

SING SWEET NIGHTINGALE

THE DREAM WAR SAGA

Erica Cameron



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Summary: Demons invade the dreams of children and create fantasy
worlds in their heads and the only boy to ever escape has to show a
girl that her dream is nightmare before she's trapped forever.

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*For my mom, Corey, who is always proud of my success but
would love me even if I failed.*

*Also, for Lani. This story wouldn't have been born or found
such a loving home without you.*

...and hereafter she may suffer—
both in waking, from her nerves,
and in sleep, from her dreams.

Bram Stoker, Dracula



They who dream by day are
cognizant of many things
which escape those who
dream only by night.

Edgar Allan Poe

One

Hudson

Friday, May 23 – 12:34 PM

I hate this park. Wouldn't ever come here again if J.R. didn't like it so much.

My little brother is running circles around himself on the path a few feet ahead, his arms out like an airplane. My gaze jumps from him to the red oaks on either side. There are too many shadowy hiding places between those trees. I know. I've used them before.

Lifting my hand to the olive-branch wreath pendant I got from Calease, I take a deep breath, calming myself like she taught me. In four, hold four, out four. Repeat. Under my calloused thumb, I can feel the bumps and ridges of the glass leaves. I focus on the soft, white, otherworldly glow surrounding it and turn toward my brother.

I drop my pendant as soon as I look up. J.R. is nowhere in sight.

Heart pounding, I scan the path. There's no one here.

"J.R.?"

He doesn't respond. My hands clench. Despite the warm spring air, I'm chilled.

"C'mon, kid. Where'd you go?"

I'm straining for any sound. Someone running with a struggling four-year-old, or the whimper of a kid who

tripped and skinned his knees. Anything. Something to lead me in the right direction. Only because I'm concentrating so hard do I hear his soft, muffled giggle.

When I zero in on a low shrub to my left, the tension drains from my body in a single flood. I catch him just as he shifts behind the plant, his shock of white-blond hair poking out from behind the evergreen leaves.

I run my hand over my own buzzed-short hair and grin. It's rare when the kid can find a good hiding spot. He's too much like me—too tall for his age and cursed with hair that practically glows in the dark.

"J.R.?" I keep looking around like I don't know where he went. Walking backward toward the bush, I check everywhere except his hiding spot.

The bush comes up to my knees. As soon as the branches poke the back of my legs, I strike. Spinning around, I reach over the bush and grab him around the waist.

"No fair! No fair!" His skin is flushed bright red. He pouts and crosses his arms when I hold him against my chest. "No fair, Hu'son. I'm too tall!" He rubs his hands over his hair, pushing down on his head like he can make himself shrink by force.

I laugh and pull his hands away. "It doesn't work, kid. Trust me, I've tried."

At four, he's as tall as some six-year-olds. I was the same way, and nothing I did kept me from topping out at six-five. From what I can tell, my kid brother's gonna end up following in my footsteps. Hopefully, he's not *too* much like me. Looks are one thing, but if he gives Mom and Dad the same problems I did, constantly getting in fights and bringing trouble home, they'll probably boot him out of the house faster than they did me. At least he won't be alone. I'll be eighteen next week. If it comes to that, he won't have to live on the streets like I did. I'll be there to take care of him.

“Ready to go home?” It’s not really a question; I’m already heading in that direction.

Nose wrinkling, J.R. shakes his head and grabs my pendant, rubbing his fingers over the etched glass. He thinks it’s cool because it’s mine, but he can’t see the glow. No one can but me.

“Aren’t you hungry?” I ask.

A hesitation, but he shakes his head again. “No.”

“Really? Are you *sure*? I think Mom was making pizza for lunch.”

His face lights up, his pale blue eyes shining as he bounces in my arms. “Pizza! Pizza! Hu’son, can I put on the roni?”

“*Pepperoni*,” I say.

“P’roni. Peh’roni.” His nose scrunches up, and he sticks out his tongue. He tries a few more times until the frustration gets to him. “Roni!” he finally shouts, giving up on trying to get it right.

I laugh. “Good enough.”

J.R. chatters for a few seconds about the bird he saw chasing a squirrel away from its nest this morning until, out of nowhere, he says, “Who’s that?”

“Who?” I look around, but I don’t see anyone worth questioning. We’ve gone beyond the playground area, and this section is almost deserted. On a bench ahead of us, there’s a guy asleep with oversized headphones on, and behind a row of trees a jogger is on the path, but that’s it.

“No, there.” J.R. puts his tiny hand on my cheek and pushes my face the other direction.

As soon as I look, my blood turns to ice. Three guys are approaching fast. The tallest one has tattoos running down his neck and covering one arm, and the shorter guy on his right is built like a linebacker but moves like a track star. I hear a blade click into place, and my eyes lock on the

third. He's moving slower than the others, but the look in his dark eyes scares me more than the other two combined.

Heart pounding, my arms tighten around my brother's legs. His weight presses my glass pendant into my chest. Calease gave it to me when I made her a promise. *No more fighting*, I swore. Ever. It was part of the deal we made two years ago, after she helped me control the anger and the instincts that kept getting my ass in trouble. The same kind of trouble that's found me now.

"Hey, buddy. Do you remember the way home from here?" I'm already jogging toward the exit. Gotta get him closer to the street. It's only a few blocks to home. The last thing I want to do is send him into the city by himself, but I have to. If I run, I'll lead these guys right to my doorstep. It looks like they came prepared. There's no guarantee they don't have backup waiting outside the park. I doubt they're gonna let me go, but they might overlook J.R. He's just a kid.

J.R. nods. "I 'member. It's right and then left and then left and then—"

That'll at least get him to our neighborhood.

"Want to race?" I put him down and push him toward the street.

"Ready." His eyes widen, and he grins.

"Set." His face settles into that intense concentration only little kids seem capable of.

"Go!"

J.R. is off like a shot. As soon as he rounds the corner onto the main street, I turn toward trouble.

"Shoulda walked right by that night," the tall one growls at me.

Calease always warned me that my past would come back to bite me. Looks like she was right. I don't know who they are or what I did to them, but that doesn't matter now.

The psycho with the knife jumps in, blade plunging toward my chest. I duck and slide away, backing closer to one of the trees. I may not be allowed to fight them, but I'm not gonna stand here and let them stab me either.

I keep them in sight but look around, hoping someone comes up the path. They'll rush me as soon as I go for my phone. I'm fast, but I can't dodge them all. If I can catch someone's eye, I might have a chance of getting out alive.

Shit. Now they *all* have switchblades. The linebacker grins at me and flips his knife, catching it easily by the hilt. "Shoulda stayed the hell outta our way," he says.

I have no clue what he's talking about. I don't have the chance to ask.

Two of them surge forward. I squeeze between them, letting their swings arc toward each other instead of me. They pull back in time to avoid slashing each other open. I try to dodge around the tall one, but he's faster than I expected. I barely duck in time. His knife catches my shoulder instead of my throat, slicing through shirt, skin, and muscle like butter.

Flexing my hand makes my eyes water. I almost scream. My arm burns like someone dumped lit propane over my skin, but it moves. Until one of them locks my arms behind me.

I break his hold on one arm. Before I can free the other, a blade slices along my ribs. This time, I can't keep from screaming.

There might be a couple seconds left before one of them lands a death blow. I could yank myself free and slam their knives into their own chests. I want to. But I catch sight of the pulsing white light surrounding Calease's pendant.

I can't do it. I *can't* do it.

I can't break my promise, but because of that promise, I'm going to die.

Jesus, I'm glad J.R. got the hell out of here.

A high-pitched shriek splits the air. All three of them cringe, looking around for cops. They think it's a siren, but I know what's coming a second before the tiny body throws itself into the mess. I heard it once. When he woke up from a nightmare.

Screaming like a banshee, my little brother flings himself into the fight and bites into the arm of my captor.

"Shit!" The guy drops his knife and shoves J.R. away. J.R. lands on the concrete with a thud, but only for a second. Before I can worry that the kid's been knocked out, he's up and launching himself back into the fray.

"Leave my Hu'son 'lone!" he shrieks.

Tough as they are, willing as they are to fillet me like a fish, all three of them hesitate when faced with a four-year-old.

I don't.

Fuck promises. I made that promise to Calease to keep my brother safe from exactly what's happening now. Not even for her will I stand by and watch him die.

Shoving my last captor away, I raise my arm to knock his head right off his neck—

And I can't move.

I can't *move*.

Why the hell can't I move?!

My head is locked down, and I'm looking straight at the pendant Calease gave me. It's always glowed with a faint white light, but the light is ten times brighter now. And it's not white anymore. It's orange.

Someone punches me in the stomach. The air pushes out of my lungs. I still can't move. It's as though I've been covered in concrete. I try to shift my weight, balance myself, strike back. There's nothing I can do to keep myself from tumbling backward.

My head cracks against the pavement. The spots in my vision clear in time for me to watch the knife arc toward my chest. I can't close my eyes.

So, I have to watch when J.R. tugs on my assailant's arm, trying to pull the knife away from me, and accidentally guides it straight into his own chest.

For the space of a single heartbeat, the world is so motionless it's as though time has stopped. All three of my would-be assassins stand over J.R., their faces masks of horror. Shock is the one thing keeping me alive. Keeping me from breaking in half.

And then the bloodstain starts growing on his pale blue shirt.

"NO!"

Something in my chest shatters, the shards shooting through my body like acid-dipped shrapnel. The orange light from my pendant pulses, and the glass is suddenly like an ice cube against my skin, but whatever was holding me paralyzed breaks.

Surging to my feet, I kick the closest body out of the way to get to J.R. I don't give a shit about them. I need to get him to a hospital.

"What the fuck did you do?" one of them screams above my head.

Sirens fade in from a distance. All three run, shoving their knives into their pockets as they tear out of the park.

"It's gonna be okay," I whisper, gently scooping him into my arms and running toward the gate.

J.R.'s eyes are wide, and his skin is pale. Too pale. He's not crying, but his breathing is getting worse. Like the air is being blocked by something. Something wet.

Before I reach the sidewalk, a cop car zooms past, directed in their chase by a lady on the other side of the street frantically pointing south. She looks up and sees me. Screaming for help, she rushes over.

She nearly screams again when her eyes lock on J.R.

“The cops are already here—an ambulance should be here any second.” Her words spill together in a rush, and her dark eyes fill with tears when she sees what I already know. “Any second” may already be a second too late. I can’t even try to stop the bleeding because I can’t risk moving the knife. It’s too close to his lungs. His heart.

The woman closes her eyes, her dark hands pressing against my arm. “Oh Lord, help us.”

He’s getting lighter. As though the blood dripping onto the pavement is all there is of him, and as it drains, he’s actually fading out of my arms. Fading out of existence.

The hilt of the knife is sticking out of his chest, his little hands holding onto it.

“Hu’son?” He smiles a little. It’s a smile I recognize—the little grin he always wears when he’s going to sleep thinking about something happy. “I saved you,” he says.

My knees buckle. Only the stranger’s hands on my arm make it possible to sink instead of fall. The sun is shining overhead, and the sky is clear. It’s a warm spring day. A few cars have stopped to see what’s wrong, and a circle of strangers is slowly surrounding us. Beyond that, life is going on like nothing has happened. But J.R.’s blood is running over my hands, staining the sidewalk red and warming my skin when everything else has gone so cold.

I hear a siren different from the others—the ambulance finally arriving.

It’s too late. His labored breathing has fallen silent.

Swallowing, I try to answer. To say goodbye. To say anything.

It takes a minute before I finally manage to tell him, “Yeah, kid. You saved me.”

But I should’ve been the one who saved him.



Under Calease's guidance, I spent four years learning to dam up my anger, control it, and release it. She taught me in the name of helping me. She kept me out of trouble and made sure I earned my way back home.

Four years of work vanish the moment I feel J.R.'s life flicker out.

The one time I *really* needed help, Calease failed me. The promise I made wasn't supposed to stop me from protecting the people I loved. It *shouldn't* have stopped me. But as soon as I tried to, I lost everything. *Everything*.

Only hours have passed, but it feels like years. I can't go home. There isn't one to go back to anymore. When my mom got home from the hospital, she expressed her grief by throwing all my shit onto the front lawn and trying to start a fucking bonfire. I barely got there in time to stop her.

Pacing the narrow motel room, I wait. Every night for four years, Calease has found me. No matter where I was at midnight, she could find me. I'm betting it won't be different tonight.

When the light comes, the first thing I notice is the color. It used to be white. Always white. It's not now. It's the same deep orange my pendant has been glowing since... since.

Wider and wider, the doorway opens until a solid lasso of light shoots out the center, straight for me.

I dodge, but it follows me like it's locked onto my scent. It wraps around my chest, and I tense, waiting for it to burn. Nothing happens. At least, nothing that hurts. Instead, the light sinks into my head, locks around my mind, and pulls.

It feels like peeling a huge patch of skin off a sunburn, but magnified a million times. I grit my teeth and wrench

back, holding on to everything. It's been a long time since I've been awake when the doorway opens. Is *this* what she does to me every night? Rips me in half to drag me into her world?

Trying to pull free, I look down. The lasso is going straight through the pendant hanging around my neck. I yank it off, and the noose lightens. Gathering strength, I focus on what I want from her, why I'm physically stepping across the border between our worlds tonight.

J.R.'s face when the knife plunged into his chest.

His smile when he reminded me he saved my life.

The utter anguish on my mom's face as she screamed at me.

Rage, black rage I haven't felt in years, burns through my veins. It heightens the adrenaline already coursing through my body, making my muscles tremble.

I start shaking, and the lasso of energy vibrates with me. Blue lines appear in the orange rope of light like fractures in cement. Small chunks break off. Larger ones. Faster and faster until finally it shatters with a *crack*.

For the first time since the first time, I physically step into the world I visit every night in my dreams. There's a slight buzz against my skin as I pass through the glowing doorway of orange light. I shudder on the other side. It's cold. Colder than it's ever been before.

At first glance, it looks the same—evenly spaced wood pillars and reed-mat floor, the boxing ring in the distance, and the mountains as a backdrop to it all. Then I look closer. The pillars are cracking, and the floor is missing half its reeds. I was standing there just last night, but now the boxing ring looks like it's been left to rot for decades.

I catch the state of it all in a second. It's strange, but I don't give a shit. The single part of this world I want to see tonight is the woman facing me. The one who kept me from saving my brother.

Calease stands there like a warrior queen, not showing a hint of the decay surrounding her. Her curves are on display more than usual, hugged by a leather outfit straight out of *Xena*, and her white hair, normally loose and hanging down her back, is pulled tight and braided in a crown atop her head. She stares at me, her chin raised and her ice-blue eyes steady. Her eyes used to remind me of the sky on a crisp, clear autumn day.

Now the color reminds me of J.R.

"You broke your promise." Her voice, once so soft and serene, now bites. It grates more than the smirk that lifts the corner of her full lips. "Well, you tried to."

"To save my *brother's* life!"

She arches one eyebrow. "You should have run. Have I not taught you there is nothing to fear in running? Battles are not worth the fight, Hudson."

"*This* one was!" My hands clench so tight the leaves of my glass pendant bite into my skin, and the sharp edges I've never noticed before now dig in so deep I might be drawing blood.

"*No* battle is worth the price. If you value one life over another—take one to save another—you will become what you were when I found you: a dangerous child on his way to becoming a monster."

It's not the first time she's reminded me of my past, but it is the first time those words don't quite ring true. Those guys in the park knew me. Did I know them?

Something sparks in my mind, a little burst like a bolt of static electricity.

I *did* know them. I know all three, but I haven't seen them since my testimony put them in juvie for assault and battery. Those guys today, they weren't after me to avenge some wrong I did. They were after me because I'd *helped* someone—an old man who couldn't fight back when three

fifteen-year-old gang wannabes attacked him late one night.

That one memory cracks the dam I didn't know existed.

More memories—thousands of moments from my own life—flood in.

Looking at the scars on my arms, I begin to remember the fights that marked my skin. Standing up for the deaf kid in third grade who didn't understand why the fifth-grader kept pushing him down. And the girl from the projects who came to school in the same dress every day—I kept her from ending up in the hospital when three girls from her neighborhood jumped her. One by one, I remember all the people I've known over the years, the reasons I couldn't keep myself out of trouble. Not because I went looking for it, but because I didn't know how to stand back and let shit happen.

The memories hit me like blows until I'm struggling for breath. My vision doubles.

"What have you done to me?" I gasp around the burning in my chest.

Her eyes begin to glow, their color shifting darker and deeper. The brighter they glow, the harder it becomes to look away.

"I saved you from a meaningless existence in service to mindless idiots. They would have used up whatever will you possessed and spat you out broken and bleeding." I'm folded over as she walks forward and runs her hand over my short hair. Her touch is icy and sends shudders through my entire body. "At least this way you will die young."

My chest aches. My lungs burn. My head pounds. Until I remembered, part of me hoped today had been some awful mistake. That something had gone wrong and Calase would help me find a way to make it right.

It wasn't. Trusting her was the mistake.

Her hand pressing against the back of my head, she bends down until she's eye level with me.

"Humans really are pathetic creatures. Shining talents trapped within worthless, weak shells." She shakes her head and frowns, but her eyes are bright. Happy. "What do I care if one more of you dies on any given day? This child was not one of mine. Humans are just talents for the taking, and I am almost done with yours."

J.R.'s face swims up before me. The burning in my chest beats back the ice of Calease's touch. I straighten, my hand shooting out to wrap around her throat.

"Give me back my brother."

She doesn't flinch at first, doesn't even blink. But when Calease realizes she can't break free, she trembles. Her blue eyes—dark and glowing—widen as she gasps for air.

"I cannot!" She grabs my wrist, digging fingernails as long as claws into my skin until blood runs down my arm.

"You *have* to!" I shake her so hard that only my hand keeps her head from snapping back. "Give me back J.R.!"

"It cannot be done!" Her face is turning red—*bright* red—and her claws dig deeper until they finally hit bone. I flinch and try to pull away.

I can't.

The olive-wreath pendant is trapped between our bodies, fusing my hand to her throat. I can move my fingers, but my palm is stuck to Calease's skin as sparks begin to fly.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

Calease's mouth moves, but all that comes out is a strangled cry.

The more I fight it, the stronger the energy shooting through my palm becomes. It zings up my arm like an electric shock, and my body locks as the current zips up my neck and jolts straight into my head.

No. *No!* I will not let her destroy me.

She cries out, and the color leaches from her skin until her face is as white as her hair. Light flashes, and her once-blue eyes are milky. In that same moment, light bursts behind my eyes. A web of lines stretches in every direction. Calase doubles, triples, quadruples—each version of her dressed differently. The world is sketched in black and white. I see everything and nothing as the colors keep flashing past.

No, no, *NO!*

I wrench my hand free. The pendant explodes.

The blast pushes me backward, knocks my feet out from under me and sends me flying through the air. My vision blurs. I slam into something that holds for a second before it tears.

I keep falling.

Falling.

Falling.



Knock, knock, knock.

The noise is persistent and pounding, each beat pulsing through my head.

“Housekeeping,” a bored voice calls. Seconds later, a key slides into the lock and the door begins to open.

She sees me before I can say anything.

“Sorry. Should I come back later?”

I try to open my eyes, but the light pouring through the open door is brighter than headlights at midnight, and everything I’m seeing blurs and shifts. Lines run across my vision, reminding me of a screwed-up laptop screen. Somehow, I’m lying across the end of the bed, my head toward the door.

“Yeah. Looks like you had a night.” The girl laughs and backs out of the room. “Sleep it off, dude.”

The door closes, and the room plunges into darkness again. But it's not dark. Not completely. Because my hands are glowing. Like I'm a fucking nightlight.

I stare at my hands, my chest, my legs, willing the soft blue glow to go away. It doesn't.

Trying to get up isn't easy—my head spins and my knees buckle—but I manage to make it to the bathroom. I don't like what the mirror shows me. My entire goddamn body is surrounded by a blue glow.

Holy shit. I'm a Smurf.

I dig the heels of my hands into my eyes until it hurts.

"Go away, go away, go away," I mutter.

When I open my eyes again, the world almost looks normal. I'm still glowing, but it's dimmer. Almost ignorable. Taking a breath, I squint and flick on the lights so I can assess the damage.

The light washes out my vision, but it comes back into focus quickly.

I look in the mirror and blink. Again. And again. What the hell? That can't be right. I *can't* be seeing that right.

My once-pale blue eyes are solid black. Not just the irises. Both eyeballs are *solid* black. Like someone ripped my eyes out and replaced them with black marbles.

I look away from the mirror and shut my eyes tight. It's a trick of the light or something. It has to be a goddamn trick of the light. Just a trick.

The first things I notice when I force my eyes open again are the bloodstains on my shirt. The same shirt I was wearing yesterday.

My hands clench on top of the counter. I drag in a breath, and it comes in jerking gasps that stab my lungs.

Yesterday.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, I had a family and a home and a dreamworld I thought was as close to heaven as you could get without dying.

I have none of that now.

My brother is dead. My parents threw me out of the house—again—with barely enough to fill a small suitcase. And my dreamworld? I was right when I figured that, if God ever did exist, he turned his back on humanity centuries ago.

Calease wasn't an angel; she was a demon.

Breathing is getting harder. It's like the air is filled with poisonous gas.

The room starts spinning. I need to find that dark corner of my head I built when I was twelve, when my parents kicked me out the first time. The only way I'm going to survive this is by pushing away the burning in my chest and the pain eating away at my mind like acid. It's hard, nearly impossible. My head feels like it's about to bust open, and I think I'm about to black out. I force my eyes open and bite back a scream.

There are two of me.

A glowing white image is superimposed on the glowing blue version of myself. The double is me, but it isn't. It has my face and my body and those screwed-up eyes, but I'm dressed like some medieval knight. Chainmail, helmet, gauntlets, sword—the works.

What am I seeing?

The answer filters in from a different part of my mind. With it comes a whiff of honey. Before tonight, Calease's world always smelled faintly like honey.

This is what Calease saw when she looked at me. This vision filter was how she picked her victims; it showed her the children who had skills worth taking and what they would be if she gave them the right push, turned their skills into something beyond the ordinary. My skill is fighting. No one ever taught me, but I always knew when to dodge and how to throw a punch. It was instinct. Like it was instinct to throw myself into fights when I saw someone

else floundering. Calease saw me as some white knight, riding in to rescue the downtrodden and the bullied. That might almost be cool if she hadn't done everything she could to rip it away from me.

When I made it out, I must've taken a lot of what she could do with me.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

I yank off my torn, bloody shirt and lift my right arm to peel off the bandage over my ribs. My body must be numb. I can't feel the wounds. Forty-six sutures and I can't feel a goddamn one of them. The tape pulls at my skin. It doesn't hurt like it should.

When it's off, I understand why.

There is no wound. No blood, no scar, not a *scratch*. If not for the stitches embedded in my skin, I wouldn't be able to point out where the cut had been. I rip the bandage off my left shoulder, and it's the same thing. A long line of black stitches is the only sign that I almost died yesterday.

I take a deep breath, finally slipping into the numb, detached place in my head that gives me some distance from everything.

Okay. Guess I picked up way more from Calease than I thought.

Now what the fuck am I supposed to do with it?

Calease mentioned others like her once or twice. She told me I wasn't the only human she "mentored." How many others have fallen for her lies? How many demons are out there, lulling their victims into complacency with visions of paradise and pretty promises? I can't be the only one. And J.R. can't be the only collateral damage in this war they're waging against us.

But I can try to make sure he's the last.

As all-powerful as these demons seem, they can be taken out. I'm proof of that. If I can find a way back into

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that world, maybe I can wage a war of my own. Or at least find a way to shut down those portals for good.

It sounds like a suicide mission, but right now I don't care. There's nothing left for me here anyway. I just have to find a way to make J.R.'s sacrifice mean something.

I have to make sure what happened to us never happens again.



THREE MONTHS
LATER

Two

Mariella

Sunday, August 24 – 12:00 AM

I grip the horse's mane tight and urge her faster.

Already outpacing the wind blowing across the lake, she becomes a streak of white, her hooves cracking against the ground like thunderbolts. I rise and fall with each stride. As impossibly fast as we're flying, as hard as I'm pushing her, and as synchronized as we are tonight, it doesn't matter.

Orane is about to catch up with me.

"Is that the best you can do?" he shouts as his chestnut stallion pulls even with my white mare. Grinning, Orane kicks his steed to greater speeds, galloping slightly ahead.

Grinding my teeth, I grip my mare's sides between my knees and lean down across her neck, pressing myself against her to match her movements. I thought cutting across the lavender field would give me the edge I need, but Orane is better. And this is his world. He created it. No matter how much time I've spent here over the past ten years, I won't ever know this place like he does. And Orane never lets me win.

"Faster," I whisper into my mare's ear.

The willow tree is the finish line, and it's already in sight. My mare puts on one last valiant burst of speed, jumping a creek that feeds the lake and crushing the forget-

me-nots beneath her when she lands. The sweet fragrance fills the air. I hardly notice it. My focus is locked on the first branch of the willow tree.

“Fast, Mariella. But not fast enough,” Orane calls as he guides his stallion into a tight turn, tagging the branch with his hand and claiming victory with a wide grin. His violet eyes dance, and his long auburn hair flies around his face.

I slap the branch mere seconds later, but it might as well be hours. Even so, I can’t keep from smiling as Orane pulls his stallion up onto its hind legs and vaults from the saddle like a circus performer.

“One of these nights, I’ll find a way to beat you,” I say as I slide off the back of my mare. She nuzzles my neck and whinnies, snuffling softly against my skin as she slowly vanishes.

“You almost won that time.” Orane rests his hands on my shoulders and presses a kiss to my neck.

I close my eyes and lean against his chest, but the shivers running over my skin as his fingers trace patterns on my bare arms can’t distract me from the blatant lie of his statement.

“It wasn’t even close.”

“It was closer than before.” His cheek presses against mine, and I feel him smile.

He’s right, but at the same time, he isn’t. For ten years, we’ve played every game known to man and many no one on Earth has heard of. He always wins. It’s usually by a slim margin, but—no. Actually, it’s *always* by a slim margin. Like he’s holding himself back to make me think I have a chance of beating him.

From anyone else, it’d be patronizing. From Orane?

It’s a good thing I can’t resist a challenge. I smile and turn in his arms, sliding my hands up and around his neck. In a loose white shirt open to the chest, black pants, and

boots, he looks like a pirate. Or the hero on the cover of one of my mother's romance novels.

"If I asked you to let me win one night, would you?" I run my fingers through his hair, relishing the satin-like softness of the strands.

"You might never forgive me if I did," he says.

Smiling, I have to admit he's right; I would hate it if he stopped challenging me. "Sometimes I think you know me better than I know me."

"You are my favorite subject to study." Orane settles his hand on the small of my back and pulls me closer. Which I don't mind at all. He's always so careful with me, keeping a tiny bit of distance between us. My pulse picks up speed. Maybe tonight will be different.

I trace the lines of his angular jaw, his dimpled chin, the exaggerated arch of his eyebrows. Orane stands patiently under my fingers, a smile pulling up the corners of his lips.

Turning his head, he kisses the tips of my fingers, and I lean into the soft caress.

"What else would you like to do, Mariella?" he murmurs against my hand. "We have some time before you must leave."

Closing my eyes, I rest my head against him, breathing in his soft, floral scent. I hate thinking about leaving Paradise. Every night since two weeks before my eighth birthday, I've been invited into this dreamworld. And every night I have to leave again. It's the leaving I hate most.

"We haven't been to the opera hall yet," I say.

Orane grins and leans down for a kiss. His touch sends a frisson of energy down my spine, and I can barely contain the desire to slip my hands under his linen shirt and finally explore the skin that has been forbidden to me for so long. But like each time since our first kiss two years ago, he gently pulls back, planting one last, light kiss on the tip of my nose.

"I hoped you would suggest that."

He offers his arm. As I take it, the air around me shimmers, changing my riding clothes into a flowing, white lace dress, accented by a wide black belt with flowers decorating the front. I run my hand along the textured fabric and sweep my long blonde hair over my shoulder.

We walk along the shore of the lake, passing the towering willow tree and the orchard of cherry trees in full blossom, their flowers not simply the usual whites and pinks, but a wild rainbow of reds, blues, and golds. The sky above us is trapped in a perpetual twilight, never fully dark, but never quite day.

In the distance is our destination, the opera hall he created for me years ago. The cream-colored marble is carved in intricate designs, and the dark wooden doors stand open. I don't have to close my eyes to picture the interior. I helped him design it all.

Statues stand in nooks along the walls, and hundreds of seats covered in red velvet fill the auditorium. A luxuriously soft, black-velvet curtain hangs from the proscenium arch, and despite the empty orchestra pit, the finest music I've ever heard will rise into the air the moment I begin to sing.

Once we're inside, Oran tells me about the modifications he's made to the acoustics—the better to amplify my natural talent, he promises. He leads me through the door, down the aisle of the auditorium, and up to the stage. Once I'm in place, he retreats into the darkness of the orchestra seats, his face lost under the glow of the stage lights.

"What will you have tonight, monsieur?" I ask, sinking into a deep curtsy. "Opera? Jazz? Contemporary folk?"

"Sing a song about love," he calls.

"That narrows it down to about all of them." I laugh, standing straight and mentally sifting through my repertoire. "At least give me a style."

"In the style of Etta James then," he replies. "So long as you sing, nightingale, I do not care."

Etta James? Perfect. I concentrate on "At Last," my favorite of her songs, and the invisible orchestra begins to play, the opening chords rising into the air around me.

I take a deep breath, and my voice rises up, carrying the song to the farthest reaches of the theater. Pushing the boundaries of the melody, I take it higher and higher, pouring myself into the song and giving it to Orane. My performances are a gift. My gift for him. I sing for hours, flowing from R&B to pop to folk to opera to alternative. I sing until my throat burns and my hands are shaking.

As the echoes of my last song fade from the air, the house lights rise. Orane is standing in the center of the orchestra seats, applauding, but the warmth of his approval can't mask the tug under my ribs, the breathlessness that hits me and gets worse with each second. Orane approaches the stage, climbing the center steps and gliding toward me with his hands outstretched.

"Time to go already?" I ask the question, hoping the answer is no.

Orane nods and brushes my hair behind my ear, then leans forward to kiss my cheek. "It is only a day. You will be back tomorrow night."

To my right, the portal opens—a doorway of glowing white light around a darkness so black it seems solid—but I ignore it, holding onto the dreamworld as long as possible.

"Remember your promise, my sweet nightingale," he whispers.

Sighing, I roll my eyes. "*Every* night, Orane? It's been years. I remember."

Orane smiles. "Yes. Every night. Your silence is too important to take a chance. If anyone else in your world should discover this one, the consequences would be dire. The war that ravaged this land two centuries ago—"

“Killed thousands until we closed off the borders,” I finish for him. It’s a story I know better than the history of my own world. It’s been my bedtime story for ten years. And after I almost slipped four years ago and spilled my secret to my parents, making this promise to Orane was easy. Necessary. “I would never risk your life, Orane. I know what’s at stake. Talking isn’t more important than protecting you.”

I lift my hand to his cheek and repeat the vow I made four years ago and have fought against instinct to keep all this time. “I promise, my love. Not a word.”

Cupping my face in his hands, he runs them through my hair and gently presses a kiss to my forehead. His lips are warm and soft, and his long hair brushes my cheek.

“For centuries, we kept the borders closed in fear of war. And then I saw a little girl through a window I kept open. A lonely, sad little girl with a light inside brighter than the sun.” He smiles and leans down until the tips of our noses touch. “So, I broke all the rules and brought her here to teach her what I know. Little did I know that I would discover a love I never thought I might find.”

“I got lucky.” Grinning, I lift up onto my toes and steal a quick kiss. “I only had to wait a few years.”

Orane’s smile grows, and he gives me one last kiss, soft and sweet and pure, before I turn and step through the portal.



I open my eyes, and my head spins. The ceiling fan doubles, then triples, before the images merge back into one. My gaze lands on the digital clock on my nightstand as it flicks to 12:01 AM. Hours spent in Orane’s world, and one minute has passed in mine.

Clearing my throat, I wince at the rawness. A minute may be all that's passed here, but tonight I've brought the ache of my hours-long concert with me. It's usually not this bad. Years of practice have built up my stamina. Tonight, though, I challenged my range more than usual. Now, I'm paying for it. Despite the ache, I'd do it all over again for that smile on Orane's face.

I sneak out of my room and down the wooden stairs without making a sound. My parents probably wouldn't care that I felt like making myself a cup of tea in the middle of the night, but I don't want to wake them. I turn into the kitchen and nearly scream when something moves.

My mother jumps and gasps, her hand flying to her chest and half of her glass of water splashing onto the floor.

"Oh, Mari," she sighs. "You scared the bejeesus out of me."

My pulse races, and I take a deep, slow breath to calm it down.

"Are you okay?" She puts the glass down on the table and dries her hand off on her yellow terrycloth robe. "You're not getting sick, are you?"

I shake my head. I haven't been sick in...years. I can't remember the last time. I walk over to the cabinet where we keep our tea, take out the chamomile, and show it to her.

"Oh. Couldn't sleep either?" she asks.

I don't answer. She doesn't expect me to, but that's never stopped her from talking to me as though I might answer at any moment. I try to give her what responses I can, but it's not enough. And I can't even tell her *why* I can't tell her why. Protecting Orane is too important.

She refills her glass, glancing at me as I wait for my turn at the faucet. "Do you want me to make it for you?"

Shaking my head again, I hold the teapot under the running water, swallowing to ease the rawness of my throat while I wait.

“So...ten days left until you start your senior year,” she says, smiling. Her hair—the same golden blond as mine—is braided, and her honey-brown eyes watch me carefully. “Are you excited?”

I nod, but only because it’s the answer she’s expecting. Until she mentioned it, I hadn’t thought about school. Or senior year. I suppose I’m excited. In a way. Senior year means I’m almost done with high school.

“Do you need anything for school? New clothes?”

This time, I can’t give her the answer she wants. I choose my wardrobe carefully. It helps me fade into the background. Giving up the hoodies and baggy jeans will attract attention I don’t want. When I shake my head, her smile wilts. I look away to hide my wince and place a hand over my stomach as though the pressure can stop its churning.

She tries to understand, she really does, but how can she get it when she’s missing so many pieces of the puzzle? And what choices do I have? If I explain the truth to her, I break my vow to Orane. I can’t do that. Not even for my mother.

“All right.” My mother sighs and shuffles closer, her slippers *shooshing* against the tile. “Clean up when you’re done, Mari.”

I nod, and she gently kisses my cheek as she passes.

“Good night, sweetie.”

Turning, I watch her disappear while I wait for the kettle to boil.

I’m glad we’ve finally reached this middle ground between what she wants and what I’m willing to give her. For a while, she dragged me to a string of neurologists, behaviorists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychics.

None of them brought me out of my silence. They just slapped the label of “selective mutism” on my file and called me disabled.

I wanted to laugh at them.

If they knew how hard I worked, especially in that first year, to stick to my vow, they’d never dare call me disabled. Disturbed and dementedly determined, sure. Disabled, not so much.

My one concession after months of pleading from my parents—and permission from Orane—was sign language classes. My mother and I took classes together on SEE—Signing Exact English—and I agreed to use it for school and when absolutely necessary at home. There are very few moments I deem absolutely necessary. Protecting Paradise is too important to risk the smallest mistake.

The kettle’s whistle is nearly ear-splitting in the midnight silence. I snatch it off the stove before the noise can wake my father.

Several minutes later, I’m curled up in bed, sipping the tea. Even sweetened with honey, it’s bland and completely gross. It helps my throat, though, and that’s what matters.

I know I used to like chamomile, but I used to like a lot of things that don’t seem as appealing anymore. That’s one of the problems with Paradise: after you’ve stared into the sun, the afterglow makes it difficult to see anything else.