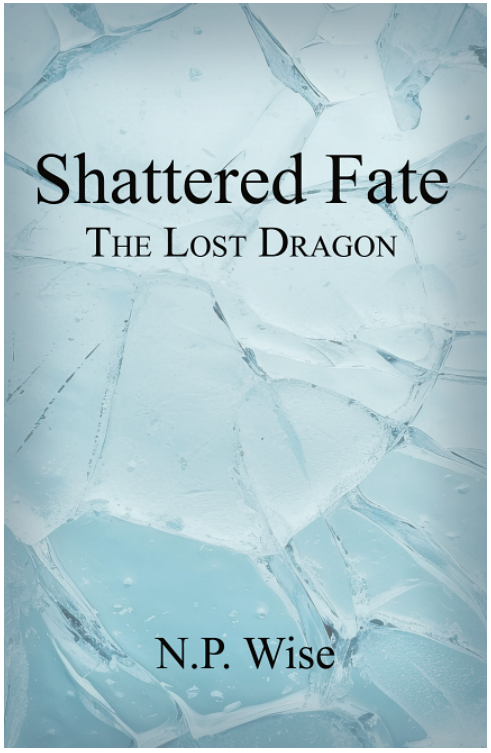
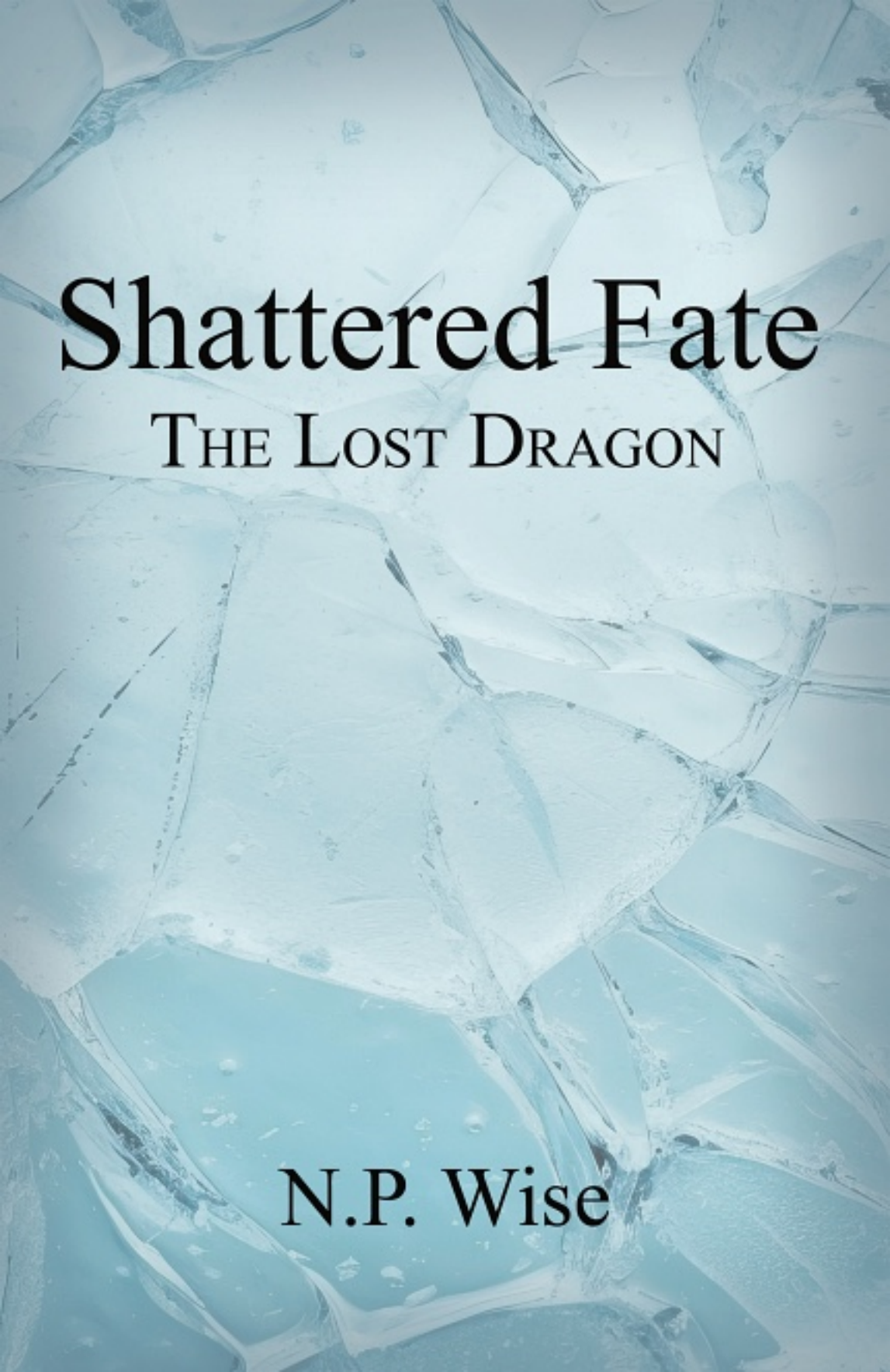


They never ask you if you want to be hero. There isn't an application or a disclaimer, in fact, most people don't even know they are one until the moment comes. Velina Musiba, however, knows. She knows and despite everything, she will win.

Shattered Fate: The Lost Dragon
By N.P. Wise


Shattered Fate
The Lost Dragon
N.P. Wise

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Chapter One - Velina

Sweat dripped from her body, her clothes and armor sticking to her skin as if it were a part of her. Her hands trembled, the far too heavy, unbalanced sword she held thumping to the ground against the dirt floor. The towering walls around her did nothing to shield her from the crowd on the other side- she felt as though she would hear their taunting and screaming for the rest of her life.

“Get on with it!”

“You’re pathetic!”

“Kill the damn thing!”

“She’s nothing but a whore in armor!”

Ouch. That last one hurt her a bit. Sure, she wasn’t exactly innocent, but she was no whore. The crimes she was accused of were nothing but a lie conjured up by the man she pissed off. It just so happened that that man had been an important one, a *really* important one.

But that didn’t matter. Did it? In a man’s world, nothing mattered more than a man's word.

And Saphrone, or at least this half of it, was a man's world indeed.

And now, here she was, facing punishment for her actions. Psh. Punishment. Such an odd word for this situation. If anything, this was more of “attempted murder”, seeing as how the dragon on the other side of the arena was closing in on her. It was still odd, though, how all she’d done was tell a man “no”, and possibly spit on him (Who could remember, really?), and now she was facing certain death. Publicly, at that.

Shaking her from her thoughts, the dragon roared. A line of fire erupted in the sky, sending a terrifying wave of shivers down her spine. The creature before her was deadly. Beautiful, but deadly.

It wasn't as big as she'd thought it would be, no, maybe the size of a large rhino. Its scales were a beautiful shade of gray, displaying an ombre effect, getting lighter as they reached its tail. Tall gray spikes lined the creature's spine and the sides of its four legs, their tips pointed to a deadly, likely poisonous end. Its wings were the only issue- they were comically small. However beautiful they were, they simply weren't big enough to hold the dragon's weight for long. No, give the thing a couple of minutes max, and it'd be sailing into the ground. The eyes of the dragon were an enchanting sort of blue, one that made the girl oddly nostalgic for the ocean.

Looking at the beautiful beast in front of her, she came to terms with her death. She wouldn't fight the beast, wouldn't give the crowd that pleasure. Not only that, but she couldn't imagine even attempting to end the life of this magnificent creature- her life wasn't even on the same spectrum as this dragon.

As the girl backed up, raising the shitty shield she'd been given, the dragon roared again, advancing quickly this time. An apple soared through the air and hit the girl in the forehead. Through the ringing, she heard someone yell, "Don't be a coward, fight!"

Easy for you to say, she thought.

"Make it quick," she pleaded under her breath. She dropped the shield, then her sword. Her hand went instinctively to the necklace around her neck, the one she'd always had. It was a simple Lily flower, its hardware silver. On the back of the flower was etched one word: Velina—her name.

Velina didn't know where she'd gotten the necklace, but she knew it was hers. It had to be.

She kissed the flower softly, her lips trembling. For her entire life, Velina wondered who her family was and what happened to them. To die here, today, without so much as a hint of the truth…the feeling was almost enough to make her want to live. Almost.

So, Velina made peace with the fact that she would never know. She kissed away any regrets she had and instead faced the dragon, her back straight and head high. She wouldn't die for the entertainment of these people. No, she would die for herself.

She looked at the dragon with a smile on her face, trying to ignore the shaking in her legs that dared to betray her resolve. Velina regarded the beast in front of her as if it were Death itself, and she was ready to meet it with open arms. Perhaps Death would be kinder than the men who put her here. Perhaps its embrace would be warmer than the fire the dragon breathed.

The dragon stood tall on its back legs, its short wings outstretched as it looked up and breathed a scorching line of fire. The crowd cheered at the dramatic show.

Velina walked closer to the dragon and closed her eyes, a single tear sliding down her cheek. She sent one last prayer to whatever fucked up higher being put her here.

But Death didn't come for Velina.

Instead, a deafening silence that forced Velina to open her eyes took over the arena. Only the sight before her was more terrifying than anything she could've imagined.

Before her, the dragon that only a moment ago had been about to burn her alive was *bowing*. Its front legs were bent in, and it's short little wings spread out as far as they could, the tips of them just reaching the dirt floor. Its beautifully terrifying head lay on the ground, its eyes closed calmly.

For a moment, Velina thought it was dead.

Her heart pounded in her chest, somehow faster than it had been before. She dared a glance around the arena and was met with glares and daggers in every single pair of eyes she made contact with. No one spoke, however, the arena remained silent for a painfully long time.

Knights flooded the floor. The same men who threw Velina in here now stood before her again, their weapons drawn. Only the weapons were now pointed at her, not the dragon behind them.

"Who the hell are you?" demanded the one in the middle. Velina recognized his voice. He was the one she'd rejected in the tavern before. He was the reason she was here.

"My name is Velina," her voice shaking. She held her hands up in defense, trying to show that she was no threat.

"Arms down!" the same Knight screamed. "No funny business, Bendegón."

Bendegón. The Dragon Blessed.

Velina wasn't one of them, she couldn't be. It wasn't possible.

But even she knew a dragon would never bow before a Wonted, a regular person. Not in a million years.

"I'm not…" she started, her mind running a million miles an hour. She looked around in a panic, unsure of what was about to happen.

She'd made peace with her death, but that was when she was dying at the hands of a dragon. Velina refused to die at the hands of a man. She'd spent her entire life avoiding that and wasn't about to lose now.

"I'm going to ask you one more time, dragon bitch, who the hell are you?" the Knight asked again, his voice loathing. In less than a minute, Velina became these people's number one enemy, more so than the dragon that still sat in the arena, its head unmoving as if awaiting Velina's command.

"My name is Velina," she repeated, "And that is all I know. I'm an orphan. I've lived on this side of The Wall my entire life. I have no family. I promise this is all I know."

All of that was the truth, but the Knights didn't know that. They had no reason to believe her.

They moved in on her, but Velina didn't retreat. She stood, frozen in fear, her feet scuffing against the dirt floor, her hands shaking at her

side. The dragon, however, began to make a low, growling sound as the Knights got closer to her.

The Knights closest to the dragon turned their weapons on it, waiting for their leader to permit them to likely kill the beast. Velina felt pity in her heart as she looked at the creature who was about to lose its life for extending hers. She wished it had just killed her instead, at least then, she wouldn't have to watch its death.

"Take her to Stone," the Knight ordered. Velina's heart shattered.

Stone was the Knights' territory, the very place Velina had always tried to avoid. She'd heard stories of the men and women taken there and how they were never seen again. The Knights claimed to be the protectors of the South Side, and they were charged with overseeing and regulating the laws on the South Side by the royal family. But the only thing the Knights actually did was take advantage of anyone they deemed vulnerable.

Velina hardly had time to think before the Knights grabbed her by the arms and dragged her out of the arena, screams erupting from the crowd. Velina heard nothing but wishes for her painful death.

They dragged her into the dark tunnel exit of the arena floor. One Knight gripped her by the hair, holding her head up as she was forced to watch the unbearable scene before her.

"Watch, bitch," the Knight seethed in her ear, "Watch while we kill it. If you're lucky, your death will follow shortly."

Velina watched with tears in her eyes as the Knights began striking the dragon, its roar deafening, the emotion within it too much for Velina to bear. Her mind raced, trying to think of anything she could do to save the beast from dying.

She didn't know if it would work, but she had to try.

"Fly!" Velina screamed as loudly as she possibly could. Her throat burned, her voice hoarse. She struggled against the grip of the Knights, fighting their hold. "Fly away! Leave!"

The dragon listened. It freed itself from its chains and soared into the air, its little wings flapping as fast as they could to allow for the escape. If the beast survived, it would likely never return to the South Side of the Wall.

Velina fell limp in the Knight's arms, closing her eyes in relief as the tears fell down her face.

“You’ll pay for that,” the Knight from the tavern said. Velina opened her eyes just in time to see the hilt of the sword fly towards her face.

Chapter Two - Velina

When Velina woke, she was tied to a chair in the middle of a circular room. Her wrists and ankles were bound by thick rope, and whoever tied them hadn't been generous- her skin was already beginning to rub raw, blood coating her wrists and the rope, the pain enough to make her wince with every movement.

The room itself was bare, save for her sitting in the middle of it and a single torch that hung on the wall to her left, illuminating her empty prison.

Her head pounded from being knocked out, the pain so much that she could barely keep her eyes open. Her breathing was ragged. She felt like death.

The single door that sat directly in front of her opened suddenly, a blinding light entering her dark room. Velina closed her eyes and tried to wash away the painful feeling the light brought to her head.

"You're awake," someone said. Velina didn't recognize this voice, but she figured it was another Knight.

"Hardly," Velina groaned. "Please shut the door, I can't see."

The Knight listened and shut the door. When Velina opened her eyes, she was unsurprised to find him fully decked out in their usual armor. She didn't see that as necessary, since she was just a girl. No, she wasn't just a girl anymore, was she?

She hated their uniforms, the stupid metal that coated their entire body and face. The only human part of them you could see was their eyes, revealed only by a thin slit across the front of their helmets. She didn't know how they moved with all of that armor.

"Who are you?" Velina asked him.

"I don't think you're in a position that warrants the right to ask questions," he answered. His voice was soft, less grueling than the

other Knights who had spoken to her so far. He sounded younger than the others, too, probably around the same age as Velina.

She guessed she was around nineteen, but she wasn't sure. She never knew when her birthday was.

"Fair enough," she answered, "Could you at least tell me where I am? Stone?"

The Knight didn't answer. Velina didn't expect him to.

But then the door opened again, and the blinding light forced Velina to shut her eyes. When the light was gone, a man stood in front of her.

It was the same man from the tavern. He wore no armor, just stood in front of Velina with his arms crossed and a glare in his crooked eyes, the one on the left slightly lower than the other and a wide, far away stare in both of them. When he grinned at her, Velina found he was missing a tooth. Cute.

"Get enough beauty sleep?" he asked her with a sneer. His dirty hair was a mix of brown and gray, each strand seeming to be coated in oil. Velina wondered when he last bathed.

"Not really. I'd prefer more time to rest if you don't mind," Velina yawned for added flair.

The man before her, whom she decided to call Crooked Eyes, laughed.

"Bold of you to be making jokes, dragon bitch," he said. He began walking around Velina in a circle, his arms still crossed as he looked down at her. "I think it's time you answer some of my questions."

"I already told you everything I know," she said through gritted teeth, "Believe me, I wish I knew more than that. I'm just as confused as you."

"Bullshit," he spat, "There's no way in hell you've just been living here on the South Side your whole life, not knowing you're one of *them*. That kind of shit doesn't just happen."

"If I knew I was a Bendegón, why would I be on the South Side, working in that shitty tavern, struggling to keep food on my plate? Why would I let myself be a slave?"

"Hell, if I know," he answered her with a shrug as he bent down and put his face directly in front of hers, only an inch away. Velina could smell the booze on him. "Maybe you're a spy. Maybe you're here to report on us, Knights, to the royal family."

"The royal family hasn't sent their people over The Wall in over two hundred years," Velina reminded him, "What makes you think they would now? What makes you think you're so important that they care what you're up to? If they cared about this half of the kingdom at all, they would've eradicated you and your worthless Knights already."

Crooked Eyes slapped Velina hard across the face, her cheek burning. She spat out the blood and glared at him, biting her tongue to keep from cursing at him.

"Watch your mouth, bitch," he growled, "You're in my territory."

Velina elected to keep her mouth shut. She was angry and hurt, but that didn't mean she had to be reckless. If she pissed him off too much, he could kill her, or worse.

"Until you're ready to tell me the truth," he drawled as he took out a curved dagger from the sheath on the side of his leg. He played with it in his hands before he looked at her, a terrifying smirk on his face. "I'm just going to have to help you remember."

Velina couldn't move. She had nowhere to go, no way to escape. So she bit her tongue and begged herself not to scream.

He brought the knife to her right arm first, barely breaking the skin. Velina only winced as she watched the thin line of blood trickle down her arm.

"Not enough?" he asked. Before Velina could answer, he pressed down harder. This time, Velina gasped, sweat beginning to collect on her forehead as he dragged the knife through her skin.

But still, she didn't scream. Even as the blood dripped down her body and fell with a soft sound to the floor, even as Crooked Eyes laughed while he traced his fingers up and down her shaking arm, Velina did not scream. She held her tongue, bit the inside of her cheeks, and did everything she could to avoid making a sound.

This wasn't her first encounter with a man like this. She knew what he wanted, how his entire goal was to break her.

As weak as Velina was, her determination to never satisfy Crooked Eyes and his cruel mind was stronger than the knife that split her skin, attempting to tear down the walls within herself. Velina wasn't anything special, not yet, but she was stubborn. She decided her resolve would be the thing to keep her alive, at least until she could die at the hands of someone, or something, other than this man.

Eventually, Velina passed out from the pain. When she woke again, Crooked Eyes was gone.

The same Knight from before silently shoved a plate of food in Velina's face. Or, she assumed it was food. Its lack of color made it hard to tell if it was indeed edible or not.

"What is that?" she asked, her voice cracking. Her throat was somehow beyond dry.

"Food," he said, "Eat."

Velina looked at her tied hands and made a face at the Knight. "My hands are a little tied up right now."

The Knight let out a sigh before he crouched down in front of her and began feeding her the sludge. Oddly enough, it tasted just like the food she used to eat as a slave for a rich family. With every bite, she was reminded of those bitter memories of the work she was forced to endure. The happiest day of Velina's life was when she tricked that

same family into giving her her freedom. She'd skipped, actually skipped, away from their home. She'd only looked back once to wave goodbye to her dear friend.

Velina planned on going back for her once she'd earned enough money to buy her away, but by the time she did, her friend was gone.

"Why are you smiling?" the Knight asked her, setting down the now-empty plate.

"The food reminded me of someone I used to know," she answered sadly, "Someone I hoped to see again before I died. But it seems I've run out of time."

The Knight didn't answer her. He just stood up and stared down at her. Velina could see soft brown eyes behind the helmet, a color so different from her own. Velina's eyes were blue and much more intimidating than his, much colder and calculating. Just by his eyes, Velina could tell this boy knew what it meant to love, to be loved. She almost envied him.

"Do you have any water?" she asked, looking up at him.

He didn't answer. He soundlessly left the room and returned with a cup of a very dirty, murky liquid.

"I said water, not mud," she said disgustedly.

"Prisoners don't get to make requests," he said coldly.

She pouted. "What if I say please?"

It didn't work. In fact, he took the cup away entirely.

"Fine!" she yelled, "Sorry. I'll drink whatever you can give me."

Neither of them said anything else as he tilted the cup to her mouth and let her drink. She tried to ignore the clear taste of dirt, but by the end of the cup, her mouth was left with a gritty feeling. She spat out a rock when he took the cup away, a bitter look on her face.

"What's your name?" Velina asked after a long couple of minutes. She hated the silence. She needed to distract herself before she began to panic.

"Can't tell you that," he said flatly.

"Can't or won't?"

He didn't answer.

"There is a high chance that I will die in this room, you know," she told him, her voice low, "You could be the last person I ever speak to, besides your boss, of course. I think I should at least be able to know your name."

He was silent for a moment, a moment so long that Velina thought he would never answer.

"Conlin," he said at last, "My name is Conlin."

Velina grinned. "Under different circumstances, I would say it is wonderful to meet you."

Conlin didn't answer Velina, but the silence in the room wasn't as loud as it was before. Somehow, just knowing his name was enough to slightly ease the anxiety weighing down on her. Somehow, just knowing his name offered her the slightest bit of hope, just enough to raise her survival chance to 2%.

Crooked Eyes visited Velina two times a day, each time asking her the same questions he always did before, each time leaving more cuts along her arms. When he began to run out of the room, he moved onto her legs.

His blade cut through her gray pants like butter, the blood seeping through the cloth until it turned black.

After every torture session, Velina passed out. When she woke each time, Conlin was waiting to feed her. Sometimes, they spoke, but most of the time, she ate in silence.

Conlin became kinder throughout the first few days, his voice gentler and his hands less rushed and forced when he fed her. He even began wiping the blood from her limbs and the sweat from her face.

"How many days has it been?" Velina asked him after she had eaten what she thought was her fourth meal.

"Four," he answered. She was right, she'd been here four days.

She didn't say anything else. Instead, she let her mind wander, the bitter taste in her mouth only encouraging her anger.

There were few options for women in the South Side of Saphrone: slavery or homelessness unless you were lucky enough to marry a Knight. But even then, marrying only meant you became a vessel for the man's child, a tool used to procreate by people who had no business procreating in the first place. The Knights were the royalty of the South Side, the people that were granted unlimited power because those on the North Side, the *real* royalty, never paid them any attention. Velina hated them all.

The Bendegón belonged to the North Side of Saphrone, and Velina couldn't think of a single good thing to say about them. She'd been taught that they were a different race of human, that the blood of the dragons ran through their veins, and that it gave them a special sort of ability over the elements, that it gave them magic. This magic gave them stronger bodies and longer lifespans, if only by twenty or so years.

The Bendegón did not waste a single moment flaunting their power. They built what Velina knew to be a paradise of sorts, a place where the drought didn't affect them like it did the Wonted of the South Side.

The royal family declared that since the South Side was dying, the North had to send over food and resources that the South couldn't grow anymore. They did, but they handed those goods directly to the Knights, who held them for ransom and forced those in need to either sell their belongings, themselves, or their children.

Sons were bought first and trained to be Knights. Daughters were bought last, the ones with already developing breasts were chosen to

be sex slaves until a Knight wanted to marry her. The women and girls had no choice in the matter.

Velina was lucky. Her body didn't start developing until later on, so she was spared from the sex slave life, but that didn't mean she was spared entirely. She'd become a labor slave, working for varying Knight families and doing only as she was told.

At twelve years old, she tricked the family who owned her into granting her freedom. It was from that point on that Velina was almost entirely alone, fighting for her survival in a world that was so determined to keep her from it.

So she bounced around from town to town for a while until she found a tavern that offered work and a room to sleep in. That became her home until she decided it was time to leave. For the rest of her life, Velina took turns working in various places, serving men booze, and fighting away their touchy hands. She hated it, but it was better than the alternative.

Throughout all of that, Velina only wondered about her family two times. Once, when she first realized she was a slave.

The youngest daughter of the family asked Velina, "How did your parents die?" Velina didn't have an answer. She didn't realize this was even a question she needed to ask.

The second time was years later. Velina was running an errand for the owner of a bar she was working for at the time. As she carried a bucket full of sloshing water through the dirt streets, Velina saw a family of three sitting on the ground, leaning against a building. The parents were noticeably malnourished, their skin pale and sunken in, their clothes tattered and stained. But still, they watched with beaming smiles while their young daughter ate an entire loaf of bread by herself.

She didn't understand that. If anything, it was smarter for the parents to eat- they were the ones who could work for more food, not

their child. But what puzzled her the most was how happy they seemed.

Velina walked back to the pub that night and wondered if her parents ever looked at her like that or if they'd thrown her away as soon as she'd been born. She wondered if their faces ever beamed with pride while they watched her eat, their hearts happy even if their bodies weren't. She wondered if they were out there somewhere, looking for her. Or maybe they'd forgotten her and moved on. Or maybe they were dead.

She found herself hoping they were dead. Only then would she forgive them for leaving her to live this brutal, unforgiving life alone.

"This is the last time I'm going to ask you before I worsen your punishment," Crooked Eyes told her. He stood against the left side of the room, twirling a piece of wood in his hands. He looked excited. "Who the hell are you? Where did you come from? Why are you here?"

Velina sighed. "I don't know how many times I have to tell you, I don't know. If I knew anything, don't you think I would've stopped this by now?"

Crooked Eyes shrugged, but instead of walking towards her, he walked over to the torch. He lit the piece of wood and watched the fire dance.

She wouldn't necessarily call it a fear, but Velina hated fire. It always made her squirm, made her recoil, and wish she could just be cold. The heat itself was never welcoming to her, always forceful. The burns the flames sometimes gifted her were unforgiving.

And as Crooked Eyes made his way over to her, the flames of the fire dancing like they were celebrating a victory, Velina realized what was about to happen.

"I hadn't hoped it would come to this," he said with a grin, "Or maybe I did."

He didn't waste even a moment. Before Velina knew it, the burning stick was against her skin, and blinding pain washed over her.

She couldn't help it. She screamed.

Through screams and pants and sobs, Velina struggled not to just let go. She felt like she was on the edge of a cliff, overlooking relentless waves crashing into the earth below her, calling her down. Just one step and she could greet them. Just one step, and the fire that chased her here, grew closer by the second, would no longer be able to reach her. Just one step.

You cannot die yet, my child, a feminine voice called. Velina looked up to the sky, searching for the source. She knew this wasn't real, knew she still sat in that room, tied to a chair while a man burned away her will to live. But it *felt* real.

"Who are you?" Velina asked the voice.

You will know soon enough. Until then, you must live. You must survive, my dear.

"Why? What good is living if this is the life I must live? What is the point?"

There is so much you don't know, so much you have yet to learn and see. I did not grant your life so you could die pitifully like this, Velina.

"Grant my life?" she asked. What did that mean? Who was she talking to?

All will be answered in time. Until then, dream of the ocean, of the water that beckons you. Smell its salt, feel its life. That is the answer.

Velina didn't have the chance to ask anything else. The voice disappeared, and suddenly, Velina was no longer standing on a cliff but on a beach. It was unlike the dirty, dried-up coast she was used to. No, this one was full of life.

The waves crashed against the shore, the crystal clear water running over her feet, inviting, no, Calling her in. She could smell the salt and feel the breeze. The sand beneath her feet harmonized with the soft hum of the waves, creating a sound she would die just to hear again.

No, she wouldn't die. Not when something like this existed.

Velina was crying in whatever dream world she was in. Her choked sobs were drowned out by the sound of the water. So she went. She dove into the water, lavishing in its cold touch, in the life and the hope it offered her.

Velina woke to Conlin forcing water down her throat.

"What the hell?" Velina said, coughing.

"I thought you died," he said, a hint of fear in his voice. "How are you not dead?"

"Is that actual water?" Velina asked, marveling at the crystal clear water in the cup he held. Conlin forced it down her throat, not answering her question.

"Why don't you just tell him the truth?" Conlin asked finally.

Velina glared up at him as he stood, setting the cup to the side. "You think I'm a liar?"

"I think you must know something," he said, "It just doesn't make any sense."

"I am an orphan," she sighed, "I was found by a man who sold me to the highest bidder. I was sold two more times after that until I won my freedom. I have worked every day of my life to have enough food to keep me working until the next day. If I had a family, Conlin, I would not have lived a life like that. If I had a family…I wouldn't be here."

"You truly know nothing about them? Not even an idea?" he asked. Velina wasn't sure, but she thought his voice sounded pained.

"Not a damn clue," she said with a sigh. "Do you have a family, Conlin?"

"I do," he answered her as he went back to his place against the wall next to the door. "I have three older siblings, two younger siblings, a mother, and a father."

"Any brothers?"

"Yes."

"Are your brothers also Knights?"

"They are."

Velina nodded. "With a family like that, I'm sure your mother is proud."

"I wouldn't know," he said sadly.

"Why not?"

Conlin sighed, "I haven't seen my family in two years. I disobeyed my father's orders and was sent here as punishment. They don't need me. I don't know if I'll ever be welcomed back."

"Is that what family is? Punishing? Unforgiving?"

"Sometimes. But most of the time, it is loving, nourishing," he told her, his voice soft. It sounded like he was recalling fond memories.

"I envy you, Conlin," Velina said sadly.

"What for?"

"When you die, you will die knowing what it is to be loved." A tear fell down Velina's face. She didn't realize how much she'd longed for that feeling. She didn't realize how much it would hurt her to never feel it.

Over a day, Velina learned more about Conlin. He told her of his rowdy older brothers who always stole the spotlight and how he often got away with things because no one noticed him. He told her he was from the South Shore, a village called Sirez that was famous for fishing. It was one of the only places on the South Side that could

provide their own food rather than relying on the Bendegón, or at least before the fish disappeared. As the drought worsened and the ocean grew angrier, the fish stopped showing themselves. In less than a year, Sirez was taken by the Knights just like every other village and now relied on the trading of slaves for goods. Velina wondered if Conlin's family used him as a slave if that was why he was here.

"Do you always wear that?" she asked him suddenly.

"Wear what? The armor?"

She nodded, "It looks uncomfortable."

"I only have to wear it on duty," he explained, suddenly standing straighter as if he just remembered why he was here. She was unable to hide the small smile that crept across her lips.

"So you can't take it off?"

"No. Why?"

"It's a shame," she shrugged, "I was curious what you look like."

Conlin scoffed, "Why? So you can hunt me down and kill me if you make it out of here?"

"Maybe," she teased, "Or maybe I would thank you."

"Thank me for what?"

"For your kindness."

He didn't answer her, and she didn't want him to. She'd grown comfortable with their silence despite her still being a prisoner. So, instead of talking more, she sighed and looked up at the ceiling.

For the first time since the Knights brought her here, she began to miss the sky. She missed its vibrant blue color and the stars that decorated it brightly during the night. She even missed the blazing sun and the warmth it offered, the energy it provided her.

Sitting here in this room, unable to move, Velina wondered if she would ever be able to see the sky again.

And as the days went on and Crooked Eyes burned and cut her down, Velina truly began to lose hope. Her skin burned with every

movement she made, the rope cutting into her skin farther and farther, her wounds never getting the chance to properly heal. She tried to ignore the putrid smell, which only grew stronger as the days went on, the stench so strong that her eyes began to burn. The only thing that kept her alive was the cold cup of water Conlin offered her once a day.

Her fear turned into hatred when Crooked Eyes appeared in her cell one day with a visitor. Velina recognized him immediately.

"Fleesus," she breathed, an odd feeling in her stomach.

He was the one who found her when she was four years old. He'd given her a roof to sleep under and food to put on a plate, but that was only until she was old enough to begin working, to be sold. She didn't hate this man, but she didn't like him all that much either. But he'd been the one to find her, he'd saved her from starvation. Even if the "saving" meant claiming her as his slave.

"Velina," he acknowledged, his lips pursed and his eyes darting towards Crooked Eyes and the dagger in his hand. He was scared. "What trouble have you gotten yourself into?" He tried to laugh like he wasn't terrified, but the wide look in his eyes gave him away immediately.

She fought against the ropes that bound her to her chair, her heart racing as Crooked Eyes made circles around Fleesus, his blade pulling and pushing the fabric of his shirt. It was torn and stained, with holes in various places. He hadn't been faring well.

"I hear you're the one who found this…abandoned Bendegón," Crooked Eyes said, his voice low and head tilted to the side as if considering his options. "Is that true?"

Fleesus looked at Velina, his eyes big and brown and so, so scared. He looked just as she remembered, with long, scraggly brown hair he'd probably never brushed and a graying beard.

"I am," he confirmed, another meaning behind his words. He seemed to know what would happen in this room, his eyes looking at

the pool of Velina's drying blood on the ground, the cuts and burns along her body. "I found her hiding in a pile of hay outside my stables."

"And you don't know where she came from? How did she end up on the South Side?" Crooked Eyes asked.

Fleesus shook his head. "Not a clue. She was alone when I found her. I thought one of us abandoned her, a Wonted. I never thought she could've been a Bendegón."

His words were kind like he wanted Velina to know he didn't hate her for who she was. This hurt her more. She could handle his hatred but not his kindness. She knew she would never be able to repay it.

"A shame," Crooked Eyes sighed, "I was hoping you'd be more helpful.'

Velina screamed, "No!" as the dagger entered Fleesus' body from behind, the blade long enough that Velina could see it as it exited his chest. His eyes went wide, and he coughed up blood, falling to the floor as Crooked Eyes pulled the knife out.

Velina sobbed and fought against the ropes again, screaming as Fleesus took his last breath. Her throat burned from her screams, the wounds on her body begging her to stop moving as she thrashed against the ropes.

The pool of blood only grew bigger as Flessus remained unmoving on the floor, his eyes left open, his mouth agape from the scream he never got to let out.

"You monster!" she cried at Crooked Eyes, unrelenting hate seething from her. She promised herself right then and there that she'd kill this man, kill him for all to see if given the chance.

She wanted to live only so she could end his life.

"I told you to give me the answers I want," he taunted, wiping Fleesus' blood off his blade with his shirt. "You're the reason he's dead, Velina. Not me, *you*. If you hadn't come here, he'd still be alive."

She said nothing as he left the room, only sobbed and sobbed, even after other Knights carried Fleesus' body away. She said nothing to Conlin, only cried and screamed, nothing but anger left for her to feel.

On the tenth day of her imprisonment, Crooked Eyes began to get restless.

"Tell me anything," he said, "I need something from you. If you don't start talking, this is about to get a whole lot more ugly."

She didn't see how it could get more ugly, not when the floor was still stained from Fleesus' body, the image of his death still fresh in her mind.

"More ugly than you? I find that hard to believe," Velina mumbled. She regretted it after he struck her across the face hard. She spat out the blood from her mouth and glared daggers at him.

"Keep that pretty little mouth of yours shut unless it's to answer my questions," he said, pulling out the same knife he always used from its sheath, "Or scream."

At this point, Velina no longer feared the pain from his cuts. If anything, she awaited it. The pain offered hope. Hope that maybe, just maybe, he would cut deep enough and Velina would not wake afterwards.

But she recalled her weird vision from a few days before, how that voice told her she couldn't give up, not yet. She wondered how much longer she had to hang on for, if she would be able to last.

She also told herself she couldn't die until she killed this man until she got revenge on him for Fleesus.

Crooked Eyes took his time, playing with her hair with the knife. He threatened to chop it off. "None of our prisoners have ever kept their mouths shut this long," he told her, a hint of surprise in his voice, "Most of them crumble. Others beg for us to end their lives. But not you. Why is that, Velina?"

"If I die at your hand, I will have failed," she told him, "My only goal now is to live long enough to be able to kill you."

He threw his head back and laughed. "Did you hear that boy? She thinks she can kill me," he said to Conlin.

Conlin remained motionless against the wall, his eyes looking nowhere but straight ahead. Velina wondered what he was thinking and what words he was refusing to say.

Crooked Eyes bent down until he was eye level with Velina. He grinned, his missing tooth a gaping hole in his mouth. His breath reeked, the smell almost enough to knock Velina out. He took the knife and lightly grazed her collarbone, peeling away her shirt. Velina squirmed, her heart beginning to pound in her chest.

"Don't tell me you're modest," Crooked Eyes crooned, his voice low, "A bitch like you doesn't have the right to be modest."

Velina bit her tongue out of fear of making the situation worse. But she couldn't stop the panic rising over her, not when Crooked eyes continued to move the knife around her body, his eyes raking over her in a way that made her wish she were invisible.

But before he could make it any farther, the door to Velina's room opened.

Through the blinding light, she could just make out three bodies. Judging by their clunky figures, Velina assumed they were more Knights.

Fantastic, just what she needed.

"Who the hell are you? This room is off limits," Crooked Eyes smeared. He stood behind Velina and pulled at her hair.

"We're from The Wall," the tallest of the new Knights said, "We have orders to escort this prisoner there."

"I haven't received such orders," Crooked Eyes said suspiciously. He looked to Conlin in question, but Conlin remained as still as a statue.

"This is you receiving them," the Knight answered, his voice sarcastic. Velina couldn't help the laugh that escaped her but immediately regretted it when Crooked Eyes pulled her hair, yanking her head back as he placed the knife against her throat.

"Something funny, bitch?" he asked, his voice low.

"Only your stupidity," she sneered. He pressed the knife against her skin.

"That's enough," the Knight said, "We are to take her to The Wall, *alive*."

"Alive and well are two very different things," Crooked Eyes said, letting go of her hair, "I haven't even gotten to have my fun with her."

"Looks like you did," the Knight said, judgment in his voice, "I'll be surprised if she's able to stand."

Crooked Eyes shrugged. "It's her own fault, she was asking for it," he said as he walked around and stood in front of her again.

Velina spat at him.

"Did you already forget what you did to be put in that arena in the first place? Have you not learned your lesson?" he threatened, anger rising in his voice.

"I told a very, very ugly man no," Velina said, her head high. "If that is a crime, then I would rather die than live in this world."

"You soon will," he told her.

Velina continued to glare at him as the Knights untied her from the chair. She tried not to throw up at the red marks around her wrists, the bloodied rope falling to the ground, the raw skin exposed. The shortest of the Knights offered their hand, and Velina tried to take it to stand, but she hit the floor hard.

Crooked Eyes laughed, "Pathetic."

Velina said nothing as the Knights hauled her up. She couldn't even stand on her own. How would she be able to make it to The Wall?

"We'll be on our way then," the Knight said, inclining his head lightly to Crooked Eyes, who regarded Velina with a hungry, hateful look on his face.

"Wait," Crooked Eyes said.

Velina rolled her eyes as the Knights turned around, waiting for Crooked Eyes to speak.

"You're just going to let her walk freely? Not going to tie her up? What if she pulls some Bendegón shit on you?" he asked.

The Knight chuckled. "She won't be able to use any magic in the state you've left her in."

Crooked Eyes looked proud of himself, a smile on his face as though he were being complimented.

"What is your name?" the Knight asked him. "So I can tell our superiors what an…amazing job you're doing here."

"Flund," he answered proudly.

Velina snorted.

"Something funny, bitch?" Crooked Eyes- no, *Flund*, asked.

"That is the most stupid name I've ever heard," she told him, "Actually, it suits you quite well."

Flund took a step forward, and the three Knights got in his way. "We'll be on our way now, *Flund*," the same one said.

They drug Velina out of the room and through the building. Velina could hear screaming behind almost every door. She wondered if any of those screams belonged to actual criminals or if they were all like her- innocent people painted to be liars. Innocent people whose only crime was being born.

Conlin followed behind them until they made it to the exit. Velina found enough strength to turn around and face him.

"Thank you," she said quietly, "For the water."

He scoffed and rolled his eyes, "It was water."

"But it saved my life. No one has ever shown me kindness like that."

"If that is kindness, Velina, your standards are unbelievably low. You should consider raising them."

She sighed, "A luxury I can only wish to have. If I ever meet you again, Conlin, I will do everything in my power to return the favor."

"I hope I never see you again," he told her flatly, "Not if it's under these circumstances." His voice was quiet in the end, softer than Velina had ever heard it. So she gave him a soft smile, inclining her head slightly before turning back towards the other Knights and following them outside.

As the sun kissed her skin, saying "hello" after such a long time apart, Velina felt the warm wind against her skin, and she thought she might cry. A bird flew overhead, and Velina began to feel envious of it. Oh, how she wished she could fly away from this place.

If I'd been born a bird, I'd fly up and up and never stop. I'd leave this hell and never look back, she thought.

"Move," one of the Knights said, "We don't have time to waste. We need to leave Stone immediately."

"Forgive me, but I can barely walk, let alone walk *quickly*," Velina said harshly. In truth, each step she took felt like one more towards her grave. Her head was spinning, pain and nausea threatening to knock her out yet again. The burns and cuts on her body stung with new movement, her wounds tearing open once more. A small trail of blood followed behind her, her feet dragging in the dirt.

One of the Knights, the shortest one, came close to Velina, grabbing her arm and taking away most of Velina's weight. Immediate relief flooded through her, her head clearing enough to almost think straight.

"What the hell did they do to you?" the Knight mumbled, more to themself than Velina. But what caught Velina off guard was that the voice belonged to a woman.

Women were not Knights.

But Velina didn't say anything in case they turned her around and gave her right back to Crooked Eyes and his greedy, harmful hands.

So, Velina followed the very suspicious Knights through Stone, leaning more and more on the female Knight until she was barely even walking, more so being carried.

Knights watched as Velina passed by, all of them standing still, their silver armor gleaming in the light. She heard whispers, though, of the infamous Dragon Bitch. She thought of all the nicknames they could've given her, Dragon Bitch wasn't so bad.

Eventually, they made it to the gate of Stone, and Velina was surprised at how quickly they passed through the guards. But she continued to keep her mouth shut, instead counting to ten over and over to ease her mind, calming her thoughts.

The Knights led Velina through the woods, about two miles from Stone before they stopped.

"What are we doing here?" Velina asked, her voice raspy. She was blinking profusely, the heat beginning to get to her. She didn't have it in her to keep going for much longer.

"Keep quiet," the Knight who spoke before said, "You won't make it any farther in this state." His voice was softer than when he'd spoken in Stone.

"I'd like to argue," Velina said as she sat, or collapsed, onto a large rock, "But I think you're right." Each breath was uneven, each one invoking a new, sharper pain in her ribs that spread the more she tried to ignore it. Every muscle in her body was on fire, every bone aching like she'd been crushed by a boulder the size of the Earth.

"What did they do to you?" the Knight asked her.

Velina looked at him for the first time. She saw his dark brown skin through the slit of his helmet, his warm brown eyes. He looked kind, his eyes concerned.

"Nothing I can't handle," she told him.

He scoffed and kneeled down in front of her. "We're about to say something, but I'm going to need you to stay calm, okay? If you freak out, it'll only make things worse," he held his hands out in front of himself as if already bracing for her panic.

"We can't do this here," said the third Knight, speaking for the first time, "We're too close to Stone."

"She won't make it any farther, we have to," the Knight in front of her argued. He turned back to Velina. "We aren't really Knights."

"I know," she told him.

"You know?" he asked, shocked.

Velina nodded. "Knights from The Wall have come to take me, the hidden Bendegón, to The Wall? Doesn't make any sense. The Knights hate the Bendegón more than anything else, everyone knows they would just kill me. And your voices- too forced. I can tell the accent is fake. And that one over there? A woman," Velina pointed to the other Knight, whose brown eyes went wide with surprise.

"How did you know?" the quietest of the three, the one with pale skin and freckles beneath his helmet, asked, his voice impressed.

"She spoke before," Velina answered, rubbing at her injured wrists.

"Well, there goes that disguise," the girl said. She took off her helmet, and Velina almost gasped.

She was absolutely stunning. Her skin was a warm, golden brown. Her pin-straight hair was cut short, just past her sharp jawline, the color as black as coal. Her golden brown eyes almost seemed to glow, the color reminding her of summer. Her cheekbones were high and

sharp, defining her face beautifully. On the left side of her nose was a stud, a red diamond that twinkled in the light.

"Nayeli!" one of the Knights yelled, "It's still dangerous!"

"It was dangerous the moment we left, Arien," she argued, "Just heal her so we can get moving before the Knights realize we were lying."

Arien and the third Knight were quiet for a moment before removing their helmets as well.

Arien, the tallest of the three of them, had close-cropped black hair and cool-toned black skin, a color so rarely seen in this part of the South Side. Velina thought he was gorgeous, with his kind brown eyes and perfectly shaped nose. He looked smart and confident, which is everything Velina had always wished she had been. Instead of a gem on his nose, Arien had his left ear pierced, a purple stone twinkling in the light.

The third Knight couldn't have been more different.

His skin was pale, almost as white as a ghost. He was covered in freckles, his messy hair a vibrant shade of red that reminded Velina of a friend from long ago. His frame was nearly three times smaller than Arien's, his body thinner than what Velina imagined a Bendegón to look like. His eyes were bright green, their color reminding Velina of the drawings she'd seen of what the grass and trees used to look like before they'd died off. His eyes matched the green stud at the top of his left ear perfectly.

Velina thought she knew what they represented, but she was too tired to ask.

"My name is Arien, and they are Nayeli and Kenly. We're here to save you."

"Save me?" Velina asked, raising her eyebrows. "How will you do that?"

"We're from the North Side," Nayeli told her.

She sighed, “I gathered that.”.

“We have orders to take you there.”

Velina narrowed her eyes. “Orders from who?”

“We can’t say that here,” Arien interrupted before Nayeli could speak. The two of them shared a look, a silent conversation passing between them. “For now, we need to heal you and keep moving.”

“I’ve been cut and burned along all of my limbs,” Velina told him, “I don’t see how you’re going to heal ten days of torture with nothing.”

Arien grinned, “Trust me.”

“There isn’t a soul in this world I trust,” Velina told him, “But if you rescued me from that sorry excuse of a man back there… Well, I have to hope your intentions are good. I don’t have any other option, do I?”

No one said anything for a moment, not as a single tear slid down Velina’s face and hit the ground, softening the dirt. Velina wondered how long it’d been since this ground felt the touch of water.

“What happened to you in Stone, Velina, will never happen to you again,” Nayeli told her, her voice serious. She joined Arien in kneeling before her, both of them with pained expressions across their faces, their brows furrowed and eyes kind. “We can’t tell you anything yet, not here, but we promise that where we are taking you, you will be safe.”

Velina laughed. “Even if I die tomorrow, I won’t mind, as long as it’s not at the hands of that man,” she told them bitterly, “So please, do whatever it is you need to do.”

The three Knights shed their armor, revealing matching outfits of jeans and t-shirts, before stashing the armor in a small grove of dead trees, branches covering the gleaming metal. Arien knelt before Velina again and took her hands into his own, closing his eyes. Suddenly, her entire body began to tingle.

"What the hell are you doing?" Velina asked, trying to jump away. She knew she wouldn't be able to run away, but still, the sensation in her body was anything but normal. It felt like she was vibrating, a deep hum running through her skin and bones.

"Stop moving," he mumbled, his eyes still closed, "I'm trying to heal you."

Velina looked down and saw a soft, warm light emitting from his hands, barely visible in the sunlight.

This is it, I've finally lost my mind, she thought.

But as Velina sat there, her hands in Ariens, she began to feel relief. Instead of the constant dull ache in her head, she suddenly felt clear-minded again. The burns and cuts along her arms and legs slowly healed over, scarring covering up the open wounds. The skin around her wrists was no longer raw. It wasn't perfect, but it was much better than it looked before.

Arien let go of her hands after a moment and fell back onto the ground, breathing hard. Nayeli was at his side immediately, offering him water from a bottle Velina didn't even know she had.

"How…?" Velina asked in awe, staring at her arms as if they were no longer her own.

Arien's breathing evened out as he said, "It's not perfect, but you'll be able to make it to The Wall just fine."

"But…" Velina didn't finish her sentence. She knew Bendegón possessed magical abilities over the four elements, but she'd never heard of anything like what Arien had just done.

Arien nodded as he stood and drank more water. "We'll explain everything later, I promise. But we really need to get moving, Velina. Can you walk better now?"

Velina stood and found her strength for the first time since before she was in the arena. She was able to walk with ease.

So, she followed the Bendegón. They told her there was an underground passage that would get them across The Wall quicker since simply crossing it at The Gate wasn't an option.

Velina was skeptical of these people and whoever's orders they followed. It was fairly obvious this mission of theirs, to save Velina, was a secret. But why? Didn't everyone know she existed by this point? Wouldn't they assume she made her way to the North Side after suddenly going missing?

But then Velina thought that the people of the South Side were more likely to assume she'd been murdered by the Knights. That made much more sense than the Bendegón saving her - the Knights and their hatred for the Bendegón was enough to convince anyone that they had killed Velina.

And no one would believe that the Bendegón would dare cross The Wall. The two halves of Saphrone might make up one Kingdom, but they most certainly did not act as one. It'd been two hundred years since anyone crossed The Wall, and as far as Velina knew, no one wanted that to change.

Velina walked a little bit ahead of her three rescuers, who were whispering incessantly, the noise almost enough to distract Velina from her own thoughts. But she tried not to focus on them. Instead, she took in the world around her, the one she would soon be leaving and most likely never see again.

The ground beneath her feet was dry and harsh, the dirt crunchy. The forest they were in offered little coverage since all of the trees were either dying or already dead, the twenty-year drought threatening to kill not just the land, but the people who lived on it, too.

In the past year or so, Velina saw people dying from malnourishment left and right, both children and adults. The only reason she survived was because the man she worked for had a son

who was a Knight. Velina worked harder than she did when she was a slave just so she could have food on her plate at the end of the day.

So, as she walked through this dying land, she wondered if the Bendegón faced the same struggles on the North Side, or if their powers truly allowed them to survive in this dying world. She wondered if the people she was being taken to would be like Crooked Eyes or if they would be like Conlin. She wondered if she would be allowed to live or if whoever was in charge would decide her life wasn't worth the extra mouth to feed.

It was odd not having any control over your own life. Velina had no choice but to follow these people, these strangers, and hope she wasn't walking towards her death. But even if she was, she thought that that would be okay. At least if she died this way, it wouldn't be at the hands of Crooked Eyes.

"Let's camp here," Arien told her. They were in a clearing in the middle of the woods, still about ten miles from Stone but at least four away from any towns or villages. Velina knew The Wall was still a day's walk away.

"There's a town a mile that way," Velina told them, pointing ahead. "Why don't we just find a place to sleep there?"

"And risk anyone knowing who you are? Or that we aren't from here? It's too risky," Arien told her. He sat down beside a rock and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"I'll make the fire," Nayeli said. She gathered some wood scattered around the floor and put it in a pile. Then she held her hands a couple of inches away from the wood, and immediately, fire erupted in front of her.

Velina fell to the floor. Arien's powers earlier had startled her, of course, but actually *seeing* fire erupt from nowhere? Velina decided she'd finally lost her mind.

"You…you just…" Velina couldn't believe what she was looking at. She stared at the flames, how they danced around the wood like magic. It looked natural at first, but the more she looked and noticed, the more she realized how unnatural it truly was. The wood wasn't burning, in fact, the fire seemed to be living by itself, supplying its own life force rather than taking that of the woods.

Nayeli grinned at her, "Cool, right? "

"Terrifying," Velina told her. "I knew your people had abilities like this, but I've never seen it before."

"Our people," Kenly corrected. He stood next to Arien, wrapping a piece of cloth around his left wrist for some reason. Velina didn't look away from him until he looked back at her. He had a weird look in his eyes, as if he were seeing someone other than Velina.

"What?" she asked.

"The people you speak of," Kenly explained, "They are *our* people. You're one of us, too, Velina."

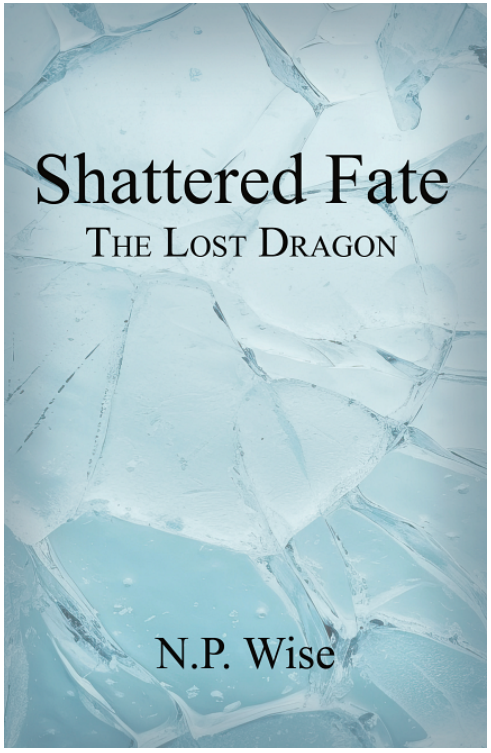
She didn't say anything else, she simply curled up in a ball on the ground next to the fire. She only fell asleep when her eyes burned so much from being open that she could no longer fight the sleep and exhaustion that threatened to push her over the edge.

About The Author

My name is Natalie Wise. Being a North Texan native, I have always sought exploration through the fictional world. You can ask anyone who knew me growing up, if I didn't have a book in my hand it was because my hands were already too full. I always found that diving into someone else's world opened my mind to places I never knew it could go. Maybe that's why I decided to become a writer.

To explore someone else's world is one thing, but to let others explore yours is entirely different. I hope you're able to enjoy the world of the Bendegón and get to know and love Velina, Raevyn, and Kiaan just as I have.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking the time to read what I have worked so hard to bring to life. I hope you found something worth exploring for!



They never ask you if you want to be hero. There isn't an application or a disclaimer, in fact, most people don't even know they are one until the moment comes. Velina Musiba, however, knows. She knows and despite everything, she will win.

Shattered Fate: The Lost Dragon
By N.P. Wise