

The background of the cover is a vibrant, swirling mass of blue and purple flames. At the top, a phoenix is depicted in the process of rising from the flames, its wings spread wide. In the lower portion of the cover, a crown with intricate silver and blue gemstone details and a sword with a dark hilt and a silver blade are positioned. The overall aesthetic is dark and fantastical.

BOOK 2

CELESTIA CHRONICLES

THE ASHES OF HOPE

"The power of Anagha's storytelling belies her age."
- bookGeeks India

ANAGHA RATISH

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DWARVEN KINGDOM

HEVASTEN



Prologue

A long time ago, in Careldon...

Destiny was a word that held little meaning for Sereia; at the same time, it was to be credited– or blamed– for what was about to happen.

Being a queen, at the tender young age of exactly seventeen, was not easy, she was told. *They* expected a reaction, a sliver of anxiety. But Sereia was, of course, well trained in the arts of wordplay and facades. She came across words of ‘assurance’ every day but she knew not to accept them, for the most vicious poisons are cloyingly sweet. It was a difficult lesson to learn, but one she heeded.

Sereia studied her reflection in the mirror. Caramel brown hair pulled back into a meticulous braid. Almost-blindingly white robes that contrasted perfectly against her warm cocoa skin. Turquoise eyes that glowed with what she liked to call, *the light of her intellect*.

Perfect.

She looked like someone who had to be respected, if not adored. *Obeded*.

With a satisfied sigh, she reached toward the delicate golden circlet that rested on her vanity and settled it carefully onto her head.

Sereia couldn’t help but smirk at the sight of her crown. The scent of power that came with being the ruler of the largest kingdom in all of Celestia was heady. And oh, it was *sweet*.

She rose, noting the elegant swish of her robes, and prepared for her coronation. She schooled her features into a look of calm, confident grace. She was young, yes, but she was far more capable than the self-important morons her predecessor had employed, who fancied themselves the wisest in the lands.

She paused at the door, looking back in the mirror. She saw a young woman who had been called a princess for years, but was always destined to be

queen. Queen of the Nymphs, and then, *all* pixies.

Any other young person would have been nervous. Sereia, on the other hand, only saw the inevitability of her success. She had long since determined that self-doubt, or anything resembling it, was a waste of time, and humility was an utterly foolish notion.

Sereia twisted her lips into a smile and lifted her chin.

Careldon was in her grasp and Celestia was within her reach.

Sereia massaged her temples. *They* were right. Being queen, she realised, was quite exhausting.

It wasn't the *ruling* part of it that she so despised. It was the insufferable blustering of incompetent ministers and advisors that annoyed her to no end. Really, had they nothing better to do than assault her ears and brain by spouting utter stupidity?

As a matter of fact, a fitting example of such a person was blithering to her right now.

“My queen, we simply *must* assist Emberglass in the war. They have asked us, implored us even, and turning them down might cause them to attack us as well.”

Sereia scoffed, “Well, it would be their loss if they *did* attempt to wage war on us. They can't possibly afford to declare war on both Hevasten and Careldon. Besides, we are far too large and powerful a kingdom for either of them to even contemplate attacking. Hevasten would never even dare, with their most populated territories lying so close to ours.”

The minister, whose name Sereia believed was Lord Valerton, sighed, “But, Your Highness, you must understand. As you said, with our forces, we could acquire even more land if we engage in the war.”

Sereia peered at him, “And, pray, why would I need to acquire more land?”

Lord Valerton stammered and stuttered something about power, while Sereia rolled her eyes.

“You and I both know you are wasting my precious time, so I think it would be best if you left now, lest you make an even bigger fool of yourself.” She dismissed him.

Lord Valerton reddened and bowed, nearly tripping in his haste to leave.

Sereia stood and paced her throne room, feeling the eyes of her guards following her.

Lord Valerton was right about one thing. She did have to do something about the war. But she didn't *want* more land or power.

The doors to the throne room opened again and another one of her advisors glided in.

Sereia looked up. The advisor, whose name was Lady Devonara or something along the lines of it, bowed and proceeded to say, “Your Highness. A messenger from Hevasten has requested an audience with you.”

Sereia sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose, “Let them in.”

A moment later, the messenger walked in, bowing profusely.

“Your Highness. I bear a message from Hevasten.” He gingerly stepped forward, tipping a scroll into her hands.

Sereia skimmed through it, already knowing what it said. A request for an alliance in the war.

“Do you require a reply immediately?” Sereia asked, rolling the delicate paper again.

“Of course not, Your Majesty.” He rushed to assure her, “King Atlas understands that this is a terribly important decision. The fate of Celestia could depend upon you.”

He hesitated, “But he encourages you to make haste, as much as possible.”

“Very well. I shall send a response within three days.” Sereia glanced back at the messenger, “Would that satisfy the wishes of your king?”

The messenger bowed again, “I'm certain it would, Your Highness.”

Sereia gestured to one of her guards, “Show him out, would you?”

She turned away and settled herself on her throne again. She already knew what her answer to King Atlas was going to be. Sereia only had to formulate a diplomatic response, for both Emberglass and Hevasten. Even if she was turning them down, the message had to be apologetic, exquisitely worded, but asserting authority at the same time. Sereia sighed again.

People thought ruling a kingdom was all about power, riches, and prestige. In reality, it was an intricate dance between other rulers and the people, filled with gushing, polite words that meant nothing and tolerating stupidity to ensure peace. And sometimes, ruling a kingdom was just sitting back and doing nothing, even when you knew you could change the world.

At the moment, she had two very distinct choices before her. To choose the well-trodden road of safety and indecisiveness, or to cut a path of her own, for the greater good. For a moment, Sereia's resolve almost crumbled.

She had been queen for three years, and done nothing particularly exceptional. If she did not act soon, she would be but a short, dull chapter in the history of Celestia.

No, that would not do at all. Sereia was the kind of person to leave behind a *legacy*.

Sereia looked up, and smoothed her robes, her vivid eyes sparkling.

Self-doubt was a waste of time, she ascertained. She knew exactly what she was going to do.

Barely an hour later, Sereia stood before her council of ministers and advisors.

She paused for a moment to take note of the subtle disinterest they showed. They fiddled with their quills and even chattered idly.

A flare of annoyance threatened to break Sereia's composure, but she forced it down. She cleared her throat, rather obviously. The members of the council looked up.

"Thank you. I am glad you finally found it convenient to pay attention to your queen."

They had the decency to look sheepish.

Satisfied, Sereia moved on, “Now, I have called this meeting to discuss our stance on the war between Emberglass and Hevasten. Many of you have been pestering me about it.” She looked at Lord Valerton pointedly, before continuing, “And I have come to the conclusion that while the war may prove to be profitable for us, I am not going to use such bloodshed and carnage for my own gain. Therefore, we will be staying neutral. We will not be sending reinforcements to either of the kingdoms, but we may help the citizens of both kingdoms by sending supplies.”

A murmur broke out among the council.

Sereia bore it patiently, the subtle whisperings on lost opportunities, waiting for it to die down, “I am not finished,” she continued, “My second announcement is that we are splitting Careldon in two.”

She paused, relishing the dramatic gasps of the council, “The fourth kingdom of Celestia will henceforth be known as Delyra. The nymphs of Careldon will be separated by their powers. Those who control water will be called Naiads, and they will remain in Careldon. The rest of the nymphs, who control plants, will be known as Dryads, and Delyra will belong to them. I thought it best if we appreciated the element of mythology.”

An advisor nearly toppled his chair in his haste to stand, “But Your Highness.... why?”

Sereia shrugged, “Multiple reasons. For one, Dryads and Naiads do not have the same powers, although they classify as Nymphs; it is a well-known fact that they have been protesting for two separate kingdoms. Two, it would be a gesture of peace. It is possible that, before the war, Hevasten felt threatened by the very size of Careldon. Knowing that they have no chance against us, they silently began extending their territory into Emberglass, inch by inch. When Emberglass noticed, they retaliated, as expected. Three?”

She paused, looking the minister in the eye, “Because I felt like it.”

Sereia drew herself upright and clasped her hands, “Now, any other questions?”

Nobody spoke. The tension in the air was almost tangible.

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