

THE SEASON TRIALS

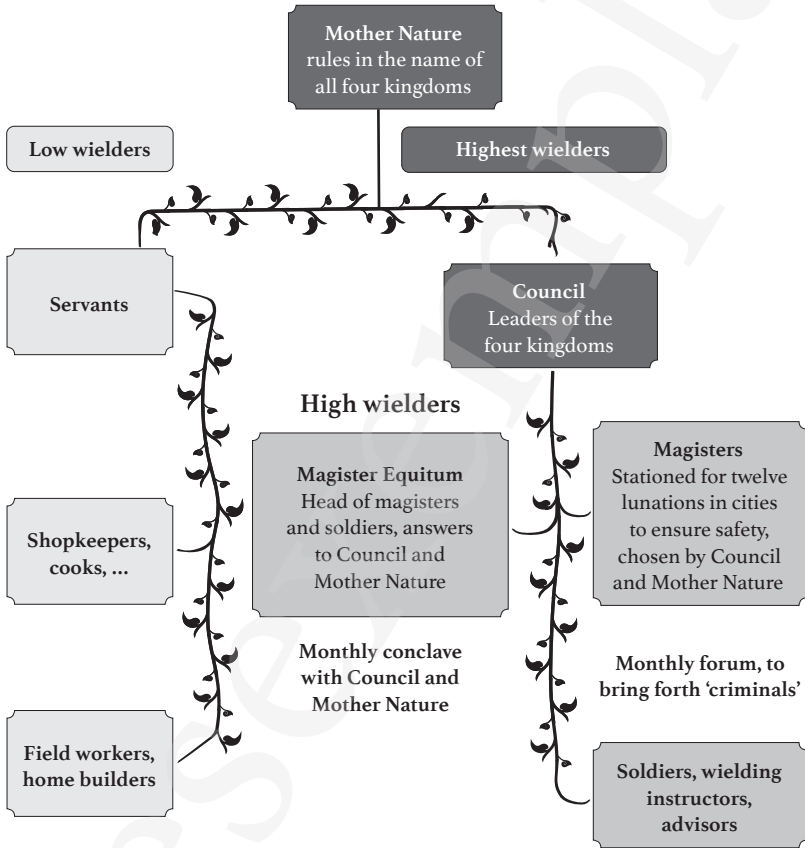
Leesexemplaar

Yasmine Van Den Meersch
& Jonas De Backer

THE
SEASON
TRIALS

P E L C K M A N S

RULING SYSTEM



PROLOGUE

ONE YEAR AGO ...

‘Please don’t leave without me, Azra!’
Ayla ran to her sister and wrapped her arms around her. She should have put on a cloak, because even in the kingdom of Summer, winter nights grew cold. But there was no time to worry about that. The only thing that mattered right now was that her sister was leaving her.

‘I’ll be back before you know it, Lala,’ her sister said, patting her head affectionately. Azra was well prepared for the journey. She was wearing a heavy fur-lined cloak, sturdy leather trousers, and black boots for the march through the icy wastelands.

Azra was leaving for the Winter Kingdom. The invitation had come by falcon not even two moons ago and her sister had accepted. Ayla wasn’t at all happy about it.

‘I still don’t see why you can’t take me with you,’ Ayla said, crossing her arms. ‘It would be much safer to travel together. I could protect you.’

Azra laughed.

‘Little sister, how would you protect me against the wolves of Winter? Do you have hidden skills I don’t know about?’

Azra had been trained in swordsmanship ever since she could walk and hold a sword. From the age of ten, she had defeated soldiers double her size. All in preparation for the contest she would participate in one day.

‘I’ll be back in a month, Ayla. It’s good that Winter reached out to us. We need their iron, and they need our crops. This will be beneficial for the kingdom.’

This kind of journey is one the king would usually undertake, but Azra had persuaded him to let her go in his place. She wanted to see what the other kingdoms were like. Wanted to meet people and see what the world had to offer outside of their own kingdom.

Their father had only reluctantly agreed. The roads had been unsafe for a while now, and he was loath to see his eldest daughter go on this journey. He'd much rather keep her safe in the castle, but understood that he couldn't coddle her forever.

Azra's hands slipped inside her cloak behind her neck to unclasp her necklace. It was the little golden sun that their mother had given her on the day she turned eighteen.

'Keep this while I'm away,' she said. 'Whenever you miss me, you can look at it and think of me.'

Ayla took the necklace, holding it close to her chest. She watched as her sister stepped into the carriage. With a flick of the reins, the horses began to walk, carrying her sister away from her.

CHAPTER 1

LEAVING SUMMER

Her hands were trembling as she held her knives. Ayla couldn't stop shaking, which made packing take so much longer than it actually should have. She simply couldn't believe this day was actually happening. Her internal flame felt unsteady. Whenever the power reared its head, usually any time she felt a strong emotion, she pushed it down, extinguishing the fire that longed to be released.

Last night had been the worst one yet. She had been plagued by nightmares for over a year now, ever since Azra left for Winter. In the recurring dream, she was running after her sister, trying to stop her from leaving, but no matter how hard Ayla ran, she could never reach her. The dream that had woken her up at the crack of dawn this morning had been different, though. This time, she finally caught up with Azra, only for her sister to crumble to dust as she touched her shoulder.

But today was no day to dwell on the past.

Today, she was going to leave Summer.

Ayla had been dreading this day for a year, ever since the letter about Azra had arrived from Winter.

With a shake of her head and a deep breath, she calmed the trembling in her hands and wrapped her blades. They had been a gift from her parents last year, after winning her first battle. The metal was pristine and each of the handles was inlaid with a ruby. They were pretty, but Ayla still wasn't sure they would do much for her where she was going.

Looking wistfully out of her window, she could see the great lake where she had played with Azra and their little

brother Auster. Where they had spent hours swimming and seeing whoever could hold their breath the longest. Where they would have picnics and eat until their bellies were close to bursting. Ayla remembered one rare evening when both of her parents had had the time to catch fireflies with them, capturing them in a glass jar and releasing them after gazing at them in awe for a while.

Her hands began to shake again. The fire power reared up inside her, like a dragon waking from its sleep.

‘No,’ she whispered.

Those days were over.

Holding back a sigh, Ayla finished packing. She had already tucked away some books she wanted to take along, but it still pained her that she couldn’t bring her entire collection. Her father had told her to pack clothes for every type of weather, even though they could easily buy more when they arrived in Oasis. Putting away some extra trousers and tunics, Ayla turned to her nightstand. She walked over to it, picked up her most precious piece of jewelry and sat down on the bed.

In her hands was the necklace Azra had given her. It felt as though her powers were reaching out to it, wanting to envelop it with warmth and protect it at all cost.

Ayla knew it wouldn’t be smart to bring it along in case she’d lose it during the journey, but she also couldn’t imagine leaving her home without taking a piece of her sister with her.

Her door opened with a bang.

‘Ayla!’ Auster shouted, before running across the room and jumping on her. Ayla fell back on the bed with a laugh.

‘Auster, what are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be packing too?’

She ruffled her brother’s hair affectionately.

‘Packing is so boring, Lala! Why don’t you come with me to the gardens? I want to go look at the flowers!’

'You know we can't, Auster. We're leaving in an hour and Father will be very displeased if he finds us smelling flowers instead of making sure we have everything we need.'

Auster rolled his eyes. He was only eight, but already very experienced at eye-rolling whenever someone said something he didn't like.

'The plan is that Father won't catch us. We'll just make a quick trip before returning to our rooms. He'll never know!'

He flopped backwards dramatically on the bed, throwing an arm over his face.

'Once we're in the Capital, you, Mother and Father will be far too busy to play with me. I'll be all alone in that big castle with no one to keep me company.'

Auster peeked out from underneath his arm to see if his words were having the desired effect on Ayla.

They were.

'Fine!' Ayla said, throwing up her hands. Auster immediately got up and began to jump on the bed.

'But on one condition. We're visiting Azra before we leave.'

Auster stopped jumping and looked at her with sad eyes.

'Of course we can visit Az before we leave, Lala.'

He walked to the door and looked behind him when he realized she wasn't following.

Ayla picked up the necklace that had fallen on the bed. Fastening it around her neck, she looked in the mirror above her dressing table.

Her parents always said she looked exactly like Azra, but Ayla couldn't see the resemblance. Sure, their features were the same. They both had dark hair and big, brown eyes. Just like Auster. But Azra had carried herself in a way Ayla never could. Her sister had been confident and strong. Always looking everyone in the eye when she spoke.

Ayla was shy, always using her long hair as a shield.

Turning away from the mirror, she walked over to Auster, grabbed his hand and walked out of her bedroom.

When they arrived in the gardens, Ayla couldn't help but bask in the sun. It was early summer and the rays were warming her skin. The trembling in her hands that had been bothering her for the past hour finally subsided.

'Do you think I should pick some flowers for Mother before we leave?' Auster asked with a sweet smile on his face.

Ayla smiled gently.

'She would love that, but don't you think Father will know where we've been if you show up with flowers from his own garden?'

Auster frowned.

'I guess you're right ...'

'Why don't you go pick out some flowers for Azra?' she suggested instead.

Auster beamed, running off to the flower fields, near the edge of the lake.

Ayla turned to face the palace towering behind her. This was where she had lived her whole life.

This was where she had broken her arm when she was only six years old. She'd been chasing after Azra, who had stolen her favorite doll. Ayla hadn't been paying attention and, rounding a corner, she'd tripped over a forgotten mop and bucket. She remembered falling and hearing a crack. The next thing she knew, she'd woken up in the infirmary with her arm in a sling, Azra standing next to her with the doll in her hands.

'I'm so sorry, Lala. I just wanted to play with the doll too. I never wanted you to get hurt ...'

Placing the doll into Ayla's arms, Azra slipped into bed next to her. It had been a bit of a struggle because of Ayla's injured arm, but they'd managed.

Ayla shook off the memory. She walked on through the gardens and spotted Aran, the combat instructor coming toward her.

'Princess, shouldn't you be getting ready for your journey to Oasis? The king won't be happy if he finds you and the prince running through the gardens.'

His stern words clashed with the smile on his face and the twinkle in his eyes. Aran had been their combat master for as long as Ayla could remember, and he was also a trusted friend to her Father. She'd been training with him intensively for the past year and she'd often accompanied Azra to her training sessions too.

Even though he had always been nice to her and her siblings, Ayla knew he was a force to be reckoned with. His fire-wielding skill was one of the strongest in the entire Kingdom and the soldiers all respected him for it.

He also had endless patience with Ayla. It wasn't that her fire wielding wasn't strong. She could feel the power buried in her core; a sweltering pit of heat waiting to be used. But something was always holding her back. It wasn't fear exactly; she just didn't want to hurt anyone.

Azra had never had such qualms. Ayla had seen her wielding whips of flame and creating dragons out of the whitest fire.

'I know, Aran, but Auster wanted to see the flowers and the lake one last time before we left. Surely you understand?'

Aran's smile turned even warmer. Everyone in the palace loved the little Prince, and he often got away with things he definitely shouldn't be doing.

Auster was significantly younger than his sisters. The king and queen had been pleasantly surprised when they discovered they would have another child. Ayla could remember the festivities when her brother was born. The entire town had

been lit up with fires and music could be heard until the early hours.

‘Just make sure you’re at the carriages within half an hour, Princess, and I won’t say a thing.’

‘We’re nearly done here. We’re just paying a final visit to Azra.’

His smile dimmed and, with a nod of his head, he continued toward the palace.

Ayla found Auster chasing a bunny through the roses.

‘Let’s go, Auster.’

He got up, grabbed Ayla’s hand and together they walked to the trees. Between them was a short path that led to a small clearing between the trees.

Sunbeams fought their way through the canopy, illuminating the statue of a beautiful girl.

After receiving word of Azra’s death, her parents had erected this statue in her honor. Her body had never been found, so this memorial was the next best thing to a true grave. Ayla used to visit this place every single day, often arriving to find her mother already there, weeping at the foot of the marble statue.

These days, Ayla didn’t come here as often anymore, but when she did, she always felt closer to Azra. The sculptor had done an amazing job, capturing her sister in stone exactly how she was in life. She was looking up, pointing at something in the sky, a big smile on her face.

Auster silently placed a bouquet of lilies at the foot of the statue.

Ayla walked over and embraced her little brother, who had tears on his face.

‘I miss her, Lala. I wish she had never left us.’

The tears came faster, he was almost sobbing now.

‘Why did Zaza leave without us? Why couldn’t she just stay home instead of going to Winter?’

He broke free of the hug to look up at the statue, tears still streaking his cheeks.

'I hate you, Zaza! You left us and now you're never coming back to us!'

Auster kicked at the marble, which only made him cry even more, before running away from the clearing.

Ayla felt helpless and useless. Dropping to her knees, she started crying as well, the grief striking her just as hard as it did on the first day.

'I can't do this, Azra. I can't just take your place in these Trials. You trained for this your whole life. You were born for this.'

Ayla could barely get the words out.

She could feel her fire rising, offering comfort, but with a big mental push, she banished it again.

She wanted to feel her pain. It was a sign her sister wasn't forgotten.

'I was never meant for this. I know I'll never be as good or as strong as you. It hurts to see Mother and Father put their trust in me. I just wish you could come back, Zaza.'

The clearing fell silent, the sun disappearing behind the trees as if it could sense her anguish.

'Please come back, Zaza ...'

Ayla stayed there for a while, knowing she would have to get up and make her way to the carriages eventually. When she finally felt ready, she stood up, wiped her face and left the clearing without looking back.

She made her way to the front of the palace, where she saw two carriages waiting. Servants were putting all of their luggage in the back compartment and the soldiers who would accompany them on their journey had already mounted their horses.

Her mother and father were waiting for her by the first carriage. She walked over to join them.

Her mother looked young for her age. She had dark, straight hair that came down to her waist. People often called her the Radiant Queen, and Ayla could see why. The queen had a warm energy about her that immediately drew you in.

Her father was tall and Ayla, even at eighteen, still only came up to his chin. He always had a smile at the ready for everyone, whether servant or nobility. He was a benevolent king who ruled with kindness.

She couldn't have wished for better parents.

'Ayla, my sun, what's the matter?' the queen asked.

She thought she'd done a good job of wiping away her tears, but without a mirror to check, she couldn't have been sure.

'I'm fine, Mother. Just saying goodbye to Azra.'

Her mother gave her a knowing smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, embracing her quickly. When she let go, Ayla could see the queen was having a hard time too. They would all be away from the palace for a while.

Ayla might never return.

Her father placed a hand on her shoulder. She could feel him cast a tendril of warmth into her. Basking in the comfort he offered, she finally allowed it to make her pain fade a little.

'I understand this is difficult for you, Ayla. But you must be strong now. Mother Nature has called upon us. It's time to take up your role as Heir to the Summer Kingdom.'

Ayla nodded knowingly. She had heard the story told to Azra countless times.

Mother Nature was their Empress, Ruler of the Four Kingdoms of the Season Realm. He or she ruled until they felt they were starting to Wither. At that time, a competition would be held among the eldest princes and princesses and its winner would become the new Ruler of the Realm.

Ayla was never meant to take part in the competition.

It was always supposed to be Azra.

Her father looked her in the eyes, seeming to know what she was thinking.

‘Don’t underestimate yourself, Ayla. I know this wasn’t how it was meant to go, but I have faith in you. Use your inner fire and believe in yourself, just as your mother and I do.’

Ayla nodded. As she walked to the carriage she’d be sharing with Auster for the journey, she looked back one final time. The smooth, red walls with towers in between them. The hallways where she used to play games with Azra and Auster.

She really hoped she would one day see this place again.

CHAPTER 2

DESTROYED AND FOUND

Leaving the only place she had ever known felt awful. It felt like losing Azra all over again. Ayla didn't leave the palace grounds often and thinking of the journey ahead made her slightly nauseous. Her gaze fell upon Auster, who was sitting beside her, beaming with joy.

His face lit up any time he was around horses. Ayla wasn't the most skilled rider, yet she loved how calm and free horse riding made her feel. It was one of the few moments she could let go of the worry.

The carriage moved forward at a soothing pace, allowing her to admire the view of the ocean that stretched out beyond the valley. She would miss the scent of it, the calming sound of the waves.

'Does Oasis look like this?' Auster asked, gazing at the waves.

'Well, they say the Capital is the most magical place in the Realm, the center of life, where Nature rules the land,' Ayla answered, getting closer to her brother. 'But I would bet good money on the fact that our Summer Kingdom beams the brightest of all.' Auster's curious eyes found hers.

'I want to see the other Kingdoms too. Azra once told me she dreamed of visiting Spring.' He already seemed to be over his earlier outburst and his smile had returned to his face.

His answer both pained and relieved her. Azra had indeed held the ambition to travel the Realm, aspiring to create more unison between the kingdoms. Ayla didn't have the same desire, at least not after what had happened in the Winter

Kingdom. She would make them pay for what they did. Nobody wronged Summer people without getting burned.

Hours later, they arrived at the border villages of the Summer Kingdom, the warm summer breeze turning colder by the hour. They stopped so the horses could drink from a nearby river. They had gotten farther away from their beloved blue ocean. Her mother asked if Ayla would rather have the carriage to herself, so she could rest, but she dreaded being alone with her thoughts. She was very grateful for Auster's imagination, it proved to be a good distraction from the task ahead. Their parents rode in the carriage in front of theirs, and Auster checked frequently to make sure they weren't getting too far ahead. After quite some time, he pointed out something he saw in the distance.

'Look! Look! There's another village! But why is it so different from the others?'

An empty village appeared in view.

'Ah, it's abandoned, you see. Not many choose to live near the borders these days.'

His eyes begged for her to say more. Ayla wanted to answer that it was for their own safety – talk of rebels in the Capital had reached even her ears – but she didn't want to frighten her brother. The rebels were a group of people who seemingly attacked villages at random, destroying them and taking all the villagers prisoner. Her father had spent many days in the Capital with the rulers of the other Kingdoms to find a solution and stop this group of killers. Not a single rebel had ever been caught and no one knew how they were pulling it off.

It was as if they were ghosts – there one moment and gone the next.

'It gets much sunnier the deeper you get into our Kingdom, and Summer people do love their tans,' Ayla said, trying to sound reassuring.

Auster chuckled as they watched the village creep closer. Ayla shivered.

She didn't like this place, the eerie energy it held. It was nothing like the warm and welcoming villages they were used to. She knew this village, Marea, had once been a thriving place on the outskirts of the Summer Kingdom; it was said that people loved to come here for the music and the food.

Marea, abandoned and robbed of all its former glory, was now a wasteland.

It happened before magisters were stationed across the Realm, with a solemn duty to maintain the peace and protect the citizens from any attacks.

Ayla sighed. She had read all about it in the royal library, the place where she felt most at home. She was fond of reading and would often sneak off late at night, when her own mind plagued her, to find a story she could disappear into. So, she often read about the wonders of the Season Realm. The courtiers, the love stories between kings and queens; the rich culture each kingdom held. All the books agreed on one thing: that the Capital was home to the most unique library ever created; a place where books and nature came together in the most beautiful way. Ayla couldn't wait to see it upon her arrival; if she could find the time, that is. But now they first had to pass through the village that lay before them. People seemed to have left in a hurry. Handmade jars lay broken outside the sand-colored houses. Even the once vibrant plants in the flower pots had completely dried out with the lack of care. Some windows weren't closed properly and moved along with the wind, creating an ominous sound.

As if on cue, Ayla heard horses in distress, followed by the rattling of the carriage ahead of them. Panic struck her when she heard someone shout, 'Snake, snake!'

The other carriage shot forward as its horses tried to flee,

the horses with Auster and Ayla's carriage speeding up in pursuit.

'The snake must have startled the horses. They don't like the slithering creatures very much, but they're good horses, so Mother and Father are going to be fine.'

Ayla released some of her panic.

Auster knew what he was talking about when it came to horses. Her brother had befriended every animal he had ever met.

The soldiers guiding their carriage were clearly struggling to calm the horses too. The animals had started to gallop instead of their steady stride. 'They're only reacting because they saw the other horses flee,' Auster remarked.

'You're a clever kid, do you know that?' Ayla replied, observing the situation.

'Of course I do.' Auster said, with a cheeky smile on his face.

The horses had settled into their former pace by the time they reached the abandoned village.

'We need to make a stop, to ensure everything is still intact,' one of the guards informed them, right before the carriage came to a halt.

'I'll check on the horses.'

Before Ayla could stop him, Auster had jumped out and was heading over to the animals. Unwilling to let him go alone, Ayla followed him out of the safety and comfort of the carriage.

'Auster, get back h—'

Unable to finish her sentence, she froze right behind Auster when their parents noticed them.

'Get inside, it's not safe here,' the king yelled, with a troubled look on his face. He was in the middle of discussing the situation with his head of security. Ayla didn't like the

angst in his features, but after what had happened to Azra, they'd all become more careful. That is, all except Auster.

'Of course, Father,' Ayla said, grabbing Auster's shoulder. He paid her no mind as he gently stroked the flank of his favorite horse, Ocho.

'Come on, little one, you heard Father.' After a few moments he turned around and strolled back to the carriage. Ayla had almost succeeded in getting Auster back where he would be safe, when a quiet cry reached their ears. They both turned around. A little creature was hiding behind a broken pillar, clearly in pain.

Auster grabbed Ayla's hand.

'We must do something, it sounds like it's hurt.' Debating the risk, Ayla sprinted forward when she saw their father disappear from sight to check on his horse, only slowing when she got closer to the animal.

'Hi there, I'm not here to harm you,' Ayla whispered in her softest, most soothing tone. 'It's a little dog.' Auster said, kneeling beside them.

Ayla glanced over to him. 'Quick, grab your satchel from the carriage, father can't know yet, or he'll never allow this.'

She tried to reach for the poor dog, while Auster hurried to get his satchel. He was back in no time.

The dog felt far too skinny, ribs almost protruding from his skin when Ayla put him in the bag. The dog wagged its tail in excitement.

'We must hurry.'

They jumped into the carriage, giving the soldiers a sheepish smile.

'Mission accomplished,' Ayla said with relief. Auster took the animal out of his satchel, and they both sat on the carriage floor with the dog, who was eager to jump on them and lick Auster's face.

'I dare say he likes you, Auster,' Ayla said, while a genuine smile reached her lips. 'But I think he injured his paw.'

Auster's face turned sad.

'We'll talk to Mother when we arrive. They will have a veterinarian at the Capital who can help us out.' Two knocks on the carriage roof let them know they'd be continuing their journey, leaving Marea behind.

Ayla smiled, a warm feeling spreading across her body. Her eyes drifted shut as she felt the calming pace of the horses and listened to her brother bond with the little dog.

Not long after she woke, Auster was eager to tell her that he had named the dog Luca – *bringer of light* – since Luca's arrival made Auster so happy.

'Luca is quite fitting, indeed,' Ayla agreed. She stretched her back while gazing out of the window. They had left the Summer Kingdom far behind them. She could tell by their surroundings. The warmth the sun offered had been replaced by a somewhat colder temperature. The ground here was covered with grass and moss decorated the tree trunks. Plants filled the area around them, the branches of the trees that lined the trail forming a roof above them.

Both Ayla and Auster stared in wonder as the sky disappeared from view. Yellow and purple flowers sprouted from hundreds of buds on the branches, hanging as though they were raining down upon them. A forest stretched out along the road. Birds welcomed them with a song, while Ayla and Auster discussed the rare plants they saw all around. At the end of the beautiful trail, they reached the famous golden gate, detailed with images of the sun in all its phases, little snowflakes, falling leaves, and some flowers in full bloom. It represented the crests of the four kingdoms within the Season Realm. Soldiers in green uniforms gave them permission to enter, after seeing their royal carriage approach. Her father

often traveled here for Council meetings, so they knew him quite well. The trees ended beyond the gate, opening into a valley. Flowers covered the ground, stretching out over acres of land. They passed several ponds full of swans and birds flew overhead. It was peaceful in a way that Ayla hadn't expected it to be. In the distance you could spot the Capital, surrounded by the oldest trees in the Realm. The spire of the castle tower reached only slightly above the tallest trees. And like that, they entered Oasis.

CHAPTER 3

OASIS

Ayla was stunned. She had never been here before; she had only heard stories about the Capital's greatness. How Oasis was a haven for everyone who lived there. Poverty and crime were rare. Everyone had more than enough and people were happy.

It was enormous. The city was circular in shape with the castle near the city's border, pressed close to an enormous mountain. Homes and other buildings surrounded the palace on the other side, some reaching up to six floors high. The trees that surrounded the city were even more impressive from up close. Ayla had never felt smaller.

Nature was thriving everywhere. Plants burst up in the middle of the streets. Rivers and streams ran right next to houses. A perfect harmony of nature and humans.

Auster looked stunned as well. His head was almost completely through the carriage window, trying to take it all in.

After a light tapping on the roof of their carriage, the driver dismounted and opened the window.

'I'm afraid we arrived on market day. The streets are too packed to pass through with the carriage. I could find a different route, but it might cost us a couple of hours, Your Royal Highness.'

Ayla noticed her parents' carriage had stopped too.

Her father stepped out and listened to what the driver had to say, then looked at Ayla and Auster, who had appeared behind her.

‘What do you both think? Do you want to walk through the town?’

Ayla wasn’t sure it would be safe. There were more people here than she had ever seen before. The abandoned village still plagued her thoughts.

Auster didn’t share her concern. ‘I would love to! Luca will be so happy to stretch his legs!’

Father gave her little brother a questioning look. ‘Who is Luca?’

Before Auster could reply, the dog skipped out, still cautious with his injured leg. He trotted over to the king, tail wagging with excitement, and promptly lay down at his feet.

‘He’s my new best friend!’ Auster exclaimed before he too ran over to his father, throwing his arms around him.

‘We found him when we stopped at Marea! He was hurt and no one was left to help him. Lala and I rescued him! Please, Father, can I keep him? I promise I’ll take excellent care of him!’

Ayla already knew her father would give in. Just as the king opened his mouth, their mother appeared from the carriage and looked at the king and the dog lying at his feet.

‘Amarr, what’s that dog doing with you?’

The queen seemed confused, but still had a smile on her face. Auster got his love for animals from his mother.

The king laughed.

‘Well, my dear, it seems our Auster has found himself a new friend.’

Auster released his father and ran over to their mother.

She embraced him and ruffled his hair.

‘What’s his name?’ the queen asked.

‘Luca! He’s the best dog in the entire world!’

The little dog lifted his head when he heard his name, but decided to stay at the king’s feet. Her father bent down and scratched Luca’s head, making the dog’s leg kick out.

Aran, who had joined them on the trip, cleared his throat.

‘We have secured a safe route through the town to get everyone to the castle. Your luggage will stay in the carriages for now and will be brought to the palace as soon as possible. If you would please follow me, Your Majesties.’

Auster walked over, holding their mother’s hand and grabbing Ayla’s with his other. Their father linked arms with their mother and Luca followed close behind.

‘Show us the way, Aran,’ said the king.

As they began to walk through what seemed to be one of the main streets, Ayla tried to take everything in at once, but it was nearly impossible.

There was a beautiful sort of chaos. Every house had a different color, ranging from the brightest yellow to the darkest blue. Some houses had little gardens in the front, others had kites tied to a railing in front of a window.

The streets were packed. Stalls were scattered throughout the streets, seemingly without any thought of order. Many different scents of spices and food hit her nose, quite frankly making her a little lightheaded. Ayla saw a merchant trying to sell his fabrics to a well-dressed woman, gesturing wildly while pushing a piece of vibrant red cloth in her face. Next to him was a woman wrapping a wooden figurine in some paper for a man carrying his young son on his shoulders.

Her father pointed out a peculiar building. One that seemed muted in comparison to the rest.

It was only one floor and had a dark, gray color. As if it wanted to stay hidden and unnoticed. It had no decorations on its facade, nor a sign mounted to the wall to tell passers-by what the building was for.

‘Believe it or not, this is where the best dressmaker in Oasis works. Your mother’s wedding gown was made here.’

When Ayla looked at her mother, she nodded, but didn't say anything else.

'Why is the building so dark then? Don't they want to stand out more?'

The king smiled, as if expecting the question.

'People either know about the shop or they don't. The owner doesn't care to advertise it. His dresses speak for him.'

They passed the store, but with the door closed, Ayla couldn't even look in to see if her father was speaking the truth.

A few streets over, they passed the amphitheater where the magisters held their monthly forums. Citizens from Oasis could present their problems and the magisters would do their best to find a solution where everyone would be pleased. They also tried and sentenced the criminals in the city dungeons, punishing them for the crimes they had committed. They were granted this right to pass judgment by their leader, the Magister Equitum, who was a close advisor to Mother Nature. The man was even older than the Empress and had already been around when the previous Ruler still sat on the throne.

Frankly, he gave Ayla the creeps. He had only visited the Summer Palace once, back when she was little. Every time he had looked at her and flashed his blackened teeth in what he had thought would pass as a smile, goosebumps had erupted across her arms.

With a shake of her head, she tore her eyes from the building and caught up with her parents, who were already a couple of paces ahead of her.

They passed a square where people were dancing around a giant tree. On the lowest branches hung hundreds of paper birds.

The queen smiled when she noticed them.

'Those are wishbirds. People write their greatest desire

on a piece of paper, fold it, and hang it up in the tree. They believe the tree grants a wish from time to time.'

She looked at her husband. 'It did for me.'

Auster had been teaching Luca how to give him a paw, but looked up when he heard his mother's words.

'What do you mean?'

'This is where I met your father,' said the queen. The king pressed a kiss to her hand, which he was still holding.

'It was right after your father had his tournament. I was here in Oasis to watch the Trials and visited this place almost daily. On the last day, before the final Trial, I came to this tree to hang up my wish.'

Ayla almost felt as if she were there. She had seen portraits of her mother when she was young and had just become queen. She had been beautiful.

'What did you write on your wishbird?' Auster asked.

'I asked for a life full of happiness. The day after I hung up my wish, I came back and saw it had fallen from the tree; I mustn't have tied it very well. Your father had picked it up and was reading it, which I thought was very rude at first – reading other people's wishes.'

At this, the king laughed and took over the story.

'I swear I didn't know it was a wishbird. It had fallen into a puddle and I only meant to pick it up. Littering is frowned upon in Oasis and I wanted to take care of the town. But then I unfolded the note and saw the wish.'

As he gazed at his wife, his love for her was so apparent. It instantly warmed Ayla's heart.

They had stopped underneath the tree, too enraptured by the story to leave this place before hearing the end.

'Your mother was furious, but I could only see how beautiful she was, even as she was yelling at me to let go of her wishbird. Her wish was so pure and I just knew I wanted

to get to know her. I gave her back the note and introduced myself.'

'And that's how the tree granted me my wish. We fell in love and had three beautiful children,' the queen said wistfully. 'For a long time, I was the happiest woman in all four kingdoms.'

A sad look passed over the queen's face, and Ayla knew she was thinking about Azra. Her father hid his pain better, but her mother was still suffering a year after losing her eldest child.

'Maybe we can hang up some new wishes?' Ayla asked.

Auster immediately agreed and her father asked a soldier to bring them some paper and pens. The soldier returned quickly with a light pink sheet of paper.

The thing Ayla wanted most was to have her sister back, but she highly doubted the tree was that powerful.

Her brother and parents were already done writing and her mother was showing Auster how to fold the paper like a bird.

She would go to hell and back for her family.

And suddenly Ayla had decided on her wish.

Keep my family safe from harm. Protect them however you can, she wrote. Folding it into the shape of a bird, she tied a piece of string around it and hung it in the tree.

As they reached the palace, the sun was already steadily sinking toward the horizon.

They were ushered in by one of the palace servants and entered an impressive hall. If Ayla hadn't seen it with her own eyes, she would have never believed she was in a building made out of brick and mortar.

It looked like she was in the middle of a forest. There were leaves covering the walls everywhere and the ground was

lush with grass. Light was coming from translucent spheres holding flames.

Ayla looked at the everflames with a smile. It was the first thing every fire wielder learned to create. Small, playful fire that never went out. The Summer Kingdom exported this magic across the entire Realm. It was one of the only things Ayla could summon with confidence.

Another servant appeared, bowing to the royal family from Summer.

‘Excuse me, Your Majesties. This is where you must say goodbye to Princess Ayla. She is to retreat to her chambers to prepare for tomorrow’s presentation.’

Her heart started beating fast. Tomorrow, she would have to present her fire wielding in front of the other royal families and her competitors. The other Heirs had been honing their wielding for years, preparing themselves for the day Mother Nature would feel she was starting to Wither and they would have to compete for the Throne.

She, however, wasn’t remotely ready.

King Amarr and Queen Raya embraced her and each pressed a kiss to her forehead, not noticing Ayla was close to a panic attack.

‘You can do this, Ayla,’ her mother said.

‘I believe that you will make us proud,’ her father said. ‘Tomorrow you will see us again, and we’ll be cheering you on.’

Auster just embraced her before he rejoined their parents.

Without looking back, Ayla let the servant lead her through the castle. The feeling of being in a giant forest returned. Hallways and corridors snaked through the building like branches.

Passing a corridor that was open to the elements, she heard a distant roar. When she looked to her left, she could see four

waterfalls crashing toward an enormous basin. It made her think of home in a way, but where the lake at the Summer Palace was calm and soothing, this body of water was a raging tempest. Waves were all over the surface, brought on by the water falling from the surrounding mountain.

Ayla squinted.

In the midst of the wild water, she thought she could see a human shape. She was too far away to make out the details of the person's face, but she thought she could make out some dark hair. Powerful arms were stroking through the water, battling it to reach the shore.

She could see it was a man now, but he was still too far to make out his features. He had black hair and even from so far away, she could see he was tall. He grabbed a towel from a nearby heap of his possessions and began to dry himself.

Ayla shook her head, wondering what had gotten into this man to go into the rough waves in the first place.

When they reached the end of the corridor, the servant took her up several flights of stairs.

At last, they stopped on the last floor, in front of a wooden door. It had golden handles and was engraved with the symbols of the four elements.

The servant opened the door. 'If there's anything you need, you can just ring the bell and a servant will arrive as soon as possible. Do you require anything else, Princess?'

Ayla shook her head and was promptly left alone.

THE TREEHOUSE CHAMBER

The sight of her room took her breath away. It was beyond astonishing, with a round window twice her size overlooking a tree outside and the view of Oasis that lay beyond.

Fireflies had already found their way around her window, lighting her room in a warm glow. They made her feel at home.

She walked away from the door, so she could further inspect the room. Her bedchamber was built around a thick tree trunk.

Near the window stood a bed covered with tons of pillows and soft blankets.

Behind it, the wall was transformed into built-in bookshelves that reached as high as, to what appeared to be an indoor balcony. Plants hung down from it, accompanied by a big lamp.

Exhaustion felt heavy in her bones, and she threw herself on the bed, the action making her feel like a small child again.

The bed was so soft she almost sank into it.

When she opened her eyes, she saw the skylight, allowing her to admire the stars above.

'Maybe everything will work out in the end,' Ayla mumbled to herself.

Ayla managed to drag herself out of bed after a couple of minutes and walked to the door on the far end corner. She opened the door slowly to find herself in a small bathroom.

To her right was a basin made of wood, a mirror hanging above it.

Her eyes fell upon the bathtub that sat by a window overlooking the leaves beyond.

Standing by the washbasin, she looked at her own reflection. She decided to braid her hair to look somewhat more put together as she walked the stairs up to the balcony.

She found a soft chair by a cozy bay window and sat down to admire the scenery before her. Ayla had been given the highest room in the palace – they must have realized she would want to be closest to the sun. It also explained why her room had so much natural light. The room resembled a treehouse, with branches spreading across the ceiling to create a green canopy.

Ayla startled when she heard a knock on the door.

A boy around her age stood before her, dressed from head to toe in the finest green clothes. Her gaze fell upon the crest embroidered on his sleeve – a blossoming flower.

The kingdom of Spring.

‘I’m sorry to bother you, but ... but I wanted to introduce myself.’ The boy was rambling. He had a pleasant voice.

Ayla was so taken aback by the unexpected visitor that she just stood there.

The boy had a lean build and wasn’t as pale as Spring people typically were. His hair was dark and lay flat on his head. He had a kind face and didn’t strike her as a dangerous type.

‘I am Yuri, Prince of Spring,’ he added, giving her a warm smile.

She thought it strange that he had come to her room. They were all supposed to meet during tomorrow morning’s power presentation.

‘I figured as much,’ Ayla said, pointing to his crest. ‘I’m Princess Ayla of Summer.’