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Amazon:

ISBN: 979-8-9852145-1-2 (paperback) ISBN: 979-8-9852145-3-6 (hardcover) ISBN: 979-8-9852145-5-0 (ebook)

Book cover design and interior formatting by Miblart.com



Chrysanthe

he water was clear and smooth as I ran the fingers of my left hand through it, feeling the moisture soak into my skin, sinking into the pores of my extremity.

I stared at the liquid as my limb glided through it, studying the piercing, vivid blue color before I cupped my palm to the fluid, bringing it to my lips to drink. It was cool and refreshing as it slid down my throat, and I swallowed, my entire body immediately feeling rejuvenated.

The water tasted the way it always should be. At least, to me.

It tasted like it was enchanted.

The remaining liquid slowly dribbled from my flesh and into the stream as I turned my left hand around to look at the red chrysanthemum tattooed on the back of it, the green stem of the flower twisting its way around either side of my wrist.

The colors were incredibly bright, alternating hypnotically in the sunlight as I stared at the flower, slowly rotating my wrist to see the entirety of the whole tattoo.

I'd gotten it when I was a baby; the tattoo was given to me by an Oracle. Named after the chrysanthemum, she'd tattooed the blossom onto my skin.

My name is Chrysanthe.

I placed my damp arm at my side as I closed my eyes and tilted my head back slightly, soaking up the sun's warmth.

I felt mud seep in between my toes from where I was standing in the stream, and I welcomed it as I slowly opened my eyes again, taking in the lively world before me.

It didn't matter that my feet were in mud; they would never get dirty because of the water surrounding me. The fluid would clean itself before anything could taint it, all the sediment immediately going to the bottom once there was movement.

As I walked out of the stream and onto the green grass, nothing was on my skin.

My skin glistened as I found a place to sit, and I saw my feet start to shine as the sun's rays bounced off the tattoos, causing them to sparkle.

I smiled as I sat down in the grass, looking at my shimmering skin, watching all the various degrees of color upon my flesh.

More tattoos adorned my feet, starting on the top of my toes before spiraling, curling completely before stopping at the base of my ankles.

I wiggled my toes and watched the design seemingly dance under the sunlight, the memory of how I got them quickly entering my consciousness.

The tattoos on my feet were tree roots, and all of the symbols I had were of particular significance to me. They all determined my fate. They had all been given to me by the same Oracle.

The Oracle who had come to my parents before my mother had given birth to me, telling her she'd seen great potential for me with my future.

According to both of my parents, it was after my birth that the Oracle had returned to see me as a newborn, gazing at me before slowly picking me up and cradling me in her arms. She had rocked me back and forth, uttering a few soft words and muttering an incantation.

The designs had begun to show immediately, slowly growing all over my flesh; everywhere she touched became a canvas for the magical inked patterns.

The tattoos had been vibrant ever since.

Three of them took over my flesh.

There was a tattoo of a red chrysanthemum on my hand, twisting down on either side of my wrist. There were tattoos of tree roots extended onto my ankles. And then there was another set of exotic peacock feathers; they appeared at the end of both of my eye sockets.

They settled on my nose before twirling and twisting. The multicolored feathers took up the area of flesh near my eyebrows and extended to the left and right of my eye.

The skin around my face was saturated in the magnificent blue and green colors of the peacock's eye feather, making me look like I was wearing a permanent masquerade mask.

I'd always loved the tattoo resembling the bird's plumage the most; out of all the symbols I had, the peacock feathers always looked so unique to me.

A breeze kissed my skin gently as it blew through my braid, and I glanced down to see the strands of my blond hair moving along with the wind. The tendrils that had escaped from the braid were flowing in the current. I had woven tree vines throughout my hair.

They were at the base of my braid too, tied in a knot to keep the hairstyle together.

The wind blew through the ends of my dress slightly, causing it to flow up and ripple around my legs.

I watched the air twirl it, studying the colors swirling in the sunlight.

The multicolored dress I wore was a light, healthy, nature-green hue around the chest area, adorned with leaf and tree vine patterns before the material changed into an aqua color at my hips.

The bottom of the dress resembled the ocean, moving and rippling, while the top part looked like the Earth, the land, the trees, the plants. It was a combination of both the tide and the soil.

Both of which I looked after.

I closed my eyes again, absorbing everything; the sights, the sounds. I heard the air whistle around me, feeling it move through my hair, over my skin.

Everything in my existence was right here. The trees and nature; I loved it so much.

Hmmm, I thought as I lay against the grass, my back against it as I absorbed the sunlight. *Hmmm*.

I was relaxing when there was suddenly a soft rumble in the distance. A faint sound of paws interrupted my thoughts.

Huh? I immediately sat up and turned around; that was when I saw a large tiger slowly walking through the clearing, its amber eyes fixed on me, its brilliant, detailed coat shining in the sunlight.

Well, hello.

I felt another smile spread across my face as the tiger's ears swiveled slightly upon recognition, and I heard a broken, breathy rumble resonate from its throat.

The noise coming out of the tiger's airway didn't sound threatening; it was friendly.

"Hey, Caliya," I said, greeting her once I knew she could see me. "Come here, sweetheart."

Caliya's eyes were on me for a few heartbeats, and then she made her way over in two bounds. She moved her head to the side, attempting to graze it alongside mine as happy noises continued to shake through her throat.

Caliya was so powerful; she rubbed her fur against me, attempting to get me to show her attention.

I was never quite used to her being so strong.

She nearly knocked me over with her immense strength, but I laughed before I straightened myself up again.

She was so happy to see me.

"Hey, sweetie," I said, petting her, looking at her patterned fur, feeling the softness. "How have you been?"

Caliya moaned, the noise emanating from her colossal body sounding affectionate as she rubbed her body against mine.

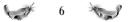
"I guess well, huh?"

I laughed as I stroked her fur.

I'd always had a strong relationship with Caliya, ever since the Oracle brought her to me when I was a child, and she was a cub when the Oracle was training me. Caliya had become an orphan after her mother had died, so the Oracle gave her to me, teaching me to raise her properly so she would one day live in the wild.

She'd been on her own for a while now, and even though she was a wild animal, Caliya had always come to see me whenever I was nearby, always greeting me in the same manner whenever she saw me.

She would always act like a giant kitten.



The Oracle had taught me well; how to raise Caliya and be around nature in general. How to treat everything, from the animals to the flowers to the streams. I had to be respectful of it all, to help it become healthy so that I could protect it from harm.

That was one thing the Oracle instilled in me from the first day she'd begun teaching. If you are respectful to the environment, it will be respectful back.

The Oracle was good at saying wise statements and, now, I understood them as I rubbed Caliya's ears, watching as she closed her eyes in a relaxed state.

She'd laid down on the grass near me, her mammoth head in her paws, her body wrapped around where I was so I could lay against her, her mood suggesting she was going to fall asleep.

I watched Caliya blink slowly; my fingertips twirled around her ear absently, not paying attention to anything else.

I was focusing on Caliya, and I was in my happy place.

And that proved the point the Oracle had taught me.

I had liked her when I was a child; she was an exquisite teacher. She taught me so much, and I had heeded all the lessons and advice. Once she was confident that I had learned enough from her, she entrusted me with carrying on her legacy when she was gone.

It was such a great honor to hold onto it, but it was also a huge responsibility since she had a job that could be challenging at times, but since she wasn't guiding me anymore, it was all my job to do this.

It wasn't easy.

But it was enthralling.

Enthralling because the Oracle had entrusted me to be the Protector of the Earth.



moved as I opened my eyes, blinking rapidly to shake the drowsiness from my brain.

The steady, methodic breathing of Caliya filled my ears as the rise and fall of her chest kept in perfect rhythm with it. The feeling was incredibly soothing as I twisted back to the position I was in before, my head moving in unison with her inhale and exhale.

I lay there, my ear pressed to Caliya's chest, the thumping of her heart sending a euphoric sensation through me. The organ pulsed in a rhythmic, healthy motion as she slept.

It was so calming to me, being with her.

I could spend eternity here, in the position I was in right now.

But, at the same time, I couldn't.

I took a deep breath, listening to Caliya's heartbeat one last time before finally pushing myself up and stretching.

I yawned and put my arms out in front of me.

"Caliya, wake up, sweetie," I said once I finished my yawn. "I need to leave, Caliya." She opened her amber-colored eyes sleepily, blinking before focusing on my face.

I laughed as I rubbed her ears, and a familiar rumble shook through her throat in response as she began leaning her head into my hand.

"Don't worry; you don't have to move."

I had been preoccupied with Caliya, and although falling asleep with her doubling as my pillow was a welcome distraction, it still took me away from things I needed to do today. I still had to look over the immense landscape, checking to make sure that it was healthy.

I straightened myself back up, studying the horizon and the turquoise blue sky.

The streams around me were crystal clear with nothing contaminating the water, the golden sun radiating light toward the Earth. The rays of light hit the streams, causing brightness to scatter across the clear, rippling liquid.

I smiled as I looked around at them, and the smile grew wider as I turned my attention to the plants around the edges of the brooks. Plants and life were abundant next to the small rivers. The flowers were bright, healthy, and colorful, while the grass, which covered the hard-packed dirt and soil underneath, was lush and bright green.

Everything around me was truly exquisite, and I had made it that way.

I admired how healthy my surroundings looked when I immediately noticed what appeared to be a dying flower.

I frowned as I watched it, seeing how sick the plant was.

Hmm. That's not how it's supposed to look.

I squinted, studying the blossom before reaching out and touching it, touching the purple, shriveled leaves, and gasped when the plant burst into life. The petals opened up, and it became beautiful and healthy once more.

I smiled at the change.

That's better.

I breathed in deeply, exhaling heavily and pausing for a few moments before glancing at the woods ahead of me. I caught my breath.

What the...?

I squinted, turning my head to the side slightly as I looked at the trees.

Huh?

The foliage, the trees, they appeared to be scorched. Like a wildfire had blazed through the woods, leaving a carcass of the vegetation behind.

I shook my head, puzzled.

The trees' bark looked like it was chipping off, while the other section appeared to be completely charred.

How did that happen? I thought as I took a step closer, my mind in a complete whirlwind.

The leaves and branches that were once a light, lively green were now a gross, brownish-black color. Their stems began to slump over, causing the entirety of the stalks to appear lifeless, dead. The wood on the trunks seemed to be hollow.

Empty and void of life.

Everything looked dead, disgusting, and rotten.

How did this happen?

I blinked, scanning the rest of the forest, and realized that the entire expanse of the woods appeared wholly burned.

I shook my head, confused.

How could this have happened? I was here yesterday *and* today, inspecting everywhere I walked; I made sure every part of the environment was healthy.

How could this have happened?

I glanced down at my tattooed feet, studying the design before an idea dawned on me.

Could it be that I...? Wait a moment.

I hesitantly took a step forward in the grass, looking behind myself afterward.

The greenery with my footprints embedded in it was already beginning to grow back; in the blink of an eye, everything underneath my feet was entirely back to the way it was before. It was as if nothing had touched it in the first place.

I smiled. My hesitation faded immediately.

Okay, so that's a good sign.

My ability still worked; nothing was wrong with my power. I could continue my duty and fix the forest that was now definitely in need of some attention.

I had the power to control and heal nature. I could regenerate plants, mend wildlife injuries, and take command of the weather.

I loved my talent; I'd had it ever since I was a child, and I wasn't the exception in my family. My parents were skilled as well.

They both had extraordinary abilities; my father, Viro, could control all the Elements; Earth, Water, Air, and Fire, while my

mother, Thera, could heal anything or anyone she touched. She could also heal herself.

Every time I had a cut or a scrape as a child, she would touch the wound with her hand, sometimes whispering an incantation, and I would watch the injury as it slowly closed up, the pain leaving almost instantaneously.

I'd always envied my parents when I was younger, watching them use their talents. It always amazed me.

I'd watch my father create thunderstorms with his bare hands when the ground was parched and thirsty; I'd watch as he'd throw up his arms, causing the air to suddenly move and whistle, and it would soon be pouring down with rain. Lightning would illuminate the sky while thunder boomed across the landscape.

I would be observant of my mother as she would gently touch something that appeared to be incapacitated. Sometimes, she would cradle it in her arms for a short while before letting it go, any ailment the creature or Being had struggled with before entirely extinct.

It was not long after I turned four that I realized I possessed skills myself; I could bring the tree saplings that had died from lack of water back to life by touching them and also heal an animal's injuries.

There was one animal, in particular, I'd saved as a child. It was a tiny chipmunk with a fractured leg from accidentally falling out of a tree. The poor little one was so terrified, I remember, shaking like a leaf.

That was the first memory I had of myself having the ability to save creatures.

I'd saved the tiny little chipmunk by putting the small animal in my palms, petting its fur softly with my thumb to relax it before placing the rest of my fingers on its leg, holding it firmly but gently, before letting go after a few moments. It had scampered off, easily able to bound away.

My mother had seen what had happened. She had come right into view in the forest after the chipmunk had run away from me. I'd wandered away from her at the time.

She'd talked to me about the chipmunk, asking me questions, and, in a few mornings, the Oracle had returned, fully intending to train me.

Both of my parents knew I was ready for something extraordinary; the Oracle prepared to teach me.

It was when I was four that she had started taking me under her wings.

I shook my head at the memories as they all came back to me, laughing as I remembered them.

I'd certainly had an exciting life so far.

Barefoot as always so my powers would work, I made my way around the terrain in the woods, leaving a fresh growth of greenery behind me.

The tree roots tattooed on my feet sparkled in the sunlight, twinkling as I moved. I brought both hands up from my sides as I walked through the forest, my red chrysanthemum tattoo gleaming as I touched everything within my reach.

A singing bird flew overhead, and I felt a grin spreading over my face as the creature moved gracefully through the trees; it disappeared within a few moments.

I loved the sound of nature, how beautiful it was, and loved the fact I had this gift. The Oracle trusted me with all the responsibilities to take care of the Earth, and I loved it.

A quick movement out of my peripheral vision caught my attention, and I paused, turning to see a brown rabbit moving toward me, its nose sniffing the air nervously as it moved through the leaves covering the forest floor.

"Well, hello," I said as I crouched down to put my hand out to the rabbit. "You can't find a lot of food, can you?"

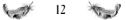
The rabbit tentatively extended its head out so it could sniff my hand, and it moved closer, becoming comfortable around me.

"There you go, little one," I said as it advanced. "There you go. You can trust me."

The creature was no longer nervous, now it knew I wasn't a threat, and it made its way in my direction, allowing me to pet its fur.

"Aww."

I rubbed the animal gently before picking up the rabbit with my left hand, cradling it in my arms, letting the creature rest while I continued to touch it.



"Aww," I said again, watching as it burrowed itself into the crook of my right elbow, snuggling down to sleep. "You're a cutie. Don't worry; I got you." I pushed myself up to my feet. "I got you."

I continued to walk through the woods, regenerating the foliage as I comforted the creature. I suddenly saw a multi-colored bird nearby, perched on a rock.

It turned its head in my direction, and I grinned as it flew from the rock and landed on my right shoulder.

I laughed; I indeed looked like I could communicate with creatures. They sensed that they could trust me.

"I love you both." I moved my head toward the bird on my shoulder. Then I looked down at the rabbit in my arms.

You both are too cute.

I smiled as I made my way out of the woods to a meadow nearby; I was still thinking about my childhood. I thought back on the happier times of my existence, lost in my thoughts, when the colorful bird promptly flew off, taking off as fast as it could in the opposite direction.

What the...?

I stopped, and that was when I felt the creature in my arms squirming; the rabbit had woken up and wanted to get out of my arms as fast as possible.

"Okay, okay little one. Here you go." I crouched on my knees to let the animal down.

The rabbit bounded toward the woods as fast as it could.

Once the animal left, I stood there, dumbfounded that both animals that were by my side had gone away around the same time.

What the...?

Then it hit me.

Something was going on here.

Something big.

I turned around, and my feet became rooted in the grass, the smile dissolving from my face.

Worry crept through my brain as I looked ahead at the scorched vegetation. My mood quickly turned anxious.

I fixated on the charred trees and leafless limbs and branches in front of me.

The forest seemed to go on forever, and that wasn't good at all.

I twisted around to see all the work I had done, but instead, I only saw an empty, vacant, lifeless, dead carcass of trees behind me. All the blood drained from my face, and my insides felt like an inferno. I saw everything I had done, yet again, was destroyed.

No. No. No. No. No. No. No.

I turned back and looked at the large, dead cluster that seemed to be eternal.

No. No. No.

I had to figure out what was going on.

And fast.

If only I knew.

If only.

A sharp, piercing shriek abruptly ripped through the once silent sky, causing me to jump out of my reverie.







y eyes darted to the source of the noise as my heart pulverized my chest.

АННН!!

I instantly stopped walking; my feet rooted to the spot as my head snapped upward. I stared at the sky, immediately attempting to locate the source of the noise.

What was that?

My eyes darted across the upper atmosphere, trying to find whatever caused the sound when the high-pitched interruption became louder and louder. The noise instantly morphed into a booming, thunderous clamor that threatened to shake the ground beneath me. As it got louder, the sky darkened, resembling the atmosphere before a thunderstorm.

What's going on here? I thought as I scanned the sky for the source of the racket. The loud sound engulfed my hearing, threatening to rupture my eardrums as I watched everything.

I finally noticed something in the distance of the sky, falling toward the ground.

It took a few heartbeats to realize it was the cause of the commotion.

It was because of this object tumbling toward the Earth.

It was falling incredibly fast; if my eyelashes would've fluttered and closed, I would've missed the entire thing.

I stared at the sky, fascinated. The loud noise assaulted my ears, and I quickly saw something strange.

Something appearing to be fire streaking across the atmosphere trailed behind the mysterious matter.

The object started lowering to the ground.

It continued to plummet, almost as fast as a hummingbird's wings, and I realized that whatever this object was, it was causing the sky's current setting. As it hurtled toward land, the sky's condition worsened, almost appearing like a gigantic tornado, with massive clouds forming above the object.

I'd never seen anything like this.

The object finally fell out of my view, slamming to the ground with a thunderous boom that almost split my eardrums apart.

I winced as it crashed into the Earth.

It took a few moments before I could move, and when I did, I was instantly light-headed.

"Ahhh," I whistled as I removed my hands away from my head. My breath squeezed through my teeth in a rush. There was still a ringing deep within the canals of my ears, pounding my eardrums.

I shook my head quickly before I stopped; even doing the most basic movement was nauseating.

I stood there in the grass, watching dust fly from where the object had landed. The remains of the dirt rapidly billowed into the sky and became a furious whirlwind.

Darkness draped everything in my view, coating me in a dreary feeling, blocking out the sun.

The healthy, happy emotion radiating from the Earth and the atmosphere had changed to a bad feeling immediately.

It took me several moments of blinking rapidly to realize there was something furry against my arm.

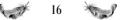
I heard a loud inhale and exhale, followed by a moan that reverberated through my bones.

I looked down to see Caliya beside me; her shoulder blade pressed up against my hand, her ears straight ahead as her amber eyes watched the clouds of sediment past the tips of the forest.

Hello there, sweetheart.

I watched her for a few heartbeats, studying her body language, noticing how focused she was. I wondered if the noise had affected her hearing.

"Caliya? Caliya, sweetie, can you hear me?"



She turned her head as she brought her attention toward me, blinking when she saw me smile.

"Hello, beautiful. I guess you can hear me. That was loud, wasn't it?" Caliya scanned the woods.

I reached up from my side; my hand began to touch her fur as I looked at her; her eyes fixed on the foggy area above the cluster of trees, her body rigid and muscles tight.

I squinted as an idea popped into my head.

"Caliya?"

She twisted her gigantic, striped head around, looking at me with her amber eyes.

"Will you go ahead of me? Will you go see what happened?"

Her tail twitched, batting the air as she heard my words. She blinked, and I could see her attitude instantly change.

"Go on, Caliya, go look," I said, pointing in the direction of the commotion.

She turned her head, and I could see that she was following where I was pointing, over to where the racket was.

"Go on, girl." I leaned down, petting her head and scratching her ear as she stared ahead. "Go look. I'll be right behind you."

Her gigantic head twisted around toward me again, and I saw her throat tremble as I heard the breathy rumble shake through her muzzle. I laughed as Caliya's eyes fluttered, and she pushed her skull into my chin, her ears pressed against my airway.

"Awww, sweetie." She pushed her body into me. "I'll be alright." I kissed the top of her head and rubbed her ears. "You just have to go see what happened. I'll be alright; just run ahead, okay? Find out what's going on."

Caliya let out another breathy moan as she cuddled up to me but stopped when her eyes fell upon the commotion again. I stopped stroking her fur; I needed her to concentrate.

Caliya rumbled as she began to focus on what was in front of her; a deep throaty noise replaced the affectionate moan, her tail twitching. The sound carried through the air as she called, trying to locate anything in front of her.

Then she took off into the woods, in the direction of the dust cloud rising far into the atmosphere.

"Good girl, Caliya," I whispered as I saw her run off into the woods, her gigantic, striped body moving fluidly through the trees. "Go see what happened."

I watched her graceful frame move quickly through the dead-looking forest; she was quite a distance away from me. She was a fast runner.

Go on now, Caliya.

She probably would be able to find or hear something even I couldn't. After all, she was a tiger, she was a Creature of the Earth, so before I could do anything, I had to trust her, to see what she would or could be able to find.

The Oracle always taught me to trust nature if I ever hesitated about anything or got scared. She always said things would work themselves out; if they needed help, I had to use my abilities to save the Earth.

I heeded her words, but even as I did, it never hurt to use my powers to help nature in any way.

The Oracle was never against it either when I used my powers to heal the planet. She was always glad I was helping nature in any way possible.

That was what I loved about my ability, having the power to help, mend, and protect the Earth and its inhabitants.

Which was why what was happening right now was so frightening to me.

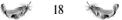
Here I was, a Celestial Being with enchanting abilities, a Protector of the Earth, yet I had no clue what was going on with the very Earth I was supposed to protect.

Calm down, Chrysanthe. Stay calm, and everything will be alright.

I took a deep breath once Caliya was out of my view, trying to steady my rising heart rate as I looked down at the grass. I watched my tattoos for a few moments before taking a step forward.

It's going to be okay. I walked ahead toward the trees.

The atmosphere continued to appear stormy and malicious as I paced rapidly through the meadow, through the long grass and flowers, determined to catch up to Caliya. My dress wavered slightly from the angry breeze that started blowing through the clearing.



I shook my head at the disturbance and continued moving as fast as I could.

I needed to see the extent of the damage, if I could repair anything.

I heard the grass rustling softly in the wind, and I glanced behind me to see that it was growing back as soon as my feet left it. For some reason, though, it was not growing as fast as it should.

I squinted at the greenery behind me, feeling bewildered. By now, I was in a rush to get into the forest, locate Caliya, and see if she possibly found anything, so I turned back around and kept moving.

My mind was still racing as I continued on my way toward the scorched trees.

The tattoos on my bare feet looked darker and gloomier as I advanced toward the deprived woodland area, and I held my breath as I finally entered the forest, stepping into the soil that was covering the ground.

My stomach dropped into my gut when I looked down.

My eyes widened as they followed the designs, which had begun to mutate, morph, and dissolve until they were almost a sickly smear engulfing my flesh.

My heart pounded against my ribcage as I watched my beloved patterns turning, changing into something appearing to look like thorns instead of tree roots. They were sharp, cutting and slicing into my flesh, leaving blood trails on my ankles.

Huh?

I quickly brought my hand up from my side, wanting to see the red chrysanthemum tattoo staring back up at me, but I gasped as I saw the design.

I closed my eyes, unsure if I was still mentally healthy or if I was losing my mind; I breathed rapidly. My entire body trembled as my mind scrambled to put together what my eyes witnessed.

It took several heartbeats to calm my nerves, and after I regulated my breathing, I opened my eyes and took in my left hand.

The blood left my face; I immediately felt bile rise from my stomach, lodging into my windpipe as I took a close look at my chrysanthemum tattoo.

Or, at least, what remained of it.

I was afraid if I continued to breathe, I would burst into tears as I studied the design.

The red chrysanthemum had mutated dramatically, the same way the tattoos on my feet had.

I stood on the soil, completely barefoot and nonplussed, watching the symbol that was now the opposite of what it had been before.

The beautiful, bright red chrysanthemum that had taken up the entirety of the back of my hand was now a deep, almost black purple. The entire flower had shrunk into the middle of my flesh and had shriveled up into nearly a disturbing ball of death. The petals were wilting and falling off.

It looked pitiful, and my heart pounded inside my chest.

The plant tattoo instantly turned; it quickly appeared depressed and hopeless while the stem of the plant looked brown and sickly as if it was rotting on my flesh.

No. No. No. NO.

The stem of the now rotting, dead chrysanthemum twisted around my wrist, slowly looking like it was cutting off the circulation in my hand.

I squinted, completely taken aback, and I observed my fingers; even they had begun to turn purple.

Okay. I was beginning to understand something massively wrong here, and I had to figure out what it was.

It dawned on me that it wasn't just my extremities that were turning purple; my entire body was beginning to look sickly since everything else on my skin had already turned.

My anxiety levels rose.

I struggled to breathe as my heart rate climbed; I felt my pulse beating through my skull.

Chrysanthe, it'll be okay. You will be alright.

I tried to slow my heart rate as I took in my new surroundings, trying to get a grip on what was around me as I trembled. At any moment, I felt like I was about to have a mental breakdown. For a Fantastical Being like me, that was almost impossible.

My body shook as I nervously glanced around, getting my bearings in this strange, dead place.

I gulped as I noticed my surroundings.

The dead trees around the area were completely rotten, some of them cracked and split in places, the bark completely stripped from the trunks. Every section of them was disgusting, with a sickening smell; the soil even had an overwhelming odor, almost like it had decaying matter mixed into it.

Ugh.

My nose wrinkled at the awful, unnatural scent.

There seemed to be no end to the woods as I looked ahead, in the distance of the dead forest, the eerie rotting place that was going on for eternity.

I shivered as I hesitantly glanced at my feet, looking at my morphed, sickly tattoos, and sucked in a breath as I tried to get my bearings. My insides froze, the blood draining from my face as I saw nothing growing where I stood. No leaves or foliage were beneath my feet.

It stayed infertile, arid, and deserted.

No. No. No. No. NO.

Something was very wrong here.

My abilities didn't work in this place; nothing could affect these woods, which was a problem.

This entire forest was like a graveyard.

Well, no.

It was a graveyard; everything here, everything I was surrounded by, was dead or dying, splintered or decaying.

Nothing was uplifting. Everything was debilitating about this particular area.

If only I could figure out the reason why.

A rumble echoed through the trees, breaking me from my thoughts; I shook my head slightly before twisting around, attempting to locate it.

Hey, Caliya.

I smiled as the noise echoed through the dead forest, floating through the air as the wind carried it. I looked up at the sky, finally locating the path where Caliya was from the debris that was polluting it.

That would be the easy way to find her. Just follow the cloud of sediment in the atmosphere.

Come on, girl, keep making noise, I thought as I began trudging through the disgusting soil, through the rotting, decomposing material. Help me out here, sweetie. I had to go down the path toward the sediment cloud, and then I would be able to see Caliya and find out if she found anything.

I was going to follow nature as the Oracle taught me.

I ducked beneath the low hanging branches and split twigs as I kept my eyes fixed on the atmospheric disturbance, Caliya's calls still shaking through the forest.

She was not far away. I could hear her; she was very close.

I stepped over a hollow log as Caliya continued to rumble, the sound shaking through the dead air, and that was when I paused to listen.

She was not far from me.

I looked at the fog that had now begun to engulf the barren forest, hanging over my head.

Where are you, Caliya? I wondered as I squinted, peering through the fog, trying my hardest to see in front of me. It had now become difficult to view anything; the clouds had dropped way below the trees, preventing me from seeing even my bare feet.

Now I knew there was something weird going on.

Something was wrong.

Get out, Chrysanthe, I said mentally as my body slowly began to feel damp; I was starting to feel like I was overheating from the inside. Come on, get out of here. Get out. Get out. Get out.

The miserable, gray clouds had completely taken over the entirety of my surroundings, making me feel instantly trapped, claustrophobic.

I scanned the area, instantly confused, and my head darted from left to right, attempting to find the path I'd been following.

Come on, Caliya. Where are you?

I stumbled blindly through the trees, unaware of where I was going when a loud huff of oxygen resounded to my right.

I stopped moving, freezing in my tracks as I squinted through the fog, now sure I had found her.

"Caliya?"

That familiar, breathy moan echoed through the air.

"Hey there, sweetie." I stuck my hand out, trying to see if I would be able to make my way through the low hanging clouds.

The dying purple chrysanthemum design smeared on my wrist as I kept my extremity out in front of me, the stem of the plant tattoo wrapping around it in an unsettling fashion, tightening around my flesh.

I felt my insides squirm as I saw the tattoo; my nervousness made me almost hit my breaking point when I heard Caliya moan again.

"Caliya, honey, I'm right here," I said as I finally made my way out of the dreary fog. I moved my hand back to my side as the low clouds disappeared, revealing the strange, disturbing forest once more. "I'm here, sweetie. I'm right..."

My words cut off in a gasp as my breath got trapped in my throat; I instantly felt as if lightning had struck me. I froze, completely unaware of what to do as I blinked, my eyelids fluttering as I took in what was in front of me.

Caliya was lying on the dirt, her mouth open as she breathed, her gigantic body sprawled out on the messy soil as her chest rose and fell.

Caliya had raked the dirt with her claws; she'd thrown it around with her muscles.

Huh?

She'd exerted herself since she was breathing so hard, and now she was exhausted.

But the fact she had overexerted herself wasn't the reason why I had stopped dead in my tracks as soon as I saw her.

It was because of what was beside her, clinging to her fur like a lifeline, grabbing her massive body to prevent falling back into the hole a little bit away from where Caliya was.

What the...?

It looked like an antelope or some other prey beside her chest as she lay there.

Utterly smothered in the dirt, filthy beyond belief, but as I started to look closer, I shook my head.

That would *never* happen. It wasn't like Caliya to show me what she was going to eat.

Something else was going on.

What is this, sweetheart? I thought questioningly, my brain not processing what was happening.

Wait.

It took me a few heartbeats to study what was going on, to understand what was in front of me.

Wait. What?

Dirt smeared across Caliya's fur as she huffed, air rushing into her lungs, and that was when I saw the grimy, soil-encrusted hand brushing against her body.

What the...?

My thoughts were whirling as I stared at what was in front of me, unsure of what was happening. It took several moments to realize what was beside Caliya, and when it did register, I gasped.

The hand with a firm grip on Caliya's body hit the soil next to her left paw, and I saw a disheveled, pathetic-looking face covered in filth staring at me, his dark brown eyes conveying complete defeat.

His body covered head to toe with sediment, his hair encrusted with dirt, with his eyes a deep, muddy, murky color.

But his attitude instantly changed as soon as he saw me; I could almost see the sparkle immediately appear in his eyes as they connected with mine.

The eyes were a deep, dirty brown but so familiar.

He blinked several times once he saw me, almost as if he couldn't believe I was real.

"Chrysanthe?" he rasped.