

Marisol Sales Giménez

Translated by Andrew McDougall



THE ASHES OF
THE LAST PHOENIX

The Fall

bromera



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NEBAR
SEA

SUNKEN
ISLAND

Asuo

La Mellada

Mendria

THE GREAT
ERTAYU FOREST

*Naked
Mountain*

Landa

DUSEN

LOST
WATERS

TUNDRA
FOREST

Belid

Tevega

NARTEGA



*The Dragon's
Ravine*

**Ronco
Avinma**

**Nebar
Mountains**

Hilmun

**Forest of
the Paths**

⊕ **PAVERS**

Arteixo

*Centuro
Bay*

Rean

Bailadero

Blons

Branwen

⊕ **EMROS**

Carez

⊕ **DORLEM**

Tlion

Noken

**MASTAR
ISLAND**

This book is dedicated to all the readers who have accompanied me in the last ten years in which I have been publishing stories, along with all my characters. When I began to write novels, I was fourteen years old and it has been (and continues to be) an absolute pleasure to have grown up alongside you all. Thank you for making my dreams come true every day and for continuing to show me so much affection.



Prologue

Alanna

The days until Cathan arrived at my house went by slowly. The dry leaves from the trees were gathering on the forest floor in Tundra. In the time that Vardur and I lived together in silence, at the same pace, I was able to think long and hard. To reflect on what was best for me. I sat looking at him in the distance, trying to memorise every pore on his face, because, if I was sure of anything, it was that after these days together, we would both be taking different paths. And I couldn't wait for that moment to arrive.

I loved Vardur. I loved him so much that my chest hurt. But what hurt wasn't the love. What hurt was being next to him and not being able to stay there. Knowing that the moments we spent together were fleeting and that in reality there could never be a stronger bond between us. It hurt doing what I was doing behind his wife's back. It hurt feeling whole when he was there and so lost when he left. Because Vardur came, flattened everything in his wake and then went on his way. He took everything around him tore it apart without blinking an eye and then set off without looking back.

I hated Vardur. Almost as much as I loved him.

While I watched him during one of those silences we fell into that were so comfortable and easy, I took the decision to never see him again once all that was over.

When I saw Cathan approaching, I felt the most peaceful I had in years. I dropped everything I was doing and ran barefoot down the hill and towards his arms. Cathan left his bag on the ground and, smiling widely, embraced me and lifted me out of the mud.

‘By all the fairies!’ I whispered into his cheek. ‘I was dying for you to get here.’

‘I came as fast as I could.’ He put me down.

Vardur came over less enthusiastically, but with tears in his eyes. They hugged each other tightly and he held back his sobs.

‘Hey, are you well?’ Cathan took his face in his hands.

‘Yes, yes. Don’t worry about me.’ Vardur sniffed back his tears and put his hands on his hips.

‘Well, we’d better go inside. It’s starting to get cold,’ I took the initiative.

Cathan was the first arhvud to find out that I had left Emros. His parents never approved of his aspirations to devote himself to magic and so they forced him to work the land just like their parents had done with them. And theirs with them.

As a young man, he packed a rucksack and, seven years later, he had travelled around almost the entirety of Nartega.

He described himself as *the wandering sorcerer*. He was ambitious, brave and smart. When he walked into a room, he didn't just draw all eyes to him, but everyone wanted to listen to him talk. He had a magnetism about him.

The three of us had known each other since childhood and Vardur and I were the only ones who knew about his plans to run away from Emros. Although the two of them loved each other like brothers, there was also an undeniable rivalry between them.

As far as I could tell, as the arhvud closest to both of them for many years, Cathan always envied Vardur's family, his self-confidence, his luck with arhvud women and the fact he was always the centre of attention. When the spotlight switched from Vardur to Cathan, the *wandering sorcerer*, the former couldn't handle being relegated to the shadows, being merely "a friend of Cathan, the arhvud who ran away to pursue his dream of practicing magic and travelling". At some point among all this corrosive jealousy, Vardur became engaged to the only woman Cathan had ever loved and began to trade with the Omens.

I wondered if Cathan would delight in watching Vardur's decline. In witnessing his fall.

'You've got me intrigued, worried and even a little excited. Who knows what you've come up with,' laughed Cathan, as if we had invited him to a party.

'We've asked you to come here due to an emergency. We need your help,' I said in a serious tone.

We were sat around the fire with cups full of hot broth. Cathan swapped his cheerful expression for a terrified one. His black eyes looked at both of us as if waiting for someone to speak.

‘Do you remember that for many years I have been hunting beasts?’ asked Vardur hoarsely.

‘Are you still doing that?’ Cathan was shocked.

‘I’ve just quit it.’ He inhaled loudly.

‘So, what’s the problem?’ he furrowed his brow.

‘The problem is that Vardur scattered the ashes of the last phoenix on his last assignment,’ I replied quickly with my heart in a knot.

From then on, Vardur began to tell him the story he had already told me. Cathan remained still, unblinking, not taking his eyes off him. The flames of the fire shone on his dark skin and black, curly hair. Gradually, his eyes began to lose their sparkle.

‘I’m afraid that this could affect my descendants. Or that they might come for us if they discover where I live,’ Vardur concluded, breathlessly.

Cathan remained in silence for several minutes while we waited impatiently, until finally speaking.

‘Only you could commit such an atrocity.’

I heard Vardur gulp loudly.

‘Cathan, please. Help me,’ he begged.

He stared at him with narrowed eyes before replying.

‘I will. But promise me that afterwards, you will leave us be. Alanna and I. I don’t want to hear from the arhvud who killed the last phoenix in Nartega ever again. Ever.’

‘So, it’s dead?’ I said, placing my hand on my chest.

‘Yes, that phoenix won’t recompose itself now. From the ashes you scattered, new, different phoenixes will be born. Distinct from the original and each other.’

‘What about the ashes I swallowed?’ asked Vardur, sweating beside me.

‘You carry that with you. Although I don’t expect it will manifest itself in you. But you need to be careful. You cannot have descendants. You *shouldn’t* have any. Okay?’

‘Yes, of course. I’ll do whatever is necessary.’

‘As for the protection, I’ve been studying ways to make amulets on my travels to Sunken. I’ll make a protective one for your wife. *Only* for her.’

‘Fine by me,’ agreed Vardur, convinced but nervous.

‘You said you were working on a legend?’ asked Cathan, scratching his neck.

‘Yes.’ I stood up and handed him a page full of scribbles and various versions of the legend. ‘It’s not finished yet.’

Cathan read it thoroughly and nodded.

‘It must be finished before I leave. I’ll take care of spreading it in books and making it known on my journey back to Nebar. It’s important we leave this legacy.’

The conversation went on all night, with the phoenix being its central theme. We finished the legend, Cathan made the protective amulet and we ran out of reasons for all three of us to be there together. Vardur had to go back to his house as soon as possible to give his wife

the amulet that would protect her if the omens came. Cathan had to return to his home in Nebar and spread the word about the legend. And I...

‘Will you be alright here by yourself?’ asked Cathan when we were saying goodbye.

‘Yeah, you know I can defend myself without anybody’s help,’ I replied.

‘Even so, I don’t know. It seems dangerous. You know you can come with me, don’t you?’ He squeezed my shoulder.

‘I’m fine,’ I smiled.

‘Did you know there are lots of arhvuds are leaving Emros? Maybe we could join together and all live in one place,’ Vardur shrugged.

Although at first that seemed like foolishness, the idea soon began to take root in my mind. Cathan nodded slowly.

‘It’s not a bad idea.’

‘No, it’s not a bad idea,’ I added, lost in thought. ‘I’ll think about what you’ve said.’

‘Vardur, are you clear on what you must do?’ Cathan straightened up.

‘Yes: protect my wife with the amulet, not have children, not use my wand again,’ he acknowledged determinedly.

‘Perfect. Then we can go.’ Cathan took a breath and hugged me tightly. ‘If your magic thing takes off, look for me. Okay?’ he whispered to me.

‘Okay,’ I whispered.

‘See you.’ He stroked my cheek.

He stepped away and gave Vardur and I privacy to say our goodbyes.

‘Think about what I said, okay?’ he said, looking at me with concern.

‘Yes, it really is a good idea. I’ll think properly about it over the next few days. Perhaps that’s my mission: to give shelter to those creatures with nowhere to go,’ I smiled sadly at him.

‘I’m sorry to have put you through all this, Alanna. For that...and for everything. You don’t deserve to suffer like this. Forgive me for having been so immature and so selfish with you. I wish the circumstances were different, because I’m sure that...’ With tears in my eyes, I raised my hand to interrupt him.

‘Please, don’t carry on. I couldn’t bear to hear you say what you’re about to say,’ I said falteringly.

Vardur stepped towards me and embraced me tightly, affectionately, desperately and sadly. A real hug, of the sort you receive very few of in a lifetime. I held back the tears.

‘The bird burned and didn’t survive. Four birds in flames,’ he whispered to me silently.

I smiled. Our legacy together for the world was that legend.

‘One went out, the other was eaten.’ I allowed two tears to fall.

1 Meiv

As I stacked and unstacked all the books over and over again, I asked:

‘Don’t you have any about quick healing?’

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a figure coming over to assist me. I didn’t turn my head, nor stop looking amongst the old, worn manuals.

‘I didn’t expect to see you back from Branwen so soon.’ I perceived slight mockery in his tone. I looked at him for the first time. The bookseller’s son had a slanted smile that I found absolutely loathsome. I took a breath.

‘Do you or do you not have a manual which contains an enchantment or potion for quick healing.’

‘All the books we have on that topic are right in front of you,’ he said, still with that mocking tone and false smile.

‘Okay, thanks.’ And I went back to the pile of manuals in case some vitally important detail had escaped me.

‘I can order more things on this topic if you’re interested. Although, of course, bearing in mind that it takes them two weeks to bring them, maybe your elf will already be dead by then,’ he added, casually, shifting

his weight from one foot to the other, watching for my reaction.

‘Sorry, what was that?’ I lifted my head again, eyes closed, containing my fury.

‘Since yesterday, the town has talked of nothing else. Of the dying elf and the two aemirs in the Grehm’s house.’

‘You’ve spoken to Merinda, haven’t you?’

‘Actually, the fisherman told me. At first I didn’t believe it, but, given what you’re looking for... that puts it beyond all doubt for me. It’s true. You have a dying elf in your house.’ In his tone there was no compassion, nor anything resembling it.

‘I see you’re just as troll-headed as you always were,’ I spat at him. ‘Do a favour to books and those who love them and stay at home, or you’ll run your father’s business into the ground.’

I put down the books I was still holding and left. Was I satisfied? Of course not. I’d have loved to show him a couple of the spells I’d learnt at Branwen and hadn’t yet put into practice on living beings. Just to see his pathetic face torn between fear and surprise, it would have been worth it, but I had a wonderful opportunity to use them for the first time on Merinda, who was still at home.

We’d been home for two days and I still hadn’t been able to sleep a wink. Staying with my family was proving incredibly complicated. Amongst other things, as the bookseller’s son correctly said, because Kian wasn’t waking up and that put us in an even harder situation

to explain. We hadn't told them why we were there nor had we had we answered any of the questions which could be seen forming under everyone's brows. Only my mother knew, and since knowing she made her way around the house without looking anyone in the eye. Originally, and despite trusting her, I didn't want to tell her to avoid causing her unnecessary suffering and headaches, since she couldn't do anything to change the situation. However, after much insistence, and with all the built-up tiredness, I gave in and told her everything.

Everything, including in the inheritance grandad Vardur had left me and how it had revealed itself in all its glory just a few days ago. That the phoenix had risen like never before to defend Kian and that the elements had helped me. That no sooner had they come than they left and my prayers remained unanswered. That it was my teacher Asena who almost killed me. And that then Melantha, the daughter of the omen who longed to capture and dismember me, made me hesitate in Acars. That Steinar, the *great* Steinar, had saved me more than once. And that with all that, having stolen her most treasured possession from the matriarch of the underground city, all I wanted was to get answers, to see Kian well again and disappear. To go somewhere no one knew who I really was, where the ashes of the last phoenix couldn't hurt anyone else. Where the dark titan could never be reborn if he fed upon enough phoenixes. Where no one knew that the Omens were desperately

trying to return to the surface, kill all of us living there and establish their own regime without beings of light. Thinking about myself as a being that could feed a titan hidden under ground made the hair on my back stand up.

My father and brothers tried to act completely normally when Shiana and Erwin sat down to eat at the same table as them and they tried not to look at their horns. Likewise when Khis began to talk to fill awkward silences. I could almost see how thousands of questions were piling up in their minds. It was the first time that had seen a being that wasn't an arhvud, a being with two eyes of the same colour. My friends were aware of this and tried to smile and create a positive atmosphere. Their efforts were in vain.

When I arrived home from the market, I didn't even try to hide my anger. I went straight into the kitchen, crossing through the lounge, where the whole family was having breakfast, to try to somehow extinguish the rage I felt inside me at that moment. I poured myself a glass of water, drank half and tipped the other half over my face. My mum followed me.

Before she said anything, I started talking.

'Merinda has been going around telling everyone we have a dying elf and two aemirs in our house.'

'She's done what?' Her eyes widened and she blinked slowly, her head tilted to one side.

'The bookseller's son just went ahead and told me. The fisherman told him.'

Without another word, she hitched up her dress and went to the lounge. She only did that when she was really mad, because she felt like she walked quicker that way.

‘Is that true, Merinda?’ I heard my mother say from the kitchen. ‘Is it true that you’ve been telling people that Meiv, Shiana, Erwin and Kian are here?’

‘Did Meiv tell you that?’ she replied derisively.

‘Answer me!’

‘I never thought Meiv would talk to the shoemaker given how she dresses,’ she replied offhand.

Driven by my anger, I went into the lounge.

‘You absolute wretch!’ I shouted through gritted teeth and with clenched fists. ‘How many people have you told?’

‘How could you be so stupid, Merinda?’ my mum added.

‘I needed to air my fears with someone who would understand how I felt. It’s not my fault Meiv brought those weird creatures home.’

My mum saw I was getting ready to respond and she put her arm in front of me before speaking in a grave tone.

‘Leave.’

‘What?’ Merinda stood up. ‘Are you kicking me out of my own home?’

‘You have a husband and a child. I think it’s high time you went and joined them. Isn’t that what you got married for? Gather your things and leave right now, Merinda.’

And, before Merinda could reply, she beckoned my father, whose mouth had been wide open for a while, to speak in private. My sister got up furiously and grabbed my arm.

‘All this is your fault. Always playing the victim when you’re the one who always causes these situations. I thought you’d have you grown up a bit when you came back from Branwen, but apparently not. You’re still the same little brat.’

‘Mum’s right: you’re an idiot who needs to learn her place once and for all. You need to be the centre of attention to feel fulfilled, but the thing is you can’t stand not knowing what’s going on and not being part of it, never mind not being the protagonist, eats you up inside.’ I wrested my arm firmly from her grasp. ‘You don’t care who you tread on as long as it suits you. I’m sorry to be the one to yell you: this isn’t your story, it’s mine.’

I took a plate, served myself some breakfast without paying attention to what I was taking and went up to the bedroom my friends were in.

‘No luck?’ asked Shiana when she saw me appear without any books.

‘Well, more than you might think actually.’ I sat down next to her. ‘My mum just kicked out Merinda.’

‘Now that is some good news,’ replied Erwin with relief. ‘It was unbearable seeing how she looked at us.’

Since arriving, we’d set up camp in the attic, with blankets on the floor and a couple of lanterns. It was the only place we could be away from my family’s curious and, sometimes, inquisitive eyes.

‘No change, huh?’ I asked in whisper, sitting down next to Kian.

‘No change.’

He still wasn’t waking up. I pushed aside the rebellious tuft of hair that was always trying to cover his right eye. At least his face was a picture of peace and we could see his wounds were healing. The hope remained that at any moment he’d be back with us.

‘Where’s Khis?’ I asked, furrowing my brow.

‘On the roof. She says she’s keeping watch, but I think she’s actually just sleeping in the sun.’ Shiana stood up.

‘Yes, we should go see what she’s up to and keep a proper look out.’ Erwin rose as well.

‘Also, that way we’ll give you some space and peace and quiet to rest properly.’

‘But if I rest and you’re all going, who will watch over Kian?’ I asked with my mouth full of food.

‘He can keep an eye on him,’ said Shaian, pointing towards the phoenix who had made his nest in the rafters. ‘It’ll only be a couple of hours, Meiv. You need to rest. And relax a little, okay?’

‘Okay.’

‘It’s a good sign at least that you’re eating again,’ smiled Erwin.

As soon as the aemirs were gone, the phoenix came down and settled in my lap to keep me company. Although my eyes screamed at me to sleep for three days straight, my heart and my thoughts were racing too fast to allow me to lay down for a bit. From the day we’d arrived, we had been taking turns to keep watch twenty-four hours a day on the roof and by Kian’s side. The shifts consisted in waiting for the inevitable. For the omens to turn up, for Kian to return to us. Our patience was beginning to run out and tiredness was taking its toll. The previous night, while on guard duty up above, Khis came up to be with me and chat for a while. We came to the conclusion that, if Kian didn’t wake up in the ensuing twenty-four hours, there’d be nothing else for it but to leave him behind and take shelter somewhere else until setting off wherever the wand led us to.

If the omens attacked while we were still in my house... the damage could be irreparable.

And the moment came while, lying next to Kian, looking for the thousandth time for a spell that could wake him up.

‘Meiv!’ shouted my mum. ‘Come down, Meiv!’

I hurried down the stairs to the front door of my house, although not before telling the phoenix to hide and locking shut the trapdoor to the attic. I realised that the bedrooms and lounge were empty. No sign of my siblings. I feared the worst.

‘What’s going on? Where is everyone? Where are Shiana and Erwin? I asked my mum in the doorway.’

‘In the storehouse, run!’ she babbled, nervously.

Just behind the house, there was a small storehouse where my dad kept the grain and ground it. In the doorway the aemirs had their wands out already.

‘We heard very strange noises,’ Shiana whispered to me.

‘Have you seen anything?’ I approached with my wand held high.

‘No. But listen,’ said Erwin in a low voice. Footsteps could be heard, along with breathing that was quickened, as if agitated.

‘It could be some animal that has snuck in to eat,’ Shiana gulped. ‘Right?’

‘No, it doesn’t seem like that’s what it is.’ Erwin narrowed his eyes, breathing fast and keeping his wand raised.

‘Okay, okay.’ Shiana, who also kept her wand held high and was trembling in fear, took a deep breath.

‘Mum, go back inside the house,’ I ordered in a serious tone. I saw in her expression that she wanted to answer back, but she didn’t find the words, so she nodded, took a breath and left. After taking two steps, she turned back to give me a kiss.

‘Be really careful. If things turn ugly, use a spell and get out of here.’

‘Go on, go. Don’t worry.’

The noises inside the storehouse didn’t stop. In fact, whoever they were, they weren’t taking much care or had little interest in going unnoticed. Could it be a trap, a distraction and, in fact, a group of omens were already inside the house looking for the phoenix? We had to find out as soon as possible.

‘From the sounds of it, there’s several of them,’ said Erwin, pricking up his ear.

‘Let’s go in, okay?’ I took a breath. ‘On three we open the doors. One, two and...three!’

We went in resolutely and with all our strength and then we heard shouts.

‘Ah! No! Stop! It’s us!’ My brother emerged from amongst the sacks with his hands in the air.

‘Steinar?’ I asked, curling my lip and feeling the emotion wash over my whole body.

‘Surprise!’ he murmured with his hands still in the air.

I ran towards him with a lump in my throat. We hugged each other tightly. He was rather dishevelled, his

hair was tangled, he smelled of smoke and had several days' growth in his beard.

'Meiv.'

I turned around and there was Melantha.

'You came too?' I hugged her, moved.

'It wasn't very safe anymore in the Tundra forest,' she told me, shrugging.

Shiana and Erwin also greeted them with joy and relief. I heard nervous breathing behind me.

'Irven? Irven!'

The dragon I had been riding for weeks and in the Kafin Games was right there. With us. In my dad's grain store. I hugged her with all my strength while she, overcome with joy, let out a sound almost like a wail.

'Oh, and you've brought a friend.'

Behind her hid a dragon with its head bent down and eyes half open. It seemed to be scared, while I was overcome with curiosity.

'He's Eddrug. You might remember he was the dragon Kian rode in the Kafins,' explained Steinar. 'By the way, where is Kian?'

'He's not with us,' replied Shiana.

I watched as Steinar grew paler by the second, even taking on a greenish tone, while his eyes grew wider.

'Do you mean Kian has died?' he asked with a faint voice, his hand rising to his chest.

'What? No, no, no. He's alive. Unconscious. But alive,' I replied quickly.

‘By all the fairies, Shiana!’ said Steinar, relieved and giving her a pat on the shoulder. ‘Don’t give frighten me like that!’

‘But I didn’t mean...’ she began to excuse herself.

‘Unconscious? Why?’ Melantha interrupted.

‘A group of trolls and harpies attacked us and Kian bore the brunt of it,’ Erwin explained.

‘He’s unconscious, but his wounds are almost healed now. It looks like he’ll pull through,’ Shiana continued.

‘Although Ofalia is dead,’ I informed them, in as steady a voice as I could manage.

‘What? Ofalia is...’ Melantha broke down word by word.

Steinar came over and put his arm around her shoulders.

‘It’s a great tragedy for all of Tundra. Ofalia was the nymph tasked with protecting those magic, almost sacred lands. Without her, the creatures of Tundra are more exposed than ever to the darkness,’ pronounced my brother weightily.

‘And she was also my friend.’ The muranya held back her tears. ‘Thanks to her, I...’ then she let them flow. ‘Ofalia,’ she whimpered.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to keep my emotions in check. Trying not to feel guilty. Driving from my mind the thought that it was likely she was to be the first, but not the last. Avoiding picturing Kian lying there, unable to wake up.

Melantha managed to stop crying just as my mother reappeared.

‘I know you told me to go inside house, but as you didn’t come back and I didn’t hear anything, I thought... Steinar?! Oh, by all the fairies, Steinar!’

My brother went to embrace her. I noted how Melantha hid behind me.

‘Don’t worry. She won’t say anything mean to you,’ I said, taking her hand.

‘It’s likely that an arhvud in Emros like her has never even heard of the Muranyas. I’ll look like some repulsive beast to her and...’

Her worries were interrupted by my brother’s voice.

‘Mum, let me introduce you to our friend, Melantha.’

My mother didn’t hide the surprise on her face, but nor did she withdraw her hand on seeing her appearance. Malantha slowly emerged from behind me, holding her breath.

‘Nice to meet you, Melantha.’

‘Likewise.’

The muranya went to shake her hand, but my mum stepped forward and gave her a hug. Then she led her by the arm towards the house.

‘Forgive the impertinence, love, but what are you?’

‘A muranya,’ she mumbled, embarrassed and afraid of her reaction.

‘Muranya, curious.’ She stopped dead. ‘And those? Dragons?’

‘Yes, air dragons, mum,’ I replied.

I heard her gasp.

‘Well, it seems you’ll have to fill me in on a lot of things. For now, just tell me what dragons eat. I have to go shopping. Do you like fish, Melantha?’ And with that they left the storehouse.

‘I think for now we can leave Irven and Eddrug here,’ said Steinar as we went towards the house.

‘That would be best, yeah,’ I nodded, looking back at the storehouse.

‘Well, I think you have a lot to tell us. Get us up to speed on the situation,’ said my brother, rubbing his hands.

On seeing Kian's condition, Melantha got straight to work on a remedy she'd learnt years ago from the centaurs in Tundra. According to her calculations, in a few hours Kian would be awake. Meanwhile, the rest of us were in the lounge.

'All done. I've prepared Merinda's room for Melantha; for Shiana and Erwin, the twin's room, and Steinar in his own. As for Kian, I thought about bringing him down to Reika's room to continue his recovery once he's awake. Besides, it's the nearest one to Meiv's,' announced my mother, sitting down. I felt my cheeks flush at her last comment. Then she looked at me and added, 'and the phoenix in with you, right?'

'Yes, of course.' I took a sip of tea, trying to use the cup to hide the colour of my face.

'Perfect. I don't fancy having him fluttering around in here.'

'So have you kicked everyone out the house so they can't carry on gossiping around the town?' smiled Steinar as he refilled his cup of tea.

'They simply weren't up to the occasion. I understand it completely, but the only thing asked of them

was discretion. Besides, I'd been thinking about it for hours, that it would be best for everyone if they went to grandma and grandad Grehm's, in the south. For their safety.'

'So why have you and Firefly stayed here? I think it would be best if you went with them too,' I gave my opinion, stern-faced.

'And miss all this? No. Someone has to stay here. I won't leave my house. And your sister...well...someone has to keep me company when you go.'

As if she had truly heard us, Firefly, the twelfth Grehm child, began to cry. My mother, exhausted, closed her eyes, but I got up before she could.

'Don't worry, I've got her.'

When she saw me, she stopped crying. Firefly was identical to my mum; even in some of her expressions. I picked her up.

'She's the only one I still haven't met,' smiled Steinar.

'Do you want to hold her?' I asked him.

'I mean, it's been years since I've held a...oh, you're already giving her to me. Okay. Hey! Hello, Firefly! I'm...I'm your big brother.'

Firefly smiled back at him.

'Why did you come by dragon and not with a spell?' my mum soon asked Steinar.

'Because it's a completely unnecessary waste of energy. Apart from the fact that a spell cannot carry you that far, and far less when there's two of you.'

'I see, I see,' murmured my mum.

‘And what will happen when they realise you’re not there anymore?’ intervened Erwin, taking some raspberries from the bowl and offering some to Shiana, who cosied up next to him.

‘Nothing. I’ve resigned from my position as a teacher at Branwen,’ he replied without taking his eyes off Firefly.

‘What?’ Shiana spluttered.

Erwin, next to her, gave her a few pats on the back.

‘Resigned?’ I repeated in surprise.

‘Yes.’ He looked at us. ‘But that’s normal. There’s nothing left there that I believe in. I’ve been thinking for months that my time at Branwen had come to an end. I’d rather leave now while I still have a good memory of my time at the school. Both as a student and a teacher.’

‘And what will you do?’

‘I’m going to set up my own magic school in Emros,’ he replied, beaming. ‘I have enough money saved up. I thought about somewhere small here, nearby. I want a modest but rigorous magic school. I think that will encourage lots of young arhvuds to become sorcerers.’

‘That’s a really brilliant idea,’ I agreed, returning his smile.

‘Really lovely,’ added Shiana.

My mum stood up and gave Steinar a kiss on his forehead.

‘So you’ve finally come back for good,’ she said, holding his face in her hands.

‘I’m back.’ He smiled and held her gaze.

‘You’ll join us on our journey in search of the phoenixes, won’t you?’ I asked him, delighted.

‘I’m afraid not. I’ll stay here to protect the family and the phoenix. The omens, sooner or later, will begin to look for you and they’ll start with this house. I should be here.’

‘What do you mean you’re not coming?’ I let out a weak, incredulous, nervous laugh.

‘I can’t, Meiv,’ he sighed, and he looked straight at me. ‘Someone has to be here in case things turn ugly.’

‘But without you I won’t be able to...’ I shook my head, blinking repeatedly and unsure how to finish my sentence.

‘You won’t be able to do what without me?’ He chuckled, stroked my chin and we looked into each other’s eyes. ‘With or without me, you’re still an incredibly powerful sorceress, capable of taking on this challenge and anything else you set your mind to. You know I’d love to stay by your side, but you and I also know –,’ we both looked at Firefly’s face, so small, delicate, defenceless and good – ‘they’re going to need a lot of protection. At least until they realise you’re not here.’

Although I’d have liked to deny it, to tell him I wanted to make the journey with him, that it would be our best bet and our family would surely be fine...I knew his decision was the right one.

‘And what about Asena? Do we know anything?’ Erwin changed the subject.

‘Do you mean the traitor who almost killed my sister right before our eyes?’ he snorted. ‘She left. No one has seen her. In Branwen they’re trying to keep up appearances, but the truth is the teachers are very nervous. They’ve even suspended the Riding and Archery classes.’

‘What for?’ asked Shiana with her mouth full.

‘So the students don’t go into the forest. Security measures. To protect their life, to protect their secret.’

‘They should cancel all classes and send everyone home,’ I said, outraged that they weren’t taking proper security measures.

‘That would raise too much suspicion,’ said Erwin.

‘Aside from the fact it’s not a decision Naiwen can take freely. Branwen is an institution, they can’t simply close it just like that. They’d have to give explanations to the governors,’ Steinar explained.

‘Which is the last thing they want to do,’ added the aemir.

‘Don’t get me wrong. Obviously, I don’t agree with all this. I’m just explaining what the reasons are.’ Steinar took my hand.

‘Well, that’s enough Branwen for today,’ said my mum, getting to her feet. ‘I’m going to make lunch. Anyone who wants to join me is welcome.’

‘Oh! I’ll go!’ Shiana was up in a jump.

‘Me too. What do you need, Mrs Grehm?’ Erwin followed suit.

‘Please, call me by my name, Erwin, there’s no need to be so formal’ she replied, touching his arm. ‘Go to the storehouse and bring milled grain.’

My brother and I were left alone in absolute silence, looking at each other.

‘Do you think I haven’t noticed,’ he asked suddenly. I knew what he was referring to.

‘What do you mean?’ I swallowed and acted innocent.

‘The thing with your fingertips, what else?’

‘It’s nothing.’

‘Your fingertips are completely black and it’s nothing?’ he raised his eyebrows.

‘It doesn’t hurt and it doesn’t seem like it’s getting worse.’

‘Did it happen after you became a phoenix?’

‘Yes.’ I looked down.

‘We’ll need to keep an eye on that because it certainly isn’t *nothing*.’

He stood up and put Firefly, who had fallen asleep, back down in her cot.

‘I’m going to rest for a bit,’ he said, stretching his back.

‘And then can we talk about grandad’s wand?’ I looked at him seriously.

‘Tomorrow we can try to cast a spell that will destroy the wand. Today I’m very tired from the journey. It wouldn’t work. And judging by the fact the bags under your eyes have bags under their eyes... you should do the same. We need to be full of energy for that.’

'You're right.'

I sighed. He kissed me on the forehead.

'There's no enemy to fight today. You can sleep with both eyes closed.' And he stroked my head.

Just when I had decided to go to sleep, I thought I'd go check on how Kian was doing. I found Melantha in the attic, nervous, sweaty even. Kian wasn't waking up and his fever had risen. I didn't even have the strength to get mad or feel anger. The only think I could do was fall to my knees by his side and whisper in his ear.

'Don't leave me, please.'

I insisted over and over again on staying, but both Melantha and Khis forced me to go and rest for a few hours. My eyes were bloodshot and I didn't even know anymore if it was from tiredness or the urge to cry. I didn't have the strength to stay. As I went back down, for the first time I seriously considered the possibility that Kian wouldn't wake up.

The phoenix came down with me and followed me to the bathroom. I looked at myself in the mirror, but I didn't see my reflection. There was no way that arhvud was me. My reddened eyes were half-shut with the weight of the sadness and tiredness. Worry hung in bags under my eyes, which, as my brother had rightly said a short while before, had their own bags now. My lips were almost as thin as a thread and had turned completely

white. My skin was full of red spots and I hadn't even realised until then. I thought that, if my appearance improved on the outside, even if only a little, I would improve on the inside.

The phoenix looked at me sadly while I brushed my hair. It had become an exact replica of the nest he'd built himself in the attic. It was falling out in clumps and I couldn't think of a reason to keep it so long. I grabbed the scissors and the bird cawed loudly.

'Don't shout! Everyone will hear us!' I hissed at him.

I turned back to the mirror, took the scissors, a deep breath, a strand of hair, closed my eyes and cut. I opened them. I had cut it around the height of my chin. When I grabbed a second strand, Shiana knocked on the door.

'Everything alright, Meiv? I heard the phoenix squawking.'

He began to make noise again, as if he were begging her to come in.

'All good!' I replied hurriedly with the scissors still suspended in the air and a lock of hair in my other hand.

'The phoenix is anxious. I don't believe you. I'm coming in.' And she opened the door. 'Erm, what are you doing?'

'Cutting my hair,' I replied, smiling falsely.

'By yourself?'

'You cut yours yourself,' I said, shrugging.

'Yeah. But I'm me and you're you and you're not someone who cuts their own hair,' she replied as if it wasn't obvious.

‘So what should I do? Leave my hair like this?’ I tried to take deep breaths, nodding at the ends of my hair.

‘No, of course not. Come on, sit down. I’ll finish this.’ I did as she asked without a word. The phoenix sat down on my lap straight away.

‘Do you want to look different?’ Shiana began to cut.

‘I *need* to look different.’

‘I understand why. New times, new look.’

‘Exactly.’

And, inevitably, that was the phrase that opened the floodgates, sobbing like I never had before.

‘Meiv, listen,’ she said, touching my chin softly, ‘what’s going on? she asked, brow furrowed, worried.

‘What’s *not* going on?’ I replied without stopping crying.

‘I know, you’re right. But, what’s making you cry right now?’

‘What if...’ I sniffled. ‘What if Kian isn’t in these *new times*?’

‘What?’ She straightened up. ‘Why isn’t Kian going to be in these *new times*?’

‘He’s gotten worse. He’s not well.’

‘He’ll get better and he’ll wake up. You’ll see.’

‘I want to be upstairs with him. Melantha and Khis kicked me out because they say I have to sleep.’ And I sighed, drying my tears.

‘And they’re right. Look. Look at my eyes.’

I did. She took a breath and carried on.

‘How about if you rest for a bit and then you go up with Kian? As it’s my day to be on guard duty with him, you can go up if you want.’

‘I do.’

‘But for that you need to promise me you’re going to sleep. And eat something. And have a bit of a wash. And then we won’t stand in your way from being with Kian, because we all know that’s your place. We just want to look after you, Meiv. Let us look after you.’ She squeezed my hands affectionately.

‘Okay, Shiana.’ And I started crying again.

‘Tell me.’ She brushed my hair out my face and left my tear-filled eyes exposed.

‘I miss him so much. I don’t even know where to start. I miss him so, so much.’ I clutched my chest, continuing to cry.

Shaian hugged me.

‘Trust me: he’s going to wake up really soon. You’ll see! I’ve got a hunch, and an aemir’s hunches never fail. Okay?’

‘Okay.’ I blew my nose.

‘And now I’m going to try to turn this tangled bird’s nest into a blonde waterfall.’

‘Thanks,’ I smiled timidly.

‘No need to thank me.’ She looked at the phoenix on my lap. ‘Have you thought about giving him a name? Calling him *the phoenix* now we know there are a good few others out there...doesn’t make sense.’

‘I hadn’t thought about it. What does he look like to you?’

We both stared at the bird's face and he looked back at us, expecting us to say something. A thin face with bulging eyes with blue and orange feathers which crowned his head. His expectant and rather timid expression made me smile.

'Ferjibert,' said Shiana suddenly.

'Ferjibert? Isn't that a rather old-fashioned name?'

'He's a phoenix! Who knows how ancient his ashes are.'

He looked at us as if he really understood every word we said. He continued to observe us, but with drooping eyes.

'But why Ferjibert?' I went on, still unsure.

'It's my uncle's name and he's the most fun aemir in Pavers. And looking at his face...I don't know, he looks like, if he could talk, he'd be soul of every conversation.'

'Ferjibert,' I murmured to myself.

'You like it already, don't you?' she nudged me.

'What about you?' I put the question to him while lifting him and holding him in front of the mirror. 'Do you like Ferkibert?'

He spread his wings, displaying his colourful feathers and blinking majestically. He was strutting and showing off his beauty. He made me smile without me even realising.

'He loves it!' exclaimed Shiana.

'Well then...nice to put a name to your face, Ferjibert,' I smiled at him while he stroked his cheek against mine.

Shiana was right. Once I had slept more than four hours straight, they let me go up into the attic with Kian. Before doing so, I had a quick shower. I didn't want the first thing he saw when he woke up to be a slovenly shadow of the arhvud who used to be his friend.

Melantha went down when I went up, after telling me that he was progressing well, but that if I noticed anything unexpected, I was to call her immediately. Khis had fallen asleep on the next blanket over and I sat down beside her. Ferjibert, naturally, followed me and settled into his nest.

I was grateful for the silence. I was grateful not to feel so exhausted and small. Without doubt, sleeping and cutting my hair had been enough to bring back my hope and positivity.

I sat there, absorbed in the elf's face. It looked like he was sleeping peacefully, like he wasn't suffering. That made me breathe a sigh of relief. As soon as the memory of the attack he suffered popped into my head, I forced myself to focus on his face.

I wondered how he could look so good even in such circumstances. How he could seem so healthy, so full

of life. How he could still be so irresistibly handsome. With those high cheekbones, those slightly sun-kissed cheeks and that magnificently defined jaw. His Cupid's bow lips, the upper as full as the lower one. His face whose harmony was disrupted by the scar on his nose and cheek, which he never escaped from, and which, although I was too embarrassed to admit it out loud, I loved. It combined perfectly with his rebellious hair and his brave, mischievous personality. With his wide, honest smile. With his intensely blue and gleaming eyes, which spoke before he even uttered a word.

I didn't let myself get drawn into thinking about what would happen if Kian didn't wake up, because he would. He had to. He would. I watched his chest rise and fall with his gentle breathing and I forced myself to match it.

'You love him, don't you?' I heard Khis whisper.

I didn't even give a start. I remained focused on Kian's breathing when I answered without thinking.

'Yes.'

'It was obvious between you from the beginning.'

Her use of the plural you didn't pass me by. The hairs on my back stood up and, for a few long seconds, I lost track of Kian's breathing.

'But it's much more than that. He's a friend, my companion. He makes me feel at home wherever I am. With him by my side, I never feel afraid. I feel brave and safe. He lights up my days. I love being with him, talking to him, discovering new things with him... This

thing always happens to me, he's the first person I think of turning to and I deeply regret not having done so... having thought thousands of times about running to him and telling him everything going on in my head and never having done it.' I began to talk without stopping for breath, looking at Kian.

'You'll be able to tell him soon.'

'I'm afraid he doesn't know how important he is to me, of not having shown it to him enough.' My eyes filled with tears.

'Meiv,' she put her paw on my hand. 'Soon you'll be able to tell him all that and much more. I'm sure Kian is aware of how important he is to you.'

I sniffed and wiped the tear running down my cheek with the sleeve of my t-shirt.

'What about you, Khis? How are you?'

'Getting used to things. Your mum told me I can stay here as long as I want, but I don't want to be a burden.'

'I know my mum loves your company,' I assured her with a smile. 'It'd be good for her to have someone to talk to about everything and to learn new things from.'

'You really think so?' she looked into my eyes.

'I really do.' I stroked her.

'Who would have said when I met you behind the curtains of Branwen that I'd end up living with your family in Emros?' she laughed.

'Better here than in Branwen. We have the river and the forest right next to us. As soon as the danger passes,

you'll see how beautiful this place is.' I sat in silence, looking into space. 'That's why I don't understand why the Omens want to destroy everything. Nor why beings like Naiwen support their cause.'

'Because she's lost faith in the system,' Khis replied with certainty.

'What do you mean?'

'Naiwen believes in Thelrora's cause because she has lost faith in the current one. It's an outdated, old-fashioned system and no one has any ideas to begin changing it. Or at least no one dares to say so out loud.'

'But what Thelrora proposes is even worse.'

'Well, that's your opinion. As valid as any other. Many elves are tired of the monarchy in Dusen. But not just that. This separation of creatures by areas worked to keep the peace and helped Nartega prosper after the Elven War, but not anymore. And, as it was what saved us back then, the rulers refuse to enact a change which is fitting for these times. Times where creatures who don't fit in have no choice but to take shelter in their groups and can never return to their place of origin, because they are seen as traitors and criminals. Times where even large institutions like Branwen promote the traditional and don't allow stepping out of that framing. Think, for example, about the almost requirement for aemirs to be musicians. It's true that in Branwen some creatures live with others, but mixing isn't encouraged. At the end of their studies, everyone goes back to their homes, in their territories, with their traditions, and

they never mix again. We're stagnating,' vented Khis, gesticulating animatedly.

'But Thelrora doesn't want to encourage that kind of change,' I said, arms in the air.

'I know. But it's a new regime. That alone...for many people is enough.' She lowered her gaze. 'Naiwen was a very militant and socially-conscious elf. Not only did she not agree with what I've just said, she was also against the crown in Dusen passing from generation to generation without consulting the Elves. I suppose she stopped shouting, but she never stopped fighting for her ideals. Maybe she should have shouted louder to stop herself being seduced by the Omens.'

We fell silent the second we heard Kian make some noises with his mouth. I span round. It was if he were awakening from a long nightmare. Almost breathless, I knelt down beside him and leaned in.

'Kian,' I whispered.

I stroked his cheek sweetly. He opened his eyes half-way. It seemed like he couldn't open them fully. He stared at me.

'It's me, Meiv.'

'Meiv,' he mumbled.

'Yes, Kian, it's Meiv.' I held back the tears of joy so as to keep talking. 'Don't worry. Everything's okay.'

'I'll go downstairs to share the good news and ask them to give you a moment alone,' said Khis, smiling.

Ferjibert followed her, seemingly very happy and understanding of the situation.

‘Meiv,’ whispered Kian again.

‘I’m here, I’m here,’ I said, moving his fringe to one side.

He wanted to talk, but the words didn’t want to leave his mouth.

‘Cold,’ he managed to say.

‘You’re cold? Okay. Let me think. I’ll nip down to get Ferjibert so he...’

‘No,’ he interrupted me.

‘Ferjibert is the phoenix. He’ll warm you up. Don’t worry, I’ll be...’

‘No,’ he interrupted again. ‘You.’

It looked like he was trying to move and make space for me to lie down next to him. I thought that was the best idea and the best thing I could do at this or indeed any moment.

I lay down beside him, resting my head on his chest and I listened as his heart rate gradually stabilised. I felt like I could fall asleep again. Before falling asleep by his side, I felt a few final tears of happiness leaving my eyes.

Kian was back.

The omens had taken all the phoenixes. I couldn't do anything to prevent it. It had been my fault. All mine.

I opened my eyes with a start, panting. It took me a few seconds to recognise the attic and realise that, as real as it had felt, it had been a nightmare.

I listened to Kian wheezing, my ear still resting on his chest. I sat up a little to look at his face. I noticed it was still nighttime, but the sky I saw through the window told me it would soon be dawn. The dawn of a day with Kian back.

With his eyes still half-shut, he asked me what day it was.

'You've been asleep for three days.'

'We're in Emros, right?'

'Yes, we carried you here. We're in my house.'

'Are you all alright?'

'Everyone's fine,' I nodded. 'That was the last omen attack. Even my brother and Melantha have joined us here.'

'That's good news.' He smiled and touched my hair. He stared at my head before widening his smile.

‘Three days unconscious and you start pulling your hair out?’

My cheeks reddened and I stammered as I tried to find a response.

‘I’m joking. You’re beautiful. I like it.’ He pushed a strand of hair behind my ear.

‘Thanks,’ I whispered, still feeling the warmth in my cheeks and the tightness in my throat.

We stayed like that, looking deep into each other’s eyes.

‘How are you?’ I asked him, sitting up.

He tried to sit up too, but he couldn’t.

‘Not so fast, Kian. You’ve gone three days without moving, completely out of it.’ I leaned towards him.

He smiled widely.

‘You’re right, you’re right. Little by little,’ he wheezed. ‘To answer your question, I feel okay. I feel lots of energy inside me, but my muscles don’t respond.’

‘You’re very weak. But just wait, in no time you’ll be up and fighting all the omens,’ I joked.

He smiled back at me.

‘Meanwhile...you could tell me what’s been going on in the days I’ve been unconscious, what have I missed? I remember a troll punching me and the next thing I know is waking up here and seeing you.’ He rested his hand on my lap.

I took a deep breath and briefly explained everything that had happened. Including the transformation.

‘You’re fascinating, Meiv. And that’s an understatement.’ He was gobsmacked.

‘Well...it wasn’t bad,’ I joked, shrugging.

‘Is it wrong that I feel flattered? I mean, flattered that your phoenix woke up to protect me?’

In his question and his eyes, I saw that whether or not he was being serious depended on my response. I decided he was.

‘I don’t think anyone but you could have awakened the beast.’ We looked at each other, unsure what to say. I cleared my throat. ‘But I hope I don’t have to use it again because a troll wants to kill you.’

‘I’ll try to recover to avoid it.’ He stroked my cheek quickly.

We gazed into each other’s eyes. His hand, on my lap again, sought mine. Eyes still locked, our fingers interlaced. My heart didn’t beat faster, but it did beat stronger. I was sure his sharp elf ears could hear it and that made it go even harder.

‘It’s been really tough, Kian. I thought I’d lost you,’ I said in a whisper of a voice, with a lump in my throat.

‘I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to be by your side and I’ll try, as hard as I can, not to make you suffer like this ever again,’ he assured me convincingly.

I nodded weakly and took a deep breath. I felt relieved and nervous at the same time. His gaze seemed to have the ability to read my mind.

He stroked my cheek again and slowly slid his hand down until reaching the neck of my t-shirt. Gently, he pulled it to bring me slowly towards his face. His hand slipped behind my neck. I felt his strong fingers, his

warm palm, pressing softly on my nape. When our noses touched, we stopped, motionless, eyes half-shut. His thumb caressed the back of my neck; his breath, my lips. Unhurriedly, he pulled me closer towards him with his mouth slightly open. When our lips touched, his breathing quickened and he tried to control it, breathing harder. Eventually I closed my eyes and placed my lips on his. Softly at first, as if stroking them, until each time grew longer and he took my face in his hands.

He kissed me passionately, strongly, hungrily. He let his hands fall from my face and placed one on my back and the other on the back of my neck again. I let him guide me down next to him, lying by his side. With my hands free, not needing them to support myself, I toyed with his hair with one hand and pressed the other on his t-shirt to feel his accelerated heartbeat on my fingers.

At that moment, we heard the creak of the wooden trapdoor. Without thinking, I sat up next to him. A fraction of a second later, Melantha's head appeared.

'Amazing! You were already awake before I came up,' she said enthusiastically.

Kian and I glanced at each other and I put my finger on my lips. I could still feel his.

'So? How do you feel?' the muranya asked, coming over.

I stood up.

'Great actually,' he smiled cheekily.

Only I understood the message between those lines.

‘Fantastic. It’s normal if you feel a bit fatigued or without the energy to stand up. So I’m going to give you a mix of herbs, spices and fruits that...you’ll be amazed at how good they make you feel! It will be as if you were drinking pure energy. In a day you’ll be as good as new. Especially with the special touch that Steinar has given it, if you know what I mean.

‘Perfect,’ he nodded slowly.

I saw in his expression that not only had he woken up, but that his personality hadn’t faded a bit. I smiled to myself.

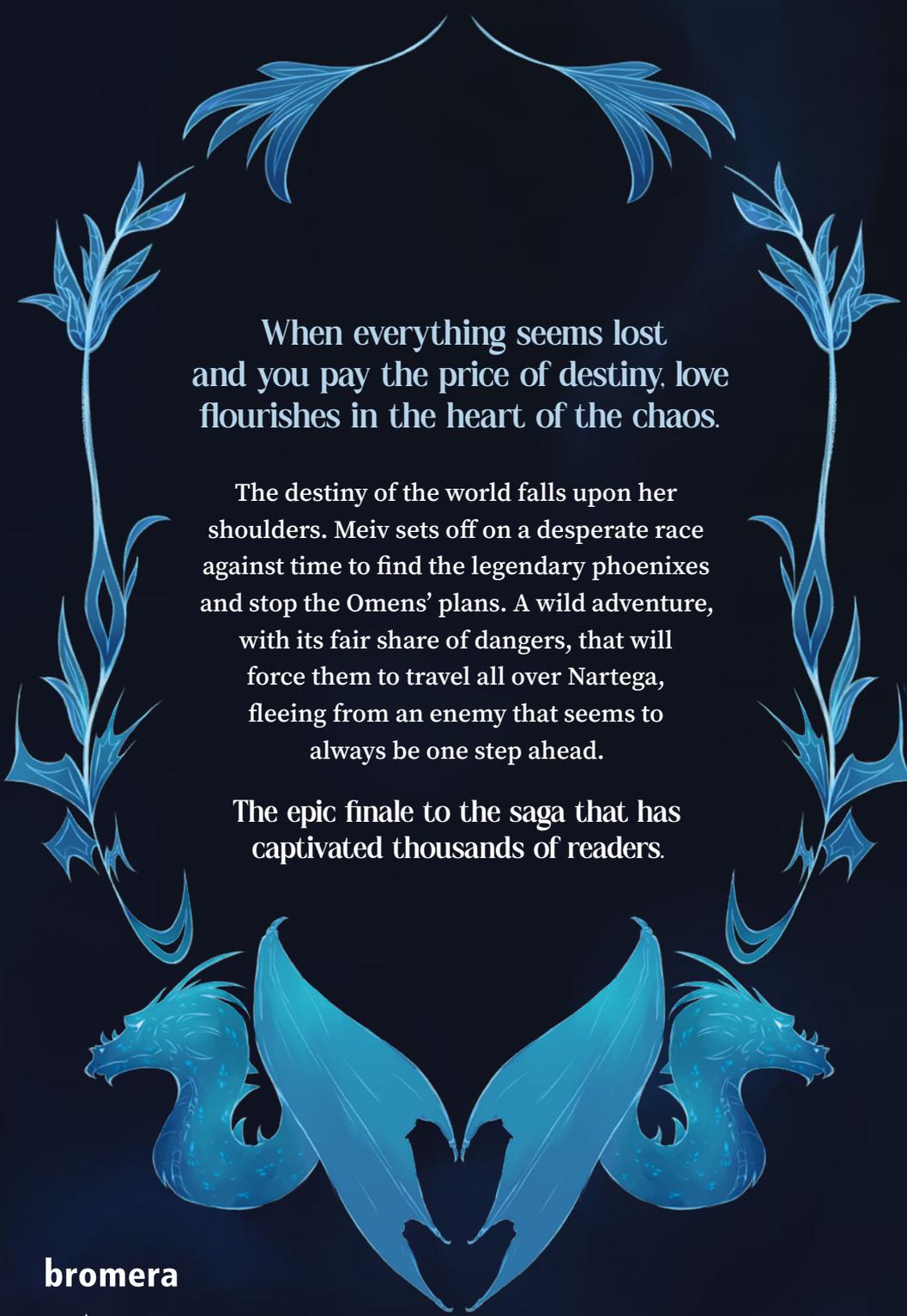
‘By the way, Meiv, your brother asked me to tell you to run down. Something about your grandad’s wand and being there by dawn. You know what he’s like, when he gets nervous, there’s no understanding him.’

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**When everything seems lost
and you pay the price of destiny, love
flourishes in the heart of the chaos.**

**The destiny of the world falls upon her
shoulders. Meiv sets off on a desperate race
against time to find the legendary phoenixes
and stop the Omens' plans. A wild adventure,
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force them to travel all over Nartega,
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