



PRIESTESS  
OF STORMS &  
STONE

ROGUE ETHEREAL SERIES BOOK FIVE  
ANNIE ANDERSON

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Rogue Ethereal Book 5

ANNIE ANDERSON

PRIESTESS of STORMS & STONE

*Rogue Ethereal Book 5*

*International Bestselling Author*

Annie Anderson

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Edited by Angela Sanders

Cover Design by Danielle Fine

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Official Annie Anderson Newsletter

*For those that have lost.*

*“The devil's voice is sweet to hear.”*

— STEPHEN KING

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(A Romantic Suspense Newsletter Serial)

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# CHAPTER ONE

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It was never a good sign to be drinking bourbon at ten in the morning, but after the week I'd had, I figured I was due. Self-medicating with alcohol wouldn't take the sting out of my grief, in fact, it was likely to make it worse. But I'd needed a teensy little breather from my housemates after the last truth bomb had been dropped, and wrapping my head around my new knowledge required booze.

I could feel Della's eyes on me, her acute vampire gaze boring a hole in the side of my face. She wanted an answer to her question, and she likely wasn't going to leave me alone until I gave her one.

*When are we leaving?*

That question echoed against the walls of my brain with enough force to give me a headache. Melody was alive. She was alive, and my sister was dead.

But that didn't make a lick of sense. Melody died right in front of me. I watched Aurelia send her soul on in a way only a phoenix could do. I watched her body burn in the flames of a funeral pyre. I needed answers before I could answer Della's question.

Because I wouldn't be leaving to hunt her down unless I was sure this wasn't some kind of trick. I'd been tricked too many times in the last week, and I wasn't falling for another one.

"Melody is dead, Della," I whispered before taking another sip of bourbon, refusing to face my bodyguard. If I looked at her, I'd see either pity or censure, and I couldn't deal with either.

"Then why is her son gone?" Della pointed out a big hole in the "Melody's dead" argument.

Shit, fuck, and damn. I made a promise to Melody to keep her son safe. If it wasn't Melody who had her son—and I highly doubted it was—then

I'd have to go get him.

In Faerie.

Aces.

But hadn't I earned a break? Hadn't I earned the right to let someone else take up the slack?

*You made a promise. You swore. You can't turn away just because you're hurt.*

Those words cut through my thoughts sharp enough to bring tears to my eyes. I did. I made a promise to make sure her son was safe. And I'd keep it. Maybe it would make my soul burn just a little less. Maybe if I did this one thing, losing Maria wouldn't hurt so bad.

Yeah, I doubted it.

I sniffed back the sting of tears, tossed back the rest of the bourbon, and managed to set the glass down without smashing it. I'd been on a smashing kick for the last little bit, and my living room had borne the brunt of it. At the time, I'd wanted to destroy everything Maria had ever touched. If I could just break it, burn it, wreck it, then it would have been like she wasn't stamped all over every molecule of my house.

Wasn't that stupid?

Like I wouldn't see her every time I closed my eyes.

"Okay, I'll give you that," I muttered, finally answering Della's question. "But I can't just bust down the door to Faerie and find her. If it is her. We need way more to go on than a note and a can-do attitude."

I peered down at myself. I had on black shorts and a black tank top. It was good enough for summer in Denver. All I needed was some flip-flops. Had I brushed my teeth today? Shrug. Was I wearing a bra? My tank had a shelf bra in it. It would just have to do. Plus, Barrett wouldn't give two shits about what I was wearing. I located my flip-flops in their spot by the door, shuffled my feet into them, and raised my hand to snap my fingers.

But Della pounced on my hand before I could complete the task.

"What?" My whole body was on red alert, my eyes searching my demolished living room and relatively untouched kitchen.

"You can't go out like that," Della whispered furiously, her face a picture of panic.

Frowning, I looked back down at myself. Yep, all my parts were covered.

“It’s summer. Shorts and a tank aren’t going to turn any heads no matter how much ink is on display.”

A dawning realization lit up Della’s face before she winced. “You haven’t checked a mirror since you got back, have you?”

My eyes narrowed as a cold finger of dread raced down my spine. I tried to think of the last week since my return from Hell. I couldn’t recall most of it, and the parts I could, I could say with the utmost authority that looking at myself in the mirror was not high on my list of things I wanted to do.

“I can’t say that I have,” I hedged, wanting her to tell me, so I didn’t have to find out for myself. Who wanted to see puffy eyes and dark circles? And worse, who wanted to stare at the person who got her sister killed?

No, thank you. My psyche was fragile enough.

“You need to, Max.”

I didn’t want to, but I shuffled my feet to my bedroom. Sure, there were other mirrors I could use, but the one in the downstairs bathroom was right across the hall from Maria’s bedroom, and I just couldn’t. I couldn’t see her touches everywhere, her favorite soaps, the spray of makeup brushes she kept on the shelf. I wondered if the brushes would still smell like her makeup, if the hydrangea blossoms she enchanted to never wilt or die would still be sitting in their vase on the counter. If her towel was still neatly folded on the rack.

I couldn’t be in there yet. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to.

I wasn’t sure I’d be able to look up at the mirror either, and despite the murmured voices behind me, I hadn’t yet gathered the courage. Warm arms surrounded my middle as a stubbly chin rested on my shoulder.

“You going to stand there all day, love?” Alistair’s low voice rumbled in my ear. I couldn’t explain the comfort I got from that voice. My body seemed to sigh in relief.

Yes, I could blame him. It was his father who stole my sister from me. Yes, it was Alistair who pulled me from Hell, keeping me from following my sister in death. I could blame him, but I didn’t. The rational part of my brain refused to shovel the fault his way.

“I might. Is it bad?”

“There is nothing on this earth or the next one that could make you look bad. But you need to see, love. You need to know.”

That sounded ominous. Internally, I counted to three and forced my gaze to move to the mirror. But the woman staring back at me wasn't me.

Her hair was blue, sure, but it was a color that you couldn't get out of a bottle if you'd tried. Her eyes were a shining golden hue, and her skin was practically luminescent. Her features were sharper, too, her cheekbones like a knife blade, her eyes just slightly tilted up, her lips a touch wider. And her ears... they were pulled into a rounded point.

This woman was a Fae. I was a Fae. Not a witch, not a demon. Not anything I'd thought I'd been.

"I look like a glowstick," I mumbled and watched as the light in those strange eyes flared.

And that was just a touch too much for me. Shoving out of Alistair's arms, I booked it out of my bathroom and down the stairs. I couldn't go outside like this—looking just like what I was.

A fucking Fae.

I needed Barrett. I needed Marcus. I needed to have a stern talking-to with my mother about what in the unholy hell was going on. My chest burned with a scream that ached to be let loose.

Panic. This was a straight-up panic attack.

I needed Barrett. I needed him right now or I was going to lose it. And then I felt the pull—almost the same pull I felt when I'd accidentally summoned Alistair. It was similar to when I transported myself, but not. It wasn't like I was pushing myself through space, it was more like my mind was already where I wanted to be, and my body was just catching up.

Before I knew exactly what the hell was going on, I was standing in the middle of a Persian rug watching as Barrett screamed like a girl. Popcorn went flying, Barrett kersplanged off the couch, and if I wasn't so freaked, I probably would have laughed.

"What in the actual, all-encompassing fuck, Maxima?" Barrett griped from the floor. He was wedged between the couch and the coffee table, the remnants of popcorn in his hair.

I gestured at my face, my body, and my pointed ears. "You saw me when I got back, and you didn't tell me I was like this? I look like a glowstick."

Was that my voice sounding like a dying hyena? Maybe. But I appeared as if I took a bath in illuminator and followed it up with a glitter facial.

Okay, I was exaggerating, but still.

Barrett's delicate fingers plucked popcorn out of his hair as he leveled me with an expression so scathing my freak-out shriveled in on itself.

"You look like a Fae, Max. You look like an embodiment of magic so potent, it leaks out of your skin. You are beautiful, and just because you look different now doesn't mean you are different. You're the same as you've always been. A giant pain in my ass. So knock it the fuck off and get your shit together," he ordered and then paused. "Please."

That last bit was tacked on in a teensy effort not to hurt my feelings, and I couldn't help but laugh.

Then I asked the question that would burn me up inside if it was so. "Did you know?"

"That you were a Fae? Absolutely not. I definitely would have told you, though it does explain some things. A lot of things. It kind of makes me think we were bloody idiots for not putting it together sooner. It also makes me really want to tie your mother to a chair and peel her mind apart. The secrets that woman has." Barrett shook his head and I shuddered at the visual.

"Tell me how you really feel, Barrett."

"Oh, I will. Like right now, I'm feeling some kind of way about the bling on your finger. Is that a wedding ring?"

I chuckled for a second and then his words registered in my brain. My gaze traveled down to my hands to catch sight of a huge black diamond on my left ring finger. Shocked, I hid my hand behind my back like a child.

At my guilty-as-fuck action, Barrett's eyes widened as he sputtered, "Are you married?"

Was that a shriek? Yes, yes it was.

I rolled my lips between my teeth and didn't say a word, but I was pretty sure my wince gave me away. The diamond on my finger was most certainly a wedding ring because I'd married—or was bound to—Alistair on our little jaunt to Hell. Granted, it was so I wouldn't be sold into slavery or eaten by a Minotaur, but still.

Married was married.

There was a bevy of shit I hadn't told Barrett yet, but I'd been dealing with my own shit for the last little bit.

"How did I not know this? When? How? Moreover, who?"

At that second, the who decided to walk through the door, and I felt my eyes narrow. All Alistair gave me was an unrepentant grin.

“What the hell?” I asked as I waved my bling-laden hand at him.

“What the hell, what?” Alistair’s grin widened on his face. That sneaky little shit. When had he snuck that ring on my finger?

I growled for a second and resisted the urge to stamp my foot. “When did you put this on my finger, Alistair?”

His grin faltered and he crossed the room in what seemed like an instant. “Do you not like it? You can take it off if you want.”

His low whisper did something to my belly and I was struck with a pang of... of... it wasn’t sadness, it wasn’t regret, but it was something like loss at the thought of taking the ring off. I looked down at my hand, examining the ring more closely. The round black stone was three, maybe four carats, and it was haloed with tiny white diamonds and another halo of black ones.

It was perfect. If I’d ever thought of marriage—which I hadn’t—it was the ring I’d have hoped someone would have picked for me.

“I don’t wanna take it off. It’s pretty,” I muttered with a pouty frown. “I just didn’t know it was there. When did you put it on me?”

“When you were freaking out about looking in the mirror. I figured if you didn’t like what you saw, you’d like the ring. That plan backfired a bit, but I didn’t want you to think I didn’t honor what we did. And I couldn’t find the right time to...” He trailed off.

He couldn’t find the right time to give me the ring because I’d been too busy tearing my house apart.

I cupped his cheek. “What did I ever do to deserve a man like you?”

“Is that a good deserve or a bad deserve? One can never tell with you.” His lips were once again pulled up into a devilish smile.

“Good, but don’t make me change my mind.”

A snap-snap-snapping broke Alistair and I out of our little love bubble, and we turned to face a stunned Barrett who was half-goggling at us and half-ready to have a full-on hissy fit.

“Married. Explain. Now.”

I winced but held onto Alistair’s hand as I began. “So, there was this Minotaur...”

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## CHAPTER TWO

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“Let me see if I have this right. You came across a bazaar run by Taurus, who had been selling souls to Soren. He found out you were a Fae and threatened to either eat you or sell you into slavery, so you got married?” Barrett ended his summation on a question like he still didn’t understand.

“Yes,” I answered for the third time. It didn’t seem that complicated, but Barrett was either actually confused or playing up his confusion for effect. My money was on door number two.

Barrett pinched the skin between his brows as he visibly tried to rein in his temper. “And this has nothing at all to do with the arranged marriage you two were supposed to have.”

Ah. There it was. Barrett was looking out for me. I couldn’t begrudge him that. But if Barrett understood how much Alistair hated his father, he wouldn’t be pushing this.

Alistair stiffened at my side. “No. It doesn’t. Taurus didn’t believe she was my wife, and honestly, I don’t know why he let us complete the bond. At the time, it seemed like the only way to keep Max safe.”

Alistair stood and began to pace, something he did when he was supremely agitated. I shot Barrett a censoring glare. “Now that I think back on it, I’m just glad he let Max go. Maybe it was a ruse orchestrated by my father. Maybe it was something else. I don’t know and... I just wanted to keep her safe.”

Alistair stopped his pacing, but I could see the steam rising off his shoulders. The fire he kept banked within him was about to burst from his skin if I didn’t do something—say something. I’d been so preoccupied with my own hurt, my own sorrow, I hadn’t thought what our trip to Hell might have done to him. What it cost him. What he might fear because of what it cost me.

Rising from the couch, I took the three steps to his side and pressed a kiss to his lips. “You did. You kept me safe. You kept me alive. You brought me home. No one could have done more. You did everything you said you would do and more.”

When he refused to meet my eyes, I cupped his face in both my hands, sending a little jolt of magic into him. His eyes flashed open, the glowing fire in them overtaking the blue of his irises.

“I’m not sorry.” I pinned his gaze with my own, and if my eyes were filling, then that’s just what happened when you told your man you couldn’t regret him.

Even if the victory was bittersweet.

“You lost too much,” he replied. “I got my freedom from my father. We stopped him, and you lost Maria. It isn’t fair. How can you not hate me?”

He was right—I did lose too much. But he was wrong, too.

“But you didn’t make me lose her. You kept me from following her. And I can’t be mad at you for that.”

Even if it was his father that took her from us. Even if he couldn’t stop what happened.

“Hate is the furthest thing from what I feel for you.”

“Ugh. This is just too cute for words,” Barrett huffed, crossing his arms and throwing himself onto the couch cushions. “What the hell am I going to do with you two? I can’t even be mad at you for not telling me because you were dealing with... stuff.” He let out a petulant growl.

“If it makes you feel any better, you knew before my parents.” I tossed that little nugget out there like a lifeline.

Barrett thought about it for a second and then smiled. “Yes, that does make me feel better.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and then brought everyone back on task. “So now that you’ve decided to forgive me, can we get back to the fact that I can’t go outside like this? I mean, I super love that I don’t have to dye my hair anymore, but I think the rest is gonna draw attention.”

Barrett rolled his eyes, but it was Alistair who answered for him. “You can use a glamour, Max. Lots of Ethereals do. Do you think Gorgon goes outside looking like that?”

I thought of the stick-thin, seven-foot-tall warlock. Alistair had a point.

“Okay. I can do that.” I nodded, trying my best not to freak out again.

Before I could even attempt a glamouring spell, Marcus shoved through the door with Aidan and Della in tow. Unlike his husband, who was still huffy on the couch, Marcus wrapped me up in his arms and squeezed me until I couldn't breathe.

"Missed you, kid," he muttered into my hair. "Glad you're back."

Gah! I freaking loved the big man. He and Barrett were like the parents I'd never really had. Sure, my parents were slowly making their way from being the absolute worst people ever—except for the whole "not telling me what I was thing" and generally lying their asses off with every breath they took. Barrett and Marcus were just better at being family than they were.

Marcus sniffed once, twice, and then pulled back, peering at me curiously. "You smell different."

"Yeah, I look different, too." I grinned. "Apparently, I'm a Fae. Surprise!"

Marcus nodded. "That... makes a lot of sense." He paused, the ramifications of my species hitting him all at once. "Your parents suck, kid."

I huffed in agreement. "Who you tellin'? On the upside, Andras did remove my glamour before I burned to death in Hell, so there's that."

"Oh, enough about the Fae bullshit," Della grouched. "Tell them about the letter. About the baby. About Melody. You're Fae, you have pointy ears, tot el que. Let's get to the important shit."

Ah, the important shit. Della did have a point.

"Last week, when the attack on Aether happened, there was an incubus in the club. He was searching for Striker because his family adopted Ronan, Melody's son. Apparently, someone kidnapped the boy and left a note. The note said..." I trailed off, thinking. "Did you actually see the note?" I asked Della.

"No, but I can smell when someone is lying, and this kid was not. The note said that she'd taken the boy home with her to Faerie."

Barrett's eyes widened. "That's not good."

"I want to make sure it's Melody that has him. I have to make sure. I promised her I'd keep her son safe."

"That is literally the worst idea you have ever had, and that is saying something. Especially considering you were the one to go into an abandoned house by yourself with a Corax demon inside," Aidan growled

before throwing his hands up. “You are bound and determined to make Bernadette light me on fire, aren’t you?”

“Okay, for one, I didn’t know there was a Corax demon in that house when I got there. And two, I saved your ass from a demon you couldn’t see. You’re welcome.”

And while I did give a modicum of a shit about Aidan and his opinion, I really cared about Alistair’s and Barrett’s.

“I don’t know, love. That seems more than a little risky, and we’ve had enough risky for a lifetime. Faerie isn’t a place for demons.” Alistair didn’t broadcast that opinion. He instead murmured it in my ear.

“I made a promise,” I whispered back. “What if the person who took him isn’t Melody? And how could it be? I watched her die. I watched Aurelia send her soul on.”

Alistair’s brow pinched in a frown, and he gave me an infinitesimal nod. He didn’t like it, but he wouldn’t stop me. If I even went. I had too many questions to just jump in headfirst.

Barrett, on the other hand, was about to turn purple.

“No.” He shook his head. “No, no, no, no, and no. We just got you back from Hell—where you definitely should not have been with your Faery ass. I agree with Aidan. This is your worst idea ever.”

I threw up my hands. “It’s not my idea. And I didn’t say I was going to Faerie. I’m gathering information to make an informed decision like a rational adult. Stop treating me like I’m an idiot without a brain in my head. I’m sad, not a moron.”

“People do dumb shit when they’re grieving. Trust me,” Aidan shot back, and it was then that I remembered he had a brother that was grieving Maria’s death right alongside me. Aidan hadn’t mentioned his brother since I’d been back, other than to drop the mother of all bombshells about Ian’s parentage.

I wanted to ask him how Ian was doing, but I didn’t know if now was the time to do it.

“I know. But I’m not them. I want to talk to Caim and Aurelia. See what they know. I don’t see how Melody could be alive. Unless”—I snorted as the dumbest explanation ever popped in my brain—“Unless she somehow magically got turned into a succubus or something.”

I watched as Alistair’s eyes widened a bit.

“Wait, is that a thing?”

Alistair wagged his hand at me and winced. “Sort of? I’d need to know more about her situation to be sure. We need to talk to Caim. He’s the keeper of the records. He’d know for sure.”

At that moment, the door opened again, and Hideyo popped his head in. His features were drawn, and my concern for the man notched up about three degrees. I’d never seen Hideyo with anything other than an enigmatic smile on his face.

“Cinder’s back. The Council is converging on the study, and they brought some guests.”

That sounded ominous. Sure, I was glad Cinder was finally out of human jail, but if Hideyo’s face was anything to go by, the guests were not—nor would they ever be—welcome.

Marcus and Barrett followed Hideyo out of the living room, and the rest of us followed—me in the middle of Alistair and my paladins like they were protecting me from something.

“Would you guys quit it?” I hissed when Aidan tried to stop me from going around a corner first. “We are not in a war zone, and I am not a delicate flower. Stop. It.”

Shrugging all three of them off, I hastened my steps to catch up to Barrett and shoved through the study door after him, leaving them to trail after me.

The whole gang was there. Caim and Aurelia were in a heated debate on one of the chaise lounges. Gorgon was in his usual leather wingback. Kyle was at the beverage cart, pouring himself a whiskey. And Striker and his mother were standing next to the couch, the pair closest to the door.

Upon seeing Striker’s face, I had only one thought in my head, and I acted on it without a moment of reservation. Out of all the preternatural people in that room, only two knew what I was going to do before I did it. Aurelia, because she’s a damn psychic, and Alistair.

Aurelia shoved off the chaise, standing faster than my eyes could track, and Alistair tried to grab for my hand. I ignored them both.

I stalked over to my former best friend, cocked my fist back, and punched Striker right in the face.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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A long time ago, I trusted Striker. He was one of the only people I had, so of course I did. He was one of the few Ethereals I'd met who didn't try to kill me once he knew I was a Rogue. Striker didn't have a family either, and he'd been so closed off to anyone and everyone, that he needed someone, too. We trusted each other—or at least I'd trusted him.

But looking back, I realized Striker was never a good friend. He got me into trouble. He was selfish. He took too much and never gave enough back.

And he kept secrets.

For those reasons—and the fact he needed to not be here for the conversation I needed to have with Caim—I made the split-second decision to knock him out. When my fist made contact with the side of his jaw, I didn't expect to knock him out in the first go. Hell, I thought I'd have to pepper my punch with a sleep spell to do the trick.

Apparently, Striker had a glass jaw.

I appraised his unconscious form and stifled a giggle. Some paladin he turned out to be.

The room around me erupted. Okay, it didn't erupt exactly so much as Caim lost his mind.

“Have you lost what's left of your mind, Maxima? You just violated the Armistice in full view of every member of the Council.”

I rolled my eyes. The fact that I currently looked like a disco ball with pointy ears should have shut him up, but alas.

“If I were a demon, sure. Since I'm not, you can take that Armistice you've conned me into protecting for the last damn year and shove it where the sun don't shine.”

Shock colored his face for about a second before it hardened into a stern mask. Yeah, that wasn't going to work on me.

"As the keeper of the records, your feathery ass had to have known I wasn't Teresa and Andras' biological child. Armistice-shmaristice. You can eat a dick."

I ignored Caim's sputtering and turned to Cinder, who was looking down at her son like she couldn't understand a single thing about him—especially why he was passed out on the floor. I didn't blame her. I thought dragons were made of sterner stuff, too.

"Sorry for that," I muttered as I jutted my chin at her son, "but I was his family for the last century and he treated me like trash. He deserved that punch, and I'm not sorry. If you want to make a thing of it, we can, but I really hope you don't. I don't have any beef with you, and I want to keep it that way."

"You say he treated you like trash. How?"

I sucked in a huge breath and let her have it, counting his atrocities off on my fingers. "Well, for starters, he didn't help at all with Maria. He didn't come to see me when she died. He kept her kidnapping a secret which could have directly caused her death. He used and abused my power for his own gain. He constantly got me into trouble or nearly discovered by the wrong people when I was a Rogue. He almost got me killed on more instances than I can count, and he was a whiney bitch and deliberately antagonistic when he didn't need to be."

I paused before adding, "He also kept secrets. Ones he didn't need to keep. Not if I was family. Not if he trusted me. Not if he gave a shit."

I didn't throw in all the lying he'd done over the last century. I figured that was implied.

Cinder's eyes widened at the start of my tirade and only got bigger as I listed her son's misdeeds. She blinked, blinked again, and then looked at her son like she'd never seen him before in her life.

"You should have hit him harder," she muttered. "I did not get to raise him. I suppose that is my fault. But living with you for the last century should have molded him into a better man. I'm sorry it didn't."

While I loved that she was on my side, I still punched her son in the face hard enough to knock him out. I kinda figured she would have been a little mad. At my utterly confused expression, she snorted out an indelicate laugh.

“You don’t know much about dragons, do you? We prize family over all things. You, my dear, were his family when he had none. He should have honored you, and he did not. Like I said, he is lucky all you did was punch him.”

“That’s all well and good, but the punching was a two birds, one stone kind of a thing. I would have knocked him out regardless, the connecting with his face bit just made me feel better. Della?” I called, turning to my very best vampire assistant. “You get to tell them this time because I’m still confused.”

And wary. Everything about this situation spelled trap, and I was more than done with those for the rest of forever.

Della let out a sigh that sounded like someone was trying to snatch her soul before giving the room a rundown. She told them about the young incubus who’d come to Aether during the massacre. About his adopted brother who’d been snatched from his crib by a woman who was supposed to be dead.

“Now, what I want to know is how Melody can be alive after I watched her die. After Aurelia sent her soul on.”

I wasn’t looking at Aurelia as I said this. No, I was examining the angel who appeared guilty as sin itself. His face was pulled into an expression I’d seen on Striker’s face a thousand times over the last century. Usually, when he’d done something wrong but was never going to admit it.

If I were ever on the hunt for Striker’s father, I was pretty sure I’d found him.

“What did you do, Caim? What did you do when your son asked you for help? Does he even know you’re his father, or did he get the bold-faced lying gene from you?”

Caim’s eyes flared wide, colored with the magic of his other form. Like he was going to let his wings free in the middle of this room. Like he was about to attack.

I wish this motherfucker would.

Caim clocked the barely contained rage in my eyes and the curl to my lip that was almost a snarl but not quite. This asshole couldn’t beat me when my power was half-chained with my mother’s glamour. There was no way he’d get the upper hand now. Not when I knew what I was.

I practically watched those thoughts cross his expression as the light in his eyes ramped down.

“What. Did. You. Do.” I seethed, but I wasn’t the only one who had turned on Caim. No, it was Caim with his son passed out at his feet against the whole room.

“You had him pull her from Heaven, didn’t you?” Alistair said from behind me when Caim still didn’t speak. “How could you do that to her?”

“It’s not that simple,” Caim shot back. “She was fractured—her soul was broken. She was in the middle of a transition when she died. From human to succubus. The baby’s blood in her veins was turning her. Half of her went to Heaven. The other half stayed here. I had Striker retrieve her, yes, but it was to put her back together. To put them back together. And why shouldn’t I give my son some peace? Why not, when I could do that for him?”

Already on the defensive. That was a family trait if I ever saw one.

“But something went wrong, didn’t it?” Aurelia murmured from her perch behind him, still seated on the chaise he’d vacated. “You wanted to put the pieces back together, but you did it wrong. That’s why it’s taken almost eight months for her to want her son back. That’s why you haven’t told us what you did. You’ve been trying to clean up your mess.”

Caim gritted his teeth and stared at his shoes.

“Because you weren’t supposed to do any of it, were you?” I immediately jumped to the reason he’d kept it a secret. Because why else would he keep it from all of us unless he wasn’t supposed to mend a fractured soul.

“No, he wasn’t.” Barrett seethed. “It’s forbidden for a reason, Caim. How? How could you do this?”

Caim ripped his hands through his hair. “You didn’t see him. You don’t know. They’d already cemented the bond. He knew she was his mate from the moment he saw her. If I’d let him go on as he was, he would have gone mad. You don’t know our stories, and why would you? No one gives a shit about angels. None of you know what happens to one of us when we lose our mates. Ever heard of the Fallen? That’s what happens to us.”

I actually hadn’t heard of the Fallen, but I made the general assumption they were bad.

“But Striker is only half-angel. Who is to say he would have turned Fallen?” Barrett asked. “You stole a soul from Heaven, Caim. You ripped that woman from her peace, and what? Stuck her somewhere? And when you failed to join the two pieces of her soul, what was the result?”

I had an idea, but it was Alistair who answered.

“She would be crazed. Unable to function at the basest level. I bet she couldn’t speak at first, right? Couldn’t walk. But you taught her or had someone teach her. I bet you had a hell of a time when she finally started remembering. You fucking scum.”

“Did he even ask her? In Heaven, I mean. Did he ask her what she wanted, or did he just take? Like he always takes.” I shook my head. “Is she even lucid? Does she know who she is? And why would she take Ronan to Faerie?”

A white-blond haired man sauntered through the door like he owned the place. He was sipping on a Waterford crystal tumbler filled with what smelled like Scotch. In his other hand was a massive sandwich with an enormous bite taken out of it. He happily hummed as he swallowed his beverage before he plopped onto one of the open seats and propped his feet up on a coffee table like he lived here.

Our very own friendly neighborhood Fae detective wiggled his butt a little to make himself comfortable. Then he peered at us like he was settling in to watch the show.

Rowan Durant was an emissary to the Seelie Court—whatever the hell that meant—and he was a major thorn in Barrett’s side. He was a prominent fixture on my shit list as well.

“Can we help you?” Marcus growled as he eyed the Fae like he was shit on his boot. For once, I did not mind this expression at all.

Rowan took another bite of his sandwich and shook his head. I had no idea what the hell he was doing here, but I didn’t have a good feeling about it. I was proved right not even thirty seconds later when Rowan swallowed his bite.

“I just want to know what you’re going to do about the half-crazed demon running around Faerie is all.”

I could actually feel my eye twitching. Rowan Marchand Durant was a pain in my ass.

“We’re having a little brainstorming session here, Ro. Why don’t you come back in a bit once I’ve figured out the best way to retrieve our wayward demon? Best be on your way now.” I lightly clapped my hands to get him the fuck out of this room before I ripped an angel apart with my bare hands.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” he said before taking another sip of his Scotch. “Demons shouldn’t go to Faerie for a reason, and idiot Princesses should surely not follow them. Not if they like their heads attached to their shoulders.”

I was so tempted to bury him in another hole and leave him there. Just like before, he wasn’t going to help us. Just like before, Rowan was going to talk in circles and needle and poke until he had a bit of fun.

He didn’t give a single shit about anyone, and I’d had about enough of men like that for a good long while.

Magic sparked over my fingers as thunder shook Barrett’s home. Well, the magic sparked over more than just my fingers. It went all the way up my forearms and crackled and popped.

“If you live or die, it makes absolutely no difference to me. I am on the razor’s edge of sanity, so I suggest you stop needling me. Because I’m one inane comment from eviscerating you in front of all these people, and I won’t have even an ounce of guilt from it when I do. So, unless you can help, shut the fuck up. Mm-kay, pumpkin?”

I turned back to Caim. “You lied to me. You and your son. You let me believe I’d let her down. I never want to see you or him again. When he wakes, tell him I said so. I’ll get Melody back. I’ll keep her safe. Even from him if I have to. You make sure he knows that.”

Before Caim could sputter a response, I snapped my fingers, sending him and Striker back to Aether and out of my sight.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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“Just out of curiosity, where, exactly, did you send them? No offense, darling, but if you dropped them into a volcano, we’re going to need to go on a rescue mission.” I wanted to laugh at Barrett’s attempt at a joke, but I just couldn’t manage it.

Someone I’d known for more than a century had betrayed me over and over again. I’d known I’d lost Striker. What I didn’t realize was how much that loss would hurt until right at that moment.

The resolve I’d built up once I found out about Melody seemed to dim. I sagged a little before shuffling to a leather club chair and plopping onto it. Ever knowledgeable, Aurelia appeared at my side with a tumbler full of bourbon.

I took the glass and sipped it, letting the alcohol burn all the way down before I answered Barrett.

“I sent them to his office. Nothing crazy.” Yeah, my voice sounded a little dead, but I just didn’t have it in me to fake it right then.

Sensing my dour mood, Aurelia shoved my arm off the armrest only to pick up my still-sparking hand.

“Ooooh, shiny! Finding you in the dark will be super easy now,” Aurelia said, and if she wasn’t one of my closest friends, I would have punted her little butt into next week.

“Be gentle with my feelings, dick. I’m still getting used to it.”

“Oh, please. You look like mayhem and magic all rolled into one—which has been your aesthetic since the dawn of the wiggle dress. Own it,” she ordered, leveling me with her pale-green pupilless gaze.

She did have a point.

Della let out a supremely unladylike snort. “Do you know how hard it was to not tell her she had pointy ears? I deserve a medal or a plaque or

something.”

I couldn't help it, I snorted too. Aurelia had the good sense to cover her mouth so she didn't bust out laughing. But I could totally feel the vibration of Alistair silently shaking with laughter even from a few feet away.

“You all suck,” I muttered before taking another sip of my bourbon.

Aurelia slid her ass off the armrest and plopped onto my lap. Despite her tiny stature, she nearly squeezed the breath out of me when she attack-hugged me. “You love each and every one of us, admit it. Well, except for the Fae stooge, but he doesn't count.”

She was right, but I didn't feel up to confirming her accusations.

“I have to go there to get her, don't I? Her son could be in danger. Now that we know it's Melody and what's been done to her, I can't just leave her there. Especially if demons are in danger just by being in Faerie.”

Just thinking of Melody made my nose sting with tears. How could Striker steal her from Heaven? That hurt everything in me just considering it.

Aurelia rested her head on top of mine and wrapped me up in another hug. For two non-huggers, she sure as shit was turning me into a cuddler. A part of me didn't mind. The other part of my soul screamed for my sister in such a way I wanted to rip the room apart and watch it burn to ash. I didn't like that bit of myself—the destructive part that only wanted to destroy.

She squeezed me tighter, and it took everything in me not to start crying. I figured she felt it because Aurelia stood from her perch on my lap and went back to the chaise.

Rowan set his sandwich on the coffee table. No coaster, no plate. Just crumbs on the mahogany. “I could have sworn I just warned you that you'd be in danger by going to Faerie. Are you going to ignore me, or do you now have a death wish?”

I snapped my fingers and put the food on a plate—only slightly satisfied that Rowan flinched when my fingers made their tell-tale snap.

“First, eww. Use a plate, you heathen. Second, I heard you fine, I'm just choosing to ignore you because my life is not worth more than the people I swore to protect. If you had any shred of decency, you'd know that. Since you don't...” I trailed off.

“Fates forgive me, but I agree with Rowan,” Barrett grumbled. “You shouldn't go, my darling girl. Someone needs to retrieve Melody and her

son, yes. But it does not need to be you. Not so soon after losing Maria. Not after Hell.”

Rowan coughed, pounding on his chest after his Scotch had gone down the wrong pipe. “You went to Hell.” He choked. “Did you look like that when you went there because I can’t see that going well for you.”

“It went fine, Rowan. Thanks for your concern. You know, I only lost my sister is all.”

He scoffed. “She wasn’t your sister. You don’t have any family.”

Something snapped in me the moment he said Maria wasn’t my sister. Without me telling them to, vines sprung from the upholstery of the couch and wrapped around Rowan’s body. Each vine was barbed with two-inch thorns dripping with a viscous sap. When one of those drips touched Rowan’s skin, he hissed in pain.

I hadn’t even snapped my fingers. Huh.

“Was that me?” I asked Barrett because the only other person in this room who could conjure magic like that was him.

“Yes, darling.” His eyes were wide as he stared at the poisonous thorns.

I studied the vines. They were so similar to the ones I’d conjured for Taurus. Neat.

“I’ll ask you kindly to shut your fucking mouth about my sister. Just because I was adopted does not make her any less family. Her life meant something to me. Her loss hurt just as much as if she was my blood. Stop trying to get on my bad side, Rowan. You’re there. Mission accomplished.”

Rowan struggled against his bonds but only hissed when he scratched himself on another thorn.

“That’s not what I meant,” he backtracked. “You should know by now that you’re one of us. A Fae. But your kind—the Elementals—have been hunted to the last. There are no more. You don’t have any blood relatives because your kind has been hunted to extinction. You are the last. I’m warning you, Princess, not making light of your loss.”

“Your delivery needs some work, Tinkerbelle,” Alistair growled, and it was then I noticed that he’d moved to stand behind me.

Rowan shot Alistair a baleful glare. “Tinkerbelle is a fictional pixie. I am an air Fae, thank you very much. Any chance you’ll be removing these bonds?”

I snorted. “Are you going to keep the asshole comments to a minimum?”

“I will now?” He said it like it was a question.

Whatever.

Snapping my fingers, the vines disappeared.

“I was trying to stress that just because you lost someone, that is no reason to risk yourself again. You should not have gone to Hell. You should also not go to Faerie. Don’t get me wrong, someone should go retrieve that demon before all hell breaks loose. But it shouldn’t be you.”

Aidan asked a question that I hadn’t thought of. “What’s the deal with demons in Faerie? Vampires abandoned this plane centuries ago, and there haven’t been any issues, so why are demons so taboo?”

Rowan sighed before he picked up his sandwich. “Demons can pass through veils that others cannot. Sure, vampires can pass to Faerie with no issues, but they can’t go to Heaven or Hell without getting stuck there because they’re technically dead. Demons are living, breathing hosts that can pass to nearly all the realms without so much as a hiccup.”

Aurelia snickered. “So, they could get a Faery parasite?”

“Faerie isn’t just whimsy and pixie dust. There are beings imprisoned there. Old gods, monsters, anything too terrible to live in Hell or on Earth is locked up tight in Faerie.” His face spoke of dark things that were too terrible to mention.

“If they’re so ‘locked up tight,’ then what’s the problem?” I asked, not understanding the issue. Maybe I was being purposefully dense, but if everything was sealed up nice and tight, and the only way to open the gates was killing, well, me, then all I had to do was not die, and we’d be good. Right?

Rowan sighed, shaking his head. “Nothing stays locked up forever. You think opening up the veil between Earth and Hell is bad? Let one of those old gods free, and we’ll enter into a whole new era of shit.”

I felt my eye twitch. Rowan seemed to know all about me—he knew what I was. He knew about our fight to keep the veils closed—the same fight that stole life from my body and damn near killed everyone I cared about.

I did not like him having that information. At. All. I did not trust this Fae one bit, and even if he was trying to help, he still gave me the creeps.

“Stalker. You keeping tabs on me, Ro? I don’t think I like that. Not at all.” Rowan went to sip his Scotch, and I snapped my fingers, making the glass and the sandwich disappear.

He rolled his eyes before leveling me with a simpering glare. “I’m the emissary to the Seelie Court. It’s my job to know things.”

Alistair’s hot hands rested on my shoulders—either to steady himself or me. Or maybe if I was between him and the Fae, he wouldn’t come across the scant space between them and set Rowan on fire. “You mean it’s your job to spy on us and report back to your Queen. Are you supposed to sow dissension between Ethereals and the Fae, too, or is that just a failing of yours?”

“Oh, please. That little tidbit is no secret. She went up against an Eidola and lived. If you think no one knew about that, you’re insane.”

I shuddered, remembering the hoard of souls that busted through one of my wards like they were tissue paper.

But that was before I knew about demons.

Before I knew what I was.

“You’ve known who and what I was this whole time. It’s why you call me Princess. You never meant demon princess. You meant Fae.”

Not that it really mattered. Rowan didn’t matter. My memories of that awful day didn’t matter.

Only Melody mattered—her and her son.

Rowan shrugged. That wasn’t an answer, but he’d probably met his quota of answers today.

“Of course, I knew. You think a witch can survive an Eidola and live? You were on our radar long before that, but we didn’t know what you were until you started causing earthquakes and storms started popping up all over Denver. Way to have a low profile, Princess.”

Just the name Eidola made me have to suppress a shudder.

The thought of thousands upon thousands of souls cobbled together to make the flesh-eating mist made me want to hurl. Technically, I didn’t go up against the Eidola by myself. It just ate through the ward that I’d stupidly attached to my life force. Yeah, I was an idiot, and I for damn sure never did that again.

“One, I didn’t go up against an Eidola by myself. Two, Kyle was the one who took care of that particular threat, not me. All I did was die.”

Kyle snorted. “Granted, you died in the most dramatic fashion ever, while also saving my ass so I could do the spell in the first damn place. Don’t sell yourself short, Sparky.”

I took that opportunity to flip the wraith off from my safety across the room. That death hurt like a bitch. Luckily for me, all Kyle did was chuckle.

Rowan was just about to reply when Andras and my mother walked into the study. It was still hard to call Andras my father—especially now that I knew for certain he couldn't be. I hadn't yet spoken to my mother to confirm my heritage, and I didn't know if I could bring myself to start that conversation.

Before anyone could even say a 'hi, how are ya,' Andras faded from his human form, turning into a man-shaped nightmare of black smoke and glowing eyes.

Then he launched himself right at Rowan.

It was then that I realized that the mass of smoke had teeth.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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Before I comprehended that my father was going full-bore demon on Rowan, Teresa latched onto my hands and yanked me from my chair. She used some sort of witchy transporting magic to get me from one side of the room to the other. The room exploded into chaos. Andras' form not only had teeth, but he also had talons, and he was slashing at the Fae like he'd very much like to rip him limb from limb.

The air Fae launched himself backward and began to fly, his body morphing into a kind of lizard? His body was as white as his hair, and he had wings of the palest blue. He appeared to be a sylph, but I couldn't be sure. All I knew was that even with fourteen-foot ceilings, he was not far enough from Andras. Andras' smoky mass was not bound by gravity, and those talons and teeth followed Rowan as he flitted around the room.

It was tough to watch—and even harder to stand idly by while it went down. Rowan was a pain in everyone's asses. If he was to be believed, his Court had systematically murdered every single member of my bloodline. It was difficult not to fault him for that—especially since he didn't seem to be too broken up about their passing.

But he didn't do the killing, and even if I wanted to punt him into outer space, that didn't mean I wanted him to die at my father's hands.

I was about a nanosecond away from stepping in when I heard a snap of fingers.

Everyone in the room froze. Andras' smoky mass, Rowan's lizardy body, every member of the Council.

Everyone but me.

My eyes locked onto the figure of a woman I'd only seen glimpses of. Bernadette was my grandmother. Straight back, British accent, carefully crafted silver bob, aging face and all. The woman before me didn't look

more than twenty. Dark hair fell in waves down her back, and her tanned skin practically glowed with her barely restrained power.

This was not Bernadette. This was Lilith. One of the first demons and Queen of Hell.

As gently as I could, I pried my wrist from my mother's frozen hand and calmly shuffled over to my grandmother. A pang of loss hit me. She wasn't really my grandmother now, was she?

"I'm always going to be your grandmother, child. Quit thinking silly thoughts," Lilith said, reading my mind.

Good to know.

Her voice had dropped an octave or two, but it was still the crisp British I'd come to love. It made me wonder if the mouth to Hell really was in England.

"Why is Andras going after Rowan like a rabid animal?" I asked, curious about the complete lack of decorum. Andras was an asshole, sure, but unless he'd been attacked, I didn't think he just offed people willy-nilly.

"He's Seelie, child. He's a threat."

Well, I knew that much, but Rowan wasn't strong enough to take me on—especially in a room full of allies. I told her as much.

Lilith gave me a knowingly sad smile. "There is a lot that you still don't know, my darling girl. No matter how harmless a Fae appears, there are claws and teeth where you least expect it."

Well, wasn't that the fucking truth.

"Fine. I'll get him out of here, then. I'm not going to let Andras kill someone who hasn't done a thing to me—no matter how much of an asshole he might be."

I didn't even need to snap my fingers. All I did was think of where I wanted him to go. Granted, the place I was sending him wasn't far. I just hoped when he landed in Aether, he wasn't still frozen.

That would suck.

Lilith unfroze the room. Teresa latched onto my hand again, only this time she wasn't trying to yank me away from anyone. No, she was just holding my hand. I stared down at her fingers linked with mine, and couldn't remember a time when I'd seen that sight. It felt good and hurt all at the same time, and I struggled to swallow down my agony.

I almost couldn't make myself look her in the eye. I'd cost her Maria—her only daughter. Her only real one, anyway. She had to hate me just as

much as I hated myself for failing her.

“Knock that shit off, Max,” Lilith growled, the strange rasp to her voice highlighting the fact that she was in demon mode. “You aren’t responsible. No one blames you.”

I wasn’t looking at Lilith, though. I was staring into my mother’s eyes as Lilith scolded me, watching for any flicker of the blame I felt. If I saw it, I was going to wash my hands of it all. I would never see her again. I’d take the coward’s way out and hide until the end of the earth or until I died. Whichever came first.

But it didn’t come. The only thing in Teresa’s gaze was empathy and pain. It mirrored my own agony, and I pulled her into a hug so tight it healed just a little bit of my soul.

“How can you forgive me?” I sobbed, breaking down. “I lost you your only daughter. She died saving my life. She saved all of us, and I couldn’t save her.”

Teresa pulled back from the hug and cupped my cheeks. “I have two daughters, Max. I’ve always had two daughters. Not birth, not blood, not death is going to change that. I’m not going to blame you for another man’s choices, and I’m not going to stop calling you daughter. Unfortunately, you’ve been stuck with me for the last four hundred years, and you’re just going to have to deal with me until we lose count.”

Teresa had never really felt like a mother—well, only in the ways that made me loathe families in general. But for the first time, she felt like a real mom. Funny how finding out you’re adopted will do that to you. Wait...

“Am I adopted, or did you get a little freaky-decky with a pixie?” I blurted, not knowing which answer I preferred.

A laugh burst from Teresa’s mouth, which was at total odds with the tears running down her face. Wow. We were a pair, weren’t we?

“No, I did not get freaky-decky with a pixie. But I can show you if you let me.”

I considered that for a second before my gaze drifted to Alistair’s.

“Come with me?” I asked, nervous about finding out where I’d come from. I wouldn’t feel weak if I leaned on him, and I couldn’t explain why. Trust—the thing he’d been asking for all along—was about to be shoveled his way.

“Of course, love.” Alistair joined me in our tiny huddle.

My mother's eyes widened when she took in our joined hands—particularly the giant black diamond on my ring finger—and her head whipped up to stare at us. “You... How? When?”

I wanted to roll my eyes, but Teresa didn't seem displeased, so I refrained.

“Hell. Since no one told me I was Fae, I didn't know to be more careful. Taurus was going to sell me or eat me, so Alistair bonded us so he couldn't. And I kind of like the guy, so...” I trailed off, smiling at my mother in a way that told her I was really happy—even if that happiness was dimmed by Maria's death.

“Congratulations. I can't say it's a surprise, though.” Lilith broke in. “But that explanation will come once you see your mother's memories. Let's find a quiet place to do the spell, Andras,” she called to her fuming son.

Andras wanted to go after Rowan, I could tell. I could also tell he was miffed at me for snatching his quarry away from him.

“We don't need to,” I answered. “I trust everyone in this room.”

Lilith smiled at me in a way that spoke of broken promises and too many betrayals to count. “That may be true, child, but some things are better seen alone.”

I nodded, but it was Barrett who offered to clear out the room for us. He kissed me on the forehead, and Marcus squeezed me in a monster-sized hug before they left. Everyone else but Aurelia and my paladins left.

“I'm trusting you not to hurt her anymore,” Aurelia said as she stared into my mother's eyes, the glow of them shining on my mother's face.

Teresa nodded, shame coloring her expression. “All I have ever wanted was to keep her safe.”

“No more lies, Teresa. Tell her everything, or I will. Do you understand me? I will tell her all of it—the good and the bad. I'm giving you this opportunity to show her your side. Don't make me regret giving it to you.”

With that, Aurelia strode out of the room with Della and Aidan following her.

“We'll just be outside this door, Max. You need us, yell,” Aidan informed me, but I could tell he was giving a not-so-subtle warning to my parents. I knew, without a doubt in my mind that if I yelled, there would be some hell to pay.

Once the door closed, Lilith told Teresa and me to have a seat on the couch and get comfortable.

“You boys, stand behind your women and hold onto their shoulders. You’ll ground them to the now while I perform the spell. Try not to let go,” she instructed before addressing Teresa and me. “You two need to hold hands.”

My mom clasped my hands, and Lilith moved closer. A dagger materialized in her hand, and in less than a nanosecond, an infinity loop was carved into the backs of our joined hands.

I hissed in pain. “A little warning next time, jeez.”

Out of nowhere, Lilith conjured a piece of red ribbon. About two inches thick and made from some kind of silky material, the fabric floated in the air of its own accord before it wound itself around our joined wrists. The ribbon wrapped further down, soaking in the blood of the infinity mark before tying into a complicated bow.

She perched on the coffee table and began to chant.

“Videre priores. Ad animi res et tempus.”

I translated the Latin in my head, and the words didn’t quite connect. It wasn’t until the second or third pass did I get the spell. To see the past. To see the mind, circumstance, and time.

Lilith wasn’t just going to show me what had happened. She was going to put me in my mother’s shoes and make me walk the path as her. Oh, I wasn’t going to like this at all.

I wanted to pull away, wanted to unbind our wrists, but I was stuck.

“Videre priores. Ad animi res et tempus.”

I felt like I was falling, even though I knew I was still on the couch. My open eyes were unseeing, blind to the here and now. I heard Teresa’s sharp intake of breath and barely felt Alistair’s hands on my shoulders as the ground swirled and tilted beneath my feet.

“Videre priores. Ad animi res et tempus.”

Everything fell away, and I landed in Teresa’s memories—a place I never thought I’d be.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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### TERESA – SPAIN 1628

My feet barely made a sound on the moss-covered rocks as I navigated around laurel branches. This was the one place humans refused to go, and I was glad for it. The Inquisition had claimed some of my witch sisters. Forests like this one were a safe space for us to practice and live without fear of watchful eyes.

Humans were superstitious for good reason. The creatures they feared were real. Had we lived alongside the humans, I wondered if they would fear us as much as they did. I missed my mother's stories of when the earth was freer—less concerned with us Ethereals. Less worried about rooting out our magic or blaming fellow humans for powers they didn't even have.

The gentle shush of my shoes against the moss was quiet to my ears, but soon Andras would find me. We were playing a game, and soon he'd appear from behind a thick tree trunk, the tendrils of Hell smoke clinging to him.

I felt my lips curl at my little secret. No one in my coven knew about Andras—my demon Prince who was set to rule Hell one day. No one had ever seen him. I'd kept him safe from witches who would try to use him and his power, and he kept me safe from humans.

It helped that we were madly in love with one another, but I couldn't wait for the day when he would take me away from this blasted country with its too-strict nature and watchful eyes. I wanted fewer rules, not more. I wanted freedom.

And I wanted Andras.

I heard a rustling close by, a gentle shush-shush-shush, followed by a whimper. The sound was unlike any animal I'd ever heard, and I stayed still trying to place it.

Feeling a trill of unease in my belly, I carefully rounded a tree. I wasn't the only one in this wood, for certain, but I didn't think there was anything in this thicket of trees that would hurt me.

Not that I couldn't hurt back, at any rate.

But when I reached the other side, there was no one there. The only thing I found was a pair of athames resting on a thick patch of moss. The metal wasn't shiny or dull but glowed with a power I couldn't name. The hilts were a delicate spiral, unlike any blade I'd seen before. The instant I saw them, I wanted to feel the metal in my hands. I wanted to cast with the power these athames would provide. I wanted to take them for my own.

I looked up, peering around me to see if there was anyone to claim them.

I knew better than what I was about to do. I'd heard stories of people who took things that did not belong to them in this wood.

But the metal called to me, sang my name and begged me to pick them up.

And so I did. I felt the weight of them in my hands, how balanced the weapons were, how light. Turning the athames this way and that, I saw a rune etched into the underside of the first turn. I pressed it, and the blade expanded into the length of a sword.

Shocked, I pressed the rune again, watching as it retracted into the length of a dagger.

Yes, I would keep these blades for my own.

"Do you like them?" a voice called from my left. Shocked, I dropped both blades, and they fell just so that the pointed end sliced into the dirt and stood straight up, sticking out of the ground.

"I'm sorry. They..." I couldn't finish that sentence. What could I say? The metal sang to me?

I studied the woman before me. She was covered almost head to foot in a green cloak, the same color as the moss that covered everything in this forest. Her eyes shown gold, the faint light catching them just so that the color gleamed. She was heavily leaning on a staff, and I predicted she was injured in some way.

So many who wandered into this forest were often refugees from the church, and I wondered if she was such a person.

“Do you want them?” she offered, a faint smile pulling at her mouth.

Of course I wanted them, but at what price? “Yes. How much?” I asked, as I offered her my hand filled with gold I’d conjured.

Money was easy to make. Jewels too. If the crown wasn’t so hell-bent on destroying witches, they could have all the riches they needed.

“I don’t want your money, child,” she said, and at her use of the word “child,” I studied her face harder. She didn’t appear to be any older than my thirty years, but I knew I didn’t look my age, either.

“Then, I can just have them?” I asked, not understanding.

“Of course.”

My eyes widened, and I snatched the blades from the ground. “Th-thank you,” I gushed, gratitude and pride swelling within me. I now owned something so beautiful I’d be the envy of my entire coven.

Relief colored the woman’s expression, and she smiled beatifically at me. “I am so happy you said that.”

Suddenly, the blades burned hot in my hands, but I could not drop them. My fingers refused to obey my mind, and they held fast to the twisted handles. I wanted to scream, wanted to cry out for Andras. I knew he was somewhere in this wood. He would save me. He would stop this agony.

But just as suddenly as the athames burned me, the heat and pain melted away.

The woman pulled the hood from her head, blue hair spilling around her shoulders as she did so. Her skin seemed to glow in the low light, and when she looked down, her hair parted just so, and I saw the point to her ears.

She was a Fae, and somehow, I knew I’d just accidentally made a Faery deal.

Fates, no.

“What did you do to me?” I whimpered, fear climbing up my throat.

She sighed before wilting to the ground. “I gave you a gift. You said, thank you. You must believe you owe me a debt. Now you must repay.”

What?

Frantically, I shook my head. “But—”

“There is no going back.” Her voice was a harsh command, cutting me off. “Only forward.”

I pressed my lips together as tears gathered in my eyes. I should have known.

“You will repay your debt, you must do me a favor,” she murmured, but her voice reached my ears, anyway.

Glistening tears fell from her eyes as she pulled back the sides of her cloak. Strapped to her breast was a sleeping baby in a sling. The fabric of it stained red from a wound in the woman’s chest. It was packed with healing moss, but I could tell it wasn’t working, and she was living on borrowed time.

“Take my daughter as your own. Keep her safe, keep her from harm. Don’t let the Throne steal her away from you. Hide her from my kind. Conceal the features that peg her as one of us. The athames will show you the way. They are the last... She is the last of us.”

My gaze snagged on the little bundle of life the Fae woman clung to. She snapped her fingers, and the baby was now in my arms, the bloody sling around my neck. I frowned at the rapidly cooling wetness against my skin, but more, I worried for the baby. Babies were fragile. She could catch a chill.

“You will need the blood to conceal her. Your demon will help you. Trust him. You will both keep my Massima safe. There are those that would kill her just because of what she is. Please remember, if she dies, you will soon follow her. The athames will see to that.”

The woman wilted some more as blood dripped from her nose and ears. She was fading fast. Instead of raging against the bargain I made, I rushed to the woman’s side, snatching moss from the closest rock and pressing it into her wound.

“Sanitatem,” I murmured, drawing on this forest to try and mend her. When that didn’t work, I tried to keep her awake. “What’s your name? Can you tell me? Tell me about your daughter.”

Her eyes fluttered, her skin dimmed, and she breathed her last.

Tears hit my eyes as I stared down at the Fae. She had just been a mother trying to keep her daughter safe. I had no children of my own, but I knew that bone-deep need to protect that every mother possessed. I knew because I now had it for this child—even though she wasn’t mine.

I couldn’t say if it was the deal I’d accidentally made or if it was Fate, but as I stared at the blue-haired infant in my arms, I knew I’d risk anything to keep her safe from harm.

Suddenly, the ground began to shake, lightning cracked across the sky, and the Fae's body began to dissolve from human form into blue light. The light grew brighter and brighter—so searing I had to protect the baby's face and my own eyes from it. Then the light exploded, blue streaks of smoke curled and roiled in the spot where the woman had taken her last breath. Slowly, it crept closer to me, surrounding us, letting me breathe it in.

Then the earth stilled, the sky cleared, and just as soon as it came, the storm was over.

But I knew the woman's name. Zeta. She was an Elemental Fae, one of the last of her kind. And in my arms was Massima, her only living child. The rest of her babies had been slaughtered. Her husband had been lost to the war that raged in Faerie. Her sister sat on the throne of the Seelie Court—a sister who shared her blood but not her power. A sister who stole the throne from beneath her under the guise of protecting the realm.

The Seelie Court would be coming for this child.

A twig snapped close by, and I extended both blades to fight, thankful that the child was still asleep in her sling—her mother passing just a bad dream. I whispered spells to keep others from hearing us, seeing us, and I hid.

Until I heard Andras calling for me. Only then did I creep from my hiding spot. Still, just in case I was mistaken, I held those blades, ready to strike if anyone so much as looked at us wrong.

“Teresa, my love, please,” he yelled, his voice a desperate plea.

“Here,” I called back, praying to the Fates that I wasn't wrong.

Andras' form slid like rippling water over the moss and stones, around laurel trees to find us in the hollowed-out trunk of a dying maple.

He sniffed, scenting the Fae blood on the sling and the tiny baby resting against my body.

“She's a Fae, Teresa. What are you doing with a Fae baby?”

“It was an accident,” I began, telling him of the deal I'd inadvertently made with a dying Fae Queen.

Andras' face went white, and he gathered Massima and I in his arms and ushered us to the small cabin we'd made for ourselves in this neglected part of the forest. The trees were mostly overgrown, but we stayed hidden here. Away from his duties in Hell, apart from my coven, away from humans who would try to kill us.

When we were safely behind closed doors, I removed the sling, and together, we inspected the baby now in my care.

Our care?

“I have to summon my mother. She...” Andras trailed off as he stared at the babe. “There was a divination made ages ago, made long before I was born that my child would be promised to the Quinn clan. It was a way to appease a hated rival—to give him status where he had none. My mother told me we shouldn’t worry, that my beloved would not be able to bear my young.”

I nodded and sighed. Witches and demons could not reproduce. That had always been the way.

“But if this Fae babe is under your care—our care—then destiny has discovered a way around my mother’s prediction. We need her help. If ever we are to keep this child safe, we will need all of her help.”

Quickly, I agreed, and Andras sought out his mother. She came to us without delay, a beautiful raven-haired woman stepping from the forest mist as if from a dream.

She inspected the babe, cradled her in her arms, and sniffed her blue hair.

“I will help protect my grandchild at all costs, my son,” Lilith said. “On one condition.”

I’d already made one deal today, so I was not about to make another. Especially not with a demon—even if she was Andras’ mother.

“Anything,” Andras replied, and I felt my eye twitch.

“You shall call her Maxima.”

In the end, we ended up saying her name was Maxima Christina Arcadios—Christina for my mother, and Arcadios for my coven. Lilith herself spoke to the angel who kept the records, and he swore he would keep her origins a secret—easy to do when we refused to tell him where the babe had come from or who her real parents were.

Only I—and maybe Lilith—knew her real name and lineage. Together, the three of us used the Fae blood to conceal her abilities, her appearance, and her location. But that didn’t stop Andras from having to kill his father.

It didn’t stop people from finding us. It never stopped. It didn’t stop when I sailed across the Atlantic to the New World. It didn’t stop when Maxima was nearly taken from me on that ship. When she died only to rise again—mortal and magical weapons never stealing her from us.

It didn't stop, and every time Andras traveled farther and farther, snuffing out the threats to our child until he stopped coming back. He stopped returning my missives.

He stopped talking to me. I became bitter, hurt, and mean.

I took another husband, had another daughter, but all too soon, that husband died from disease. And my bitterness grew. I was destroying the light inside this child. Day by day, year by year, I was snuffing her out.

And all the while, Andras never came back—not until we faced a threat inside my own coven. Only then did he return to help me hide the Fae child we'd been trusted with.

We had to get her away from us—from me. And once she was away from my coven, we took turns watching her from afar, watching her grow into a woman who would not stand idly by while others were suffering. A woman who would always help, always fight fiercely for those that needed it.

We let her flounder, we let her rise. We kept the biggest beasts at bay. Until it was time for her to stand on her own.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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I came back to myself as if I was sinking onto a mattress—which was by far better than how I left. Alistair’s hands on my shoulders helped me find my body, and when I opened my eyes, I knew I’d cried through all of it.

For the life that was stolen from my birth mother. For the agony Teresa felt after losing Andras. For the missed opportunities and all the pain. And more, the love that Teresa felt for me, even when she was bitter, even when she didn’t do it right, even when she had to shove me out.

All the wrong reasons and all the mistakes—I saw it all through her eyes. Felt her heartbreak, experienced the bitter agony of it all.

How she didn’t hate me, I didn’t know. I was the catalyst for all her pain, and on top of it all, I was responsible for Maria.

Slowly, I sat up, meeting her gaze with my own. “It’s really tough to hate you now. I hope you’re happy.”

It was a terrible joke and not very funny, but I just couldn’t express my... gratitude? My utter horror that I was the root cause of her pain?

“You should have told me sooner. I could have handled it,” I murmured, trying to get ahold of the terrible ripping ache in my chest. We could have had years, decades even, as a family.

“It wasn’t time yet. We had to wait until your glamour started dissolving on its own. We didn’t know it at the time, but with the Fae blood, the spell we cast was too powerful for us to break. Not without hurting you,” Lilith returned, the color of shame painting her words in a new light. “We couldn’t show you—not until we had an inkling that the spell was breaking. Your powers finally started to show themselves, and only when we could wait no longer did Andras remove the glamour.”

I pondered this for a moment. “It hurt like a bitch. I thought I was going to die.”

Andras squeezed Teresa’s shoulders before rounding the couch to rest on the arm of the sofa. “Imagine if I’d tried to do it four hundred years ago. You would have died.”

“Did all that really happen?” Alistair murmured, still frozen in his spot. “Did you kill your father to save her?”

“Of course I did. She’s my daughter. The only one I’m ever going to get. I’d die to keep her safe. I’d say I’d kill to keep her safe, but we all know I’d do that. Will you do the same, Quinn?”

Alistair’s head whipped up, piercing my father with an expression so sharp it was as if he’d wielded a sword. “You know I will.”

“Good. Then welcome to our fucked up little family,” Andras said with a roguish smile. Leave it to Andras to welcome and threaten someone at the same time. Then he faced me, and his grin fell away. “If you still blame us, I get it, but we kept you alive as best we could. With a few hiccups here and there, to be sure, but we tried our best. You deserved better parents.”

It was tough not to think of the mother and father that I’d missed out on. The ones that were stolen for someone else’s gain.

“So when Rowan called me Princess, he meant of the Seelie Court. I was born a Princess, and the queen had my family and everyone like me killed. My brothers and sisters, my birth parents. She stole everything, and now I’m going to have to hide from her ass when I go get Melody. This is a total shitshow, isn’t it?”

Andras stood from the arm of the couch, his form flickering from black smoke back to human again, those flame-like eyes burning into me. “You aren’t going, Max. You can’t.”

I stood facing him, my glow, my magic not sparking an inch because I wasn’t mad—not after all he’d done, all he’d sacrificed. But he had to know. “I’m pretty sure we’ve discussed you telling me what I can and can’t do. But you’re forgetting something that even I hadn’t realized until a few seconds ago.”

“What’s that?” he growled.

“I made a promise. I am bound to it, just the same as Mom was bound to her unintentional deal. I have to go. I have to help. There is no other way. I can’t send someone else, and I can’t sit here and let that baby be hurt.” I sighed, my tone without malice or heat as I continued. “So, I’m going, and

you can help by telling me everything you know, or you can get knocked the fuck out, and I'll go, anyway. You choose."

Andras narrowed his eyes at me, the demonic flames dimming. "I'm not going to be able to stop you, am I?"

Shaking my head, I grinned at him. "No, but you can help."

"Fine, I'll tell you what I know," Andras huffed and then glanced over my shoulder to Alistair. "Looks like we're going to have to sit this one out."

Alistair scoffed. "Speak for yourself, old man. I'm going to retrieve my kinswoman and support my wife. You can sit this one out if you want to, but I'm going. I drug her out of Hell. I'll drag her out of Faerie if I have to."

In all of this, I did not think about whether Alistair would go with me or not. But the danger of it hit me in the face like a two-by-four. Fear crawled up my throat as I reached for him. I didn't know if I could do this without him. I didn't like feeling weak, but there it was.

I couldn't do this without him, but I couldn't ask him to come.

Alistair must have seen the fear in my eyes because he leaned down to pierce me with his gaze. "I'm coming. Protect me with a spell if you need to, ward me until you are satisfied, but I am going with you, love. I won't be left behind."

Shaking, I latched onto his biceps, leaning into him until his warmth thawed me. I gave myself thirty seconds to calm down, and then I turned to my grandmother.

"There are anti-possession spells, right? A way to protect him?" My voice sounded steady, but I was fooling precisely no one.

"Yes. We'll need your blood for them, but I can show you how to perform the incantations. I would, but your magic far surpasses mine on that front."

I could feel the shock on my face. Lilith was one of the first demons in Hell. No way was she small potatoes.

"Believe it, dear. Why do you think we tried to keep you hidden?" Lilith chuckled. I found it strange that I thought of this woman as Lilith and the aging beauty mask as Bernadette.

"I'm both, but this form is Lilith, the Mother of Demons. Bernadette is a grandmother, an elder. Lilith is something to be feared. I'll need this form for now while you and your husband are gone." She was reading my mind again.

Not creepy at all, Gramma.

“Like you wouldn’t use that ability if you had it. It’s easier to suss out bullshit this way, dear,” she said while giving me a conspiratorial wink. Then she faced Alistair. “And you are lucky you’re pure of heart. Otherwise, no one would find you. Not even the Fates.”

“Yes, Alistair is appropriately cowed into treating me with respect until the end of days. Good on you. The incantations? I’ve someplace to be.”

Lilith went over the spells with me, of which there were three. One for protection, one for concealment, and one for anti-possession. Each one required blood, and each one took a whole hell of a lot out of me. Not nosebleed-worthy, but it wasn’t a walk in the park, either.

Only after were his protections put in place did I notice that while he’d given me a ring, his finger was still bare. Call me silly, but that would just not do.

Pulling on a bit of strength, I conjured the best ring I could think of. A platinum band with an inlaid channel of pure obsidian. A ring that couldn’t be made by anything other than magic.

Instead of asking—because why should I?—I snapped my fingers, and it was on his hand.

“There. Even-steven,” I said and then stuck my tongue out at him.

Alistair growled at me, and I couldn’t help but laugh. A real one this time. In answer, he cupped my face and brought our bodies close. “Stop doing things that make me want to kiss you in front of your parents, love.”

I couldn’t help it, I kissed the shit out of him in front of my mom, dad, and grandma. I wasn’t wasting a moment with him, not on pleasantries or propriety. I was holding on to everyone and everything for as long as I had it.

Maria taught me that.

When we broke apart, I tugged on his hand. “Come on. Let’s go watch Barrett’s head explode when we tell him the news.”

“I DON’T LIKE THIS, MAX.”

I snorted. “So you’ve said.”

Barrett huffed, stomped his foot, and then flopped onto the chaise like a pissy two-year-old.

All class, that one.

I was busy arming myself with every single bit of magic I had. Every potion, every magical weapon, every concealment spell I’d cooked up in the

last four hundred years was either tucked away in a never-ending pouch or stuffed in my pockets. My athames were strapped to my legs in their handy-dandy weapon sheathes, and my leathers were slightly modified to blend in with the Fae realm.

Similarly, Della, Aidan, Alistair, and Hideyo were gearing up, preparing for whatever we'd need for however long it would take to find Melody and bring her back.

My plan included not being found by the royals, staying under the radar, and not making any enemies. I snorted to myself. Yeah, I didn't think this was going to go down like that at all. Hence, weapons.

I'd already snapped the rope dart to my belt and was in the process of stuffing a set of self-replenishing throwing knives in my boot when the door to my casting room opened. My mother popped her head in, and when her body followed, I knew what kind of discussion we were about to have.

She was decked out the same as me, only the leathers on her left side were covered by silver armor that protected her arm, half her breast, and her hip. Spelled leather shielded the other side, but her right arm was uncovered to her wrist, where her hand was encased in a bowman's glove. At her hip was a spartan-style sword, the hilt covered with a geometric guard and the tang starting skinny before curving wide again. And at her back was a quiver full of arrows, and a bowstring crossed her body.

If I didn't have my athames, I'd want a sword like that one. Also, I had no idea my mother knew how to use a bow.

I could tell just by looking at her face I wasn't going to talk her out of this.

"I made a vow to protect you, and I'm not letting you walk into the one place where they actually know how to kill you by yourself. Yes, I know you'll have backup, but—"

"Okay," I said, cutting her off. If I didn't say yes, she was just going to follow me. Better have her on our side now.

"Okay?" she repeated. "You haven't agreed with me since you were three."

That wasn't true. I'd agreed with her two weeks ago when she said Ian was a jerk.

"Then I'm turning over a new leaf. Maybe now that the truth is out, we can be... a family again?" I offered, tossing my mother an olive branch so fast she had no idea what to do with it.

“Yes, Max, I would love to mend our shattered relationship,” Barrett answered for her using a mock-girl voice, rolling his eyes as he did it.

“Yes, Max, I would love to mend our shattered relationship,” she croaked out Barrett’s words before continuing in a clearer voice. “I’d like to be your mom again—if I ever really was.”

I’d take it.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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The door to Faerie was not ornate or obvious. In fact, I almost missed it entirely—especially since the door right next to it was about as ostentatious as a wooden door could be. The not-Fae door was carved to perfection, and several of the grooves were inlaid with gold. If I was going to pick an obviously Fae door, that would have been it.

Apparently, the ostentatious one went to a club in Vegas, and the broken-down almost-off-its-hinges one was the way to the Faerie realm.

“Is this some dumbass test to show me that nothing is as it seems?” I asked no one in particular as I studied the two portals. “Because I’ll bet that lesson is going to get real old real quick.”

Della jostled my shoulder, her tentative smile mired with a little bit of worry. “You’ll see. Faerie is just like any other realm. People and things are trying to kill you, there are eyes everywhere, and don’t ever give thanks or a promise. Really, it isn’t so bad. Plus, the Fae taste positively scrumptious.”

I thought back on all the times I bled around her, and she’d not so much as showed me a peek of fang.

“How come you never freaked out about my blood?”

Della scoffed. “I’m not a mindless heathen, Max. Plus, you used to smell different. Now you smell better, but I make it a point not to eat my friends. Kind of puts a damper on the relationship.”

Well, when she put it that way, I kind of felt like an asshole. The sum total of what I knew about vampires was from TV and movies. And the occasional vampire romance novel. Okay, more than occasional. The prevailing theme in all of them was a vampire’s nearly uncontrollable hunger.

“Good to know.”

I reached for the door to Faerie, not eager to do the job I'd set out for, and nervous as hell that I would what? Die there? Lose the majority of my closest friends? Lose Alistair—who was my husband in a sort of loose sense, but also, he was someone I could really care about if I let myself.

I didn't quite love him yet, but almost.

What if I lost them all like I lost Maria?

That thought blazed through my head like a brushfire, and I snatched my hand back.

You promised Melody you would make sure her son was safe. You. Promised.

"Max?" Alistair's smooth rumble of worry hit my ears, and I reached for the door again, twisting the knob in my hand.

I stood there shaking, and slowly I managed to take the first step, then the second. One after the other until I was out of the way, and my companions could join me. Teresa was the last to go through, and she closed the door behind her. It blended in perfectly with a ramshackle little house that seemed to come out of Hansel and Gretel—complete with a thatched roof and scalloped shingles.

In a pique of worry, I slid past Teresa to open the door again. When we went to Hell, the portal faded away to nothing, and we were stuck. If shit went sideways, I wanted a way out.

I turned the knob in my hand and opened the door. The hallway in Aether greeted me, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Okay, I can totally do this.

Turning back to the group, I shrugged. "I wanted to be sure we weren't stuck."

We crunched across the lawn, which quickly gave way to moss-covered trees and a brambling forest that seemed dark and full of things I wanted no interaction with—especially since I had no idea what was real in Fae lore and what was bullshit.

"Lead on, MacDuff," I said to Della, letting her take the lead on the rather thin footpath that led who knew where.

"Misquoting Macbeth? That's not ominous at all, Max. And that isn't the way," Della informed us before she latched onto my shoulders and turned me ninety degrees to the left. "That's the way."

The trees to the left were darker, thicker, and coated in a glittering mist. The mist itself was something out of an acid trip: it moved like fog, had the

consistency of runny sap, and it clung and stuck to the trees yet passed over them all at the same time. And it glittered. Super.

“That fog is going to fuck with us, isn’t it?” It wasn’t really a question. I knew without a doubt in my mind that the glitter-slime-looking fog was gonna make this whole trip a thousand times more bullshit than it had to be.

“Oh, absolutely.” Della emphatically nodded her head.

“This is going to ruin my whole day, isn’t it?”

“Yup.”

“Aces.”

Groaning, I trudged behind Della toward the path, Alistair and Aidan behind me, and Hideyo and my mother behind them.

I knew Della had been here before—hell, she lived here since the beginning of the Spanish Inquisition, so that made her a couple of hundred years older than me. I wondered if Hideyo had ever been. He hadn’t said as much, but since he was a Kitsune, I had to wonder if that particular species was more Fae than Ethereal.

“Don’t let the fog get on your skin, guys. That is one acid trip that is guaranteed to be a bad time,” I said, the knowledge filtering into my brain from nowhere.

Della stopped at the edge of the forest and turned back to me. “How do you know that?”

I wanted to be snide and say, “common sense,” but all I could do was shrug.

Without me telling them to do so, my arms raised, and I began a complicated series of hand gestures before I snapped my fingers. The fog peeled itself back from the path as if I was Moses—okay, I was totally picturing myself as a young Charlton Heston and the fog was the Red Sea.

Surely that trill of fear was totally normal, right?

“What the fuck, Max? I remember coming through here the first time and damn near losing my ass in this forest.” Della seemed both relieved and slightly miffed we wouldn’t get to experience the full accoutrement of Fae horseshit.

“Your guess is as good as mine. I have absolutely no idea how I did that, and I probably couldn’t repeat it if you held a gun to my head.”

But I sure as shit wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the taint. Skirting around Della, I took point and began our little march into the trees. The further in, the darker the forest became, photoluminescent mushrooms

clustered at the bases of black trees, the leaves looking like spray-painted ferns with dayglow tips.

I wanted to inspect everything, but I also didn't know how long this barrier spell was going to last. I picked up my pace, walking at a steady clip along the path when I heard a rustling in the trees. A stupid person would go to check. A complete idiot would want to know what was beyond the tree line. I was neither of those things, so I walked faster.

"What is that?" Aidan whispered. Why he was whispering, I had no idea, but it seemed like a good idea.

Leave no trace. That was supposed to be the way, right? Just like in state parks and shit.

"It doesn't matter. Don't look at it, don't breathe at it. Leave everything in this forest alone, and maybe whatever it is that is most definitely following us, will not eat you."

Then I heard a chuckle coming from a dense thicket to my right. It was dark, deep, and masculine. It was also way too close. It took everything I had in me not to start running. But I did ramp up my pace to the speed-walk range, kinda like the same one I had in Vegas when I wanted to get the fuck out of the crowd.

I shook my head and kept saying "nope" over and over again until the light at the end of the path grew brighter. The closer we got to it, the faster I walked until I was damn near jogging. There was a valley sprawled out below the end of the path and a mountain range beyond.

The giggles in the trees got closer. Fucking Faerie. Already I hated the damn place, and I'd only been here an hour.

I wanted out of this forest.

I wanted out of this stupid realm.

As soon as we cleared the trees, I did a full-body shudder and turned back to look at whatever the hell was following us. All I could make out were glowing eyes in the middle of dense branches. The trees were the ones chuckling at us. The trees were sentient.

I couldn't tell if that was comforting or not.

I noticed an all-white deer walking near the tree line. It stopped to nibble on the grass close to a broad trunk. Like a whip, a branch shot out and wrapped around the doe, dragging it into the thicket of trees.

Nope, not comforted by sentient trees at all.

Pursing my lips, I tried to ignore the decidedly unsettled exclamations from my traveling group and studied the wall of mountains in front of us. I had a sneaking suspicion I'd need to climb this bitch of a mountain to really get into Faerie, and I was not looking forward to it. I looked left and right, and unless there was some kind of hidden passage, the only way out was up.

"I do not recall anyone saying anything about climbing a fucking mountain, Della."

Della stopped her minor argument with Aidan—he was not a fan of not knowing there were carnivorous trees, either—to address me. "I decided parceling out information as we went was a better course of action."

If I had laser-beams for eyes, she would have been dead right there on that spot. I was done with people withholding shit. I was done with people keeping secrets.

I was not a child, and paladin or no, I was D-O-N-E with being treated that way.

"When has that ever worked for anyone in my life? Did it work for Striker, or Ian, or Caim? No, it didn't. In case you haven't realized, I've started excising people who keep important shit from me. Cutting them out like a cancer. So, I'll ask now, you got anything else you want to tell me before I climb this fucking mountain?"

Della had stiffened when I asked my first question, and she was what I'd call dead-still when I asked my last. She wasn't breathing, wasn't blinking.

"After living here so long, I forget that your realm is different. Here, there are more secrets than truths, and if the information will hurt the outcome, it is not given. That is how I've lived for six hundred years. Only when your grandmother called in her marker did I go back to your realm."

"Called in her marker?"

"Lilith made me. I am her progeny."

My grandmother could make vampires. That was news. Grandma had some 'splainin' to do.

"I used to be a nun until a rather vicious cardinal decided I was a witch infiltrating the church. He and his acolytes tortured me for a month, and every day I prayed to God to save me. No help came—just like no help came to the others during that time. On my last day, I stopped praying to God and prayed to Lilith instead. Swore I would serve her until the end of

time if she would help me. She saved me. Pulled me from the depths of that Hell and turned me. Made me stronger. Faster. Lethal. She gave me fangs and talons, and she helped me end every single evil soul in that place.”

Della paused, and the world around us was so quiet, I knew even the trees were listening.

“When we were done exacting my revenge, she sent me here—where my kind was allowed to rest, to thrive. And as long as my kind did not cause trouble, we were allowed to stay. My kind stays on the outskirts. We live in these mountains along with the Tandrirr. And all of us wait for Lilith to send for us.”

Because Lilith didn’t just make Della. Lilith was the mother of all vampires. I digested that leap of logic and nodded my head.

“So what you’re saying is, you know a shortcut,” I quipped, my anger melting away and my trust of Della growing by the second.

Della gave me a rueful smile. “Yes, Max, I know a shortcut.”

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## CHAPTER NINE

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I didn't know what I was expecting, but a tram was not it.

In my mind, Faerie was a place with no technology, no scientific advancement, no industrial progress. I was proved wrong in the first hour, which caused me to alter my whole concept of this realm.

Della led us to a path hidden by a waterfall. The waterfall itself seemed to be a river that passed over the edge of the mountain above but refused to pool at the bottom. Instead of the water collecting at the base of the mountain, it just fell through what I assumed was a never-ending hole in the earth. Maybe the water went to an underground aquifer that recycled through the realm.

Maybe it went nowhere.

I didn't ask, even though I wanted to. Della's pace was too swift to spare a minute on my ponderings. We followed Della through a winding footpath around the massive hole in the earth, ducking every so often so we didn't snag the trip wires and traps that kept this passage safe.

I didn't know how many people had access to the Faerie realm, but I had a feeling those safeguards were necessary. Maybe the carnivorous forest filled with psychedelic fog was, too.

Behind the cascading water was a Fae-style tram. Made from glittering metal and braided vines, the small car sat waiting for us to board. Inside the car was a tall woman with leather and armor on her shoulders. Her red hair was braided in rows on one side of her head, but the rest fell in a cascade down her back, some locks in braids, some in dreads, some wrapped in a thin wire. The red of her hair contrasted beautifully with her pale-bronze coloring which was a few shades lighter than my own. She wore two swords on her back, the weapons situated parallel with one hilt at the top and the other at the bottom.

Reading the motes of energy swarming around her head that she was at least part vampire, Della gave the woman a smile and approached her for a hug. They embraced for a long minute before Della made the introductions.

“Everyone, this is Idris. Idris, this is my charge, her paladins, and her family.”

I noticed right away that Della did not introduce us by name, and I was all for that.

Idris looked us over like she was inspecting us for flaws. “Why have you brought them here? You know Father eschews outsiders and you’ve let a witch, a wraith, and a demon know where the safer passage is hidden,” Idris scolded Della, and I noticed she did not say anything about Hideyo or me. I now knew Kitsune had to be Fae of some kind.

“We were the outsiders once, too,” Della replied, squeezing Idris’ hand. “They are here to reclaim a kinswoman. If you have her here, then we will retrieve her and be on our way. If you do not, my charge is bound by oath to aid her.”

Idris shook her head. “Well, get on then. I’ll have to take you to Father.”

We piled into the tram, and other than being cleaner, and decidedly less clunky, it was like any other tram I’d been on.

“Idris, have you seen who we are looking for?” I asked, watching her face for any sign that she might not tell me the truth. “She would have come through here about a week, week and a half ago. Light-brown hair, pale skin, blue eyes. She would have been carrying an infant boy.”

Idris shook her head. “I did not see such a woman, but I’m not always at the base of the mountain. Or she could have used one of the other paths. They are more treacherous, but a determined mind can traverse them. Father does not like me to be in danger, and the other paths have creatures that are most unpleasant.”

Idris didn’t speak to the group again until we reached the top, preferring to talk to Della in hushed whispers instead. The pair seemed close, and I had to wonder if they were related. That brought up a whole host of questions about vampire reproduction. Could vampires have babies?

Could vampires and Fae make babies? I tried not to think of vampire-Fae sexy times as I studied the Fae mountain city. There were whole tenements on individual peaks with bridges connecting them all. Closer to the base, the bridges were stone and wide as highways. Up higher, they

were made of a kind of living metal and vines and no wider than a footpath. I figured these people had no issues at all with heights.

The tram let us off at one of the wider stone bridges, and we followed Idris into a glittering building that was part ivy-covered monolith and part glittering metal spires. The inside matched the outside, the dichotomy of metal and vines stamped all over the walls and giant ceilings that seemed to go on forever.

We walked for ages, finally reaching a council room where a bunch of people sat around a round table arguing. It was evenly split between men and women and Fae and vampires. One man was clearly the leader. His midnight skin gleamed against the overhead light, his pointed ears peeking out of a head full of silver dreadlocks. Idris went directly to the man even as the room continued their tumultuous yelling.

Some were shouting in Catalan, some in German, some in what had to be a Fae language because I couldn't place it and I'd been around for a while. I considered whether or not I wanted to know what they were saying. That was kind of a no-brainer, so I snapped my fingers as unobtrusively as I could, letting the translation spell I'd concocted in about half a second work.

"They encroach on more of our mountain every day. We cannot divide our resources any further. The dwarves will just have to move west. We must renegotiate," a pale vampire female said reasonably.

A giant of an elf stood up, slamming his hands on the table. "We promised them amnesty. We cannot go back on our word."

"It is not going back on our word. It is renegotiating a deal—which you know is perfectly acceptable." This came from an old tottering elf who couldn't be any taller than my shoulder.

"Friends," Idris' father called in English and the arguing stopped. "We have guests. Let us not frighten them with our shouting. Newcomers, wife, come closer."

Wife? I shot Della a look. She gave me the most enigmatic of smiles and sauntered toward her husband. At the last second, she took a running leap and wrapped her arms around him, kissing him for all she was worth.

"I missed you," he said when they broke apart.

Even though this was another secret, I held no animosity for it. Della had a family—she had a husband and a daughter and who knew how many children. The smile that had bloomed on my face fell in an instant.

Lilith had taken her away from her family because of me. I felt awful. I had no idea she would be leaving anyone behind in Faerie, but now that I was smacked in the face with it, I realized I'd never asked. I'd never asked what her life was like before she turned or what she left behind.

I was a first-rate asshole.

"Did you know that Della was married, had babies?" my mother asked, her question whispered in my ear.

I shook my head ruefully and vowed to myself that I wouldn't embarrass her in front of her people. Or at least I hoped I wouldn't.

"We are pleased to make your acquaintance. I am called Lothan, and welcome to Tandriir. Please give us your names so we may be properly introduced."

Della smacked her husband in the stomach. "My charge is already wary of our realm. Don't start that Faery shit now."

I snickered, loving that Della went from proper to irritated wife in less than two seconds.

"I'm called Max," I replied, copying his phrasing, "but I feel you probably knew that considering your wife is my paladin."

Lothan's eyes widened and he sputtered, "Highness," before dropping to a knee. The rest of the vampires and Fae did the same. Well, all except the tottering elf who seemed a bit too old to start any bowing. I didn't blame him.

So much for flying under the radar.

"Please rise. I'm just Max. Not Highness. Not Princess. Just Max." I also may have flopped my hands around in a solid "no" gesture. Class, I was not.

Lothan and the rest of his retinue rose. "Lilith gave us our brethren, our families. Without the addition of the vampires, the Tandriir would have died out. She helped us thrive. We will be forever grateful to her."

He thought I was a demon princess? I hadn't bothered with a glamour since the Fae could see through them, so I knew what I looked like.

At my skeptical expression, Lothan smiled. "We know your origins. Highness works in a variety of ways."

My earlier thought fell out of Alistair's mouth. "So much for flying under the radar, Della."

Della sighed. "You're safe here. It's once you pass the mountains that you're going to have to keep to yourself. The Court and the Tandriir haven't

seen eye to eye since before I came to this realm.”

To ease Alistair’s irritation, I slipped my hand into his and squeezed. “I trust her, Knight. It’s okay.”

Alistair pursed his lips together so he didn’t say anything else, but his eyes told the tale all on their own. He was not happy. At. All.

“We are here searching for a kinswoman. She is called Melody. She has brown hair and blue eyes, and she has an infant with her. Has anyone seen her?”

Lothan shook his head. “A kinswoman? You mean a demon.”

“Yes, we believe she is part demon. I haven’t spoken to her since she turned, and her soul is... She was brought back, and she is—for lack of a better word—fractured. I swore I would make sure her son was safe, so here I am.”

“I’m sorry, but we do not allow demons to pass our borders. If she came this way, she would still be here. Demons are too vulnerable in the realm.” Lothan’s voice was smoother than silk and twice as nice.

He was being kind when he probably didn’t have to be, and I was glad for Della to have a husband like that.

“I understand. Is there a chance you will let us pass to search for her? My husband is a demon, but I have placed every protection I can on him. He should be safe here—or as safe as I can make him.”

Chatter in the room erupted. The giant table-slamming elf raged that demons had no place here. The sensible lady wanted to hear what protections we’d put in place. But I could tell no matter what I said, the real person I’d have to convince was Lothan, and he had already made up his mind.

“Your husband cannot follow you. It would be too dangerous for him. The old ones are restless, the chance of them breaking free grows every day. The risk is too great. The rest of your party can pass, but the demon cannot. He may stay here and wait for you.”

Alistair gripped my hand tight, and the fear of being apart from him splashed me like a wave of dread. The rational part of me knew I sounded codependent as fuck. The irrational part of my brain told the rational one to go fuck itself.

Della must have felt my fear, because she did something she hardly ever did which was give me a hug.

“Don’t worry, Highness. I know a guy,” she whispered in my ear as she squeezed the shit out of me.

Della knew a guy. Yeah, I’ll bet.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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There were few things I hated more than being the center of attention. Okay, that wasn't exactly true. I didn't hate being the center of attention on Earth. In the Faerie realm with a whole bunch of mountain elves and vampires staring at me like I was some kind of messiah?

Yeah, no. That was a whole lot of something I wanted no part of.

"It is too late to descend the pass tonight. You will stay and feast with us," Lothan decreed. While I appreciated his distraction, the fact that I would have to be subjected to more stares sounded about as fun as having bamboo shoots shoved under my fingernails.

Still, I was smart enough to give him a conciliatory nod instead of the "Hell, no" I wanted to respond with.

"I'll show our guests where they'll be sleeping," Della announced and ushered us out of the room.

We walked for ages before we got to another part of the castle. That was the only thing I could think to call this place, and Della dropped Alistair and me off at a sumptuous room fit for legit royalty. The room itself appeared as if it were carved out of the heart of a tree. The walls seemed like almost living wood. There were no windows, but there was a chandelier with glowing orbs of magic that lit up the room as if we had our very own sun.

This said nothing of the bed. Constructed from vines and that same living metal that seemed to be everywhere, it resembled a canopy style with gossamer curtains and fluffy down bedding.

There was also a wardrobe, a dressing table, and two doors. I opened them both, inspecting the fully-stocked closet filled with anything a woman could need—be it leathers for war or an evening gown. The other door led to an interesting kind of lavatory. The walls were rocked in smooth stones veined with vines, and it had modern conveniences like a toilet and shower

and sink. The only thing that was missing was the mirror, but I could live without it.

Alistair pulled at my hand, leading me out of the odd bathroom and closer to the giant canopy bed. It was the first time we'd been alone, really alone, since we spent that blissfully drugged evening in New Orleans. He sat on the edge of the mattress, pulled me between his legs, and wrapped his arms around me, resting his head against my chest. It couldn't be comfortable since I was still wearing leathers and bits and bobs, but it was the best fucking thing I'd felt in a while.

Without much consideration, I pulled the strap of my bag over my head and gently set it on the floor. It was full of potions and supplies, so I wasn't going to toss it. After that, I yanked at buckles and zippers until I was in the silver-threaded compression shirt and leggings that I wore to protect my skin. Once that was gone, I was in nothing.

I couldn't say why exactly I went from a hug to get naked. By the time I spared a glance at Alistair, he was riveted on my boobs and half-naked himself, his fiery runes calling me to touch and taste.

"I have no idea why you're getting naked, love, but I am all for it," he murmured, and I couldn't help but laugh—a real one this time.

I moved closer, putting a hand on his shoulder and pushing him onto the mattress, following him down. "I'm getting naked because I want to kiss you. When I kiss you, I'm going to want to do all the things I've wanted to do to you since we were forced to deal with all my shit. When we do those things, that is going to lead to other things, and it's best we're naked for all of it. To save time. I'm being proactive, really."

A slow grin spread across Alistair's face, and I felt the heat of it in all my parts.

"I married a genius," he growled, cupping my face before planting a searing kiss on my lips.

Damn right, he did.

HOURS LATER, I WAS IN A SCARLET GOWN THAT WAS HALF BODY ARMOR AND half fluffy confection. The bodice was constructed from golden scales that I sincerely hoped were metal that wrapped around my curves like someone had conjured it specifically for me. Which, in hindsight, could have been the case.

We were outside on a courtyard under a canopy of trees, the night sky sprinkled with a heavy hand of diamond-like stars. It was a different sky than I was used to, and while it didn't feel like home, it was more beauty than I'd seen in my many years.

People were clustered in groups, eating and drinking, talking animatedly about this and that. Many people stared at me as Della introduced us, but no one was rude. I'd felt silly in the gown Della had chosen for me, well, until I saw many of the women dressed like I was. Unearthly fire pits dotted around the courtyard, and Fae and vampire alike congregated around them. The air held a slight chill, and the brilliant purple flames warmed me as Alistair and I found a place to sit out of the way of so many guests.

The air held a sort of anticipation that made my stomach burn, and I didn't like it. It was like I could feel a hint of danger on the wind even though I knew that was stupid. I wasn't a Seer or a psychic. But I knew enough to trust my instincts.

Della handed Alistair and me a glass filled with a glowing sky-blue liquid. Neither of us took it from her. Before we started this journey, I told Alistair every single bit of Fae lore I'd read over the centuries. I had no idea what was bollocks and what was on the level, but I knew not to eat or drink anything here.

Exasperated, Della shoved the glass in my hand. "I'm not going to make you dance until your feet fall off, and you're hobbling on bloody stubs. I swear, Max."

It totally wasn't fair that she brought that up. I'd told her about that fear in confidence.

"You're the one who reminded me not to eat or drink anything here. Excuse me if I took you at your word."

"I meant when I wasn't there. Not when I'm the one handing you the food, dummy."

Okay, it was totally possible I may have read way too much Fae-themed horror books in my time. I took a tentative sip of the drink. It tasted fruity and delicious and mildly alcoholic.

"We distill that from the fog at the dryad forest. It's diluted about a thousand percent, so it won't make you see things that aren't there, but it will fuck you up. Use sparingly."

That one sip would definitely be my last.

“We’ll begin the feast soon. Yes, it’s okay to eat it,” she said before I could even ask. “Just don’t break bread before Lothan unless he asks you to. Which he might. He knew your family, your father. From before Verena took the throne.”

She really meant before she stole it. Verena. I could only assume that was the name of the Seelie Queen, who’d had my whole line murdered. She sounded like such a sweet woman.

“So Lothan knew... Did you guys know I was alive?” Wariness filtered into my voice without my consent as I asked the question.

Della shook her head. “We all thought the Elementals were killed. It wasn’t until you came back from Hell, did I start to put two and two together. Honestly, the fact that I didn’t figure it out sooner just goes to show how good that glamour was. Lilith had to know I’d smell it on you as soon as we met.”

Appeased, I relaxed some. After Striker, I wondered if I would always question my friends’ motives, if I would always wonder if they were holding back secrets and lies. I was a Fae, so my die-hard penchant for telling it like it was wasn’t exactly normal. But Della had lived with and married into a Fae clan. Honesty probably came easier to her than it did most people.

In the middle of my musings, a tall, dark-haired man approached us. He had strikingly cold blue eyes offset by bronze skin. His hair was long on top, shaved on the sides, and the tips of his locks were the same color as his eyes. I couldn’t tell if that was the best dye job in the history of dye jobs or if his hair was naturally like that. Considering we were where we were, I figured it was natural. His lips were full, his nose slightly narrow, and cheekbones like mine—sharp and high.

He wasn’t dressed like Alistair or the other men who were clad in half-armor, half dress shirt and slacks. Instead, he was in all-black leathers, his weapons at the ready at his hips.

Maybe I’d met my quota of new people, maybe it was the almost sneer to his mouth, but right away I could tell this guy needed to be knocked down a few or five pegs. Maybe even ten.

Della rose from the seat next to me. “Max, meet my son, Torren.” She hugged her son, but he barely returned his mother’s embrace. Okay, maybe he needed to be all the way at the bottom of the ladder with a couple of broken legs.

“Pleased to meet you.” I managed to keep nearly all of my immediate hostility out of my voice. Go me.

Della had informed me of what the Tandrirr were. They were the guardians of the realm, keeping out those who would do it harm—especially if the carnivorous forest full of bloodthirsty dryads didn’t do the job first. The Tandrirr took pride in their purpose, something they hadn’t had in many years since the Seelie Court tried to steal their lands.

But Torren seemed less about the pride of it all. He wanted to hurt something. I knew that as sure as I knew my hair was blue. I couldn’t say how I’d gleaned this information from him, but my mind was solidly made up that Della’s son was a prick.

That ice-blue gaze moved from mine to Alistair’s. “So, you’re the demon who wants into Faerie. I had no idea demons were so stupid. Are all Ethereals like this?”

I prayed to the Fates that Della was not about to tell us that this POS in leather armor was our way out to Tandrirr. Like usual, the Fates were zero help.

“Torren will be sneaking us out at dawn.”

I fucking knew it.

Della’s son stiffened, his sneer growing. “I said no such thing. I said I would do it for a price. One of my choosing. It is risky going against Father—especially about this. And for Ethereals?” He scoffed. “I want a favor. If I need to, I wish to call upon you.”

First off, his mother was an Ethereal. Second, another open-ended favor? I didn’t think so. I got lucky that Alistair actually liked me when he called his marker in. Torren would ask me to go jump in a burning lake.

“Absolutely not.” I tossed my thumb over my shoulder. “An open-ended favor is how I ended up married to this big lug.” I turned to Alistair. “Not that I’m complaining, but you actually like me. This kid does not.”

“That’s my price. Take it or leave it. It’s not my business to play lapdog to royals who can’t find their own way.”

That was another less-than-veiled dig at his mother. Oh. Hell. No.

“Oh, please,” I blurted, knowing this kid better and better each second. I’d met plenty of this kind of asshole in my years. “You’d go against your father for a ham sandwich and a cold soda. Don’t play me, junior. Do you know how many assholes like you I’ve met in four hundred years? A lot. They all have that same sneer, that same chip on their shoulder, and that

same shitty attitude. You didn't even hug your mother back, and she's been gone for almost a year. And I'm supposed to trust you to do what you say? Not in this lifetime, pal."

Turning to Della, I said, "No offense, D, but your son sucks. I'd rather take our chances by ourselves than trust this turd."

What was it with shitty sons this week?

Della covered her mouth, but she couldn't quite contain her snickering. "Just like always, Max, you never disappoint."

I made a mock bow to Della but kept my eyes on Torren just in case he decided my honesty was a little too much for him. I felt his fingers twitch before I actually saw them move, and my athame was out and against his throat in less than a millisecond.

"Don't test me, son. I've put better and stronger men than you on their knees. I respect your mother, and that is the only reason I haven't gutted you in front of your entire family yet. You are very close to making an enemy."

It was then that I felt the ground quaking beneath my feet, and I tried very hard not to take the whole damn mountain down in my anger. The flashes of lightning and rolling thunder, though, could not be helped. The wind howled around us, and the flames in the fire pits flared high.

Yes, I was drawing a crowd.

Again.

The welcomed heat of my husband was at my back. I knew without looking that he'd phased into his demon form. Blackened skin, glowing runes, and all the fixings. If Torren wasn't scared of me, he sure as shit should be of Alistair.

One wrong move and Alistair would ruin this guy's whole fucking day.

"My apologies," Torren began, his Adam's apple bobbing as he carefully swallowed. His gaze did not stray from mine, and I could glean the faint hint of my eyes glowing in the reflection of his irises. "I was out of line."

"Accepted, and I'll make you a deal of my own. You will immediately start treating your mother like the fabulous woman she is and lead us out of the mountain unharmed, together, and on the safest route. In exchange, I will promise that if ever you are in mortal peril not at the edge of my blade, I will lend you my aid. Do we have a deal?"

Because unless Torren started getting real cool with a lot of people real quick, we were going to have a problem.

A big one.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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“Take the deal, son. You won’t get a better one.” Della spoke from my elbow.

The same elbow that was attached to the hand that had a knife to her son’s throat. Just because he’d apologized didn’t mean he wouldn’t try some dumb shit.

Torren swallowed again. He didn’t seem any closer to agreeing to my deal than he was before I’d put a knife to his throat.

“Torren, I don’t know what you have against Ethereals, and I have no idea what has you so pissed at your mother. But considering you are half-Ethereal, you’re doing yourself and your family a disservice by looking down on them.”

His eye twitched. Ah, I’d hit a nerve. Torren was a not-so-closeted racist. He didn’t like what he was, and because of that, he lumped his hate onto his mother.

What an idiot.

“I accept your terms,” he muttered, insolence stamped on each word.

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I’m gonna need the words.”

“It’s a deal.”

I sighed, stowing my athame without taking my eyes off Torren. He was the type to do something stupid. “Was that so hard?”

His sneer was back in full force proving that, yes, it was hard. Without another word, Torren was striding away, and Lothan was taking his place.

Way to keep a low profile, Max.

I wanted to greet him, but I was too busy looking Della over to make sure she wasn’t either mad at me or hurt by her kid. Why was it that family could hurt us more than anyone else?

“Please tell me you meant for me to teach him a lesson because if not...”

If not, she was probably ridiculously pissed at me right about then.

Della gave me that most tremulous of smiles, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “You did exactly as I expected. It was Torren who surprised me.”

Her voice was clogged with emotion, and I was sorry I didn’t kick Torren’s bitch ass up and down this mountain for hurting his mother.

“What has our son done now?”

I wanted to brush it off, but it was Alistair who answered, his voice low enough that it couldn’t be heard by prying ears. “He insulted your wife and our entire party. And Ethereals in general. Oh, and went for his weapon while speaking to my wife. If at all possible, could you have a word with your son? Before one of us do?”

Alistair nodded his head to Aidan and Hideyo, who moved out of the shadows at my left and right, and my mother—still in full body armor—marched up from behind him. I knew I was never in danger, but damn. I was really never in any danger.

Lothan’s midnight skin turned gray for a second, the blood leaching from his face before his shoulders stiffened to stone. “He disrespected you in my house? He dishonored his mother?” Lothan whispered, menace coating each word. I wouldn’t want to be Torren for all the money in the world right then.

I shrugged, used to people not liking me for whatever reason they had. “I handled it, but he does not like Ethereals. He said as much. If I were his parent, I’d want to know where he’s learning this. From what I’ve seen, your species coexist beautifully. It’s something we could strive to emulate on Earth.”

Pride welled on his face before concern slashed through it. “We weren’t always this evolved, and not all the species in this realm like Ethereals. Some think them as less than, but I thought...” Lothan paused, rubbing the back of his neck. “I don’t know who has his ear, filling it with this nonsense. Everyone knows we are all the same. We all have the hudau—the magic—in us. It doesn’t matter which realm we call home.”

I couldn’t do much more than nod. I didn’t want Lothan to know why we were talking to his son, but the fact he was a racist ass needed to be dealt with.

“I know why you were talking to Torren. I know you want to sneak your husband past the mountains to look for your friend. And while I cannot publicly allow you passage, when I find the lot of you gone in the morning, we will not go looking for you. I wish I could do more for Dušan’s daughter, but in this I cannot. If there is ever a time for you to retake your throne, please call on me. The Tandrirr will be here for you.”

The wet hit my eyes before I could stop it. I’d learned my birth mother’s name, but I hadn’t known my father’s. I’d seen a faint glimmer of him in my mother’s memories, but nothing more.

Lothan took a step toward me, probably concerned that I’d went from normal to damn near crying in the space of a second.

Shaking my head, I tried to wave him off. “No one told me his name,” I croaked, trying to smile even though the loss hit me like a hammer. Why did I feel the burn of it when I’d never even met the man?

“Dušan Lafitte was a great king and an even better friend. If you ever want to know more about him, ask. I will tell you everything. The good, the bad. His wins and his losses.”

Lothan wouldn’t sugarcoat it, either. He would tell me everything. I had to appreciate that about him.

“Come, my little Queen,” Lothan said, breaking the tension. “Bring your family and eat with us. I promise none of the food will make you dance.”

You tell your friend one little Fae dream and she tells the world. Can’t trust anyone anymore.

AFTER A NIGHT OF FEASTING AND AVOIDING FOG-BOOZE, WE WERE RESTED enough to begin our trek out of Tandrirr. Starting at dawn, Torren escorted us out of the castle, and in the early light, we got to experience the full wonder of the mountain elves home. The river that we thought went nowhere wove itself through the city. Tiny offshoots made even tinier waterfalls, the water pulsing through the city like blood in veins. There were clear pools filled with water lilies, and if I looked closer, I knew I would glimpse water nymphs swirling in their depths.

Everything smelled clean, the sky looked bluer, the trees greener.

But I knew that there was just as much blood spilled here as there was at home. There were just as many wrongs and just as many injustices. I wasn’t fooled by the pretty façade.

Even if it was nice.

The waterfalls gave way to a rocky terrain, and it was slow going for a while as we free climbed over boulders bigger than city busses. One of the few things going for us was the fact that it was still cool. Wearing these leathers, this trek would be a balmy mess if the weather decided not to cooperate.

My mind kept snagging on the difficulties I'd been having with my magic. While some of my spells—not that I had to use spells anymore—were working just fine, all my attempts to locate Melody had me turning up bupkis. I almost wished it were like Maria, even if that thought hurt. I almost wished I could hear her screaming, crying, something.

But every time I tried, I couldn't find her.

I didn't know who to ask or what my questions might be. Who would be able to help me navigate the power running through my veins if I was the last one?

The last.

That thought hurt, too. I almost missed the identity of the first-born demon-witch—the hybrid no one thought could be made. Being the first was a much better feeling than being the last. The last meant that if I died, there would be nothing left of the family I'd never met.

Nothing left of the family who were slaughtered for a reason I didn't know and probably couldn't comprehend. I couldn't think of a good reason for genocide, and that was exactly what it was.

I wondered if I'd ever stop hurting. If the pain of all this death would ever wear away. I wondered if I could ever trust again. Then I mentally slapped myself as my gaze snagged on the black diamond on my finger.

Yes, I could trust a few.

I could trust Alistair. I'd given him the only thing he'd ever asked for and he refused to let me down.

“What's that smile for?” the man in question asked as we continued to traipse down the mountain. We were supposed to be headed to the dwarves to check if they had seen Melody.

“I was just mooning over my husband. Have you seen him? He's about this tall”—I gestured over my head—“has a snarky British accent and killer dimples.”

Alistair smiled at me, showing off said dimples. “I may have met the fellow. He sounds positively dreamy.”

The sound of someone gagging made me glance over my shoulder. Aidan was a little green. Someone hadn't steered clear of the fog-booze, and he was paying the price today.

"Fucking newlyweds," Aidan muttered, shaking his head before groaning at the motion.

I stuck my tongue out at him. "Party pooper. If anything, somebody should have pooped your party last night. How many drinks did you have?"

Aidan waved my question away like thinking of the drink made him want to die. "I only had one. No one told me what it was. I spent half the night trying not to float off my bed, and the other half trying to keep my insides from falling into that weird toilet thing they had in our bathrooms. Never trust Della when she says an alcohol isn't strong. She lies."

"Or you just can't hold your booze," Hideyo piped up from behind him.

The kitsune wasn't holding in his enigmatic smile as he razed Aidan which I thought was a fabulous thing. Hideyo had been uneasy since the moment we stepped in Faerie, and I couldn't blame him. I didn't know his history—or even how old he was—but I knew without a doubt that this realm did not make him happy at all.

And why would it?

If he were Fae like me—and I strongly suspected he was—anything that sent him running to the Earth realm couldn't be good.

Suddenly, Hideyo stopped dead on the path, cocking his head to the side like he was listening for something. I trusted his and Aidan's ears a lot more than my own, so when he stopped, I grabbed Alistair's hand and froze, too.

Without a thought, something rose up in me and pulled Della and my mother to me—the magic in my veins activating on an instinct I didn't know I had. One second, they were thirty feet ahead of us, and the next, they were behind Aidan and Hideyo.

I realized my body's mistake as soon as I made it. Just a glimpse of Della's expression hammered that home. I'd pulled Teresa and Della to me, but Torren was still out there, and he was about to be found by whatever or whomever pinged Hideyo's ears.

Footsteps reached my ears before I could do anything about Torren. Out of all of us, he was the one least likely to be picked apart by another Fae, so I did the only thing my limited time allowed—I hid us. The glamour I tossed up was some of the most advanced magic I'd ever done, and it went up without much of a fight.

Keeping it up was the problem.

The longer I held the walls in place, the more drained I felt, the magic to keep us concealed syphoning everything I had. Moving mountains and causing storms was no big deal, but this? This was... unnatural magic. It felt wrong, too big, and too much.

I knew Fae could see through glamours, but this one? I had a feeling even I would have had trouble seeing through this type of spell had I not been the one casting it.

I wasn't sure what anyone else was seeing, but me? I saw the exact second Torren was spotted by a group of six soldiers.

Each of them had white hair and pearlescent pale skin, their bare arms swirled with glowing blue magic. Their armor was the same living metal I'd seen all over Faerie, but it was limited to breastplates and shoulder pieces. They held spears, the tops a deadly sharp triangular head and the bottoms barbed like tiny maces.

Torren saw them, stuttered to a stop, before giving them a low bow, using that bit of movement to discretely check his six. He was searching the magic in the air for us, but his gaze slid off our hiding spot before he rose. If Torren couldn't see, it was completely possible these soldiers couldn't, either.

"Filthy half-breed." One of the soldiers sneered. "What are you doing off your mountain top? Here to muddy your blood even more by fucking a dwarf?"

The tips of Torren's ears turned red, and I figured his whole face matched them. He said nothing in response, but I knew without a doubt his face told them to go fuck themselves.

"Look how red his face is!" another taunted, his following laugh echoing off the rocks. "How can you tell a dwarf woman from a man? Or does it matter?"

Torren growled then, his anger getting the better of him.

And that's when the six Fae swarmed him, the magic in their glowing blue arms flowing like tentacles of power, slamming him onto the ground.

A whimper escaped Della's throat, and Teresa put her hand over Della's mouth before she could give away our position. As the soldiers thrashed Torren, Teresa and Della struggled, and I watched horrified as Della's fangs slid into my mother's flesh.

Where was a random bolt of lightning when you needed one?

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Torren was in danger, I was scared, and I had no idea if I could hold this glamour much longer. So it wasn't much of a surprise when the walls of my spell crumbled to dust. What also wasn't a surprise? My nose pouring like a fountain as I fell to my ass in the dirt.

I was using my magic the wrong way. Not that I knew how to use it the right way, but whatever.

Della struggled against Teresa's hold for about a millisecond before she realized the glamour that kept us hidden from the six men kicking her son's ass was down. Then she waffled. She had a duty to protect me, but I wasn't going to stop her from defending her son. Especially since it was my fault he was out in the open.

"Go," I growled, pissed that whatever loyalty Della had to Lilith could possibly trump family. Della's gaze whipped to me, and with tears in her eyes, she gave me a single nod before she leapt at the closest man.

Every time I watched Della fight, I was reminded that she was not dainty or fragile. She tore into one man's throat, viciously ripping his flesh with her fangs. Then, I couldn't see much else because Aidan and Hideyo were in front of me, defending me from the soldiers that still hadn't realized we were behind them.

If I could've stood right then—or spoken complete sentences—I would have told them to help Della. As it was, I couldn't do either of those things. I'd thought I was done with this draining bullshit, but I was wrong.

"Sanitatem," my mother murmured, putting some oomph into the healing spell that I hadn't quite mastered as she snapped her fingers. The jolt of energy and healing had me shaking off the blood loss, but I could tell it took a bit out of her. Especially when I glimpsed the plant she'd drawn from crumble to ash in her hand.

Damn.

One of the soldiers tossed Della off his back, her body flying through the air back toward our still-stationary group. She landed in a crouch, hissing at the six of them like she could ward them off somehow, but it was already too late.

We'd been spotted.

The five of them were going to protect me. No matter what I said, no matter what I did, they were going to put their lives on the line for me.

I figured it was high time I should put my life on the line for them, too.

The sky darkened to pitch as storm clouds rolled in, the earth roiling with the magic that leaked out of me when I couldn't help it. Wind whipped around us all, creating spouts of earth as the dirt fell prey to the gale. Lightning streaked across the sky, and without my body telling them to, my hands reached for my athames, extended the blades, and met the bolts of fire. Energy coursed through the metal, and if I were a human, I'd have died from the voltage ten times over.

As it stood, my blades were a conduit, and I knew exactly where I wanted my power to go.

Two bolts of lightning flew from my blades into two men, the blue tentacles of their magic writhing under the strain of electric heat. I was too busy staring at the two dudes I was frying to pay much attention to the other four, which was a problem when an azure wave of magic knocked me off my feet.

The magic was so cold it felt like knives pelting my skin as it stole my breath, but I rolled, twisted, and landed in a crouch. Slashing through their thrall with my twin swords, the seemingly incorporeal tentacles bled easily enough. A hot hand yanked me to my feet, and I briefly took in the sight of Alistair's demon form before his scythe hacked through another rope of magic.

The two I got with the lightning were smoking mounds on the ground, but the other four were holding their own against my companions. Della was trading blows with the soldier she'd nearly beheaded with her fangs. Teresa's electric fireballs were keeping another busy, while Aidan smoked in behind to cut off his head. Alistair was going toe to toe with a monster-sized soldier, his blue ropes of magic nearly taking Alistair off his feet.

But the last one was tangling with a floating animal that looked like the biggest fucking fox I'd ever seen in my life. Then it dawned on me. Hideyo

was a Kitsune. Duh.

Hideyo's seven tails moved independently of each other and were much longer than any tail of any animal ever. Four of the tails had wrapped themselves around a limb, holding his prey still as Hideyo's jaws clamped around the soldier's head and pulled.

Gross.

I looked away just in time to watch Della get thrown into Aidan. Luckily, the wraith had just taken the Fae's head, so he had enough time to catch her midair and set her on the ground. Unfortunately, her soldier was on the move, realizing a little too late that he was vastly outgunned.

He took off, moving so fast I almost couldn't track him. If we lost him and word got back to the Seelie Court, we'd be fucked. I tiredly summoned lightning once more, my pull on the element not as strong as I'd like.

"Stop, love. We'll track him and take him out," Alistair murmured in my ear, half-holding me up as I tried to wield the current.

But before I could do any more than sink into his waiting arms, the guard seemed to bounce off of air. He fell to the dirt, and then his back bowed as if an invisible giant pulled his chest with a string. He writhed, his pale skin turning red and then blue and then a sickly purple. He gasped, clawing at his neck and chest, but he couldn't pull in any air.

Not a minute later, we all stood shocked as the soldier stilled, the life in him snuffed out. When he couldn't be anything other than dead, I relaxed a touch, but couldn't rest easy until I knew what the hell made him die.

"Mom, did you do that?" I called to Teresa, watching as she wiped the blood off her face.

She shook her head, her eyes never leaving the soldier.

And for good reason. Not a second later, white smoke poured from the soldier's mouth. It kept coming and coming until it coalesced into the shape of a man, the form solidifying into a guy I'd hope to never see again.

Rowan. Fucking. Durant.

He didn't spare us a glance until he'd reached down with both hands, took hold of the soldier's head and yanked it clean off the body, the bones of the spine cracked and crunched until it was finally free. It was not a clean process, and it made me want to toss my cookies.

"What the fuck?" Aidan murmured, and I couldn't help but agree with him. This was definitely a WTF moment.

Rowan carried the head by the Fae's braid as he sauntered back to us, and I couldn't decide if I was afraid, pissed he was here at all, or grateful for his assistance.

He stepped over the mounds of soldier ash, giving them a respectful nod.

"What the fuck?" Aidan repeated, louder this time like he wanted an answer. Since I was on my ass in the dirt, I let him take the lead on this one.

"I'm sorry, did you want Seelie guards to make it back to the queen and tell her you're here? If so, I suppose I should have let him pass and saved myself the trouble."

This did not make even a tiny lick of sense. Rowan was a Seelie emissary. He belonged to the Seelie Court.

"Oh, dear. I suppose I'll just have to spell it out for you." He sighed, exasperated we didn't understand. "I'm a double agent, obviously."

Obviously. Like he wasn't a lying liar who lies. Yup, totally trusted him.

"That does not inspire confidence, Rowan. In fact, it makes me a little bit difficult to trust you—you know, with the whole lying thing," Aidan growled, moving more in front of me to keep the sylph away.

"Do you see this?" Rowan held up the guard's head. "This is a Seelie guard with direct access to the queen. I ripped his head off so he wouldn't tell his beloved majesty you are here. For which you are welcome. And why are you still on the ground?"

I rolled my eyes and pushed at the back of Aidan's legs so I could see the bastard. Aidan shuffled to the side, but he was tense and ready to fight if he had to.

"You try putting up a glamour not even a Fae can see through and see how well you do." I put a hand in the dirt to try to still my swaying brain, but it didn't work. My mother's healing spell was a Band-Aid, and it was failing.

Rowan crouched to see me better, his crystalline eyes flashing blue in the sun. "Why aren't you drawing on Faerie? Or are you such a complete moron that you think you can sustain using power like that?"

A fireball streaked across the air and exploded in Rowan's face. Surprised, he fell back on his ass in the dirt, coughing and hacking as he snuffed out the flames, his skin only a little pink from the heat.

"Stop speaking to her that way," my mother growled, stepping in front of Aidan, her sword in hand. Her right sparked with a fireball traced with

electricity. “Or the next one won’t be a warning shot. It’ll stay glued to your sylph form, and I’ll watch as you die screaming. Don’t test me, Rowan Marchand Durant. I’ll bind you in a heartbeat.”

I had a feeling using his full name was significant, especially since Rowan stood, the magic rising in him. The men around me shifted their weight, preparing for a fight, but Teresa stood calm, ready to set a man on fire if she had to. Go, Mom.

“She had no idea she was Fae until a week ago. She knows nothing of the Elementals because there is no one to teach her. If you have any helpful remarks, I suggest you supply them. Now.”

“Using concealment magic big enough to hide from Fae is more magic than her body can sustain. But just like when she was a conduit for the lightning, Elementals can draw from all elements to replenish their power and heal. So draw on the earth, draw on the air, something, so you don’t look like a pitiful girl sitting in the dirt.”

I thought about it for a minute and asked what he thought was probably a dumb question. “Will I hurt them—the elements? Will I take too much?”

Rowan’s expression was like I’d hit him in the face with a two-by-four. “I just told you that you can draw on the whole of Faerie, and you’re worried about taking too much. That you’ll hurt the realm and, by extension, the beings in it?”

“Well, yeah. If an earth witch draws too much, plants around her die. If a fire witch does it, the air gets too cold to sustain life, the same with water and fire. I never draw on anything, just myself, so I want to know what I’m doing before I take too much. The life around me matters, Rowan.”

“I see,” he muttered, his voice catching, and he cleared his throat. “No, you can’t take too much. The elements are yours to wield. Close your eyes, put your fingers in the dirt, and pull. The earth wants to help you, sustain you. Breathe in the air, let it heal your lungs. Feel the fire crackling in the sky, let it warm you.”

Worried about the truth in his words, I reluctantly did as he asked. Tunneling my fingers into the dirt, I felt the grit push under my nails as I closed my eyes. It was as if the earth was waiting for me. Power rushed into me, warming me up, healing me more than I’d ever been healed in my life. Aches and pains I didn’t know I had eased, the rupture of blood vessels in my nose sealed shut, the lancing pain in my lungs that I’d ignored lessened

until it went away altogether. Then I breathed in, letting the air heal me even more.

My heart raced as I drew on the lightning still cracking against the clouds. My body felt alive for the first time since... since... I couldn't remember.

Was this the way I was supposed to feel? Was I supposed to feel this good?

I forced myself to ramp down the connection, knowing that if I cut it off, it could hurt me. Slowly, I disconnected, opening my eyes.

Night had fallen sometime since I closed my eyes, and I searched for Alistair, for my mother. I was in a forest, alone. They wouldn't leave me alone. Something was wrong.

"Rest easy, child. No one has left you," a man's voice rumbled, and I searched the trees for it. A giant of a man sat on a rock to my right, his purple black locks waving above his head like he was stuck underwater. His hand held a ball of flame, and if I focused, I could see the shape of a woman dancing in the center of his palm. She twirled and bowed and blew him a kiss as he stared at her with a mournful pull to his mouth.

I should know this man. I should, but I didn't.

"You were a baby when last I saw you. You look so much like your mother," he murmured before closing his fist on the fire. "I knew if you drew on the elements, I would be able to find you—even if I'm stuck here."

I wanted to ask who he was, but I didn't know if talking to him would be bad or not. The rules in Faerie were different and complicated and...

"I won't harm you, Massima. You are of my blood. You are the last."

"You can hear my thoughts like Lilith can. I have to say, I don't like that power."

His face split into a grin. "Only here, my child, and only because we are in a small pocket of the spirit realm. You accessed this element to help heal you—even if you didn't mean to. My name is Dušan, and I am your father."

Tears hit my eyes, and I tried to swallow them down. "They said you died."

Dušan nodded. "I did. But I carved out this little place for myself before I left so I would have somewhere to go to. Your mother decided to stay with you, so I wait here for her to come back to me. Her spirit will find me eventually. I just have to be patient."

"Is patience a family trait? Because if so, it skipped a generation."

He grinned bigger this time. “It is not, but we do what we must. I brought you here so I could deliver a message. And to see your face, if I’m to be perfectly honest. Your brother and sisters are out of my reach, and I miss my children.”

My eyelids gave up the ghost, and my tears fell. The loss in his voice spoke to me, spoke to my grief and pain.

“I lost someone recently, too. I’ve lost plenty, but...” I trailed off, shaking my head. “My sister. She is lost to me.”

“Maria, yes?”

I nodded, my chest feeling like it was going to cave in on itself. Her name burned. “She was pulled into the Seam. I can’t get her back.”

Dušan stood from the boulder and sat in front of me in the dirt. His face was kind, with eyes like mine and my same too-wide mouth. “No, you cannot. But she doesn’t feel pain where she is. She doesn’t feel sorrow or fear. She is... gone. There is no coming back. She is at rest.”

I couldn’t explain why, but that made it almost hurt worse. I would never see her again. Never see her smile, never hear her voice. Why hadn’t I taken more pictures? Why hadn’t I recorded her voice so I’d always have it?

Because I thought I had more time. I thought I had forever.

Warm arms surrounded me, and Dušan pulled my head to rest on his chest. He smelled like hickory smoke and leather and magic, and I felt the hug deep down in my soul where it was ragged and torn. It took me a second to realize I was crying, the keening wail of a pain so deep it had to come out. These were tears that could never be silenced.

And Dušan didn’t try.

He hugged me tight until they petered out on their own.

He kissed my forehead and let me go, relief on his face so acute I had no idea he’d been in pain. But then again, why wouldn’t he be? He was stuck here alone, waiting for his family to come back to him.

“Thank you for giving me that, Massima. I haven’t felt like a father in a very long time.”

My heart broke for him, but I gave him a smile, anyway. It was the best I could do. Then my brain caught on the “thanks.”

“I am in your debt, my child. Your tears were a gift that I have every intention of repaying. I’ll start by giving you the message I sought you out

to provide,” he murmured, the warning in his voice clear. “She knows you’re here. Verena is coming for you.”

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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“You are not safe where you are. You need to get back to your family, your protection.”

But why? Why is she coming for me? What is so special about me?

Okay, I knew I was supposed to be able to open a door, but I thought that door was in Hell.

“There are many doors, Massima, but that is not why she wants you. She’ll say that you could free the old ones, and that is true, but she wants you dead because you’re supposed to be on that throne. Not her.”

Freaking politics. They were the same on every realm—complete bullshit.

“Can’t I just tell her I don’t want it? Because no offense to you and your realm, but I don’t. I have a home and a life and a job. I have a family I built bit by bit. I don’t...” I trailed off, not able to tell him why exactly I didn’t want to be here.

Dušan sighed and rubbed his brow with the palm of his hand. “She will not believe you.”

“I thought the Fae can’t lie.”

“We can’t. That doesn’t mean we don’t talk around the lie to weave it into a truth. She murdered her sister in cold blood. She slaughtered every single Elemental and all the Fae that stood up to her. She’s still letting her men do whatever they want to half-breeds and any that she deems unworthy. Verena is poisoning Faerie, and she will use any means she has to stay right where she is.”

I sighed, the peace I felt a moment ago long gone. “You want me to kill her. To take her place or—”

Dušan shook his head. “No. I want you to stay alive. If not you, someone else will save this realm. It is not up to you, and I would not ask it

of you. You deserve better than to inherit this war.”

The waterworks came again, but I did my best to hold them back. I’d been a tool my whole life—something to wield, something to gain. This was a man who had every reason to want me to kill his rival, and all he wanted was to keep me safe. He reminded me of someone.

“Your Alistair? Yes, we are much alike in that way. All he wants is you safe and happy. As far as husbands go, you chose well. Get back to him. Find your charge and get out of Faerie. This is not your war. I won’t ask you to fight it.”

Dušan gave me a soft smile, snapped his fingers, and...

My eyes flashed open, and I was now staring into blue irises I knew so well. Alistair was cupping my cheeks, worry etched into every line of his face.

“Fates, love, don’t do that,” he hissed, pulling me into his arms. “You weren’t breathing. Fates, you weren’t breathing.”

Aidan chuckled. “Ah, so this was your first time seeing that. Just wait till she actually dies on you. It’s super fun and not at all frightening.”

“That happened one time,” I grumbled, sinking into Alistair’s arms.

“Twice. You forgot about Micah,” Aidan reminded me, and I shuddered, remembering both times the bastard almost killed me.

“Oh, right. Is Torren okay?” I asked, changing the subject.

Alistair snorted. “No, love. Teresa is trying to help, but it doesn’t seem to be working.”

Worried, Dušan’s warning that we couldn’t stay here replayed in my head. I needed Torren up and moving. I needed him to lead us where we were supposed to go.

“Let me try,” I whispered into Alistair’s ear and he reluctantly let me go. I could tell he wanted to say no, but wouldn’t on general principle. Smart man.

I stood, noticing the lack of creaking to my joints, the sheer absence of pain in every part of my body. I wondered how bad off I’d been, drawing off of nothing or myself for four centuries. By the way I could take a deep breath for the first time in a while, I figured pretty bad.

Alistair stopped me, his hand at my elbow as he drew me back to him. “You look different. You... you glow. More than before. Did Faerie heal you that much?”

I widened my eyes at him, lowering my voice not much more than a whisper. “You have no idea. Let me see what I can do to help, and then we have to move. Verena knows I’m here.”

Alistair’s gaze cut to Rowan and then back to me, the unspoken question lingering between us. Did he tell her?

I shrugged at him and made my way over to Della and Teresa who were putting everything they had into Torren. I stilled their hands, moving them away and replaced them with my own. Pressing one to the skin above his heart and the other on his head, I willed some of my strength into him.

Information streamed into my brain, hitting me like a brick. Torren getting beat up as a child by Seelie for having fangs he couldn’t retract. Getting made fun of because he didn’t have his father’s powers to move earth. Being slower than other elves, being taunted, being hurt, someone attacking, tearing, shredding his throat. Fear, so much fear. Someone—he couldn’t see who—hurting him in ways no one should ever be hurt. No one will believe you. No one will believe you. No one will believe you.

His father’s disappointment. His mother’s abandonment. His sister’s fear of his anger.

Painpainpain.

I willed myself to back out of his mind, and pulled on the earth beneath my feet to seal the wounds in his body. Some of them were fresh from the Seelie. And some were old—ones that had never healed right after...

Giving it less than a second’s thought, I drew on the spirit element, willing just a little into him to try to mend his soul. I was working off of instinct and hope.

Hope that this little bit would help.

Torren’s eyes opened slowly, a languid set to his shoulders, his jaw relaxed. He was beautiful—the ravages of his past momentarily absent from his face. Then he caught sight of my expression, and, somehow, he knew what I’d seen.

I saw the instant his face shuttered, and I willed just a little more spirit into him.

So no one would hear, I brought my face to his ear. “I’ll find him. I promise you. I have his voice, his thread. He won’t hurt anyone ever again.”

I wanted to tell Della, but I knew I couldn’t. That wasn’t mine to share—that pain, that brutality, that stealing didn’t happened to me. And it was a

secret I would keep until I couldn't keep it anymore. Preferably after whoever hurt Torren was a smoking pile of ash.

I shifted back, pulling Torren up with me. "I keep my promises."

His crystalline eyes shone with an emotion I couldn't name. "I believe you."

No wonder. No wonder he was angry at Ethereals. No wonder he wanted nothing to do with vampires. If one did that to me, I'd probably be just like him—livid at a whole species for the actions of one.

"Good. Take us to the dwarven caves. We can't stay here."

I'd wanted to elaborate, but I didn't. I couldn't say why I didn't want to tell them about Dušan in that tiny pocket he'd carved out for himself.

Maybe it was because I wasn't sure it was real. Maybe it was because I wanted that little piece of him for myself. Maybe it was because I didn't want someone to tell me he was wrong or lying or...

I had to get over it. I trusted these people—or at least I trusted most of them. I wondered why I still didn't trust Rowan. He had given me the information I needed to heal myself. But after Striker, my trust button was broken big time.

Following closely behind Torren, we kept our eyes peeled for more Seelie guards. Rowan overtook our little group, beckoning for us to follow him. This didn't feel like a trap, and yet it did at the same time. Once we entered the mouth of the cave, I felt a ripple of magic against my skin.

Immediately, I went on high alert, which ended about three seconds later when I caught sight of the walls of the cave. Crystals of every color jutted from the walls as they pulsed with magic as they lit our way. A soft voice in my head told me not to touch them—not because they would hurt me, but because they did not belong to me.

Bad things would happen to those that took without asking.

"Don't touch the crystals," Rowan and I said at the same time, and he whipped his gaze back to me.

All I could do was shrug. It was like the forest and the lightning. I had no idea how I knew what I knew, just that whatever—or whomever—was guiding me, they had my best interests at heart. A part of me wondered if it was Dušan whispering in my ear, our spirits connected over space and time. Or maybe it was the knowledge Zeta had given my mother in her passing, filtering down to me.

It was completely possible that it was both, and my spirit was bolstered a bit by that thought.

The caves seemed never ending, the tunnels snaking around stalactites which appeared to be made of the clearest crystal and stalagmites of a living, breathing metal. They were almost molten, but no heat came from them.

Alistair and I moved closer to Rowan. I wanted to be there if he struck out on us. I was stronger now—thanks to him—but my trust had limits.

Rowan seemed to sense when I was behind him because he began talking like we were continuing a conversation. “The Seelie have been searching these caves for years trying to find us, but they never do.” His chuckle was dark as he hopped over a set of Fae bones propped against the cave wall—the breastplate marking him as a Seelie guard.

I wanted to inspect them to see what killed the man, but Rowan wasn’t slowing down.

“Seelie magic doesn’t work in these walls. The crystals keep the taint out. The Resistance might have cells all over, but here is where we do most of our work. Helping those that need it, trying to repair the damage wrought by the queen and healing the wounded.” Rowan’s steps faltered for a second as we come to a fork in the trail. He seemed to be searching for something before he chose the third tunnel from the left.

“I thought the Seelie were supposed to be the good guys. That’s what all the stories say,” I wondered aloud, my questions multiplying in my head too fast to keep them in.

“History is written by the victors, Max. That’s as true in Faerie as it is on Earth.”

Rowan shuffled to a stop again, turned ninety degrees to his right and knocked on the cave wall three times, paused, two times, paused, and then five more times. The cave wall rippled, the rocks moving like blocks as they peeled themselves back to make a person-sized hole in what used to be a solid wall.

Was everything in Faerie creepy as fuck or was that just me?

Without another word, Rowan marched through the newly made doorway, and against my better judgment, I followed. This new cavern was dark, and even though I’d had no trouble seeing in the tunnels, it was black as pitch now.

Unable to make myself wait for Rowan to turn on a freaking light, I snapped my fingers. The goal was to put light in my hand. Instead, I managed to light every torch, ignite every candle, and flare every single non-lit crystal in the immediate vicinity.

Which would have been super awesome had we not been completely fucking surrounded.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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The brightly lit cave was filled with every manner of Fae, but dwarves took up a large portion of the populace.

I was no stranger to Fae lore. I'd had a fascination with their stories since I'd heard my very first one. Ethereals—even the ones I hadn't heard of—were easy to figure out. But Fae? There was always some convoluted reason for skinning someone or stealing a child or gnawing on bones. And there were so many kinds and so many variations. And I wouldn't even start on fantasy books.

But none of them had pegged dwarves correctly.

Yes, they were short—the tallest one was no more than chest-high. Yes, they were stout—their thick legs and strong arms seemed fit for hauling rocks or mining gems. But they didn't have bushy beards or jolly faces. No, these dwarves were battle-ready in head-to-toe armor. But they didn't carry axes or swords. Each one had a war hammer in their hands, the dual-sided mallet fit for crushing rocks or skulls depending on their mood.

And the mood in here was three steps past hostile.

We were not welcome. Message received.

My first instinct was to draw on the earth to see if I could steal their weapons away from them. But I knew if I did that, they would never trust me.

No, I couldn't win them over by force.

The best course of action I had was to see if I could talk them down. It wasn't my strongest skill, but it was what I had.

Elbowing past Rowan and ignoring Aidan, my mother's, and Alistair's whispered threats, I walked closer to the horde, raised my hands, and sat in the middle of the floor.

“I’m called Max. We mean you and yours no harm.” Glancing around the room, I spotted a bevy of split lips and black eyes, a few broken arms, and other injuries. “What happened here? Are your people okay?”

The dwarf closest to me seemed confused, not expecting the question at all. His eye was swollen shut, his nose a bloody mangled mess. His left arm didn’t look right, either—like it wasn’t quite attached properly. He shifted his weight before dropping the hammer to his side, his one good arm barely holding onto the heavy weapon. Through what was close to a thick Scottish brogue, he asked, “You worry after my people?”

I covered my mouth with a hand, worried I’d made a mistake. Nowhere in Fae lore did it say compassion was a bad thing. “Is that not done here? I meant no offense.”

A few more warriors lowered their weapons, eyeing me with a suspicious air.

“I’m called Aramal, and no offense taken. A lass blew through here a night or so ago carrying a wee baby with her. She wanted past, but she was of demon blood, and Faerie is a dangerous place for people of that sort. When we wouldn’t let her through, she put a spell on us. Made us want to fight our own.”

None of this was good news. Like none of it. Why in the blue fuck was Melody in Faerie in the first place? She said she was going home, but Faerie wasn’t her home at all. Her home was a massacre sight in Bumfuck, Indiana.

“We’re looking for that woman. She’s called Melody, and she—” How could I possibly explain a broken soul to these people—that she was broken and put back together in such a fashion there was no way she was even lucid. “She is fractured. Her soul, I mean. I’m not sure she’s cognizant of what she’s doing.”

Aramal scoffed, his dubious expression telling me he in no way believed me.

“She was stolen from Heaven and put back together wrong. I don’t even know if she’s in her real body or…” I shook my head, trying to find the words so he would know just how broken she was.

“Someone nicked her from Heaven? Who would do such a thing?”

“A complete fucking moron, that’s who,” Alistair growled, his feet shuffled behind me. “Look, I know my kinswoman hurt you, but she isn’t in

her right mind. We're looking for her, we're trying to get her home. Do you mind lowering your weapons? We're not here to make trouble."

Aramal raised his fist, and as one, the dwarves and assorted Fae lowered their weapons.

I thought of the only thing I could do to endear me to these people, and asked, "Are there any severely wounded? I can help if you let me."

Aramal didn't seem convinced, so I held out a hand to him. Reluctantly, he wrapped his rough fingers around mine. Gently, I pulled on the earth element, feeding it into his body. Almost instantly, his swollen-shut eye began to deflate, his nose cracked before righting itself, and his shoulder seemed to go back into its socket. He stood taller, taking a deep breath—the first one I imagine he'd taken in a while. Years flew off his face, the deep grooves of pain melting away.

"Elemental," he whispered, his eyes shining. "I haven't felt the earth like that in some time. Please help my people, and we'll return the favor in kind."

His emotions pulled at me. Why could he not feel the earth when he was at the center of it? "Of course. Lead me to the worst ones, and I'll do my best."

The lot of us moved through the throng of people to an alcove where the really injured were. I had no idea, but that swarm of warriors were protecting their wounded. And there were a lot of wounded here. Some with missing limbs, some with split skulls. I had no idea if these Fae were like me, if they could regenerate over time. Based on the stench of fear clouding the air, I had to bet on no.

"Alistair? You're with me. Aidan? Della? Help me triage these people," I ordered like the general I was so not. "Everyone else, help them make sure they have clean water to drink and a way to prepare the dead."

I held Alistair's hand as Aramal led me to the worst off. The woman was barely breathing, her skin sallow as she clutched a dirt-covered rag to her abdomen. She was septic, and I knew that from years of watching humans kill each other. Alistair was there to protect me, but also, he was there just so I could hold his hand as I surrounded myself with this much pain. I could feel it seeping into my toes, it was so big.

"I'm new at this, so I'm going to do what I can. You understand, right?"

Aramal's newly fixed face gave me a sad sort of smile. "We can only do what we can do, my Queen. If you can help my people, we will follow you

until the end.”

This was the second person to call me Queen in the last twenty-four hours. I didn't know if I liked that or not, but I had bigger fish to fry, and this woman wasn't going to last much longer.

Putting a hand to the cave wall, I drew on the earth, feeding it into the woman by my fingertip at her forehead. In a flash, she opened her eyes, pink coming back into her cheeks, her wound drying up.

Like a whip, the element flitted through me, and I knew the answer for so many wounded.

“Everyone, touch the ground, a wall, something with your bare skin. Your foot, your hand. Something.”

The ones who could move, did. The ones who couldn't, we moved them before I sat in the middle of them all. I buried my hands in the earth, the rocks jagged and sharp, and the sand between them so smooth it was like butter. Air pulsed through the room, fire bloomed from the crystals, water dripped from the stalagmites. I pulled all the elements into myself, letting my body taste them before I pushed them all back out to the wounded.

At first, they didn't want to go, like rusty gears, they forgot how to turn. But I pushed and shoved and manhandled the elements to do what I wanted. I gave them back to Faerie.

Something told me these people hadn't had a real breath of air, or fire in their blood, or earth under their nails, or water in their veins in some time. They were empty, and they needed to be filled.

“Max?” Alistair called from what seemed like far away. “You're hurting yourself, love. You have to stop.”

That's when I felt the blood dripping down my chin. I was doing it the wrong way. I was supposed to draw in as I gave it back. It was supposed to be a circle. A give and a take.

I could almost feel Rowan rolling his eyes at me.

“I'll fix it. Just let me fix it.” My voice was barely there, and I had no idea if he even heard me, but I switched course, taking the individual elements into myself so I could heal these people.

The power almost burned as it flowed through me. The molten heat of Faerie's core, the frisson of energy raked across my mind as I gave it back to the people who were in such dire straits, they couldn't possibly do this for themselves.

When I couldn't hold it anymore, I mentally snipped the threads tying me to each of the wounded, gently titrating them off the power one by one until it was just me. The ruptured blood vessels in my nose and ears sealed shut, the damage I'd accidentally done to my organs healed, and I breathed in a steady breath.

Opening my eyes, I met Alistair's gaze. Concern and something like pride was stamped all over his face.

"I was doing it wrong at first. I fixed it. I didn't mean to scare you," I whispered so no one could hear, trying to ease his worry.

I didn't want him to tell me to stop. I didn't want him to tell me I couldn't help when I could. Not that I'd listen, but it would hurt if he were like the rest of them.

Alistair didn't say a word. Instead, he cupped my cheeks in his hands and kissed the shit out of me. I could feel the fire in him calling to me. I'd never felt the element that lived in him like that before, and something in me wanted to bask in it, wanted to roll in it, wanted to drink it down, and let it fill me forever. I wanted him, all of him, in all the ways.

This is what love feels like. You love him.

That thought streaked across my brain, not snide or unkind. It was a gentle missive to the wholly uneducated, a soft reminder that this was what I'd been missing.

I deepened the kiss, wanting him to feel everything I was, hoping that I wasn't alone. I didn't think I was. I was sure I was arriving at this party late as usual. When the kiss ended, he drew back from me, pinning me with his gaze, the fire of his demon in it.

"I'm so bloody proud of you, love. I can't—" Alistair cut himself off, disbelief and awe coloring everything about him. "I'm a lucky man having you as my wife."

The pride that he felt was like a warm blanket, and I felt cozy and safe and so full, I couldn't possibly wait for a better time when we weren't surrounded by people.

"I love you."

Those three words slipped past my lips for the first time ever. I'd never told a man that I'd loved them—not the way I meant it right then—and for a split second, I felt more vulnerable than I ever had in my whole life.

But he didn't let me down. No, Alistair was the kind of man who would never let me down.

“I love you, Max. To the ends of the earth and far beyond. Vaster than Heaven or Hell or any of the worlds in between.”

That was it. That was the exact feeling, and I could tell he meant it because his boyish grin most likely matched my blisteringly bright smile. I could see a lifetime—hell, a hundred lifetimes—in that grin. Mischief and mayhem and laughs and worry. I could see all of it like I was taking a tiny peek into our future.

Alistair raked a thumb across my cheek, catching a tear that fell from my eye. I didn't know why I was crying. I was the happiest I'd ever been in my life. In the middle of Faerie searching for a half-crazed succubus while on the run from a mad queen.

Only I could tell the man I was bound to that I loved him for the first time in the middle of all this mess.

“I know you guys are having a moment, but I don't think the dwarves are going to wait much longer to talk to you, Max,” Della said, popping our little love bubble.

The sounds around us rushed into my ears for the first time since I opened my eyes. Excited whispers of joy buzzed around the cave, and as much as I didn't want to, I let Alistair pull me to my feet.

Aramal took that opportunity to approach. “I haven't felt the earth like that in centuries, child. Not since—” He cut himself off as something dawned on him. “You aren't just a queen, are you? You're Dušan's daughter.”

I knew Dušan was a king—the last true King of Faerie—but the way Aramal was putting it, was he more than that? I didn't understand, and for a second, I was afraid.

Alistair sensed this because I was behind him and surrounded by Della, Aidan, Hideyo, and my mother in a blink.

“I mean no disrespect, your Maj—”

Alistair cut him off. “She doesn't like that. She's Max. Just Max.”

“Right. I meant no disrespect. Dušan was rumored to be a god in hiding. One of the first old gods. He made this world from nothing, molded it, shaped it, gave it life. From it, all Fae emerged.”

That sounded like a cool story, but Dušan was dead... and living a half-life in a pocket world he'd made for himself.

Aramal saw my utter disbelief and dialed up his legend to the nth degree.

“Have you ever heard of the god, Chaos?”

I was the daughter of Chaos? Yeah, that sounded about right.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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“Are you trying to tell me that I’m a demi-god?”

Aramal blinked at me. “Well, yes. Do you not know who your father is, lass?”

According to Greek mythology, the god Chaos was the void that the primordial gods sprang from. Chaos was supposed to be the beginning of everything. If what Aramal was saying was true, then Dušan was way more than the stories suggested.

“If he was a god—not just a god, one of the first gods—then why is he dead? How could Verena kill an immortal?”

Dušan said so himself. He was dead. But why hadn’t he told me what he was?

Aramal sighed, the pain in it hitting me square in the chest. “It was a rowan arrow that hit him in the heart. There is only one rowan tree in Faerie. It was his only weakness, and he was said to have kept it just in case he needed to die. But that was before he met Zeta and his children came. Before your brother and sisters, Dušan was a different man. A god hiding within his own creation. He was sad and tired and alone. His type does not do too well by themselves.”

Aramal spoke as if he knew my father. As if he’d sat down and chatted with the man. Or god. Or whatever.

“Why was he in hiding? Why make Faerie at all? And how in the fresh hell can he possibly think he’s hiding if he’s making whole realms? Who could he be hiding from?”

“Well, that depends on who you believe. Some say he was hiding from his brothers and sisters. Some say he just wanted peace, that the wars took too much out of him. Some say he wasn’t hiding at all, that he just desired

to make his own way without man muddying it up. There are a lot of stories, Maj—Max.”

I couldn't quite wrap my head around what Aramal was saying, but he couldn't help a realm full of mumbo jumbo.

“I don't think I'm a demi-god—even if Dušan is my father. But I kept my word, your people are better, right?”

Aramal scoffed at me. “Not a demi-god my wrinkled arse. Take a look around, Max. See what your “non-god” abilities did for my people.”

Looking around the cave, I spotted people who were on death's door five minutes ago smiling and laughing, hugging their fellow dwarves.

“All I did was tap into the elements and give them back. Rowan?” I called, spying the sylph talking with a fawn woman, her antlers and cloven feet a dead giveaway.

He sauntered over, unaware of what we were talking about.

“Tell him what you told me, that Elementals can draw from the elements. You told me what to do to heal myself.”

Rowan looked like he'd been caught in a snare. He'd known this whole time—before even I did—that I was Fae. He knew I was an Elemental. Did he know I was a demi-god, too?

“Elementals can draw on the five elements, yes. But they cannot conjure objects from thin air, they cannot give the elements back to heal others, and they cannot heal an entire cave full of injured at once. You wield the elements, yes. But you can do things I've only seen a god do.”

Aramal nodded, crossing his arms over his barrel chest like what Rowan said made it a done deal. “The last time we felt the earth move within us, the air touch us, the water fill us, the fire warm us, was before your father passed. No other Elemental could do that, lass. Not even your mother.”

I started laughing, that not-right laugh of a woman at her limit. It was part-hysterical giggle and part-exasperated irritation. “Yeah, I'm done talking about this. Aramal, I'm glad your people are better. If you need help, give me a shout. Someone needs to lead me out of this cave before I lose it.”

Alistair wrapped his arm around me, and I leaned into him. Only then did I think to glance at my mother.

She felt my gaze and threw her hands up in surrender. “Don't look at me. I didn't know any of this shit. Zeta's memories, or instructions, or

whatever that was did not include your father's information. I didn't even know his name until Lothan told you."

"Not everyone believes that Dušan was a god. I know Lothan would have said something if his best friend was a..." Della trailed off, seeming to consider what her husband would and would not have told her. She blinked hard, shook her head, and then winced. "Okay, it is completely possible he would have kept it from me if Dušan said to. Fuck." She groaned, rubbing her face with her hands.

Yup, I needed to get out of this cave. To keep myself calm, I buried my nose in the crook of Alistair's jaw and inhaled. He drew me tighter to him as I counted to ten. When ten didn't work, I counted to fifty, the silence stretching as I refused to explode in a room full of people I just helped.

"Lass," Aramal began, his voice pitched low as to not irritate me. "You shouldn't head out into the forests without warriors with you. That is where the girl was headed. I'll send some of my best to help protect you. We owe you more than that, but I have a feeling that will be all you'll accept."

I didn't want to accept even that. We were fine. I was fine. But those Seelie guards nearly kicked our asses. If Verena knew I was here, I was a sitting duck. And when Verena came for me, she wouldn't just hurt me. She'd destroy all of us.

Begrudging, thy name is Max.

"I accept your generosity. It would be helpful to have more warriors."

Look at me being all adult and shit.

I did growl a little under my breath but gladly followed Aramal as he took point to lead us out of the maze of tunnels, his ten best warriors following us. I was half-tempted to see if Rowan was right, and I could conjure shit and make myself a bottle of bourbon.

I didn't even need a glass. The bottle would do just fine.

But I had a freaked-out slightly homicidal fledgling succubus to find, and I needed my wits about me. Denial was going to have to be my friend for a little while longer.

When the mouth of the cave yawned wide, I was aggrieved to find that it was now night. Della said that we shouldn't travel after dark. Then again, if Melody was out there causing mayhem, we might just have to contend with the darkness.

The tunnel we exited didn't seem to be the same one we entered. The other was surrounded by craggy rock and black sand. This entrance was

spongy grass, with a copse of trees not too far away. I could even hear the tinkling of a stream nearby. It seemed almost peaceful if it weren't for the creatures I knew were within the wood.

Aramal was conferring with the fawn woman Rowan had been talking to in the cave. She stood tall, at least three feet taller than Aramal, dressed in a leather skirt that covered until the first bend in her knees. Her top was an amalgamation of living metal armor, dangling feathers that glowed even in the low light, and several clusters of animal bones.

Or at least I hoped they were animal bones.

Her antlers flowed up and back, almost like a ram's, and she had an additional knife-edged bone that protruded from either side of her neck. But none of that compared to her face, which was beautiful and frightening all at the same time. Her cheekbones were high, sweeping back like knife blades from her cupid's bow of a mouth. Her eyes were thin and wide, her irises and sclera blending together to make it look like the cosmos were in them. And her skin—the part that wasn't furred—was an unusual shade of gray, threaded through with veins of glowing green magic.

She was quite possibly the most stunning creature I'd ever encountered in my life.

Aramal and the woman moved closer, and she made her introduction, not bothering with typical Fae customs as she thrust out her heavily ringed hand.

"My name is Maireen. I am the leader of the fawn people. I came to Aramal because your Melody has come through my lands. Her destruction has been great. I won't mince words. Can you help us?"

I wondered why she didn't say as much in the cave. I would have gladly said yes then.

"I will do what I can," I replied before pausing, asking the question that was at the forefront of my mind. "Can you guarantee our safe passage? I was told the night was not friendly to us."

"A demi-god is worried about a few Faeries? You have nothing to fear from the night or the inhabitants of my forest."

Shrugging, I gave her a wan smile. "I don't know if I believe the demi-god theory. And I'd rather not fight or hurt people when I don't have to."

Maireen turned to Aramal. "You're right. She is very different from Verena." To me, she said, "Your aunt is my enemy. Is that a problem for you?"

I stood there speechless for a moment, struck dumb from Maireen's direct questions. I'd never met a more direct Fae.

"She murdered my whole family. I grew up not knowing what I was, not knowing how to live in my own skin. Alone. Without anyone to hold my hand or love me or look out for me when I needed it. I do not care that Verena is your enemy as long as I'm not."

Maireen gave me an enigmatic smile that could mean she was plotting my murder or lending support—I had no idea which.

"That is good. And no, I do not consider you an enemy. We'll see if you are an ally if you can help my people."

So somewhere in between, then.

"Fair enough."

Maireen led us deep into the forest where the air warmed just slightly. Usually, with deeper tree cover, the air cooled down, but not here. The farther into the woods we walked, the hotter it got.

I soon found out why.

Parts of the forest were burning, a magic sort of fire that did not spread. Instead, the tree sat smoldering, the flames killing it bit by bit. Maybe there was a spell holding it in place, perhaps the fire could not be put out. Maybe the tree couldn't die.

"Did Melody do this?" I asked as I squeezed Alistair's hand. He hadn't left my side once since we'd said our I love yous, and I didn't mind one bit.

Sadness rolled over Maireen's face as tears collected in her eyes. "No," she croaked before shaking her head. "This is Verena's doing. Because we would not pledge loyalty to her. It was a sacred tree, thought to be one of the first that Dušan made when he created Faerie. It was our holy place."

"That bitch. I mean, who burns down a church? Honestly." I knew humans did the same, sure. I'd seen the aftermath of smoldering churches of all religions. It seemed like the biggest dick move, and it never worked out how the perpetrators wanted it to. It just made for a fiercer enemy with rage in their veins.

I let go of Alistair's hand and walked closer to the flames. It was hot, but it didn't burn, and I closed my eyes to try and sense the fire. The flames were sentient, they did not want to burn the tree, but they were under a spell. A crude and hastily crafted one. Plucking the threads of it, I unlocked the flames from their unwanted mission, drawing them into myself so they wouldn't go rogue and spread throughout the forest.

But the flames were too much for me to hold—the power too great for my body to sustain. The magic fire wanted out, it wanted to live free, not trapped in my body, so I gave it what it wanted. I filtered the energy back into the ground—into the center of Faerie, where it could be of use but also where it could flit around in the core of this world free as any fire could be.

It was crude, sure, but it was better than the whole damn forest burning down. Plus, with as formidable as that fire was, it would burn more than just the wood. Verena wasn't being smart. Conjuring flames like that was an excellent way to rule over ashes.

When I opened my eyes, all I saw was the charred tree. It was still standing, but the damage was considerable. I wondered if I could heal the tree itself. If Dušan was Chaos, if he was a god, then this tree was a piece of him. Could I even make a dent?

“Only one way to find out,” I muttered to myself as I put my hands on the sizzling bark.

The embers glowed with heat, but I didn't feel it. No, I felt the tree's agony, the seared fronds, the blackened branches. I could feel myself screaming—the tree's pain lashing through me. It wasn't like with the others. I could sense their pain, sure, but not like this.

This felt like I was burning at the stake all over again.

Alistair's arms circled me from behind, but I couldn't appreciate his support. All I could do was feel, all I could do was flail in the mindless agony of it all.

“Max, love, you have to let go.”

Didn't he know that I couldn't if I wanted to? Didn't he understand that this tree was alive?

“Then heal it, love. Give it earth, give it water. Give it the elements and then let it go.”

His voice called to the sensible part in my brain that had decided to fuck off and hide while the pain lashed at me. Following his words, I did what he said. I pulled from the earth, the air, the water in the lake nearby. I gave it to the tree, gave her all the tools she needed to heal herself because I couldn't do it all.

The water hit first, the relief of the cool wetness dousing the smoldering bark made me almost lose our connection. The earth hit next, the green shoots of new growth overtook the charred bits, absorbing them into itself as the tree shot up, towering over all the other trees in the forest. Buds of

fresh flowers sprouted, their petals opening to the moon. Air hit last, as it ruffled the leaves, and carried its pollen on the gale.

There would be more trees like this one popping up all over Faerie soon. A whole family so she wouldn't be alone anymore. I smiled at that, severed the link, and opened my eyes.

Alistair was holding me up with one arm as he guarded me, his scythe in his hand as he kept people back.

"What did I miss?" I whispered, my eyes scanning the crowd.

"You were healing that tree for twenty minutes, love, and at first, it looked like you were killing it."

I peeled my gaze from the rather weaponry people in front of us to look at the tree. It was bigger around than it had been when I started. Ten men couldn't reach their arms around it. It had started the size of an ancient oak, and now it was more like a redwood.

Whoops?

The bark had healed, the branches flowering in the night.

"But it's fine now, so?"

"You stole water from the lake. They are not pleased."

I rolled my eyes so hard I almost gave myself a headache. I stood up, the pain a distant memory as my anger made a sashaying appearance.

"Are ya'll fucking with me right now? Didn't you hear me screaming? That tree was in pain, and you would rather be pissed I took water to douse the flames than be happy that tree—which is your holy place—isn't dying? This has to be the dumbest shit ever."

Growling, I stomped over to the nearby lake. There had to be a water nymph or whatever I could talk to to get this shit sorted.

"Knock, knock," I called.

And that's when a familiar water dragon popped his head out of the water.

"Zillah, you beautiful beast, how are ya?" I wasn't quite sure how the giant water dragon got from Hell to here, but I decided not to question it. He was his own man—or dragon—and he could do as he pleased.

Zillah gave me a gentle purr and rested his head on the shore so I could pet him. I'd missed the scaly monster, and I was glad I could see him again.

"You pissed I took some water? I'll make a storm and give it back if you need me to. But that tree was dying. You understand, right?"

He gave me an “obviously” expression, which I took to mean he didn’t mind I took some water.

“See, Zillah doesn’t care,” I offered to the still-antsy crowd of warriors—a crowd that seemed to have multiplied since my encounter with the tree.

“Zillah is not in charge of the water Fae. I am,” a voice called from my left.

But when I turned, it wasn’t a person, it was a seaweed-maned horse. A pissed off kelpie. Fabulous.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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It was said that kelpies tricked passersby to jump on their backs before luring them into the water to drown. I had zero intention of jumping on the back of the water horse, and I couldn't imagine a world where anyone would do it, either. This kelpie looked mean. Horses always appeared regal to me, but this one was one irritating comment away from stomping me into next week, and I knew that just from the expression on her face.

"What do I call you?" I asked because I liked to be introduced to people I was arguing with, and I had a feeling I was going to be arguing with this filly for a minute.

"You want my name?" She sounded offended. Oh, joy. It was going to be like that.

"I don't give a shit what your name is. I want to know what to call you. If you don't pick a name, I'm going to start calling you Karen and be done with it." She sounded like a Karen.

She whinnied, and I really hoped she understood the insult. Still, no name was supplied.

"Okay, fine. Look, Karen, I took water to revive a sacred tree. If you would like it replaced, give me a minute and I'll make a storm. You'll get your water back and you can fuck back off into the lake. Honestly, I thought the Fae were a little more understanding than that."

Alistair gripped my hand, trying to get my attention. "A diplomatic approach might be better suited, love."

I agreed, but I was pissed. "A diplomatic approach might have been not to pull weapons on my husband when I was doing them a favor. A diplomatic approach might be to introduce yourself. Did I get either of those things? No. All I wanted to do was keep that tree from hurting, and

what do I get for it? Threats and weapons and bitchy attitudes. No. Hell, no.”

“You take most of what is likely the only clean water we have, and you have the nerve to be offended?”

My head whipped back to Karen the Kelpie. “What do you mean? How is what I took your only clean water?”

She stomped her hooves as she whinnied. “Verena is poisoning our water—our lifeblood—because we will not join her. Now that you have taken our good water, we will die. Just as your aunt planned.”

Oh. Shit. I could totally understand the brandished weapons now. Whoops?

“Fates, that woman sucks.” I growled for a second, wracking my brain for a solution. I didn’t have one, but I could at least see if I could fix this problem, too. “Okay, let me see what I can do.”

I made for the lake, but Karen stomped in front of me.

“Look, lady, I fixed the tree.” I waved at the massive fucking thing at our backs. “Let me see what bullshit my aunt of doom has pulled, and maybe I’ll be able to fix that, too.”

Karen’s eyes narrowed at me, but she backed off when she saw my steely-eyed glare. I was one thousand percent done with her attitude. Understood it, sure. Willing to deal with it? Absolutely not.

I snapped my fingers, swapping my leathers for a dress so my bare feet could go in the lake without the undignified rigamarole of getting my boots off. Wading into the water, I felt the poison immediately. It wasn’t close, but the black fingers of it reached far. Fae were sick, some were dying. I knew the bad stuff had to get out of the water, but what I was going to do with it once it was out, I wasn’t sure.

Could I burn it up? Encapsulate it in the earth? And what was it?

I concentrated harder, trying to get a fix on it. Iron. Verena poisoned the water with iron. What a dick. Lucky for me, I wasn’t hurt by iron. At least I didn’t think I was. Pulling on the element, I drew out the iron-tainted water, leaching it from the lake so it did not poison anyone else and let it evaporate. What iron there was left, I let the air take it to me.

The object poisoning the water was an iron dagger not much bigger than one of my athames. Of course it was. Because why wouldn’t she poison the water with the very thing that could kill her. I drew it to me, fusing the particles of it in the air with the stupidly ornate dagger.

Iron hurt the Fae, but I could change it. All I needed was a little alchemy. I snapped my fingers, molding the metal into what would least hurt the Fae, and when I was done, the dagger was a crystalline weapon so clear it looked like glass.

“There. No more poison. Your waters are clean again.”

Zillah purred from his perch on the shore, and I was half-tempted to give his head scratches. Instead, I snapped my fingers again, putting my leathers back in place complete with a new belt loop which now held the crystal dagger.

Karen the Kelpie was less gracious. “Your repayment of debt is adequate. We hold no issue toward you.”

“That warms the cockles of my heart, Karen, let me tell ya. Next time you have a problem, ask instead of brandishing weapons. I’m a mostly reasonable kind of gal.”

I gave her my back, now facing the Fae that used to be pointing weapons at us.

“When you kill your aunt and become Queen, we will work well together,” the kelpie said, her words like a slap.

My feet stuttered to a stop, I turned, and marched back to her. “I don’t play well with people who threaten my family. Keep that in mind.”

With that, I about-faced, marching toward Maireen and Aramal, pissed that they, too, drew down on us when I was doing her a favor. My face must have said as much because both of them bowed to me.

“Quit it,” I said, exasperated. “Had I known there was an issue with the water, I would have fixed it. Maybe, just tell me next time. Cool? And quit bowing. It’s weird.”

“Apologies. We thought... Verena...”

I filled in the blanks myself. “You thought that even though she is an evil bitch from Hell, and she killed my entire family, I was siding with her anyway? Ya’ll didn’t think that through, did you?”

“I suppose we didn’t,” Maireen replied, her hooves shuffling with unease. “But not everything is as it seems here—even for us. We didn’t know if we could trust it. You, your coming here, seemed too good to be true. Too much to hope for.”

That, I understood perfectly—the not wanting to hope because it hurt too much when nothing panned out. “Don’t worry about it. I get it, just... trust me when I say I have no desire to hurt good people. What Verena has

done makes me sick. Living under a thumb like that, I can see how you wouldn't, but I'm not her."

A part of me wanted to march into the spirit realm and give Dušan a piece of my mind. How could I let these people suffer and do nothing? How could I leave the fight for someone else? The other part of me realized all too quickly that if I unseated Verena, I would have to take her place. I would stay here in Faerie, and that thought hurt my heart, too.

Faerie wasn't my home and I had no desire to be a queen. Not here, not on Earth, not in Hell, nowhere.

"Please, just take me to your people. I want to see if I can help." I may have said those words, but the fight had left me for a moment. I was weighed down by everything that was happening here. Their pain wrenched at my heart, and I didn't know if I could leave this place with so many suffering.

Warm fingers threaded through mine as we followed Maireen further into the forest. I hadn't noticed the chill in the air with the fire gone, and Alistair's grip on my hand was a comfort in all the ways. For a moment I was buoyed, breathing air again after a harsh minute of drowning.

I wanted to look at him, but I couldn't. He would see the fight within me, and I didn't know what I thought about it enough to have that discussion.

"I know what you're thinking," he whispered in my ear when I didn't meet his eyes.

My stomach dropped—I wasn't ready.

"You're trying to figure out how we can keep Zillah as a pet. Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you live in Denver, love. There is no way we can keep a water dragon in your backyard, no matter what you say."

I couldn't help it, I snorted out a laugh. Zillah would be the very best of boys.

I tapped my finger on my chin, pretending to ponder the ridiculous situation. "I see your point. We'd need to move to a lake or something."

He bumped me with his shoulder, and I peered up into his face. "I know you're thinking of it, love. Helping these people. Staying. I know it's ripping at you, the sense that if you can do something, you should."

Wetness hit my eyes and I groaned. What was with the waterworks all the time? Hadn't I cried enough?

“I’m with you, Max. Whatever you decide, and if you want to, say, run some ideas past me, that couldn’t hurt, either. You don’t have to do this on your own.”

“Okay,” I whispered, and that was the only thing I could say around the lump in my throat. I wanted to kiss him, but we had things to do. Instead, I squeezed his hand and bumped his shoulder with mine and felt safe in our little bubble for a moment.

That moment was obliterated the second we rounded the next copse of trees. The magic high on the air, I couldn’t quite make sense of what I was seeing. The whole of the area was under some sort of stasis spell—for which I was supremely grateful, but the rest...

Fawns were floating in the air—some eviscerated, some intact. Wood sprites were frozen solid or in burning embers. There were pixies that had been turned into objects and some that had morphed into floating, pixie-shaped drops of water. Some Fae had their insides turned out; some were contorted into shapes no body should ever make. There were more things that were screwed, but my brain refused to process them all.

And that stasis spell wasn’t going to hold them forever.

It was a complete and utter shitshow. A clusterfuck of epic proportions. I didn’t think even me, my mom, and all the magic-users in the realm could fix this shit.

I stared at Della, wide-eyed, and afraid. “We need backup. Contact the elves. We need everyone they can send to help. This... this is...” I couldn’t even finish.

“We do not need elven help,” Maireen hissed, her stomping hooves too close to my feet for comfort.

Rounding on her, I threw my hand out, wildly gesturing at the complete dumpster fire of the situation we had on our hands. “Yes, lady, you do. I cannot possibly fix all this myself. Not after healing everyone and their brother, fixing the sacred tree, and unfucking the lake. If people are willing and able to help you, no offense, but you need to get your head out of your ass and fucking take it.”

“They will shit on us every chance they get. They will lord it over us. My people are proud—they will not want elven help.”

“Then they are idiots and so are you. You’d rather let your people suffer than accept help? You’d rather them die? How about this, when the elves

come—and they will because I asked—they will treat you with respect, or answer to me?”

Maireen backed up a step in surprise. “You would do that? You would defend our honor?”

“I’ll make a speech and everything. Cool?”

She smiled at me, that same enigmatic one that could mean death or friendship. “You are kind, Max. I did not think a goddess like you could be this kind.”

I stuck my fingers in my ears and did a childish “lalalala.”

“I’m not listening to god, goddess, or demi-god talk right now. Let’s just get this fixed.”

Maireen scoffed but cast her gaze on her injured people. “Denial is not your friend, little goddess. Everything you shove away will come back to you before you’re ready. Best to meet it head on.”

We both knew she was right—which is why I did the only thing I could think of.

I blew a raspberry at her and walked off to find Della.

Adulthood could wait until tomorrow.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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The elves came faster than I thought possible, arriving from a portal someone or other conjured. I wasn't positive what kind of abilities the elves had, but I knew they were potent magic-users and we needed all the help we could get. And yes, I had to make a speech like a teacher over kindergarteners about showing respect and treating everyone with kindness.

It was super well received by everyone. It totally wasn't at all going to backfire on me.

Honestly, I probably would have been better served to knock out the first asshole that started some shit and moved on with my day, but I was trying on my diplomatic hat. It was bullshit.

Once the elves realized that I wasn't joking about the non-assholery, we moved on to undoing each curse, counter curse, hex, jinx, transmogrification, and plain old fuckery done to the forest-dwellers. By the time I was ready to pass out, we weren't anywhere close to halfway through them all. It would take days to fix the havoc Melody wrought, and we didn't have that kind of time.

I was staring at a map of Faerie, my eyes burning from exhaustion, as my vision swam. Maireen pointed to the glowing spots. "This is her destruction. This is what she has done."

The glowing dots of affected creatures looked like a forest fire the way it spread, heading straight for the Seelie Court. This was the definition of not good. Della had said that Melody was going home. That was what she'd written in her note—that she was going home to Faerie. Why would Melody think that Faerie was her home?

And how did she get through the LSD-trip-from-Hell forest? I knew the answer was staring me in the face, but I just couldn't think.

“You need to rest, Max,” Teresa said, pulling on my hand and away from the makeshift war room that was little more than a tent with a table in it. “You aren’t doing yourself any favors. Running yourself ragged is not helping anyone. Alistair set up a tent for you two. Go to sleep.”

I was just tired enough to do what she said and not argue. Without a fight, I let her lead me to our tent and shove me inside. I caught sight of Alistair passed out on a two-person cot, his body curled around my space, and I crawled into the bed with my boots still on, passing out as soon as my head hit the pillow.

I woke up with a start in a wash of blackness. It was still night, but something had pulled me from a deep sleep. Alistair was still out, his face peaceful, his brow smooth and unfurrowed. I refused to wake him and made my way out of the tent. Torches burned around the affected Fae, offering only a meager bit of light. A force I couldn’t name was calling to me, the need to go to it almost visceral.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Aidan whispered, scaring the shit out of me. He was perched on a cut stump outside my tent, his weapons drawn like he was guarding me while I slept—which when my lagging brain finally caught up, I realized that was exactly what he was doing.

“Christ on a cracker,” I hissed. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“And you avoided my question. Where are you going?”

I let my mind wander, listening for the call that woke me from exhausted sleep and pointed. “That way. I need to go that way. I don’t know why. I just need to go.”

Aidan made a low whistle and Hideyo jumped down from a nearby branch, also scaring the ever-loving shit out of me. “You need to go somewhere—you aren’t doing it alone. Let’s go.”

I contemplated this for about a millisecond and decided just to roll with it. Following the thread of calling, we left the clearing to a denser part of the forest. At the base of a gnarly oak, Torren sat curled in a ball, rocking back and forth. He held onto his knees with one arm, shaking as he rocked. He was quietly having a meltdown, that only possible because he held a hand over his mouth to quiet his sobs.

I knelt at his feet, afraid that if I touched him, it would only hurt him worse. “Torren? Sweetheart?”

But he didn’t answer, his gaze unseeing as he rocked himself. Gently, I put a hand on his shoulder, and even though he flinched, he didn’t stop

rocking.

“One of you get Della or Lothan. Now,” I ordered, and I heard the faint wisp of wind as Aidan did as I asked.

I’d put spirit into Torren. Maybe that tied me to him in some way. Maybe if I funneled more in, he could show me what happened. I glanced up, catching Hideyo’s concerned gaze. “I’m going to look to see what happened since he isn’t talking. Watch my back?”

“Always, my Queen,” he replied, his voice no more than a faint whisper. He said it with such sincerity, such conviction, I couldn’t say anything back.

Harnessing my courage, I felt myself sink into the ground, letting the earth energize me, the air wake me up, the water revive me, the fire warm my tired bones. Then I tapped into spirit, the element ephemeral and hard to hold as I gave Torren a little, trickling it into him as I tried to read him.

It was that same voice I’d heard in his memories. No one will believe you.

And then I knew. The man who had brutalized him was here. He was here and Torren had seen him, or had been hurt by him again, or... he was hurting someone else.

That was it.

The man who’d hurt him was hurting someone else, and Torren was trying to get back to us—trying to tell someone, but either he couldn’t, or he’d been stopped. Plucking at the magic that held him down, kept him quiet, I freed him from the prison of his own mind.

Blurry images hit me, but I couldn’t place the faint outline of the man—Torren’s mind protecting itself from remembering. Gently, I pulled back. “It’s okay. I’ll find him.”

Torren didn’t respond, but that was fine. Lothan had arrived. Brought by Aidan to this little thatch of trees, he knelt to take care of his son.

“There is someone in this forest hurting a fawn. I think it’s an elf, but it might not be. Torren was trying to tell me, but he can’t right now, so I’m going to search for them.”

Lothan stiffened, every line of his posture gearing toward a fight. “This is madness. No elf would hurt a fawn. We are civilized. You think one of my people are...” Lothan began but trailed off when he saw my face.

“Do you want to see what this man is capable of?” I asked but didn’t wait for Lothan to answer as I touched his forehead, giving him what I’d

seen. Letting him see what had been done to his son, his blood.

Lothan fell back, turned, and retched. When he could breathe again, tears were in his eyes. “No—no one should ever go through that. My boy,” he whimpered as he reached for his child, pulling his adult son in his arms.

“I swore I’d find who did this. Take care of your son. I’ll be back soon.”

I felt the pull again, the thread I’d cast out to find the man who broke Torren, who stole his innocence and his mind. Following the thread, Aidan, Hideyo, and I picked our way through the forest, turning back in almost a full circle, coming around the other side of the camp.

How far had Torren run as he’d lost his mind? How far had the man sent him, letting Torren’s brain deteriorate into mush?

The thread pulled at me harder, and I began to run, the faint strains of a woman in distress hitting my ears. Before I knew it, lightning was streaking across the sky, dipping down into the trees like a playful puppy, begging to be used. When I saw them, when I saw the poor fawn woman scrabbling at the tree as a giant of an elf hurt her, I let the fire in my veins loose.

Light grew in my hands until electricity yanked free from its tethers and poured into the elf.

I’d seen him before. He was on the Council, demanding they give the dwarves more access, more space—a kind gesture that was now tainted by what he’d done. He was a rapist, an abuser, a monster. A man of power who abused those who he was supposed to protect.

The fawn fell to the forest floor, the poor woman crying as she told us thank you over and over again. I wanted to vomit. I sure as shit did not want to be thanked for this.

The earth roiled beneath my feet as a storm of rage lashed us with biting rain and booming thunder. I knew I’d woken the entire encampment, but I didn’t care. They needed to see this. They needed to witness what happened next.

Soon enough the elf stirred, crawling to standing as he tried to defend himself.

He shouted arguments I’d heard before from men—from men I’d killed. From husbands with murdered wives, and boyfriends with abused girlfriends. From big shots who thought no one would care that they’d hurt children, and from magistrates with no one to keep them in check.

His defense was no different from theirs and would be met with the same fate.

“I don’t care what your reasons are. There is no excuse you could give me that I would accept. I told that woman’s leader they would have respect, or the violators would answer to me. This is what that looks like.”

The elf growled and shot forward, but he didn’t make it very far. I snapped my fingers, enjoying his split-second scream before I turned his body inside out. A fine mist of blood sprayed outward, coating the forest floor, and I watched as the earth soaked most of it up, taking the sacrifice as an offering. Lightning snaked through the treetops and fire bloomed over the elf’s carcass, taking its due before the air swept through, consuming some of the ashes before dropping the rest into the lake.

My elements were just as bloodthirsty as I was, and they were appeased by the offering.

But I was not okay. Rage still coursed through me. Unsatisfied at the elf’s quick death, I wanted more blood for the innocence stolen. I wanted justice for those wronged.

But I had no one to hurt, no blood to take.

So instead I screamed. I screamed for every woman I’d failed, every death I couldn’t stop, every brutality I couldn’t prevent as the world roiled around me.

I didn’t want to hurt anyone else, but I was ravenous for blood, hungry for violence, starving for a fight. I fell to my knees on the wet earth, unable to hold myself up anymore, and when I opened my eyes, I was back in a familiar forest.

Dušan crouched in front of me, his face a mask of pain. All I wanted to do was cry.

“How do I make it stop?” I croaked, the hunger for violence still coursing through my veins.

“You breathe in the air, you feel the rain on your skin, you dig your fingers in the earth, feel the fire in the wind, you let spirit flow through you, and you wait. There is no answer for brutality like that, and that scar must be healed, too.”

An easy answer, but sometimes, that was the way of it. I took one shuddering breath after the other, letting the spirit of this place heal my soul just a little.

“You’re a god, aren’t you?” I asked when I could think again. “Chaos? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Some things are better learned in small doses. I wanted you safe more than anything else, and so I told you what you needed to know.”

I snorted. “That’s a shitty parental habit you need to break. I’ve had enough of that garbage to last ten lifetimes.”

Dušan smiled the indulgent smile of a father negotiating with a feisty toddler. “I’ll remember that.”

“I’m glad to know, though. I’m glad to know you a little. Glad to have a piece of you here. I’m sorry it’s a prison for you.”

I tried to focus on the particulars of this place, this little pocket he’d carved out for himself, but I couldn’t exactly make out the details. We were in a forest at night. Fireflies popped up every now and again, but the edges were blurry, like a crude drawing.

“It is and it isn’t. I get to see you, don’t I? That alone makes it worth it.”

So I didn’t dissolve into a puddle of tears, I settled on sass. “You are determined to have another cry-fest on your shoulder, aren’t you?”

“It’s my mission in life,” he replied dryly, and I couldn’t help giggling. “I’ll look forward to our next visit, Massima. Stay safe.”

When I opened my eyes, I was staring into my mother’s brown ones. She was crying, and I didn’t know why.

“What’s wrong?” I croaked; my voice rusty from disuse.

“Oh, thank the Fates,” she breathed, cupping my face in her hands. “Don’t do that, baby. You scared the life out of me.”

“Don’t do what? What did I do?”

Teresa pulled me into her arms, the leather of her armor softer than I thought it was going to be. “You stopped breathing for an hour. Where did you go?”

“Promise you won’t think I’m crazy?”

“Of course you aren’t crazy. Tell me.”

I worried my lip, debating on what I could say that wouldn’t flag me as certifiable. But then I remembered that this was Faerie and crazy shit was its modus operandi. “I was in the spirit realm. I was talking to Dušan. He’s a god, Mom. This is real. All of this is real.”

“Of course it’s real, baby. This is the land of possible.”

“Max!” Alistair called from behind us. He sounded frantic like he was two seconds away from lighting people on fire.

I stood from my perch in the muck and Teresa tugged at my hand.

“I’m sorry in advance for what he’s about to tell you. He was losing it, so I knocked him out for a little bit. But it was so he didn’t go full monkey shit on the elves that were pissed you killed one of their own. Lothan told them what happened, and they backed off, but—”

My mother was cut off when Alistair crashed into me, clutching me close to his chest like he was never going to let me go.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there, love. I’m sorry—”

I kissed him to make him shut up. I was the one who left him to sleep like an idiot. I wondered how much spirit I would have needed to take if Alistair had been with me. Would I have unleashed that much rage?

I figured probably not.

He would have calmed me. He would have helped.

We sank deeper into the kiss, uncaring of those around us. This was the peace I needed.

A faint rustling hit my ears, and I broke the kiss, whipping my head toward the sound. It pulled on me like Torren did when he was stuck in the forest. It was a call for help—a familiar one. One I did not want to answer. Not ever again.

But I had to follow the thread, and I did.

Only to find my former best friend shivering at the base of a tree. He was wet, ragged, and beaten. His bloody cheek looked red and puffy with infection, and he was holding himself all wrong.

“Heya, Maxie. Long time no see,” Striker croaked before passing out on the forest floor.

Aces.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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“Wake up, you idiot,” I muttered, snapping my fingers at my freshly healed former best friend.

Striker’s eyes flashed open as he sprang up from his cot, only to meet resistance at the end of a chain. Yep, I’d chained him to a stake in the ground—one my mother assured me he couldn’t break—and I wasn’t sorry.

I didn’t trust him—not even a little.

Striker stared at the chain, at his manacled wrist, at the stake in the ground, and then at me. “First a punch to the face, and now this? I’m starting to think you don’t like me, Max.”

He said this like he hadn’t earned that punch or his current confinement. Like he hadn’t done anything wrong. Like he hadn’t stolen a soul from Heaven.

“I don’t. You’ve seen me cut a lot of people off, Striker. People who have abused me, taken things without asking, lied to me, treated me like dirt. It might have taken me a century to get smart, to remove the blind spot you made, but I see you for what you are. And no, I don’t like you.”

My words seemed to have hit him like a slap, because he reared back, yanking at the manacle around his wrist.

“I was protecting you.” He put his feet on the floor like he was going to stand up and face me. He didn’t make it very far until he was staring at the pointy end of Alistair’s scythe.

“You were doing fuck all. Have a seat, Striker, my wife has more to say.”

Striker sneered at him. “You won’t use that blade, demon. The Armistice prevents it.”

I laughed for a good long minute at that one. “Pumpkin pie, you are in Faerie. There is no Armistice on any realm that will save your ass if you

start acting cute, so sit the fuck down. No one gives a shit about your excuses. No one is ready to listen to you wheel and deal like you have a good reason for stealing a soul and lying about it. And don't think you can use your abilities to try and convince us to listen. I turned that off as soon as you passed out."

Yes, I fiddled with his powers some to prevent his mojo from affecting us. Again, not sorry. I didn't know if his abilities affected me differently with the glamour gone, and honestly, I wasn't going to chance it.

"You turned off my abilities? Like I'm some pup that needs to be put down?"

Was he high?

"You. Stole. A. Soul. From. Heaven," I growled, punctuating each word with a clap right in his face. "A soul that I have been cleaning up after for two fucking days now, and I'm tired. Do you know what she's done? Do you know how many people I couldn't save all because she wanted to walk through Faerie like she was tiptoeing through the fucking tulips? People are dead, Striker. Dead."

I wasn't even going to get into all the other shit he did. The list was too long.

"It wasn't supposed to be this way." His body melted back into the cot like I'd deflated him.

"Like that makes it any better. Just like always, you turned off the empathetic part of you. You turned off the part that actually has a conscience. You did what you wanted and fuck everyone else. Did you even ask her if she wanted to come back? Or did you just take?"

Shame made his face haggard—a feat I didn't think possible on a mug like his. He had always been beautiful, but now he just appeared lost. Lost and ashamed.

"I didn't ask her," he admitted, his voice so low I almost didn't hear it. "I saw her, and I was so happy that I just took. She was at peace. I knew that, but I wanted her with me."

I knew it. I knew that was what he'd done. I was just so disappointed that I didn't want to even look at him. Still, I needed to know why he was here and who beat him senseless.

Unable to look at his face anymore, I peered up at the canvas tent wall as I asked the questions I needed. "What happened to you in the forest?"

A little moan of pain had me turning back at him, even though I didn't want to. Tears filled Striker's eyes and he shook his head. Not like he was telling me no, but more like he couldn't process what happened.

"I've been following you since you got here. I figured you would find Melody before I could, since no matter what I did, I couldn't use our link to find her. I heard a woman in the forest. She wasn't screaming, but she was making this horrible noise. But sound here doesn't make any sense. The sound of her was everywhere and nowhere, I couldn't follow it, so I dropped my emotional warding." Striker covered his eyes, shook his head and sniffed like he'd shove tears down by force of will alone.

"She was... she was being hurt. An elf had tied her wrist together around a tree and he was..." Striker shook his head, unable to go on.

He didn't have to. I knew what he saw. I'd seen the same thing before I turned him inside out.

"I attacked him, or at least I tried to. With my wards down I couldn't do much damage—I was too affected by her pain. He stomped my ass into the dirt and went back for her. Then you came."

But that had always been his problem. He shut off his emotions and turned himself into a flaming asshole only to be hindered when he turned them back on again. We'd been going through this cycle for a century. I knew the only reason he turned his emotions on again was because he wanted to find Melody. I held no illusions about that. But it was a tiny point in his favor that he actually did something for someone else.

Even if it would never heal our friendship, I was glad he wasn't a total monster.

"Do you have any idea why Melody would come to Faerie in the first place? That's the one thing I can't figure out. She called it home in her letter. Why would she think Faerie was home?"

"When I brought her back to Earth after trying to repair her soul, she kept saying that—that she wanted to go home to Faerie. But as far as I knew, she was human. If she was part-Fae, that could explain why..." Striker trailed off, but I knew what he was thinking.

If Melody was Fae, it would explain why the spell he used to fuse the two parts of her soul didn't work.

It would explain why she was still broken.

"Was she adopted? A changeling? What?"

My mother was the one to pipe up with an answer. “She could have been part-Fae from a distant line. There are plenty of humans with a fair amount of Fae blood. Fae come to the Earth realm all the time. Where do you think the lore comes from?”

“So, what? Her brain gets scrambled in the re-fusing process,” Alistair offered, “And then it somehow gets stuck on the Fae setting like a homing beacon? I don’t buy it.”

I didn’t buy it, either. “There had to be outside influences. Who did you leave her with to try and rehabilitate her?”

“I didn’t. Caim had people lined up—they took her to a convent-type place. It wasn’t until she broke out that we realized there was a problem.”

Aidan popped his head in the tent. “Hey, the Fae are going nuts. You’d better get out here.”

We filed out of the tent to see Fae scrambling. The fawns were trying to gather up their wounded and get them out of here. The elves were on high alert, and the dwarves were readying their weapons.

I turned back to Aidan and Hideyo. “Keep an eye on him. If he fucks up, knock him out. I’ll be right back.”

Alistair and my mother followed me as I sought out Della and Lothan. Or Maireen or Aramal. Really, I’d take anyone at this point. I found Della and Lothan in the “war” tent—the one we’d used to look at the map of doom.

“What’s going on?” I asked, likely breaking up a heated discussion.

“Seelie are coming. We need to move or get ready to fight,” Della answered, her accent thicker with either fear or rage. It all seemed the same on Della.

“How do you know?”

Della stiffly pointed at the map. Blue dots clustered in groups in an arrow-point formation heading right for us. Shit on a stick. Melody’s destruction glowed gold. The two were headed right for each other.

“How can I help?” I asked the question because I had minimal battle experience, and even less with military tactics. But I could be a weapon. I was real good at that.

“I don’t know, Max. How can you help?” Della’s tone was biting, and I knew why. I didn’t tell her about the atrocities done to Torren.

“It wasn’t my secret to tell,” I murmured, my voice pitched low so she would know I didn’t want a fight. “If it had happened to you, would you

have wanted me to tell? He was scared and ashamed. It wasn't my place."

"But you told Lothan. You showed him."

"That was more so he wouldn't stand in my way while I killed his council member. That man was hurting someone else, and I didn't have a chance to explain."

I met Della's gaze, hoping she saw how much it hurt not to tell her. Hoping she knew I couldn't betray a trust like that. Not ever.

She raised her chin, her mouth tightening as she pressed her lips together. When she spoke again, it sounded so raw, I felt her despair in my bones.

"I'm angry, but I know you can't change it. I know you did what you thought was best. But I'm just so mad. Mad that I can't kill him. That I can't... He hurt my baby."

I wrapped my arms around her shoulders, knowing it may be a long time before Della could process this. "If I'd had more time, I would have urged him to tell you. But we didn't have time then, and we don't have time now. How can I help?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Lothan and the other elves are making portals so we can house everyone on Tandrirr. Some fawns won't go. I don't know what we could possibly say to convince them after what Irion did. A part of me wants to throw his whole family off a cliff, but I know they couldn't possibly have known—or if they did, they were just as cowed and abused as my son."

No one will ever believe you.

I shuddered. "One problem at a time. I'll see if I can talk to the fawns. They might listen to me."

I turned to go, but Della stopped me with a hand on my arm. "Thank you, Max. Thank you for healing my son, for finding his attacker, for meting out justice even if I couldn't. I won't forget it."

"You would have done the same."

"Damn right I would have."

I kissed her temple, squeezed the shit out of her, and sped off, searching for Maireen with Alistair and my mother in tow. I found Maireen close to the lake, trying to coax an injured pixie to come with her. Pixies were bigger than I'd have thought, close to a foot tall with ephemeral wings, so faint they were practically invisible. They were human-ish shaped, with

longer legs and arms, their faces spritely and beautiful except for the razor-sharp teeth.

This pixie had a broken wing and a bum leg, making traveling almost impossible, but she didn't want to go with Maireen.

"Goliah, you have to come with me. The others left for Tandrirr. If you don't come, the Seelies will kill you. Stop being so stubborn," Maireen argued with the pixie, but based on the mulish expression on the pixie's face, she wasn't budging.

"For the love... Goliah, is it?" I asked, startling them both. The pixie nodded. "Do you have a death wish? Do you wish other people dead?"

The pixie shook her head. Maireen could hear the pixies in her mind, but not many others could. Pixie's didn't have vocal cords for some reason, so communication was mostly sign and head nods.

"Then get your stubborn ass up and get to safety before you cost someone their life. Do you hear me?"

Goliah nodded, but she didn't seem happy about it. She held out her tiny hand to Maireen, who gently scooped the tiny lady up, placing her in a pocket.

"How many more will not come?"

"Not many. Even the fawn you rescued is coming with her family, granted she's staying away from the elves themselves, but Torren is looking after her. He hasn't spoken yet, but he's helping where he can."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Good. I need to get my people out of here. We need to find Melody and get out of this realm. Maybe Verena will settle once I'm gone."

But I knew she wouldn't. I knew she would just keep picking off her opponents until the whole of Faerie was fully under her thumb.

Maireen's face told me she was thinking the same thing I was—that Verena would never stop, that it didn't matter if I was here or not.

Fuck.

What do I do?

"You save as many as you can, love."

I glanced up at Alistair, unaware that I had asked my question out loud. "How do I do that and keep my promise? She's heading right for an army." By she I meant Melody. "How am I supposed to keep her and her son safe in the middle of a war? And she's killing people, Alistair. What..." I trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

What am I supposed to do with a woman who doesn't appear to want to be saved?

Alistair reached for my hands and enveloped them in his—sharing a little bit of peace and warmth with me. “You fall back and regroup. Reassess when we aren't looking down the barrel of a loaded gun. Yes?”

“Okay. Go help Maireen round up as many Fae as you can. We'll get Striker and meet you in the war tent?”

Instead of answering, he pulled me into his arms and gave me a quick, blistering kiss.

We broke apart, heading in opposite directions.

“You know, when I heard the prophecy about you two, I was against it, but now it all makes sense,” my mother muttered—more to herself than to me.

“What prophecy? The one where we would be married?”

“The very one. Had I known then that he would be your match, I might not have been so against it.”

I chuckled, remembering how I'd been under her roof. “Or maybe we wouldn't be together at all because we had our parents' blessing. Fate's a funny thing, Mom. Let's just be happy it turned out like it did.”

We approached Striker's tent, and I slowed to a stop. Where were Aidan and Hideyo?

I held my hand out to stop Teresa from going any farther. Our eyes met and she nodded. Without a word, we separated, circling the tent on opposite sides. On my side, I found a decidedly gnawed upon Aidan, his arms bloody from sharp teeth, his sword drawn and coated in red. He was unconscious but breathing.

“Max,” my mother called from the other side of the tent, and I rounded to find a bloody Hideyo half-in and half-out of his kitsune form.

My heart stuttered in my chest until I noticed he was breathing. But if Hideyo was stuck this way, he was not doing good at all. I knelt on the ground, willing the earth to rise up and greet him, begging it to heal my friends. Hideyo's other half melted away, and his breathing became less shallow.

I wanted to feel relief, but I knew I couldn't. We were in danger here.

“Who did this?” Fear leaked into my mother's words as she scanned the forest for an attacker.

I shook my head. Could it have been Melody? Why would she come back here? She was supposed to be heading to the Seelie Court...

Without thought, I stood and slashed the tent canvas rather than rounding it. The inside was empty save for a lonely cot and Striker's broken manacle.

Suddenly, blistering pain bloomed across the back of my head. I staggered, and then the ground rushed up to meet me.

Before darkness took me, I saw a familiar pair of dark boots stop in front of me. I knew them and the man they belonged to.

Striker.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Being chained to a tree was about as fun as one would think. As in, it was not at all fun, not even a little bit. Being chained to a tree with a spiky wooden collar around my neck was even less fun. Especially when I could sense that the wood was carved from a rowan tree.

The same rowan tree that had killed my birth parents.

Each carved spike pressed against my throat, their sharp tips digging into my flesh. If I moved the wrong way, I was going to get a rowan spike jabbed in my throat.

Awesome.

My brain caught up to the last thing I remembered. Aidan and Hideyo were hurt. Aidan looked like he'd been attacked by a wild dog? Or could it have been a kitsune? And Hideyo had looked like he had been slashed by a blade and got stuck trying to turn back to his other form.

Wasn't that how all the others had been hurt? They'd attacked each other. Was that Melody using her succubus influence, or was it Striker?

It didn't sound like my former best friend, but then again, I couldn't trust what I knew about Striker to be true. The man I knew could have never done that to his friends. The man I knew would have never bashed me on the head. Or chained me to a tree. Or made sure I was restrained by the one thing that could really, really kill me.

I wanted to believe that the man I knew was still in there, but as I stared at Striker scratching sigils into the dirt, I was certain that the man I knew was long gone.

As it stood, Striker's blond hair was loose around his face, the strands in disarray as he used a steel blade to carve into the dirt. From this vantage point I couldn't see the design, but I could sense it. It wasn't a language I knew—or a language I thought Striker knew, either.

He was muttering to himself, but not in a sane way that said a person was in charge of their mental faculties. No, it was as if he was arguing with himself as he carved into the dirt and then smoothed out the furrows before starting all over again.

Staring past my former best friend, I took in our surroundings—well, as much as I could without turning my head. We were in a deep fissure in the earth, the sides coming up and over us with only a thick sliver of sky overhead. Even though it was night above, there was light down here. An eerie blue light was coming from a closed pair of doors in a cracked-and-craggy archway set in the smallest part of the crevasse—the light leaking around the seam of them like it was begging to get out.

That wasn't to say that the doors were small. No, those doors made the ones at the Seam look doll sized. Each one was easily a hundred feet tall and thirty feet wide, the design etched into them a seal that seemed in danger of cracking.

“What are you doing, Striker?” I called to the mumbling man who was on his fifth pass of carving and erasing sigils in the dirt. Well, it could have been more than his fifth since I'd been knocked out for a bit.

He twitched like he heard me, but he didn't answer. Instead, he drew the sigils again, expanding them this time until they made a whole circle of carvings in the earth.

“Why are you doing this? Why did you hit me?” When he still ignored me, my anger grew enough that the ground shook beneath us—well, not beneath me, but the earth roiled under him, disturbing his drawings.

“Answer me!” I yelled and then hissed as a rowan spike dug into my flesh. It didn't draw blood, but it was a very near thing. Screaming was out.

Striker looked up then, his face a mask of haggard lines, and sunken cheeks. He'd aged fifty years since I saw him last. Like something was stealing the life out of him. His eyes—normally a beautiful hazel—were now milked over.

Could he see me? Could he even hear me?

“What happened to you?” I breathed, not expecting an answer to this question, either.

He shook his head, turned back to the still-trembling earth and began carving again. The dirt where he dug his knife stayed still, but everywhere else moved with my anger, with my fear. Lightning lashed the sky above us,

one bolt hitting a tree on a nearby outcropping. The tree burst into flames, and I wondered if I could coax a bit of lightning to do the same to this tree.

The fire wouldn't hurt me, and if it burned this wood up, all the better.

I closed my eyes, trying to convince the fire to come closer, but it did not heed my call. By the time I reopened them, I was sweating, and the lightning drew no nearer than a few feet away. It stabbed down in the middle of Striker's sigils, but refused to come to me.

Was there something about this particular tree?

Then I understood. This was the tree—my father's insurance policy against eternity. Striker had chained me to a rowan tree, before clamping spikes to my neck.

What a dick.

If fire was too scared to come over here, would earth help me? I did my best to read the earth, letting myself sink into it. The element accepted me, embraced me, but could not work against the tree. It wasn't magic or a spell I could break that prevented the element from coming closer. It was more than that.

It wasn't magic or a spell or a curse. This tree was a void of nothingness housed inside the gnarled branches. It was an instrument like the Seam—a place where nothing could exist, so it took all life indiscriminately.

The elements couldn't free me.

Undeterred and in total denial, I decided to keep reading the earth, keep working the problem. I focused on Striker's sigils. On the surface, they just looked like furrows in the dirt. But below, where no one but me could see, blue tendrils of magic snaked toward the giant door.

Was he trying to open it? Well, duh, of course he was trying to open it. But why? What purpose could Striker have for opening the door where monsters were kept? Why would he care what was behind that door?

Or was someone making him?

I looked closer at the magic as it trailed sickly blue fingers toward the door. That magic wasn't coming from the sigils like I once thought. No, that power, that magic was coming directly from Striker. Each furrow in the dirt poured more magic in the earth, and each furrow sucked the wealth of power from Striker. It was draining him dry.

No, someone was definitely making him do this. There was no good reason for him to open this door—not when no one knew the horrors behind it.

Was this it? Was this how I went?

Rowan had said that I was the only person able to open the door, and just like with Soren, I had been led to the one place I did not want to be.

No.

I wasn't going to survive four hundred years of bullshit just to let myself get knocked down by a stupid fucking tree.

I could stop this. I could. Maybe.

I was too busy contemplating the likely instrument of my death to notice when Striker stopped drawing his sigils. Not until he was right in front of me. Brandishing an athame—one of mine, the prick—he snatched up one of my chained wrists and slashed down. His aim hit true, and my forearm split down the middle. Blood poured from my arm, the pain waiting a few moments to make itself known. But when it hit, I suppressed a scream that tore up my throat and would have shook the whole realm if I let it out.

But I couldn't scream, even though that was all I wanted to do. The last thing I needed was a neck full of rowan.

I should have hit Striker with lightning when I had the chance. I should have killed him. That would have been better than letting him hurt me, than letting him start the working to open that door. It would have been better than letting him be used this way.

The plink-plink-plink of liquid hitting metal had me groggily peering down. Striker had put a bowl under my arm and was collecting my blood. That was not good. I had a feeling I knew where that blood was going to go.

"Striker, don't do this," I begged, my voice barely above a whisper. I hated it. I didn't need to beg—I wouldn't. "You don't know what's behind that door. Fight this. I know this isn't you. I know you wouldn't do this."

Striker shook his head like he was trying to clear it. It wasn't working—whatever had ahold of him was stronger than he was. He slapped his own head, his face, but it wasn't working.

Maybe I should try and hit him with lightning again. That thought streaked across my brain an instant before a fiery bolt slammed into him. Being a dragon—at least in part—should protect him from the heat of it. Maybe. Okay, I didn't think that action through even a little bit, but it was what I had, and if it could get him to stop trying to open the monster door, then I was all for it.

Two other bolts of lightning slammed into Striker, his arms reaching for the sky as the electricity surged through him. He was screaming at the top of his lungs, the agony of it lashing through the air so hard I could feel it, too. And then the bolts titrated off, the electricity spent, and he crumpled to the ground.

I hoped I did the right thing. I hoped I didn't just kill him, even though I knew opening that door was going to kill me.

Wasn't that stupid? It felt stupid. I was such an idiot for trusting him so long. For letting him get away with dumb shit, for letting him lie. And now that he was a puppet for someone else—even though he'd been shit to me—I still hated that he might be...

I shook my head. He wasn't dead. Couldn't be.

Still, I watched to see if he was breathing, to see if his chest moved even a millimeter. It didn't.

Tears hit my eyes even though I didn't want them to. I didn't want to cry at all. I wanted out of these chains. I wanted one of my very best friends to actually be a best friend and not die on me in the middle of the ass end of nowhere Faerie while I was chained to a death tree bleeding the fuck out.

Tears were not helpful.

Trembling, the cold of blood loss hitting me hard, I begged the earth to do me a solid. I coaxed it to feed into him a little bit. Not enough to heal him all the way—just enough that he wouldn't die and maybe break whatever bullshit spell was poisoning his mind.

Earth did not want to help Striker. It wanted to heal me, it wanted to reach me, but the tree's roots stopped it from coming to my rescue.

Stupid. Bullshit. Tree.

I begged the element to help—if it would do as I asked, maybe Striker wouldn't be such a dumbshit and take these fucking chains off me. Yeah, that would be good. Reluctantly, the element heeded my call, threading just a little bit of power into the idiot. I watched as Striker took his first breath, his second, and then earth backed off.

It refused to help anymore, but that was okay. Striker was alive at least—even if I couldn't tell if that was a good or bad thing.

As intently as I was watching Striker, I still heard the footsteps that crunched through the crevasse heralding another's approach. They were light, careful steps, and the earth told me it was a woman. I couldn't turn

my head too much—the collar of death spikes keeping me immobile—but I hoped it wasn't the woman I'd search the whole damn realm to find.

I hoped it wasn't her that put Striker up to this. I prayed it wasn't all a big trick.

But when the tiny woman came into my line of sight, all my hopes were dashed.

She stood at the base of the tree, her gaze shifting between me chained to a tree and Striker's still-but-breathing body.

“Melody?”

She sighed before giving me her full attention. “I knew he was going to fail me.” She shook her head. “But you know how it goes. If you want something done right”—She snatched up the athame Striker had used to cut me open—“you have to do it yourself.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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Betrayal at this point should be second nature to me. Really, it wasn't such a stretch to figure out why unseated Kings and Queens were paranoid as fuck. I mean, when you had so many people in your life not telling you shit, hiding ulterior motives, and straight-out stabbing you in the back—or in the arm as the current case may be—paranoia was just smart.

The Melody before me only slightly looked like the one I remembered. Granted, the last time I saw her she was bleeding out on a battered pool table while Ian attempted to put Humpty Dumpty back together again, so I supposed I couldn't gauge her on that. Gone was her giant baby belly and swollen pregnancy cheeks. Gone was her sweet smile, and the playful glint in her eyes. And gone was any semblance of the sweet girl that sat in my tattoo parlor so long ago, her eyes begging for help.

No, this woman and the one I remembered were vastly different.

But if she took her son to Faerie, where was he? Because he sure as hell wasn't in her arms right then. It wasn't like Faerie had a list of babysitters on call.

So where was Ronan?

"Where is Ronan, Melody?" I asked, my voice pitched low because I was talking to a woman that in all likelihood was severely unbalanced.

She hummed in answer as she fiddled with my athame, pressing the sharp point of it into the tip of her finger—not like she was trying to draw blood, but more like she just wanted to see how sharp it was. When she drew her finger back with the flesh only slightly marred, she smiled.

Yes, the edges were sharp as fuck, and no, I did not have to sharpen them. The metal hadn't rusted or tarnished since I'd owned them, and I supposed the same could be said for the matching blade my mother had carried with her all these years.

I tried again to get her attention. “Micah’s dead. I killed him. His puppet master is dead, too, and the one above him.”

Granted I didn’t kill Elias, Ruby, or Soren, but I’d taken out Samael and Micah at least.

Melody nodded and hummed again as she found the rune to extend the blade—only it was as if she already knew where it was. A sinking feeling hit my belly, and I couldn’t decide if it was blood loss or the realization that this woman was nothing like the one I remembered.

The Melody I knew wanted her son, loved him even though she hadn’t met him. The one I knew begged me to care for him as she took her last breath.

This wasn’t Melody. Couldn’t be.

“Where is Ronan, Melody?” I asked, insistent, the flash of lightning punctuating the question like a threat.

“Around.” She shrugged, like leaving an infant to crawl around Faerie was top-notch parenting. That was if he was even still alive.

Not-Melody abandoned her inspection of my athame and moved to Striker, kneeling at his side. “Striker, my sweet, you must get up. Our job is not finished.”

I felt the power in her voice. A power I definitely felt before in Micah. Shit. Maybe it was Melody after all, because that persuasion wasn’t something just any kind of demon could do. No, that kind of powerful mind-control was something only the incubi and succubi were able to wield.

Striker’s body jerked, stilled, and then jerked again. He groaned long and low, kind of like he was recovering from a lightning strike or three.

Okay, so I was only a little sorry about that—especially now that I knew he was alive.

He rolled away from her, putting his hands in the dirt as he struggled to stand. His hair was still smoking from the electricity I’d pumped into him, the color now less blond and whiter.

Whoops?

He kept his face turned away from her, groaning in pain as he staggered on his feet.

“You must finish what you started, my sweet,” Not-Melody called in a saccharine-sweet way, shoving more power into her words.

Strike stumbled closer, his feet nearly tripping over each other as he made his way to me. He was between her and me, and only then did he raise his head. His face was still aged and sunken, but his eyes were a different story. His hazel gaze was clear as crystal as he bore it into me.

And then he winked.

I tried not to let the relief show on my face, tried to coax the earth and fire into him, to bolster him a bit more because I knew my best friend wasn't under Not-Melody's spell. Not even a little.

With each step, I watched as his face filled out, the wrinkles erasing from his skin, his cheeks pinkening.

He was healing right in front of my eyes and I was glad for it.

Because I was about to pick a fight.

"So how long have you been inhabiting Melody's body—if that is what you're doing? Because I know you aren't her. Drop the act."

Not-Melody's gaze flicked to me, an expression close to grudging pride on her face. She didn't think I would figure it out so quick?

"What tipped you off?" she asked, confirming my suspicions.

I wanted to list them all on my fingers, but my wrists were chained, so I had to make do. "Melody loved her son. She wouldn't leave him unless she had to. She loved Striker. She wouldn't use him. Ever. And Melody hated Micah Goode, and she'd be jumping for fucking joy that I murdered that rat bastard."

"Too bad you're not the one I needed to convince. Your friend here believed it all too quickly. It was rather sad, actually, how easy he was to fool. Is that what blind love and devotion does to people? Makes them gullible?"

Yep, definitely not Melody.

"Sometimes. Sometimes the havoc that love does to us can make a sane man crazy. Then again, he isn't the one impersonating someone else to try and open a door that should stay shut. So, who's really the idiot here?"

Not-Melody smiled wide, her lips not quite right for her face. "You think I don't know what is behind that door? Oh, you child. Of course I know what is beyond that seal, dear. And it's the reason no one will mind when I kill you. No matter how much support you've gained, no matter how much people love you now, no one will once that door is opened wide."

"Why would you give a ripe shit about the support I ha..." I trailed off, knowing exactly who she was.

I was an idiot. “Verena, I presume?”

Not-Melody smiled wide again, her whole face melting and rearranging as her body grew. Melody’s light-brown hair fell from her skull and blonde hair replaced it, growing in quick-time. Her skin darkened a touch—after it rearranged, that was—her nose a touch wider, her eyebrows dark slashes over piercing, unearthly blue eyes. One side of her cheek and mouth puckered around an old scar that cut a jagged path over her cheekbone, down through both lips, and curved back along her jaw. Still, she was pretty, the scar only adding to her appeal.

Verena was at least six inches taller than Melody had been, so I was glad to see her illusion came with new clothes, too. Granted, those clothes consisted of a floaty medieval-style dress and golden circlet of a crown. Verena wasn’t built for a fight, nor was she dressed for one, and I hoped that would work in my favor.

“Shapeshifter?” I offered, worry filling me. Shapeshifters could turn into anything they wanted—they weren’t limited to just one animal as long as whatever they turned into was of similar mass. But if she was one, then Melody could be long dead—if she was ever brought back to begin with.

Striker looked like his world was ending all over again, but he didn’t stray his gaze to Verena at all. He didn’t even twitch. Instead, he knelt at my feet and retrieved the bowl of blood.

She smiled and shook her head. “Changeling, actually. It means something a little different than the way humans use it. Yes, I was born in your realm, but I had a touch too much Fae in my blood. My human parents put me in a Faery circle and left me—not knowing if I’d die from exposure or if I would get taken. I was eight. Changelings can do just that—change—so I can be anyone. My parents didn’t like when I impersonated my sister. They dropped me in that Faery circle and never looked back.”

Like that could excuse four hundred years of bullshit. I wanted to feel bad for her—I did—but I just couldn’t muster up the empathy for someone who had killed as many people as she had.

“And I was burned at the stake and shunned at fourteen. You don’t see me murdering people en masse.” I wanted to roll my eyes, but I was too tired. “Is Melody even in Faerie, or did you kill her on Earth and take her place there?” I asked this not just for my benefit, but Striker’s as well. He needed to know.

Verena seemed so pleased that I'd taken such a leap in logic. "Oh, you must think me so devious. No, I can't leave Faerie anymore. That doesn't mean I didn't call her home—rather insistently, I might add—but I suppose that is beside the point. You want to know if she's alive?"

"Yeah, that'd be great. I would love to know if the person I've been searching for all over this fucking realm is actually breathing. Her son, too."

"Last I saw they were, but then again the dungeons in the Court aren't exactly the best at keeping people alive."

I could actually feel my eye twitching. I needed out of these chains so I could slap the shit out of this woman.

"Were you not loved enough as a child? I mean, come on, being adopted is not that bad." I paused, thinking about my own experiences. "Okay, so sometimes being adopted is a complete shitshow, but honestly? Did you have to kill everyone and be a total she-beast? Were you just jealous? What? Is there an evil plot you can explain to me because I am not getting it at all?"

Verena sighed. "I would, but what's the point? You'll be dead soon just like your parents and anyone else who opposes me. I'll finally have the throne—not the watered-down version I have now because you're still breathing. Eventually, I'll get some other poor soul to open the Hell gate. I may have fibbed a little bit to Soren about that, by the way. I don't need an Elemental to open it. I didn't even need you. I just wanted to see how far he'd go to get you there. Bravo on killing him. I really appreciate you taking out the trash for me."

I was still processing the implications of what she'd just said, when Verena snatched the bowl of blood from Striker's loose fingers and flung it toward the furrows in the dirt.

The thick, red liquid flew out of the bowl, dousing the sigils. As soon as the blood hit, the earth trembled, and I knew it wasn't from me.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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As the red droplets hit the dirt, Striker lunged for Verena, his phase catching him on the fly. The pair of them tumbled to the earth, but Verena managed to scramble away mostly unscathed. Striker's change was hitting him hard.

The few times I'd seen Striker phase, his form had stayed mostly human-shaped, and it most certainly did not cause pain. In fact, the limited times I'd seen him in his other form, he hadn't even known it had come over him.

This time, not so much.

He screamed in agony as his body grew and grew, his form morphing into a giant winged beast that put Zillah to shame. His scales were still mostly scarlet, and he'd kept the scaly yet feathery wings—they were just a hundred times their previous size.

Striker opened his mouth and roared at Verena; the deafening sound punctuated by blistering flames that swept the ground as she did her best to dive out of the way.

Striker was a fire dragon. Good to know.

The last time I'd seen Striker phase, he hadn't nearly been this size. Did I do this to him? Did I accelerate his abilities somehow with my weird demi-god mojo? It kinda looked like it.

But I couldn't count Verena out. She hadn't spent four hundred years in Faerie sitting on her ass. I had no doubt that she'd changed into a bevy of creatures in her time as Faerie's supervillain, and she was morphing into one before my eyes.

Gone was her circlet crown and pretty dress. No, now she had a bone-like face and delicate wings—topped off with talons that could rend flesh

and glowing yellow eyes that nightmares were made of. Tiny bones hung from leather strings at her waist like a macabre wind chime.

Bone Fae.

If I had a list of Fae that freaked me out the most, Bone Fae would be at the tippy top.

She dove at Striker's legs, digging her blackened talons into his scaly flesh. He roared again, spitting fire as he kicked, but Verna stayed glued to his leg like a barnacle, climbing up his flank.

A part of me wished he would blow some of that fire onto me. I wouldn't burn—at least I didn't think I would—and I'd love to see this tree be reduced to ash.

Plus, someone had to deal with the cracked seal on the door that I had a feeling was going to open any second now, and I was pretty sure the only person that could deal with that bullshit was me. I wanted to be free from this stupid death tree. It was too close to my burning, too close to the first time I was helpless.

I didn't do helpless. It was bullshit.

I got my wish about thirty seconds later as Striker reached down with his giant clawed hands and ripped Verena off his leg, tossing her away from him like he was flicking a bug. She flew, her Bone Fae body twisting in the air, but she failed to land on her feet. No, she smacked into the wall of the crevasse, crumpling to the ground.

Solid distance. If I had a scoring card, I'd give him a ten.

"Yo, Lizard Boy," I called, trying not to yell so I wouldn't jab myself in the throat and kiss this fight goodbye. "Any chance you wanna let me outta here?"

Striker curled his neck down so he could look at me, his belly resting on the ground. Jesus fuck, he was huge.

"I'm thinking you need to breathe fire on me. I can't call the elements closer, but I can still wield them. So gimme. Cough it up."

Striker's lizard face frowned at me, and it was majorly disconcerting that even in this form, he still looked like himself.

"Just do it before I hit you with lightning again." Not that it would hurt too much in this form, but whatever.

Dragon-Striker rumbled out a little growl.

"Sack up and do it, dick," I taunted, praying he would get his head out of his ass quick enough that I had enough time to get the hell away from

this tree.

Striker's growl grew louder, shaking the ground with its power. Any minute now.

His jaws opened wide, and I heard a tiny little click before he bathed me in flames. I'd never been so happy in all my life that I was fireproof. The heat of them was blistering, sure, but I barely felt it. What I did feel was the way the collar jangled around my shoulders as the wooden spikes burned away. The chains at my wrists and waist melted, and then I was free.

Without me telling the element to, it filled me, strengthened me, replenished the blood I'd lost, and the blow to my head.

The only thing Striker's flames didn't do was burn the stupid tree. Coated in a fire that could liquefy metal, the tree stood tall without so much as a wilted petal or singed bark. I wondered if I could dig it up and drop it in the Seam. Punt it into outer space. Something.

Stepping away from the roots, I could feel all the elements fill me again, the power in my veins humming as I breathed them in.

I looked up at Striker, giving him a nod of thanks before I searched the spot where I saw Verena fall.

She hadn't moved, and I was tempted to ask Striker to eat her or blow her up before she sat up like the killer in a horror movie. Just as I was about to ask exactly that, the ground shuddered beneath our feet, the source of the quake cracking the seal that held the giant door closed to who knew what.

I'd heard whispers about what was behind that door—or behind one of the many portals in Faerie—to the hidden part of this realm. Some said Unseelie. Some called it the dark place. All I knew was, I was perfectly happy with my ignorance. I had absolutely no desire to know what was behind it.

Too bad I was a pro at not getting what I wanted.

The seal on the doors was a giant ram's head, the horns curling up and back to flow into the ornate design engraved into the stone. Down the center of the ram's face, the crack grew wider, the stone hissing as air passed through.

I didn't know what I should do. If I hit it with lightning, it might crack the stone further. If I hit it with pure fire, I feared the same. Earth, maybe? Would that help?

In the middle of my ponderings, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. Verena was up and moving fast, her dark gossamer wings only

adding to her speed as she ran full tilt right at me. Before I had a chance to react, she caught me in a flying tackle, her talons ripping into my shoulders as the pair of us landed in the dirt.

But Verena hadn't been training for the past year with a guardian, and even though she tore at my skin with her stupid Bone Fae talons, I still had the upper hand. I landed on my back and immediately rolled, taking her with me, and we switched positions—her on the bottom and me on top. The earth rose up in greeting, climbing over her face, filling her mouth and nose with soil. She coughed, breathing in dirt as I scrambled off her to my athames. One was at the base of the tree, and the other was in the middle of the weird sigils frozen into the earth.

I extended the blades, rounding just in time to greet Verena as she wrenched herself free. She opened her skull-like mouth, screeching at me like something out of a nightmare and lunged. Only it wasn't a lunge so much as her taking flight. Her delicate wings were unexpectedly powerful, and she shot at me like a bullet.

I slashed with my swords, marking her chest with a bloody "X" as my aim hit true, but still, she came at me, reaching for me as I rounded out of her way. My shoulders were tingling where the flesh was already knitting back together, my body pulling at the elements without me telling it to.

In the middle of all this, I could feel Striker's stomps and hear his roars, but this was the first time I'd had a chance to glance at him. He was roaring at the gate, breathing fire on the black smoke that was leaking from the cracked opening. On the upside, the fire was burning up the smoke—odd, I know—and driving it back.

The downside?

The gate was cracking more, the fissure in the ram's head so deep, light was pouring out of it.

The ground bucked, tossing even Striker off his feet. And I tried my best to figure out how to stop the door from opening all the way.

I asked the wind for a gale to blow away the furrows, but no matter how hard the wind pushed, not a single grain of dirt moved.

I called rain from the heavens, and fire from the clouds, and begged the earth to move, but nothing touched the sigils—nothing moved them. And I could feel them reaching for the door. I could feel the magic in them breaking the seal on the doors, chipping away at it bit by bit.

While I was busy trying to break the opening spell, Verena had her own problems. Somehow healed from the “X” I’d placed on her chest—she batted the black smoke that coalesced around her like a shroud. Verena ripped and scratched at her own head—her talons falling through the smoke. Try as she might, she could not fight the smoke, and she ended up rending her own flesh.

Black tendrils filled her nose and mouth, and she choked, stumbled, and fell. It reminded me of when Rowan had killed the Seelie guard, and I worried if we had a dark sylph on our hands. The vapor rose from her, and she gasped a breath.

So it didn’t want to kill her? I couldn’t say if that was comforting or not.

The ribbon of shadow crept back down to the earth before punching into it, the blackness disappearing altogether.

Nope, not comforting at all.

The earth bucked again, and neither of us knew if it was coming from the door or the black smoke that decided to make the earth its home. Striker screeched at the moving door—the seal now ripped wide.

Rather than try to figure it out for myself, I bolted for Verena and wrenched her from the ground.

“What did you do?” I screamed in her face, shaking her a bit to get her attention.

Even half-dead, Verena was a diabolical bitch because she just laughed—her bone jaw open wide in a macabre smile.

“Only I can close it. Only I can stop the monstersssss,” she hissed, which shouldn’t have been possible since she didn’t have a tongue or lips.

I flung her away from me, watching with no small amount of satisfaction as she flew, bounced, and hit the ground with a decidedly pleasant thud. When she landed, blackened hands shot up from the earth and grabbed at her, their talons ripping at her flesh.

And, I hated to say, I felt good about that for about point-five seconds.

That was until very similar hands reached up from the ground and latched onto me as well. I yelped as I ran to Striker, but they gripped my ankles, using me to rise from the earth like eyeless zombies. Their enlarged heads and skeletal bodies crawled from the dirt like the worst sort of nightmare.

We were well and truly fucked.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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If I ever made it out of this, I was never watching another zombie movie for as long as I lived. I had no idea what kind of Fae these bastards were, and I didn't want to know. All I wanted at that point was a shotgun and a gas mask, so I didn't have to be subjected to the stench.

Like anyone who had seen even ten minutes of any zombie movie, television show, or hell, even glimpsed the first pages of a comic, I knew to cut off their heads. The problem was, my athames were working full-time, swinging like helicopter blades, and I wasn't making a dent in the horde of whatever the fuck that was coming out of the ground.

"Striker! Anytime now you can flame their asses," I yelled, hacking through a zombie's neck like butter. And the next, and the next. My cuts and scrapes were healing on the fly, but this shit was no picnic.

The glorious feeling of Striker's flames washed over me, and I had enough time to do the sensible thing and call down enough lightning to power a small country. And because my lightning was enough to kill damn near everything, I didn't want to hit Striker with it. Instead, I did the friendly thing and picked off the zombies attacking him—or trying to—one by one, until they were all basking in the same flames as their brothers.

Zombie ash filled the crevasse for a moment before I whisked it away on a gale, shoving it back through the cracked door. A tiny bit of relief filled me until the world pitched again. This time the gate didn't just open a crack. Oh, no. The doors flew open wide, shoved open by a blackened figure bigger than any human.

Easily eight feet tall, the thing was made of shadows and smoke. If I didn't know any better—and I did—I would've believed it was a demon. His face coalesced into the shape of a ram, with horns curling back from his head, twisting with smoke. This thing looked so close to Andras' phased

form it freaked me out a little. Especially since the very first thing it did was go after Verena. The giant reached down for her as she tried and failed to scramble away.

It roared at her in a language I couldn't name, and even with my translator spell, I couldn't understand what he was screaming at her. Verena's form shifted while she was in his hold, turning back into the scarred, blonde queen. She squirmed, fighting him until he flung her away from his body.

Verena landed on her feet and screamed at him some more. "I will have what I am owed. You nor she will take it from me."

She changed shape as she ran at him, growing twice her height as she morphed into a tree-person. A dryad, maybe? They clashed, Verena's limbs smashing into him. Or almost. The monster dematerialized right as she swung, moving out of the way before reforming behind her, his talons digging into her bark and wrenching her to the ground.

I kinda wanted to watch them duke it out, but more things were coming out of the wide-open gate. Shadows fell upon us as hands grew from the ground. Again. The zombies were back, and they'd brought friends.

Fates, would these things just fucking die already?

But the zombies and shadows weren't alone. Grotesque and monstrous things crawled from the open portal, things I couldn't name or describe. Things that there were no words for. A horde of them poured into the crevasse, overtaking us with mindless determination and razor-sharp claws.

Striker and I poured flames into the land—and that worked on most of the surreal beings that hacked and slashed and snapped at us. But some were made of flames, made of smoke, made of air, and that element did nothing to hold them back.

A particularly nasty thing made of noxious purple smoke and gnarled teeth took a hunk out of my arm—the venom in the bite enough to nearly bring me to my knees. A burning yet freezing agony tore through my veins—so bad I didn't think I'd keep my feet. My body slowed, failing me in battle as I tried to hack and stab my way through the horde.

A shadow fell over me—Verena's smoke monster, and I thought that was it. I wasn't going to make it out of this chasm. But instead of hitting me when I was down, the smoke monster stabbed at it with its claws before ripping it away from me—his talons able to cut through it when my sword

could not. This lone monster appeared to be on our side as it helped us push back the horde.

My arm hung useless for a few harrowing minutes as I stabbed and hacked with one lone sword until the elements filled me again. But as much as I was drawing on the elements themselves, I wasn't healing fast enough, wasn't moving fast enough. I was flagging and I couldn't see a light at the end of the tunnel.

The earth began to pitch again, a gentler vibration than the ones before it. It felt like hoofbeats pounding on the ground, and soon I saw the giant head of a kitsune barreling toward us, his seven tails fanning out behind him like a banner of an army.

And Hideyo wasn't alone.

Beside him—hacking through monsters like it was his happy place—ran Alistair, his scythe rending through the crowd like butter. Behind him was Aidan and my mother, bowling through nefarious beings with the single-minded focus of warriors. Rowan and Aramal and Maireen and all their retinue followed with Della and Lothan not far behind. Lothan and his elves blasted the horde with magic as Aramal and the dwarves swung their battle hammers and the fawns shot their arrows.

The cavalry had arrived.

Alistair wrenched his scythe through three bodies before he got to me, yanking a sightless zombie-thing off my leg before wrapping me up in a swift hug.

“I leave you alone for five bloody minutes and you've gone and caused the apocalypse,” Alistair quipped before smashing a quick kiss to my lips. “I swear from now on, I'm not leaving you alone. Ever. You get up to too much trouble on your own.”

I'd never been so happy to see him in my life. I would be kissing the shit out of him if we weren't in the middle of the biggest shitshow I'd ever seen.

“You cannot possibly blame this on me. Also, the dragon is Striker. Don't ask, just don't kill him.”

Alistair pondered that for about a second before he gave me some sage advice. “You might want to make an announcement, love,” he insisted as he ripped through another body, “otherwise they might assume he's just another monster.”

He had a valid point.

“Audite me,” I whispered, pressing my fingers into my throat. Hear me. “Don’t hurt the dragon. He’s a friendly. Drive the horde back to the gate. We can’t let them gain any more ground.” I released my throat and glanced over to Alistair. “Did that work?”

“You mean did I hear that in my bloody head?” he asked, ripping his flaming sword from the scabbard at his back and beheading a crawling thing that looked almost inside out. “Yeah, love. It bloody worked.”

“Good,” I muttered before pressing into my throat again—the action like a walkie-talkie. “Anybody got any ideas on how the fuck to close that gate? The sigils are immovable. Cutting these guys down is great and all, but if we don’t get that gate shut, we’re screwed.”

My mother’s voice sounded off in my brain and I understood Alistair’s shuddering reaction. “If you can’t rebuild the gate you’ve got,” she began, grunted, and then continued, “Why don’t you just make a new gate?”

I wanted to slap myself upside the head. Duh, Max. To my credit, I was fighting monsters and kinda failing, so I gave myself a teensy break.

“Anyone want to watch my ass while I do that?”

Yes, Alistair was doing a fine job, but we were going to be overrun in about a minute if things stayed as they were.

“Everyone, back up.” Striker’s voice sounded in my brain, the volume ten times what my mother had, the sound rattling inside my skull like a gong. “Fire in the hole.”

Everyone but Alistair and the monsters scattered. Striker let out another ear-splitting roar as the flames bathed us in heat. Alistair and I fell into step, the pair of us back to back as we hacked through the ones that the flames didn’t touch. The ones that we missed and weren’t reduced to ash were attacked by a white sort of miasma—the familiar shape of a sylph running through the remaining creatures, stealing their lives in a manner I couldn’t name.

“Your ass is covered, love. Figure out a way to make a new gate,” Alistair prompted, his flaming sword whirling around his body like a dervish.

The only thing in this whole crevasse that hadn’t been touched by flames or wind or earth was the death tree—the rowan my father had made as an insurance policy against forever. If I couldn’t kill it, and I couldn’t remove it, could I convince it to work with me?

I made a beeline for the tree—or at least I tried to. The way was blocked by clashing bodies and carnage, only the spot right outside of the root line was clear.

“Ah, fuck it,” I muttered before latching onto Alistair’s hand and snapping my fingers. I hadn’t traveled here like I’d had on Earth—too scared to use that particular power because I had no idea where I’d end up. When we landed at the tree’s roots, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Did you—did you just travel us without knowing if it would work?” he asked, a might bit cranky for a man who had been in his happy place a second ago.

“Maybe? We’re under a time crunch. There were people in the way.”

Alistair leveled me with a stern expression.

“Okay, fine. I’m sorry. That was rude.”

He muttered something under his breath, shaking his head as he readied himself for attackers. But it was as if no one wanted to be anywhere near the giant tree. Even Alistair’s flaming sword sputtered and died as he stepped closer to the bark.

No one came near the tree because they couldn’t—even the elements refused to come to me here.

Alistair snagged my fingers, pressing them to his mouth. “You’re safe, love. Do what you need to do.”

Shaking, I pressed my hands to the one thing that could kill me. The tree was warm to the touch, the fire we’d poured into the crevasse heating it but not burning it at all. The rough bark pressed into my skin and I sank down to the gnarled roots that peeked up from the dirt, resting my forehead against the trunk. I felt myself slipping away, separating from my body as my consciousness fell into the tree.

I’d thought the tree would be blackness and death like so much of Faerie was—like the creatures that had once been held back by the ruined gates—but I was wrong. It was bright here, so bright I could barely open my eyes, even though I knew I didn’t really have “eyes” here.

“Hello? I hate to bother you, but I need help.” I couldn’t see anything, all there was to the place was brightness and white.

“First, you want to burn me down or rip me up or punt me into—what was it called? Oh, yes. Outer space. And now you want my help?”

The woman’s voice shocked me. I thought I would get a feeling or something, not a full-on conversation. She had an accent I couldn’t place,

but that wasn't important.

"You're right. I was rude. I had no idea you were a sentient being, and even if you were, I would still hold a grudge. Your bark nearly killed me. It did kill my parents and siblings. To me you were a symbol of my family's death."

"Ah," she said as a shadow moved through the whiteness.

A woman's form took shape, her coloring not much different than the world around her. She seemed to pull the brightness into herself and she became clear. White hair topped albino-white skin and glowing ice-blue eyes. Her lips were radiant blue as was the crescent moon in the center of her forehead. A pair of horns peeked out of her hair, the bones curving forward toward her brow like a kind of crown.

A formidable woman with a face like stone, she contemplated me, sizing me up before she spoke again. "Am I not still a symbol of your family's death?"

I thought about it for a minute, weighing my words carefully. "You are, but you cannot help how you were used. Unless you gave your branches freely, someone took them to use as weapons. Someone used you as an instrument of death. On Earth, rowan trees are symbols of life and perseverance. They grow on mountain tops in barely any soil. On the sides of cliffs where nothing else can flourish. I have a tough time believing you ever intended death—even if that was what my father made you for."

She smiled then, as she gave me a bowing nod. "You are intuitive, but I would expect nothing less from the daughter of Chaos. I am Aiyana the Eternal. I cannot be burned or chopped or dug up. I cannot be moved, and I can never die. But my branches do fall occasionally, and people use them in horrible ways. Ways I cannot predict nor understand."

She was confirming my suspicions in a roundabout way, and I understood that she had not conversed with anyone in some time. I needed to ask direct questions in the hopes that I might get direct answers.

"You cannot be moved, but can you move yourself? Can you reach out your roots?"

"Perhaps. If I have a good enough reason."

"The gate to the dark place is open—broken in a way I cannot repair. I can't fix the old gate, but I thought if your roots dispel magic, then you could grow a new door, one that could not be opened by magic. One that—"

“Yes, I know what you want me to do. But why? What do your people say? What’s in it for me?”

Oh, shit. Aiyana wasn’t a Fae, but she also wasn’t a goddess—or maybe she was. I still did not want to make a deal with anyone ever again.

“You would have a purpose other than just sitting still in a crevasse. You would be holding back things that kill.”

“Anything can kill, child.”

Boy, was I getting really tired of people calling me child. Granted, Aiyana was older than time itself, so to her I was probably a fucking embryo.

“Okay, so I don’t understand the things beyond that door. I don’t know why they are there, and I don’t know if they can be reasoned with, so they don’t mow down an entire realm full of creatures. I don’t know what I don’t know. I need time to get smart, and to do that, I need you to close that damn door. Better?”

Aiyana’s smile grew as she twirled a ring on her first finger. It was a plain band of wood no thicker than my fingernail.

“You remind me of your father. He is just as direct and impetuous as you are. I will do what you ask and make a gate no magic can open, and when you are settled, you will come to me. I will educate you on what you do not know. That is my bargain.”

I’d get a closed gate and answers. I couldn’t agree fast enough.

“Sold. I will agree to those terms with the caveat that this moves fast. My people are being hurt out there. I can feel it.”

And I could.

Aidan and my mother were bleeding. One of Hideyo’s tails was damn near ripped off and might not grow back. Della was being held up by Lothan because her belly was pouring blood, and the list went on. Dwarves were dying, fawns were being cut down.

“Agreed,” she murmured, her body right in front of me. I hadn’t even seen her move.

Aiyana pressed two fingers to my forehead, and I fell backward, my body following suit when I returned to it.

I gasped in a lungful of air, the world swimming around me like I was caught in a dervish. Alistair grabbed me by the shoulders and stood me up, and I struggled to hold my own weight.

“You all right, love? Can you stand?”

I gripped his shoulders for all I was worth. “Get me away from the tree,” I croaked, and as soon as he put me on the soil outside of the drop line, I could breathe again, the elements filling me until I could stand on my own.

“She said she would help us. We need to get all the monsters on the other side of the gate.”

“She? You mean the tree is a she?”

“Yep. Aiyana.” I pressed into my throat again, calling to my people. “Get all the monsters back on the other side of the gate.”

“What do you think we’ve been doing out here? We can barely hold them back,” Aidan growled, his voice sounding in my mind like a slap.

The elements weren’t enough to drive them back, but I wasn’t just an Elemental, was I?

No. I was a fucking demi-god. My father was Chaos.

It was time to cause some.

Drawing on all the elements, I filled myself full until I could draw no more. Then I pushed, not using the elements themselves, but me and my magic. The power that resided in me since birth. The power that no one could name or quantify, the abilities that marked me as an outcast, and got me burned.

I pushed them all, the things in the ground, the smoke in the sky. Anything and everything that belonged on that side of the door, I shoved it back. Zombie Fae were plucked from the ground like daisies, blackened smoke-like things flew back to where they came from. Every monster and ghoul, every unnamed grotesque thing, all of it.

A few things scrambled at my people as they passed, trying to hold on to something as they were forced back into their prison, but nothing was stopping them. They all went, every single one.

And I watched as roots grew up out of the ground like climbing vines, the thick bark widening, stretching, weaving into itself until nothing could make it out of the new gate. The vines solidified, turning into a new carved door, blue like the darkness of space and with a larger seal.

This time, the lock that held the two doors closed was a carved rendering of Aiyana’s face, her horns like a crown and all.

I turned back, searching for Alistair, only to find him crumpled just outside the drip line of Aiyana’s tree. Forgetting everything else, I ran to

him, pushing my hands to his chest ready to fill him with every element I had at my disposal.

But as soon as I touched him, he grabbed my hands—gasping awake.

“Are you okay? What happened?”

Alistair’s brow furrowed in confusion as he stared at me and then at his surroundings. Shaking his head, he blinked and rubbed his temple. “I’m all right, love. I’m okay. Just a bump on the head.”

Unable to hold in my relief, I tackle-hugged him, clutching him to me like he was life itself. We were okay. It was going to be okay.

For the first time since we’d set foot in Faerie, I finally felt just a little bit of relief.

“My Queen, what would you have us do with the usurper?”

I pulled back from Alistair to give Hideyo the stink-eye. “Usurper? That’s just—” I couldn’t even think of the right phrase. “Weird. And quit with the queen shit. You know how I feel about that. I’m Max. Just Max.”

“You should start getting cool with it real quick, Majesty. You have an entire realm full of people who will refuse to call you by your name. Think of this as a crash course.”

“Whatever,” I grumbled. “Bring Verena to me.”

Usurper. I rolled my eyes.

Hideyo shot me a wide grin that was all teeth, and he was off to collect the former queen.

My eyes drifted over the battle-weary Fae, and without me telling them to, the elements reached for them, restoring my people. We had casualties, and those would have to be honored.

I stood, searching the crowd for my mother, for Della, for Striker, and Aidan. Striker was harder to find since he’d gone back to his human form. I spotted the lot of them were grouped around a woman until Hideyo joined them. He reached into the middle of the group and plucked the former queen from the earth, dragging her struggling body to me.

I saw the instant she was about to let a change come over her and pounced.

Pressing three center fingers against her chest, I turned them like a key, shutting off her power like a faucet. “I don’t think so. You’re changeling days are over.”

She was about to scream at me, her mouth opening as she sucked in a breath, but I snapped my fingers, shutting off her voice. Her body bucked

with rage, and I decided to do Hideyo a solid.

“Somnum,” I murmured, putting her to sleep, her body sagging in Hideyo’s hold. “That’ll make the trip easier.”

“What trip?” my mother asked, pushing her shoulder under my arm to give me a hug. I squeezed her, so happy she was okay—so happy that they were all okay.

Alistair answered for me, knowing exactly where I needed to go.

“We’re going to the Seelie Court.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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I couldn't imagine what the Seelie guards were thinking when they saw roughly four hundred of their enemies show up in the middle of the Court like they had a right to be there. I would assume some shitting of pants was involved, but I couldn't be certain.

When Striker hit me over the head and took me to the Unseelie gate, it had taken a minute to rally the troops. Striker didn't just hit me when he broke out of the encampment, and Teresa had been knocked unconscious. Once she managed to get the word out that I'd been taken, the Seelie soldiers were nearly upon them. The Tandrirr, dwarves, fawns, and water Fae banded together and drove them back.

Only then were they able to come to my aid with Alistair using his obsidian charm once again to save my ass. I didn't want to think of what would have happened if they hadn't shown up. Striker and I wouldn't have survived it.

Striker seemed to be more himself than he'd been in nearly a year. I didn't understand it until I touched his forehead, diving deep into his brain to make sure I could trust him. After the events of the last year, I wasn't taking any chances. I could feel traces of old magic in him—the same spells I'd found in Cinder after she'd been controlled by Soren. The lightning I'd poured into him seemed to have knocked something loose, but there was still lingering magic there.

"This is going to hurt," I told him before I burned out the last vestiges of the spell that held his mind captive. I may have made his nose bleed a little, but it was better than him not being in control of his own brain.

I saw flashes in his mind of when he'd been taken, and I had a feeling it was in the hours he'd been missing while we were on the hunt for Melody

before she'd died. That's when he'd really gone off the deep end, but it could have been before that. Striker had been acting off for some time now.

That was the only reason he was by my side as we walked through the Seelie Court like we had a right to be there. The walled city took up nearly half the realm, the walls moving by magic as more land was conquered. That wall would be the first thing to go once I had things settled.

A castle sat at the center of the Seelie Court—the giant stone structure spanning much more land than a single building should. The turrets touched the clouds, the tops hidden from the naked eye. Each stone was such a brilliant white that I wanted to muddy them up a little, and the whole of the structure gave me the creeps with how pretty and perfect and just wrong it was.

I led the charge through the streets, climbing the last set of steps to the closed castle doors. In front of them was a set of four guards and a stuffy-looking fellow with twigs for horns, line-drawn face paint, and pointed ears. He wore clothes that were out of a regency romance novel, and he appeared no happier wearing them than I was seeing him in them.

“Who—”

“I'm going to stop you right there, Jeeves. I am Massima Bertrand Laffitte, Dušan's only living daughter. I have come to take my place as Queen of Faerie. Oh, and to throw your shit rag of a queen in the deepest, darkest hole I can find.”

The guards got the message. Jeeves did not.

“Y-you can't—” he began again, yanking at his cravat like it was choking him.

“I am the daughter of Chaos. Are you going to come over here in your pretty pantaloons and stop me?” I crossed my arms over my chest and sized him up. Jeeves didn't seem like he wanted to challenge me, more like he was scared of what would happen if he did.

“I turned off her magic. She can't hurt you or anyone else.”

Relief made his shoulders slump like I'd deflated him. He straightened again. “Are you sure?”

“Hideyo, show him his former queen,” I called, wanting this poor Fae to see his boogeyman incapacitated.

Hideyo grabbed Verena by the hair, showing him her face. Jeeves wilted again, one of the guards having to catch him before he fell.

“She can’t speak, she can’t wake, and she cannot turn. She has no power.”

Jeeves spoke again, only this time, his words were clogged with tears. “She has our families’ as prisoners. If we make a false step, she...”

“Then, lead me to the dungeons. I figure I have some prisoners to free.”

JEEVES—WHOSE REAL NAME WAS WARRICK—LED US DOWN TOO MANY flights of stairs until we reached the dank and freezing dungeons. It took forever, but he told me what each prisoner was remanded for. Almost none of the prisoners stayed in their cells. There were a few exceptions, men who were in there for murder or torture, but I planned on revisiting their cases to make sure they were there for the right reasons.

In one of the very last cells sat the woman I’d been searching the whole damn realm for. Melody sat on a lone stool, holding tight to her son, who was sleeping against her chest. I worried she might not remember me—or Striker, for that matter. Worried that her soul was as broken as they said it was.

“Melody?” I called, hoping she knew me.

“Max?”

I couldn’t help it, I teared up a bit. I never really thought I’d see her like this—alive and holding onto her son. “Yeah, sweetie. It’s me. Are you... you?”

I wasn’t sure how much Verena had influenced her, how much she made her do. I shouldn’t have worried over Melody’s sanity.

“You mean, am I planning on pitting people against each other for my own gain? No, Max, I hadn’t planned on it.”

A relieved sort of laugh bubbled up my throat, and I gave Warrick the nod to open the door. Striker was right behind me, so Melody passed me her sleeping son, stepped around me, and then socked Striker right in the face.

Aidan and I exchanged a glance before busting up into giggles. Yes, the big man giggled. I didn’t care what he said.

“You had no right,” she hissed before shaking out her hand.

Striker nodded, his face the picture of bliss even with a bloody lip. “You’re absolutely correct. No one has the right to take you where you don’t want to go. I have no defense, but I will do anything in my power to make it right.”

“He does too have a defense. He’s just too worried you won’t believe him to use it. Verena mind-controlled him just like she did you. Granted, he might have done it, anyway, but...” I piped up for Striker, hoping he at least got a little bit of happiness.

“Really?” she asked him, mostly ignoring me.

When he gave her a gentle nod, she lunged at him, kissing the shit out of him in the middle of a damn dungeon. Now I knew how other people felt when Alistair and I kissed in inappropriate places. I snorted to myself and hugged Ronan closer.

“Hideyo, drop off our package, please?” I asked him as I handed off Ronan to his mother.

He dropped her in the middle of the dungeon floor, her skull hitting with a solidly satisfying thud. Warrick locked the door, and I took the key from him. Verena wasn’t going anywhere, and I was going to be sure of it.

Calling on all my magic, all the elements, everything I had, I weaved a spell so tight around Verena’s cell, no one but me could open it. There was no escaping, no conning her way out, and no one would kill her before I could question her.

I refused to let history repeat itself.

PRETTY MUCH THE ENTIRE COURT WAS RELIEVED THAT VERENA WAS THE dungeon’s newest resident. But speeches had to be made, and I wasn’t going to live in a place where people were going to poison my food or stab me in my sleep. I kept it simple, letting them know she wasn’t coming back except for judgment, and if they were her supporters, they had five minutes to get the fuck out.

“If you feel I am not the rightful Queen of Faerie, then I suggest you get out of this castle and out of the Seelie Court post haste. Because if you decide to rise up against me or mine, it will be the last thing you ever do.” I said it with a smile, but I got the feeling they knew I wasn’t playing around.

“Warrick here will instruct you on your new tasks. None of which include working yourself to the bone, starving, or worrying about the safety of your family. If you have family recently freed from the dungeons, please go to your homes and welcome them. Take all the time you need to come back—but only if you want to. Everyone is dismissed for the day. Please go home and relax. Tomorrow is a new day.”

My stomach dropped at the end of my speech, and I knew why. Queen. I was acting like a queen. I'd never wanted that kind of responsibility. I'd always wanted something small. My tattoo shop, my greenhouse. My little family that I made for myself.

But a kingdom? No way.

I wanted to hold Alistair's hand, but he was all the way on the other side of the throne dais, too far away for me to snag his hand.

"Warrick, if you could find rooms for us and directions to the kitchen, that will be all for the day. If you want to come back tomorrow, I would love to have you, but it is up to you."

Warrick looked like I just gave him the biggest Christmas present and topped it with birthday sprinkles.

"Of course, Maj—err—Max. I will be back in the morning." I nodded and dismissed him, almost everyone following the Fae down the hall for some grub and a decent night's rest.

I plopped onto the throne—a place Warrick insisted on taking us to make the speech to the household staff. It was cold and lonely, and I wished Alistair would come talk to me.

He'd been weird since the crevasse, and I hoped all of this wasn't too much. I'd meant to talk to him about accepting this role—about all of it—before, but nothing had turned out how I wanted it to. It all seemed to be happening so fast.

"Are you mad? That I took the throne? I know we were just supposed to get Melody back, but I couldn't just leave them here like this."

"I know that. I don't think you did the wrong thing. I think I'm just tired."

I stood, making my way to Alistair and snagging his hand like I'd wanted to. I was ready for a good night's rest in something other than a cot. Hopefully, in a room with a decent shower and maybe a tub.

A tub would be glorious.

"Come on, Knight." I pulled him to me. "Let's find us some food and a bed."

I pressed my lips to his for one brief moment.

In an instant, my whole body ran cold. On instinct, I reached for my athame. In the next second, I'd shoved him into the closest wall, and my blade kissed his throat.

My whole body shook as fear and rage and horror filled me.

“You are not Alistair,” I said through clenched teeth, tears pooling in my eyes. “Who the fuck are you, and what have you done with my husband?”

*Max’s story will continue with...*

***Queen of Fate & Fire***

*Rogue Ethereal Book Six*

**QUEEN OF FATE & FIRE**  
**Rogue Ethereal Book Six**

**A crown I don't want. A bargain I can't take back. A life I refuse to sacrifice.**

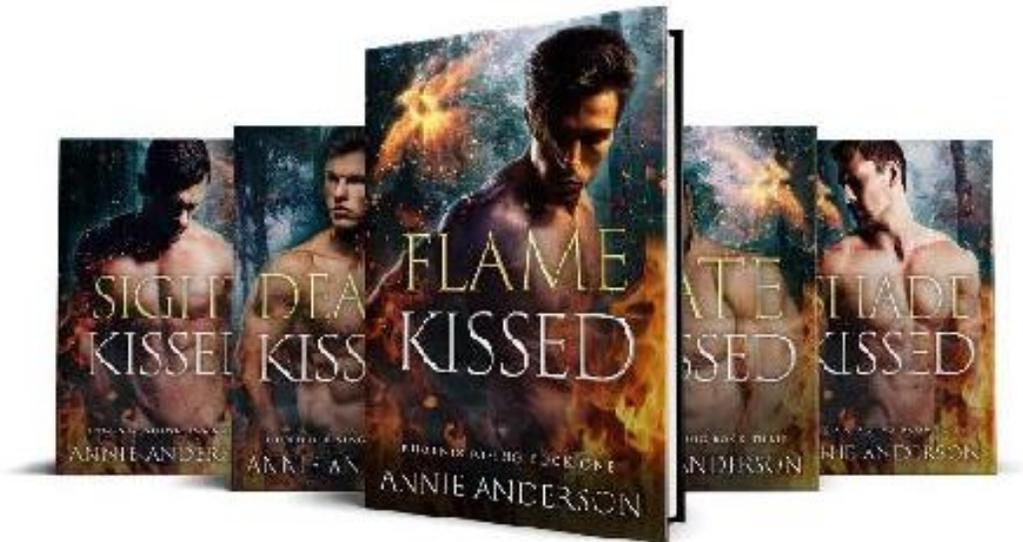
After four hundred years on my own, one would think I'd be able to walk away and never look back. I'd done it a thousand times before with nary an inkling of guilt. But with my brand new predicament, there is no way I can turn down the offered bargain--not if I want everyone I love to stay alive.

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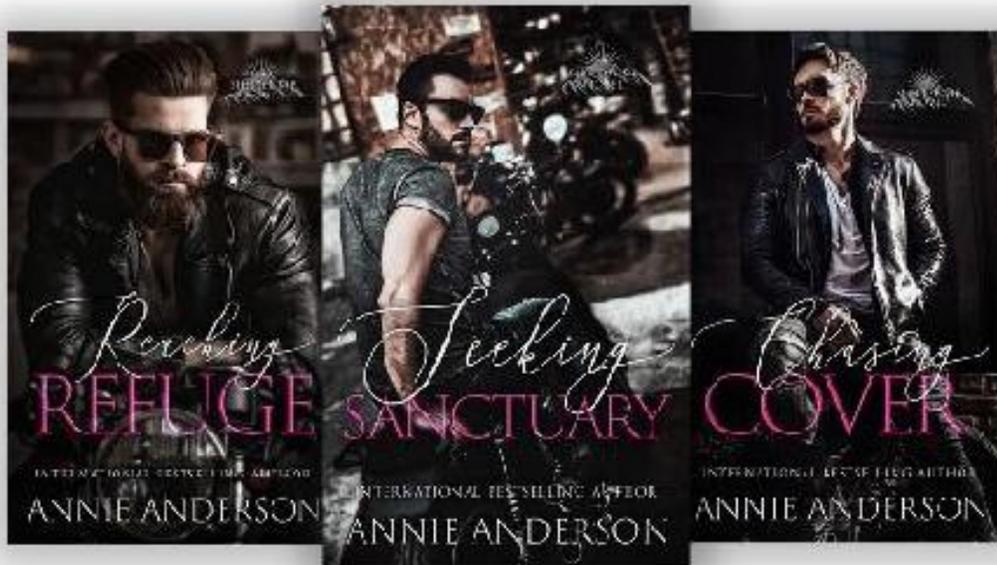
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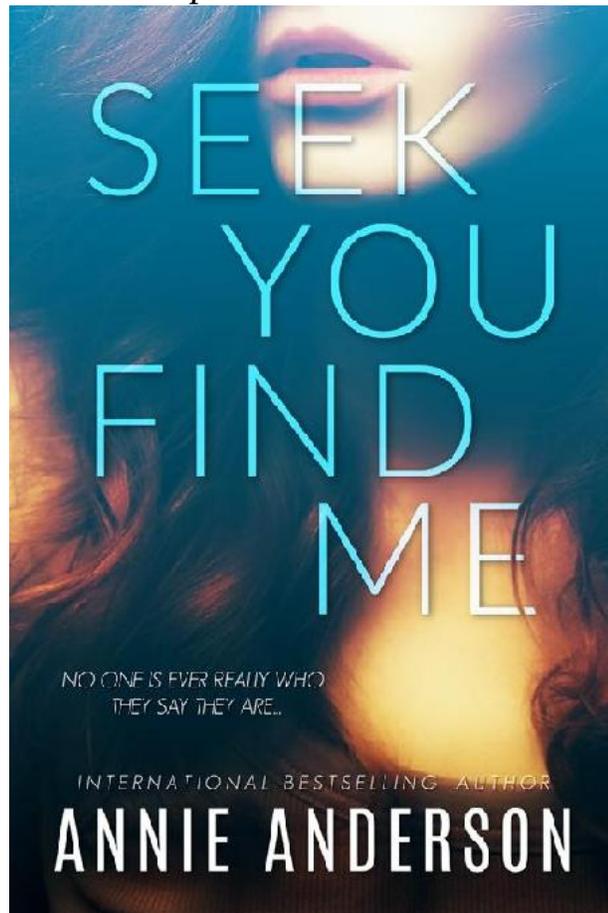
Levi just needs an accountant. Someone smart, dependable, and someone who won't blow town and leave him in the lurch. When a pretty but battered woman falls into his arms, he can't help but offer her the job. If only he can convince her to take it.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Annie Anderson is a military wife and United States Air Force veteran. Originally from Dallas, Texas, she is a southern girl at heart, but has lived all over the US and abroad. As soon as the military stops moving her family around, she'll settle on a state, but for now she enjoys being a nomad with her husband, two daughters, and old man of a dog.

In her past lives, Annie has been a lifeguard, retail manager, dental lab technician, accountant, and now she writes fast-paced romantic thrillers with some serious heat.

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