine, I’ll ask,” she used her fingers to comb the beautiful animal’s lavender hair. “Good morning, Mr. Pegasus. Can I—”

“*We,*” Priyam added with a cough.

“Can *we* fly with you... guys?... Girls?”

My name is Kostus, and this is Veatus. We’re both males, my queen. The lavender Pegasus spoke to Gaia, and she could hear his relinch but understood his words inside her mind. *And it would be our pleasure.*

Kostus bent down so she could climb up easier, something she was truly thankful for, especially since the last time she tried to ride one back in Truckee and fell twice before she even managed to sit down.

Ready, my queen?

“Absolutely!” And with that, Kostus and Veatus flew up into the sky.

The feeling was exhilarating. The cold morning breeze hit their skin, but the sun was shining so bright and warm that they barely felt it. As they lifted up into the sky, Gaia was overtaken by a mix of emotions. The contrasting sensations of adrenaline and the calmness of the view gave her what she needed. A moment where she felt alive. A moment where everything seemed like it would be alright.

She lifted her hands, and her fingers slid around a cloud creating tickles over her fingertips. “This is incredible!”

I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself, my queen.

“I am. Thank you,” she caressed the Pegasus’ neck as she kept her eyes on Moonstrand. How breathtaking the forest looked from the sky. She could see the jade-colored Temple of Honua coming out of the Big Rakau, the cold river that crossed right in the middle of the village, the huts that hung from the many different types of trees and the mix of vegetation that seemed unthinkable, yet made total sense. “I can’t believe you get to see this any time you want.”

We’re here for anything you need. Spoke Veatus as he flew past them and increased the speed.

“Why so slow, G?” Priyam taunted her with a playful smile.

They want to see speed?

“I believe they do, Kostus,” she grinned at the challenge.

LELE ITURRIOZ

Hold on tight.

And she did

After a few more minutes of racing, flying, and doing crazy pirouettes around the clouds, Kostus and Veatus took the girls back to the team where Edan, Veter, Shui, and Willow were waiting for them.

Gaia and Priyam were laughing so hard, their cheeks were covered with dry tears. “Shut up, Priy” Gaia tried to breathe, but she couldn’t stop laughing. “My stomach hurts.”

“Good to see you smiling, Moja Princeza.”

“You should’ve seen it,” she dried her happy tears with the back of her hand. “Halfway through the race, Priyam distracted Veatus, and she ended up crashing against a pillion.”

Priyam glared at her friend. “The pillion’s fine if you were asking.”

“Oh, I know it’s fine,” still sitting on Kostus, Gaia stretched her arm, reached Priyam’s hair and untangled a gorgeous blue feather. “I checked on it while you were spitting feathers. This is for you,” she gave it to Priyam. “A souvenir.”

“Come, Red.” Edan patted Kostus’ neck. “We need to go.”

“Can’t we wait a few hours more?” she pleaded. After all, she wasn’t ready to let go of that ease feeling and being able to laugh like that once again.

“I’m sorry,” he took her by the waist and carried her off Kostus’ back. “Nádúr is a few hours away, and I don’t want the night to catch us.”

She locked her arms on the back of his neck. “What if we leave early tomorrow?”

“As much as I love seeing you happy and excited to do something,” after making sure no one was looking, he leaned closer and kissed her. “We can’t stay here for the night.” He spoke against her lips. “They’re expecting us.”

“Fine.” She gave him the last peck and went to say goodbye to Kostus.

Edan turned towards Priyam. “Thank you, Priyam. You made her really happy.”

“Sorry, Fireball, but I didn’t fix this up,” she glanced at a certain beautiful, pale-blonde girl. “It was Willow’s idea.”

“This was all you?” Gaia stared at Willow’s gorgeous amber eyes as she scratched her freckled nose.

“I mean,” Willow shrugged. “Sure.”

“Thank you so much,” Gaia jumped and hugged her. “I loved it.”

S U M M E R

“Yeah, yeah. It’s no big deal,” she hugged her back for a second and then she took a step away. “Like Edan said, they’re waiting for you.”

“Right, let’s go then.”

Gaia walked away, and Willow smiled at herself.

“Aww,” Veter slid his arm over her shoulder and hugged her. “Look who’s a closet softie.”

She punched Veter on the rib and got herself out of his reach. “Shut up and hurry; we’re already late,” she said and walked away while hearing his grunting laughter.

* * *

Gaia and the rest arrived at the main house. They climbed the vine ladder and reached the standard room where a tall blond stranger with a wicked smile, was waiting for them.

“Stranger danger.” Pink and Floyd screamed at the same time as they took out a dagger and pointed it at the intruder’s throat.

“Wait!” the stranger said, jumping. His pastel green eyes were wide open, half alert, half amused.

“Jeez!” Willow pulled the twins away from the twenty-seven-year-old man, and Veter cried with laughter. “This is why we don’t take you guys out so often.” she hissed at them.

“What?! He looked suspicious.” Pink complained at the same time she was being dragged.

“And dangerous,” added Floyd.

Willow dropped the twins a few steps away from the man. “He’s holding a teacup,” she pointed out. “How’s that suspicious and dangerous?”

“Boss is always carrying a teacup... and I reckon he can kill us all if he wanted to.” Floyd ended his sentence with an ominous tone.

“Oh man, that was incredible.” Veter dried his tears and gave the stranger a big bear hug and a pat on his back.

“Maybe for you, Veter.” The stranger laughed and rubbed his neck. “Lucky for them, Adriana wasn’t in my place.”

Willow smiled at his remark. “Now *that’s* something I would’ve paid to see.”

“Apologies, Roa. They’re... new.” Shui hugged him.

LELE ITURRIOZ

Finally, at the end of the ladder, Edan offered Gaia his hand and helped her get on her feet. “Thanks, Mr. Blau,” she squeezed his hand and then noticed a man with pastel green eyes, staring at her.

Edan held Gaia’s hand and walked her towards Roa.

“Agnosco, Edan.” Roa placed his right arm on Edan’s right shoulder.

“Agnosco, Roa.” He placed his left hand on Roa’s left shoulder creating an X. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Congratulations to both of you,” he nodded towards Gaia. “I knew you would make it.”

“Barely,” he chuckled leaving her breathless. Besides the fact that she loved how carefree Edan looked whenever he laughed about something, she knew this man was significant to him, or else he wouldn’t act so relaxed and familiar with him. “Red, let me introduce you to Roa. Roa, meet our princess.”

“Hello,” she offered her hand. A gesture she found dumb since she knew Terrians didn’t greet each other like that. In fact, for the last few days, she’d accidentally greeted Terrians like that, they all stared at her not knowing what to do. *Crap, Old habits die hard, I guess...* but to her surprise, Roa took her hand and gave it a good shake. *No way, he’s been to Earth!*

“It’s an honor to finally meet you,” he let go of her hand and placed his against his chest. “I’m your guide, your soon-to-be friend, Mender, and spokesman of the fire leader.”

“Spokesman?” Priyam jumped in the conversation. “Where’s the leader?”

“Long story, baby girl.” Donovan entered the main room with Eva by his side.

“Just like everything with Adriana.” Edan scoffed, and by the way the group laughed, it let Gaia know there was a story there. Most likely a funny one.

“Animal Whisperer,” Priyam pointed at the bags that Donovan and Eva were carrying. “What’s in those bags?”

“Provisions,” he said.

Priyam frowned. It’d been a while since she’d heard that specific word and it always meant the same thing; they’ll have to walk and for a very long time. “For what?”

“For our journey to Nádúr, of course,” Roa’s wicked smile grew into a wide grin. “So, what do you say, Princess? Ready to go back home?”