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SUMMER

First Edition

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Chapter 3

Nádúr Noc

THE TRIP TO NÁDÚR NOC from Moonstrand wasn't relatively long, and still, to Gaia, it felt like ages. For twelve years she'd grown up dreaming about this city, and even if it was a dark place full of beasts, suffering, and death, it was the only constant thing in her life.

The first memory she had from her home.

Her world.

And now, after all those years she would be able to stand there once again and claim her place as Mother Nature and rule the worlds.

Throughout the journey, thousands of questions invaded her mind. Doubts, thoughts, and memories that kept her uneasy. And yet, for some strange reason, her mind circled around one particular person, Marie Antoinette.

Is this what she felt on her way to France? She wondered about the young girl who was sent away to be queen at the age of fourteen. *Well, she was younger than me, but come on! She was going to be the queen of a country, I'm going to be the queen of both worlds. That's insane.* Her thoughts consumed every bit of information she had from the movie, books and Priyam's 'fun facts' about the French queen. *Oh crap! She died at the guillotine... didn't she? Do they have guillotines in Terra? I don't know... she held her neck. I feel like my neck would be too small for that. Or do they make you stretch it?*

"Red..." Edan's deep voice took her out of her daydream, and she stared directly at his beautiful green eyes. "Are you Okay?" he glanced at her hand squeezing her neck.

"Oh, sure." she moved her hand away with an embarrassed grin. "I was just checking... my neck's dimensions."

He chuckled. "What for?"

Well, for my imaginary execution, obviously. She let out a long sigh. *Great... He'll know for sure his match is a nutcase.* "I'm just nervous."

"About?"

"Meeting and reaching the expectation of hundreds of Terrians at the same time."

"No way!" Priyam's gasp luckily shifted Gaia's mood.

“What is it, Priy?” she decided to follow her friend and distract herself instead from unnecessary thoughts.

“Right here,” she stood at the edge of a hill and tapped the floor with her foot. “I want to build a house right in this spot. Wake up every morning to that view,” she turned smiling at Gaia. “What do you think, G?”

Gaia knew precisely where Priyam was standing. She’d been there before. Every night for twelve years. After all, that was the hill where Hans and the rest of the Elder Clan stood witnessing the horrifying war. “I think...” She walked next to her best friend and stared at the same breathtaking view Priyam was staring at. It was nothing like her nightmare.

Instead of ashes and death, everything was covered with acres of green grass full of rare flowers that danced with the swish of the wind. At the far end was the tallest and most beautiful mountain she’d ever seen. Big, half green, half full of puffy white snow. Behind the mountain, in the sky was the moon. Only this moon was twenty times bigger than Earth’s moon as if it was inches away from touching the atmosphere. In the middle of the acres full of grass, flowers, and trees full of fruit stood the round city of Nádúr Noc. “Wow,” Gaia gasped at the stunning view. “We’re right in the middle of everything, aren’t we?”

“We are.” Donovan slid his arms over both of the girl’s shoulders.

Gaia scanned the entire view and noticed that at the South Eastern section, she could see the colorful forest of Moonstrand and a huge tree whose top reached further away from the rest of the woods. “Is that tree—?”

“Yes,” Donovan grinned. “The Big Rakau is visible from almost every part of Terra.” He explained. “And if you beautiful girls take a look at the western section.”

“You mean the ocean?” asked Gaia.

“That’s not an ocean. That’s a lake on top of a waterfall that ends at the ocean.”

“The floating city of Lakefall,” Priyam said out loud, and the rest of the team stared at her with confused expressions. “What? I picked up some small reading at Eva’s house. I like being informed.”

“Lakefall,” Gaia’s gray eyes trailed the edge of the lake. It looked like one of those infinity pools she’d always seen in magazines. Only way bigger and better. “Isn’t that where you and Shui are from?”

“That’s correct,” smiled Shui.

“What about you, giant. Where’re you from?”

“From the top of that mountain, little Prisum.” Veter held his vanilla cigar between his two fingers and pointed at the huge mountain in front of them. “That’s Wintercliff and the shiny light you see sparkling at the very top, that’s the Temple of Aeras. Now follow the trail of mountains and tell me what you see.”

Gaia did what she was told and followed the chain of smaller mountains that created a belt around most of Terra and ended on a massive volcano. “A volcano.”

“That’s the city of Emberdale, Moja Princeza.”

Priyam let out a grunt. “Looks hot.”

“It is.” Edan hissed. He openly disliked Emberdale’s climate.

“You can see all of Terra in this one spot.” Gaia smiled at herself. “It’s beyond majestic.”

“So I take it you’ll also live in my house?”

“You’re building it right in this spot? Then yes, absolutely.”

Priyam stretched her hand and closed the deal with Gaia. “Only if Edan cooks our food every day.”

“I can cook it.” Gaia volunteered.

“No offense,” she let out a loud laugh and patted her best friend’s back. “But I don’t wanna die young.”

“My food’s not that bad!” She glared at The Six who were standing behind them. “Is it?” The Six and Edan broke eye contact with Gaia pretending not to know what was happening. “Icarus?” she asked the sugar glider, and he sort off ‘agreed’ her food was excellent, as his face stood still and his eye twitched. “I can’t believe it.”

The twins arrived with a heavy bag full of weapons hanging from their backs. “Bloody hell, is that’s Nádúr Noc?” Pink huffed with excitement as she dropped the bag on the soft grass next to her. “Wicked.”

“Crikey!” Floyd joined his twin. “That’s rad, little princess.”

“They’re right, G” Priyam grinned. “Your food might be horrible, but your city makes fairytale castles look like a doll house.”

“My city,” she whispered to herself.

Edan cradled her waist with his hand and pulled her closer. “Welcome home, Red.”

“I’m not sure I ever left.”

“Ready?” He asked yet she didn’t speak since she wasn’t sure of the answer herself. She just held Edan’s warm hand and followed him down the hill and into the city’s iron gates.

* * *

Gaia squeezed Edan’s hand as she entered Nádúr Noc. All she remembered were ashes, dead and stench but as she walked through the city towards the palace, all the horrors of her nightmare were replaced by wonders. She could imagine the ashes lifting towards the sky revealing the real Nádúr Noc as if the reality was erasing her dream.

The bloody river next to her wasn’t bloody, it was fresh crystalline water, and the houses weren’t burnt and destroyed but clean, stunning and full of life. It was as if the place never knew death at all.

“Right this way” Roa guided them towards the main bridge.

As they crossed the bridge towards the plaza, she lifted her gaze and saw it. Zansèt palace. Two enormous trees were holding each side of the castle as their branches intertwine in the middle. Pearls and jewels were shining on the walls and flowers blossomed over the roots of the gigantic trees.

“Oh... aren't we a little bit under-dressed?” Gaia's voice hitched as she saw the gorgeous outfits everyone in Nádúr was dressed up with.

“I agree with G. Even though I love our loose shirts, small vests, and cool wrist gauntlets, it looks like we just arrived at the *Olympus* wearing the *Lost Boy's* clothes with none of *Peter Pan's* magic. If you know what I mean.”

“We rarely know what you mean,” Donovan chuckled.

“Look, she's back!” a teenage girl pointed at Gaia as she hailed.

Gaia smiled, not having a clue about what to do. She always greeted everyone on Moonstrand, but in this place, everyone was dressed *so* elegantly, that she had no idea if saying ‘Hi’ back would be frowned upon.

Terra is a world of customs, Edan had told her once.

A woman with a silver silk Greek-goddess dress pointed at her. “I can't believe it,” she said and was followed by many villagers that kept saying stuff like, ‘The princess is here,’ ‘Isn't it too soon?’, ‘She's beautiful,’ ‘She shouldn't be here this soon,’ ‘Look, she's still with the boy,’ and the typical ‘Welcome home, Princess.’”

Ever since Gaia knew she'd be returning to her home, she always had an idea of everyone's reaction towards her would be. Maybe they would be mad she's Mother Nature, or that she broke the necklace or that she seemed cool and likable. She had pictured a million different scenarios, but to be honest, the crystal clear surprise/confusion on their faces was something she never expected.

“Roa...” she leaned closer to her guide.

“Yes, Princess Gaia?”

“Why is everybody looking at me weirdly?”

“Weirdly?” he asked not understanding what she meant.

“As in ‘what the hell is she doing here?’ weirdly.”

“Oh...” Roa chuckled nervously. “Well... The necklace still had a few months left before it was to be broken.”

“I know that, but what does that have to do wit—” Gaia shut up as soon as she realized what was happening. “You've got to be kidding,” a chill of pure panic crawled down her spine. “They didn't even know the necklace broke, right? Oh, crap! They had no idea I was back and living for two weeks on Moonstrand?!”

“Not a clue,” Roa grinned trying to diffuse the tension. “The Parliament thought it would be for the best.”

“Bloody hell,” Edan rubbed the nape of his neck. “I should've known.”

“They didn't want to cause panic,” Roa explained the dumb reason why the Parliament decided not to tell anyone about her return.

Gaia pointed at a gasping woman that stood motionless a few feet away from them. “How is this any better?”

“It’s not,” Roa took a peek to see if any of the citizens were close enough to hear them. “Parliament tends to do whatever they want. No questions asked.”

“But Moonstrand knew.”

“That was all Mor’s doing,” said Eva as she waved at a little brunette girl who was calling her name. After all, she was a member of the Nova Clan and the chief of her village. “She warned us ahead of time.”

Gaia took a deep breath trying to calm herself down. She’d been nervous about arriving at her home after twelve years, and this situation wasn’t helping at all. “What do we do now?”

“I don’t know,” Roa shrug his shoulders. “Just be like... Surprise! Guess who’s back!”

“Not funny,” she glared at him while Priyam covered her chuckle.

“A little funny,” Priyam whispered towards Donovan as he was also trying to hide his laugh.

“Anyway... what’s done is done,” Roa said. “Try to relax now and let’s take you to the palace. You guys need to change before the Parliament sees you.”

“Oi,” Pink cheered next to Willow. “Can I wear one of those tunics? Or does it have to be a dress?”

As everyone discussed their clothing options, Gaia tried to relax, but the closer she got to the palace, the more people she heard. Either it was negative or positive, it was overwhelming for her. For some reason, she felt the same way she did whenever she walked her high school’s hallways. Confused, lost, judged and with something to prove.

Her hand began to shake, but Edan immediately lifted it and gave it a soft squeeze. “Relax. They are scared of the unknown. People from Nádúr guide themselves with logic and planning. They don’t particularly like situations out of their control.”

“You’re saying I’m screwed?”

“I’m saying, give them time to get to know you.” He slid his finger over her hand. “Besides, we’re here.”

Gaia faced forward and stared at the gorgeous main entrance. The dark golden doors were covered with vines, flowers and gorgeous pearls that twinkled with the sun each time the soldier opened up the gate. And just then, for the first time in twelve years, Gaia took a step forward and walked into her home.

“So?” Priyam leaned closer. “Just like you remembered?”

She shook her head. “Better. This is a lot better.”

And it was. The main hall was huge and ridiculously tall, with butterflies flying all over the room. The walls were made of rainforest topaz, vines, pearls, and white lilacs.

There was a natural fountain in the middle, flowers everywhere and a few trees that merged with the walls. Needless to say, the place was unbelievable.

The smell, the way the light entered the room and the way the fountain sounded, sucked Gaia into one of her memories.

The room was exactly the same. Gaia was four years old. She placed a bunch of turtles inside the fountain as Edan held her by the back of her shirt. "A little further." She pleaded.

"No. You'll fall."

"Gaia..." Tanya's voice sounded loud and clear. Little Gaia lifted her head and saw her mother with an angry expression. "What do you think you're doing, little girl?"

She bit her lower lip. "Putting turtles in the fountain."

"Why?"

Little Gaia pointed at the turtles swimming in the crystalline water. "They look pretty."

Tanya crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Is the fountain their home?"

"No." whispered the little girl.

"So you separated them from their home and family so they could look pretty for you?"

"I guess."

Tanya squatted in front of Gaia so she could see her eye to eye. "What if someone decides you'll look pretty in a box and they take you away from Edan and me?"

"No!" shepanicked. "That would be horrible."

"Then why is it different for those turtles?"

The little girl looked at the animals and somehow now she could feel they were sad. "I'm sorry, mom."

"Go return them to their home."

"Yes." She took the three turtles and walked away, only, she stopped around the corner to wait for Edan.

"Edan," she heard her mother calling him. "I know you were going to return them once Gaia left, but don't allow her to do stuff like that from the beginning."

"I'm me," he responded. "I can't tell her what to do."

"It's called, teaching what's right. And no one is above what's right, not even Mother Nature." Tanya passed her fingers across the boy's messy hair. "You're her guardian, Edan. You teach because you care," she said and walked away into the hallway.

"Mom." Gaia snapped out of her memory and followed the same way her mother went.

"Princess Gaia," Roa lifted his arm to stop her, but Edan blocked him with his hand.

"Let her be. She needs this."

Gaia walked down the hallway up to a large room made of marble and vines. “No way,” her heart stopped at the sight of the desk she saw her mother writing on the last day before she was sent away. She remembered how Hans scowled at a soldier for disrespecting Edan and how they talked about The Six. Her hand glided over the top of the desk as she circled it and sat on the chair.

Strange, she thought as it looked smaller than she remembered and yet she felt so little in that chair.

Every room she entered was the same feeling, like a constant déjà vu of a life that wasn't hers. Her life inside the palace seemed so unreal now. Every place she walked in, she was hunted with a vision of her little self as if her brain was regaining all of her memories at the same time. She touched the curtain, feeling the odd sensation of knowing exactly how it felt before her hand reached the fabric. The smells, the lighting, everything was there.

Gaia stared down a corridor. Her heart began to beat faster and faster. “Could it be...?”

Back at the kitchen, The Six, Priyam and the twins waited for Edan to finish making a traditional Nádúr Noc's dish he learned how to cook for Lady Tanya called Grappo, a raspberry-grape salad with pear squares, caramelized nuts, cheese and tons of different lettuces

“Sir Veter,” a soldier bowed in front of the Viking man and Priyam had to swallow her laughter. She never once imagined her mischievous-childish-loveable giant would be treated as a fancy lord.

“Speak,” Veter commanded as he kept helping Shui clean her transversal flute.

“We can't find her,” the soldier shivered. “We looked in every single room. The princess is nowhere to be found.”

“Here, take care of this.” Edan gave the cooking knife to Donovan. “I know where she is.”

The soldier stood in front of Edan and wrapped his fingers around his sword's handle. “You—”

Veter stood up and smacked the table with his fist creating a loud cracking noise. “*He* is the youngest branded by the Three Markings, our chosen leader, and my good friend, so I recommend you move your hand away before you end up regretting it, soldier.”

The soldier's face whitened, and his hand fell to his side. “I... I'm sorry.”

“You better be.” Priyam glared at him. “Now go and bring us some snacks.” She caught the stare and grin of Floyd and turned towards the twin. “What? Everyone's bossy, why can't I be bossy?”

Edan thanked Veter with a small nod and faced Roa. “How long until the Parliament is ready?”

“An hour, give or take.” He stared at the light outside the kitchen. “The rest of the Nova Clan will be here soon.”

“Perfect. She’s in *The* room, let us know when the rest arrive.”

“Understood.” Roa bowed, and Edan crossed the palace towards the place he knew Gaia would be in.

* * *

Edan pushed a wall made of vines and entered into a secret room made of branches, flowers, and pearls. “Red?” he called and found her sitting next to a beautiful tree. He could see it, the sadness, her happiness, hope and tears, everything at once. Every emotion rushing through her eyes. He sat down next to her and took her hand.

“This is the last place I saw my mother. It’s where you put me on the Fireball,” she finally spoke.

“Yes, it is.”

Gaia leaned her head against Edan’s shoulder. “That day, you looked so serious.”

“I was terrified.”

“What happened after I left?”

“Azazel found us.” He trailed circles on the skin of her arm. “I tried to protect your mother but she pushed me to the ground, and it swallowed me until I reached Klog Mor. I begged Mor to come to save Tanya, but she never did. Instead, she took me out of the barrier. I tried to go back for days until Mor took me to a small town near the forest and I saw you through the window. It was at that moment that I stopped trying to get back to Nádúr.”

“No way! You were in Truckee?” she asked, and he nodded. “I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t,” he chuckled. “You’re very dense sometimes.”

“Hey! I was six when you were there.”

“That time.”

“Were there others?”

Edan took a deep breath. “I went to Truckee 87 times.”

“You’re kidding!” Gaia couldn’t believe it. And it wasn’t the fact that he was in Truckee or the times he was there, but the fact that being there wasn’t permitted to him or any of The Six and well... if Edan was something, it was a rule book. “Wasn’t that against the rules?”

“Yes. I broke it 87 times.” He admitted. “At first, I used to go once a year. Then twice but as soon as I turned 17, it became more difficult. I couldn’t stay away for long; each time it was harder to leave you. Plus, you were always getting in trouble.”

“Hey! Well...not always. Did I ever see you?”

“A few times. Last time you actually talked to me, you were around eleven. You confused me with a neighbor.” He lifted his thick eyebrow and grin. “You used to watch me from your window.”

“That was you?”

“Yes.”

Gaia remembered that. She had a big crush on a neighbor’s kid that walked by her window from time to time. Even Priyam knew she found him cute and kept teasing her about it. “But I thought I had a neighbor that looked like that.”

“I made arrangements and had a family moved.” He explained with a hint of pride in his tone. “They had a son with green eyes. I thought that would suffice.”

“You’re insane.” She laughed at this unknown side of her match.

“I needed a cover in case the Parliament heard rumors of a green-eyed boy strolling near your house. It worked.”

“Did they hear about it?”

“Yes.” He scoffed. “Darius told them.”

“Darius?” she asked, but by the tone of his voice, she could tell Edan wasn’t very fond of him.

“Noisy little prick, you’ll meet him soon enough.”

“Hello?” Priyam’s voice was heard from outside the wall. “Icarus said you were looking for me, Fireball.”

“You called her?”

“I thought you would like to show your best friend the place you dreamed of every night.”

“Thanks,” Gaia kissed him softly on the lips and wielded the vine wall so her friend could enter the room without having to crawl under the trees.

“Wow!” Priyam gasped at the sight of the room. After all, it had its own waterfall. “The walls, the waterfall, the smell. Everything is exactly how you described it.”

“I told you it was nice.”

“It’s beyond amazing, G.” she passed her hand across the cold water. “You need to learn how to describe things. A bacon burger is nice; this is freaking epic,” Priyam walked towards the waterfall. “This is the spot where your mom gave you the necklace, isn’t it?”

“Right where you are.”

“Honestly, it’s crazy to think that after all those years of talking about the place in your dreams, and look at us,” she smiled and leaned against Gaia. “We’re here, G.”

“Excuse me,” Roa spoke from the edge of the vine wall. “They’ve just arrived.”

Gaia studied Edan’s reaction to the news, even if she had no idea they were expecting someone, his smiling face made her realize he was aware of that meeting’s motive. “Who’s here?”

“The Nova Clan,” he announced proudly.

The Nova Clan... she remembered Eva telling her stories about how they are the new Elder Clan. She'd never met the other three members, but she knew Eva and a so-called Adriana, were also a part of them.

"I see they're early," Edan stood up, dusted his medieval-looking brown pants and nodded. "We'll see them now."

Gaia, Edan, and Priyam exited the secret room and followed Roa across two hallways, down five stairs and through a lovely indoor garden, until they reached a strategic room that had a long wooden table covered with maps and statistics, a bunch of pots full of flowers and a gorgeous tall window that brightened the entire place.

Gaia saw Eva standing next to the table beside two strangers.

"Hello, guys," she greeted them with a big smile. "Allow me to introduce you to the rest of the team," she pointed at a tall twenty-four-year-old Asian-looking man with light blue eyes, an elegant linen shirt, shorts that reached the top of his knees and had the Temple of mark branded over his left wrist. "This is Zen Yeng, he's the water wielder of the Nova Clan."

The young man bowed. "It's an honor, your highness."

Priyam's chocolate-brown eyes opened wide. That member of the Nova Clan had a remarkable resemblance to Shui. From his facial expressions to his manners. "Is it me, or he looks just like Shui?" she whispered to Donovan.

"Likewise," replied Gaia. "I'm very happy to meet you."

Zen faced Shui and smile. "Good evening, cousin."

Shui took a step forward and hugged him. "Nice to see you again, Zen."

"I assume that answers your question," Donovan grinned at Priyam.

"It does," she admitted. "Though they should change the song to *'They're small worlds after all.'*"

"I don't think that rhymes at all." Eva laughed at Priyam's comment. "Gaia, Priyam, this is Jeda. She's the wind wielder of the clan."

Gaia faced a beautiful black woman with big golden eyes and a stylish bun made of golden dreadlocks. She had the mark of Aeras tattooed on her left wrist.

"Jeda, Jeda... Jeda." Priyam repeated multiple times until her best friend glared at her. "What? It's a cool name."

"Nice to meet you." Gaia smiled at Jeda.

"Welcome home, your highness."

"Yes, welcome home, *princess,*" hissed a nineteen-year-old man that just walked into the room, making emphasis on the last word. "Pleasure to meet you, I'm Darius."

Gaia scanned the man from head to toes. "Yeah...I've heard about you."

"Of course you have." He combed his straight, long, pitch-black hair with his fingers and glanced at Edan with his equally black eyes. "What do we have here? Look at you Edan, still trying to fit in? That's a shame."

“Still no temple’s mark and out of every group that requires an ability?” Edan grinned. “That’s a shame.”

“I didn’t even try to pass that stupid temple.” He spat, though everyone could tell Edan hit a nerve. A big one. “I had better things to do. Unlike you.”

“I can’t imagine what’s better since I’m now taking care of my match.” Edan held Gaia closer to him. “I mean, the princess.”

Darius glared at Edan’s hand resting on Gaia’s waist. “Outrageous.” He growled and stomped away.

“Nice, Fireball.” Priyam congratulated him with a pat on his back. “Very macho-alpha of you.”

Gaia bit her lower lip and frowned. “Not to point out the obvious, but he really hates Edan,” she told Eva.

“Hate doesn’t even begin to describe it. Darius is someone of name and reputation, yet he can’t get any respected position. Unlike Edan, who even though people try to push him out of the system and is basically an outcast, has always been chosen by everyone of importance.”

A female soldier with blond hair and hundreds of freckles arrived at the room carrying a long white box. “Excuse me, Princess. You need to change into these clothes,” she offered Gaia the box. “The Parliament is expecting you.”

Gaia stared nervously at the white box that was placed on her hands. She liked the idea of wearing one of those gorgeous dresses, but doing it in front of everyone was a bit too much for her. “I’m sorry, I have to change right here?”

“No, Princess,” the freckled soldier tried her hardest not to smile. “There’s a room you can use at the main building.”

“Let’s go then.” Gaia pulled Edan, but the soldier stopped her cold.

“Apologies, my Princess. No one, but the Nova Clan, can come with you.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry.” Edan gave her a reassuring smile. “We’ll wait outside the Parliament with the rest of the team.”

“Come this way.”

And she did. She followed the Nova Clan and the soldier across a wooden bridge to a building outside the palace. A building where she would meet the Parliament and decide the worlds’ fate.