



Chapter One

It was as if she turned the tides of time itself.

The long branches, covered sparsely in dry, graying leaves just a few moments ago, were once again adorned by a multitude of fresh buds.

Almost there.

Neya shifted her weight, her muscles taut and on the verge of aching as she moved her hands around the plant, the incantation still lingering on her lips.

Gently, meticulously.

Carefully and with reverence.

The leaves began to emerge. Each of them unfurled lazily, almost reluctantly. Aether, the ever-present magic particle, danced around the greenhouse under Neya's command as she coaxed the last of the buds to sprout.

It was enough.

It had to be—she was already skirting the edge of the potential drain that loomed whenever she did this. Soon, her muscles would tremble as the void in her chest deepened. Pain would come next.

The desert rose was elegant and proud, perhaps even more so with the deep, silver, vein-like cracks that ran along the entire length of its trunk.

It stood in its decorative pot oh-so-innocently, as if it wasn't the source of constant guilt that gnawed at the back of Neya's mind. One easier to ignore away from the greenhouse but still buzzing under her skin, never letting Neya forget for too long.

How many cycles had she forced on it now? Seven? Eight, maybe? It was better not to count. It was after the third time the rose began to ask Neya to stop. To let it rest.

To let it go.

But letting it die was too much of a failure, too big an evidence of Neya's inadequacy. Her parents would have never let things end this way if it was in their care.

And so Neya continued, and somewhere along the way, the rose stopped asking.

Or maybe Neya stopped listening.

None of the other plants in the greenhouse caused her such grief, and there were a great many of them. Some were so tall, their tops bent across the ceiling. Others, short and stubby, huddled together for comfort in numbers. Some sprawled over the floor, making the otherwise straight path into a green obstacle course, while others kept politely to their pots. Some had leaves with oval holes in their middle, so large a hand could fit through them. Others had frayed edges like the frills of a dress. Some were blooming, others just about to—the floral scents mixed pleasantly

in the humid air. Vines draped all around as if they were curtains made of string and beads set out for a celebration.

The sun tinted into oranges and reds, and shadows crouched over the stone floors of the greenhouse as the chatter of the plants began to quiet for the night.

Shit. Neya would be late again, and she still had to tidy up. The bracelet on her wrists jingled as she got up to her feet; the thin metal of the enhancer caressed her skin reassuringly. Magic stirred once more under Neya's command. One incantation later, all the tools were organized on a nearby shelf. Another spell, and the old leaves turned to dust.

As the last remnants of the mess disappeared, Neya let the spell go. That was the last one she'd be able to cast that day.

She eyed the space as lights began to flicker in the enchanted braziers. Maybe she spoiled the plants by tending them every day, but she wouldn't be gone forever or far. They'd be okay.

Shooting one last glance at the desert rose, Neya couldn't help but feel relieved to leave it behind.

The sun had already disappeared behind the tree line at the back of the estate as Neya made her way toward the main house. White gravel crunched under her leather boots, and her long skirt billowed gently in the breeze. Tall walls of yellow brick surrounded the sprawling grounds, too vast to see all its boundaries at once.

A smaller building tucked to the side came into view. Her parents' workshop—where only the most affluent were invited and served and where her parents spent the vast majority of their days. But the interior was dark so Neya swore under her breath, picking the pace up.

'Just a few more days,' she reminded herself, but it was both too soon and not soon enough at all.

The main house, built from the same brick as the perimeter walls, was two stories tall and kept in neurotically pristine condition. No moss or discoloration was to be seen anywhere. The windows were crystal clear. And the shingles on the roof were dark and sleek, as if they had been laid just yesterday, not decades ago. The imposing wooden door opened effortlessly, thanks to the enchanted iron hinges and other metals that had been imbued into the wood.

As soon as Neya crossed the threshold, any hope she might have had about being on time evaporated without a trace. Two familiar voices came from the dining room, and judging by the cadence, her mother was far from pleased.

Sparing one look into the tall mirror by the entrance, Neya attempted to adjust her appearance, but the effort was futile; her clothes were creased, and her long, brown hair had puffed up substantially in the humidity of the greenhouse. Some curls had gone flat, others protruded at odd angles, their coils uneven. There was no fixing it now without being even later.

Taking one deep breath, Neya entered the dining room.

Both her parents had already begun eating. Even after a whole day of work, they looked as polished as ever—not a hair out of place, nor a wrinkle in their clothing. Their image was every bit the perfection it always was.

“You’re late, Alanea.” Her mother didn’t spare a look in her direction as Neya slipped into her seat. The food left on her plate was no longer steaming.

“I was in the greenhouse and didn’t realize how late it had gotten. Sorry.” Neya reached for the cup that had already been filled with wine for her—tart and dry, just as her parents preferred. Probably imported

from one of the fancy wineries in Inumos. “I wanted to prepare it for my absence.”

“The fact is you are late, regardless of your excuses. You spend too much time there anyway.” Her mother gave her a long look, one immaculate eyebrow rising pointedly. “You need to focus on actual studies if you don’t want to waste your life.”

Neya’s grip on the glass tightened. So they were going to have this conversation again after all. “Plants are what I study. Wouldn’t spending time in the greenhouse be exactly what I should be doing?”

Her mother would have snorted if it wasn’t so undignified.

“Please, Alanea, do us all a favor and stop pretending you don’t know what I mean. You’re merely playing garden in there.”

Neya dropped her eyes to the plate. Roots, the words hurt even after all these years. Perhaps in her parents’ eyes, it wasn’t important, but Neya cared about it a great deal. Reducing it to ‘play’ made her feel all the more inadequate.

Her father, the ever-pretend peacekeeper, decided to speak.

“We’re just concerned about your future, dear.” There was a whisper of gentleness in his voice. “You can’t blame us for caring about you. Simply passing is, well...” He seemed to be searching for the right word. “Academic success is important, you know that.”

Important to her future or their reputation? Neya never dared ask, but perhaps they were one and the same. She only shrugged in response. The meal turned tasteless as guilt and shame began to rise up in her stomach.

Soon.

Soon, she won’t have to reenact this conversation every other day. And if the thought of finally moving out made her nervous, it was wholly

outweighed by the promise of freedom from the guilt. Or at least part of it.

Much more importantly, keeping up the facade was becoming unmanageable. Hiding a secret this big was a challenge already, but having to constantly scrutinize your every move and every reaction was a disaster waiting to happen. She'd slip up eventually. At least living in the dorms, she would be away from the never-ending surveillance.

"I want you to help at the workshop tomorrow." Her mother's voice was firm—it wasn't a request. "Even if you don't study enchantment, you have a duty to your name. You need to at least appear capable in front of the clients."

"I need to pack..." Neya began, but her mother didn't let her finish.

"You've had plenty of time for it. It isn't my problem that you can never be bothered to start things early."

The words stung. Neya often put things off to the last possible moment. The urgency was a powerful motivator in completing even the most boring of chores, but she did get things done before they turned into a problem.

"Would you like us to come with you on Sunday?" her father asked, but the question was only a formality.

Neya shook her head. "No, I will settle in on my own just fine."

It would have been a weakness to ask for help with something as insignificant as moving into dorms, not to mention a giant waste of their time to coddle their adult daughter.

They wouldn't have taken the day off anyway.

Having shifted food around her plate for what she deemed long enough, Neya headed up to her room. Though spacious, it was in a constant state of disarray. Books and notes and various rocks she collected

littered her desk—a proud piece of furniture rather at odds with the rest of the space. Its dark wood was covered in intricate floral carvings Neya loved to trace with her fingers, the surface mostly smooth apart from an occasional edge, the change in texture satisfying. She begged her father for it when she was little. It had seemed very grown up to her seven-year-old self. A proper desk for studying, for doing important things like her parents did.

The sky had already turned a rich shade of spilled atrament, and the enchanted lights of Gillingham twinkled between the trees, as did the Sovereign’s palace nestled in the distance. On a clear enough day, Neya could glimpse the mountains that loomed further to the east, though most of the time, it was just the clouds tricking the eyes.

A familiar and comforting view.

She might have pondered it for longer, if not for a hard knock on the door. Great. Another lesson to be had, or another attempt at persuading her to stay home.

“Surprise!” It wasn’t her mother but Ruby—one hand on her hip, the other shaking a small paper bag. “My house is a disaster right now, so I figured I’d weather the storm here.”

She plopped herself onto Neya’s bed as if it were her own, and Neya’s mood lifted immediately. Ruby had the ability to light up every room she was in—with her golden hair, delicate tan, and infectious smile, she was the embodiment of summer. It was hard to believe they’d met only a year ago, Neya couldn’t remember what her life had been like without Ruby in it.

“What happened?” Neya sat next to Ruby and eyed the bag. “And what’s that?” Something delicious, if the smell was anything to go by. She all but forgot about dinner.

“A bribe, so you’d let me crash here for a while.”

“Well, now I feel like I should have been more strict with my visitation hours if you’d have brought treats every time.”

Ruby laughed and opened the bag to reveal a few plump pastries. “Too late now.” She shoved one into her mouth, and Neya followed her lead, almost groaning at the taste—buttery and sweet, with a soft jam at its center. And still a little warm.

“And to answer your question—Liam and Zack are moving out.” Ruby licked her fingers before continuing. “They told our mother a few hours ago.”

“What? Moving to where? I thought they decided to enlist.” Ruby’s brothers, twins, graduated a couple of years earlier. Since then, their days were mostly filled with scouring bars and entertaining ladies.

“They said they found jobs back in Port d’Estelar. Supposedly all on their own, but I am more than certain Father helped. He never liked the idea of them joining the military.” Ruby took another bite of the pastry.

How Mrs. Dunlevy would recover was a mystery, but something in Ruby’s story wasn’t quite right.

“So, instead of avoiding the havoc by going into town as you usually do, you decided to head all the way out here?”

Ruby put on the most innocent of her faces. “Is it a crime to want my best friend to comfort me?”

“No, but you have to admit, bringing a bribe is a little suspicious.”

Ruby sat up laughing. “Fine, you got me. There is something I want your help with.” The covers rustled as she shifted her weight. “I’ve been working on a spell for a while, and I was wondering if you’d let me try it out on you.”

Neya’s face did not betray her, but her muscles stiffened.

“The fact it’s a spell you have to try on a person, *and* you are asking my permission doesn’t fill me with confidence,” Neya forced a laugh. She’d never refuse to help Ruby, but she’d need to tread very carefully here. “What does it do?”

“I think it would be best if you let me try, and then tell me what you felt. I want your unbiased opinion.” Ruby gave Neya a long look. “I promise it’s nothing bad.”

If there was anyone Neya had confidence in when it came to untested spells, it was Ruby, who was truly shaping up to be a once-in-a-generation prodigy in spellcrafting. Unburdened by self-doubt, she always seemed to stretch the limits of what was possible. Neya trusted her implicitly.

It was still a big ask.

Ruby’s channeller, a golden dermal piercing between her clavicles, glimmered in the light as silence stretched. Neya could refuse and it would change nothing between them, but she couldn’t deny she was curious.

“Alright, but you owe me a giant favor.”

Ruby sent her the biggest of grins. “Yes! You can just stay as you are. I’ll start the incantation.”

Ruby began chanting under her breath, and Neya tried to follow the structure, picking apart some of the elements, but the spell was impossibly intricate and long-winded.

For a while nothing happened.

Then, the faintest smell of lilies filled the room. Golden aether, so very similar to the shade of Ruby’s hair, began drifting in Neya’s direction and, roots!—she almost flinched, catching herself at the last moment. She held her breath, but the aether faltered before it reached her skin.

Ruby finished the incantation with an eager expression on her face.

“And?”

Neya shook her head. “Nothing, sorry.”

It wasn’t a lie, Neya told herself. She didn’t *feel* any effects, and everything else, well... She wasn’t going to mention it, as much as she would have loved to.

Ruby let out an exasperated sigh. “Damn it. I’ve worked on it for so long, I was sure I was onto something.” She laid back on the bed, digging in the bag for another pastry.

“Are you going to tell me what you were trying to do?”

“Right, yes. You know the rumors about Lord Wurley, and how he rose in power so quickly because he was an empath?”

Neya blinked a few times. “Please tell me you weren’t trying to create a spell to change someone’s thoughts. Empaths never existed. It’s been proven over and over again.” It was just like Ruby to get fixated on something impossible as a challenge. “Wurley admitted he paid to have the rumors spread to further his influence. You know that.”

Ruby waved her hand. “I know, I know. I just thought it was worth a try. Imagine if it worked—I could probably graduate with that alone!”

It really would’ve been incredible if she succeeded. And quite terrifying, too.

Thankfully, tampering with people’s thoughts using magic was impossible.

They lay on the bed in a comfortable silence for a while.

“I wish you’d move into dorms with me.” Neya sighed. “We won’t have as much time together this year.”

“I know, but at least we’ll be much closer. We won’t need to take a carriage just to see each other over the weekends.”

Another benefit of moving out. Ruby's house, the Dunlevy residence, was a short walk from the campus grounds, almost in the city center, while the Everille estate spread over the outskirts, a small forest separated it from the closest neighbors. Neya walked home only once, on a particularly hot autumn day almost a year ago. It took her the better part of the afternoon and a good chunk of the evening, and her thighs chafed so badly she limped for the next few days.

Ruby got up to her feet. "You know what we should do? Pack your stuff. I bet you haven't even looked at your trunks yet."

"Am I that predictable?" Neya sighed. "Just so you know, I am fairly drained, so all the spellcasting is going to be on you."

She opened one of the trunks that stood in the corner, and a layer of dust covering the painted wood lifted into the air—its particles not wholly dissimilar to aether.

"Ready to repay your favor? Last chance to do something else if you're tired." Neya flashed Ruby a grin.

"Is this care for me, or you just really don't want to pack?" Ruby smiled back, a knowing look glimmering in her eyes.

Neya sighed again. "You know me too well."

And it was almost true. Ruby was her best friend, the only close friend Neya'd ever had. She'd do anything for Ruby, everything in her power to keep her safe.

And that meant there was one thing Neya could never share with her, no matter how much she wanted to. Because if anyone found out Ruby knew Neya's secret and didn't report her, they wouldn't ask questions, and there would be no opportunity to explain.

There would only be an execution.