

The
ENCANTO'S
DAUGHTER



Melissa de la Cruz

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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For Mike and Mattie, always

*For my Chinese-Spanish-Filipino family
and everyone in our households, especially the ones who
told us kids all the scary stories about mambabarangs*

For Grandpa and his anting-anting

*For Ellen Goldsmith-Vein
for being my Hollywood mama*

Every jungle has a snake.

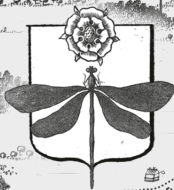
—FILIPINO PROVERB



ISLAND OF BIRINGAN

Recorded for the Council of the Courts with
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AURORA
WETLANDS



LAMBANA
PALACE

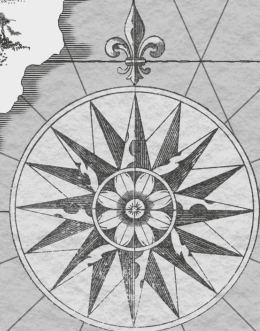
LAMBANA
VILLAGE

OLD BUMARA WALL

SIRENA
PALACE



SIRENA
VILLAGE



1



THEY CAME FOR me without warning.

It was just another first day at a new school, which happens a lot when you and your mom are on the run. I couldn't keep track of how many first days I'd had, although the year I went to ten different schools was the worst one. That morning I was supposed to be taking notes about supply and demand economics, but instead I was doomscrolling under the desk.

Experts say the next recession will start earlier than expected. The nation's business economists predict that due to rising interest rates . . .

Strange winter weather in the southwest United States goes beyond climate change. These "freakish" weather patterns are not attributable to . . .

Police are asking the public for help once more in the case of a missing teenage girl from Santa Ana. Phoenix Xing was last seen leaving school a year ago today . . .

Another scandal for reality TV star accused of cheating on his long-term girlfriend . . .

A shiny black beetle scurried across the floor, pincers waving. *What are you doing here, buddy?* It paused, almost like it noticed I was watching, before finally disappearing beneath the wall. I wished I could do the same. I was desperate to get out of there. High school sucks, no matter if you've been at the same town since you were born or if you've just arrived like we did. I wanted *out*.

Be careful what you wish for, as my mother would say.

A crackling voice interrupted over the PA: "Can we have Maria Josephina Robertson-Rodriguez to the office, please?"

I dropped the pencil and sat up straight. That could only mean my mother was picking me up early. Already? Why? Was it happening again?

The teacher, whose name I hadn't even learned yet—nodded at me. Every head turned in my direction. *What's up with the new girl?* they were probably thinking. I ignored them, trying to appear nonchalant, stuck my phone in my pocket, grabbed my beat-up backpack, and stood to walk out. Behind me, the teacher picked up where he'd left off. *If supply decreases, then . . .*

The door clicked shut. I started down the long, empty hallway toward the main office. I heard the shriek of a chair scraping against linoleum and muted chatter drifting out from one of the classrooms.

I was going the right way, I was positive, because I'd come in that direction from the office only a couple hours earlier. But somehow the hall seemed to go on and on. Endless. Hmmm.

Above me, a fluorescent light flickered, making a snapping noise.

Then everything went silent. No more screeching chairs or hushed voices. All the classrooms around me were dark and empty.

Probably no classes this period, I told myself. Or maybe they're meeting in the media center. *Nothing creepy about it. Right?*

Even my footsteps seemed louder. Each step pounded in my ears. I felt weirdly, impossibly, completely alone.

No—it was just that I was in an unfamiliar place, making me feel unsettled. That was normal. Everything was normal. And I was on my way out, anyway. In a few minutes, I'd be home.

A door slammed behind me. I turned to look, but no one was there. My heart sped up.

When I looked forward again, the hallway stretched on as far as it had when I first left class. *What the . . .*

There was a popping sound, like a balloon bursting. I spun around again, stomach in my throat. The lights at the end of the hall were all out. It was pitch-black where my classroom was. In a flash, like dominoes falling, the darkness rushed toward me. The popping sounds grew louder and sharper. Lightbulbs were bursting, glass shattering onto the floor.

I bolted for the office.

It's happening.

What my mother warned me about for years.

Here.

Now.

I ran so fast I couldn't even feel my body anymore. I had only one thought: *Get out!*

Then everything went black. My eyes didn't have time to adjust, so I had no idea what was in front of me, but still I kept running. Any second, I'd reach the end of the hall. I'd be near the office, near an exit. It was right around the corner. Where was everybody?

We were covered in shadows, yet there was no sound. No teachers ordering their classes to quiet down. No announcement. No alarm. Nothing.

There was only me, running, in the darkness.

Up ahead, I saw movement. Figures, like shadows. Half a dozen or more. Illuminated, just barely, by dim light coming in through the exterior doors to their left. Sharp relief filled me: I wasn't alone after all. Of course not. Why did I panic? Just a blackout. Staff was out checking on everyone. I slowed to a walk, winded, a cramp in my side.

The figures stopped moving—they seemed to be waiting for me at the end of the hall.

"What happened?" I called, out of breath.

They didn't respond.

"Um, I was called to the office?" As I approached, their bodies and faces took shape.

Oh. They didn't work at the school. Not teachers. Not administrators. And they weren't students either.

Narrow faces, with flawless skin and sharp features. Slight frames with long limbs, covered in nondescript black cloaks.

I knew who they were immediately. More importantly, I know *what* they were. Encantos. Also called fairies, but in my father's language: *encantos* or *engkantos*. Magical creatures. A different race, hidden from the human realm. There were different types—diwatas were female forest and mountain spirits and human in appearance; dwendes were akin to dwarves. These were mostly munduntugs—hunters.

One of them stepped forward. Dark hair curled underneath his pointy ears. "We have very little time to waste," he said, his voice a

melodious whisper. "Your father, the king, is dead. You're in grave danger. We can protect you, but you must come with us."

"Right now?" was all I managed to say. My mind was spinning. *My father is dead, I'm in danger, I have to go with them.* No, I needed to talk to my mother first. This was why we had been running all my life. To keep me safe from my father's world. And now his world had come out of the darkness and found me.

"There's no time," insisted another. Two of them stepped toward me.

The first repeated himself. "Come with us. Now."

"But my mother . . ." I began. I couldn't go without her. She needed to know where I was, what had happened.

One of them took my arm. "You must," the creature declared. "The others will be here soon." The cloak moved aside when she reached out to me, revealing an iridescent wing folded at her back. She was from the flying battalion, then. They had sent the best hunters to fetch me.

"All right," I said slowly. "But what about . . ."

"Your mother will be informed." She looked anxiously at the others.

The one who seemed to be in charge spoke again. "Of course. Now follow . . ."

Before he could finish a giant gust of air blew in, like a storm coming right through the building. We all shielded our eyes but were otherwise frozen in place, stunned by the swirling wind.

The female hunter yanked on my arm and began pulling me away. She shouted to the others: "Run!"

Just as we began to move, I felt her lurch away from me suddenly, and she was gone.

The air settled, revealing another group of fairies—a group of patianaks, with sharp teeth, iridescent skin, and wings as black and glossy as a raven's. They were the fiercest and most unforgiving of the encanto warriors. I shuddered.

The hunter who'd been holding me was on the floor. One of the patianaks stood over her, his sword driven right through her torso.

Horried, I stumbled backward, frantically trying to figure out which direction to run in. But everywhere I looked, there were more of the enemy.

The patianaks slaughtered the winged munduntug battalion with ruthless efficiency.

Back down the dark hall was better than whatever was going on here.

I turned to run, but as I did, strong arms wrapped around me.

2

A decorative flourish consisting of a series of small dots and a curved line, positioned below the chapter number.

DOORS OPENED. COLD air hit me. I was thrown over a shoulder and carried outside. The sky, which had been blue and sunny when I walked in that morning, had gone dark gray, menacing, with storm clouds swirling like dozens of tornadoes about to form. I was too terrified to even scream. I felt like I was outside of my body, watching it all happen.

My captors shoved me into the backseat of a black car. Two patianaks got in, one on either side of me and another in the front passenger seat. The driver was already there, waiting with the engine running.

“Where are you taking me?” I demanded as we sped away from the school. There was an earsplitting clap of thunder directly overhead followed by blinding flashes of lightning.

I lunged over to open the car door and jump out, but the patianak on my right wrapped his hand around my wrist before I could.

I tried to yank my arm away from him while struggling to get at the door with the other, but then he gripped both my wrists, and he was far stronger than I was.

I sank into the seat as if I’d given up trying to escape. When he let go of me, I leapt for the door again, but it was no use; he

effortlessly blocked me. The car jerked to the right, knocking me sideways, then right back to the left, so that I tumbled the other way.

“Seat belt,” he hissed.

I held on to the headrests in front of me and yelled, “You’re joking, right?” I looked up—we were speeding toward a red light. “Stop!” I screamed. “Stop!”

The car flew straight through the intersection, dodging other cars, which spun around behind us, blaring their horns.

The speedometer crept up, up, up, past eighty-five, then one hundred miles per hour. No way I could jump out now. This ride was going to end in a fiery crash.

We weaved around traffic. Narrowly dodged a slow-moving minivan. Cars drove off the side of the road to avoid us. I clutched on for dear life and closed my eyes, bracing for impact. We went faster and faster. Like we were flying. And maybe we *were* flying. I was afraid to look.

How were they so calm? Once it felt like we were at least traveling in a straight line, I peeked out of one eye. We were careening right into the back of a huge tractor trailer. I opened my mouth to scream right as we rammed into it—except, we didn’t.

Somehow we swerved around it.

I whipped around to see the truck still in one piece. When I faced forward again, we were speeding directly for a bunch of preschoolers. They were toddling across the street with their teachers, who couldn’t see us behind the huge umbrellas they were holding over the children’s heads. This time, I did scream.

Right before we collided, the front of the car pulled up and flew right over their umbrellas.

We were flying. Literally flying into the thunderous sky. The

driver spun the wheel all the way to the right, narrowly avoiding a bright white flash of light.

And then, all at once, we were nosediving.

I shut my eyes tight again as my stomach heaved. *This is it. It's over.*

The car hurtled toward the ground below. I bent forward instinctively and covered my head with my arms, even though that probably wouldn't do any good. The seconds felt like minutes, each one drawing out the inevitable.

But then the car yanked upward again, straightening out and slowing down. Once it was clear we were back to a stable position, I sat up cautiously and opened my eyes. We were over a huge empty lot, coming in for a landing.

Eventually the car came to a smooth stop in the dirt. At first, I was relieved to be on solid ground again, but then I had to figure out how to escape.

"Is Don Elias ready for us?" the patianak to my left asked one of the others.

Elias—I knew that name. I had vague memories of meeting him as a child; my mother talked about him. He worked for the crown, hence the title Don, which marked him as one of the lords of the court. Now, apparently, he was a traitor. Had the king's daughter kidnapped. He probably wanted the throne for himself, then. That's what this was.

My three captors stepped out of the car, one of them holding his hand out to me. "Oh, now you have manners?" I didn't take it. "No, thanks. I've got it." I scooped over and got out. I was a bit wobbly on my feet after all the death-defying aerial stunts. "Where are we?" I demanded, but none of them answered me.

My heart was throbbing painfully.

They'd already killed the soldiers sent to fetch me. Would they also kill me? The hunters sent to protect me had come too late.

They gathered around me in a circle, so that I couldn't flee, and herded me across the lot. I could drop to the ground, maybe. Knock their legs out from under them and make a run for it. There's no way I should let them walk me into a field. I needed the perfect moment, something to distract them, and then I could . . .

Before I finished the thought, the air in front of me changed, and for a moment everything was pixelated. Great, now I was hallucinating from the anxiety. I hoped I wasn't about to faint, because that would really screw up my escape.

But the image got clearer—it wasn't a hallucination. It was a door. An actual door. Made of dark wood, with a curved top and a gold handle. Out in a field.

Overhead, the storm clouds gathered again, as if they'd followed us there. A sudden boom of thunder, coupled with a bolt of lightning that hit the ground mere feet away, made me drop to the ground.

"Hurry!" someone said, taking my arm and getting me back up.

They began running, pulling me along, until we got to the door. One of them threw it open and pushed me through it.

All at once, the storm was gone. The field was gone. The door slammed shut, and I jumped at the sound.

We were in some kind of round room. I got the feeling we were underground, even though we hadn't gone down any stairs or anything. There were no windows and no other exits. And it was oddly cozy for a kidnapper's lair. I looked around at the walls, made from

the same polished mahogany as the door. There was a gray stone fireplace and an antique-looking table and chairs. Then I saw him.

“Don Elias,” one of the patianaks greeted him. He was seated in a high-backed chair. A throne. So he’d already made himself king, after all. I felt a sharp stab of betrayal as I remembered exactly who he was. Elias was my father’s most trusted adviser. Head Councilor to the king. My godfather.

And now he meant to get rid of me, the inconvenient heir. I’d watched enough prestige medieval fantasy television shows to know how these things worked.

He sat there, large hairy hands gripping the armrests, regarding me with something like smug curiosity. The way he’d scrutinize an insect before smashing his foot down on it. I stared right back at him. I was sure he was going to kill me, but that didn’t mean I had to make it easy for him.

3



I RAISED MY chin defiantly. If Elias expected me to cower and cry after that little stunt, he was in for a surprise. The corner of his mouth curled into a smile. Now he was mocking me?

“It’s been a while,” he said. His voice was deep. “Nice to see you again, MJ.”

“Only my friends can call me that.” I practically spit at him when I said it. Even though I had no friends. It was hard to make friends when you were always running away without leaving an address. I wasn’t allowed social media either. Mom had made that clear. You couldn’t find us online—you weren’t supposed to find us anywhere.

He laughed. “You *are* your father’s daughter.” He pushed himself up from the chair and came toward me. I gritted my teeth and braced for a fight. It wouldn’t be a long fight—he not only towered over me but was solid and muscular, too. Still, I’d inflict as much pain as I possibly could.

Then his arms opened wide. “I know you haven’t seen me in too long a time.” He studied me and nodded, satisfied. “You have your mother’s eyes. The rest is all your father.”

My mother had told me I took after my dad—that I had his same dark hair, olive complexion, proud nose, and sharp chin. But

I had my mother's eyes, as blue as the cornflowers that grew wild in her hometown.

The old man moved closer. "Is it still okay if I hug the princess?"

My eyebrows scrunched together. "Excuse me?"

He was smiling now. "It was touch and go there for a minute. We were afraid we'd lost you to the insurgent faction."

Insurgents?

The munduntug hunters were insurgents? I thought they'd come to protect me.

My shoulders relaxed, even as my mind was swirling. "So you're not . . . hang on, didn't you stage a coup?" I motioned to the huge throne he'd been sitting in.

Elias looked at the throne, then back at me, horrified. "Of course not! Oh my, is that what you thought? That's just my comfy spot in the safe house." He reached out and gave me a bear squeeze, like a grandpa would. "You can't imagine how relieved I am that you're here with us, anak," he said, calling me *child* as he stepped back. "I made a vow to protect you, and if I'd failed, well . . ." He shook his head. "No matter. You're here in one piece."

"I thought I was being kidnapped," I said. With the immediate threat gone, I was starting to shake from the adrenaline aftershocks.

Elias narrowed his eyes at the others. "None of you explained what was happening?"

"There was no time," one of the patianaks answered, her voice raspy like the whisper of the wind. The rest nodded. Someone else confirmed: "None at all, Elias. It was dire."

"It's true," I jumped in. "I was about to leave with the others first, and then they showed up—"

“So the insurgents did get to you?” He looked angry.

Before I could answer, another patianak stepped forward. “We thought we’d eliminated all of them. However, it looks like a few managed to breach the protective barrier before we arrived. They must have been alerted to our presence in the human realm as soon as we had crossed.”

“We got lucky, then,” Elias said. “Was a mambabarang among them?”

The warrior fairies all looked at each other, and then back to Elias. They shook their heads. “No witch,” one of them said.

Elias sighed. “I suppose I’m not surprised. It would be too reckless. But we can discuss this later. There’s no time. We must get her to Biringan.”

“Wait.” I held up my hand. “No one’s even told me what’s going on. So it’s true, then, that my father is dead? They weren’t just saying that so I’d go with them?” I was a toddler when my mother moved us to the human realm, so I hardly knew my father, but I felt a sharp pain in my heart, nonetheless. The pain of not knowing and then never truly knowing him.

“Afraid so, Princess,” Elias said, his voice catching. It was clear Elias loved my father dearly.

My eyes watered. My father was dead. “What happened? How did he die?”

Elias didn’t answer me right away, and when he did, he didn’t look me in the eye. “It was . . . basically it was a natural death.” He shifted his feet.

It’s not like my father was old. He was an encanto; he could have lived a thousand more years. “How is that possible? Did he

fall ill?" Encantos were long-lived, but I supposed they were not immortal.

"As I said, Princess, we can talk more later. The insurgents can't be far behind. I'm certain they've discovered what's happened already."

"Can you at least tell me who they are and why they're after me?"

"With the death of your father, some in our world think the throne is up for grabs. And how better to stake a claim than to first assassinate the king's heir? I have my thoughts on who might be behind it but can't share until I have more proof. It's not just you at risk, either—our entire world is in danger. Without the rightful encanto on the throne, the forces of nature and magic are out of balance."

I nodded. "The weird storms."

"Correct. And every moment you're not in Biringan, it gets worse. In both worlds. Already the magic is flickering. Nothing is working as it once did."

"But why would they want that?"

"Simple. Because in the chaos, they can reign." He clapped his hands together, and the fairies rushed into action, readying their weapons and preparing to flee again. "But once you take the throne and satisfy the treaty, balance will return."

"What treaty?"

"The ancient encanto kings signed an agreement to keep the forces of magic in balance. You'll learn more when we get there." He held his arm out, motioning me toward the door once more.

I swallowed, trying to push down my anxiety. "We're going there . . . right now?"

“Yes. Well, no. First we have to get your mother.”

That was the best thing I’d heard in hours. I suddenly felt lighter.

As we walked to the door, he added, “You need the amulet. The sign of your birthright.”

The confusion must’ve showed on my face, because he said, “You don’t know about the amulet?”

I shook my head.

He looked more worried now. “Let’s hope it’s not lost, then. And that we get there before the insurgents. If we don’t, your mother will be dead.”

4



“MJ!”

My mom ran for me before I even got out of the car. She was waiting anxiously at the door with two suitcases, already packed, and a belt bag over her chest. Her hair, tinged with gray at the roots, was a mess, haphazardly pulled into a bun, pieces falling out. She looked tired. More exhausted than I’d ever seen her.

“I was afraid of this,” she said as she hugged me. She leaned back and took my face in her hands. “But I never guessed it would go so bad so fast.”

We both looked up at the menacing sky. It was still swirling with clouds, and they were getting darker by the minute. As before, the storm seemed to be trailing us.

She started looking me over. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “I’m fine.”

“Michelle!” Elias hugged my mom.

“Is it true, then? Jun is dead?” she asked, her voice quavering. My father’s name was Vivencio, but my mother called him by his nickname, the one used by his intimates.

“I’m so sorry,” he told her. Elias cleared his throat. “You have the amulet?”

She said that she did, so he loaded the suitcases in the trunk and slammed it shut. "Let's go."

Mom and I crammed into the backseat. Elias got in the driver's seat, and then we were off again.

Looking into my eyes, Mom pulled something out of her pocket. A rough, pale crystal, attached to a thick silver chain. "This is your father's amulet, an anting-anting. It's made of a very rare salt mined beneath the Paulanan Mountains of Biringan." She placed it in my hand. "Your dad gave it to me, to hold until you were ready." She got quiet, like she was remembering something, and then shook her head. "Anyway, it's yours now."

I rubbed my thumb against the grainy exterior. It was rough, yet it twinkled like a gem and seemed to glow from within.

"Here," she said, taking the amulet from me and slipping it over my head. "Keep it with you. Protect it at all costs. Because it will protect you."

"How?" It was pretty and everything, but I didn't see what protection it offered.

"If used correctly, it repels evil." She reached for my hand, and when I looked up, I saw that her cheeks were wet with tears. With a start, I realized that she still loved my father deeply and had sacrificed being with him to hide me from his enemies.

It was so dark now that we needed headlights to see in front of us, despite still being early afternoon. I could also tell it was getting harder to control the car, with gusting winds pushing it onto the shoulder. I looked out the window, but there wasn't much to see. All the streetlights had blown out. There were no other cars on the road either.

More thunder rumbled, and it seemed to stretch on and on,

forever. Lightning bolts flashed all around us. Elias's jaw was clenched tight; his hands gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were white.

More lightning again—red this time—like veins full of blood against black clouds. It made everything around us look like it was on fire. I held on to my mom's hand as the car picked up speed. We flew down the highway, passing signs so fast I couldn't even read them.

Bright flashes of yellow and red and even green and blue. Then something smacked against the windshield. I screamed. "What is that?" Whatever it was kept coming—*smack, smack, smack*. Like globs of mud hurled at the car.

No one answered me. Then I spotted what it was: frogs.

It was raining frogs.

"Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?" I shouted.

"It's the insurgents. They want us to give up," Elias yelled back. "They think we'll be cowed by their show of strength."

Their show of *frogs*, more like. Although, to be honest, it *was* sort of gross. When the frogs hit the windshield, they splattered their amphibian guts all over the place. Eeks. Point to the insurgents.

The car veered suddenly, yanking us to the right.

We were headed straight into the mountains.

Lightning flashed. I spotted something in the rearview mirror. Another car. Without headlights.

"Someone's following us," I announced.

Elias nodded. "I know."

I started to turn and look, but he blurted out. "No, Princess!"

I sank down in the seat so my head was below the window.

Along with the car, the storm clouds trailed behind us. "How do we lose them?"

"We get to Biringan," my mother said through gritted teeth.

"What happens if we don't?" I asked.

"Everything you're seeing now and worse. Tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanoes erupting. You name it. Everywhere in the entire world," Elias replied. "Except none of us will actually be around to see it."

He hit the gas. I looked at the speedometer. Well over one hundred miles per hour again. And still the car behind us seemed to be gaining ground.

Elias glanced at the side mirror. "Come on," he muttered.

Just then, there was a terrible crashing sound, metal crunching. I heard it before I felt it and noticed everyone else in the car being whipped around before my brain registered that it was happening to me, too. I felt my mom's arms reach out to protect me as the car rolled, then finally came to a stop.

I tasted blood in my mouth.

There was a second of silence.

Elias turned around. "Out!"

I broke from my mom's embrace as all the doors opened and everyone jumped out. I slipped in the mud, and pain traveled up my entire leg. My mother yanked me up with one arm. We followed Elias and the others through the woods. Branches scratched my face and snagged at my clothes, but I barely noticed. My only thought was getting away from the insurgents.

Lightning. I saw eyes in the dark. Woodland animals, peering out at us from behind the brush, as if they were spying on us.

"Nearly there," Elias called out.

The rain turned icy then, whipping into my face and burning my cheeks. We pushed on, stomping over sticks and leaves and mud,

even as the droplets became chunks of hail. Elias yelled, “Watch out!” as a huge frozen ball the size of an orange hit the ground near us.

We put our hands over our heads and pressed forward. I wasn’t sure how much more I could take. Hail bounced off the ground. A piece hit my mom, and she cried out. But we couldn’t even stop to make sure she was all right.

Amid the chaos, the hail became snow, then a blizzard. All I could see in front of me was white. I tried to focus on Elias’s dark clothing, but then I lost sight of that too. If I hadn’t felt my mom holding on to me, I wouldn’t even have known she was there.

This is how it ends, I thought. The bad guys win.

Both my legs ached now, and I was freezing. I had the urge to lie down in the snow and go to sleep. I slowed. My mom pulled. “No,” she shouted in my ear. “We have to keep going.”

“I don’t want to,” I said, though she couldn’t hear me. I could barely force myself to take another step.

My mother yelled for Elias.

Then, out of nowhere, I saw light.

First it was dim, but it got brighter and brighter and then the snowfall thinned, until it was merely drifting down, and I saw where the light was coming from.

A huge, glowing outline of a door in front of the massive stone face of the mountain.

“There it is, MJ. The portal to Biringan.” My mom encouraged me. “You’re almost there. Keep going.”

Elias pushed, but the door wouldn’t open.

Behind us, I heard commotion. Stomping through the woods. Flittering. Like the sound of butterfly wings fluttering together. Sounds that no human could hear, but Elias and I could. We who

were from the other place. More winged battalions. More mund-untug hunters. The insurgents were right behind us. *Hurry, hurry, hurry.*

But the door wouldn't open.

They were getting closer.

"What's happening?" my mother asked Elias. "Why won't it open?"

"They've enchanted it against us," another patianak told her.

Elias looked at me. "Princess!" He waved me over, frantically.

I limped up to the door, and he pointed to my necklace. "Hold it against it!" he shouted.

I touched the anting-anting to the door handle.

At that, there was a loud click, and it began to open.

The stomping was right behind us. The door was opening too slowly, partially enchanted by whatever dark spell our enemies had cast on it. *Come on, come on, come on.*

"Get in," Elias called out. "Squeeze if you have to!"

But it was too late. They were on us now. So many of them, even more than had attacked me at school. Some were on foot and others were flying down from overhead. One of them landed between my mom and the door, blocking her. We were surrounded. And they were armed.

They charged, swords raised, and our patianaks charged back, metal clanging.

My mom ducked around the insurgents and ran for the door, bodies falling around her.

"Go!" Elias screamed at me.

I had one foot in the door. I just needed my mom. *Come on. Come on.*

Another insurgent swooped down at me, blade ready. I jumped back from the portal.

One of our warriors appeared and knocked him away from me. They rolled on the ground together, struggling. I watched as the insurgent plunged his sword into the warrior.

Elias appeared next to me, breathing heavily, with green blood all over his armor. He held out his hand. I looked around—we were the only ones left. All our allies were dead.

I was just steps from crossing into Biringan.

“MJ! Go!” My mother yelled, even as the remaining insurgents closed in.

No! I wouldn’t leave her.

Then Mom reached into the bag strapped across her chest. When she pulled her hand back out, she was holding a sword.

I stared at her in awe.

She smiled. “Another gift from your father.” Then she raised it up over her head, and it burst into flames. “I’ve got this,” she shouted at me. “Go with Elias!” I could see the sky over us again, dark and swirling, pulsing with electricity.

“What about you?” I couldn’t just leave her behind. She couldn’t take them all on her own.

“I said go!” She turned away from me and charged for the insurgents.

This time, when Elias offered his hand I took it, and we ran for the portal. As we passed through, I looked behind me and saw my mother beyond the closing door, wielding a blade of fire that prevented the hunters from getting to me.

My mother, a warrior and a queen.

5



“**BRACE YOURSELF,**” Elias warned me as I stepped through the doorway. Everything turned pitch-black, and then, immediately, blindingly white. I closed my eyes and held on to him, a little disoriented. I felt a lurch deep inside my stomach, like I was going to throw up.

There was some kind of turbulence, like an earthquake, and then, from beneath my eyelids, I could tell the light had dimmed. Squinting, I started to take note of our surroundings; we were inside some kind of cave. Crystal stalactites jutted down overhead, twinkling. I heard running water somewhere. A river or stream, splashing against rock. Up ahead of us, I saw an opening. On the other side there was sunshine and lots of green.

A minute later we emerged onto sandy shores softly lapped by a shimmering blue sea that matched the bright sky above. I blinked to let my eyes adjust. On the left there was a lush, dense jungle; to the right, a settlement of bahay kubos. I looked over the quaint wooden houses to see a huge structure—a castle, maybe, from what I could make out so far away, looming above the rooftops. It was searingly hot, and the air was thick, but it wasn’t unpleasant. I knew Biringan was the hidden fairy realm of the Philippine

islands, and so shared its climate. And because I was of its blood, I could enter its domain from anywhere in the human world, even from Southern California, where we had just left.

At the beach in front of us, mobs of people gathered—not human people, but my father’s kind, *encantos*. Elias gestured to them. “They’re here to see you. No doubt they’ve heard about what happened in the human realm.”

“Great,” I said sarcastically. Just what I needed on the worst day of my life. An audience. They stared at me, and some of them were smiling. “Welcome back, Princess,” I heard a few of them say.

Elias pointed to the placid blue sky. “We’re safe here. The insurgents and their storms have been held back, for now. They won’t dare attack you here, under Biringan’s protection.”

Mom had done it. Did she defeat them?

Was she alive?

She had to be. She *had* to be alive. I would know if she was dead, I told myself. I would feel it. She had to have survived.

There was a small wooden boat docked at the pier. We stepped in, and then Elias began rowing across the lake to another dock on the other side. All around us, I could see fish darting through the water around the boat, some staying alongside it and some swimming ahead.

A huge tail splashed at the surface, and then an entire body popped up out of the water. It took me a few seconds to process what I was seeing. The fish had a human upper body and nearly human face, except for the bluish-gray skin and the gills on their neck.

“Mermaids,” I murmured, stunned.

“No, *ija*, *sirenas*,” Elias said. Then he whispered, “Much more deadly than mere mermaids.”

The sirena disappeared beneath the water.

I couldn't let the surroundings distract me from the immediate issue. "Do you think my mom is okay?"

"Your mother had the Sword of Kabunian. The Hand of God. It will have kept her safe," he said firmly.

"You'll go back, though? And make sure?"

Elias didn't answer me. He looked off into the distance. At last, he said, "If that is your wish, Princess. But first we must secure your ascension. That is why she did what she did."

I nodded as I gripped the amulet, trying to anchor myself to something. I felt disoriented, a little dizzy. And suddenly, acutely alone.

I couldn't think, couldn't process what was happening. My father was dead, and my mother . . . she had to be alive. Elias would find her and bring her back. I had to believe I would see her again.

But there was no more time to think about any of it. The boat drifted to a stop again in front of a wooden pier.

A small army was there to greet me. Guards lined the short walkway from the cavern to the road in strict formation and fanned out into the field beyond. All dressed in white formal uniforms, with long swords at their sides, they reminded me of nutcracker figurines.

A wooden calesa waited in the road beyond them. The two-wheeled carriage was painted white, with gold-spoked wheels, and the whole thing was teeming with massive, faux-floral garlands—at least, I thought they were fake. No flower could actually look like that. It seemed like the carriage itself was blooming, all the huge, vivid flowers and vines growing right out of it. Four white

horses whose manes caught shades of blue and purple in the light stood at the front, unharnessed.

A guard stepped up to the boat and held his hand out to assist me. I stepped out and onto the dock, knees shaking and ankle still throbbing.

Nothing was familiar at all, even though I had spent my earliest years here. Not the vivid colors of the foliage and sky, not the hilly, lush landscape, not the undulating mountains in the distance or the river that wound through the dense forest jungle.

My mother had tried to prepare me for my role; she had taught me about the different types of encantos, and over the years my father had written me long letters about life at court. While I knew what to expect, I was still in awe of the sights in front of me.

I felt uncomfortable all of a sudden. My faded jeans looked ridiculous and out of place. I tugged my shirt down self-consciously.

Elias escorted me toward the carriage. None of the guards looked directly at me; they kept their eyes forward and their expressions glum beneath their comically large hats. When we got near, one of them opened the carriage door. I reached out to touch one of the flowers. Surprisingly, not fake.

I climbed up some little steps on the side of the carriage.

Inside, the seats were wide and plush, upholstered in silk, soft and buttery, and the canopy was decorated with intricate embroidered floral patterns, edged with gold thread. I wanted to reach out and run my finger across the texture, but I was afraid to make it dirty. It was like sitting inside a museum piece.

Elias sat across from me. The door shut.

We set off down a rustic dirt road that was lined with flowers, inky blues and intense pinks, bright yellow and white and every

shade of green imaginable. Onlookers stood at the edge, vying for a chance to see the princess inside the carriage. They looked like any group of regular people, until I noticed the small differences that gave them away as *encanto*—their elfin ears; the impossible perfection of their thick, glossy, waist-length black hair; their long, delicate fingers and long necks.

“Remember, Princess. Enemies are everywhere. Since your father died, we’ve been investigating, but until we know who the insurgents are, and which court they’re working for, trust no one.”

My mother had schooled me in the history of Biringan and how the four courts representing the four kingdoms had been unified long ago. In his many letters, my father explained it was an uneasy alliance, and while Sirena, our court and kingdom, was the most powerful and thus the overall ruler, there were those who chafed under our reign. As the princess of the Sirena Court, *diwata* of Paulanan, I embodied the power and spirit of the mountains and the seas. The Court of Sigbin harnessed the power of thunder and lightning and was full of *encantos* who practiced chaos magic. The equinox courts were the kingdoms at the outer edges of the realm—the Court of Tikbalang was rooted in the power of the forest and known for its affinity for animals, while the Court of Lambana commanded the air and the wind and counted mischief among its talents.

The road split, veering off toward the mountains in the distance, disappearing into towering trees to the left; we took the right turn, through still more trees, where the crowd could no longer gather. As we traveled farther and farther from the world I knew, I marveled at how the landscape could be so familiar, yet not; the earth was somehow darker and richer, the blue sky and

puffy clouds looked like a watercolor or a filtered photo. The birds seemed to come straight out of a fairy tale. They were plumper, and less skittish, and it almost seemed as if every one of their feathers were perfectly hand-painted. I didn't know much about birds, but I was pretty sure those patterns and colors didn't exist in the regular world. I was tempted to hold my hand out the window and see if one would land on my finger.

Still, I was well aware that, just like in a fairy tale, evil was lurking out there, somewhere nearby. Waiting for the right moment.

Elias sensed my apprehension. "The sooner you are crowned queen and solidify your power, the sooner you—and all of us—will be safe."

As we rounded one of the turns, some sort of huge stone or hill appeared in front of us. It rose up into the clouds, so high that I couldn't tell where it ended. Like everything else, it was almost too perfect to be real.

"Almost there," Elias told me. "The palace is just ahead of us now."

I leaned close to the window and searched around in every direction. "Where is it?" I asked him.

He pointed at the enormous rock. "Right in front of us, Princess."

This time when I looked back, I saw immediately what I'd missed before. There, at the base, partially obscured by a cinematic fog, a glittering palace materialized from within, like it was carved directly out of the stone around it.

As my eyes focused, I made out the detail. The surface of the palace kind of reminded me of a geode I bought at the museum gift shop when I was little—a dazzling gemstone inside an unassuming

gray rock. The entire surface looked like that. Tiny multifaceted gems jutted out as if the stone been split wide open long, long ago, revealing the jeweled interior. There were many windows, too many to count, set deep into the structure, and at least four rounded, pearlescent towers.

When we got closer, I saw a steep path set with large stones, like marble, winding up to a huge, domed doorway, which seemed to be made of glass or some type of crystal. Smaller—though still larger than any human would ever require—double doors were cut out of the glass. I watched as they opened to let in two guards marching in line. Two more stood on either side of the doors, and still others were visible within.

We pulled up in front of the path. A guard stepped up and opened the door. Elias exited first, then helped me out.

I stood outside the carriage and gazed up at the castle I would now call home. I had been there before, but I was too young to remember. My mother had made sure I grew up knowing who my father was, what my birthright entailed, but this was so far from our reality of cramped one-bedroom apartments and hand-me-down furniture that I found it hard to believe I was truly from here.

And as I looked at the serious faces of the rows of armed guards surrounding me, I reminded myself that while it appeared to be a dream on the surface, it concealed a nightmare underneath. A throne without a ruler and a plot to kill the heir.

6



WE STEPPED INSIDE the palace. The round entrance hall had a sky-high ceiling that came to a steep point. A diamond chandelier hung overhead, suspended from a long gold chain. All the walls and floor were made of quartz or marble, vaguely translucent and almost glittery, but there were also blooming vines that seemed to grow straight out of where the floor and walls met. White sampaguita flowers climbed the walls on all sides. Then I noticed an interior doorway—at least two stories tall, arched, with double doors and huge curvy handles, like twisted branches. The handles had perfect, stick-like trunks, with puffy round green tops, and tiny white and pale-pink flowers.

“Welcome to the Palace of the Sirena Court, Your Majesty.” A butler in a barong Tagalog—a sheer formal shirt made from the linen of pineapple husks—appeared by my side. He barely came up to my elbow. “My name is Ayo.” He was one of the *dwendes*, mischievous sprites. He held his hand out to show me the way.

I looked to Elias, unsure whether I should trust this stranger. He nodded his approval.

Still unable to find words, I followed Ayo through the big doors. They opened like magic in front of us, revealing another foyer with

a wide curving staircase. It went straight up and split to the right and left. We headed up. Elias and some guards marched dutifully behind us, along with a few maids in matching gray uniforms. Like the door handles, the banister was made from varnished tree branches. It seemed to be one continuous piece of wood.

We went to the right. At the top of the stairs there was a gorgeous landing, the same quartz floor. “Your rooms are this way,” Ayo told me.

We went through another amazing door, and another, until we reached a deeper interior of the palace. A sitting room with large chairs made of woven rattan, with high, curved backs, preceded yet another room, this one with a large desk and a gold chair with a white seat.

“This is your office, where you will receive your correspondences, conduct official business—that sort of thing,” Ayo told me.

My heart skipped a beat. I had no idea how to do any of that. I hardly knew how to manage myself. Mere hours ago, I couldn’t even pay attention to an economics lesson. Let alone manage a kingdom. I felt like an impostor.

I wished my mother was here with me, and that I had been able to see my father before his death. But I pushed down my fear and sadness. No matter how intimidated I was, I had to honor both my parents by taking the throne and living up to the position. And to my ancestors. All the encantos in my family tree. The last diwata of the Paulanan Mountains had been my great-great-great-grandmother. There had not been a female heir, a mountain spirit, in the family until my birth. I had to take up the mantle of my legacy. Later there would be time to grieve my father and the separation from my mother.

“On to your private chambers,” Ayo said as he kept on walking, past some more sitting spaces set up around the area and tall bay windows with seats built in, and through yet another door. That one led to another high-ceilinged chamber that not only accommodated a massive canopy bed but also multiple wardrobes, a dressing table, and a walk-in closet that could easily have been another bedroom—in fact, it was bigger than mine at home. There was a gleaming, airy bathroom attached, with another separate space just for the ornate marble clawfoot tub, as well as a private lanai with tall French doors opening onto a golden-railed balcony. It was larger than our entire apartment back home.

Even better, it was all in my favorite color: shades of purple, from lilac to deep, rich plums, coupled with lots of white—the floors, a crescent sofa, the furniture—and gold accents. Handles, doorknobs, a huge gold and crystal chandelier.

After a brief walk-through of the rooms, we returned to the bedchamber. A timid young girl not much older than me stood near the door to the walk-in closet. Her hands were clasped in front of her white and silver gown. She looked down at the ground.

“This is Jinky, your lady-in-waiting,” Ayo told me. “Her family has worked in the Sirena Palace for centuries.”

Jinky curtsied. She was pretty, with long black hair and a gentle smile. Her skin was a pale moss green, which marked her as a mountain spirit. She seemed nice, so that was a relief, at least. “Hi,” I said to her. “My name’s MJ.”

That caused a flurry of uncomfortable throat-clearing around the room. Jinky looked up, as if she was alarmed, and Ayo rushed forward and started making excuses for my apparent gaffe. “Ahem. Yes.” He cleared his throat again. “May I present Her Highness,

princess of the Court of Sirena, diwata of Paulanan, one true heir to King Vivencio of Biringan,” he announced.

After that everyone seemed more at ease. I guess I’d been too casual with Jinky. Not sure how I was going to keep up with all this protocol.

“It is good to see you returned to us,” he said. “We were worried the insurgents . . .”

“They came close,” I said. Just thinking about it brought back the fear, as if a winged enemy would appear from the shadows.

“You have no fear of that here, Princess,” Ayo assured me. “They cannot breach the magic that protects you in this palace.” To Jinky, he said, “Our soon-to-be queen is as yet unfamiliar with court etiquette.” Then he turned to me. “However, all will be remedied. You have been apprised of your start date with the Biringan Academy of Noble Arts?”

Even as the one true heir, I couldn’t escape school for more than a day, it seemed. “Afraid not,” I said.

He took out a tiny leather pocketbook and flipped a couple pages. “Ah, then allow me to deliver the wonderful news!” he said, as if I’d won the lottery or something. “Your coronation training will commence immediately. You are set to begin bright and early tomorrow morning.”

Tomorrow morning? “But I just got here. I don’t just get to, like, settle in first?” I had just escaped from an insurgent faction of winged assassins, lost all contact with my mother, and said goodbye to the only world I had lived in for almost all of my life.

“Afraid not, Your Highness. We want our leaders to be wise, learned people. And if I may be quite honest, you are a few years

behind in your formal training. There's no time to spare. The coronation is scheduled for your eighteenth birthday."

I balked. "That's in a month."

"Technically speaking, less than a month," he said. "Therefore, as I said, no time to lose."

"I can't be ready in a month," I insisted. Panic rose in my throat.

Elias stepped up. "If I may, Princess, the reality is, you must. Biringan's magic will only continue to fade until then. The disorder we just endured is nothing compared to what will happen should we lose control entirely."

Ayo agreed. "Thank you, Don Elias, for underlining the gravity of the situation." He turned to me. "If you'll excuse me, there is much to be done. I'll return later this evening." At that he nodded curtly, bowed, then turned abruptly and left the room. The other maids and guards followed him.

Once they were gone, Elias asked me, "Before I go, since we have a moment of privacy, is there anything I should tell the academy about your talent?"

I had no idea how to answer that. "Like, can I sing?"

"No, Princess." He looked perturbed. "What I mean is, what is your ability? Your magic?"

"Oh! Um . . ." I tried to think. Did I have one? At any time in my life, had anything magical ever happened to me? As the mightiest warrior in Sirena, my father could command the oceans to do his bidding, and it was said he possessed many magical gifts, so great was his power. But I couldn't even make a ripple. In his letters, he had told me my talent would manifest when it was time. So far, it had not been time.

Encanto magic was rooted in the earth and in the elements, the ability to command water, fire, to communicate with animals and plant life, or transform into different creatures. But so far, I was as ordinary as any other mortal.

“Think, Princess,” Elias said. “Surely it’s revealed itself by now. Perhaps you simply didn’t recognize it. Think of a time you were under duress. Did anything strange happen? Something otherwise unexplainable?”

I racked my brain, trying to think of something, anything, I’d ever done that could be interpreted as magic. Nothing came to mind. Not a single thing. And the most stress I’d ever been under had just happened to me. Still, nada.

“Hmmm,” Elias said, tapping his chin. “In order to be crowned queen, you must display your powers as part of the coronation. While I understand you did not grow up here, we were led to believe that your father guided you from afar. You were supposed to be taught about these things, so you’d—”

“Well, actually, yes. I have magic,” I said quickly. I wasn’t going to let him think my mother somehow failed. In fact, it made me mad. For good measure, I added, “I do remember something. My mother always told me to keep it a secret. I’m not super comfortable talking it about it right now.” I attempted an air of confidence. In my father’s letters, he assured that I would eventually discover my talent, that it would manifest at the right time. Since it had yet to reveal itself, though, I couldn’t help but begin to panic. But I couldn’t show Elias that.

The old man was visibly relieved, his tone brightening. “Of course. I understand. Rest assured, the staff here at the palace has been thoroughly vetted, by me, personally. We’re all invested in

your ascendancy. You should feel safe to share your talent when you're ready."

"Right. Good to know. So, how, exactly, do I display it? At the coronation." I needed to figure out how I was going to make this work.

"After a display of their powers, the one true heir must remove the royal scepter from a solid wooden chest. Only the rightful ruler can do so; all others will fail. Pass this test, and you are crowned."

I swallowed. "Sure. No problem." Also a lie.

It was a huge problem.