Chapter One

June and Kai enjoyed each other’s silence, as usual, in the crystal tower they shared. Lost in thought, she watched the sunrise through the glass walls, a sense of pride over everything she had accomplished over the course of thousands of years welling up inside her.

Well-organized and disciplined, June was the creator of Celestiopia. She spread beauty throughout the land and instilled a sense of magic within the hearts of its inhabitants. She loved every one of them. Kai not so much; he hated them, solely because he could not directly create his own. June represented light and Kai the darkness.

June sat on a silver chair decorated with sapphires. Her long nails traced gently along the surface of the window frame she gazed through. The crystal tower soon filled with shimmering rays of light as the sun lifted above the clouds. She rose, the hem of her white robe lightly brushed the marble floor as she paced around the small room. The sunlight created a glowing floral pattern of golden threads on the walls.

Each of the two tables situated on opposite sides of the room held a white porcelain vase filled with golden roses. She plucked a rose from the vase on his desk and lifted it to her nose, smiling with pleasure as she inhaled its aroma before waving it slowly in front of him.

“What do you want Kai?” she asked.

Kai grinned, revealing perfect white teeth. His Amber eyes glistened with what she perceived as playful wickedness. He raised his arm and made a quick gesture. The glass walls were now wreathed in golden rose vines. She frowned.

“Flowers will not help your cause. I know better than that. Your charm is nothing but a lie,” she said.

“I’m tired, June,” he replied, his features darkening and his eyebrows gathering in a frown. “It’s a simple matter for you to divide your powers into multiple beings. I have to deal with everything myself. I don’t have any help.”

“I can’t help you,” she said returning to her chair.

“I thought of a way you can,” he replied, his gaze hopeful.

“Your ideas are bad,” she sighed, hoping to end the conversation.

“Hear me out. Can I borrow Stratus from you? I’ve been watching him and I think he would make a great vessel,” he said.

“What do you mean *borrow*?He’s a living being, not an object. Get out of my room and don’t bother me anymore!”

Kai rose from his chair and approached hers. He knelt in front of her, taking her hand into his.

“Please June, evil is not born, it’s created. I need a vessel and Stratus is perfect,” he implored.

She thought about the hardships he went through, managing the mortal realm’s negative attributes by himself. Perhaps it would be a good idea if he had some help. If so, maybe he wouldn’t be so unpleasant all the time.

 June gently tugged her hand from his and nodded. “Very well. I’ll make the necessary preparations, but be considerate. You must not disturb the balance of Celestiopia. Everything you do may affect only Stratus.”

 “Thank you,” he said.

Clearly pleased, he stood and straightened his robe, then June watched as he left the room, with a mischievous grin.

Chapter Two

Unlike typical summer mornings, which Status usually spent resting by the lake, this one would be spent traveling toward Lighthaven, much to his frustration.

For the first time in hundreds of years Alpestris, the mysterious and unique plant from which all their kind was created, foretold the awakening of another.

As the morning breeze stirred ripples on the nearby lake, distorting the reflection of the sky and snow-capped mountains beyond, Stratus combed his fingers through the tangles in his white beard; a beard so long it fell past his knees and touched the earth. His long hair brushed the top of his broad shoulders. His fur was gray, dusty, and matted in places, with patches of dry mud here and there.

With only a shimmer stone as a gift, he heaved a long sigh and made his way toward the path leading deep into Mistwood Forest.

As the hours passed, the sun rose higher in the sky. Sweat dripped from his forehead. He’d plodded through the heavily overgrown and humid forest. Finally, fearing he was lost, he pursed his lips and glanced around in an attempt to get his bearings. Seeing what looked to be a break in the dense foliage ahead, he pushed through a clump of thick brush. Once through, he stopped to catch his breath. A *dasyurus* jumped from a tree branch and landed on the ground in front of him. Stratus stepped back in alarm. The small creature whipped its tail, shrieking loudly as it stared at Stratus. Dasyuruses inhabited the forests, but it was not usual to see one during the day, as they were night creatures. Their short stubby fur often grew voraciously in the moonlight, shedding just as quickly as the sun rose. The small creature’s whiskers twitched as it sniffed the air, revealing pointy sharp teeth.

“Oh my, you’ve given me a fright, little fellow,” Stratus muttered under his breath as he looked around. “Don’t worry, I’ll be on my way soon. If only I could figure out where I am, that is.”

The furry creature eyed Stratus a few seconds more and then quickly ran away, disappearing in the underbrush. Stratus ran a hand over his sweaty fur. With a frown, he glowered up at the sky.

“This heat is unbearable,” he mumbled. He raised his arms and conjured a breeze. In moments the sky darkened and the resulting gust ruffled his fur, cooling him.

“Perhaps a light rain as well,” he said, smiling. Immediately, the now darkened sky released a deluge. “I said light!” Stratus shouted, running through the trees, trying to find shelter. He instantly realized that he preferred the oppressive heat instead of this downpour. He found a tree hollow and squeezed inside, now shivering with cold. The wood was damp and smelled like mold, the one scent Stratus hated. He scrunched his nose but endured the smell until the rain stopped.

Finally, he was able to crawl out of his makeshift shelter and continue his journey. He had lost time. Picking up the pace, he grumbled was about the disobedient sky as he trudged along the now muddy path.

Eventually, he left Mistwood Forest behind and arrived at the edge of Lighthaven. His stomach rumbled with hunger. He picked a few mushrooms growing along the edge of the meadow among clusters of dead branches, half-rotted leaves, and rich loam. He chose carefully. If he didn’t pay attention, he could have easily mistaken the molybdites with gibbosum. Both mushrooms were red, the only difference between the two, beside the fact that one had white gills and the other black, was that one would make a delicious snack, while the other would temporarily cause unusual and often unpleasant visions.

He paused to rest under a giant Mimosa tree, one of the few that grew in those parts. He leaned his back against the massive trunk, his feet stretched out before him. As he ate, he gazed around to see if anyone else was out and about.

He grinned with pride and self-satisfaction when he realized he was the first to arrive.

The Alpestris rose in the middle of the meadow ahead, surrounded by a ring of stones. It resembled a multitude of thick vines twisted together and branching above his head. A central flower, shaped like an unopened rosebud with transparent petals held a heavy burden inside of them.

Once again, Stratus marveled that he had been born from the Alpestris. He smiled, swallowed the last bite of mushroom, and closing his eyes, drifted off to sleep.

*He leapt into nothingness beneath him. The rush caused his heart to beat loudly inside of his chest. He felt the rush of adrenaline building up in his body. He smiled and took a deep breath, enjoying the warm sensation of sunrays caressing him.*

 *As the ground appeared closer and closer, he opened his wings, black as the night and strong as the wind, and soared gracefully above the ground. The wings were long, thick, and twice the size of his body, supporting his weight with ease. His surge of fearful adrenaline faded into joy.*

 *Approaching the mortal realm, he gazed below in curiosity. A feeling of peace and pride nearly overwhelmed him. Shifting the angle of his wings and extending them to their maximum limit, he flew upward into the sky and marveled at the view.*

 *Suddenly, the air thickened. A strange force pulled him downward. He struggled to stay in the air, but what at the beginning had been effortless had now become a literal tug-of-war to stay aloft. His muscles burned with pain as he fought against the gravity pulling him downward toward the ground. The force was powerful, confusing him. He fought against it as best he could.*

 *Gathering the last of his strength, he flapped his wings faster, harder, in an effort to seek shelter. Looking up, he saw his home in the distance. Celestiopia, the realm above the clouds.*

*His efforts were futile. He regretted his earlier decision to jump as pain and weariness finally got the best of him. Down he fell, landing with a hard impact on the ground below. Stunned, he lay still for several moments to recover. Overwhelmed with confusion, he realized he was now in the human realm. A shiver of dread crept into his heart.*

 *He was surrounded by darkness, but sitting up, he saw a dim light in the distance. On shaky legs, he walked toward it. It felt like he was in a cave or tunnel.*

*The closer he got, the heavier his wings grew. Their weight burdened him, and as he dragged them behind him, he wished them gone.*

 *No matter how far he walked, the light seemed to grow ever distant, seemingly farther away, and unreachable. The sound of dripping water reverberated inside the tunnel or cave or whatever it was and he began to shiver. He realized he wasn’t getting any closer to the light and stopped to rest in the darkness.*

 *Looking behind him, he saw where he had entered. He turned back around and saw that the light he had followed was gone. Darkness took its place.*

 *Despair overtook him, but with one quick burst of desperate energy, he opened his wings and flew toward the dim light from whence he had come. He emerged in a valley. Relieved and proud that he had escaped that horrid tunnel, he settled to the ground and looked over his shoulder toward the cave entrance. It had disappeared, replaced by a tall tree with golden leaves.*

*His mood shifted from confused to curious. He moved to inspect it. The roots were twice as big as the crown and grew larger as he approached. He climbed over them, ignoring the idea that he could fly instead. As he reached the base of the roots at the base of the tree, he looked back and saw that thick thorns grew in the places his feet touched.*

 *Stratus looked up. The tree seemed huge and out of proportion compared to him; the leaves too high to see. A golden light shone from above, forcing him to look away.*

 *“What a strange place the human world is,” he muttered, sitting wearily on one of the thick roots.*

 *“Your wings are majestic.”*

*The deep raspy voice echoed throughout the valley, startling Stratus. Who was complimenting him?*

 *“They are so beautiful,” the voice boomed.*

*Stratus realized that it was the tree speaking to him. “You’re beautiful as well, tree,” Stratus said, patting its rough bark. He felt a sharp prick and yanked his hand back. His finger bled.*

Stratus was startled by the sound of a melodious note. He woke from his dream and touched his back in search of the wonderful wings, but all he felt were dry leaves and small twigs caught in his fur. Disappointed, he rubbed his neck and looked around. The meadow was filled with others and he realized that he must have slept for quite a while. Had he eaten some bad mushrooms by mistake?

A small being wielded a magnificent harp. Some creatures admired her, while others admired the Alpestris. Stratus stood, smoothed his hair, and approached the crowd.

 He greeted the others briefly while passing among them, stopping near the harp player. He nodded his head in salute and approval as he admired her. She smiled at him.

Myra was the watcher over the night, the guardian of the kingdom of dreams, a talented harp player, and the owner of a vibrant personality. She was also the daughter of Stratus.

Her fur was long and smooth, well taken care of. Her long hair was plaited into two braids that draped over her shoulders.

She strummed a dark mahogany wood harp with strings made of moon rays. The notes shining forth from her instrument touched her admirers deeply, evoking a myriad of images in their heads. Their thoughts wandered from visions of the setting sun caressing gentle waves lapping on the shore of a lonely beach to an image of the moon peeking through the mist of a foggy midnight, and into the dawn of love in the heart of man.

 The song was so gentle at times, with its melodious notes echoing throughout the valley, that it nearly put her listeners into a trance, and a feeling of peace surrounded them all. All gathered were in awe under her spell, from the youngest to the most powerful elders.

 Her translucent azure blue eyes never looked up at her admirers. She was one with the song now. The faded birthmark shaped like a crescent moon imprinted on her forehead glowed. Her fingertips barely touched the strings. As she played the last note, a cool breeze wafted over them, as if the wind itself had stopped to listen to her emotional journey.

She looked at Stratus, wishing to go to him, but he shook his head, urging her to continue playing. Disappointed, her fingertips touched the strings once more and another song came to life under his proud gaze.