

## CHAPTER I

### DAWN

*Good morning.* I felt a bitter, stinging cold wrap around the whole of my body. The sun was softly piercing through the silhouette of a tree's canopy I sat beneath. The air should have been warm, only being broken by what could best be described as the perfect spring breeze. The kind that slowly bumps clouds in its path. But I was cold. Painfully, excruciatingly cold. To the point where I could not bring my hand to pinch my own body. Unannounced, a drop of warmth slid down my forehead. The sensation was not pleasant or homey. Rather it burned like a reopened cut as it spread to my eyes. I noticed a clot of the magma-like liquid settle on my arm. And I stared at it, watching without moving, without breathing. Thick, crimson streaks slowly crawled down the limb, carving a river until I could feel them reach the delta of my fingertips. My breath remained hard. Shallow, despite the desperate gasps from my heart, which only kindled the fire.

I startled awake to a roar, deafening and coming from above. Quickly, I tried to rise up from the ground I laid in to find my body not much more responsive than what it had been in my previous nightmare. Still, I managed to remain crouched, enough to make out I was inside a cenote. Or at least it appeared to be one, for it was a small cavity likely flooded by the storm outside. The entrance from which the water flowed was too high to reach, leaving me to stumble about in an attempt to find another exit. With barely functioning eyes and a buzzing head, I tripped by my own dragging step onto what seemed to be a broken-off piece from a tree's roots. Still struggling, I grasped the root with the only hand I could still close. Using the stick and my shameful tail, I steadied myself on the wet rock. A shred of sound came out of my throat, which felt destroyed and unfamiliar with pain, unable to produce a proper grunt. Still, I trekked, scrambled, squirmed in my definition of a straight line at the time 'til I spotted a faint hole. I did not care where it went, or whether it was safe, as eagerly as I could, I pushed myself through it, falling into a chain of tunnels. They seemed to trail on infinitely, long and slim like the burrows of a wyrm. Along the system of channels and turns, my mind grew fuzzier and numb, my own heaviness bringing pins and needles to my legs, my own blood still staining my cloak and coagulating in the frigid cavern air. But again, I did not care for that. I did not, would not, could not fathom caring about anything besides living at that dying point. I refused to stop. I refused to fade. I refused. I...

Awoke, emptied and delirious. Lying on a small, framed bed in a large tent, my wounds wrapped and tended to. The space was rather cluttered, scraps and metal parts littered throughout it. As I peered around, my body ached, somewhat recalling to me the cavern. Only somewhat, for I could only remember what I'd felt. Most of anything I saw there had been replaced with mere static. I stood, without much difficulty now, and continued to balance on my tail. By now I had become well-accustomed to being unable to step properly. An inexplicable heat shot through me as I acknowledged that, not too different from what I'd felt in my dream. Suddenly, footsteps echoed from outside the tent. I reflexively tried to hide behind my wings, or what was now one wing, which I'd not noticed before due to my ignorance. Not disregarding the missing appendage, I shivered as a figure entered the area. We both glared quietly at each other.

"Ah, you are standing," they sighed, "A relief, I must say."

She was a lady—an owl with bright brown plumage, wearing a soft smile on her face despite the dark bags under her eyes and narrow gaze. Her clothes were simple, a robe similar to my own and large,

round glasses. My heart pounded as in my previous dream, this time for a different reason. My mouth tried to move too, but no voice came out. I suppose I didn't know much of what to say anyway.

"I apologise for not spotting you sooner, I'd been cataloguing a handful of books at the library."

She spoke with delicate poise, though it seemed each sentence was demanding of her. Still beaten, I made no sound in reply, but my mouth kept stuttering to speak. She slowly approached the bed, each step silent. Her stature rather towered over mine.

"Be not so distressed, I do not expect a response after seeing you in such broken conditions," the lady said suddenly, "Though, I take it you are not one of many words."

She let out a hushed laugh alongside her last phrase, deliberately noticeable. As I processed her speech, it crossed my mind that she was a unique sight. Meeting a living soul in this era was a remarkable event, let alone one not belonging to my own kind.

"Would you come with me?" she continued, wing outstretched, "It is alright if you're in want of more rest."

I lightly nodded and gave my hand to her, my shoulder sore, but willing. The warmth radiating from her felt affectionate and sunny, serving as a pleasant break from not being able to go outside. We walked, with her matching my pace, towards the exit of the tent, revealing that we were within a low-ceilinged, circular cavern on the edge of a chasm's inside. A long, hanging cloth stretched from the cave opening and across the chasm to the other side. Meanwhile, what must've been miles below us was a ruined stone bridge, weathered and obfuscated by a thick, almost cloud-like fog that looked stormy in the darkness of its depths. Anything beyond that envelope of fog was invisible from our height. Upon the conclusion of my awe, she began to take me to a small stairwell deeper in the cave, which was very clearly handmade.

"This path leads to my library, both a storage and resting place for those who stay here," said the lady, confirming our destination.

We arrived there at the bottom of the spiral, carved stairwell, where humble candlesticks and lanterns cast a yellowish light about the room. The entirety of it smelled of beeswax and hardwood, with a lingering hint of mildew. Despite that, not many books were present.

"I am well aware it is not the greatest piece of construction, but I am forever thankful for the person that made it," she sighed shyly, pausing, then gasping, "My! Forgive my scatteredness, I've forgotten to introduce myself. I am Judith, a keeper of this tiny refuge."

Judith held my hands with both her wings, cocooning them tenderly in a flustered fit. I felt as if my thoughts were plugged with a cork, wishing I could reassure her that her manner was no less than perfect. She proceeded to point ahead toward a man in welding equipment, who was reading a sort of manual. I followed behind her as she headed to the man, him attentively noticing her.

"Ma'am, the lass is up?" said the man, significantly louder than her.

"Alive, though I am unsure about her wakefulness," joked Judith. I smiled internally.

The man observed me, furrowing his brow, "I'm Vixe. Pleasure to meet you."

He firmly shook my hand, his expression less narrow. Vixe was a dragon, like me, although significantly more menacing in appearance—his tail more slender, his horns sharper and unfurled, his scales broad and bolder. The greater dragon held his hands to his chest to form a circle, coiling his tail around the legs and spanning his wings to strike a pose seen in draconic myths, used as a special symbol amongst the race. I mimicked the pose, only with worse symmetry. Vixe had noticed my necklace, which

was in the shape of the pose's original sigil. I couldn't recall who had given it to me, nor that I was wearing it in the first place. The room grew brighter.