

Chapter 22 Niaden

Elena cautiously stepped through the treacherous and uncharted terrain, her every move calculated and precise. Sharp rocks jutted out from the ceiling, threatening to snag her clothing or cut her skin at any moment. Sudden turns disoriented her, making it impossible to gauge where she was headed. With each turn, she braced herself for whatever danger may lurk in the darkness ahead.

The tips of her fingers lightly grazed the slick, damp walls, sending shivers down her spine as she felt the clammy moisture creep into her skin. It was like touching a living thing, pulsing with a chilling energy that made her want to pull away, yet she couldn't resist exploring further.

A frenzied energy surged through her fingertips, pulsating and crackling with a mysterious force that seemed to sense something beyond her sight. With a surge of curiosity, she pressed her body against the wall, eager to feel the pulsating energy emanating from within. Suddenly, the ground gave way and she was falling through solid stone. The wind rushed past her as she plummeted, until finally she landed on a bed of soft green grass with a jolt. Her heart raced as she

realized she had just passed through a solid barrier without any resistance.

"Whoa, buddy." Uno said as he looked around.

Elena's eyes swept across the breathtaking landscape. The sky above was a brilliant, deep blue, dotted with fluffy white clouds. The leaves of the surrounding trees were a vibrant green, shimmering in the golden sunlight that filtered through their branches. Clusters of colorful flowers sprinkled the lush grass, creating a kaleidoscope of hues. Majestic trees towered around a vast lake, its surface glimmering like liquid silver under the warm rays of the sun. She couldn't help but feel small and awestruck by the beauty that surrounded her.

The magic felt familiar, like a piece of home. This was fairy magic. It felt like Elysium, only it wasn't.

"Where are we?" she asked breathlessly as she rose to her feet.

"Some place we should not be." Uno's voice quivered as he flew up to Elena's shoulder.

"This is fairy magic."

"This is not your fairy magic." Uno looked around nervously. "We shouldn't be here."

"Where is here?"

"This is Niaden!" A deep rich voice boomed hidden near the brush. The leaves swayed and moved to the side as a tall, beautiful man stepped through. Yes, he was beautiful. His hair almost looked black, except it wasn't. It was a dark shade of purple. His plum-colored eyes fixated on her as he stepped closer. In the middle of his forehead there was a lavender colored tattoo of the North Star. "And you, princess, should not be here."

Elena watched as tiny sprites peeked out from behind the trees. Small skints and brownies also hopped onto nearby branches to get a better look. This was a place for fairies.

"I don't understand. This feels like Elysium but—"

"This place is not part of Elysium." The man sighed in agitation as he stood directly in front of her. "And you do not belong here."

"I don't understand. This is a place for fairies—"

"Yes and no. You don't have to understand, but you can't stay here."

Elena looked into the plum eyes of the man in front of her. She could sense a strong magic coming from him. "I'm Elena. Nice to meet you,"

she said, extending her hand. The man stared at her outstretched fingers without moving. Waiting for her to withdraw her hand.

"I am Everett, the protector of this realm."

"Oh, are you like a guardian?" Elena asked, and the man scoffed loudly.

"I am nothing like a guardian."

"I've never heard of Niaden." Elena could see this man didn't want her here, but she wanted to know more. "I'm really busy, but maybe I can come back again so we can talk."

"You can't. The entrance changes all the time and it is always hidden. You will never find this place again. No one does." This time the man's voice seemed sad. His eyes looked more distant as if he was deep in thought.

"I'm so sorry. That sounds very lonely. Can you leave?" She watched as his eyes snapped at hers.

"If I leave, I may never find this place again. Who would protect it? No, I can never leave. I have to protect this place and the magic that dwells here. It is connected to me."

"This is Endymion's power right?" Elena could feel the power, and it was the same. None of this

made sense. It felt like Elysium.

"Yes, but this place is not part of your world. It is a realm that exists next to your world."

Suddenly, a grizzly creature charged at her. It looked like a hairless wolf with a spiked tail. Elena immediately went to use her shadows.

"Be still." Everett's calm words immediately shrank her shadows away. He narrowed his eyes at the creature in a challenge. It let out a yelp, hunkering to the ground and crawling away.

"How did you do that?" Elena pursed her lips together. Her power meant nothing in his presence, which meant that, whoever this man was, he was very powerful. Was he a deity as well?

"Not even your fairy queen is stronger than me."

"Are you a deity?"

"No."

"Then—"

"Come on, let's get you back where you belong." Everett went to step away before his eyes landed on Uno. "You are welcome to stay here if you wish."

"No, I'll be sticking with the princess. She needs

someone to protect her."

Elena watched as a smile reached Everett's lips. It was there only for a brief moment before he started walking away.

"Follow me."

Elena looked around the utopian-looking place as she followed behind Everett. He didn't want to answer her questions. It looked like he preferred for her not to know much about Niaden. Why was this place separate from Elysium? She wondered if her family knew about this place and about the man who was protecting it.

Everett didn't seem like a bad man. He needed some work on his social skills, but he looked lonely. Even while he was telling her to leave, she felt like he was excited to have a visitor.

The rhythmic thudding of hooves on the earth brought her to a sudden halt, her eyes widening in awe as she took in the breathtaking view before her. A vast, open meadow spread out in front of her, the tall grass swaying gently in the warm breeze. As if summoned by magic, a herd of magnificent unicorns appeared, their shimmering white coats radiating in the sunlight. From above, a flock of graceful Pegasi descended, their wings beating softly as they joined their land-bound

counterparts. Tears welled up in her eyes as she was overcome by the magical sight before her.

"They've come to see you off." Everett stopped and looked in their direction.

"They're amazing."

"They are non-shifters. They decided to take their animals as their true form, making their magic more pure and powerful. They must be protected at all costs. This is their safe haven."

"Why would they come to see me? Creatures of pure magic... why would they come to the shadows?" Elena watched as the man looked at her in shock.

"You don't understand your magic, do you?" He turned to her, arching his eyebrow up. "You think you control darkness?"

"I control the shadows." She listened as the man began to laugh. Tears even came to his eyes as his laughter rumbled uncontrollably.

"I'm sorry, that was incredibly rude of me." Everett breathed in deeply as he wiped the tears from his eyes. "You are not a shadow bender. You have embraced the shadows, manipulating them, but not because you control the shadows."

"What do you mean?"

"You control the light, Elena. So much that you can manipulate the shadows. You make the shadows obey you with the power of your light. A shadow cannot exist without the light. It can also grow when you make the light retreat."

Elena shook her head. "No, even when there is no light, I—"

"Yes, Elena. You and your sister control the light, but you have learned to manipulate the shadows with your light. You and your sister are neither light nor dark benders. You are prism benders. A prism has three sides that bend the light. The three fairy princesses together are the world's prism. You three bring the color and magic to the world. You each have different strengths, of course."

Elena stood there quietly as she tried to understand what he was saying. Yet, there was more meaning in his words.

"Earth, Elysium, and Niaden. Is this part of the prism?" Elena watched as his face grew blank. He turned away from her and began to walk away. It didn't seem like he wanted to talk anymore.

This made sense to her though. If Earth and Elysium were meant for her and Lenore, then

Kendra belonged in Niaden. In this way, they connected all three places, sharing their light and connecting the worlds. But that would mean that Kendra would have to live in Niaden, but that was something that was never discussed before. Her brows knitted together in thought as she slowly followed behind the mysterious man.

A sudden darkness enveloped her as a colossal creature glided low to the ground. She glanced up and saw a magnificent silver dragon gazing down at her with curious, piercing eyes. The sunlight glinted off its metallic scales, giving it an otherworldly glow. Its great wingspan blocked out the sky, creating a sense of awe within her. She could feel the heat radiating from its body and hear the beating of its massive wings. The ground quaked beneath its heavy steps as it landed near her. She could feel the warmth radiating from its body. With one swift movement, it lowered its head to be at eye level with her, and she could see every intricate detail of its powerful features. The air was filled with the earthy scent of the forest mixed with a hint of smoke from the dragon's breath.

"He doesn't shift either," Everett said as he waited for her impatiently.

This world was a place of untamed magic, far

different from the tranquil paradise of Elysium. It was a land that beckoned with its intrigue and beauty. The creatures that roamed here were wild and magnificent, shrouded in mystery. As she wandered through this realm, she felt drawn to its enchantment and wished to stay longer. Every corner held a new wonder, each one more magical than the last. It was like experiencing true magic for the very first time, and she wanted to savor every moment of it.

The silver dragon let out a low, purring hum as he watched her. He seemed pleased with her presence.

"Chagga." Everett warned in a low growl. The beast's silver eyes flickered at Everett for a moment before he lifted his head and roared into the sky. "She does not belong here for you to keep!" Everett quickly returned to Elena's side. He grabbed her arm and pulled her behind him. The purple star on his forehead glowed angrily as he confronted the dragon. "Do you really want to challenge me?"

Elena stood in wide-eyed amazement as the powerful dragon tilted his head away from Everett, bowing in humble submission. But it was only for a brief moment before two more dragons appeared out of thin air, their scales shimmering

in the sunlight. The first was a sleek black dragon, with eyes that seemed to pierce straight through one's soul. The second was a pure white dragon, radiating an aura of peace and tranquility. They landed gracefully next to the silver dragon, who immediately straightened up as all three sets of intense, challenging eyes locked onto Everett.

"Are we really about to do this again?" Everett rubbed his forehead as he sighed in irritation.

A blinding flash of gold caught the corner of Elena's eye, causing her to shield her eyes. She watched in awe as a massive, swift dragon descended from the sky and landed with a resounding thud in front of the other dragons. Its scales gleamed brilliantly in the sunlight, radiating an aura of power and dominance. Its amber eyes glinted with a hint of greed as they locked onto Elena, its lips curling up into a predatory grin accompanied by a low growl.

"I hate dragons," Uno snorted as he lifted up his hand, creating a large shield in front of Elena. "It's fireproof but we should probably step back."

"But Everett—"

"Will be just fine. Stand back, Elena, while I remind these four who rules this land." Everett took a protective stance as he glanced back at Elena.

"Go to the trees." He watched Elena move back to the safety of the forest before he focused on the dragons. "You four really need to learn your place. After all, this place is for fairies, not dragons. You are under my rule!"

Elena's eyes widened in terror as she watched four intense lights form from the depths of the dragon's throats, slowly building and growing until they reached their mouths. The anticipation was palpable, and she could almost feel the heat radiating from their jaws. In a blinding flash of light, the flames erupted, shooting towards Everett with unstoppable force, like a fiery storm unleashed upon the world. Elena held her breath, as she felt the heat upon her skin. She lifted up her hand, shielding her eyes unsure of what was happening to Everett. As the flames stopped, smoke engulfed the area.

Elena searched frantically for Everett until she caught a glimpse of his purple glow. The smoke swirled in a circle until it vanished into the sky. Everett's eyes glowed as a smirk curled over his lips.

"My turn."