

VANESSA THURGOOD



THE  
EARTH  
SPARK  
BOOK I  
THE COMSTOCK  
CHRONICLES

THE EARTHSPARK

VANESSA THURGOOD

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This book is dedicated to Luke for helping me chase my dreams.

# 1 - Ashes and Dust

Foothills Above Solomon; 1287 Years Earlier

*Rei!*

Tellen's heart stopped as smoke obscured the scene below him. Rocks dug into his knees as his captors forced him to kneel, but he no longer felt the pain. The rough hands that gripped his arms were all that kept him from collapsing. Tears stung his eyes, and he blinked them away; the only thing his paralyzed body could do.

Then he felt it. His connection to the girl who held his heart was gone. He scanned the meadow below where he'd seen Reina and Fallon only moments ago.

Fallon's cry of pain. Rei's sobs. Saul's bellow of triumph.

All of it reverberated around his skull creating a tumult so loud he thought his head would split open. And yet, his mind refused to believe what his eyes had seen.

Rei and Fallon were dead and he, the Earth Guardian, had been powerless to stop it. He'd failed, and now his friends had paid the price.

He lived.

And his beloved Reina was *gone*.

Images of the blade descending upon the two women played over and over in his mind. Saul's twisted face as he raised his sword. Reina's resignation. Fallon's bleeding form. A swirl of faces and hands that were all tinged with red.

He willed his arms and legs to move, begging them to respond. If he got down there, maybe he could heal them before it was too late.

But he knew that wasn't true.

Ash rained down from the hazy sky, hiding the soldiers below, including Saul—Tellen's exiled Pathfinder. The man had once been part of the Guardian's inner circle. His Earthspark had shaped entire hillsides, the rocks eagerly molding to his will. He'd been so full of light and goodness before Fiora corrupted him. After that, darkness was all that remained.

Now Saul had shattered Tellen's heart by wielding the sword that had murdered Rei and Fallon. His chest constricted, squeezing out any air left in his lungs.

The Nightshade bird venom, derived from the winged demons the Fire Witch had created, still burned in his veins. He wished it would burn away the rest of him, leaving nothing but ash. The venom caused his limbs to convulse, and the rock beasts holding his arms tightened their grips.

Only one thought cycled around his mind. *Rei is dead.*

Then he heard it.

Laughter.

Who could laugh when light and love had been taken from the world?

The smoke shifted in the breeze and Fiora came into view a few paces away. *His sister.* Her ember hair rippled, shimmering between black and red like coals in a hearth.

She turned her dark eyes on him. Her cruel smile broadened on her bright red lips. “It seems part of your debt to me is repaid. You take my mate, I take yours. Though that slave girl you loved so much was hardly worth the trouble she caused.”

Tellen swallowed hard. The venom clogged his throat, filling his mouth with bile.

“You killed them.” The convulsions passed, leaving his brow coated with sweat. He slumped in the grips of the Grimmoles holding him. All he could feel was a gaping emptiness where his connection to Rei and Fallon had been a moment ago.

“And why wouldn’t I?” Fiora raised an eyebrow as her lip curled. “They were just two more of your mangy, flea ridden pack. Sworn to follow an oath given by a backstabbing, glory mongering—”

She stopped herself and squeezed her eyes shut. The Fire Guardian wheeled to face the smokey sky. Her voice was little more than a whisper.

“You stole Darius from me, just like you stole everything else. You owe me, Little Brother.” She glared back at him on her shoulder. Her eyes glistened in the red tinged sunlight. “And I will continue to take pieces of you until you are no more than dust. Maybe then we’ll be even.”

“Killing isn’t the answer, Fiora.” He gasped, trying to find enough air to continue speaking. “I’ve done everything I can to make it up to you after what I did. Yet you still refuse to accept anything I’ve done to make amends.”

His voice broke as he stared at his elder sister. The one with whom he’d created this world. Even now, he could still feel fire had lifted the molten rock from the belly of the earth and how he used that to shape the mountains and valleys that covered this land. They’d been inseparable. Once.

He’d never intended to hurt her. Since that day, he’d given her anything she asked, all in hopes of setting it right. Yet she continued to despise him, even after thousands of years. She would never forgive, nor ever forget, his greatest mistake.

Fiora was in his face now, the taint of smoke stinging his nose. “And I never will.”

His gaze flicked to the four medallions hanging around her neck. His second greatest mistake. The white, green, blue, and red gems of the elemental medallions glimmered, taunting him.

Gems he’d created for his siblings, the Elemental Guardians, to use when they needed extra power in defense of their homes and their people. All at Fiora’s beguiling suggestion. Once the siblings had stoked their pieces with enough power, she’d struck, stealing that magic for herself, and turning it against the people they were sworn to protect.

“Bring him.” Fiora gave a dismissive wave with her hand and walked toward where he knew the Nightshade birds waited. The Grimmoles dragged him after their mistress.

He'd trusted his older sister. Loved her even. And he'd believed that love still lived in her shriveled heart.

*No longer.*

A wave of anger washed over him, churning against the Nightshade venom holding him captive. His body lurched as the paralysis gave beneath the force of his power. His fingers twitched.

Tellen pushed harder at his Earthspark, clearing the venom from his veins. A plan formed in his mind as the birds came into view. If it worked, he might save the rest of his friends; if any still lived after the attack on Peroma. His gaze shifted to Fiora. No one else would pay for his mistakes.

Sparks flared to life on his hand. With a shout, he ripped his arms free from the Grimmoles' grips and charged his sister.

She whirled around, but by then, his fingers were at the chain around her neck. His fingers crackled with power as they closed around the combined forces of the four cardinal powers. Earth, Wind, Water—and *Fire*.

Flames erupted around them at his command, splintering wood and rock from the intense heat. Fiora tried to retaliate, but he cast up earthen shields, blocking every attack. Next he willed a wall of water to encase her, taken from the forest around him. Trees groaned and green leaves crumbled as he took their lifeblood. If there was any other way to contain Fiora, he'd do it. But he was out of options.



With a mental nudge, Tellen urged the earth to cover the watery orb with Fiora inside. It wouldn't hold her for long, but it would give him a chance to get away. To find a place where he could destroy the medallions and prevent any more life lost. His sister may have destroyed his world, but there was still a chance to save the rest of humanity.

He shifted into a large black eagle, the chains of the medallions swinging from his talons as he took to the sky, smoke trailing on his wings. Unbidden words filled his mind as he flew.

*One element alone may stand,*

*Yet the convergence of four will shape the land.*

*Their unity, a tapestry of fate,*

*If not stopped will be too late*

*The one who merges the elements of force,*

*Shall wield a sword sharper than the descending blade's course.*

*With power to mend or make all bend,*

*In their hands, the world finds its end.*

Words spoken to him from the mouth of a dragon after he'd delivered the medallions to his siblings. He'd dismissed the prophecy, thinking the creature had it wrong. His siblings would never turn against one another. But he'd been wrong.

He flew along the Eastern Fringe until he spotted Celestine ahead. Puffs of ash floated around him as he touched down and took his human form. Tellen stared at the metal encase gems.

Part of him loathed to eliminate the stores of power. It was so easy to rely on his medallion to perform any task he needed without drawing on his innate abilities, leaving them fresh for emergencies.

The problem was that he'd relied too heavily on the external power, allowing his natural gifts to atrophy. He was weaker now than he'd ever been, and the threat of his sister couldn't be greater. Should he really destroy the medallions?

The sound of a fireball hissing through the air toward him made up his mind. Tellen raised the silver studded pendants high, urging the powers within them to wake. Golden light flared around him as all four elements activated.

*Love. Family. Honor.* His motto echoed in his mind. That was why he was here. That was who and what he fought for.

Fiora barreled into him, flames licking his skin. He stretched his arm higher to keep the medallions out of her reach. She pawed at them, tugging on the chains dangling below his hand.

Tellen urged the rock to rise between them, prying her away. She screamed and he matched it with a bone jarring yell of his own. He forced his Earthspark into the gems, fueling the golden light of the combined elements until it was blinding.

He turned his head away to find Fiora rushing toward him, flaming hands outstretched. His resolve faltered. He'd needed to fight back if she caught hold of the medallions. He needed his extra power.

A resounding boom issued from the gems, and white light enveloped the forest. Heat seared his palm and he let go of the chains. The medallions pinwheeled high into the sky on the force of his magic. Before they disappeared above the trees, the gems blasted apart in a lightning flash.

The blast lifted Tellen off his feet and into a nearby tree. He fell to the ground with a crash, leaving him breathless. He lifted his face from the dirt, his body crying out with pain. The explosion had left him covered with burns and bruises. He only hoped his plan had worked and that medallions were no more. Or, at the very least, that they'd flown far from anyone who could use them.

Pungent smoke curled off the skeletal remains of the surrounding trees, standing like spent sticks of incense in the explosion's aftermath. The ash that had coated the forest floor now hung suspended, choking what air there was to breathe.

Fiora struggled to her feet on the opposite side of the clearing. Brushing the charred soil from her face, she glared at him once before staggering away into the smoldering forest.

A guttural noise escaped Tellen's lips, followed by green sparks on the tips of his fingers. His medallion was gone, but his magic hadn't fully left him. The black lines that crisscrossed his skin gave way to their normal purplish hue as the Earthspark burned away the last traces of the Nightshade venom.

With a groan, he healed the worst of his battered body. Then the Guardian lurched to his bare feet, swaying like a dried reed in the wind. Fiora's skirt whisked behind the blackened trunk of an old tree as she tried to escape.

*Not this time.*

The acrid smell of burned flesh bit his nose as he teetered through the trees, squinting through the smoke. Pain crackled along his skin. If he survived this, he could finish healing later. If he didn't, then so much the better. Seven thousand years was more than anyone should endure.

Tellen pulled the Earthspark, the primordial power he'd imbued into the world, into his center, straightening and lengthening his stride. His strength would be short-lived, so he'd have to make this count. He lunged forward into his black wolf form, snarling as he sped through the trees.

Fiora shrieked, flickering in and out of the smoke. If she transformed now, he'd never catch her. However, it seemed the blast had weakened her just as it had him.

He caught up to his sister, transforming back into his human skin as he tackled her around the middle. His vision flickered as he opened a pit behind her and plunged them both into the dark crevasse. The pull of gravity made him tighten his hold as he exposed channel after channel through the rock. The pounding in his skull intensified.

Fiora clawed his chest, leaving deep rivulets of blood in her fingers' wake, screaming in his ear, trying to burn his skin. He would not yield. Instead, he poured more of his magic into their descent, green sparks glittering all around like stars as they careened downward.

*No more fire. No more death.*

"Release me!" shouted Fiora.

Tellen opened one last chamber. "Gladly."

He dropped his sister with a hard thunk on the warm stone in time to tuck into a roll before his face met the bedrock. He collapsed a moment later. Fiora groaned as she rolled to her side.

Everything inside urged him to just keep lying down. But, if she got free, the world wouldn't stand another day. Tellen pushed to his feet, hauling his sister to the wall on quivering legs.

“What do you think you are doing?” she asked, trying to wriggle free while her eyes crossed.

“You've destroyed everything the Guardians stood for. You corrupted our magic, destroying all we created,” Tellen spat, pinning her arms to her sides. “The only way the world will be safe is if you're not in it.”

He urged the rock to fold over her arms and legs, securing her against the wall.

“You can't do this!” Fiora screamed, straining against him as the clay rolled over her. “I'll regain my freedom, and when I do, I swear I will take *everything* from you.”

As the stone covered her face, Tellen's fragile heart shattered. “You already have.”

Fiora's scream echoed throughout the cavern as stone encased her. Tellen dropped to his knees, breathing hard. He'd done it. He'd trapped the Fire Witch at last. Now, no one else would suffer the way he had.

Sweat dripped into his eyes and he wiped it away as he stared at the blank expanse that hid his sister. The Earth Guardian marshaled his aching body to climb back through the layers of sediment. Yet, it would never be far enough.

A solitary tear slid down his cheek as Tellen pushed through an open space moments before his body gave out. If death could have any claim on him, he prayed it would come.

## 2 - The Letter

### Present Day

The ticking sound of the wooden clock connecting the three-story library echoed in the otherwise silent building. Evening sunlight streamed in through the upper-story windows, filling the alcove with a warm orange glow. Nienna Comstock hovered over a wide table where a newly inked map of Tellidus Valley lay open.

Nienna's gray eyes raced from her notes on the corner of the table to the measuring instrument in her hand. The detail was as accurate as if she still stood at the invisible line that divided the Northern Reach from the kingdom of Tellidus. Biting her lip, she set the last of the bordering lines, then stood back to admire her work.

*It's perfect.*

A commotion on the lower floor pricked her ears, but Nienna ignored it. Tonight there was only her and the map.

She and Samuel Talley, Chief Advisor of Road Development, were making the case to construct a new road before the king's council tomorrow. This map had to convince even the biggest skeptic that a way existed through the woods and up the mountainside to Silverlen.

The problem with the Silverlen mines lay in getting the ore to the forges in Solomon, where it could be refined. But her map, and Talley's road, would bring it all back. The vast deposits of pure silver around the northern city promised wealth this kingdom hadn't known in

generations. Her and Talley's road would cut what was currently a ten-day journey to four. Thus allowing for greater shipments of the metal to travel southward.

When the Comstock Empire fell a thousand years ago, much of the prosperity Tellidus had once enjoyed dried up. Most blamed the fall on the Guardians and their black elemental magic. Without them, this land would still be a vast empire, spanning from the Northern Reach to the southern coast and west across the Mountain Veil.

Now, the empire lay in four broken kingdoms. The west was uninhabited, while the south and north teemed with cutthroat, lawless people. And then there was Tellidus. Named for the Guardian who helped create it, or so the darker legends claimed, her home of sprawling fields and fertile forests was a gem between the mountains.

With a satisfied sigh, she sprinkled sand on the map to keep the ink from smearing across the page, then stretched.

"You're late," an amused voice whispered.

Nienna screeched, jumping away from the intruder—and her completed map—toppling over when she hit a tall stack of books lying on the floor. She glared at the trespasser, doubled over with laughter.

"Are you finished?" she asked.

"I'm—I'm sorry." Her older brother Owen gasped between laughs. "You should have seen your face!"



She tried to roll to her side, but couldn't get untangled from the books. "*You* shouldn't sneak up on people. It's considered rude."

"I didn't do much sneaking," Owen said, wiping his eyes. "I yelled your name when I entered the library because I knew you were here. You're *always* here, and you never answered me. So I went searching."

Nienna tried again to get out from under the cascading books.

Her brother continued between fits of giggles. "I kept calling your name, but still no answer. When I found you with your nose touching the parchment, I spoke your name four times with no response. So, I thought I'd try whispering. And it worked."

"You nearly made my heart stop," Nienna complained.

Owen held up a finger. "I did wait until you'd finished."

Nienna shrugged her shoulders, conceding. "Aye, you did. Now help me out of this."

He reached down and pulled her out of the entrapment of books. Pretending to brush dust from her vest and trousers, Owen fussed over her, clucking in disapproval. She hit his hand away, causing a large smirk to spread across his face.

"So why are you searching for me?" Nienna stooped to restack the books. "Run out of pranks to pull on the kitchen staff and hope the library might spark some ideas?"

Her hair, which had once been in a neat knot at the base of her neck, now hung like a curtain around her face.

“That’s a terrific idea, but I’m on a bit of a tight schedule. The guards had a terrible time finding the buckles for their saddles and we’re running late.”

“Late for what?” Nienna stared at him in confusion.

The room suddenly spun as Owen twirled her around in a wide arc. Her foot connected with another neat stack of books, sending them spilling to the floor. She shoved away from him.

“What is the matter with you?” she asked, straightening her vest. Then she froze. “Oh no. It’s tonight, isn’t it?”

Owen leaned against the table, staring at her with an innocent expression.

Nienna grabbed the side of her head and whirled to face the clock on the opposite wall. Eight o’clock. “Your engagement ball. It starts right now, doesn’t it?”

Using the heel of her boot, she kicked over the last remaining stack of books, finalizing the evidence that an indoor hurricane had just passed through.

“I thought you were supposed to come get me at six so I could get ready? Look at the state of me. I’m covered in ink from head to toe!” She bent to snatch up all her supplies into her carry bag.

“I thought you were a big girl and could get yourself ready anyway. You’re usually the one hurrying me along.” He glanced down at the wooden table. “Oh, is this the map for tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Nienna gushed, forgetting the party and her lack of preparation. “I’ve been working on it all day. I don’t think even Vargus can say no to this.”

“Hopefully, this will ease Father’s mood. He’s in a tizzy since I made him miss his meeting with Advisor Harker before the ball.” He gave her a sidelong glance. “Not to mention he hates balls as much as you do.”

Nienna groaned as she rubbed a hand down her face, covering her eyes. This situation was getting worse by the moment.

Owen blew the sand from the parchment and whistled. “If I hadn’t seen you working on it, I wouldn’t believe *you* did this.”

She peeked through her fingers, lips narrowing.

“I didn’t think a girl could do—”

She punched him in the arm.

“Ow,” he said, rubbing his shoulder.

She tried to stow the map away before it could come to harm, but Owen was quicker. Spinning around with the parchment stretched between his hands, he held it out of her reach. “This is even better than Professor Bates’s work at the university. And he’s supposed to be the best.”

Nienna couldn’t contain a smug smile as she grabbed for the parchment. “I could never stand him as a professor. I swore I’d become the best cartographer in Tellidus, just to rub it in his face. Pompous old man that he is.”

Owen raised his eyebrows, and his arms, as she tugged on his sleeves. “Don’t get your hopes up too high. Otherwise, the next round of cartographers leaving Alturis will leave you crushed. Besides, mother’s planning to do a double wedding after finding your beau tonight.”

Nienna drew back her fist to punch him again when Owen cleared his throat. “Speaking of professors, whatever happened to you becoming one? I thought it was your dream to shape young minds and all that.”

He rolled up the parchment and handed it back to her.

“It was. I mean it is. But no positions were open before I left. So I took the job with Talley. The dean said she’d reach out if something changed, but I’m afraid I’ll have to wait a couple of years.” She set the map back on the table and began cleaning up her supplies once more.

Owen pulled out an envelope from his vest pocket and fanned himself with it. “So, should I wait to give you this, then? It just arrived this afternoon, but as you seem set on waiting—”

“Give me that!” Nienna tackled her brother as he held the envelope out of reach.

“How do you know this is even for you?” he asked, ducking out of her grip. “It’s addressed to a *Nina Rostock*. Is she a friend of yours?”

“Give me my letter!”

“Relax before your hair falls out. That Ballitine prince won’t want to marry a girl who looks like she has mange.”

“I’m *not* marrying someone I’ve never met.”

The letter floated out of Owen's hand and Nienna caught it before it hit the floor. Her hands trembled as she read the scratched out addresses.

*To: Cartographer Nina Rostock of Alturis City, Waldorman, Luz, Caspian, Jericho, Solomon City, Solomon Castle.*

Outside of Solomon, no one knew what the princess looked like. Even many within it. Where the crown wouldn't pass to her, she hadn't needed to present herself in various cities after coming of age the way Owen had.

That was why her parents had allowed her to attend Alturis using a pseudonym. A name only her parents, Commander Marks, her guards, and Owen were privy to. If a letter made it here, it had to be what she hoped.

"Open it," Owen said, leaning his elbows on the table and resting his chin on his hands, eyes wide in mock anticipation.

Nienna flipped the envelope over to inspect the back. Her fingers caressed the seal of Alturis University, with a dancing stag and an owl perched on its antlers, before pausing.

"You opened it?"

"I had to make sure it wasn't a love letter from a secret admirer. I've got a friend lined up for you tonight."

"You are hopeless." But as she slid her fingers under the flap, her heart beat faster. The university wouldn't bother to tell her not to wait for a position to open.

“The courier said no one remembered where ‘Miss Rostock’ was from or where she went after graduation,” said Owen.

Nienna slid the letter from its casing. If this was what she thought, this was her chance to get away from the castle and all the gossiping courtiers.

Unfolding the letter, she read the words aloud.

*March 17, 1287*

*Dear Miss Rostock,*

*We wish to inform you that the Department of Geology and Geography has opened the Professor of Cartography and Survey Basics position. Your name was on our list of potential candidates, as you expressed interest upon graduation this spring. We will host your interview on the 22nd of April at one o'clock in the afternoon at Dean Harmon's office.*

*Should we select you for this role, you will have two weeks to settle your affairs and move into the professors' quarters before the start of the summer term on the 6th of May. We wish you the best of luck in your career and hope you consider us as your next stepping stone.*

*Best Wishes,*

*Matilda Figg*

*Secretary for Dean Belinda Harmon*

*Department of Geology and Geography*

*Alturis University*

Owen's amused expression met her shocked one as she glanced up. Alturis was offering her an interview.

"Owen! Nienna!" Her father, a broad man with short-cropped hair and a finely trimmed beard, barked as he came around the corner. He stopped short. "Nienna! You're not even dressed!"

She willed herself not to retreat behind the work desk as their father stormed forward like a thundercloud. King Hammond Comstock's gray eyes stormed like the fabled snow squalls of the North.

"We. Are. Late," the king said, punching out every word. "First, Owen hides all the buckles on the guards' saddles. Then I find you still wearing your ink-covered trousers! Where have you been? Your mother is threatening to lock us in the Bricks for showing up late."

Nienna bent to gather her notebooks and stow them in her carry bag to hide her flustered face. How could she make it to Alturis? She pressed her lips together as she gathered the last of her things. *She had to make it.*

"I found her playing with the protractor, smearing ink all over the place," Owen said.

Nienna curled her lip and whacked her brother on the shins with the notebook in her hands. Owen hopped away before she could do it again. Hammond's eyes crackled with anger until they landed on her completed map. His expression cleared like the sun coming from behind clouds.

“The map! You finished it.” Her father picked up the parchment. “This is exactly what we need tomorrow.”

Owen waggled his eyebrows behind her father’s back. She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her vest to keep from bruising more of his princely arm. It wasn’t becoming of a lady, as her mother so often reminded her.

“Let’s go before your mother comes hunting us. I have no desire to hear her rant the entire way to the Parkers.” Turning on his heel, King Hammond led the way down the grand staircase, all the while staring at the map.

“I’m amazed he knows where he’s going. A normal person would’ve tripped after the second step,” Owen said.

“Lucky for him, you haven’t booby-trapped the place to make sure it happened.”

“Next time.” Owen sniggered before bounding down the stairs two at a time.

The commander of the King’s Guard, Horacio Marks, waited for them at the bottom. Commander Marks had been part of her father’s retinue for as long as Nienna could remember. He was wiry with dusk-colored hair and a scar that ran along the left side of his keen face. This man was also her father’s dearest friend.

As she approached, the commander gave her a curt nod and a tight smile. Ever the soldier.

King Hammond tore his gaze away from the map and handed the parchment back to her. “The council can’t say no once you and Talley present tomorrow. The trail you’ve outlined is



passable for multiple wagons and will need little blasting. It's got to go through this time. We need that silver."

"Talley's been working on the presentation all day. I think he's got our argument down," Nienna said. Her partner had stopped by that afternoon, hair frazzled, but grinning as he gave her the pitch.

But was working with the road crew what she wanted to do for the rest of her career? She loved working with Talley, but living back at the castle and wearing the title of princess carried its own burden. Old women whispered behind their hands, wondering if there was something wrong with her because she wasn't married yet. Or the noblemen who didn't bother to whisper, wondering why the king hadn't offered his only daughter to the Ballitine prince as a token of peace.

For all she knew, her career as a cartographer could be over tomorrow. *Not if I can help it.* Her hand slid inside her carry bag and clutched the letter from Alturis.

The family left the library through the oak double doors and into the courtyard. The last rays of sunlight spiked above the jagged peaks of the Mountain Veil in the distance. A stiff spring breeze cut through her vest and tunic, making her shiver.

Her father was about to enter the carriage in the drive. She needed to ask him now.

"Father?" she called, racing to catch up with him.

He paused with a foot on the step.

"I received a letter today—"

The king's shoulders sagged. "So I've heard."

"I want to go to the interview," she said before her courage could flee.

Her father fixed her with a measured stare, the corners of his mouth dropping. "Let's discuss this tomorrow. Get back to the castle and change. Then come as soon as you're ready. Take Perrill and Falkirk with you. I don't want you riding over there alone."

He turned on his heel and stepped inside the carriage. Owen placed a hand on her shoulder. His usual mischievous smile dimmed. "I'll have that friend of mine wait for you in the entrance hall. That way you won't have to enter alone. Plus, it might keep the old hags from talking. Or it just might give them more to gossip about."

She smiled half-heartedly at him. Sometimes Owen wasn't a complete imp. "Thank you."

He swept into a low bow as her mother, Elora, leaned out of the carriage, her periwinkle dress shimmering in the courtyard's light. "Owen, get in here before I tie your coat tails to the luggage box and drag you down the road."

"Oh. The friend that will wait for you. His name's Ross," he said before the queen grabbed his jacket and hauled him inside before slamming the door.

Nienna watched the royal party disappear from view. She wouldn't be a bargaining chip or a pawn to be sold to the highest bidder. This was her life, and no one would tell her otherwise.

Clutching the letter again, she stared at the diminishing carriage. Then she took a sharp inhale as a sudden thought struck her.

It was a four-day journey to Alturis at a leisurely pace, using the roads. If she cut across the countryside and rode with speed, however, she could make it. Possibly with time to spare.

## 3 - Glitter and Insults

The Parker estate came into view and Nienna rounded the bend with her guards, Aspen Perrill and Liam Falkirk, in tow. Though the two young men served in the official capacity as her guards, the three of them had been inseparable since childhood. But as rank and station pried them apart, they found new ways to remain close. The two boys joined the military academy, and she left for Alturis to become a cartographer.

The mansion glimmered in the torchlight lining the drive, throwing a golden reflection on the pond out front. Starlight twinkled in the ripples as a pair of swans paddled away from shore as her party rode by. All along the drive were carriages from the various noble houses.

“Should be a fun night for you,” Liam called to Nienna as they passed a blue carriage. “The Ferris’s are here.”

Aspen snorted in disgust. “I don’t know how you put up with Jeremiah’s company. He smells worse than roadkill left to bake in the sun.”

“Quit, will you?” she asked, glancing around. “Someone might hear you.” Though Aspen had a point.

*Jeremiah Ferris is the least of my worries,* she thought as she stared at the entrance to the mansion. A young man waited at the top of the steps, and she bit her lip. Had Owen really sent someone to escort her tonight? He’d mentioned a name, but she couldn’t remember what it was now.

However, she was spared the embarrassment of not remembering the young man's name, because as she and her guards neared the path to the front doors, he was gone. *So that wasn't my escort.*

The footmen standing by the royal carriage stepped forward to take the reins of their horses. Nienna slid off her black gelding and smoothed out the wrinkles in her midnight blue dress. She pulled her dark riding coat tight around her.

*Hopefully, I don't walk in with too much horse hair on me, she thought. Though I'd rather have people gossiping about hair on my dress than asking why I'm not spoken for yet.*

With the folds of her dress clenched tight in each hand, she stared up at the front door. Owen had been right earlier. She hated balls and everything that accompanied them. Especially the people.

Liam nudged her shoulder. "Get up there. The sooner you dance your feet off, the sooner we can get home. Cookie's making jam tarts tonight." His large green eyes were bright with anticipation.

"You better save one for me. I'm afraid you'll get to leave before I do."

He cracked his easy smile. "I'll do my best, but there's no guarantee."

A glance at Aspen told her he wished they were somewhere else, too. But likely for different reasons.

Together, the three of them walked through the heavy oak doors. Lively music flowed down the hall, as did the overwhelming scent of the purple hyacinths lining every doorway and banister. Ahead, the ballroom doors stood open.

A swirl of evening colors of yellow, orange, pink, purple, and blue greeted her eyes. Glittering jewelry winked like shooting stars as their owners twirled around. The sight was breathtaking and nauseating all at once. The air was stifling hot with so many warm bodies, and the clash of perfume made her want to gag.

Her guards each patted her shoulder. Aspen's hand lingering a moment longer, before he and Liam took their places along the walls with the other Solomon guards. Nienna's throat constricted. What she wouldn't give for that friend of Owen's to be by her side. She was a chunk of coal sinking in an ocean of stars. Princess Nienna Ariene Comstock, an outsider, and a spare.

She searched for anything and anyone stable in the ballroom to keep her from floating away. Swallowing hard, she rubbed the moisture from her palms onto her dress. So many people. And she was just a second-born royal to be sold to the highest bidder if she missed her interview in Alturis.

Her father stood in an alcove deep in discussion with a handful of his advisors, likely the ones he was supposed to meet with earlier. Cloistered in a corner, her mother spoke with two other women, one copper headed, Owen's future mother-in-law, and a curvy dark-haired woman. Then she spied Owen and his bride-to-be, Rivkah Parker, greeting guests in the back of the hall.

She wound her way toward her brother. At least he wouldn't scold her for being so late. When Owen caught sight of her, his double-take was dramatic enough to cause the person in front of him to glance around. Then he returned his attention to the well-wisher in front of him.

The attention did nothing to decrease the perspiration trailing down her back.

"I wondered when you might show," Owen said as she approached. "You know, none too few heads turned as you came across the room. And not all of them were single. Even now, there are a few gentlemen trying to catch the eye of the mysterious woman in blue." He waggled his eyebrows.

"Oh, go stuff yourself," Nienna said quietly.

"You are stunning," Rivkah said, giving Owen a light squeeze on his shoulder. "He wasn't entirely jesting about the head turning."

Owen gave Rivkah a squeeze back, staring at her down the tip of his nose. "Though she would have been even more sensational if that cousin of yours hadn't wandered off. He promised me he'd escort Nienna when she arrived. Then Jeremiah Ferris would've kept his eyeballs on the ground instead of ogling her the way he did. Did you see how that toad-faced—"

Rivkah cut him off. "I'm sure Ross got called away to fix something out in the gardens. The servants have been hounding him all day."

"Anyway," Nienna said, clearing her throat. "Sorry I'm so late. I lost track of time as I was working this afternoon."

“It’s all right,” Rivkah said, eyes narrowed at her betrothed. “Owen didn’t beat you by much. I’m told one of the guard’s saddles came undone on the way over.”

A wicked grin split her brother’s face as he puffed himself up and quirked an eyebrow. “Quite a fiasco.”

Nienna couldn’t prevent the smile curving up her mouth as she imagined the chaos. “I’m sure mother handled it with a cool head.”

“If you’re lucky, I’ll give you a reenactment,” Owen said.

“Maybe some other time.”

Owen shrugged, fingers twitching to escape and cause more havoc before the night was over. “Suit yourself. While you wander, if you see a young gentleman who’s almost as devilishly handsome as I am, kick him in the shin, will you? Galbraith owes me for abandoning his post.”

“I’ll keep my eyes out and my shoe ready.”

“That’s my girl.” Owen winked at her.

Nienna smirked and shook her head, leaving the couple to their business. The musicians were playing a slow waltz, and dancers filled the floor, swaying in unison with the tempo.

She scanned the room. After the better part of four years away from court and castle life, she knew very little of what went on in the elite social circles. Nienna stared miserably around the glittering ballroom, wishing to be anywhere but here.

Then she spied her father.



“I thought you’d be out dancing,” Hammond said as she drew near. His advisors slunk a short distance away, but remained close enough to eavesdrop.

“I need to speak to you about the letter I received today. I’m going.” No sense in beating around the bush.

He sighed and rubbed the back of his head, watching the dancers swirl before them instead of looking at her. “Nienna, you’re still a princess. Even if it isn’t your chosen vocation. Besides, what about Talley?”

“What about Talley?” she asked, a hand sliding to her hip.

“If you leave now, he’ll be on his own to work on the road. This is your project. Why are you in such a rush? I thought you enjoyed what you’re doing.”

*Because I can’t stand being back at court. I hate being the topic of conversation and having everyone’s eyes following me, wondering why you haven’t pledged me to the Ballatine Prince to stop the border skirmishes?* She squeezed her eyes shut. If she didn’t halt that line of thinking, she’d be in tears before she could walk out of here, and that was the last thing she wanted to do in front of so many onlookers.

“I do enjoy it,” she said in a small voice. Which made this decision harder. The road crew, and especially Talley, were some of the best people she’d ever encountered. However, they wouldn’t be able to save her from the direction fate was pulling her. “I also really miss Alturis, and the freedom to be myself.”

An advisor, Master Gutmund Vargus, stepped closer to her father, an eyebrow raised. The corner of Nienna's lip curled. Vargus was the loudest voice in favor of selling her to Ballitus. He'd openly accused the king of allowing men to die because he refused to send her south.

Hammond ran a hand through his hair. "Owen showed me the letter on the ride over to the library. You would have needed to leave two days ago to make it. I'm sorry, Nienna. It just wasn't meant to be this time. Right now, you're required here. We need that road. Besides, I'm sure there will be another chance for you to teach in the future."

It was a hollow statement, and they both knew it. He gave her a brief, bracing smile before turning back to the advisors still hovering around like flies. The slope of Hammond's shoulders was more pronounced than before.

An angry flush crept up her neck as she clasped her hands in front of her. Vargus was behind this, she knew. Whatever she'd done to affront the man, she couldn't say, but it was clear he wanted to use her for some end.

A slow inhale and exhale accompanied every step as she meandered toward her guards. Maybe she could get away with feigning a headache and they could leave in time to enjoy one of Cookie's jam tarts while they were still warm.

A tap landed on her shoulder, and she turned. *Oh no.*

Jeremiah Ferris stood before her, panting and sweating. He must have rushed off from his last dance partner to make it over here. "Princess Nienna, may I have a dance?"

She pursed her lips together and breathed shallowly as the tangible odor coming off the heir to the Ferris estate wafted around her. “Sure.”

For the next ten minutes, she was trapped in a cocoon of rancid garlic as Jeremiah crushed her foot with every other step. The boy’s enthusiastic gait left her wondering if two of her toes were broken. When she finally extricated herself from his tentacles, she made a beeline for the door to the balcony.

However, she found her path blocked by Prentice and Livia Parker, Rivkah’s evil little sisters.

“Well, well, look what the footman dragged in,” Prentice drawled. With her hands on her hips and a sneer on her otherwise pretty face. Though a year younger, the girl had the temperament of a sour old woman.

Nienna’s hands balled into fists. The throbbing in her feet begged her to find a quiet place to sit, and these two were in her way.

“I thought I spoke to Mother about keeping out the riffraff this time,” Prentice said to Livia.

Livia crossed her arms. “She came half-ready for the party, as usual. I thought the queen would have loaned her some diamonds at the very least. But I suppose the rent is too much for a commoner.”

“No wonder she and Jeremiah get along so well. Look! I can even see horse hair on her dress!” Prentice squealed with delight and pointed.

Nienna glared at the girls but moved to walk around them. As she was about to escape, a hand latched onto her arm.

“What’s the hurry?” Prentice asked.

Nienna’s blood simmered. Why couldn’t they leave her alone? The two girls had the same flaming red hair and good looks as Rivkah. Unlike their elder sister, Prentice was mean tempered and had a habit of picking fights.

Livia was thin, with freckles covering much of her body. Fairy-kissed, some called it. Demon-kissed was more like it. Nienna never reconciled how someone as sweet and kind as Rivkah could have such awful younger sisters.

Nienna put on her sweetest, most sycophantic smile. “I’ve had a long day and don’t wish to be sucked down to the party debris with you two. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

“You can’t turn your back on me,” Prentice hissed, her face going as red as her hair. “We’re practically sisters now. You do as I say.”

Nienna whirled around, her blue dress wrapping around her ankles as she arched an eyebrow.

“First off, I am your princess, Prentice Parker, regardless of what I choose or choose not to wear. Second, never in any definition of the word will you or I ever be sisters. You’re a hag beneath those red curls of yours and I’d hate for any of that nastiness to rub off on me.”

Nienna stormed off, aiming for the balcony again. She’d pay for those words as soon as they reached her mother, but she didn’t care. It was well worth it to stop the wretched girl from

talking. Glancing around, she wondered how much trouble she'd be in if she just left. If she packed her bag tonight, she could take off as soon as the meeting was over tomorrow.

*Whatever it takes, I'm making it to that interview.*

## 4 - Ross Galbraith

Nienna burst through the balcony doors, breathing in the perfume-free air. Ahead, she spied a bench away from the light spilling out of the ballroom and sank onto the cool stone. Her bruised, possibly broken, foot cried with relief after the torture it received from Jeremiah. She rubbed her sore toes as other things she'd have liked to have said to Prentice circulated in her mind.

However, heated voices from the far end of the balcony caught her attention. Two men argued in the deep shadows near the stairs that led to the estate's gardens. The older one seemed dressed for travel. His younger, taller companion wore polished party attire.

The older man leaned in, gripping the younger man's arm. The young man shoved the older one away, then cradled his arm like he'd been burned. Incomprehensible words slipping from the younger one's mouth as they both glared at each other. Their argument likely would have kept building if someone hadn't called her name.

"Nienna! Are you out here?" The voice wasn't loud but carried on the still night air. Aspen stepped out onto the dark balcony, his face pinched with concern.

"I'm here," she said. She should have known he'd follow.

The young man she'd been watching stormed by them. He wiped a hand across his mouth, as though whatever words he'd just spoken had left a poor taste. His dark features contorted with rage or pain.

When he was gone, Nienna scanned the balcony, but the older gentleman must have disappeared out into the gardens.

Aspen, dressed in his smart green and silver uniform, approached and gave her a low bow. Unbidden heat swelled up her chest and neck as she stared. When did her friend grow up?

“Are you all right?” Aspen sat down beside her. “I saw you run out here after Prentice caught you.”

“I’m fine.” She rubbed her arms, wishing she could leave. “Every time I come to one of these things, I’m reminded of how much I hate being back here.”

“Then let’s leave. Just you and I. We’ll make a new life somewhere along the coast.”

“We’d either have to cross the Mountain Veil, which is nearly impossible with how jagged those peaks are, or travel through hostile territory where we’ll either be killed or conscripted.”

“North?” he offered with a winning smile.

“I’m sure getting scalped would be a treat,” she said.

He scooted closer, much closer than a guard should. “Where do you want to go? I’ll take you anywhere.”

Emotion pricked her eyes. Leave it to Aspen to come charging to her rescue. “I want to go back to Alturis.”

“What did your father say when you asked him earlier?”

She wiped her eyes. “He told me I was a princess and needed to stay here. He’s promised that he won’t sell me to Ballitus, but I know the council is pushing for it. Or at least Vargus is.”

“If that’s what your father decides, will you go?” Aspen’s words were slow, as if he had to pry them from his tongue.

Nienna stared up at the stars. Her favorite constellation, The Queen of the Night, the most infamous thief in all of Tellidus, appeared in the sky. The cluster of stars shone brilliant, only to vanish without a trace before morning came.

“I’m not a bargaining chip. If Owen gets to choose who he marries, then I do, too.”

Aspen’s hand closed around hers, and she squeezed it. If anyone were to see the pair of them out here, there would be more than a tirade on propriety from her mother. Before he could lean in and give her the kiss she knew was coming, she leaned back, taking her hand with her.

“That uniform fits you well,” Nienna commented, hoping to distract him.

Aspen glanced down at himself and grinned. A faint pink colored his ears. “It’s something I’ve always wanted. To be so young and earn a place in the royal guard is rare. Plus, it allows us to still gallivant around the woods like we did as children.”

She smiled. How she missed those days when she, Aspen, and Liam used to run around with the rest of the castle children, getting into trouble as they explored forgotten passages and stole sweets from the kitchens.



The Queen of the Night twinkled above her. She wanted one last adventure before she disappeared forever. Whether it was to Ballitus or somewhere else, it wouldn't be her choosing. Not unless she did something about it.

"I'm leaving for Alturis tomorrow. Are you coming with me?"

"All you had to do was ask," he said, taking her hand again.

"Good. Be ready to leave as soon as the council meeting is out. Now, we better get back inside. I'm getting this itchy feeling that we're being missed," she said, standing.

He stood as well. "I'll be ready. See you inside, Princess." He gave her a stiff bow and marched back inside, keeping his attention forward.

Once he was gone, she let her face fall. She knew she needed to get back in there. Her mother would search for her next, and that never went well.

With a sigh, she eased forward, testing her bruised foot. It was tender, but usable. The light from the ballroom fell on her and she blinked in the brightness.

Then, a shadow detached itself from the curtains inside of the balcony doorway, causing her to jump. It was the young man from earlier. Was he angry that she'd been watching them?

"May I have the next dance, milady?" he asked.

She found Aspen back in his spot. Everything from the deep creases between his eyebrows to the rigidness of his stance stated he didn't like the young man next to her. But Aspen didn't like most people.

All this she took in before turning back to the man beside her. "I'd be delighted."

The young man's smile didn't reach his sharp eyes as he said, "Excellent." He offered her his elbow and led her onto the dance floor. He was trembling. Was it from his argument, or something else?

He swung her into a wide arc before catching her in the starting position. This man was no stranger to dancing. He moved them around the floor with a fluid grace. A relief after Jeremiah.

"I'm sorry if I interrupted you out there, sir," Nienna said, relieved her foot had suffered no lasting damage.

The young man's eyes glinted, and she swore there'd been a hint of red in those deep brown irises. Yet, when she looked again, it was gone. *Strange.*

"Please, call me Ross. Ross Galbraith. I was relieved when the interruption came. The conversation needed to end. How much did you overhear?"

"Nothing. You were on the far side, and your voices didn't carry. I saw tense body language, and him grabbing your arm."

She wanted to ask if he'd been hurt, but at the mention of his arm, the hand holding hers tightened. She flexed the hand to get him to loosen his grip, wondering if she should pretend a dizzy spell. It wouldn't take much. The clash of perfumes was growing worse by the minute.

Ross glanced away. "I heard that guard call you Nienna. Any relation to the groom-to-be?"

Owen, sitting in a chair and nursing something stronger than the standard party drink, smirked when he caught her eye. Then he lifted the glass in his hand in salute before miming kicking an object.

She turned back to her dance partner. The way his eyes traveled over her jaw and neck made her stomach do odd leaps; not helped by the bold perfume trailing behind an older couple.

“Unfortunately. He’s my brother. Do you know him?”

“We’ve become friends as of late.”

When she returned to Owen, he mimed kicking again and nodding his head. She furrowed her brow. What in the wandering woods was he going on about? *Oh, right.* He’d asked her to kick the young man that was supposed to meet her when she arrived. This must be him.

Perspiration gathered at Ross’s temples. His hand was feverish on hers, and he'd wince like she’d stepped on his foot. However, he was such a superb dancer she never got close. Not that her slippers would do much damage if she did.

The dance ended, and he dropped his hands. His face was an odd mixture of flushed cheeks and pale skin. Maybe he was ill.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Fine,” he said, breathless.

She allowed her glance to slide away from him, landing on Prentice. The girl’s lip curled like she’d stepped in something repulsive as she stared at Nienna.

*If looks could maim, she'd have sliced me up long ago.*

“If you’re a friend of my brother’s, I’m sure he’s dragged you to every event possible,” she said, hoping this was a safer topic.

“No, thank the gems. Luckily, he and my cousin will only get engaged once,” he said, a touch of sarcasm coloring his voice. “I can’t imagine doing this every day.”

“Your cousin?” she asked.

“The queen-to-be, Rivkah Parker, of course.” She glanced at Owen and Rivkah, linked arm-in-arm and speaking to one of her father’s advisors.

“Which side of her family do you come from?” Nienna asked. She’d plan to avoid them as the wedding preparations ensued.

“The Monroes. Jenna is Denise’s older sister.” When Nienna’s brows pinched together, he continued. “They couldn’t have children, so they adopted me and named me heir to their estate. Now Jenna’s hoping I’ll find a pretty girl at the party and settle down.”

“Are you having much luck?” Nienna asked, unable to resist a touch of sarcasm herself. The young man stared at her, forcing her to break eye contact.

“No. The girls here are too ridiculous or already have a beau.”

He rubbed his arm one last time, then held his arms out, silently asking her to dance again. Despite his sickly pallor, the young man was still the best dancer she’d come across since Alturis. With Jeremiah prowling about, she had no desire to find another one. Twice the boy stepped on his partner’s foot before she limped off halfway through the last song.

She took Ross's hand, and they swirled around with the rest of the dancers.

He cleared his throat. "Is the guard you met out on the balcony your beau? Or your secret lover, perhaps?"

She paused, glaring at him. "No. He's just my friend."

The young man leaned in much closer than the dance required. "Did you used to be sweethearts?"

She leaned back. "I don't see how that's your business."

Ross's arrogant features grew smug, and he sent her around in a turn. "Shouldn't it be my business to protect a girl like yourself from poor life choices? A guard wouldn't improve your situation. If anything, it would hurt it."

Nienna clenched her jaw, nostrils flaring as she placed her hand on his shoulder again. *Time to change the subject.* "How long have you been part of the Monroe household?"

The smirk spreading across his face annoyed her even more. "Seven years. I serve as the chief architect under my adopted father, Frank, and have many who work under me."

She narrowed her eyes. Owen usually did a better job of picking friends. At the moment, Ross was not ranking high on her list.

"How does the man from the balcony fit?"

"That man... was a servant, but not one of the Monroes'."

She twisted her hand in his grip again, and he loosened his hold, pinching his eyebrows together.

“Sorry,” he muttered. His broad, calloused hands spoke of hard work. *Refreshing. Even if he is a dirt muncher.*

When she met his glance, she said, “You don’t seem native to Solomon, Ross. You have an accent I can’t place.”

Seeming glad for the change of topic, he relaxed, and they flowed around the dance floor. If he kept his comments in check, she might enjoy dancing with him.

“I grew up in Lambswell, in the inner part of the city. Though you’re one of the few to have picked up on it.”

Her interest piqued, Nienna asked, “If you’re from Lambswell, how did you end up in Solomon?”

“It’s a long story. But to be short, I nearly died at the hands of street thugs and Frank came to my rescue.”

“That sounds awful. I’m sorry.” She bit her lip, wanting to know more, but afraid to ask too much. “You said the Monroes were your adopted parents. What happened to your family?”

That flicker of red lit around Ross’s liquid brown irises, and angry blotches colored his face. His voice, however, was steady. “I’m estranged from my family, and hope never to see them again.”

“Oh... I’m sorry...” she said, embarrassed. “I hadn’t meant to pry.”

“Then what was your intent?” he asked, cocking his head to one side. They’d stopped dancing, allowing the crowds to flow around them in a river of shooting stars.

“To glimpse who you are,” she said, avoiding his gaze.

The hand on her waist trembled more. Heat poured from it through her dress, making her wonder if he had a fever.

“Hmph.” Ross’s lip curled into a sneer as they resumed dancing. “To do that would take hours. Besides, I can see many gentlemen trying to catch your eye as we speak. Should I let them and fail completely at my duties tonight as your escort, or do you want to remain with me?”

*Neither*, if she was honest. She was ready to ditch her dancing slippers, find a hot bath, and then her bed. The council meeting would come far too early tomorrow.

When she didn’t respond, he said, “I see. I can drop you off at the balcony doors, and you and your guard can have a few more moments. I promise I won’t tell.”

Nienna paused midstride. “What makes you think I’d want that?”

He pulled her along. “Don’t you princesses keep a trail of men on your heels? The whispers around the city say you’re destined for a marriage yourself, either to the prince of Ballitus, or to one of the aristocracy. Given those two options, I’d run as far away as possible.”

*Running is what I have in mind*, she thought. *But not where you might think*. With a glare at her brother, she made a mental note to give Owen an earful the next time they were alone.

Ross continued. “Though if anyone caught such a fine animal as yourself, I’m sure they’d have to fight off a dozen suitors.”

*Animal!* Nienna dropped her hands, eyes wide. “Thank you, sir, but your presence is no longer required.”

His eyes flashed with that tinge of red again as he took her reluctant hand, giving the back of it a kiss. In that moment, she swore sparks jumped between their skin. Ross paused, keeping his head low, but the hand holding hers trembled.

When he straightened, her pulse quickened as he stared down at her. He looked like he might want to say more, but stepped back as Aspen approached.

A muscle in the guard’s cheek twitched. “Your Highness,” he said, his words as stiff as his posture. “Your father said he’s leaving, and that you should join him. He wants you ready to present tomorrow.”

Nienna glanced at Ross, who was sizing up her guard. She slid her hand from his grip and gave him a slight curtsy. “A pleasure, Master Galbraith.”

This time Ross bowed deep, though his eyes never left hers. “It’s all mine, Princess.” Then he walked off the dance floor and disappeared into the crowd.



