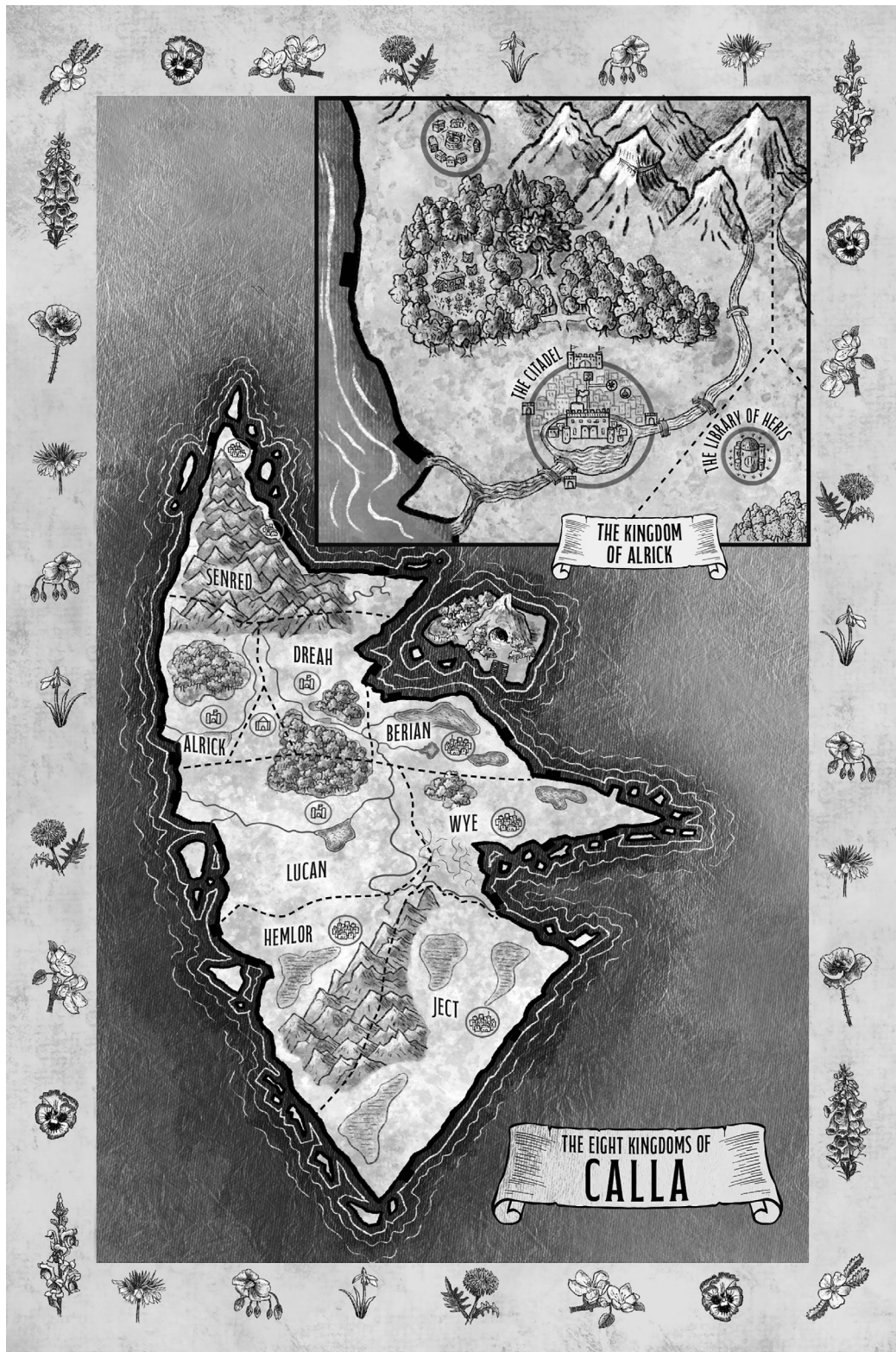
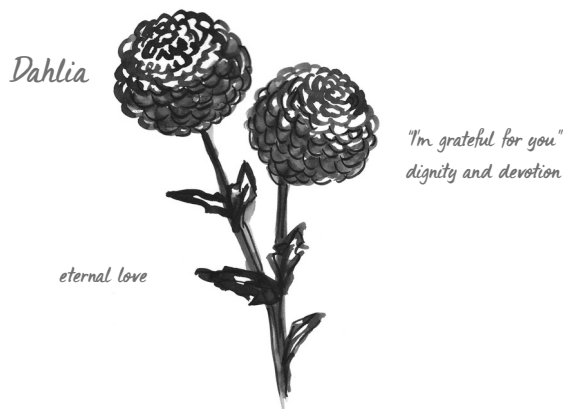


*To all the past versions of myself,
I see you, I love you.*



THE KINGDOM OF ALRICK

THE EIGHT KINGDOMS OF CALLA



CHAPTER ONE

I saw a woman crying today, the bouquet of mourning flowers cradled in her arms like the son she lost. I'd made the bouquet myself – a cluster of fiery-orange marigolds nestled alongside dahlias in orbs of peaches and pinks, each pleated petal simmering with grief. The whole lower square is an overwhelming explosion of colour and sorrow, as expected when a Guard of Alrick loses their life. Even more so when the guard was so young. Queen Fern had commissioned me last week after the rebel attack in the forest and I'd spent hours poring over the marigolds I'd had in stock, enticing the magic within them to the surface. The same flowers Simon's mother now weeps over, tears streaming like the fountain at her back.

My bouquets are more than a message. I enchant them so the receiver *feels* the message within, as each flower has its own emotion that I can amplify. I dive into the depths of the petals, search the stems, consider each leaf and thorn and stamen, until the magic is coaxed out and confessing the deepest of sentiments. The marigolds and dahlias in Simon's mother's hands, the ones that cover the fountain and decorate the square, they understand her. They sing





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of sadness and eternal love, and, if I've done my job right, they will help her heal.

It also means that my shop has run out of funeral flowers, which is why I've dragged Cardamine out this morning to stock up. Tall dahlias grow just outside the citadel walls, not far past the lake to the south, so with the clear spring sky stretched above and the smell of fresh grass in the breeze, I kneel on the skirt of my pastel dress, clipping away at the flowers in the meadow and collecting them into my basket.

Cardamine lounges on his back a few feet away, his tousled ash-blond hair fallen to one side and an open book lifted to block the light, that familiar focus on his heart-shaped face. His rolled-up sleeves in the sun reveal the freckles on his skin as he scans the pages with sharp cerulean eyes. It's a peace I think he needs. His wedding planning has been taking up every spare minute recently, and as he keeps reminding me, it's not just any wedding. It's a *royal* wedding. In six weeks' time, he's marrying the crown prince of the Kingdom of Alrick, and soon my best friend will have the queen as his mother-in-law. If I could be sarcastic, I'd say that I was *thrilled* for him.

But I can't.

Because I can't lie.

I'm cursed to tell the truth.

'I think I've got enough,' I say, and place the last dahlia in my basket.

Card snaps his book closed. 'Let's make a move, then!'

He leaps up, changing pace like the rolling waves at sea. As I try to do the same, my basket catches my long skirt and, unsurprisingly, I stumble.

'Fliss, my dearest, I'm not having my maid of honour covered in even more bruises,' Card says, steadying me. 'Perhaps we need to put you in armour until the wedding. Could you do that for the next month and a half?'





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If I could, I'd make a joke back. I'd protest. I'd say I'm not *that* clumsy, that he's exaggerating and I haven't fallen over in ages. Instead, I carefully choose each word and say, 'I don't think armour is my style. And I'm shorter than the average guard.'

'I'll get a cute suit commissioned for you. Perks of being a prince's husband.'

'Husband-to-be,' I correct him, and my throat relaxes in relief, like it does every time I manage to speak without aggravating the magic that binds my voice.

'Not for much longer!' Card takes my hands to help me onto the path like I'm a fragile toddler. 'Come on, you. One step at a time, there you are, good job.'

'Card.'

'All right, all right,' he says, freckles scrunched up by his grin. 'Anyway, did I tell you I have a meeting later today with the fashion designer? He said he'd sourced a few different laces from the Kingdom of Lucan, so you *absolutely* have to take a look. Maybe later this week? I need you to tell me which one I should choose. We can use it on the trim of your dress too, then we'll match.'

'That sounds wonderful.'

I smile up at my best friend, noting the confidence in his tone, the poised line of his shoulders. You'd think he was the royal one in this relationship – that he'd been born to rule. He fits right in at the castle without much effort. Then again, he fits in anywhere. Cardamine makes friends like a flower attracting bees. In fact, he can make conversation in no less than eight languages and doesn't show signs of slowing down. He has skills that are so foreign to me, I doubt I'll ever stop being in awe.

While we walk, Card plunges into a lengthy explanation of how they could incorporate a Dreyan poetry book he's reading into the wedding ceremony, and I'm happy to listen. This dynamic is one of the reasons Card and I get along so well. He loves to talk, which



frees me from the obligation. Around him, I get to relax. Card is my best friend for a reason – he’s my *only* friend.

When we first met at seven years old, I’d already learned the hard way that being cursed to tell the truth doesn’t help you make friends easily. I’d spent most of my school life hiding away in the tiny library, tucked under the window among the bookshelves and dust. Then entered Card, fresh to the citadel from a small village, who’d plonked himself cross-legged before me without even introducing himself.

‘What are you reading?’ had been his first words to me. He’d glanced at the book about butterflies in my hands and barrelled on without waiting for an answer. ‘I think I’ve read that one. Anyway, look what I found. Have you seen this? It has some ancient Alrickan language in it.’ He’d held up an atlas of the eight kingdoms of Calla and pointed at an illustration of our own Kingdom of Alrick. ‘See here. This is the citadel, but they’ve labelled it *carhfel*. And this is where I just moved from – Valeth. Do you know it? Probably not; it’s inland and really small and boring. But not as inland as the Library of Heris. They have hundreds – no, *thousands* – of books there, and I’m going to read them *all*.’

On he’d spoken, telling me about his family, his home, his interest in languages and libraries, until the sound of the handbell signalled the start of class. I’d been wide-eyed and curious as he approached our classmates in a similarly open manner, but when it came time to take seats, he’d chosen the empty one beside mine. Either he didn’t notice or didn’t care that everyone else excluded me. The next day he’d brought me a book on woodland insects, and he hasn’t left my side since.

Even now, as we head back to the castle in step, there’s barely a break in his non-stop chatter. The only diversion is when I’m drawn off the path towards the daisies in the grass. If there are flowers nearby, I can sense them. It’s a flutter of intuition rather than studied sorcery, a warm greeting in my chest. Some people in Alrick are born with a natural sense for magic, like my connection with flowers, whereas



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some have to use books to learn spells. Others, like Card, couldn't care less about magic – something I think his fiancé is grateful for. Prince Bastion's lack of magic has always been a sore point.

I pluck some of the daisies and braid them as we wander through the guardhouse at the edge of the lake – one of the only breaks in the tall stone walls that surround the citadel – then around the side of Alrick castle. If the kingdom were a flower head, our circular-shaped citadel would be the seeds in the centre, with the castle inside, watching over the town from its southern viewpoint. When Card finally takes a breath, I hold up the finished flower crown.

'Here,' I say.

He smiles. 'Cute. I'll give it to Bash. He's been so stressed about the rebels and his father's illness. His mother has been piling on the pressure, as usual. Ugh, not to mention that Willoh Vane keeps showing his face lately, and he *always* knows how to make matters worse.'

The scandals surrounding the sorcerer Willoh Vane are not something I ever intentionally stick my nose into. He used to be Prince Bastion's best friend, and now he's the citadel pariah because of an incident involving black magic about five years ago. It's a tangled mess, and because of my curse, it's best not to get involved, so I smile and say nothing.

In the castle courtyard, with courtiers already flocking for his attention, Card waves goodbye and I'm alone once more. How I always am without him. I head up the citadel's muddy cobbled streets, past cream-stone houses fortified with dark wood panels and plumes of smoke from slate roofs; past clattering carts carrying wheat, fruit, vegetables, and valuables we've traded with the bordering kingdoms; past people I've known all my life, some laden with fresh laundry or carrying children.

My stomach tugs with discomfort as eyes turn aside and voices hush, lest I overhear even the most mundane of conversations and then be compelled to report them to the queen. I should be used





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to it by now. Being avoided, I mean. But I'm not. Each time is a fresh hornet sting of hurt.

All the while, the mourning flowers around the fountain at the end of the street call to me like an orange-and-pink stain of blood on our stone citadel.

I wonder if Simon's mother is still sitting there, frozen in her grief. I hope not. I hope she's found some comfort. I hope I made a difference. But what can flowers do when you've lost so much?

I turn right towards the shop my mum and I call home. It's clear that our house is a florist's before you're close enough to read the wooden FARROW'S FLOWERS sign. I always keep an ever-growing number of seasonal flowers in pots lining the walls and windowsills, and right now, there are freesias that bloom in early spring, their petals bending backward in a variety of bold shades that welcome me home with a burst of colour. They're usually what I give Card on his birthday. Freesias are a symbol of friendship and trust, and there's no one I trust more than him.

I know my neighbours are aware of my curse. Mum has never tried to hide it. She says it's because she never wants me to feel ashamed, but I imagine the strange way I spoke as a child needed to be explained somehow – and what better way than the truth. I learned quickly how much sway my words can have. Everything I say is meticulously thought through. The truth *must* be carefully handled. Too much restraint, and it'll suffocate, kill chances, deceive. But if you let it free without care, the consequences can cause irreparable damage, so I spend my days with a tightly wound headache and forced smile, thinking through every sentence that leaves my mouth and trying to ignore my mother's guilt-ridden eyes.

Before opening the front door, I pause at the noticeboard and the wooden boxes nailed beside it. They were an idea Mum had years ago when she ran the shop full time. Her friend had mentioned that her daughter wanted to buy a bouquet for her crush but was too shy to ask for it directly, so shortly after, the anonymous request box





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had been born. In a lucky coincidence, it's also what retains the customers who don't want to speak with me directly now that I'm mostly in charge.

Today, when I unlock the cedar box, I find a sheet of parchment sitting inside and excitement sparks in my chest. Gods, I love getting these requests. Not knowing what kind of bouquet I'm about to create is *such* a delight. It's the silently held breath before the creative cogs in my brain leap to life, before I get to rummage through my collection and journals and do something useful that isn't related to my curse.

I slide the request form out and study it. The penmanship is interesting, like they've purposefully altered their letters in a strange and stilted way – but it's nothing I haven't seen before. Some people want to stay truly anonymous, especially with the queen squeezing every drop of information from me. However, instead of a string of sentences answering the standard questions on the form, there are only three words: *Feiyan. Collection. ASAP.*

What the gods is a Feiyan?

I flick the page over expecting to find some sort of budget or payment plan, only to find a crudely drawn map of the Kingdom of Alrick on the back. I can make out the citadel walls in the centre, the crossroads within the northern forest leading up to the mountains, and to the far northwest, there's a highlighted field with a bold arrow pointing to it. My chest tightens. *No.*

The northern forest is where the rebels have been attacking and robbing the trading wagons after being corrupted by dark magic. It's where the rumours say Willoh Vane killed an oak tree and poisoned the land. It's where Simon— Well, it's not somewhere the king and queen like anyone going. Why would someone ask me to go up *there*?

And why haven't I heard of a Feiyan? The fact I haven't bothers me. A lot. More than it should. I'm supposed to be good at this.

Inside, as the door chime fades, I'm still turning the request over in my hand as if it'll suddenly reveal a hidden clue. I place the





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basket of dahlias on the wrapping table in the middle of the room, puzzled.

‘How was the meadow, dear?’ Mum asks from the corner of our wide downstairs room. She sits at our teacup-cluttered kitchen table, long black hair loose down her back, and her typical tight-lipped smile on rose-tinted lips.

I used to grow my hair down to my waist too.

Then Lark happened and I’d wanted to burn anything he’d touched.

Months ago, in a moment of madness – with Card on hand for moral (and physical) support – I’d used some gardening shears to chop my black hair in a jagged line above my shoulders. It hadn’t been enough, so I’d grabbed some blush-pink roses and barrelled my magic into their petals, bleeding the colours into my hair until the ends were dyed pink. It had worked. I’d felt lighter. Cleaner. Different. And when I’d next met Card and his fiancé at the castle, when we’d walked past a group of guards, I’d refused to return Lark’s stare.

‘I got some more dahlias,’ I say. ‘Have you heard of a Feiyan flower? I just found this anonymous request.’

I wave the paper, and Mum pulls her straight eyebrows together.

‘No, I haven’t. Are you sure it’s spelled correctly? Did you read it wrong?’

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Even though I’m cursed to only tell the truth, she still finds ways to doubt me.

‘Yes. There’s a map too.’

‘Well,’ Mum says, and picks up her cup of tea. She’s been working a few shifts at the local tearoom since I took over most of the workload of the shop, and since then, she’s hardly ever without a cup. I sometimes wonder what ingredients they’re putting in those blends, because she’s thoroughly addicted. ‘You could always ask Creon. He might know.’

‘Yeah, I might pop to the apothecary tomorrow. I have some orders to complete here first though. Did anyone come in while I was out?’





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‘Only the painter from down the road. He wanted some carnations for his mother’s birthday coming up.’

I nod and start to transfer my freshly picked dahlias into vases I filled with slightly warm sugar water. With my eyes on my work, I try to keep my tone light.

‘I saw Simon’s mother earlier. She was by the fountain again.’

Mum sighs and rests a pale hand on her chin. ‘Poor thing. And poor Simon. Such a horrible way to go. Although I suppose an explosion would make it quick . . . Anyway, I’m sure *that woman* will be doing everything to make the forest safe from now on so Prince Merit can come back for the wedding.’

‘That woman’ is what Mum calls Queen Fern. She’s always held a deep resentment towards the queen, but never told me why. Mum was like this before I was first summoned to snitch for Queen Fern, so it can’t only be that. It’s one of Mum’s many secrets – one of the topics that darkens her eyes and brings out the snap in her tone, like it does whenever I ask about my father. I don’t even know his name.

I nibble the inside of my cheek. The thing about telling the truth is that there’s a time and a place, and when it comes to my mother, no time ever seems suitable. I keep my head bowed so the pink ends of my hair swing over my cheeks as I busy my hands.

‘Card showed me the wedding invitation list earlier. They’re being sent out later this week,’ I say, slowly.

‘Oh?’ Mum takes a sip of tea. ‘Are the king and queen from Dreah coming too? Gods, I hope so. King Cyrus is a hunk and a half.’

‘Mum.’

‘What? I’m allowed to look,’ she says, unrepentant. Mum always enjoys it when the Dreyan royals visit. I thought it was because they export most of the fruit teas she’s so into, but apparently not.

Prince Merit, Bash’s younger brother, lives in the next kingdom over – the Kingdom of Dreah – for a few months of the year because of his peace-making betrothal to their youngest princess.





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It's hard to believe that Queen Fern allows him out of her sight, seeing how she's so overprotective of Bash.

I pause, my fingers resting on the stem of a particularly vivid dahlia, and fight a flicker of fear. I tried not to react when I'd read the name earlier. I tried to push it down. But the truth always comes out one way or another.

'Um,' I say, then clear my throat. 'No. Not them. It's . . . Morgana. Morgana is invited.'

Mum's back snaps straight. 'She's coming *here*?' A flash of hysteria has her pitch rising, her hands turning to claws around her teacup.

I nod, my jaw as tight as her fingers. Morgana is the sorcerer responsible for my curse. To me, she's a mystery, an invisible face. To Mum . . .

'But she never comes to Alrick these days!' Mum squeaks. 'She's supposed to be at the Library. *Here? Soon? Gods—*'

She meets my russet-brown eyes and quickly flattens her expression.

'I'm sure she won't come,' she says briskly. 'It's far too beneath her. She hasn't been back in years. I wouldn't worry about it, baby. She won't come here. No, of course, she won't.'

Mum can repeat lies to herself until she believes them.

A luxury I don't have.

I turn back to the anonymous request for the Feiyan flower. The map on the back leads into the northern forest, past the site of the explosion that killed Simon and farther than I've been before. Regardless, I'll go. I have to. I'll get the flower and deliver it, for whatever purpose the person needs. Because despite my curse, it's what I do best. I tell the truth. On behalf of others, for things they can't say themselves. Not through words or letters, but through flowers. Petals instead of carefully crafted sentences. A bouquet instead of a sonnet.

Mourning flowers for a mother's arms.

White wedding flowers for my best friend.

Feiyan for an anonymous stranger.

