

Part I: Aletheia's Call
Chapter 1: Unthinkable

How can this be happening to me? Yesterday I was worried about applying for college, and now I need to start planning my funeral.

The whole room is still. The silence breaks when Kirstin's phone hits the floor; her screen shatters, but she doesn't move. Her finger is still wrapped around her red curls. Her blue eyes are fixed on me, frozen in the last place she was looking when Dr. Naveen broke the news. Her twin sister Shiloh collapses in her chair, burying her face in her hands. Mom exchanges glances with Dad, biting her lip to keep from crying.

I quickly bend to retrieve the cell phone. I feel like I'm trapped in a bad dream—one from which I desperately want to wake. Dad and I were supposed to attend the father-daughter dance in January, and Mom and I were looking forward to shopping for my first prom dress in April. I was going to give Kirstin and Shiloh riding lessons this summer. Yesterday, I finally talked Mom and Dad into leaving me in charge when they take a cruise in July to celebrate their twenty-year anniversary. We do family portraits every January in honor of the New Year starting. All our plans, our entire family... shattered by one single word.

"Cancer?" Dad breaks the spell, his voice hoarse as he puts his arm around me. "How can Evangeline have cancer?"

Dr. Naveen's brow furrows over his deep brown eyes, and I know it's because he hates to see our family upset. "Perhaps the twins could wait in the lobby, Patrick and Maddie?"

Mom nods, clearly regretting the decision not to leave the twins in the lobby when Dr. Naveen recommended it. We thought it was strange when he asked us to come in after my check-up. I wondered if I was coming down with something; I've been feeling ill and exhausted this past month and even had some pain and bruising.

I glance over at my little sisters; their faces are red and puffy. My older sister instinct takes over, and I know they need me. "I'm going to wait with them," I volunteer.

Dr. Naveen hesitates. "I think you should stay, Evangeline."

I shake my head. "No, thanks. I don't want them to be alone." I pocket Kirstin's cell phone and take each of them by the hand, leading them gently out the door.

I sneak a peek over my shoulder, worried about Mom and Dad as Dr. Naveen closes the door. I pause for just a moment, torn. I don't know who needs me the most right now. Ever since I was adopted, I have promised myself that I would take care of my family, and return the love they have never ceased to show me.

Who will protect them if I can't?

Our family is so tight-knit. People used to tell Mom they thought it was wonderful that we were so close despite my being adopted. Mom would assert that the reason we're so close is partly *because* I'm adopted. It means we are more grateful to have each other.

Dad taught me that I need to set a good example. I've done my best to be a good role model because I know that Kirstin and Shiloh look up to me. They've always followed me everywhere, watching everything I do, so that they can either know the right way to do things or learn from my mistakes. *I don't want them to lose their big sister. I don't want them to face this world without me in it.*

And what about Mom and Dad? My parents always tell me that I was their first miracle daughter. They didn't think that they would ever be able to have children, and the day they

adopted me was one of the best days of their lives. Then, three years later, they had two more miracle daughters on the other best day of their lives. *What will happen to them without me? What will happen to them if I...* I feel like I'm going to be sick. I can't even bring myself to think the word. *I can't leave my family.*

I lead Kirstin and Shiloh over to the waiting area. They lean against me, and I wrap one arm around each of them, allowing them to cry into my shirt. The events of the last five minutes suffocate me. I can hardly fathom that, just moments ago, we were all chatting excitedly about where we would have dinner before my sisters go to their basketball tryouts. Each month, we go out as a family, and today was Dad's turn to pick the restaurant. He had even joked about forgetting his wallet on purpose so that Mom would buy. Then Kirstin and Shiloh had done their customary teasing because I'm working on a project later tonight with Shawn Lawrence.

How long ago was that, an hour? An hour ago I had my whole life ahead of me...

"Evie?"

Kirstin's voice breaks my thoughts. The sound of my nickname makes me want to cry. Kirstin and Shiloh gave me the nickname when they were small because they couldn't pronounce "Evangeline." I remember all those times we teased my parents for disliking my first name so much that they ended up calling me Evangeline, which is my middle name. *We gave them a hard time about that yesterday. But yesterday was a lifetime ago.*

"Yeah?" I ask finally, managing to keep my voice from shaking.

"I need to use the bathroom," she murmurs. "Will you and Shiloh be okay without me?"

My breath catches in my throat. *I'm not even gone yet, and she's already acting like a big sister.* "It's isn't your job to worry about me," I tell her gently, taking charge. "You go ahead and go. But take Shiloh with you, okay?"

"Evie—"

"I'll be fine," I promise.

"Okay," Kirstin agrees reluctantly, as the two rise from their chairs. They disappear around the corner just as Dad stumbles into the waiting area, looking like he's seen a ghost. His red hair, usually neatly gelled, is tousled. He's been running his fingers through it, a habit that he and my sisters share when they're anxious. His green eyes are swollen and puffy, and he glances everywhere but at me.

Mom follows behind, leading Dad into the stairwell. I leave my seat and follow, hoping to speak with them before Kirstin and Shiloh come back. But I stop dead in my tracks when I accidentally catch sight of them through the small window in the stairwell door. I gasp when I see Mom embracing Dad, whispering things as she holds him. Mom's blue eyes are shining; her curly blonde hair is a mess as they cry in each other's arms. Their actions confirm my worst fear.

I'm not going to make it.

I move away before they notice me, unable to look at their pain anymore. I quietly slip into the waiting area, grateful that Kirstin and Shiloh aren't back yet. I try to block out what I've just witnessed, what it must mean for me. I don't want to face it, but I know that eventually I won't have a choice. *I'll be gone.* The word terrifies me and echoes over and over in my mind. *What will it be like... not to exist?* Despite the fact that I won't know I've ceased to exist, the thought of not being terrifies me even more than my fate.

My sisters return shortly, both resuming their places next to me. By the time our

parents join us, they've regained their composure. If I hadn't seen them break down just now, I wouldn't know how strong they're being. "Evangeline," Mom begins, her voice steady, "you're going to meet us at the car in a few minutes. Dad wants to talk to you alone in the garden."

"Why?" Kirstin demands protectively, gripping my arm.

Mom bites her lip, a telltale sign that she's about to cry. "It's okay," I interject, knowing that Mom hates crying in front of us. "Go with Mom." I hand Kirstin her phone. "Dad and I will be right there. You still need to eat dinner so you can focus at basketball try-outs tonight."

"No way," Shiloh argues. "We're not leaving you alone."

"You need to go," I insist. "You both have been working hard for this, and I don't want you to miss it. And I won't be alone. I'll be at the library with Shawn."

"But—"

I pull them into my arms, kissing each of them on the head. "This is important to you, and that makes it important to me."

"All right," Kirstin finally agrees. "Thanks, Evie."

"You're welcome. I love you guys."

"Love you, too," they both reply, in perfect unison.

I glance over at Mom, who is watching us. I find myself worrying about what will happen to Kirstin and Shiloh without me. They're in their turbulent, early teenage years, and I've taken it upon myself to be somewhat of the peacemaker with my twin sisters. Mom says that I always know exactly what to do to reach them. I constantly tell her it's because I'm also a teenage girl. But she insists it's because I have such a good heart.

Mom hugs me next. "You're being so brave," she whispers. "I love you, Evangeline."

"I love you, too, Mom."

I'm completely numb as she releases me and takes my little sisters by the hand, leading them to the elevator. *This can't be happening, not to my family.* I turn toward Dad, whose face is expressionless as he hugs me. I don't ask what Dr. Naveen said, not yet... because I don't want him to speak my fate aloud. As soon as he does, it will be real.

We make our way to the elevator and finally out of the building. Dad doesn't speak as we walk, and I find myself wishing that I could somehow freeze time, or at least pause it for a little while. But, much too soon, we reach the garden. Built between Dr. Naveen's office and the hospital, it's a place to relax or meditate. Inspirational sayings are carved into the cobblestone pathway that winds throughout, and multi-colored flowers grow alongside the stones.

Tall hedges bearing roses grow in the center of the garden, encircling a more intimate area lined with benches. Something about this place is familiar and comfortable to me, and I've always felt at home here. Dad leads me toward a bench, and we sit. The silence hanging over us is suffocating.

"You used to love this place," Dad reminisces. "After every visit with Dr. Naveen, you'd beg me or Mom to bring you here."

"You tried to bribe me with stickers instead," I remember. "It didn't work. After a while, you learned to schedule my appointments in the afternoon and take the rest of the day off."

"Your mother and I loved those doctor's visits," Dad murmurs. "We'd take turns because you were so much fun to watch. We couldn't get enough of you."

"I'd... I'd give anything to go back," I express. "Even to yesterday."

Dad swallows hard. "I know, Sweetheart." He wraps his arm around me. "You know I'm

no good at this. Remember the day that you figured out you're adopted?"

Despite the present situation, the memory almost makes me smile. I was only five years old but had already noticed that I was different. With doe-brown eyes, dark brown hair, and light brown skin, I didn't resemble my light-skinned, fair-featured family. "We were sitting right here," I remember. "The twins had their two year check-up. You were going to tell me when I got older, but I brought it up first."

"You've always been so incredibly intuitive, Evangeline," Dad tells me. "Smart, kind, funny... unselfish. And so beautiful," he adds, his voice breaking. "Your mother and I are so blessed to be your parents."

"I'm so blessed to be your daughter," I murmur. "I love you, Dad."

"I have loved you since the moment I laid eyes on you. That was the first day I became a dad." He sighs. "There have been hard times... being a father. But this... this is the hardest."

I can tell by the tone of his voice that he's about to say the words that no parent should ever have to say: words that will destroy him and Mom more than my sisters—or even me. More than anything, I wish I could save him from that. But I know that I can't. All I can do is help him, so he doesn't have to do this alone. "I already know, Dad."

"I know you do." He kisses me on the top of my head, having to clear his throat several times before continuing. "When Dr. Naveen first noticed the irregularity in your blood, he ordered further tests." Dad pauses, grappling with himself. "You have acute lymphocytic leukemia. It can appear sometimes in sixteen-year-olds."

"Is it hereditary?" I ask, breaking my rule of never referencing my birth parents.

"It can happen. But it's usually more common between biological siblings."

Anger burns within me. I've always resented my birth parents for giving me up. Now I hate them for doing this to me. If they had just told someone that I might have leukemia, I would have known to have my blood drawn every year, and not just because it's required for my junior year physical. If we had been warned, we would have known to watch out for it—they could have caught it sooner. *But now...now it might be too late.*

Finally I ask the question I've been dreading. "How bad is it?"

A long silence follows. Dad shifts uncomfortably, his breathing becoming more ragged. "It's serious, Evangeline," he murmurs, sounding as if he is literally forcing the words out. "Dr. Naveen said that you need a bone marrow transplant from someone who is a complete match. Most often, people with this disease are a match with a biological brother or sister."

But I don't know my biological brothers or sisters, or even if I have any. I clench my fists, so furious that I'm shaking. *This is all my birth parents' fault. They abandoned me, and now because of them I'm going to lose my family, and my life.* I finally have to look at Dad. He's obviously a complete mess, but he manages not to cry. "How long do I have?" I whisper.

"Dr. Naveen thinks it might just be a few months," he tells me softly, his voice breaking. "We made some appointments for you to see an oncologist Monday afternoon. Dr. Naveen has already put you on the list to get matched with a bone marrow donor. There are several treatments we can try in the meantime... but... they'll decrease your quality of life. And... and most likely..."

I don't want him to have to tell me. "They probably won't work."

Dad says nothing, but pulls me into his arms as I start to cry.

Chapter 2: The Project

By the time six-thirty rolls around, our entire family is going our separate ways as we pull out of the driveway. At my insistence, my parents drop my sisters off at try-outs. I wanted Mom and Dad to have some time to recover from the news today. I know they'll both need to talk it over, which usually happens best when there aren't any distractions. Mostly, I want them to have time to come to grips with what is happening.

I'm on my way to the library to meet Shawn. It's only September, but Mr. Sidely has already assigned us a fifteen minute presentation and five page paper for literature class. It's due in three weeks, and there are no internet sources allowed. I know things like this should hardly matter when I'm dying, but I can't bring myself to ignore a commitment. As stupid as it sounds, I can't leave anything unfinished. And it would be irresponsible to leave Shawn hanging on a project worth fifteen percent of our semester grade. Aside from this, I just need to be normal... at least for a little while longer.

After about twenty minutes, I reach the library. I switch off the car and rest my head on the steering wheel, trying not to think about having leukemia. My hands are shaking badly, and I try to calm my nerves so that I'm not a wreck when Shawn gets here.

Presently, someone parks next to me, and Shawn nods in my direction as he gathers his things and gets out of the car. He walks around to my door, startling me slightly when he opens it for me. "Hey, Evangeline," he greets me, his blue eyes twinkling as he smiles at me.

"Hi, Shawn," I return, knowing his thoughtfulness shouldn't surprise me by now. I find that I'm glad to see him despite everything going on. "Let me just grab my bag."

"I got it," he insists, taking it from me and stepping aside so I can get out.

"Thank you. That's really nice." I notice that his blonde hair is mussed. The sleeves on his blue t-shirt are rolled up, his farmer's tan contrasting with his fair-skinned, muscular arms. His black sneakers still have dirt on them, and his tan cargo shorts have fresh grass stains. "Were you landscaping today?"

"Yep," he replies cheerfully, shutting the door and slinging both our bags over his shoulder. "I was uprooting bushes. So," he adds, puffing out his chest and speaking in a British accent, "ready to write a thesis about how C.S. Lewis still inspires modern day literature?"

I actually smile. Shawn suggested that we pick C.S. Lewis because he is one of his favorite authors. Aside from this, Shawn has always thought it ironic that my last name is also Lewis. "Sure thing. And thanks again for being my partner."

Shawn shrugs it off, which is his way. He doesn't talk much but always volunteers to do projects with me. We've been partnering in every class since our first project in the eighth grade three years ago. We've never hung out socially, but we do homework together in study hall on occasion and sometimes meet up for lunch when we need to review for a test.

Kirstin and Shiloh always tease me about this, but I've never thought about Shawn as more than a guy in my class. We're on good terms, and I know him fairly well. He's definitely the closest thing I have to a friend, and we do spend a lot of time together. In fact, yesterday he suggested that we head up the student council planning committee for prom this year. I had thought it was a great idea.

But now I won't live that long...

The thought hits me like a ton of bricks. Shawn holds open the library door for me, but I hardly notice. I'm starting to think that coming here might have been a mistake. By the time we

get to the bookshelves, I'm almost in tears. I try to dodge Shawn before he can notice, but I'm not fast enough. "What's wrong?" he asks softly.

I allow the tears to fall as I sink into the nearest recliner; mercifully, it's in a little cove of books away from prying stares. Shawn sits down next to me, and an awkward silence follows before he takes another stab at asking me why I'm upset.

"Do you want to talk?"

I shrug, not having the slightest idea of what I want to do. Aside from my family, I don't open up to people. I've never really thought that this was a problem, but Mom has always said otherwise. She's constantly telling me that I shouldn't shut people out. But I have never been in a rush to heed her advice. And I always thought there'd be time, if I ever wanted to change.

In fact, it's for this reason that I never thought I'd have any friends at all. But, for some reason, Shawn was the exception. But even though Shawn is the one person I talk to the most at school, he doesn't know that I'm adopted, what my legal name is, or even that my sisters call me "Evie." I can't even fathom telling him that I'm dying. And not because he wouldn't care... but because he's such a nice guy that he probably would.

Is it fair for our first real conversation to be about my death?

"I shouldn't be crying like this," I tell him as I manage to get a grip on myself. "I don't know you that well. I'm sorry."

"It's all right," he assures me. "If you want to talk, that's okay with me. You look like you could use a friend right now."

The word "friend" strikes a chord in me for reasons I can't explain. The next thing I know, I'm admitting things to him that I'd never tell my family. "I'm really having a tough time. I just... I'm not ready to..." I trail off, not wanting to tell him but needing to talk to someone all the same. "Have you ever thought about death?" I ask finally.

He soaks in my question. "A few times," he admits, surprising me with his honesty. "I'm not afraid," he continues slowly, "because once I'm gone, I won't know it. But I hope that I can leave the world a better place. And... and I hope that I'm at least remembered." He falters, his forehead slightly wrinkled. "Are you going to lose someone, Evangeline?"

I'm taken aback. There's so much empathy in his voice, so much sadness. It's as if he knows exactly how it feels to lose someone and is so kind that he doesn't want me to endure it alone. *But I'm not the one who is going through it.* It's my family who is in pain, who will continue to suffer for the rest of their lives—and *I'm* responsible for their heartache. *I don't want to do that to Shawn.*

"I know someone who is dying," I answer finally, not untruthfully.

"Oh man," he murmurs, studying me, "are you okay?" When I don't answer, he adds, "Want to work on this later?"

I shake my head. "I don't want to be alone right now."

He hesitates a moment before pulling a book out of his bag. "I brought *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*," he offers. "It's from *The Chronicles of Narnia* series by C.S. Lewis. My dad used to read it to me when I was a kid. Ever heard of it?"

I shake my head. "We don't read a lot of fantasy books at home. But we should include it," I agree, grateful for the subject change. We both head for the shelves, selecting more of Lewis' fiction and non-fiction, as well as some biographies on his life. I find myself intrigued by his writing, actually perusing some of his books.

As we work, Shawn makes extra efforts to cheer me up. I actually laugh when he uses his British accent again, and I find it so funny that he does it for the next two hours. Somewhere along the line, we give up on the project because we keep getting distracted by *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*.

Shawn insists on reading aloud with his fake British accent. I find myself getting lost in the story, smiling when I see how excited Shawn is to share it with me. He even does funny voices for all of the different characters, and I laugh so hard that the librarians have to keep coming by and shushing us. And for a while, I get my wish to be normal. I forget about everything, except working on a project with Shawn for Mr. Sidely's class.

But all too soon the library closes, and we check out several of Lewis' works before packing up. Shawn walks me to my car and even carries my bag again for me. Once my doors are locked, he gets in his car, signaling for me to go ahead of him. He follows behind me to make sure that I get out of the parking lot safely before turning off in the opposite direction.

Then, just like that, everything comes rushing back. I remember that I don't have much longer, that my life will be over soon, and I won't even remember it.

As I drive home, I wish more than anything that time would stand still.

Chapter 3: The Wrong Choice

The next thing I know, I'm under a brilliant full moon. I take a few moments to gain my bearings, trying to figure out where I am. Sparkling stars dazzle the night sky, illuminating the marble beneath my feet. I'm standing on a porch within a majestic temple. Great, glittering columns support the temple's magnificent roof; beyond the columns are immense, jeweled doors leading to the inner sanctuary. The longer I wait here, the more everything else fades away... except for the knowledge that this must be a dream.

I turn my attention toward the doors, which seem to beckon me. I walk a little further between the columns, my footsteps echoing on the marble porch. The dream feels so real, and everything around me is electric, bursting with life. When I finally reach the doors, I hesitate. It's as if someone I've always wanted to meet is waiting for me—as if whatever lies beyond these doors can fill a yearning I've always had for something I couldn't explain. But I don't know if I'm ready to find out what that something is. Because, if I find out, then there will be no going back to the life I have always known. I'm not ready for that.

After a short deliberation, I leave the temple doors. I pass through the columns again, until I exit the porch and reach an area that's more open. Here there are golden steps, and I get a better view of my location. Approximately twelve city blocks to my left is a shining, splendid castle. Its parapets reach upward, with winding, magnificent spires dancing their way into the sky.

A huge portcullis and drawbridge stands about eight city blocks before me, both of which are sealed. There are cozy homes and intriguing businesses in this area, as well as people milling about. A huge stone wall protects the entire perimeter. Instinctively, I realize two things. One, I'm standing within a palace city. The second is that I have dreamed about this place every night of my life.

I descend the temple steps slowly. The breeze envelops me, bringing with it the scent of honey and roses. I follow the fragrance, turning towards the left and crossing almost the entirety of the palace city. The guards I pass are smiling, and they nod at the few people who are still meandering through the streets. Every person is glowing with happiness, reflecting the life that surges from this place. The torches and lanterns bathe my surroundings in light, and the moon and stars are so radiant that the world is aglow.

I reach a larger area, where there are several street performers entertaining the crowd. Some are juggling smaller torches, while others sing or walk on their hands. A crowd of children and their parents are watching, cheering appreciatively and clapping.

I drink in the beauty of every detail, allowing the warm stillness of the night to fill me with peace. Presently, the performers extinguish their torches, hugging the children who come toward them. People murmur goodnight to each other as the businesses close up shop, some of them even inviting the guards in for a meal before they begin the night watch. With every step, this place feels more welcoming, more *familiar*, and not just because I have visited here in my dreams. There's another reason, something that is tickling at the back of my mind, but I can't decipher what. All I know is that I never want to wake up from this dream.

At last, I reach the place where the scent of honey and roses is strongest. Here, a marble enclosure encircles a small area about the size of my backyard. The wrought iron gate swings open at my touch, and I enter a secluded garden that strongly reminds me of the meditation garden outside Dr. Naveen's office. Curved benches line the wall, as well as bushes with

beautiful, rose-like flowers that are one solid blossom rather than layers of petals. The flowers bear no thorns nor leaves, and their sweet, honeyed scent caresses me.

I've been here every night... waiting for something.

Tentatively, I approach the center of the garden. Within it stands an ornate, cylindrical silver pillar. The pillar is entwined with jeweled, multi-colored vines dazzling in the moonlight. Atop the pillar rests a golden arrow, shining so splendidly that it might have been forged in the sun. I wish that Shawn could be here—he was a natural when we practiced archery in gym class. I study the arrow, which is about three feet in length from end to end, some of what Shawn taught me now coming back. The arrowhead is finely cut, and the shaft is thinner in dimension but nonetheless sturdy. The fletching on the end is helical, twisting around the end of the arrow in a slight spiral. Despite the fact it's made from solid gold, the arrow appears as if it were carved from wood.

I memorize every detail of the arrow, not wanting to move. I'm usually here when the dream ends, but that's not why I linger. It's because I'm hoping, as I do every night, that I'll find out what I'm waiting for.

Why do I always forget about this dream? I wonder to myself, as I gaze upon the arrow. *No matter what, I have to remember this time.*

At this thought, a light swells in the garden, so blinding that I have to shield my eyes. My heartbeat quickens because I don't think this has ever happened. At least, I don't remember this part of the dream. Finally, the glow abates. There's someone walking toward me, but he's little more than a silhouette against the moonlight.

"Peace be with you, Evie."

The voice is soft and gentle like still waters, and yet powerful and majestic like a mountain. I don't recognize him, but an indescribable happiness fills me at the sound of his voice. It's a happiness unlike anything I've ever felt, except when I wanted to enter the temple. Somehow, the person before me is what I've been missing, though I didn't know it until now.

When the illumination finally fades, I see a golden-haired king with olive-colored skin and a faint beard. Atop his head rests a golden crown, and he carries a sword inlaid with jeweled vines on the hilt. A quiver of golden arrows is slung on his back, though these do not shine like the one on the pillar. He is clothed in a red tunic that tucks into a wide, tan leather belt, white trousers, and brown knee-high boots.

What captivates me most, though, are his eyes. They're honey-brown but shine with a myriad of colors, as if reflecting a sunset. For reasons I don't understand, I'm immediately drawn to him. The moment I meet his gaze, I know that this isn't a dream. Of everything I have ever seen or felt in my entire life, nothing has been more genuine, more *alive*, than this person in front of me. "This is a vision or something, isn't it?" I whisper, watching him. "Who are you? Did you bring me here?"

"I am the Arrow Bringer," he answers. "You are standing in the palace city of Giuda, in the country of Aletheia, and you have guessed rightly that you are seeing a vision." He motions for me to come forward. "Behold, my arrow," he murmurs, drawing my attention to the arrow on the pillar. "This is Aletheia's protection. I gave my arrow to this country at its creation four thousand years ago. It is my promise that I am watching over the Aletheians. This arrow must never be touched, unless by my instruction. The arrow has been here since this land was formed, and it must always remain here. If not, terrible things will befall Aletheia."

I nod, knowing that the Arrow Bringer is someone I should respect. It's the way he speaks—as if his every command comes from unsurpassed wisdom and is ultimately for the greater good. Though I've never met royalty before, something about him is so kingly, as if he is radiating great authority. But it's not just his power. I can sense his love for Aletheia, as if every life within it matters more to him than anything.

But there's one thing I don't understand. "Um... what does it have to do with me?"

"You have beheld this arrow every night since you were a child," he tells me kindly. "And every night for the last year, you have wished for nothing more than to come to Aletheia when you weren't dreaming."

"But you've never been here before," I prompt, now remembering these thoughts.

He shakes his head. "I have been here every time, but you were not ready to see me."

"Then... why can I see you now?" I ask timidly.

The Arrow Bringer motions toward the garden entrance. A beautiful woman dressed in a lavish, cerulean blue gown with matching satin slippers enters the garden. She wears a simple golden tiara and appears to be in her late forties. She has long, dark, flowing brown hair, doe-brown eyes, and light brown skin. It's as if I'm seeing through a window of time and witnessing my future reflection.

"Who is she?" I question, though I have the feeling that I know already.

"Her name is Catalin," the Arrow Bringer explains. "She is your birth mother."

Despite expecting this answer, I feel like I might be sick. I hug my arms against myself, something tickling at the back of my mind. I vaguely recall being furious with my birth parents before this vision, but I can't remember the reason.

Before I have time to try, my attention is arrested again as Catalin waves to a man outside the garden. He's also in his late forties, with lighter skin, shoulder-length brown hair and blue eyes. He is tall and muscular, with a deep cleft in his chin, his broad smile revealing his dimples. He wears a jeweled crown, a silky green tunic, black trousers, and black boots.

Catalin greets the man with a kiss as he enters the garden. "Is that..." I ask, glancing towards the Arrow Bringer. When he nods, my stomach does several flip flops: I'm now seeing both my birth parents. I'm immediately seized with a strong desire to speak to them. They cannot see me—but, more than anything, I wish they could.

"Hello, Baeddan," Catalin murmurs. "I've just come from the temple. I was giving thanks to the Arrow Bringer."

Baeddan's smile instantly vanishes. "Again?" he demands, sounding exasperated. "What has he ever done for us?"

"Baeddan!" Catalin scolds. She glances around, but there's no one within earshot. Catalin lowers her voice. "Shush! What if someone hears you talking like this?"

"What of it, Catalin?" he scoffs, waving off her concerns. "What have I to show for my faith? You have grown more ill. We have served him all these years. We have done everything he's asked. And yet he did not grant us our one request," he spits, his voice climbing. "Either the Arrow Bringer never existed, or he is dead."

Without another word, Baeddan storms out of the garden, with Catalin tearing after him. I can hear them arguing as they disappear into the night. I finally sink onto one of the benches. Now that my birth parents are gone, the reality of what is happening overwhelms me. I can't even fathom being from Aletheia, or that someone who is worshipped and served in this

country is here talking to me. A hundred questions swirl in my mind, but I'm not ready to know the answers. "Do Mom and Dad know?" I manage finally, my throat dry.

"Your parents once loved Aletheia well. But no longer."

I jerk my head up. "They know? Why wouldn't they tell me..." I trail off when I see the Arrow Bringer's face. He's staring off into the distance, his brow furrowed. I get the feeling that he sees something horrible. The expression on his face banishes away any betrayal I might have felt from my parents keeping this from me. Whatever the Arrow Bringer sees matters far more. "You didn't bring me here just to tell me where I come from."

He shakes his head. "I did not."

"Then why?" I ask. "Why are you telling me this?"

He finally turns to look at me. "Aletheia is going to suffer," he declares solemnly. "I've come to ask for your help to save it."

"Me?" I echo numbly. I stare at him, trying to fathom why on earth he would ask such a huge task of me. "Why... why me? What could I possibly do?"

"You alone can prevent what is going to happen."

"I don't mean any disrespect," I answer him, "but you've got to be wrong. I'm... I mean, I know I'm from Aletheia, but I'm not a fighter."

He laughs softly. "You do not need to wield a sword to have a warrior's heart."

"That's easy for you to say," I return, hoping he knows that I'm not trying to be rude.

"If you are willing," the Arrow Bringer answers, "then I can help you do more than you ever thought possible. And, then, these events will not occur."

"What events?"

The Arrow Bringer motions to a portion of the sky. "Behold."

Suddenly, the world shifts so violently that I have to grab the sides of the bench to keep from falling. I watch as time flies forward, as the sun rises and sets. One day passes, and a heavy darkness sets upon the world as we reach the evening of the second. It's now pouring down rain, and thunder and lightning explode in the sky. "What is this?" I whisper.

"You are seeing a vision," he explains, "of what will come to pass without your help."

A cold shiver goes through me as Baeddan once again enters the garden, no longer resembling the man that I just saw. Stubble lines the contours of his cheek bones, and dark shadows hang under his eyes. He wears a dark cloak, as well as black clothing. In his hand he carries a golden arrow, which is a striking copy of the one on the pillar.

I don't quite know what comes over me. My whole body tenses, and my instinctive response is to wrest the fake arrow from him. I try to move, but I'm frozen. The powerlessness enrages me, and more than anything I want to stop what I know is going to happen.

With one swift motion, Baeddan grabs hold of the true golden arrow with one hand and slams his false arrow in its place. Immediately, he cries out and drops the Arrow Bringer's arrow, his hand badly burned. Without hesitation, he snatches it up again, ignoring the pain as the arrow sears into his flesh.

He glares at the heavens, his entire body seething with rage. "This is for killing my daughter." My stomach lurches as he snaps the arrow across his knee, throwing the broken pieces to the ground. He spits on them before disappearing into the blackness of the night.

The result is instantaneous. A blistering wind blasts through Aletheia, carrying the pallor of death. A chilling roar erupts, followed by the smell of rotting flesh. I fight the urge to scream

as a horrifying, sixty-foot long black dragon with blazing red eyes careens into the world, seemingly from nowhere. I freeze in terror as it plunges from the sky. It opens its mouth as it barrels toward me, and I'm certain that it will devour me. But it doesn't. Instead, it swallows both pieces of the golden arrow before vanishing.

Then the screaming starts.

I cover my ears as shrieks of agony and desolation pierce the night. I shake all over, imagining all the horrible carnage causing the wailing. One scream resounds above all the others, reflecting intense, excruciating pain. And that's when I know I must do everything in my power to stop this. I have a responsibility to protect Aletheia from what my birth father is going to do. *If I don't, then I'm just as guilty as he is.*

Presently, I sense the Arrow Bringer's hand on my shoulder, and we're once again back in the present. I rise shakily to my feet, knowing that I believe him. More than this, I know that I'm connected to him. I can't explain it, but I feel like I owe him my allegiance. He could have asked anyone to do this—but he chose *me*. *And he wouldn't be asking unless it was important.*

"How can I stop this?" I murmur.

The Arrow Bringer studies me. "If you come to Aletheia for a time, you can save your people."

"How much time?" I ask quietly, slightly jolted by the words "my people."

"Baeddán's heart is deeply broken," he answers solemnly. "It will take several months to repair. But if you come to him, he will repent of his intentions. Your presence will mend his heart and restore his faith, as well as the faith of many."

I nod numbly, still processing what I just witnessed. "Who was Baeddán talking about... when he mentioned his daughter? Was he talking about me? Does he think I'm dead?"

"He was referring to your sister," the Arrow Bringer explains. "She died one year ago, from the same disease that plagues you."

It's as if I've had the wind knocked out of me. I can't believe it, but I'd forgotten that I have cancer. But now it all comes rushing back. I collapse onto the bench, wishing I could return to when I still thought this was a dream. I know that I have a responsibility to Aletheia, and minutes ago the choice was obvious. *But now... now I don't know what to do.*

It's like my heart is torn. Part of me—the only part I've ever known until today—deeply desires to protect my family. But now there's another part of me that instinctively wants to protect Aletheia. And now I have to choose a side.

I grapple with myself for several minutes. In my heart of hearts, I've known the right choice since I witnessed the vision. More than this, it would be wrong to allow the Aletheians to suffer just so that I wouldn't feel guilty for choosing Catalin and Baeddán over my family. And that's why, at first, my immediate instinct was to do everything in my power to save Aletheia, no matter what it meant for me.

Until I remembered that I'm dying.

Now... now I'm about to make the wrong choice, and it isn't because of Catalin and Baeddán. In fact, now that I've seen them, I can't bring myself to be angry with them anymore, let alone hate them. In fact... the last thing I ever expected has happened: I want to meet them.

But I can't sacrifice my family for Aletheia. I can't abandon Mom, Dad, Kirstin, and Shiloh the way that Catalin and Baeddán abandoned me. Not when I only have a few months left to live, and I might never make it home. I can't leave my family behind without an explanation. I

have to choose them.

And that's why I'll have to live with what I'm about to do.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, closing my eyes because I can't bear to look at the Arrow Bringer, "I can't."

I regret the words immediately but can't bring myself to take them back. When I open my eyes again, I'm lying awake in bed. I toss and turn for the rest of the night, haunted by nightmares of broken arrows, screams, and dragons.

When I awaken, I know that I've made two unforgiveable mistakes. The first is refusing the Arrow Bringer and betraying Aletheia. The second is knowing what I have done and yet not doing anything about it.

Chapter 4: The Meadow

Monday arrives quickly, mostly because I asked Mom and Dad to allow my sisters one last weekend of normalcy. Both Kirstin and Shiloh made the basketball team, and I wanted them to celebrate. I insisted that Kirstin and Shiloh pick our family activities for the weekend, and that nobody bring up Friday's events. For two blissful days, I was able to forget about everything, and I haven't had any more dreams about Aletheia.

I made the decision when I awoke Saturday morning to allow the memory of my vision to dissipate. I may have wanted to know the truth about my past when the Arrow Bringer first told me, but not anymore. With so little time left, I didn't think it was worth mentioning. Mom and Dad hid my past from me for a reason. The last thing I wanted was to cause them more pain by bringing it up, let alone to make them live with the knowledge that I found out the truth. *I don't want to spend my last days like that. I want more days like we had this weekend.*

We hiked in the mountains all day Saturday and had a picnic. On Sunday, Dad made his famous chocolate chip pancakes, and Mom surprised us with our allowance for the entire month. Then Mom and Dad let me take the twins shopping for new school clothes and told me to get the expensive pair of riding boots I've been wanting.

The twins and I made sure to get home in time for dinner, and then we played board games until midnight. We laughed, talked, and told stories, and I pretended everything was fine. I pretended that it wasn't bittersweet, because I knew it would all come to an end soon. And I pretended, as I'm sure my family did, that I wasn't dying. But I knew full well, as soon as the weekend was over, I'd have to accept the truth. *Yesterday was my last day as just another normal teenage girl.*

I lie awake, listening to the familiar morning sounds of my family. Dad shuffles past my door, and I hear the clunking of his feet as he heads downstairs. My sisters and I always tease him about how heavily he walks, and Mom lovingly calls him "Bigfoot." Soon, the tantalizing smell of sizzling bacon wafts into my room, and I smile to myself. Dad loves to cook and is a chef at his own restaurant. He makes breakfast for us most mornings, even though that involves rising an hour earlier for work.

Eventually Mom gets up, and she passes my door as she heads for the twins' room. It's a long-standing joke in our house that Mom always has to wake them first, because I can get completely ready in the time it takes my sisters to pick out their clothes. They take after Mom that way. And it has taken even longer this past month because they both turned thirteen and are now allowed to wear make-up.

More than anything, I wish I could go back to being thirteen, when all I wanted were horseback riding lessons. My horse, Feather, was just a foal with a broken leg when Mom saved her from getting euthanized at the Equine Clinic five years ago. Now, she's blossomed into a beautiful mare with a dark coat, white speckles and mane, and deep chestnut hooves and eyes. Both my parents wanted me to focus on school but promised I could compete professionally once I turned eighteen. They had wanted me to be an adult before making that kind of commitment.

But now... now I'll never be an adult.

I toss aside the covers, knowing that Mom and Dad probably don't plan to send me to school. I pull on a green blouse and slip into my black jeans and blue sneakers before stumbling into the bathroom.

By the time I pull my hair back into a ponytail and head downstairs, the rest of my family is already in the dining room. Mom, Kirstin and Shiloh are seated around the table, and Dad is dishing up his own food. I pause in the doorway when I see that they haven't set a place for me. I know it's because they think I'm sleeping, but soon that won't be the reason. *Soon it will be because I'm no longer here.*

This thought is too much for me, and I send my parents a text explaining that I've left for school. I slip out the front door, closing it softly so that no one will come after me. The day is warm and pleasant, and the sun is shining brilliantly.

I check my phone once I reach school, only to discover that I accidentally left it on silent and have a text from Mom. I'm indebted to her when I read it, grateful that neither she nor Dad were upset that I snuck out. Instead, her text says that they were sorry they missed me and will pick me up after morning classes for my oncologist appointment. I quickly tell her thank you, and that I'll meet her out front at noon.

I reach my locker and stare at its contents, somehow forgetting what books I need to bring to class. *I wonder if I'll finish the semester, or if my parents will have to come empty it.* The thought bothers me so much that I throw my bag in the locker and slam the door. I nearly jump out of my skin when I discover that Shawn is standing behind it.

"H-hi," I stammer. "You scared me."

He doesn't reply at first, and something seems different about him. Then I realize what it is: he's not smiling. In the three years that I've known Shawn, he's almost always had a smile on his face. But today he seems incredibly serious, and the usual spark in his eyes is missing. His black t-shirt and white shorts are rumpled, his black sneakers are untied, his hair is flat, and there's a faint hint of stubble on his chin.

"Are you okay?"

He shakes his head, as if I've just interrupted a deep thought. I get the feeling that he didn't hear me at all. "Hey, um, are you cool if we talk instead of going to literature class?"

I'm glad that I haven't gotten my books yet, because I'm pretty sure that I would've dropped them. Shawn has never been late or absent from a single class. He's trying to get a scholarship for college and is a straight A student, which is part of the reason why I'm glad he always partners with me for projects. Whatever he wants to discuss, it's important if he is asking to skip class. "Sure. We can go to the meadow."

He seems a little surprised but nods, and the two of us leave the building just as the first bell rings. We walk in silence for ten minutes or so, and I find myself wishing that he would say something. He keeps glancing around, as if he's waiting for something. I've never seen him like this, and it puts me on edge.

We finally reach the long dirt road leading to my house. But, instead of following it, I lead him through the trees toward the meadow. It's strange coming this way. I haven't walked through here since I was young, when my sisters and I used to pretend it was a medieval forest. *I'd give anything to go back to those days.*

This thought hurts badly, and I'm grateful when Shawn breaks the agonizing silence. "Do you remember when we first met?" he asks finally. I notice that he waited until there was no chance of being overheard before asking me.

I don't reply at first because it's so random that he's bringing it up. We were both in the eighth grade, and he ended up sitting next to me all year. My nose had been stuck in a book

when he introduced himself. It wasn't really what I'd call a magical moment. "We met in science class. You partnered with me for the final project."

Shawn finally smiles. "It took me all year to work up the guts to talk to you."

I raise an eyebrow, confused. "Why?" I ask quietly.

"It just did," he answers evasively.

"Oh," I comment, sensing that he doesn't want to explain further. "But we did talk," I add after a moment, "pretty much every class, didn't we?"

"I gave you a weekly report that was literally about how my grass was growing," he reminds me. "Except in the winter, and then it was about how my grass *wasn't* growing."

I burst out laughing at this, and it feels so good, so normal. "I just thought you were really excited about your lawn," I reply, cracking a smile.

"It was nice of you to pretend to be so interested," he comments, grinning. "I figured you were either really polite or just bored."

I shrug. "Maybe a little bit of both."

He laughs at this. "Well, after almost an entire school year, I figured it was time for a subject change. We didn't have a real conversation until that project."

I ponder this. Now that he mentions it, we did talk a lot during the month we worked on our project. Our assignment had been to grow plants with two different dependent variables in class and determine which plant did better. Shawn's idea had been to grow one plant inside and one outside. Mr. Brander loved the idea and gave us special permission to be outside during class. We spent a lot of time together.

"You told me that you used to landscape with your dad, which explained why you loved grass so much," I tease. "You guys would also go boating or rock climbing. I think you did karate, archery, and fencing, too."

Shawn stops walking. "You remember."

"Of course," I reply, not knowing why it matters. "But why are you bringing this up now?"

He watches me, seeming suddenly serious again. "You've always been a good friend to me, even if you didn't think so." He glances at my hand before sticking his own in his pockets. "I thought a lot about what you said at the library. And there's more I want to say—if it's all right with you." He glances around. "But let's go to the meadow. You've talked about it before. I know it's special to you."

I nod, feeling sick at his mention of the library. I lead the way, now grateful for the silence as I consider Shawn's words about us being friends. I'm not sure how I feel about it, because I've always been kind of detached. I suppose my detachment makes sense, after learning that I'm Aletheian. But the fact that Shawn considers me a friend means something to me. My mind keeps going back to Friday, when he asked me what was wrong. I have the feeling that he suspects I'm the one who's dying, and he wants to ask me about it. I can't think of any other reason why he would want to skip class to talk to me.

We walk deeper into the woods behind my house, which used to be another favorite spot for adventure games. My sisters and I spent hours out here, poking around the wooded area and pretending to hunt for lost civilizations. I never told them, but my lost civilization was always in another world. Now, I wonder if I've always had an inkling that I wasn't from here.

Thinking about it, I remember that we had to stop coming out here because my parents

thought it was dangerous, and that's when we started playing in front of the house. But I always felt more drawn to this area, and I came here even after my parents told me not to. I had been out riding with Feather last year and decided to take her through the trees. I went much farther than Kirstin, Shiloh and I ever had. I then stumbled across the meadow, which instantly became my favorite place.

We exit the trees, bursting into the sunlight. Shawn gasps as he takes it all in, and I can't help smiling at his reaction, nor cease to admire the meadow myself. Here, there are multi-colored wildflowers, and both they and the tall grass sway in the wind. The flowers stretch far into the horizon, and sunshine reflects off the dew within their blossoms like tiny, sparkling crystals. I turn in the wind's direction, noticing that it almost seems to beckon me farther out, where I know there is a small lake. At the exact same moment, a sweet aroma wafts around us. I freeze as it enters my nostrils, certain that it smells like honey and roses.

"Whoa..." Shawn finally murmurs, turning to me. "Is this... I mean..."

I study him, noticing the dumbfounded look on his face. "What?"

Shawn doesn't answer at first. He glances toward the trees, then at the meadow again, studying a certain point intently before turning back to me. "You really don't... oh."

"Are you okay?" I ask him, baffled by his strange behavior.

"Yea-yeah," he tells me. "I guess, well, I guess I just thought, since you come here so much... actually, you know what? Never mind. It can wait," he murmurs. "First, we really should talk about Friday."

My heart goes out to him. *He shouldn't have to ask me to tell him the truth about my death. He considers me a friend. I need to act like it.* "Wait," I murmur, surprising both of us when I place my hand on his. "I wasn't completely honest with you," I blurt out, quickly removing my hand.

He seems a little taken aback, and I regret interrupting him. It's as if I've stopped him in the middle of a speech he's been practicing. "About what?"

I hesitate. I don't know how to come out and say it. If I'm honest with myself, I would admit that I never intended to tell anyone, not even Shawn. But somehow, my protectiveness of my family has extended to him. As much as I don't want to hurt Shawn with the news, I also can't deal with him finding out in some other way. "Let's sit down," I begin, sitting cross-legged in the grass.

He joins me. "What's up?"

"I... um..." It's a lot harder than I thought it would be. I swallow a lump in my throat.

His face changes from confusion to concern. "Evangeline, you can tell me anything," he assures me.

I shake my head, and then I start to cry great big, gasping sobs that make my insides ache and my eyes hurt. I bury my face in my hands, embarrassed to be crying in front of him. *I don't want to die.* The words reverberate inside me. *I don't want to stop existing. I don't want to forget my family, or Shawn.*

"I wish you'd tell me what's wrong," he murmurs, laying a hand awkwardly on my shoulder. "You don't have to go through this alone, you know."

"I don't want to see you in pain," I whisper, hardly knowing where the words are coming from. "How is that being a good friend?"

He doesn't back down. "You think that seeing you like this doesn't hurt? You've been a lone wolf since the day I met you. Just this once," he insists, "let me help. I owe you that."

"You can't help me," I whisper. "I... I'm dying, Shawn." He flinches, and I have to fight to get the rest of the words out. "I... I have leukemia. It's pretty far progressed. And I'm adopted so... they... there's not much they can do."

He grimaces at my words, his face contorting. But he quickly regains his composure. He exhales slowly, as if he's been holding his breath, fixated on a point to his right. The worst part is that he doesn't say *anything*. And I have the feeling that it's not because he doesn't want to, but because he can't. *It's because he's trying not to cry.*

I have no idea what I should do. But the sight of his pain hurts far more than I ever imagined it would, and even more than the thought of my own death. And as I watch him hurt, wishing that I could take it away, I realize something. Somehow, we've been friends all along, and I just didn't know it. "I'm sorry, Shawn."

"How long do you have?" he asks, as if he hasn't heard me.

I shake my head. "Not long. A few months." He runs his fingers through his hair, sweat forming on his brow. It's impossible for me to imagine his grief. "Didn't you already know?" I ask quietly. "Isn't that why you wanted to talk to me today?"

Shawn seems incredibly distracted. He suddenly rises, and the abrupt movement startles me. Something about him seems off as he helps me up. Before I can figure out what it is, he steps forward and embraces me. It takes me by surprise, but it's the best thing he could have done. For just an instant, I don't feel alone.

"I'm sorry I can't stay here with you longer," he tells me softly, his voice shaking. "I wouldn't leave now if it weren't so important."

"You can't stop living your life because of this. I don't expect you to," I assure him.

"If I could, I'd change things," he continues, though I have no idea what he's talking about. "I want you to know that you've made my life better. I'll miss you. And I won't ever forget you, Evie."

He releases me without another word, so quickly that he leaves before I can even process what just happened. I recline in the grass, trying to make sense of our exchange. Something about what he said stays with me, and it isn't until he's long gone that I figure it out.

He called me Evie. Was he telling me goodbye? I wonder. But why would he do that now? Try as I might, though, I can't figure out the reason. It's almost like he thought he was never going to see me again.

Deciding that I'll ask him about it later, I finally check my phone. I've missed about two dozen text messages from my parents asking why I'm not at school. Though my hands are shaking, I quickly reply that I'm sorry for worrying them, that I'm safe, and I needed some time alone. I also promise to be home by noon. After what just happened, I can't stand the thought of being around people, not even my family.

I lie down, feeling exhausted and drained, as if I've been awake for thirty hours instead of three. I decide that I'll stay here awhile. I watch the grass sway above my head, but it no longer carries with it the scent of honey and roses. I try to soak in the world, knowing that I won't remember it but needing to feel it at the same time. Something about the meadow has always felt electric, comforting, and familiar. Oddly, it felt the same way in my vision of Aletheia. This seems important, and I drift off to sleep still wondering the reason.

Chapter 5: Aletheia's Betrayal

As soon as I fall asleep, I find myself in Aletheia. This time, I guess that I must be in the palace because I'm standing in an immense, gorgeous room with a marble floor. It's lined with stained glass windows depicting images of people and places that I don't recognize but suppose are Aletheia's history. In between each window is an intricate silver tapestry with a golden arrow embroidered on it.

At the far end of the room are four steps; atop them sits an ornate golden throne, with several smaller chairs on either side. Baeddan, dressed in a crimson robe, dark trousers and boots, and a black tunic, sits upon the throne; his crown rests somewhat crookedly on his unkempt hair. He has dark shadows on the contours of his cheekbones and hasn't shaved in a few days. He appears exhausted, somewhat gaunt, and a little sick. He rests his elbow on the arm of the throne and sets his chin on his fist. His eyes are troubled and keep flicking toward the windows. The colors streaming through the windows tell me that the sun is setting: it'll be dark soon.

The door opens, and in walks Catalin. She's dressed in a white flowing gown and matching slippers, her clothing sharply contrasting with her features, which are similar to Baeddan's. It's unsettling to see her again, because I had already forgotten how much I resemble her. Except for my dimples, which I get from Baeddan, I imagine that I would look just like her if I were to age.

"Tell me the truth," Catalin demands when she's halfway across the throne room. "Do not think it has escaped my notice that you have pulled away. When the dragons first appeared yesterday, it was clear you were keeping a secret."

Baeddan quickly clenches his other hand, hiding the fairly fresh burn mark in his palm. "Perhaps the Arrow Bringer has abandoned us," he says in a low, hollow voice.

Catalin grits her teeth. "No, that is not it." She grimaces as an unearthly roar resounds from outside. "It is happening again." She glares at her husband. "What did you do, Baeddan?"

Baeddan leaps to his feet, his hand still clenched as he points toward the door. "I did nothing! Now leave me!"

"Lies!" The echo of a new voice explodes in the cavernous room as the door bursts open. In marches a younger man, perhaps in his early twenties, with green eyes, bronze-colored skin and dark hair. He's tall and muscular, with broad shoulders and a firm jawline; his hair is cut into a short crop. His white tunic is covered in blood, his brown trousers and boots are stained with dirt, and he bears many scratches on his face and hands.

A woman follows at his side, who would be of Polynesian descent if she came from our world. She has long black hair tied back in a pony-tail, light brown skin, and dark eyes. She wears chainmail, black trousers and boots, and carries a sword. Upon her armor is a seal identical to the one embroidered on the tapestries: a golden arrow encompassed by a silver circle. The woman stops halfway across the room, standing very close to me. Her breathing is ragged, and she also bears wounds.

"Jairo, Liana... what is this?" Catalin demands.

Jairo storms into their presence, his left hand clutching a sword dripping in blood. He throws something on the floor, and I feel sick as I realize what it is. There, lying in several broken pieces, is what appears to be a golden arrow. "See for yourself. I was able to touch the arrow without being burned."

Catalin cries out when she sees it, dropping to her knees to examine the pieces. She gathers them into her hand, studying them. "No," she whispers, as they fall from her grasp. She turns toward Baeddan. "This is not the Arrow Bringer's arrow."

"It is a forgery, Mother," Jairo seethes.

Mother? My stomach twists into knots. *Is that... I have a brother?*

Catalin turns toward Baeddan, who does not break her piercing stare. "Where is the real one?"

Jairo whirls on Baeddan before he can answer, storming up the stairs and charging at his father. Baeddan doesn't move nor even reach for his sword as he approaches. "Choose your words carefully!" Jairo warns. "I am not interested in hearing anything else but an answer to her question."

"Please, Baeddan!" Catalin cajoles, shakily getting to her feet. "Haven't our people suffered enough? Why did you do this?"

Oh no. I shut my eyes, trying to block it out. I don't want to see, don't want to know what I've done. But when I open my eyes again, nothing has changed. I can't wake up.

Baeddan's attention falls on Catalin, Jairo, and finally the sword pointed at his chest. "I no longer have it."

"Where is it?" Catalin shouts. "Undo what you have done!"

"It cannot be undone." Baeddan pushes Jairo's sword away, rising slowly and descending the stairs. Catalin doesn't move, and Jairo seems frozen in place. Baeddan removes his crown, handing it to his wife.

Catalin's hands are shaking as she accepts it from him. "Tell me you didn't do this," she pleads. "You are not responsible. You knew nothing about it." Baeddan, however, doesn't answer. Instead, he opens his palms, revealing the burn marks. Catalin gasps, taking several steps backward. "I do not know you."

Baeddan doesn't move, his face contorting when he speaks again. "I'm sorry, Catalin. I destroyed it."

Catalin's wail resounds through the chamber, and the echo of the crown clattering to the floor reverberates long after it falls from her grasp. A scuffle ensues as Jairo lunges for his father, his sword singing through the air. Liana leaps in the way, catching Jairo's sword with her blade. "Jairo, no!" she shouts breathlessly, pushing him back, "you mustn't! You will not be able to live with yourself if you do this."

Jairo immediately backs off, meeting her eyes for a moment before glaring at Baeddan. "Get out of here!" he roars, his hand shaking as he points toward the door. "If you ever set foot again in these halls, I will see that you hang for the crimes you've committed against Aletheia."

At these words, Catalin's knees give out as she faints. Liana barely manages to drop the sword and catch her as she collapses. Baeddan moves toward his wife but stops dead in his tracks as Jairo turns his sword on him. "You are no longer worthy to be part of this family! You are not worthy to rule. You have betrayed your own people! Your own wife! Your own *son!*"

Baeddan's eyes widen when they meet Jairo's, and he recoils slightly. "It was a mistake, Jairo. I see that now. I should have listened when—"

"Silence!" Jairo roars. "You cannot smooth this over with me, Father. And you were right. What you have done cannot be undone. Now go," he orders, "before I change my mind and kill you."

Shaking badly, Baeddan turns and flies from the room. Jairo waits until his footsteps fade before he sighs and sheathes his sword. He approaches the crown, staring at it with a mixture of hesitation and surrender. Wordlessly, he places it on his head.

"Are you all right?" Liana murmurs, her voice shaking.

He sighs. "You know that I am not, Liana. And I will not be for a long time. I cannot protect my people from this."

Liana gently lowers Catalin to the floor, now removing a cushion from the throne and laying it under her head. Once she's sure that Catalin is comfortable, she slowly approaches Jairo. "You'll find a way," she asserts, embracing him. "Your people love you—I love you. You are not alone."

"Your words mean much," Jairo murmurs, holding her for a moment. "You do not know how often I depend on your strength." He takes her face gently in his hands, kissing her. "Please continue to be forthcoming with me, even if you must be abrasive," he requests. "You think it does not show your love, but I rely on it more than you know."

Liana nods, now stepping back from him. When she speaks, her voice is calm and collected. "Then you cannot stay here with me," she tells him matter-of-factly. "You told me that we must convince your father to make a defense against the dragons. Now, that is up to you... King Jairo."

"You are right, Liana." He clears his throat. "We shall take my mother to her chambers and then find Lonya to tend to her. When the sun rises, gather as many Aletheians as possible and bring them into the safety of Giuda. Instruct them to hide in the tunnels when darkness falls. Then bar the gates."

"I don't think that is the best course. Giuda was just attacked by dragons," she reminds him. "Will the Aletheians be safe in the palace city?"

Jairo sighs. "I do not know. But Giuda is our best defense."

Pounding footsteps resonate from the hallway. Both Jairo and Liana turn as a palace guard sprints into the room carrying a torch. He wears chainmail and light armor with riding boots, a sword and sheath, and a golden arrow painted on his chest plate. This guard is tall, with the same black hair and jaw structure as Jairo, although he has much darker skin and deep brown eyes.

"Sire, come quickly—" he stops dead in his tracks when he sees Catalin on the floor. "What happened to the queen?" he asks, his eyes widening. "Should I fetch Lonya?"

"I will take care of it," Liana answers immediately. "What is your news, Cadmus?"

Cadmus turns toward the queen again, frowning slightly before giving his attention back to Jairo. "You had better come with me, Sire."

Jairo sheathes his sword. "Liana, will you—"

"I said that I'll take care of it," she answers, an edge in her voice. "Now go."

Jairo meets her gaze meaningfully. "Thank you, Liana."

Cadmus raises an eyebrow as he continues to look at Jairo. "Sire... why are you wearing the crown? Where is the king?"

"There is not much time," Jairo answers. "I'll explain on the way."

"Yes, Sire."

Cadmus leads the way as he and Jairo exit the throne room. I hesitate for a moment, part of me not wanting to leave my birth mother. However, something tells me that I need to

follow them. I glance back toward Liana one last time, who checks Catalin's pulse before leaving to find Lonya.

Deciding that there's nothing I can do, I chase after Jairo and Cadmus. I catch up just in time to hear Jairo explain what transpired in the throne room. Cadmus doesn't speak, but the dim moonlight shows that his brow is furrowed. What pulls at my heartstrings the most is the sadness in his expression: it's like he's been betrayed by his best friend.

The hallway is immense, lined with tapestries and paintings that I cannot make out in the dark, as well as large cathedral windows. The moonlight creeps in through the stained glass, and outside I hear the dragons. Every once in a while, ember-colored silhouettes dance against the wall. Even from within the safety of the palace, I can sense the intense heat of the fires.

Jairo cringes at the sound of screams. "I need to get back out there, Cadmus."

"Not yet," Cadmus implores. "There is an urgent matter. I just received word from Khyton that a man barely escaped being killed by a dragon."

"Tell me the details."

"Khyton managed to kill the dragon before it was too late, but the man had lost consciousness. Khyton felt that you would want to know about this, due to the circumstances."

"Such as?"

"With all due respect, Sire, it will be much easier to explain once you see him."

We reach a different hallway, and Cadmus turns right. The hallway is lined with more stained glass windows, tapestries, and paintings. Cadmus notices nothing, seeming intent on wherever it is we're going. Jairo, however, keeps watching the dark shapes outside.

I follow his line of sight, able to make out the shadows of the dragons. Though they are smaller than the dragon in my vision, perhaps only thirty feet in length judging by their silhouettes, they're still terrifying. Cadmus finally breaks the silence as we turn down another hallway. "There is something else. You will have questions when you see him. I fear that we may never learn the answers."

Something in Cadmus' voice seems to strike a chord with Jairo. "What is the extent of his injuries?"

Cadmus hesitates. "I think they may be fatal."

I follow Jairo as he enters a dark room, lit only by several candles near one of the beds. Through the shadows, I can make out the form of an injured man among the sheets, his wounds bandaged. "Lonya has tended to him?"

"Yes, Sire."

Jairo takes the torch from Cadmus and approaches the man, lifting the light to see him better. "His attire is strange. Who is he?"

"That is what I wanted to discuss with you, Sire. I think, perhaps... that he is an other-worlder."

My chest tightens at these words, and I take a step closer so that I can see. As the torchlight hits the man's face, I scream and sink to my knees. *No. No. No!* Everything inside of me seems to die, and my whole body shakes as I collapse.

Shawn.

Chapter 6: Beyond the Gate

I awaken in the middle of the meadow, out of breath and sweating profusely. The sun has traveled farther into the sky, and I don't need to check my phone to know that I've been asleep for a couple hours. I pull my knees up to my chest, hugging them close to me, rocking back and forth. *It isn't possible.*

But I know the truth. Somehow, Shawn has found his way to Aletheia. My stomach aches, my head hurts, and I can't get the sight of his injuries out of my mind. I've never seen someone who's unconscious and gravely injured before, at least not in real life. I'm shaking all over, and one thought echoes over and over in my mind: *What if I lose him?*

I didn't know we were friends until Friday, and I had no idea how highly he thought of me until today. Nor did I know, until I saw him lying half-dead, just how much he means to me. *I can't leave him there. I have to go to Aletheia.*

I turn toward the sky, unsure of whether the Arrow Bringer can hear me, or even if he'd listen. "Arrow Bringer?" I call, unashamed when my voice breaks. "I should've gone," I continue, when I don't get an answer. "I'm sorry. But please don't make Shawn pay for it. Please... please let me help him."

A few minutes pass, but nothing happens. I sigh, my attention traveling toward where the tree line should begin. I freeze at what I'm seeing, certain that I'm imagining it. I scramble to my feet and bolt in its direction, now fixated at the exact place where Shawn first looked when we entered the meadow.

A tall archway stands at what has always been the border of the meadow. The archway is constructed of a shining white marble and dazzles in the sunlight, and atop it are words I cannot read. Within the archway are the woods outside my house; I can see them, as real and vivid as if they are in front of me. But they're not here anymore: they've *disappeared*.

I circle the archway several times, always seeing the woods through it but never once leaving the meadow. When I step through, however, a strange sensation similar to wind overtakes me. It feels as if I'm flying, that I'm lighter than air. Lights and colors now swirl around me, and I find myself in the wooded area by my house.

I freeze, unable to fathom what I'm seeing. I have been this way almost weekly when I ride with Feather and, every single time, I have just seen the woods stop and the terrain gradually evolve into the meadow. But now I see an archway standing alone in the middle of the trees, an image of the meadow within it. I circle the archway, just as I did in the meadow, never leaving the forest, which stretches for miles. Now I remember why my parents never wanted my sisters and me to play out here. *It's because they were afraid we'd get lost.*

I step back through the gate, greeted by another rush of wind and color before I find myself in the meadow again. But this time I'm not alone, and my heart feels that it could burst—the Arrow Bringer is here. Though he is clothed as he was before, the smile he once had is now replaced by sadness. Despite how ashamed I am, there is no one I wanted to see more. "You came."

"I told you before, Evie. I never leave you." I'm stunned by this, not having known that he's with me in my waking hours. He nods toward the gate. "It was not until you were ready to accept me that you could see my presence. I have been calling to you for a long time."

My heart beats faster. "Am I going to Aletheia?"

He smiles. "My child, you have been in and out of Aletheia for the last year, ever since

you first found the meadow.”

“You mean I’m in Aletheia *right now*?”

“Yes. But you never could have seen it until now. Many are blind. I have opened your eyes to that which is unseen.”

“Why did you let me come here?” I murmur. “Why did you choose me to save Aletheia? You must’ve known that I’d say no.”

“I give gifts to all,” he explains, “even to those who do not yet believe. For those who finally come to understand, they can see what I have done for them.”

“Shawn saw it,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “Is that what he was trying to tell me?”

The Arrow Bringer nods. “He answered my call.”

I don’t reply, unable to stop taking in the meadow, which stretches far into the horizon. Now that I think of it, I have never traveled beyond the lake that is a mile from here. For some reason, I never had the desire. Now, I feel that is exactly where I need to go. *I have to find him.*

I turn back to the Arrow Bringer. “Is Shawn going to make it?”

“He is gravely wounded,” he pronounces solemnly. “You must trust me.”

His explanation is unsatisfying, but I don’t have the courage to ask again. I falter at my next question. “Is what happened to Shawn my fault?” I begin, my voice shaking. “Would you have needed to call him to Aletheia if I’d stopped Baeddan?”

“There are many things which would not have been necessary,” the Arrow Bringer explains tenderly. “Some of them will bring a greater good than Aletheia thought possible.”

Guilt and shame boil within me. “I know I messed up.”

The Arrow Bringer lays a hand on my shoulder. “Think no more of that now. It does no good to dwell on such things. You cannot change what has been done. But what will happen,” he adds, “is up to you. If you wish to save Shawn, I will help you. But if you go forward, your path will be dangerous. Your life will be threatened. Is this still what you want?”

At this warning, I resist the urge to forget the whole thing. *I can’t leave Shawn.* This thought drowns out all my fear. “I have to save him,” I decide finally. “I can’t abandon him, not when he’s hurt because of me...” I trail off. “I know you said that I shouldn’t think about it... but I have to know... how bad is it?”

The Arrow Bringer glances out toward the horizon. “You have seen it, Evie.”

“What will happen to Aletheia?”

“Darkness is approaching.” The Arrow Bringer turns toward me. “It has already begun. But, in time... there will be light.” I swallow hard, not having forgotten the screams. I can’t even bring myself to look at him. “Your heart is resistant, Evie, for you fear of letting anything get close to it. If you allow me, I will change it. Though you cannot undo what has been done, there will yet be time to help Aletheia, if that is the path you choose. If you wish it,” he continues, “I will work through you to save many.”

My insides twist into knots. As much as I regret what I’ve done, I can’t even fathom what he might ask of me. I shake my head, not able to process what I’m feeling. “I’m sorry, but I can’t promise anything. I’m going... but for Shawn. Nothing else. Please don’t ask me to.”

The Arrow Bringer says nothing more but respects what I ask of him. Now, he motions, and another marble archway appears, though this one doesn’t shine as brilliantly as the other. Just like the first one, it’s in the second spot where Shawn could not stop looking. *He saw both of the gates. He must’ve known this meadow was in Aletheia. And when he said goodbye to*

me... it was because he didn't think he'd ever see me again. Now I know how he felt. I might never see my family again. I didn't even say goodbye.

I shove these thoughts away as I study the archway. Once again, it bears writing above it, though these letters seem different than the last. "The words are your name in Alethé," the Arrow Bringer explains. "Before now, you have understood the visions with my help. Once you pass through this gate, you will be fluent in the language of Aletheia."

"What about the first gate?" I ask, managing to keep my voice from shaking.

"That one bears my name. If your heart were completely closed to me, you never would have passed through it, nor felt at home here."

The Arrow Bringer now steps aside, and I have the sense that he respects my wishes. He will ask nothing more of me than what I am willing to give. And yet I have the feeling, if I asked him, he would give me far more than I could ever hope for.

I approach the gate, having to fight myself the whole way. At first, I'm certain that I won't have the courage to pass through it. That is, until I think of Shawn.

And it is only for Shawn that I step forward, leaving everything behind, unsure if I'll ever see my world or the people I love again.