

ISU YIN & FAE YANG

**** SPECIAL 3-CHAPTER SNEAK PREVIEW FILE ****



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**ROTA FORTUNAE**  
**Grims' Truth - Book 1**

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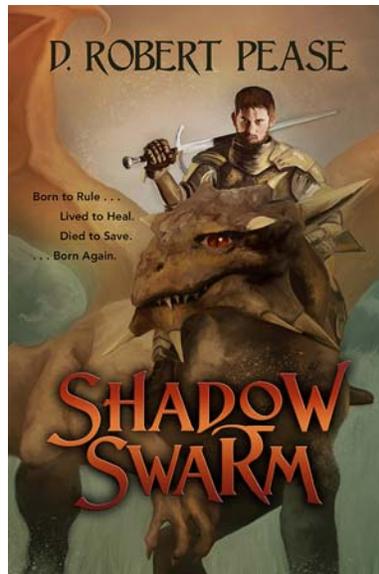
BONUS CONTENT

We're pleased to offer at the end of this book not one, but *TWO* Special Sneak Previews you're sure to find of interest. First, be sure to move on to the Special Sneak Preview of the second book in the "Grimms' Truth" series, *Conundrum*, available at this link:

[**CONUNDRUM by Isu Yin & Fae Yang**](#)

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Then, check out the preview of the award-winning *Shadow Swarm* by D. Robert Pease, an epic fantasy loaded with memorable characters and an unforgettable journey, available at the link below the cover.



[\*\*SHADOW SWARM by D. Robert Pease\*\*](#)



*For the unusual, the undesired, the unheard, and the unaccepted. Within every soul is a message waiting to be told. Within every world we may hope to find a glimmer of ourselves, and we hope you find the representation you deserve in ours.*

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# EMPIRE OF MU





1

BEYOND ETERNITY

*Everything that has happened – is happening – will happen again. This is the law of the universe, the beginning and end of a story told to me by someone so bright, I was merely a shadow by comparison.*

*In order for you to fully understand, I must spin this web from the middle – the day of my seventh birthday.*

*The Age of the Ancients dwindled in the Empire of Mu. With time grew the population of the lesser beings, the Rahma. Being lesser both in strength and mind, the Rahma depended upon us Ancients for support. Our mere presence extended and improved the lives of the Rahma people. It seemed only natural for Ancients to rule the twelve kingdoms, yet two Rahma kings ruled the second kingdom, Nex.*

*I resided in Nex, a kingdom divided by a wall. The twin rulers each ruled their own city and created their own laws. One side of the kingdom prospered while the other, Macellarius, suffered. My brother, Abyssus, and I grew up in Macellarius. We knew very little of the struggles in the community, as our father never let us experience the true suffering of commoners, but we saw it from the palace.*

*The people's cold stares called to us from below. They wished for us to ease their suffering, but we were children, and we played no role in our father's rule.*

*I often wondered why they loathed him.*

*If only then I had known the truth of our presence in Nex, I might've been able to rewrite our fate and the history of the empire.*



Fate sat at the wide balcony and peered through the balusters at the idle marketplace. The community, like the palace, sat dull and lifeless.

In spite of her tender age of seven, Fate had already spent many turns viewing the community outside the palace. For every twenty-five of the Rahma's turns, she – and all of the other Ancients – aged only one turn. Thus, the seven-turn-old, who had only lived in the palace for two of her turns, had spent fifty Rahma summers and winters in Nex.

This left for her an odd, glaring question: *What happened during the first five turns of my life? Where did those memories go?*

Fate watched the community every day, asking herself that same question. She remembered her first day in Macellarius, and often discussed it with her brother. In that memory, she and Abyssus gazed upon a forest of glowing trees.

She remembered the trees singing and whispering to her. They told her secrets and stories, but those secrets had dissipated long ago.

Neither she nor Abyssus recalled how they first moved to this bleak palace in Macellarius.

Since sharing this fact with each other, and given the five 'lost' turns that had vanished from memory, they found it difficult to trust others. This included their father, King Neco,

though Fate remained compliant because he proved nothing but kind. He provided them every necessity, and adored them as any loving father should.

At least, he adored Fate. He often held her close, and liked watching her as she slept. He spent more and more time with her as the turns went by, regularly separating the siblings.



Fate meandered the palace hallways, dodging bustling servants as they decorated for her party. They strung tiny white lights through each room to cast away the shadows. The people of Mu feared the darkness but, more importantly, they feared the Grim.

Fate thought of this as she stepped into the main hall, staring up at the lights. She'd first learned of the Grim when she and Abyssus began searching for the truth of their origins.

The siblings possessed traits passed on through few Ancient families. These special families, the Elementals, were born with only one ability. Strangely, Fate and Abyssus carried several of these traits. They could conjure up electricity like the Feh, and darkness like the Grim, but their dark hair and violet eyes served as a symbol of the Capital Royals, the Iu – Masters of Body.

Fate and Abyssus most relied on their darkness. All darkness elementals connected to the Abyss. If they called to the shadows and submerged themselves in the vision of space, the Abyss would respond and allow them to manipulate the shadows.

Fate had always wondered how she and Abyssus managed to acquire such a wide range of abilities. She especially questioned their darkness.

*Could we be like the Grim? Will we also leave this world?*

Abyssus stepped beside her, taking her by the hand. He shone a radiant smile to quell her discomfort. His presence always soothed her, even when she feared the worst. "Sis, the party will start soon. Come with me. Let's go see the decorations in the yard."

When they crossed through the doorway to the backyard, they spotted a member of Neco's private guard, Ignis Firmus. He carried a table in each arm and set them up on the lawn in the yard.

Abyssus rushed to Firmus's side and the tall guard stopped to greet him.

Firmus spoke softly, his expression lightening. "Good evening, Abyssus..."

He had a strange habit of trailing off mid-thought, which often brought Fate to believe he might be restraining something.

He soon resumed his greeting with a bow of his head. "...and Lady Fate."

Fate grasped the open air in search of her brother's hand. When she realized how easily he'd left, a hollowness grew inside of her. She accepted the bond between Abyssus and Firmus but refused to accept that Abyssus so easily told their secrets to an outsider. She liked keeping their secrets – they made her world with Abyssus feel safer and more special.

Firmus nodded towards the doorway. He knew about Fate's distaste for him but never attempted to win her favor. As long as Abyssus loved him, he could overlook everything else.

Fate spun on her heels to meet with her father. For once she almost felt grateful for King Neco's summoning. She quickly followed him to avoid further complications with Firmus.

The guards opened the front doors and let in a crowd of finely dressed nobles. The guests greeted Neco upon arrival and exchanged jokes.

Aside from the tactless yarns, Fate also struggled to understand her father's glances. Every so often, his emerald green eyes beheld her in a strange and captivated manner.

She curtsied to the guests to distract herself, but none of the guests showed any interest in

her. They seemed more interested in Neco.

Nevertheless, he soon grew tired of greeting and passed the responsibility to the guards and servants. Once they assumed their positions, he joined the celebration in the yard.

Fate waited in the hallway and watched the lights, preferring observation to participation. Without Abyssus, she lacked the motivation to socialize. She hoped he would find her so they could separate from the rest of the party, because something about it made her uneasy.

Finally, he returned, dragging Firmus along with him.

Fate scowled at them. "Must you bring Firmus everywhere?"

Abyssus asserted, "I must! Firmus will get lonely, after all."

"I'm sure." She reminded herself that she liked Firmus and Abyssus, and even liked seeing them together. She simply feared that Firmus would take Abyssus away.

Firmus paid little attention to their commentary. He watched the entrance, where a woman in a fur coat greeted a huddle of interested guests.

"Oho!" She swung a long sleeve and swept a piece of brown hair from her cheek. "Really, you're all too kind."

Firmus often appeared more brooding than he intended, but when he saw the woman, his gaze grew darker, even haunted. "Fortuna?"

The striking woman cast a glance over at Firmus. Her golden eyes glowed like embers, a distinct trait of the Ignis Family. She turned her head, and her diamond earrings twinkled in the light. A bright smile formed on her full lips, and she giggled almost in mockery. "Oh, dearest Firmus, how dreadful you look."

Fate wondered which part of Firmus looked dreadful. He stood tall and robust, a revered soldier even at a young age.

He ignored the woman's comment. "Fortuna, you were invited?"

She snorted, flapped her hand, and crossed through the room to him. "Oh please, it would hardly be a party without me." Her eyes moved over him slowly. Moving closer, she readjusted his grey sweater. "Ooh, look at you, so rugged. Honestly, what have they done to you? You look like you haven't eaten properly since you left."

He brushed her hand away. "What are you doing here?"

She looked into his eyes but said nothing in response. Instead, she turned to Fate and leaned down, exposing a great deal of her bosom.

"You must be Fate."

Her flaunting astonished Fate, who had never seen such a seductress before, though she had heard of such women.

"Who are you?" She'd intended to ask what a regal woman like Fortuna meant by visiting the palace, and why she, unlike the other guests, took the time to acknowledge Fate's presence.

Unfortunately, Firmus interjected. He put his hands on the woman's shoulders to restrict her movement. "I apologize. This is my sister, Fortuna."

Fate glanced between the siblings, astonished by their difference in temperament. "Sister?"

A man's boisterous greeting echoed through the main hall. "Oh, what a surprise!" His sudden outburst drew the attention of the Ignis siblings to the entrance. He jumped up and down, forcing his way through the crowd.

Fortuna groaned. "Ohh, here he comes."

The man approached, panting and pouncing wildly at Fortuna and Firmus.

Fate struggled to see him clearly because of his wild behavior. When she finally examined him, she almost couldn't believe her eyes. "Are there —" She shook her head. "— three of you?"

By chance, the man mirrored Fortuna with a proud chortle and a flip of his hair. "Three of

me? Praise be, whatever would the world do?"

He looked so much like Firmus that Fate checked them twice.

Fortuna elbowed the lively man against the ribs and cleared her throat. "As I'm sure you can see, this is our brother, Fortis." She scanned Fortis from head to toe and pursed her lips. "Look at this fool, so dandy. Firmus, this is precisely what I expect of you. Take away some of his bliss. He has more than enough as it is."

Fate carefully examined the three Igni. "You're triplets?"

They nodded in unison, but each responded differently. Firmus narrowed his eyes, Fortuna sighed, and Fortis beamed.

As far as Fate knew, it shouldn't have been impossible for an Ancient couple to bear triplets. All Ancients were supposed to be born with their mate. Essentially, they were twins.

The Elders called them 'Bound' – one soul split in half, an inseparable bond that could extend into many lifetimes.

Since the early decline of the Ancients, there were rumors of Bound being separated. Many Ancients died of illness when they could not find their other half, yet none of the triplets appeared ill.

A crack echoed through the hall, and Fortuna turned sharply towards an old woman by the door to the yard.

The woman cracked her cane against the tiles again.

Giving a partial curtsy, Fortuna excused herself. "I have some business to attend. I will be seeing all of you later."

Firmus's gaze trailed after her with suspicion. He looked at Fortis next and relaxed with a sigh. "Did you leave the King's party?"

Fate repeated his words in her head: *King's party*. Considering Fortis didn't serve in Macellarius, he most likely served in Nitor. That suggested Neco had invited his brother to the event, a very odd occurrence for two quarreling kings.

Fortis flapped his hand. "That I did! I heard there was a striking woman approaching the palace but I never imagined it would be Fortuna." He trailed off and shook his head to draw himself back into the conversation. "Anyhow, where's little Abyssus? I thought you two were an inseparable force."

Firmus darted off without warning, surprising Fate with his sense of urgency. His need for Abyssus often proved greater than hers. Sometimes Fate even wondered if Abyssus and Firmus were Bound. She tried not to think about it because it meant she was separated from her intended mate. Those thoughts would only concern her.

*Will I die?*

She fidgeted uncomfortably and focused on Fortis.

He grinned the moment he regained her attention. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Fate. I am honored to have your company during this important occasion."

"You might be the only person who thinks so," Fate said, saddened by her revelation.

He crossed an arm over his chest and bowed to her. "Lady Fate, if you wish, I would be honored to celebrate with you."

Her face burned as she let out her hand to accept his offer. Deep down, she wondered if Abyssus felt the same way about Firmus. Of course, Fate's reaction to Fortis differed from their bond. She admired his aura without falling victim to it. The same could be said of her feelings towards Firmus. Fate, like Firmus, cared little for anyone other than Abyssus.

Fortis led her across the yard, and they sat down on the edge of a fountain to view the drinking adults. Though he didn't say so, he seemed to share her distaste for the party.

She kicked her feet back and forth. "You are from Nitor?"

"I *serve* in Nitor, or at least, I am Niteo's personal guard."

"You must be close to call him without a title."

"Close?" Fortis winced. "I'm not sure. Titles are only appropriate when I'm addressing someone who has earned my respect."

Fate considered that for a moment. "Are you suggesting I've earned it?" She wanted to ask why Niteo *didn't* deserve his respect, but decided it sounded rude.

"You have, at least, not lost it." He folded his hands and flames ran along his skin. Fire elementals struggled to survive in the cold so it was odd that the triplets even lived in Nex.

Neco approached the fountain and shortly stood before Fate, offering his hand. "Come with me. We still have guests to greet." Shifting his view to Fortis, he said, "I believe my brother has arrived. He will be looking for his guard."

Fortis grimaced, furthering Fate's suspicions about his relationship with King Niteo.

"Looks like we'll have to reschedule our date," he said. "I look forward to speaking with you again, Lady Fate." He stood and bowed a last time. "Happy birthday. I will bring a gift when I find you. I left it with the king. All the more reason to find him, no?"

She nodded to accept his promise and watched him depart. The more time she spent with others, the more she realized how unusual her father behaved. No sooner had she found company than he retrieved her, shooing off Fortis.

Once again, Neco escorted her around the yard like a dog on a leash.

She greeted the nobles and they clapped, praising Neco for having such a beautiful daughter.

After the third greeting, Firmus and Abyssus returned, apologizing.

Neco paid them no mind. He continued leading Fate towards the palace while Abyssus and Firmus straggled after her.

As they moved, her eyes began to study the party scene. The unfamiliar adults scattered across the lawn, each carrying an alcoholic beverage in their hand and chattering mindlessly.

Fate scanned the people in confusion and caught sight of something unexpected. She turned her head slowly to follow the gaze of a startling boy on the opposing side.

White hair swept neatly across his forehead. His mint-colored eyes fixed onto her with equal fascination.

Fate gawked, though she knew it was rude. She meant to call out to him but only whispered, "*Who?*"

The boy tilted his head and disappeared into the crowd.

Fate wanted to chase after him and ask what family he was from. Never, in all her life, had she encountered a person that looked like him.

Neco continued to draw her farther away from the party. He entered the palace through the back doors and stopped in the main hall.

Lady Fortuna stepped forward, hands pressed against her middle, shoulders and back straight and proper.

In the shadows, the old woman who'd earlier drawn Fortuna away hunched over her wooden cane. Her squinty silver eyes scrutinized Fate in disgust.

Upon feeling the gaze, Fate glanced around to investigate. The guards waited at each doorway, tightly gripping their weapons, but nothing else appeared amiss.

Neco placed his hands on Fate's shoulders. "Lady Fortuna, I will presume you have met Fate. You must raise her well. I expect that she return with proper training."

Fortuna's velvet red lips formed a smile and her eyes gleamed. "If by proper training you

mean etiquette, then she will learn just that."

He tapped his fingers impatiently. "You know precisely what I mean. If she is to be my wife, she must become a suitable queen. She must learn to fulfill the needs of her king."

Fate jerked back her head to look at her father. Her mouth slowly opened but nothing came out, not even a breath. The conversation sounded strange and distant. Her ears rang as she filled with terror and dismay.

Fortuna's voice grew unusually terse. "I raise my girls well."

Neco shook his head slowly and laughed. "Fate may be your girl, but she will certainly be my woman."

Fate's skin turned cold. Her shoulders, still in Neco's grasp, trembled. The lights spun and blurred overhead.

Abyssus lost his bearings. "What? Wife! Your woman?"

Her breathing quickened as her brother's shouting stabbed at her ears. She scratched her throat in hopes of clawing out the forming lump.

The Lady Fortuna leaned down to her wearing a practiced but beautiful smile. "You're going to be living with me from now on. It's nice to formally make your acquaintance. I am Ignis Fortuna, the brothel's new madam."

Abyssus choked. "Brothel?" No one answered so he turned to Firmus and shook his arm. "Firmus? Firmus, tell me it's not true. Fortuna is your sister, right? She wouldn't... She's an Ancient!"

Firmus slowly closed his eyes and shifted his jaw to the side, as if struggling to swallow something distasteful.

Abyssus' voice wavered more with each passing moment. "Firmus, do something! We have to do something!"

Fortuna draped an arm around Fate. The Madam might've been able to calm her but Abyssus sent her emotions spiraling again.

He tugged on her hand to bring her back. "No, don't take her!"

Fate's eyes chased the shifting shadows, as the darkness loomed around them, just waiting. She closed her eyes and tried urging them forward, but no matter how she pleaded they refused to rise.

*Why won't they rise? Why won't they protect us?*

Neco waved a hand at Abyssus. "Firmus, deal with that child."

Firmus gently pulled Abyssus back, lost to the scene unfolding before his eyes.

Fate's voice quivered and she swallowed hard, attempting to find courage. "Always? You always knew? You always wanted to send me away?"

Neco responded with a glimmer of pride. "I have raised you well. You have always been my little princess—" He leaned over to stroke Fate's head. "—and someday you will be my queen."

His remarks echoed in her head over and over. She struggled to process the conversation but when she did, she burned with fury.

Neco stood back, watching Fortuna. "Well, I look forward to seeing the results of your teachings."

Fortuna held Fate closely. "As you should. Come now, Fate. We will show you to your new home." She carefully led Fate away from the main hall.

The sudden movement pulled the siblings apart and Abyssus cried out for his sister. "No!" He stretched out his hand. "No, bring her back! Fate, don't go!"

Firmus held onto him tightly, enduring his thrashing.

"Firmus, stop this!" Abyssus wept. "Please!"

Firmus shook his head remorsefully, collected Abyssus in his arms, and sauntered towards the staircase.

The warmth of Abyssus' hand slipped away from Fate's grip. Her hand lingered in the air.  
*Abyssus, don't leave me.*

Neither Fortuna nor the old woman responded. They did nothing but gaze at the path ahead. At their signal, the guards opened the doors.

Fate shook her head violently. "No!" She shrieked and lunged towards the main hall.

Fortuna threw out her arms and pulled Fate back by the waist.

"Let me go!" she demanded, kicking and snarling. As she drew closer to the door, she shrieked again, lashing uncontrollably. Streams of violet light extended from her body, flashing and crackling throughout the hall. The small bulbs on the white lights shattered and sparked.

The old woman exploded. "Fortuna, by all that is, restrain her!"

Fortuna lifted Fate and tried carrying her outside.

The guards closed in, pinning her down by the arms and legs.

She tossed and screamed as the electricity shot from her body.

The old woman removed a long needle from her pocket and stabbed it into Fate's arm.

Fate blinked hard to fight the drug but it was no use. The room warped and blurred, then disappeared in a haze of twinkling lights. Soon she was drifting in the stars, the way she'd always imagined.



2

BEGINNINGS & ENDS

*I once dreamt of two kindred spirits whose souls amounted to nothing. The first spirit, a boy of light, sat staring out at a glowing wave that hovered about white space. He watched from a cliff for what seemed an eternity, gazing upon the wash of pastel-colored clouds, as if looking for something.*

*The second spirit, a girl of darkness, found herself drawn to this boy who endlessly looked at nothing. Eventually, she joined him at the cliff-side to enjoy the scenery – she wanted to know what drew his attention, but became lost to the meaning of his search.*

*Neither the boy nor the view changed in the slightest.*

*From the cliff, they heard the sound of other children and a soft chime ringing in the distance.*

*Occasionally, the boy would initiate conversation. He spoke about the universe and an odd concept called ‘time.’ Time did not exist in the world of light, yet he genuinely believed in it.*

*I heard the boy and girl speak many times, and recorded each conversation to memory. Their most important exchange still lingers in my mind.*

*The boy prefaced the conversation with a glance and spoke softly. “Why don’t you go and play?”*

*The girl watched the pastel-colored clouds with a small frown. “Because a nobody like me has no business here. Everywhere I go I am nothing, and I shall bring nothing but destruction.”*

*“Nothing....” He saw her the way he saw the scenery from the cliff. He marveled at her display of darkness. Although he emanated an air of light, the boy lacked something important – more accurately – he’d lost something important. “I am also nothing. We can just be nothing together.” He stood and let out his hand to the girl.*

*“Together?” She cast fearful eyes upon his invitation. “What would come of two nothings being together? I will destroy everything you come to love.”*

*“I promise,” he said, brimming with determination. “I shall prove to you that two nothings can make something.”*

*Growing up, this story and those words always stayed with me. I thought, ‘No matter how hard you try, two nothings cannot ever amount to anything.’*

*Listen well and know: there is more than what meets the eye.*



Fate’s eyes shot open and she gasped for air. Her body throbbed as an unfamiliar ceiling spun over her. She regained her bearings to the best of her ability and slowly sat up.

From a distance, the old woman’s voice crackled, “That creature does not belong here. Dolls bring nothing but chaos.”

*Dolls.* Fate hesitated to move for a moment. She recognized the word from her studies of the Grim – the only existing family that maintained the ability to Puppeteer.

Puppeteering had been classified as *illegal* by the Royal Council of Mu and the Elders. A Puppeteer’s special ability enabled them to call back an Ancient soul from the Abyss and plant

it within a vessel.

The Council could not interfere with the Grim's laws, so they had tried taking advantage of their ability to restore balance to the Ancient's dying era.

Fate listened to the conversation, trying to determine the subject of the old woman's accusations. While listening, she observed the round window in the room, and checked the lattice gate to see if the two women noticed her movement. The hall rested between them and her, preventing a clear view from either direction.

Fortuna interrupted the old woman's next comment. "Stop treating her like a monster. She is a little girl, and it is my duty to protect her, even from you."

The old woman scoffed irritably. "How dare you speak to me with such disrespect!"

Fate's mind still meandered with thoughts of Abyssus and how desperately she yearned to be by his side. Her violet eyes traced the window as she crawled nearer. Dawn broke over the snowy rooftops of the shops in Nitor. The biting air brushed against her skin, calling her to its arms.

She climbed out to the path and ran through the community. The winter breeze never hurt so much. She feared that she would be caught, that she would never see Abyssus again.

She sprinted behind the brothel, evading the eyes of a small girl tending to a pond.

The girl unexpectedly stopped and turned her head to scan the area. Her cobalt-blue eyes searched as though she sensed someone was watching her.

Fate covered her mouth, certain the girl somehow detected her breathing.

The pause ended and the girl walked inside through a sliding door to the brothel.

Fate slipped through the courtyard and across the snowy path. She slunk beneath the tea house veranda, hiding from passersby. For a moment, she buried her hands and face against the stone-cold gravel. All of the emotions she had attempted to conceal, forced their way back. She never imagined living such a nightmare, being an escapee, or experiencing the fear of losing Abyssus.

The panic set in and caused an ache in her lungs. She raised her head to focus on the path ahead. She needed to find a way to pass the border.

A group of nobles gathered at the crossing for inspection.

Fate thought about sneaking in between them. She reasoned it would take time for anyone to realize that Neco had sold her to the brothel, but she didn't want to be seen by the guards at the border. Unlike other guards, those at the border were trained to question every person, including children of the Royal families.

Fate crawled over the ice-bitten gravel, watching for an opening.

A deep voice emerged and said, "Hey, little girl."

Someone tapped her arm and she broke into a fit of thrashing and gnashing.

"Praise be, are you all right?" The fair-haired man leaned down from his kneeling position to see her more clearly. He placed his hand on the wooden plank of the tea house walkway, staring calmly.

Fate knew of his nobility. The polished vest and kempt hair, his polite behavior—every part of him displayed his status.

The man lowered to his elbows. "Are you trying to get past the border?"

Fate's eyes pored over him, searching carefully for signs of deception.

"I can help you," he said.

She gave a small frown and her eyes focused hard. Even if she didn't speak, her whole presence seemed to ask, *why?*

"You are from the brothel, no?"

Fate withdrew into the shadows. The mere mention of the brothel brought back a rush of terror. She couldn't leave Abyssus in the palace.

"I will take you into Macellarius, if that is what you wish, but I cannot guarantee your safety." The man offered his hand, beckoning kindly. "Please, I wish you no ill harm."

"Who are you?"

He sighed and smiled. "I am Nigel, the Lady Fortuna's accomplice. I often assist in smuggling girls away from the brothel."

"Away?" Fate turned her head to listen more carefully. She considered the word *accomplice* surprisingly negative.

Nigel rested on his knees, pressing his hands against his legs for support. "Once the brothel's courtesans become of age, they are auctioned off. It is my job to find them suitable patrons."

"Will I be free?" She dragged herself out from under the tea house and he wiped her face.

"I do not know, as only you can truly decide your fate." He tied his handkerchief over her head and stood, drawing her under his arm. "Stay close. Do not utter a word and do not look at anyone, understand?"

Fate nodded as they plodded down the path towards the gate.

The drunken guards stopped him for questioning.

"Good day," he said. The guard to Fate's right peeked at her curiously, and Nigel deterred him. "For the king."

"Oh." The guard stepped back quickly, signaled to the others, and the gate opened, allowing Nigel and Fate passage into Macellarius.

She pulled him to the side. "Has he always...?"

Nigel didn't need to respond, for she already knew the answer. Her father had been sneaking in other girls while she lived in the palace. She didn't dare imagine what he did to them. It upset her too much.

She gripped Nigel's arms and shook him. "How many?"

Placing his hands on her shoulders, he whispered, "You must not act now. You are still too young, too powerless to stand against the forces lurking here."

"What forces? You mean there are others?"

Nigel took a few staggered breaths as he searched for the right words. "You must finish your work here and return to Fortuna. She will explain everything. Do not attempt to act on your own. You still have a lot to learn."

"I don't care about any of that. I need to find my brother."

He paused for a time.

His gaze still warned her, but Fate wouldn't listen.

"Very well," he said.

She returned to his side, thinking only of her brother and her desire to free him.

Nigel repeated his trick with the guard at the palace gates, then watched as Fate dashed off through the yard.

She sprinted by the well to the large pillars around her brother's balcony. Gripping the vines, she attempted to climb and slipped on the snow covering her shoes. By then, her emotions had weighed down upon her shoulders. She ripped off her shoes and tossed them to the ground. Nothing would stand in her way, for she simply couldn't let anything take Abyssus away.

Fate had often read about daring adventures in books. She went on journeys with bold characters and experienced life vicariously through their suffering and triumphs.

Yet life was nothing like books. This pain was real and treacherous.

Her fingers, arms, and legs throbbed. Every inch traversed felt like a mile, and after a while, she thought she might never reach the top. Unlike the protagonists in her books, she had no training, no experience with true pain until now.

She clung to the pillar with all her might as her face flooded with tears. Little by little, she finished her journey up the pillar and dragged herself over the edge of the railing. Her skin burned like fire, so she rested against the cold stone.

The balcony doors rattled and Abyssus knelt down beside her. "Sis!" He embraced her with all his might.

Fate expected to lose control of her emotions the moment she saw him, but for some reason she managed to collect herself. She shot up from the ground and grabbed him by the arm.

"Abyssus, let's go. Let's go to the Capital!"

"Wha – but, Firmus...." He turned back to the shadowy door.

She pulled his arm again. "Abyssus, we can tell the High Queen about what Neco has done! We can take Firmus away from here! Come with me!"

"I can't leave him! I don't know what Neco will do to him."

"I don't know what he'll do to *you*. I can't leave you here. Come with me!" She looked into his eyes, pleading with him, and the more she tried reasoning with him, the harder it became to choke down her tears. "Please, Abyssus, come with me. We have to go now."

He gently pulled away and stepped back. "I will go and get him. Wait here."

Fate reached out to him as he ran off into the darkness. She gasped in fear for her brother. "Abyssus, come back!" Every cell of her existence seemed to scream: *Abyssus! Come back, please!*

Footsteps echoed through the palace, up the stairs, and down the hallway. The palace filled with the shouting and rumbling of guards on a hunt.

Fate paced the room, searching for a place to hide. Using the balcony railing and the open doors, she hoisted herself onto the roof and lay flat to listen.

Soon the guards entered the room below.

Fate noted Fortuna's voice amongst the others who had entered the room: Neco, Abyssus, Firmus, and several soldiers.

Fortuna initiated the first conversation, "Abyssus, where has she gone?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Abyssus said. "You took her away from me. You took my sister. Give her back!"

Neco droned, "We shall make this simple. If Fate does not return to the brothel, then Abyssus will no longer have any reason to remain in Macellarius. He shall be... *removed* if necessary."

Fate's eyes shifted back and forth as she listened to the discussion. She couldn't imagine a world without Abyssus. He was the only being in existence that made her life worth living.

Fortuna sprang back into the conversation. "Wait a moment, he's just a child."

"Yes, a worthless child. I have no need for worthless things."

Fate shook her head over and over. She wanted to beat it against the roof tiles to shake herself from the nightmare, but it was no use. Unless she interfered, her brother would be lost.

She jumped down from her hiding place and turned slowly to face the others. "Just once, let me be with Abyssus. Just once more. I want to play with him like usual."

Neco laughed spitefully. "In return for what, exactly?"

"My cooperation." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I will stay at the brothel and I will follow orders."

He raised a brow at her suggestion. "And that's all?"

Fate's eyes filled with tears, but she refused to cry in front of Neco. She clenched the fabric of her dress and met eyes with Abyssus as she gathered her resolve. No matter how much he protested, she promised herself that she would do everything in her power to protect him.

Swallowing again, she choked down her tears. "I will become your wife and I will do as you wish without objection." Although she made her vow, she knew in her heart that she could not resign herself to Neco's will. She would never marry him; she just needed to protect Abyssus, even if it meant lying.

"Anything?" Neco waited for a nod of verification. "Very well."

"I wish to spend some time at the brothel first. Then once more—just once—I would like to return to see Abyssus."

Neco exhaled through his nose, glowering subtly. His emerald eyes gleamed in the moonlight. "And for this request, Abyssus shall become my property."

Fate took a long look at her brother. "Why are you keeping us apart like this?"

Neco crossed his arms. "Why, you ask? You look at me so coldly, with such hatred. You have only yourself to blame for being a spoiled girl. You're always clinging to your brother, always chasing after him. You shall one day return to me, Fate, once you have learned how to please your future husband. If you will not do it for me, you will do it for your brother."

"You can't keep him from me." She glimpsed at Abyssus.

His violet eyes, like her own, glistened with longing and guilt.

Firmus ran his hand through Abyssus' dark hair to comfort him. It seemed as though he wanted to do more for Abyssus, that he wished to stop Neco, but something held him back.

Fate's gaze shifted from Firmus to Fortuna in an attempt to understand. The two Ignis Ancients could have effortlessly killed Neco if they wished.

She sensed a hidden purpose behind their cooperation. The longer she studied them, the more she thought they resembled two wild cats waiting to spring on a gazelle. She wanted to understand their strange behavior.

Neco dug his fingers into his sleeves. "What will you do? This is your last chance, Fate. If you accept, you may come see your brother again."

Fortuna pushed Fate behind her. "She will accept. In exchange, Firmus shall become Abyssus' personal guard. If any harm shall come to Abyssus, then Fate will be freed from the brothel." She brushed her long willowy fingers across the side of her face, revealing a satisfied smirk.

Neco released a low grunt of discontent. He settled for some time, debating on the proposal. He repeated it carefully while checking for loopholes, "Fate will come visit Abyssus once more. He shall be under my control, but Firmus will be his guard. If all remains in agreement, Fate shall return to me and become my wife."

"Mmm-hmm." Fortuna leaned back, supporting the weight of her bosom against her arms. "If your brother interferes, then neither of us shall have a say in the results. We each hold our end of the agreement."

Neco rubbed his face, growling. "Niteo...." He wrestled the thought of his brother and returned to the conversation. "How do I know you won't instigate?"

"We will sign a contract. If I break my promise then I will relinquish my rights to the brothel and, of course, to Fate."

He relented but remained skeptical of her proposal. "Fine, we will test our agreement."

"Good, I will send a messenger to deliver a contract by morning. Fate shall be in my hands." Fortuna called Fate to her arms and slowly led her out of the room.

Fate met Firmus's gaze. Though she could not speak with him, she did her best to convey

her feelings.

*Protect him.*



Fortuna held Fate's hand on their walk back. Fate looked back on the community, knowing full well she could never again awaken to stare down from the palace balcony. The sunken faces she used to watch from a distance looked at her closely now. She realized that they watched her as much as she watched them, and perhaps they even knew of Neco's transgressions.

Perhaps they pitied her as she had pitied them.

Fortuna squeezed her hand. "You decide your own fate, and you make that man pay for what he has done. You deserve more than this, don't you ever forget that."

Fate staggered through the snow behind her new caretaker. Each step she took drove the pain deeper inside. She pressed a hand to her chest as large tears poured from her eyes.

Fortuna guided her inside the brothel, gently pushing her by the shoulders.

They may have been walking but Fate could hardly tell. Before she realized it, she stood in front of the same room from which she'd escaped.

"Stay here," Fortuna said. "I'll bring blankets."

Fate dropped to her knees, her lower lip trembling, and hunched over while holding her churning stomach. Her throat strained as she choked out a faint plea for her brother.

She should have run away with him to the Capital. Now her window of opportunity had closed.

"Get up, you lousy girl."

Before she could look something hard cracked against her spine.

The old woman stood out of reach, extending her cane. "Can't handle the life of the low and sultry, girl? Fortuna will ruin my brothel, bringing in every lousy rat from the street. Get to work!" She swung again.

Fate scrambled back until she hit her arm on a low table. The jarring impact caused a shudder of pain from her elbow to her shoulder as she spotted Fortuna's silhouette moving through the hallway.

The Madam carried an armful of blankets, so she used her foot to open the gate.

Before Fate could cry for help, the cane struck the side of her head and she balled up, using her arms to shield herself.

Fortuna tossed the blankets aside and gripped the old woman's cane tightly. "Stop that!"

The old woman struggled to pull her cane back. "Fortuna, I will not allow you to coddle another one of these rats in my brothel!"

Fortuna ripped the cane from her hands. "This is *my* brothel, and I will raise my girls however I please! If you do not relinquish your rights, then I will crush you with them!"

Fate watched Fortuna in awe and fear. For the first time in her life, she saw the form of a true Royal and the strength of a caretaker.

The old woman hissed, "Wicked thing!"

"Leave. I will not tell you again. This is my brothel, and you are not welcome here."

Fortuna waited for the former madam to leave, and then quickly returned to Fate. "Are you all right?"

Fate's thoughts were lost to the wonders of her new mentor. She questioned whether or not Fortuna expressed the love and care of a mother figure. Fate had never known the care of a mother; it was painful to behold. She hugged Fortuna, hoping that she would prove to be as

wonderful as she seemed.

“You can’t let them break you now,” Fortuna said. “You must rise again and take back the land that was stolen from you. The kingdom is yours.” She brushed away the hair from Fate’s ear and leaned in closely. “This is your time. You must be strong. You must prevail and bring balance back to this kingdom. I’m here for you. You will grow up and become the very queen you were made to be.”

*Made.* Fate riddled over the word in her head. She wanted to sleep away the pain in her heart and never awaken. The time she had with her brother – that which she longed to protect – slipped through her fingers. She now regretted her negligence towards Neco’s chronic misdemeanors.

Fortuna sheltered her with the blanket. “Cry as much as you need, little Fate, and rest well. There is much to learn, but I promise that by the time I am done teaching you, there will be hell to pay in Nex.”

The Madam’s warmth brought Fate to tears.

The Igni did more than conjure up fire; their passion burned deep within their souls. Fate had read that their fervor often made its mark in history, and more frequently, left reminders of how easily the world fell at the hands of the Tainted.

Fortuna seemed to have somehow escaped the fate of her people. In fact, her siblings carried the same, pure warmth. Their family had fought extinction many times, but they always survived. Whenever anyone spoke of the Igni, they always said the same thing: *They are survivors.*



Fortuna had exited again, leaving Fate with her thoughts. She wrapped herself in her blanket and shuffled to the round window in her room.

She gazed upon the snowflakes outside, which drifted so peacefully that she envied them. The bite of winter was harsher in Nitor. Fate had always considered the weather in Macellarius particularly frigid, but now understood that it was because she knew nothing of the conditions beyond the border.

The air rushed against her cheeks, stinging her skin and nearly cutting through her the moment she opened the window. She shivered and pulled the blanket tighter, until only her nose and eyes faced the bitter wind.

Her new quarters offered no view of Macellarius, merely one of Nitor. The palace rested behind an iron gate, past a prosperous community. Women bustled down the path in their extravagant gowns. They walked beside their counterparts and laughed, careless of the suffering in Macellarius, or even right under their noses.

Fate observed her room to remind herself that she had a new home. Her living space contained few pieces of furniture: a tall bureau, a small table, and an oval mirror. She maneuvered to the mirror on her knees and gazed at her reflection. Her violet eyes burned with tears, and her dark hair tangled around her cheeks. She failed to see the same queen that Fortuna sought.

“I am nothing, not even Cruentus Fate.” She appreciated the blanket, for it hid her heart and her tear-streamed face.

Fortuna shortly discovered her new pupil encased within the ball of fabric. She approached carefully, set down a mug of tea on the table, and made no attempt to remove the blanket. It appeared she respected Fate’s desire to hide.

“At first it will be difficult,” she said, “but with time you will come to know your own strength.”

Fate heard her words and wanted to become stronger. She wanted to conquer the land and restore it. She sought to protect Abyssus with what little power she possessed.

“You must persevere,” Fortuna said. “No matter how difficult or painful it may be, you do what you must to survive. I will aid you to the best of my ability, and you will grow up to be queen, but not Neco’s queen – a queen of your own volition.”

Fate rested her head against Fortuna’s chest. At that moment, she pushed her feelings far to the back of her mind and clung to the hope of restoring Nex. She received affirmation of her new goal and submerged herself within it.

*I will reclaim Nex, no matter how difficult, no matter how long it takes. This kingdom is mine.*



3

## THE REBELLION

**Fate awakened in the morning to** her new, unfamiliar room at the brothel. The sun rested along the edge of the rooftops, sleeping amongst grey clouds.

The moon still hung through the high window in the hall, resisting the daytime. Since her room lay at the farthest end, she saw it better than anyone. She gazed wistfully at its fading white haze, rose from her bed, and walked barefoot through the cold building to the sunken hearth room.

The Madam sat viewing a red journal full of notes. She soon noticed Fate and set it down. "Good morning, Fate. We will begin your lessons today."

Fate sat down on her knees and shuffled.

"Let's start with the basics," Fortuna said. "All girls under the age of twelve assist by cleaning and organizing during appointments. We work from dawn to midnight. Older girls work from mid-day to early morning. Young girls like you undergo a variety of lessons ranging from effective time management, cleaning, entertainment, and etiquette. Are you following so far?"

Fate remained sullen and focused. "Yes, Madam."

Fortuna nodded and smiled. "Very good, you already understand how to respond. Clever girl."

Fate's violet eyes shifted to the floor as she persistently pushed down her emotions to focus on her new task.

Fortuna's smile waned and her tone deepened. "Now, I must tell you something extremely important. Please listen closely." She waited for Fate's gaze to return, and continued. "When our girls turn sixteen they must be bid off to clients. We do not celebrate the coming of age. Every day is a struggle, but with the help of your sisters you can grow strong."

"Sisters?" Fate frowned.

"Yes, you should think of the other girls in the brothel as your sisters. Together, you can persevere. You should grow as a family by encouraging, following, and assisting each other in this challenging environment."

"Where are they?"

Fortuna smiled softly. "They have gathered together in the dining hall for breakfast. Would you like to meet them?"

"I... okay." Fate pictured her anger and fear as an enormous growling bear from which she had to hide. The shift of her focus from reality to imagination helped her suppress the emotions better, though both she and the bear knew the truth. She didn't want to become attached to anyone, not after losing her brother.

Fortuna escorted her farther down the long hall and opened the sliding doors to the dining hall. "Girls, I'd like you to meet your new sister, Fate." She pushed Fate into the room and

exposed her to nearly twenty other excited young girls of different ages and sizes.

They left their tables and huddled around Fate, throwing out an onslaught of names and greetings.

"Girls, girls!" Fortuna patted the air to calm them. "Slowly. She's still adjusting. You must learn to be patient and disciplined. You remember what it was like when you first arrived, so treat her kindly and take your time greeting your new sister. Only two at a time, understand?"

The girls responded harmoniously and scurried back to their tables.

Fortuna raised her hand out towards two girls who'd sat quietly during the bombardment. She gestured between them as she addressed them by name. "Fate, please go sit with Myrna and Tori."

Fate followed her directions and sat between the two girls.

The girl on her right side carefully pushed over a bowl of rice and fish. "Don't push yourself. We'll help you when you're ready."

Fate unintentionally gawked at her.

"Ah, it's okay," the girl said, laughing.

Fate remembered to swallow suddenly and realized her error. She had been taught not to stare or point during her stay at the palace. Now she wondered if Neco had trained her for her future – or rather, his desired future with her. She shook the sickening thought from her head and reminded herself that nothing mattered more than Abyssus.

The girl beside her shone a line of pearl white teeth. "I'm Myrna, by the way. It's nice to meet you."

"I'm sorry." Fate's cheeks burned and she covered her face with her long black hair. "I was rude."

Myrna laughed aloud. "What for? You've done me no disservice."

Fate studied through her hair. She hadn't been able to break her habit of observing others, no matter how much Neco warned her.

Myrna's eyes nearly shone like gold against her smooth, dark skin. Small black curls hugged her sculpted cheekbones like soft clouds. Her tall, slender figure and calm demeanor divulged the contrast in age between her and the other girls.

Fate shyly tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "How old are you?"

"I'm seventeen, and you?"

"Seven."

"Then you're the same age as Tori."

She cautiously turned her head to examine Tori and recognized her as the strange girl from the yard.

Tori maintained an air of maturity, but something about her didn't seem quite as stable as Myrna. Her expression focused so hard it caused tension around her eyes.

Fate faced her new sister in fascination. "Are you an Ancient?"

Tori gently placed her bowl on the table. "I am. Aren't you?"

"What family are you from?"

She squinted and scanned Fate. "Vem."

Fate's lips parted and she choked down her urge to blurt out. "You mean like the air elementals? Isn't your family lost? Why are you in the brothel?"

Tori whipped her head in the opposite direction. Her shoulder-length hair fanned out and rested again like the skirt of a billowy gown. "Shouldn't I ask the same of you?" Her cobalt-blue eyes pierced Fate again, causing her to withdraw. "What's the future heiress doing in a brothel," she said more than asking.

*Future Heiress?*

Myrna put a hand on each of their shoulders. "Let's talk about this in the hallway."

The three girls exited quietly to the hallway of decorative screens to avoid drawing attention.

Myrna opened her hands to either side of her. "Listen, we hear a lot from travelers and clients, and Madam is very open with us. Before you arrived, we received notice that she would be taking you under wing as her pupil."

Tori closed her eyes and opened them again, looking fiercer. "Interesting, isn't it? I already knew when I came here, that the Princess of Macellarius was the Capital's precious Heiress." She sneered, "Lost princess? You're a kingdom away. I wonder why they don't just take you back."

"Tori!" Myrna's brow furrowed. "Look, we don't know all the details, but the Madam seems to be striking up some kind of rebellion."

Fortuna entered the hallway from a room down the hall, her arms folded to support the weight of her bosom. "Myrna, Tori, don't try to explain things you don't fully comprehend."

Myrna bowed her head. "My apologies, Madam."

Fortuna smirked. "The three of you, come with me."

Tori and Myrna exchanged glances and looked back at Fate, and all three girls rushed into the room after Fortuna and sat down.

Fate clutched the skirt of her dress. "Is it true? Am I really supposed to be the Future Heiress?"

Fortuna responded simply, "Yes."

"Then can't I just go to the Capital?"

"No."

"Then what are they talking about when they say there's a rebellion?"

Myrna ran her fingers through her short curly hair. "I don't understand. Why aren't they looking for her? If they searched then they would have found her immediately."

Fortuna's golden eyes gleamed in the shadows. "This information must never reach anyone outside of the Rebellion. If it does, I'm afraid we will have to hunt you down and kill you."

Tori's mouth twitched faintly.

Fortuna shot a glare. "Especially you, Tori. You must learn to humble yourself." She looked at each girl carefully. "The decisions you make after today will either save or destroy the empire. Each and every one of you will play a role in this grand design. Whether or not your role is big or small is irrelevant. A machine cannot run without every cog functioning properly."

The three girls nodded at each other.

Fortuna sighed. "I cannot tell you everything you wish to know, not without endangering you. The first thing you must know now is that the current high power has been tainted."

Tori's voice strained. "Tainted?"

"I shouldn't say tainted, as that's inaccurate. What I mean to say is the High King has been infected by miasma. The Empire is in danger of falling at his hands. This rebellion you've just heard about is a group of highly trained Ancients working to restore balance to the Empire. I'm a part of it, as are many others whose names I have no right to disclose. If they should tell you themselves, that's another matter."

Fate glanced at her new sisters' ghastly expressions. "What is miasma? I don't understand."

Fortuna raised her brows. "Praise be, child, miasma is negative energy that contaminates and plagues the people of Mu. Most people can't see it but the air grows heavy whenever

someone is infected. There are people known as the Tainted who emit this energy and cause ailment, destruction, and even death everywhere they go. By law, it is required to turn them into the Council to prevent the plague from spreading."

"You said the High King is tainted?"

"That was a mistake on my part. He's infected with the plague, not tainted. Still, those infected can spread it as well. That's why it's very serious that the High King is infected. Everyone around him could potentially spread the disease."

Fate's skin turned cold. "Is that why you tried to stop me from running to the Capital?"

Fortuna's eyes blistered with consternation. "It's not just the High King. We cannot trust the Council with our affairs. This betrayal began long ago, and I wish nothing more than to put an end to it."

Tori sat back, pressing her hands over her mouth. "Even the Royal Council? What's going on?"

Fortuna cringed when she replied. "I believe this matter is far grander than the state of the Empire. I fear someone is corrupting our world for a greater purpose, but am still unclear on many of the details myself."

Tori slapped her hands against the mats. "What? Who? How could this be? You mean someone is intentionally infecting our leaders?"

Fortuna quickly checked the hall. "Listen, I am here to protect Fate. This is no time to be bitter or angry. We must teach her quickly and prepare for the storm ahead."

Myrna reached out and patted Fortuna's hand. "Madam, what can we do to help?"

Fortuna looked at Tori first. "Tori, you are a brilliant girl. I have mentioned your talent to the High Queen, Heqet."

Tori's cheeks flushed. "What?"

"You're from a lost family. I was able to bargain with the High King. When you become of age, Queen Heqet will send a representative to serve at the auction. If any harm should come to you prior to the auction, you will immediately be taken in by the Capital to protect your bloodline."

Her blue eyes grew wide. "Madam, I'm sorry. I've been awful."

Fortuna folded her hands properly and nodded. "Your heart is kind, Tori. You must learn to express that generosity."

Tori sat forward quickly. "Madam, how can I help? I wish to assist your cause."

"Tori, you will become our eyes and ears at the Capital. You must become our scholar and learn as much as you can under Queen Heqet's wing. Complete any task she sets for you."

"Yes, Madam!" Tori bowed her head. "I swear my allegiance!"

Fortuna fought a chuckle. "Praise be, girl, you are trouble." She turned her attention to Myrna next. "Myrna, I have found you a suitable patron. My accomplice..." She trailed off and shortly returned. "He's taking in several of my apprentices to fund a small organization. That organization will travel Mu and record private data to support my private foundation."

Myrna bowed her head as well. "It would be an honor, Madam."

Fate watched the other two girls in confusion. "What about me?"

Fortuna finally concentrated on her. "I will raise you here until you become of age. Use that time to grow and plan your future. I don't know what path you will choose, but I will support you and help bring balance back to this kingdom."

"That's all I have? I don't have more—"

Fortuna lifted Fate's chin with a finger. "More guidance? No. There are many complicated pieces to your puzzle. I will teach you to the best of my ability, and then you must use your

skills to choose your own destiny. Will you pursue the Empire or reclaim Nex? Do you wish for vengeance or do you wish to take Abyssus and run far away? The choice will be yours. I will simply offer my guidance, no matter what path you may choose." She stood and cast a smile over her shoulder. "Choose wisely, and remember always: you do what you must to survive."

**---END OF SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW---**